

Jon Ripslinger

LAST KISS



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One

Wow! Windy looked different.

When she came flying out of the front door of her house, bounding across the lawn to my Ford pickup, I couldn't tell why for sure. Not her clothes. She was wearing what I expected for an afternoon outdoor birthday party on the Memorial Day weekend: blue T-shirt, gold shorts, white deck shoes.

Blue and gold are State Center High School colors.

I wore cutoff jeans, sneakers, and my gold polo shirt with the blue collar. We were dressed nearly alike. Like a brother and sister. Like our mom had dressed us for a party.

Not until Windy landed next to me in the pickup, slamming the door, smiling, did I understand what was up.

She was wearing makeup. Not a lot. Just enough. Delicate touches of blue eye shadow and mascara highlighted her eyes, and berry-brown lipstick gleamed on her lips. Tiny pearl earrings perched in her earlobes. Cool.

She slid the tip of her tongue around her lips. "What are you looking at, Billy?"

She'd been my best friend forever. Really, since birth. The things we usually did together like hunting, fishing, and canoeing didn't require makeup.

"What's with all the makeup?" I said.

"What do you mean *all* the makeup?"

She yanked the rearview mirror around, peered at herself, and ran her hand through her spiky black hair. She made a pouty mouth. "Don't I look okay?"

"Like a princess."

For the first time that I could remember, she was wearing nail polish, berry brown, the shade of her lips, and suddenly the scent of her perfume danced in front of my nose. Gardenia. She didn't often wear perfume.

She smoothed out her shirt and shorts. "If we're going to prove to the Witch

you're finished with her, I have to look like a girl who wants to keep her man, and you have to at least pretend this afternoon I'm your girlfriend. You up for that, Billy?"

"I can handle it."

I readjusted the mirror. I slipped the Ford into gear and headed out of town on County Y28, a hilly blacktop winding through the Iowa countryside. Newly planted black-dirt fields of corn and soybeans stretched for miles on either side of the road.

It was Saturday—sunny, bright, and warm. Only four days of school left, and I'd be a graduate. Not Windy. She had a year left. She was sixteen, I was seventeen. Eighteen next month.

"You're really up for this?" Windy repeated. "Being my boyfriend for an afternoon in front of the Witch?"

"You don't have to call her a witch."

"I played on the same volleyball team with her for five years. She's a witch."

"We'll hold hands, kiss—whatever it takes. I'll prove she can't yank me around any longer."

"That's what I want to hear."

"I don't know how I got invited to her party, anyway. I don't fit in."

"*Duh!* So she can sink her claws into you again."

Lisa Wells, the Witch, lived off a lonely tree-lined gravel lane in the country named Castle Drive. Her dad was president of State Center University. Lisa told me once he craved solitude and that's why he rejected the idea of living in the house on campus provided by the university.

I braked the Ford to a stop off the lane and parked on the grass. Gleaming in the dappled sun, fifteen or twenty cars had parked ahead of me.

I climbed out and glanced at my watch. Two o'clock. The invitation had said the party started at one.

"Lots of people are here already," I said.

Windy stepped around to the front of the Ford. "Maybe she wants to tell you she's pregnant, that's why she invited you."

"She's on the pill."

"You know what they call a guy whose girl's on the pill?"

I tried to ignore that, but Windy dished out the answer with a smile: “They call him Daddy.”

“Not funny.”

Windy’s hand was warm as it snuggled into mine. “I’m your girlfriend now, got it? Act like I am.”

“Got it.”

We crunched along the gravel lane for nearly a block, following it as it veered to the left, and suddenly I found myself in sight of Lisa Wells’s house.

I’d never seen it in daylight.

Flanked with woods in the back and on both sides, the house was a two-story structure of wood, glass, and stone. Lots of peaks, porches, and decks, it perched on the top of a grassy hill that sloped fifty yards down to a lake. The Wells had no neighbors. The place sat aloof on the top of the hill, a symbol of Dr. Wells’s position and importance at State Center University.

In back of the house, on a flat, wide expanse of lawn, kids romped, playing volleyball, badminton, and horseshoes. Close to the side of the house stood an open-sided tent, bigger than a small barn, sheltering a dozen or more long, cafeteria-style tables and chairs. Gold and blue tablecloths draped the tables, and music blared from speakers hung from the eaves of the house.

“Wow!” Windy said. “What a layout.”

I remembered seeing the inside of the house for the first time with its fireplaces, thick rugs, and lighted paintings on the walls, and I’d thought to myself, *Lisa lives in a palace!*

I’d never seen the house from this vantage point. Meetings between Lisa and me had always occurred at night in her bedroom after I’d paddled across the lake in a canoe.

The outside of the house with its shrubs, grass, woods, and lake impressed me as much as the inside.

As Windy and I strolled across the lawn, Eric Benson—Lisa’s father-approved boyfriend—strode out from under the tent toward us.

“Uh-oh,” Windy said. “Trouble already.”

A senior like me, but a football jock and a brilliant student, Eric was this year’s student body president. His father was a full professor in the Law

Department at SCU. The word was Eric intended to enroll at the University of Michigan to study law and walk on as a football player. After he graduated, he intended to set up his own practice here in State Center.

“Wondered if you’d show.” Eric stopped in front of me and pushed his glasses in place on his nose with his forefinger.

He was taller than me, solidly built, but not as thick and wide as me.

I kept my face blank.

He tucked his thumbs in the front pockets of his shorts. “What a great honor.”

“I was invited. Same as you.”

“Not wearing bibs today?”

I felt myself tense. Eric might think himself a stud, but there’s no way I was going to let him push me around. He hadn’t worked on a farm all his life. Hadn’t wrestled with a hand-powered posthole digger five, six hours a day in the July sun. Lifting weights and playing football didn’t measure up. Not in my book, anyway. No Irish in him, either. No O’Reilly.

Windy wrapped her left arm around my waist. She pulled me close and smiled up at me. “We almost didn’t make it—nearly slipped our minds, didn’t it, sweetheart?”

“Thought we’d drop by a minute,” I said. “See what’s happening.”

Eric scowled at me. Leaned close. “I know *all* about you and Lisa.” I smelled alcohol on his breath. That didn’t surprise me. Eric liked to party.

Windy kissed me on the cheek. “That’s over. He’s mine now.”

Eric looked surprised, and I gave a start, hardly expecting a kiss from Windy so quickly.

Eric adjusted his glasses. “Lisa’s been under a lot of pressure lately, getting ready to graduate, trying to choose the right college. She lost sight of her goals and started doing some stupid things for a while.” He eyed me.

“Like hanging with me? Forgetting about you?”

Windy squeezed my hand, signaling me to relax.

“But she’s over that now,” he said. “She realizes how stupid she was.”

My lips thinned.

“So stay away from her,” he said. “Stay in your place.”

“My place?”

“Cows, sheep, pigs—on the farm! Away from Lisa.”

My face heated up. I’m a blusher. It’s the curse of being Irish—redheaded, freckled, and light-skinned.

My hands started curling into fists, and I felt Windy flinch as I crunched her knuckles before she wrenched her hand free of my grip.

“My place,” I said, “is any place I want it to be.”

Windy tugged on my sleeve, backing me up a step. “Let’s mingle.”

“You mess with Lisa again,” Eric said calmly, “you’re dead. After today, don’t ever come back here. I’ll take care of you personally.”

“Recruit the rest of your football team.”

Windy yanked on my arm, trying to drag me away. “Billy, I’m thirsty.”

“Don’t forget what I told you, farm boy.”

I gritted my teeth.

Eric spun on his heels and marched toward the volleyball players.

I wanted to kill him.

“Look!” Windy said, jumping around in front of me, stomping her foot. “We’re trying to prove you’ve broken the hold Lisa had on you. You’ve moved on.”

“I know that.”

“Why didn’t you say you could care less about her? Why didn’t you kiss me? You’ve never *ever* kissed me.”

“I don’t have to take any crap from Eric Benson.”

“I’m trying to help you out here, Billy. At least make an effort to stay out of trouble.”

We wandered over to the tent. Windy exchanged smiles, hellos, and high-fives with some of her volleyball buddies. I nodded and mumbled hello to everyone. I knew them because I’d watched a lot of Windy’s games. My watching volleyball is how Lisa and I’d first met.

I knew hardly anyone else at the party, though. I didn’t expect I would. Most of the kids here were university kids and/or jocks.

The thing you have to understand is the unique situation at State Center High School. The school features three cliques: university kids, whose white-collar parents teach at SCU and live in wooded subdivisions; city kids, whose blue-

collar parents work mostly in the service industries supporting the university and live in the surrounding little towns; and farm kids, whose bib-and-boot parents live and work on farms. If you're a farm kid, you don't hang around much after school to play sports. Your butt's needed at home on a tractor.

Windy fit in because she was a jock. A non-jock, I'll bet I was the only farm kid here. Invited personally by Lisa Wells, the most beautiful, talented, and popular girl in school. Imagine that.

Under the tent, I dug out two Pepsis buried in ice in a Coleman cooler and handed one to Windy. I was still fuming about Eric. I rubbed my ice-wet hand across my forehead, held the cold can up to my cheek.

"You need to calm down," Windy said. "Your face is pink."

Suddenly two more of Windy's volleyball teammates descended on her, laughing, giggling, squealing, wanting to drag her away to play softball on a makeshift diamond behind the house. A ball hit into the woods was a home run. They needed one more girl.

"Billy and I just got here," Windy said, shaking her head. "We're together." She clutched my arm.

"Come on!" Mary Alice pleaded. "I've seen you hit the ball a mile in gym class. The woods isn't that far."

"Go ahead," I said.

Windy stepped up and whispered in my ear: "The Witch's got to see us together. Especially when she spots us the first time."

Barbara Templeton grabbed Windy's hand and started dragging her away. "C'mon before they find someone else."

Windy looked at me, begging me to rescue her.

I smiled. "Go. I'll be over to watch in a bit."

"You going to be all right?"

"Don't worry about me. Everything's cool."

I snapped open my Pepsi can, took a few icy swallows, and wandered out from under the tent. My eyes scanned the yard, lake, kids.

Where's Lisa? Why haven't I seen her yet?

Two

I spotted Lisa as she slammed out of the front door of the house and raced down the grassy slope to the lake, where a dozen kids splashed in the glimmering water.

She ran by without seeing me, her body tan and sleek, and my heart jumped.

At the water she stopped and looked back, like she sensed I was staring at her from fifty yards away. I was sure she saw me now.

She wore a short, white, terry cloth robe. She shrugged her shoulders and the robe dropped to the grass.

She was tall, willowy—a lithe athlete. A white bikini clung to her.

Even at that distance, the sight of her knocked me breathless. I remembered the first note she'd left in my locker back in April—April Fool's Day, in fact—and how the note had blown me away: *Let's meet, Billy. I know you probably think I'm a stuck-up snob, but I'm not. Where'd you get all that red hair? You should let it grow. And those blue eyes? Please meet me at Hollyhocks Park in Eldridge after school. Four-thirty. I think you're a person who's real.*

Someone touched me on the back of my shoulder, jolting me.

I whirled and lost sight of Lisa splashing in the lake.

“Lovely, isn't she?”

Dr. Malcolm Wells—Lisa's father, the president of State Center University—stared at me with dark eyes.

My Pepsi nearly slipped from my hand. I clutched the cold can tighter. “Hello, Dr. Wells.”

“I'd like to talk to you, William.”

Dr. Wells's baritone voice was smooth, resonant. He was dressed like most of the kids: a gold State Center High T-shirt, blue shorts, and sandals. And he was built. Probably spent a lot of time in the gym. A weight lifter maybe.

“Me?”

“You, William.” His square jaw was tight, his eyes level with mine. I’m six foot.

I’d never spoken to Dr. Wells before, and I felt my throat tightening as I tried to say, “All right.”

“In the house,” he said. “Where we won’t be disturbed.”

In Dr. Wells’s study, I sat in a huge black-leather chair.

The air conditioning chilled me.

Sunshine filtered through the drawn curtains lighting the room dimly. The room smelled of lemon polish and wood. Bookcases housing hundreds of hardcover books lined the walls.

In front of me sat a mahogany desk, and behind the desk in a high-backed, maroon-leather chair studded with brass buttons sat Dr. Wells.

He drummed the carefully manicured nails of his right hand on the glass covering the desktop, the sound grating on my nerves. “Are you having a good time at the party, William?”

“Just got here, Windy and me, but, yeah, we’re going to have a good time. All kinds of things to do.”

“Keep young people busy, I say, and you can keep them out of trouble. We’re going to trap shoot soon. Do you shoot?”

“Um ... I hunt a lot; I’ve shot trap a few times.”

“You’ve seen my gun collection?”

I felt a cautious smile creeping across my face.

I knew instantly what Dr. Wells was trying to do.

He wanted to trick me into admitting I’d been in his house before. The fact is Lisa’d shown me through the house the first night I’d been here—he’d been out of town. I couldn’t have missed the gun collection. In a recreation room complete with bar and pool table, ten glass-doored walnut gun cabinets lined the walls. Shotguns and rifles, new and old—Browning, Ruger, Winchester, Ithica, a Parker double barrel—stood at attention in the cabinets.

I gathered my courage now and said, “What is it you want, Dr. Wells?”

The drumming stopped. Silence filled the room.

“I know you’ve been seeing my daughter.”

“Not any longer.”

“That I know is also true. I believe you’ve been in this house before.” His voice was low. Like a purr. “I have a good idea what’s been going on.”

Heat rushed to my face again. I felt my Adam’s apple bob.

“I can’t police my daughter every second. She is sometimes a very foolish, impulsive child—it’s not the first time she’s made an error in judgment.” Dr. Wells eased back in his chair. “I haven’t announced it yet—I will this afternoon—Lisa is going to attend school right here at State Center. *My* university.”

“That’s not where she wants to go,” I said. “She told me that. She wants to go far away from here.”

Dr. Wells nodded slowly. “Lisa has unlimited potential. I have done very well with my own life, and I’ve worked long and hard to make sure her future will be brilliant.”

His eyes narrowed as he leaned forward. Still a purr, but now threatening, his voice lowered a notch. “You see, she’s not leaving this area, and I’ll not see her future jeopardized by her fooling around with you. Or with anyone else I don’t approve of.”

“Everybody has the right to choose their own friends.”

“Don’t entertain any more ideas about seeing her. Is that clear?”

Suddenly a doorknob behind me rattled, and someone straight-armed Dr. Wells’s study door open. “We gonna shoot?”

I swung around in my chair. I’d never seen Rodney Wells before, but I knew the rat-faced skinny guy with shoulder-length dishwater blond hair must have been Lisa’s stepbrother, home for the summer from college. She complained about him all the time.

The way Lisa explained it to me was that before he met Lisa’s mom, Dr. Wells had been married to a widowed woman with a kid named Rodney. He adopted the boy. Later, Rodney’s mom died in a boating accident, and this is the kid who now faced Dr. Wells and me.

A limp cigarette dangled from Rodney’s mouth.

Dr. Wells’s voice suddenly rolled out of his throat like thunder. “Rodney! When a door is closed, you *knock* before entering. And I’ve told you not to

smoke in this house.”

Rodney scissored his cigarette between two fingers and pulled it from his mouth. “Who’s this dude?” He swaggered into the room in his black concert T-shirt and faded knee-torn jeans. “This the dude my sister’s bopping?”

I flinched.

“Rodney!” Dr. Wells spit the kid’s name. “This is a private conversation. Get rid of that cigarette!”

“Where do you want me to throw it, Dad? On the floor? No ashtrays around.” Then he smirked, and to me he said, “I’ve been hearing them argue about you all day.”

“Rodney—!” Dr. Wells heaved from his chair and stood, his fists clenched on his glass desktop, knuckles down. “Get out, Rodney!”

“We gonna shoot? Gimme the keys and I’ll lug some guns out. Maybe I can win a few bucks.”

“I’ll take care of the guns.”

Rodney smiled at me, his teeth small, yellow, and even. “Hang in there, stud.” He poked the cigarette back into his mouth, puffed a cloud of smoke. “But don’t let him catch you—he’s mean.”

“Rodney!” This time, Dr. Wells bellowed the kid’s name.

Through another cloud of smoke, Rodney winked at me, marched out of the room, and slammed the door.

Dr. Wells was shaking.

He turned away from me, hands at his sides, clenching, unclenching. When he was threatening me, he’d kept his voice calm and cool. In the face of his stepson, he’d become rattled. Suddenly I didn’t find Dr. Wells quite as fearsome as before.

His face appeared pinched. “Rodney is rather undisciplined.” He moved to the curtain, pulled it back, and looked out. A patch of brilliant sunlight splashed on his desk.

“I’m going back to the party,” I said.

He released the curtain and faced me. “I told Lisa not to invite you.”

“She slipped the invitation into my locker at school through the door vents,” I said. “I couldn’t disappoint her.”

“I’m in charge,” he said, his voice calm again, controlled. “I’ll not tolerate your presence in her life. That’s my final word.”

“Because I’m a farm kid?”

“She’ll be socializing only with peers.”

My face burned. “Ones you pick for her? Like Eric Benson? Someone with a pedigree.”

“I know what your truck looks like, William—I don’t want to see it parked around this estate again. I know where you live—I’ll inform your parents as to what kind of young man you are.”

I pivoted and stalked toward the door, leaving him behind me, stone-faced.

I hated Dr. Wells’s threats. I hated being told to stay out of Lisa’s life. First by her boyfriend. Then by her father.

Yet deep in my heart, I understood Dr. Wells’s reasoning.

Lisa was destined for greatness. Besides being beautiful and an all-state athlete, she was a straight-A student. No way could I fit in with her plans. Her life. Not Billy O’Reilly. Farm kid.

And no doubt Rodney was right: Dr. Wells could be mean.

Stay cool, I told myself. Stay with the plan. Hang out with Windy at the party. Prove it’s really over with Lisa. *Prove you’re fully recovered, Billy.*

“Billy! *Pssst!*”

I was headed for the front door. I stopped dead in my tracks by the black-stone fireplace in the living room.

“*Pssst—!*”

My eyes wheeled round.

My head swung and lifted. My heart went *Wham!*

“Billy!”

Shivering at the top of the stairs in her wet bikini, her robe clutched in one hand, her blond hair clinging to her face, Lisa beckoned me up the stairs with frantic waves of her other hand.

I shook my head.

Dr. Wells might have come storming out of his study any second, right behind me. Rodney could have been lurking somewhere in the house. Or Eric. Someone might’ve wandered in from outside.

“Billy, I’ve got to talk to you. *Please!*”

Now Windy’s words sailed through my mind: *At least make an effort to stay out of trouble.*

As if it didn’t belong to me, I had no control over it, my head swiveled left, right. Down the hallway. Toward the kitchen. Then at the front door. My eyes searching all the while.

No one.

I drew a breath. My heart slamming against my rib cage, I bounded up the stairs two at a time. Smiling, Lisa held her bedroom door open for me.

Three

She eased the door closed and leaned against it.

Click!

She locked it.

I backed away from her, toward her bed. She smiled again, her lips wide, cheekbones high.

My eyes latched on to her. Hugged her. I totally loved her, though I'd never told her that; I'd been waiting for her to say she loved me first. But she never had. Not yet.

She stepped up to me and slipped her arms around my waist. I inhaled her scent from the lake and sunshine and slowly wrapped my arms around her, the full length of her bikini-clad body crushed against me.

"I was afraid you'd be a no-show," she said, and kissed me.

A voice in the back of my brain screamed: *Let go of her! Get out of here!*

I waited for my heart to slide back down my throat before I said, "What do you want?"

"We have to talk."

"What's left to say?"

"I saw you earlier. Then Rodney told me Daddy had you cornered in his study. I waited at the top of the stairs. We can't talk now. There's not enough time. But later."

"No way."

She strolled across the room to her bedroom's sliding-glass door that opened to a sun deck and steps. That's how I'd been able to slip into her room at night. Steps. Sun deck. Sliding-glass door. Six weeks of trysts. Of having sex. Fifteen times, total.

I touched the white chenille bedspread.

Lisa's entire room was done in white: carpet, walls, vanity, desk, night table,

canopied bed, all with splashes of gold, blue, and pink for accent. I'd never seen the room filled with sunlight like this before, only moonlight and lamplight. The place was immaculate. Bed made. Spread taut. No clothes or other clutter on the floor. Dressing table neatly arranged.

In a way, her bedroom suddenly reminded me of Dr. Wells's study: everything in its place. Perfectly.

Muffin, her white Angora cat, lay on the bed, its eyes half-closed. I scratched the cat under the chin with my forefinger.

Lisa looked out the glass door and combed at her wet hair with her fingers. "They're still playing softball. Daddy wants to eat at three. It's quarter to now. He'll want me down there. After we eat, he wants to make a speech. Then he wants to organize a trap shoot. He'll be busy with guns, throwing the clay birds, making sure everything is safe. I'll meet you in the woods, where you always beached the canoe."

"Tell me what you have to say right now."

"Sweetie, there's not enough time. We don't want to get caught here." Still peering through the glass door, she stood on her tiptoes. "Oh, Daddy's out there now, talking to the catcher and batter, probably telling them it's nearly time to eat. Go down the stairs and out the front door. If you see anyone, tell them you were looking for the restroom."

She turned from the window, blond and beautiful, eyes blue, her tan the color of light honey.

"Are you pregnant?"

She flicked me a glance, and her lips melted into a smile. "Hurry, Billy. I have to change." She reached behind her neck and pulled at a string on her bikini top. Then she pulled the string behind her back. The bikini top fluttered to the floor.

I stood there a second, staring, my face feeling brick red, then bolted from the room.

Five minutes later I stood in the food line with Windy and clutched a paper plate, a plastic fork, and a plastic knife. I felt breathless. Encounters with Dr. Wells and Lisa—how red was my face, still?

“How’d your shirt get wet?” Windy said, and handed me a napkin. Her face glistened with sweat from playing softball in the sun. “Where were you? Did you see me hit a home run?”

The line moved forward two paces.

“I was talking to some guys,” I said. “I ... went into the house to the bathroom.”

I wanted to look away, but before I could Windy nailed me with her chestnut brown eyes.

“Two Port-O-Potties near the edge of the woods,” she said. “His and hers.”

“I ... didn’t see them.”

Windy stepped closer to me, her voice low, and jerked on my arm. “You found her, didn’t you? I can practically smell her on you.”

“I wasn’t looking for her.”

“Don’t lie, Billy.”

I’m sure my face looked on fire now.

The line moved two more paces.

I stood in front of the baked beans, smelling the brown sugar and bacon in them. From farther down the table I picked up the smell of barbecued chicken and ribs. I saw coleslaw, potato salad, and corn also sitting on the serving table

“Uh-oh!” Windy suddenly nudged me in the ribs. “Here she comes now. On the prowl.”

“Where?” I looked up.

“Hi, when did you guys get here?” Lisa strolled up to us and tossed us a smile.

“Hey,” I said. “What’s happening?”

She’d changed into white, cutoff, Calvin Klein jeans, lace around the edges of the legs; and a white, frilly, sleeveless blouse. Her blond hair swung free and silky to her shoulders. Pinned in the right side of her hair at the top of her head was a blue ribbon, a gold one on the left side.

“We’ve been here a while,” Windy said brightly. She grabbed my hand and snuggled against my side.

“Nice party,” I said. “Food smells good. I’m starved.”

“There’s plenty, and lots of things to do. Have a good time.”

Windy stretched and kissed me again on the cheek, a loud smack. “Oh, we

intend to.”

Windy’s kiss made me twitch. Lisa didn’t seem to notice the kiss, but her eyes caught mine as she said, “See you later.” She smiled, gave a little finger wave, and strolled away. *Awesome butt and legs.*

“Put your eyeballs back in your head,” Windy said.

“Sorry.”

Windy and I filled our plates and sat at a table under the tent. I shoveled beans into my mouth, ripped off a bite of chicken breast, scarfed it down, and then gulped cold Pepsi.

“What was that all about?” Windy said.

“What?”

“The Witch ignored the fact I kissed you. Then she looks you straight in the eye and goes, ‘See you later.’ What’s with that?”

“Everybody says ‘See you later.’”

“Why didn’t you kiss me back, right there in front of her? On the lips. Hard.”

“I—I didn’t think of it.”

“I’m trying to help you, Billy. But you don’t seem to be paying attention.”

Sitting at tables, most kids ate under the tent. Some sat on blankets in the grass under the sun and devoured their food. A few ate on the porch, others down by the water.

As kids finished eating, Lisa and Eric herded them under the tent, where Dr. Wells wanted to say a few words. A cool breeze puffed through the tent. Dr. Wells stood in its center. He turned slowly, spoke in his rich voice, and made eye contact with everyone he could. “Much has been written and said this year about the accomplishment of State Center High’s volleyball team and coaches: a perfect season, a state championship. I would like to add my congratulations and say that I am happy that all of you could be here for this special celebration of my daughter’s eighteenth birthday. If you’ll permit my indulgence a moment, I would like to summarize the personal achievements of the graduating seniors of this team. These are the players who provided the maturity and leadership for this championship year.” Dr. Wells heaped praise on all the girls but especially the three seniors, pointing out the school records they set serving, blocking, and spiking, and noted that all three had earned college scholarships. A major

accomplishment.

Saving Lisa for last, Dr. Wells said, “My daughter, as precious to me as she is, does not need praise from me. She knows how I feel about her, how proud I am of her, how she has honored me and continues to honor me. However, let me take this occasion to announce that after much soul-searching, she has decided to attend college right here at State Center University.”

Everyone whooped and cheered.

I glanced at Lisa, where she sat twenty feet away from me at a picnic table with Eric. She was twisting a straw around her finger, a faint smile on her face. A fake faint smile. Not the joyous smile of someone who had made up her mind about college.

When Dr. Wells said he wasn’t going to waste any more time on speech making, more applause sounded. Kids rushed to congratulate Lisa, hugging her, shaking her hand. I lost sight of her in the crowd.

“You going to congratulate her?” Windy said.

“Do it for me.”

“I should at least shake the Witch’s hand.”

I got up and strolled out from under the tent into the sunshine. I was full of chicken and ribs and needed to stretch. A breeze blew off the lake, cooling me.

I decided I’d talk Windy into trap shooting. She was good with a shotgun or a rifle. I’d seen her bag squirrel, quail, rabbit, pheasant, duck, turkey, and deer. She’d like shooting and would probably break more clay birds than any of the others.

Once her turn came, I could sneak into the woods to be alone with Lisa.

God, I hoped she wasn’t pregnant.

Four

Rodney Wells was the first shooter.

Mounted on a four-by-four piece of plywood, the spring-loaded trap thrower sat on the ground. Fifteen or twenty kids had gathered around wanting to shoot. The others had gone back to swimming, badminton, horseshoes, and volleyball.

Dr. Wells explained to all of us—Rodney looked bored—that the gun should always be pointed up range, safety on. Don't turn around with it and wave it at someone, even if it's not loaded.

Dr. Wells cocked the thrower's arm, laid the clay bird in place, and pulled the cord. The arm sprang forward and hurled the fluorescent-orange bird toward the woods. A Browning over and under .20 gauge already at his shoulder, Rodney sighted the bird in an instant, fired, and blew it to dust.

Holding hands, Windy and I stood fifteen feet directly behind Rodney. I watched closely as Rodney broke another bird and another and another, the pungent smell of gunpowder filling the air.

It appeared Rodney wasn't leading the birds but was firing as soon as his sights hit the target, then following through.

"Have you ever shot trap?" I asked Windy.

She shook her head.

"I have a couple of times. It's not all that tough. Not with a spring-loaded thrower. The birds fly in generally the same direction at the same speed."

"I see that."

"I'll shoot next, then you can give it a try."

"All right."

Rodney broke twenty-five birds in a row. He turned around and smiled smugly. "Next?"

"I'll shoot," I said, before anyone else could volunteer.

Rodney emptied the leather pouch belted around his waist that held his

twenty-five spent shell casing. He tossed them into a cardboard box on the ground. Handing the pouch to me, he said, “Ten bucks says you can’t break twenty-five.”

Dr. Wells said, “Rodney, we’re shooting for pleasure.”

I dumped a box of twenty-five shells into the pouch and belted it around my waist. “Let’s make it twenty,” I told Rodney.

He smiled. “You’re on.”

“You said you’ve shot trap before?” Dr. Wells asked me.

“Couple of times.”

He nodded and handed me the Browning. It was the most beautiful weapon I’d ever touched, its polished wood and oiled barrel glimmering in the sunlight.

A gold trigger and a pheasant-hunting scene engraved on the receiver added even more class. The piece probably cost a thousand dollars or more. I knew he had even more expensive ones in his gun cases.

“Beautiful gun,” I said.

“That doesn’t make it shoot straight,” Rodney said. “Straight’s up to the shooter.”

“How about thirty bucks?” I said.

Rodney frowned.

I’d put him on the spot. He couldn’t back down, not after he’d broken twenty-five birds and had made the first bet. Too many other kids watching.

“Thirty?” I repeated.

Rodney’s eyes narrowed. “Forty.”

“You’re on.”

Dr. Wells said, “The top barrel’s improved cylinder, bottom’s modified. You ready?”

I glanced around the crowd, searching for Lisa. Didn’t see her. Maybe she’d already gone to the woods. I spotted Eric, though, waiting for a turn. Good. Windy could shoot next and Eric would have to wait his turn. Both would be busy.

“Ready,” I said.

Turning, facing the firing range, I swung the gun to my shoulder a couple of times, getting a feel for it. Nice balance. I sighted an imaginary bird in the sky

and followed it with the gun's sights. Satisfied, I cracked the gun open, inserted two shells, and snapped it closed.

"Everybody misses the first one," Rodney said.

"Pull," I said.

The bird shot out of the trap faster than I'd anticipated. I slammed the gun to my shoulder, sighted the bird and fired. My shot nicked the edge of the fluorescent-orange target—probably a single BB—splintering off a piece. The bigger chunk wobbled through the air like a wounded duck.

I blew out a breath. I'd been lucky.

Rodney sneered. "You going to count that?"

"He broke it!" Windy piped in from behind us.

"You want to go for fifty bucks?" I said.

"You won't break ten shooting like that," Rodney said. "Seventy-five."

"Enough!" Dr. Wells said.

I knew what I'd done wrong. I'd made a simple mistake that I shouldn't have. I hadn't followed through.

"Seventy-five bucks," I said.

I had maybe seventeen dollars on me. I doubted that Windy had more than ten. I didn't know how I'd pay up if I lost. I'd have to go home for more money.

"Pull," I said.

The clay bird winged out. I aimed, fired, and followed through. The bird exploded into dust.

"Way to go!" Windy yelled. Others applauded.

"That's only two," Rodney said. "Twenty-three more."

"Pull!" I said.

I aimed, fired, and dusted another bird. And another ... and another ... and another ... until I broke twenty-five in a row.

Tight lipped, Dr. Wells said, "Fine shooting."

Windy jumped to my side. "Wow! You were great."

She kissed me on the cheek.

Smiling, I cracked the gun, pulled out the two spent shells, and handed the weapon to Windy. "Your turn. They fly a little faster than I thought. Don't forget to follow through." Unbuckling the pouch, I looked around the crowd. "Where's

Rodney?”

“He left after the twenty-third bird,” Windy said. “He’s probably hiding.”

“I’ll be back in a minute.” I handed the pouch to Dr. Wells.

“Billy! Aren’t you going to watch me!”

“I won’t be long.”

Windy poked her bottom lip out. “Get your money later, Billy! Watch me!
Billy—!”

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