



THE LAST 18

Travis Mewhirter

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THE LAST 18

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CHAPTER 1



God, I loved that ball flight. I loved everything about it.

My pearly white Titleist breezed just along the tree line, teasing the branches that had gotten so much satisfaction from stealing an untold amount of perfect drives all season, and sailed by them, curving back into the fairway with a little draw.

It dropped safely into the short, apple-green grass about 280 yards from the tee box, rocketed off the sun-dried ground and bounded another ten to fifteen feet or so, leaving me with an easy wedge into the green.

It may have been just the first hole but we all knew this was going to be a low round for me today. When I had that ball flight working, there were few in Maryland who could beat me. Call me boastful or bigheaded but it's true. So, I guess you could just call me honest.

I could bend shots around trees at such a sharp angle the ball would look like a piece of paper being ripped by the wind. I could send them sailing over oaks sixty feet high that were just 10 yards in front of me. I could punch them under hungry limbs looking to eat up any unfortunate ball, coming their way only to have it whistle right under their branches and take a sharp hop and stop on a dime a few feet from the pin.

But, of course, golf is a masochistic game meant for the miserable and the insane. It was very rare for me to have this complete control of the ball but I had become so used to playing such erratic, risky, give-me-an-eagle-or-a-10 type of golf, I couldn't go back to the safe, take-a-bogey-if-you-have-to type of golf I had been raised to play.

Since I had hit my growth spurt midway through my junior year of high school and sprouted about eight inches overnight, I could hit it farther than two decent players combined. I loved that. There was nothing better than taking out a driver and blasting it over trees to cut a dog leg down by a hundred yards. The only problem, and a rather big one at that, was with the 300-plus yard length I had off the tee and with the rather abstractly artistic element, I sometimes unnecessarily added to my shots, I was about as consistent as a center in basketball shooting free throws.

My younger brother, Brian, who had just teed up his ball, was three years my junior and a shorter, stockier version of me and, befitting our disparate body types, was a much different type of golfer. We could both hit it a mile but he couldn't make a putt if the cup had Bugs Bunny sitting under the hole with a giant magnet, as in Space Jam (one of the all-time greats, mind you). But the kid was an artist with a wedge in his hand. He could open up the face until it was nearly 90 degrees lofted and still have the confidence to take a full swing, sky it 30 feet in the air just to have it come down five feet in front of him purely for the show of it. We always had to one-up each other—much the way brothers do—me with my crafty ball flights and gargantuan drives and him with his deft wedge-work.

No matter how many issues we could potentially have on the course with our rather interesting, homegrown style of play, if we were paired together, we were a hellish tandem

to beat.

Just three matches into the fall season, the local papers had already dubbed us the best duo the county had ever seen, possibly even the state. Neither of us really cared for that sort of thing. We were just out there because we loved the game and, of course, because we were driven mad to beat each other.

Our dad had to separate us about a dozen times a round when we were younger. We constantly argued and bickered, claiming the other had somehow cheated to lower his score by the one stroke, typically the difference between us.

Of course, we both knew neither of us would ever cheat with our father around, or even without him around. He was a stern man yet as loving as any father could be. He taught us the difference between playing and playing the right way.

Fathers have a tendency to do that.

“Golf,” he always said, his deep blue eyes finding ours no matter how hard we tried to avoid them, “is a gentleman’s game—a game of honor and you are going to treat it as such. Do you hear me?”

Even as I walked down the fairway now, with him nowhere in sight, I could hear him in my head as clearly as I had the millions of times I had heard it before. Meanwhile, Brian was busy muttering things to himself in a language only he could understand. His ball hadn’t been quite as fortunate as mine. He played it a little too close to the tree line and his ball had caught a stray branch and wound up somewhere in the woods next to the left side of the fairway, a place each of us had been roughly 1,000 times before.

I think I heard him mutter “typical” and “lucky”, which probably were good guesses, considering those were his usual go-to lines when I hit a better shot than he did; but nobody will ever know what he said to himself on the course, maybe not even him.

The two poor kids we were playing against were from Ronald Reagan High School just a few miles down the road and, for lack of a better word or explanation, they sucked. Their game was about as pretty as their brown and black uniforms. Reagan had always gotten the short end of the stick when it came to golf just the same as we had always gotten that same treatment with football. I’m actually not too sure why these kids weren’t on the football team. They were both built like linebackers—broad shoulders, tree trunks for legs, a neck thick as a keg and arms that seriously tested the elasticity of their shirts. I’m not sure what they fed the kids over there at Reagan. Somehow, every year, they were built like trucks, yet equipped with blistering speed. This subsequently earned them the nickname ‘Ronald Roids High.’

My dad, a quarterback in his high school days who had gone on to play a few years in college, always joked he wished we’d moved to Reagan’s district where we would have likely ended up playing football. Well, that and because Ronald Reagan was his favorite president. He still has Ronald Reagan pictures hanging in our basement.

Unfortunate for him, or fortunate considering I was about as built for football as the Monstars were for basketball before they stole the NBA players’ talents. We had been raised in Parkstead where we grew up in a town that lived and breathed by the health of the local golf course.

That's where we were now, good old Everdeen Hills.

Here I stood, smack dab in the middle of the fairway, completely alone as Brian crashed through the woods looking for his ball.

He had turned one of his irons into a makeshift machete, whipping it into as many unlucky branches as possible, where having a chainsaw in his bag might just have been worth it. The Reagan kids were somewhere off to the right in the neighboring ninth fairway, which ran parallel to the first hole but in the reverse direction. I chuckled as they moved farther and farther away from our hole and closer to the ninth tee box.

Football players, indeed.

I turned and focused on my upcoming shot, nothing more than an easy sand wedge. The blue flag on top of the pin meant it was in the back, just over the second-tier of the green that stretched about 60-feet deep. *Leave it short and it's almost a sure three-putt. Sling it over and I'll be left with a nasty chip that would give the best players in the world cold sweats.* I only had about 100 yards left to the back so I pulled out my sand wedge.

A gap wedge would go way over and a full-swing lob wedge was too stupid for even reckless me to try. I glanced around to see if anybody else was ready to take his shot. Nobody was, so I stepped up to my ball.

The setting sun put a devilish glare even on the wedge's graphite-colored clubface. I turned my focus away from the club and onto a target just in front of the ball, a nifty trick my dad had taught me when I was ten.

It took only a three-quarter, watery-smooth swing and as soon as I hit it, I knew it was going to be good. One of the greatest feelings in the world is a purely hit golf ball. It's almost as if you hit nothing at all, completely effortless. That's exactly what it felt like now. A wallet-sized divot flew from the ground as my ball took off, high and straight at the pin and into the merciless sun.

I lost sight of it moments after impact but I really didn't have to look to know it was going to be good. My mother clapped as I heard the soft thud of my ball hitting the green. I didn't know if it had made it to the second tier or not and there was no way my mom could have either. However, regardless of the result, she would cheer just the same.

She was an incredible woman, my mother. Somehow she balanced the duties of raising three children—all boys, no less—playing the role of cook, chauffeur, maid and devoted fan among at least a dozen other things. She managed to make it to every single one of my older brother Colton's football games, even though she couldn't bear watching him take a handoff.

She would squeeze my dad's arm, wince when she heard the sound of pads crashing together, and then peek out with one eye, as a child plays hide and seek, only to see that about 99 percent of the time Colton was nowhere near the scrum in the middle of the field. He would be darting outside the fray, flitting this way and that, making a mockery of nearly every unfortunate defender who made any attempt to bring him down.

Poor Colt, ending up at Parkstead High with us. It was a black hole for football players. Even with his heart-stopping speed and remarkable ability to run 40 yards just to

gain three, he had no chance with the puny offensive line that Parkstead threw in front of him. Still, he had had his cleats, jitterbug moves and an indomitable spirit, which earned him a scholarship to a little Division-III school to play running back, a much different future from his two younger brothers who had never known the blood sweat and tears attitude of a football field. We preferred the etiquette and quiet serenity of a golf course.

Well, I preferred that quiet serenity, at least. I was typically calmer than Brian, who had finally found his ball in the middle of the forest. It appeared to be buried under a collage of brightly colored early-fall leaves. The Reagan kids had found theirs in the other fairway, albeit the wrong one but a fairway, none-the-less.

I saw the glimmer of one of Brian's irons, as he hacked his ball out of the woods. It thwacked one tree and zipped into another but somehow pin-balled its way out of the blanket of leaves and into the rough where it came to rest about the same distance from the hole where my drive had landed.

I still hadn't even moved after I had hit my ball, still had no idea if it was going to be an easy birdie putt, an impossible 2-putt or a heart-attack-inducing downhill chip. As calm a person as my mother had raised me to be, I was already getting frustrated.

I hated slow play, just like my father. As much as I hate to admit it, I was just a seventeen-year-old version of my father, Don Lammey. The way he felt about things like slow play, I felt the same.

In what seemed like an eternity, which, realistically, was probably a maximum of five minutes, I watched the Reagan kids roll, shank, duff and scoot their ball ten more times before they reached the green. It made me wince watching them. They reminded me a bit of Crabbe and Goyle in Harry Potter. I hated playing with bad golfers.

To my relief, Brian had finally emerged from the woods, covered in sweat and dirt with a few leaves tangled in his shaggy brown hair.

He got to his ball and didn't even take a practice swing. He just stepped up and ripped at it and, even in the thick Everdeen Hills rough, he was able to knock it to what appeared to be on the second tier with me.

He slipped the club back into his bag without wiping it down and threw the bag over his shoulder. We walked to the green in silence until he let out a low whistle when he saw our balls sitting side by side about five feet from the pin.

"Ten says I'm closer," he said, flashing a cocky grin, a grin that should never be allowed on a freshman's face.

Despite my frustration with the glacial pace of the round induced by the Reagan kids, I felt a smile creeping. Competition, especially with Brian, put a fire in my belly every single time. I could forget about the Reagan kids.

"I tell you what," I said. "I'll bet you I'm closer, and I'll even spot you three strokes the rest of the round. Winner does the trash tonight and dishes tomorrow."

Our only two chores—the trash and the dishes. We didn't even have to feed Jake, our yellow lab, or take him out when he needed to go about his business. Our parents asked very little of us and we still barely managed to do the only two things they did ask us to

do. But I knew if one of us had to do it because of a lost bet, the other would never let him forget about it.

“Oh, you’re on, big brudda,” he said, extending a hand and then pulling it away as I went to shake it, acting like he was slicking back his hair.

Typical freshman, I thought but I was still unable to keep from laughing a little at his antics.

When we got to the green, it turned out his was, in fact, closer, by maybe an inch. Nevertheless, to him, an inch may as well have been a foot, a yard, 100 miles.

“Told ya.”

“I’m so nervous. I mean, you’re such a good putter,” I said, sarcasm dripping from my mouth. “Actually, why don’t you just pick it up now since we all know it’s automatic anyway, right?”

“You’re still a-wayyyy,” he sang.

I smiled. I loved it.

I crouched down low, about three feet behind my ball, to read the putt, my knees cracking enough to sound like somebody just dropped a couple drumsticks on the ground (growing pains). I’d had this little 5-foot putt about a million times. It would slide a little to the left, maybe an inch, if I had the right speed. The greens looked as if they’d just been rolled that morning, which meant the ball would probably run a little quicker than normal.

As soon as I hit it, I knew it was in. I didn’t even watch it as it rolled towards the cup. Brian knew, too.

I saw him look my direction. I winked and blew him a kiss.

“You take any notes, sweetheart?” I crooned as the ball hit the bottom of the cup, making a satisfying ‘dink’ as it did.

“Even a broken clock is right twice a day,” he grumbled.

My mother, of course, reacted as if I had just won the U.S. Open.

“Way to go, Jay,” she exclaimed. “Woo.”

Brian’s putt dropped halfway down on the right side of the cup, took a 360-degree turn and popped out. He proceeded to tomahawk his putter into the ground, spraying dirt and grass all over and let out a string of curses that would make a sailor blush.

“Well, I guess you should have taken notes,” I said, laughing as I slipped my putter back into my bag.

Much to my pleasure and my little brother’s displeasure, that was generally how the rest of the round went.

My swing was just as silky as it had been on the first two shots. I don’t think I missed a fairway or green all day. Brian kept challenging me double or nothing as I rolled in birdie after birdie—five, in all. He didn’t play badly, tapping in for par on the ninth hole to shoot a 1-over-par 37. But very few high school players would have been able to get

within three shots of my five-under 31, which somebody, I forget who, told me broke some age-old county record.

After I picked my ball out of the ninth hole, I pointed directly to Brian.

“Trash tonight, dishes tomorrow...freshman.”

That always got him going. He hated being ridiculed for being the youngest. He didn't even bother shaking Crabbe and Goyle's hands afterwards, storming off and throwing his bag over his shoulder as he went.

Before I could even get off the green, my mother was wrapping me up in a bone-crunching hug.

“Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god, you were wonderful,” she shouted.

My cheeks burned with embarrassment. I tried to nudge her away just a little bit so I could get off the green. The group behind us still had to make their approach shots.

My coach, Mr. Hamilton, thumped me on my back as I made my way off the backside of the green, toward the cart path.

“I see Brian's lost some sort of bet,” he laughed, pointing at Brian, who was already waiting by my clunky little Honda Civic.

“Something like that,” I chuckled.

I was about halfway to the parking lot before another person, someone I had never seen before, or at least I thought I hadn't, but he did look awfully familiar, called me over.

“Young man,” he said, leaning his enormous frame against a pine tree next to the driving range. It seemed to bow a little under his weight. “You have one more minute?”

I sighed, held up a finger to Brian to let him know I would just be a minute, and made my way over to the man.

He had to be one of the largest people I'd ever seen. He was at least 300 pounds and had more chins than any normal person should have. Nevertheless, he had a friendly face and a Santa Clause-like twinkle in his brilliant blue eyes.

“Name's Mike,” he said, extending a chubby, sweaty hand. “Mike Oberdorf. That was a hell of a round you had there, son.”

The name rung so many bells in my head but I couldn't place it. I'd google it later.

I took his hand and tried to shake it but it ended up being more like a slippery high five.

“Thanks. I'm Jay. I guess I hit it alright out there,” I said sheepishly.

I was never any good at accepting praise.

“Alright?” he exclaimed. “Son, I've seen alright. I've seen good. I've seen remarkable. What you did out there was flat out stupid good but I'm not here to talk about your round. I'm here to talk to you about where you're playing golf next year because, son, I'd damn well like you to be playing for me.”

CHAPTER 2



“Who was that?” snorted Brian, as I climbed into my little beat-up Civic.

I could hardly talk my smile was so big. My cheeks had actually started to hurt.

“He was uh...he was,” I couldn’t get through it. I was giggling with excitement. “You’ll see.”

However, as we drove home, I still couldn’t place where I had heard that name before or why he looked so familiar. At the moment, I was too giddy to care.

I had been recruited before, but never in person. Coaches would always get turned off by my glaring inconsistencies. They would call me after I would fire a 67 in some tournament but then a week later tell me they would be “pursuing other options,” when I followed it up with a spectacularly atrocious 92.

The few who had expressed real interest in me were from smaller schools. They knew I could go as low as any high school kid in the country could and I could probably draw some serious attention for it. Nevertheless, even they had their hesitations about extending any sort of scholarship offer. I was one of the riskiest moves a coach could make. Maybe I would somehow find a consistent swing and keep the majority of my rounds at par or better but there was an equally good chance my swing would disappear altogether and I would make the coach look like an idiot for wasting a scholarship.

I had never really minded what little attention I did get. I knew I could play and I knew there were certain days where it looked like it might have been my first time ever touching a club. I knew I was putting coaches in a tough spot and realized I might not get the offer that would likely be extended to Brian in a few years.

Brian had been playing since he could pick up a twig. He had never felt the lure of a basketball court or the glorious temptation of becoming a football star like Colton. Golf had been his one and only love. His swing came as naturally and reliably as the sunrise. He never had days where he would shoot 92 or 97, as I so regularly did. He would stomp and snort and throw fits anytime he was over par, even if it was just one-over like today.

Me? I was just thankful to walk off the course with a ball left in my bag.

He didn’t speak the whole ride home. He just stared out the window, pondering the “what-ifs” that every golfer, no matter the handicap, will go through after each round.

What if I hadn’t hit that drive out of bounds on No. 3? What if I’d run in that 12-footer on five or chipped in that easy look on six? What if, what if, what if?

He was especially caught up in them this time because I had beaten him. Well, “beaten him” doesn’t quite describe it. I crushed, clobbered, destroyed and, most of all embarrassed him. Even if I was three years his senior, he couldn’t stand losing, especially to anybody who shared the same blood as him.

The five-minute commute home wasn't enough time for him to give his round a full examination. As he did after most of his bad rounds, he remained in the passenger seat as I got out.

I had only opened the squeaky screen door to my house before my mother was wrapping me in a hug again.

"Congratulations," she exclaimed. "You were awesome. Where's Brian? Pouting in the car again? Who was that man you talked to after the round? What did he want? Was he a college recruiter? Where is he from?"

"Whoa, easy there. Settle down for a second," I said, freeing myself from her grasp while trying to soak in the barrage of questions.

"First, thanks. I played pretty well, I guess."

"You sure di..." she said, trying to interrupt before I put a finger up to stop her.

"Let me finish," I said, exhaling.

"Yes, Brian is in the car thinking about how badly I just kicked his ass. That man was a college recruiter from Alcorn..."

This time, there was no stopping her. Her normally deep brown eyes lit up like the Griswold's house in Christmas Vacation (another one of my all-time favorites).

"Alcorn? Alcorn? Honey, that's amazing. Congratulations!.

She hugged me again.

"Mom, c'mon. I get it, it's a big deal. He's actually coming over right now for dinner."

I was immediately freed from her grasp.

"Right now?" she squealed.

She hurried into the kitchen to tidy up. I made my way to the family room but I could still hear her talking to herself a million miles an hour.

"Alcorn...I wonder what he's like. Does he like chicken? I hope he likes chicken because that's what we're having. Well from the looks of him, he'll eat just about anything. Ah, but this place is so dirty. I have to clean, I have to..."

I clicked on the TV and let the sounds of SportsCenter drown out her incessant muttering. Finally, a moment to enjoy my round all by myself. Well, almost. Jake came trotting in and flopped down next to me on our black, leather couch. A few seconds later, Brian came thundering through the house, slamming every unlucky door in his way.

Yeah, some moment.

"What's for dinner?" I heard him ask my poor mother, who was already freaking out about Mr. Oberdorf's coming over.

"It's your favorite, Brian's chicken," she hastily replied.

Brian simply grunted his approval and belly-flopped onto the couch next to me.

"You should be nicer to her, you know," I said.

“Oh shut up, pretty boy. We can’t all be Mr. California like you. Shit, if I’d played like you half the time I’d have already quit golf and picked up badminton or something girlish like that. You’d be good at something like that.”

“You’re right, I guess waxing you by six shots in nine holes just wasn’t good enough. Or getting recruited by Alcorn isn’t very good either.”

That shut him up.

His dream was to go to Alcorn like our father. The college had won two national championships in golf each of the last two years. The idea of hoisting an NCAA trophy was something we both knew he could not live without.

“Is that who that person was?” he asked. The tone of his voice had gone from anger to something that resembled a humbled awe.

“Yep. Should be here any minute, actually.”

He shot up off the couch, sprinted over to the window and peeked out through our red curtains.

“Shit. Is that him walking up right now? Ughhh, he watched me shoot a 37. A 37.”

“Oh shut up. You act like that’s bad. Try shooting a 97 after having three coaches call you the week before.”

He sniggered and ran over to the door, eager to meet Mr. Oberdorf. I heard Brian open the door and stammer out some form of hello before the two made their way into the kitchen.

Whatever my mother was cooking smelled awesome. She had laid out a tray of shredded chicken marinated in barbeque sauce, a pile of French fries, fruit salad, and some kind of strawberry jello thing topped with whipped cream. I don’t know exactly what it was, but I certainly wasn’t asking any questions.

By the time we had all taken our seats, Mr. Oberdorf had already wolfed down half his food. There was something I liked about the man but I couldn’t quite pin it down. Maybe it was the fact he was so homegrown and not uber-professional as many recruiters would be. Most of them barely touched the food when they came to see Colton, only eating it because it would be rude not to eat. Not Oberdorf—this man from Alcorn, the most prestigious college golf program in the country, just put his head down and went for it. Maybe that meant he wasn’t all that serious about recruiting me, which I honestly expected and could live with. Or, maybe this was just who he was, putting it all out there for everyone to see.

“So, Mr. Oberdorf, is it?” my mother asked.

“Yes ma’am. You got it. On the first try too, not many people do. Most people will go with O-Bee-Darf or O-Beer-Dorf, something like that.”

“And you’re interested in Jay playing golf for you?”

“Well, interested I don’t think quite describes it. This boy,” he said, pointing a grubby, barbeque stained finger at me, “is truly something special. I’ve never seen a high-schooler

work the ball like him in all my years in this business and, let me tell you something, it's been quite a few."

I could feel my face turning bright red. Brian, who had been so excited to meet him, was clearly getting frustrated with me getting all the fame, at the moment.

"If it were up to me," Oberdorf continued. "I'd offer him a full-boat right now. Unfortunately, we have to do all this formal, important stuff like filling out papers and documents nobody looks at or cares about, to be honest. Then it has to be approved by somebody in some office, who then tells me if it's a go or not. But, like I said, I've never seen a talent like him, except for maybe that little man seated across from him."

This time he pointed to Brian, who immediately perked up.

"You're saying awfully nice things," said my mother, beaming at the two of us. "I don't know what to say."

"Well," he said, rising out of his chair and bringing his plate over to the sink. "I tell you what. If these boys, Jay in particular, can keep this type of play up. You don't have to say much. Their game is going to be doing plenty of talking for all three of ya."

He rinsed off his dishes, slipped them into the washer and turned to leave.

"Here's my card," he said, passing me a little blue business card with the golden Alcorn Ram logo shining up at me. "Call me anytime you'd like, whether it be that you just want to chat or you get the case of the shanks."

He paused and winked at me. He must have known my unfortunate proclivity for those cursed shanks, sometimes.

"Or if you want to tell me that you smoked your brother again. Either way, I'll keep in touch. It was wonderful meeting y'all, I can't thank you enough for that delicious dinner, but it's about time for me to be getting back home."

With that, he waddled out, leaving the three of us all stoplight red from his radiant praise.

"What a pleasant man he is," my mother gasped after a few minutes. "I'm so proud of you boys."

After dinner, I helped my mother clean up and tidy the kitchen. When I went up to my room to shower and relax, Brian stood in the hallway with a smirk, clutching a bottle of something clear but, judging from the look on his face, it certainly wasn't water.

"I think even a pretty boy like you, knows what this calls for," he said, waggling the bottle in front of me. "It's time to celebrate."

CHAPTER 3



The bass blasting from the house 50 yards away sent vibrations through my little Civic as I pulled up to Mike Cheyene's driveway.

The kid was crazy. Always throwing parties, always doing the craziest shit you could imagine—skydiving, picking fights, motorcycle races. He was that kid with the fake ID that every high school seems to have. Anytime somebody needed alcohol, Mikey was your man.

An adrenaline junkie at heart, the kid was out of his mind. Nevertheless, everybody loved him. Even the parents who knew of his less than responsible lifestyle adored him. He was charming and fun, always saying please and thank you, but then never failing to throw back 10 shots and do a backflip into his pool off his roof—*his roof*.

Somehow, he never, and I mean never, got caught. The cops made routine visits to his house but he was so good at hiding what was going on he never got hit with anything more than a warning. His four-story mansion was tucked back beyond Beckerstreet road, deep in the woods, protected by massive pine trees in the front and an endless forest in the back. No matter how loud he blasted his music—which he took full advantage of—nobody who wasn't invited would even hear a blip.

Everybody in the school knew Mikey, even Brian, a freshman. The kid had a reputation for throwing the craziest bangers of the year, ranging from toga parties to beer Olympics that attracted anybody who was anybody at Parkstead High. Naturally, this one was no different.

As Brian and I walked down the pine needle covered path to his house, we could hear the chants of some attention-starved kid going on his 30th second in a keg stand.

"31, 32, 33," bellowed a rowdy crowd, clearly in a drunken stupor even though it wasn't even midnight yet.

"You're lucky you shot so low today," Brian said.

"And why is that?"

"Well, you're gonna have to do a keg stand for every stroke. That's how it works."

Of course, my freshman baby brother would be telling me "how it works" in the drinking world.

"Double or nothing says I beat you again," I said, punching him in the arm hard enough for him to drop the case of cheap piss-water beer he was hauling.

"Freshman," I added, flashing a cocky grin back at him as I turned and quickened my pace to the party, growing louder with every step I took.

I turned the corner and hopped onto Mikey's deck and was greeted by a roar from the belligerent crowd.

“Jay, Jay, Jay, Jay,” they slurred, half in unison, half trailing off on their own pace.

“Keg-stand, Keg-stand,” began another chant from somewhere on the balcony, two stories above.

Christ, I’d only been here two seconds and I was already getting pushed into doing a keg stand.

“Can somebody toss me a b...” I began to ask but was cut off. Somebody behind me had grabbed my feet and was hoisting me upside down into the air. Whoever was holding my legs, were doing a bad job of it. They stumbled forward, knocking my head into a pair of knees and shins, hauling me toward the keg.

“Jay, Jay, Jay,” began the crowd again. I rolled my eyes, hoisted myself on top of the keg with my left arm, grabbed the nozzle with my right, and went for it.

Forty five seconds later I was lying on the soaking wet pool deck, lightheaded, close to vomiting and giggling my ass off.

“You sssee that?” I coughed at Brian, who had a beer in each hand. “45 seconds, 45 freakin’ seconds,”

“Oh, yea, you must be so proud, out-drinking your freshman brother for a whole forty-five seconds,” he replied sarcastically. “You’re a real heavyweight, let me tell you.”

I tried to get up but my head did about a 400 degree turn and, before I knew it, I was back on the refreshingly cold pool deck.

“Gimme a minute. I’ll be up at it in a sec.”

I just lay there, waiting for the spins to die out while the rest of the party raged on. After a few minutes, I was back up again, wading through the shirtless and bikini-clad crowd while being offered drinks and shots everywhere I went. Some of the shots were fruity. Some were bitter. Some burned. Some cooled. I knew I’d feel every single one of them in a few minutes. After about half an hour of fighting through the mob of teenagers, I finally plowed my way inside to the unfinished basement and worked my way onto the beer pong table with Brian.

“You see your girl yet?” he asked, grinning.

“What? Who?”

I clutched to the table to keep my balance. The shots were beginning to take their toll. My vision was getting a little blurry. My legs didn’t seem to be working quite right.

“Oh c’mon don’t play dumb with me. Morgan’s here and you know it.”

“She is?”

I tried to stand up straight but immediately thought better of it, grabbing back onto the table.

Brian roared with laughter.

“Oh, yea, that looks believable.”

I let go of the table and tried to stand on my own but again failed. To make matters worse, a pair of hands covered up my eyes.

“Guess who?” whispered an all-too familiar voice.

My heartbeat must have tripled in a second. I loved that voice.

I grinned, resisting the urge to turn around and wrap Morgan up in what would likely be a falling, stumbling, sloppy hug.

“Hmm, I don’t know. Alex?”

“Nope, guess again.”

I could feel her warm breath against my ear. She smelled of watermelon and vodka. I spluttered a little bit and tried to regain my cool. She was too good at this.

“Umm...uhh, Catie?” I asked, making my best attempt at playing it off.

“God, you’re cute,” she said, uncovering my eyes and spinning me around. Before I could even get a grip of my surroundings again, her fingers were running through my hair and she pulled her body tightly against mine and gave me a long, wet kiss. I think my heart exploded right there.

“Uhh, big bro,” cut in Brian. “We’re trying to play a game here. Either get a room so I can get a new partner or put your little lady down and shoot.”

My face must have been stoplight red. I turned back towards the table but couldn’t stop smiling. My cheeks actually hurt...again.

“You mind if I play this one?” I turned and asked Morgan, who was leaning her head on my shoulder, her impossibly blonde hair spilling down her back.

“Do your thing, Jay,” she said, slapping me on the butt. “I’ll just be outside in my little. Tiny. Itty. Bitty. Bikini.”

She spun and headed towards the deck, slipping off her shirt in the process to show a bikini top of which her mother certainly would not have approved.

For a minute, we all just stared, watching her strut out of the room.

“You sure you would rather play beer pong with three other dudes than go be with that?” laughed Brian. “I tell you what, I’m not letting you play. Please, for the love of God, go be thankful a girl so hot could ever possibly consider you.”

He didn’t have to say it twice. I tossed the ping pong ball behind my head and practically ran. Well, I did a drunken version of running, to catch up to her.

“That took you longer than I thought,” she said, when I got to her. She turned around and grabbed my hands, pulling me in close again.

“You want to get a little wet?”

Her nose was touching mine and I could feel her hands sliding down my torso until they gripped my waistband. She pulled me in a little closer.

“I think you should come get wet with me.”

Any cool that I had, which wasn't much, before was completely gone. Obliterated, incinerated, vanished, gone; whatever you want to call it, I had none of it.

"I..uhh...err...um..you look...wow," was all I managed.

"You're too cute, Jay," she giggled, turning and taking a few steps toward the pool. "Get that shirt off and come swim with me."

My shirt was on the deck in a matter of seconds. She shimmied out of her skirt to reveal an equally tiny bikini bottom. I breathed hard and shook my head. Brian was right. I was way out of my league here.

I slipped into the pool after her as she drifted back towards the deep end that was dimly lit and away from the fray of the throngs of yelling, obnoxious drunks.

"Well, what do we do now?" I asked, finally regaining a little bit of my cool as the drunkenness turned from sloppy to overconfident.

"Just be quiet and kiss me."

Her fingers were working their way through my hair again, pulling my face into hers. I floated in as close as I could, my hands running down her Goosebumps-riddled body, which might as well have been naked considering how tiny the American flag bathing suit was that she was wearing.

"Jay," she breathed, moving down and kissing my neck. "Let's go upstairs, or to your car. Let's get out of here."

My mind blanked on what to say. This girl, widely considered as one of the best looking in the school, was asking, no, suggesting, I take her to my bedroom or car.

"Car it is," I whispered into her ear.

We snagged our clothes and raced across the wet yard, falling and stumbling the whole way, with her holding my hand and giggling behind me.

"This is crazy," she laughed. "Are we actually doing this?"

"Your idea," I called back.

I fumbled with my keys, desperately trying to open the damn Civic. What was I even bothering with the keys for? The passenger door hadn't been able to lock for years. I ripped it open, slid the seat all the way up to the front and helped Morgan slip into the back. I clambered in and checked to make sure nobody was spying before I closed the door behind me.

My 6-foot-4 frame was not an ideal fit for a little backseat hookup but Lord was I going to do everything in my power to make it work. We laughed and giggled and stripped, banging against the roof and door and bumping into each other every two seconds.

"You're fun," she giggled. "I didn't think you would actually do something like this."

"Well, you never know what a 45-second keg stand followed with about 100 shots will make you do," I said, giving her a swift kiss.

My legs were jammed against the door in the most awkward angle of all time and I knew I was squishing her. She was only about 100 pounds soaking wet and I had all 190 or so pounds of me lying directly on top of her. I looked down at her and we both started bursting into laughter.

“This will never work,” she said in between a fit of giggles.

“I should have picked the bedroom.”

I punched the driver’s seat mock anger.

We untangled ourselves in a half-naked mess. I sat up, kissed Morgan on the cheek, and began slipping my button down shirt back on when I saw a sight that made my heart stop.

I couldn’t believe it. This couldn’t happen. Not now. Not today. Not on the day I had received an unofficial college scholarship offer. But it was happening anyway. Right in front of me.

Blue and red lights, hordes of them, flashed about a hundred yards down the road, flying right for the driveway.

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