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SEAN PORTER'S DILEMMA

You wonder, sometimes, how you get into these situations. Looking back, I have to believe that, somewhere along the timeline of my life, I was led to this point, that I would be here no matter how I led my life. But I digress...

In the spring of 1981, I was experiencing a crisis. I was a sixteen-year-old soccer jock with girl trouble brewing, ready to spill out and burn me good. On this particular weekend, I had spent Saturday afternoon doing homework and fooling around with Kristina Mendoza, the girl I had been dating for a few weeks, only to end up frustrated when her mother called. Our fun was interrupted, and she had to go home. Later that same afternoon, I helped coach a team of younger kids, a boy's under-eight soccer team, to their first win of the season, and we all celebrated by going out for pizza and sodas afterwards. Davey and Kip, two kids I had been working with who

were on the team, fell asleep in my car as I was driving them home. I carried them into their house, where my old girlfriend, Molly O'Toole, was babysitting. One thing led to another, and before I could stop it, Molly and I were going at it on the family room floor.

Now, here it was, Sunday afternoon, and I still couldn't work up the courage to call Kristina, even though I knew she was waiting to hear from me. Not only did I screw Molly, but I had the feeling I had royally screwed myself by letting the little head do my thinking for me last night. I had no idea what I should do.

So I did nothing, which was even worse. I hid at home most of the day, even though it was a gorgeous spring Sunday. I didn't want to see anybody, I didn't want to talk to anybody. I couldn't even stand being in my own skin. I tried to tell myself to give Kristina a call, pretend that everything was all right, but I knew things weren't all right, and I knew my voice would betray me. I thought about calling her brother Jorge, one of my best friends, but I wouldn't know how to explain it to him, either. My best buddy Jake would be sympathetic, but he had his own troubles, ever since he was caught with his pants down, literally, with his next-door neighbor, Jaimie.

It was just too much of a dilemma for a sixteen-year-old kid.

So I stayed locked away from the world at large, hiding in my room (it almost sounds like a Brian Wilson song; in fact, it felt like a Brian Wilson song). I dreaded going to school on Monday, but I knew I wouldn't be able to effectively fake an illness. Mom and Dad had seen it all with my older brother Mike, and he pretty much ruined it for me, as well as my younger brother Stephen, when it came to trying to scam the parents.

Monday morning dawned cold and rainy, perfect for my mood. In the hallway before first class, I imagined that everybody around me was whispering and pointing at me accusingly, knowing practically first-hand what had happened over the weekend. I kept my head buried in my locker, trying to will myself into some sort of invisibility.

By lunchtime I was a wreck. I wanted to move away, start life over under a new identity. Everything, including what little future I had, looked bleak. And then things got really bad.

I was standing under the canopy of one of the rear doors of the school during lunch. It was one of the spots where the smokers tended to congregate, but I was hoping that the weather would discourage a lot of them. Of course, today I couldn't be that lucky. I was enveloped in a blue-white cloud of cigarette smoke as I tried to choke down my sandwich. Finally, I had enough. I disgustedly tossed the rest of my lunch away and yanked open the door. I thought maybe the library would be a safe place to hang out for the rest of my lunch period. It was, after all, foreign territory to most of my acquaintances. I headed in that direction, only to bump into Jorge Mendoza.

Jorge was a couple of inches shorter than me, but what he lacked in height, he more than made up for in ferocity. He grabbed the front of my shirt and pushed me back against the wall.

"What the fuck is going on, Sean?" he growled.

I put my hands up in resignation, and tried bluffing. "What do you mean? Get off of me, Jorge."

"You know what I mean," he said. "Rumor has it you're back together again with Molly. So tell me, Porter. What the fuck is going on?"

"No, I'm definitely not back together with Molly. Where did you hear that?"

"The usual sources," he admitted. He let me go, but still stood close to me, not about to give me a chance to slip away. "So how would a rumor like that get started?"

"Uh," I said cleverly. My mind was scrambling for something plausible to say, and was coming up blank, as usual.

"You din' call Kristina all weekend, either. And she's pretty upset about it. It's pretty suspicious, Sean," he continued.

I desperately needed a friend in my corner, if I had any hope of redeeming myself in Kristina's eyes. I had to hope that Jorge was that friend.

"Look, Jorge, I need your help. You've got to talk to Kristina for me."

"Why, *amigo?* Why don' you talk to her yourself?"

"Because I am drowning in a lake of shit, and she's probably going to throw an anchor at me instead of tossing a safety rope, when she hears about this." I put my arm around his shoulder and turned with him to walk down the hallway. I felt his shoulder muscles bunch up, as if he wanted to shrug off my arm, but I was determined to enlist his help. I hung on to him until I finally felt him relax a little. Not much, but enough. "I'll tell you all I have to tell, Jorge, but you've got to help me convince your sister that I'm not the bad guy here," I pleaded.

He looked at me out of the corner of his eye, but at least he didn't shove me away and bury me. I steered him toward the library, where we might be able to find a corner we could whisper. A place where I could confess my sins.

The library was nearly empty. I guided him to a table away from the windows and the doors, and we sat down across from each other. We both put our arms on the table and leaned in toward each other so we could quietly converse. Jorge's eyes were hard and dark as he sat across from me, implacable and cold.

I laid myself bare and told him nearly everything. I told him about studying with Kristina in the afternoon, and about making out with her after lunch. I told him about the soccer game, and how well the boys had played, and especially how the keepers had seemed to grasp what Jorge had tried to teach them. I told him about going out for a pizza celebration afterward, about how the boys had fallen asleep, and about how Molly had answered the door at the Wilkinson house. I told him about putting them to bed, and about how I was looking at Molly's art project. I confessed about being

lulled by her, and I told him about her little play with the wax banana, and how she used it to her advantage. I told him about fucking on the floor, sparing no detail, offering no excuses, letting him see the Sean Porter I had come to loathe. The only thing I didn't tell him was how his sister looked on my family room floor, her hands on the back of my head, pressing my mouth harder onto her naked pussy as I reveled in her sweet taste, and how much she loved licking her own juices from my face and lips. I needed an ally, after all, not another enemy.

"Sean, you really fucked up," whispered Jorge as he shook his head.

"I know I did. I've been beating myself up about it since it happened. But what do I do about it?" I asked in desperation.

"I dunno. Lemme work on it a little." Jorge stood up from the table and walked away, still shaking his head.

Maybe I had found an ally. I hoped I had. Then again, maybe I had given him all the ammunition he needed to bury me.

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RUNNING

Jorge was a true friend. Even with all his efforts, though, Kristina cried for a week after she found out about what happened, and she wouldn't even talk to me. Molly started out the week practically vamping around me, but after a couple of days of me not even acknowledging her, she toned it down a little. It was still monumentally embarrassing, but there was nothing I could do about it. Maybe I was imagining it, but there seemed to be a lot of whispering and finger-pointing going on in the halls between classes as I walked alone through school. My appetite was gone, and I couldn't concentrate on homework.

What I did, instead, was run. Every afternoon after school, I would grab my soccer ball and head for the park and run laps around the baseball fields and the soccer fields. At first I just kicked the ball and ran after it, getting some of my frustrations out by slamming on the ball. Chasing that ball down got old pretty fast, so I began to give myself targets to aim for. Maybe it was a stick in the grass I would try to hit, or I would aim for a fence post and give

myself some imaginary give-and-go passes. This progressed into doing alternating laps dribbling with just my left foot, then my right foot, then just the inside of each foot, followed by a lap using just the outside of my foot. By the end of the week, I had added an occasional lap where I would try to keep the ball in the air, juggling it off my foot, my knee, my head, shoulder, chest, anything I had to do to keep the ball from hitting the ground. That was surprisingly hard to do, especially while trying to move around the perimeter of a field.

Twice a week, Coach Bill and the team would meet me at the park for practice. Bill and I had allowed the boys to pick a team name, and they decided to call themselves the Warriors.

Early one afternoon, Lori Wilkinson saw me working out when she dropped off the boys for practice a few minutes early. I was just coming toward Bill and the boys, doing a crossover dribble that made me look like a hopping, wounded duck, when I saw her walking toward me, a big smile on her face.

"What are you doing, Sean? It looks so funny," she said.

I was out of breath, and couldn't answer for a minute. I wiped the sweat off my face with the edge of my t-shirt. I saw her eyes glance at my belly, but I was huffing and puffing too much to suck it in.

"Torturing myself," I finally managed to reply. "It looks pretty odd, I know, but it makes me concentrate on the ball more."

"How early are you here before practice, Sean? If you have time, I know Davey and Kip would really like to play more soccer with you."

"That would be great," I said. "Practice starts at five, so if you can bring them by around four-fifteen or so, that will give us plenty of time."

"Wonderful!" Lori clapped her hands together in delight. "I'll tell them about it on the way home. If I let them know now, they'll be impossible to handle during practice, they'll be so excited." Her eyes were bright as she continued, "You've been so good for them. I can't even express how much you have meant for them, Sean."

We chatted for a few minutes more as Coach Bill got his cones and drills organized. Other moms were driving up, dropping boys off for practice. Justin's mother saw Lori and me talking, and came over to say hello.

"Sean," said Lori, "this is Wendy Marcus, Justin's mother."

Mrs. Marcus was short and chunky, very busty, with short, dark brown hair. "Hi, Mrs. Marcus, glad to meet you," I said, holding out my hand.

She held my hand in hers, her fingers tracing along my hand as lightly as feathers. "Please," she said with a twinkle in her eye, "call me Wendy." She turned to Lori. "You're right, Lori, he is to die for." She actually winked at me as she turned and walked back to her car, giving her backside a little extra wiggle as she went. I just stood there goggling at her. Lori snorted, then burst out laughing.

"Subtlety is not Wendy's long suit," she said with a chuckle.

"I guess not," I mumbled, embarrassed.

"I'll see you after practice, Sean," said Lori. She waved to Davey and Kip, and walked up the slope toward her car. I caught myself admiring her ass as she was walking away, comparing her slim backside to Wendy's more substantial one, and gave myself a mental boot in the ass for it. *Jesus Christ, Sean, aren't you in enough hot water over women? Now you're going to go letching Mrs. Wilkinson?* I chided myself for a fool, and shook my head roughly.

I trotted over to catch up with Bill, so we could go over the drills he had in mind for that day's practice.

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I had also called Mrs. Dailey, from our soccer association, and told her I would be glad to referee any games she wanted. After some convincing that I really did have the time for such a schedule,

she assigned three games to me each for Saturday and for Sunday. Along with Coach Bill's game, that meant I would be at seven soccer games each weekend, more than enough to keep me busy, exhausted, and out of trouble.

The next Saturday morning, I started at nine o'clock in the morning with an under-eight girl's match, followed immediately by an under-twelve boy's game that required a lot of running on my part. I had an hour break for lunch, and then it was back to the field for the Warriors game. I just had time to help Bill pack up his equipment, and I was off to referee my third game, an under-twelve girl's game.

On Sunday, I worked as a referee in two games, and as a linesman for an adult game. By the time I got home late Sunday afternoon, I was sweaty, tired and hungry, and I still had all my homework to do. I spent about fifteen minutes on the phone with my best friend Jake Lehigh, and managed to crawl into bed by nine that night, looking forward to simply closing my eyes and allowing my troubles to float away for a few short hours.

The next week it was more of the same, except that I wasn't quite the monster at school that I had been. Typical of such an environment, a new crisis emerged that took the spotlight off me, and nearly everybody, except for the primary players in the Sean Porter Soap Opera, pretty much forgot about it all. Even my best buddies, Eric Johnson and Jake, dropped the subject, leaving just Kristina and Jorge, Molly and me to address the lingering issues.

And even the other three players in the drama never mentioned the one issue that was scaring the shit out of me: because of our little adventure, I was afraid Molly might be pregnant.

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TRYING TO MAKE AMENDS

Finally, the place we all most liked to hang out, the Dairy Queen, opened for the season. I headed over there between games on a Saturday, and found a bunch of kids there. Molly and her best friend, Tessa Navarrone, were sitting at a table with Tessa's boyfriend, Austin Graves, and, of all people, Joey Amonte. Joey was one of Richie Del Toro's Bulls, our local version of a gang of bad boys. He was acting large, no doubt because he had one of the prettiest girls in school sitting next to him. I ordered a hot fudge sundae and joined Toby Mueller, Ashley Horvath, Josh O'Toole, and Andrea Coulter at another table. Toby and Ashley had started going out together right after the Turnabout Dance, and Josh, Molly's twin brother, had been going with Andrea since around the first of the year.

As I sat down, I nodded in the direction of the other table.

"What's up with that?" I asked.

Josh looked disgusted. "You know," he said, "I used to think that Molly was pretty much okay, as sisters go. But lately..." He just

shook his head at the sight of his cheerleader sister sitting with one of the true losers of our school.

Andrea grasped his hand, as if she could somehow channel support into him.

"Hey, Sean," Toby began, "I thought you and M... Ow!" he exclaimed, giving Ashley a hurt look as he reached down to rub his shin where she had apparently swiftly kicked him. She was giving him a stern look, practically willing him to shut up, especially with Molly's brother sitting at the same table.

"So, Sean," said Ashley, trying to divert the conversation, "I hear you've been refereeing a lot this spring."

"Yeah," I said. "I'm on an hour lunch break right now, and then I have to go back and referee one more game, and then the boy's team I'm helping with has their game right after that."

"Is that the team with the Wilkinson boys on it? I hear that Mrs. Wilkinson is a hottie," said Toby. Again, out of the corner of my eye, I could see Ashley trying to kick him into shutting up, but Toby wasn't going to let himself be caught within her range again. He drew his feet up and sat Indian style on the bench.

"Yeah, I guess she is," I said uncomfortably. "I just coach the boys, though. After all, she's kind of old. Old enough to be a mom, anyway."

"She could mother me anytime," laughed Josh. That earned him a good-natured jab from his girlfriend.

"I guess I'd better be getting back," I said as I stood and tossed my empty cup into the trashcan. "Gotta keep them young 'uns in line, don'tcha know." I hopped back on my bike, but before I could pedal off, Kristina Mendoza walked around the corner of the DQ. She stopped short when she saw me, and then nonchalantly walked over to the table where Molly and Tessa were sitting. I heard the tone of her voice, if not the actual words, as I rode away, making me feel hollow and empty inside.

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The Warriors were gaining a reputation as the under-eight boy's team to beat. Bill and I had worked out a good schedule for practices that took advantage of the high energy levels and the short attention spans of boys that age. We did some warm-up drills first, followed by some simple passing drills, making sure all the boys were kept moving in patterns. After a short break, we started up with scrimmages. Sometimes we played full-field scrimmages, dividing the team into two squads. Other times, we played three-on-three short sets, rotating teams around in a kind of round-robin tournament and playing across the width of the field. Other times, we played the World Cup game, usually with me in goal and Bill shagging balls beyond the net.

We also developed a scrimmage we called Freeze Soccer. We would divide the team into two squads for a full-field scrimmage, and let them go at it. When they heard either Bill or me blow the whistle, they had to freeze right where they were. We would then give them a specific instruction, such as "Red team take three giant steps to your right", or "Blue team switch forwards and backs", or "You can only touch the ball two times". All of our instructions during Freeze Soccer were designed to keep them from bunching up. We were trying to instill in them the concept of keeping as much space around them as they could, giving them confidence to pass into open space instead of into a crowd. Sometimes it worked beautifully, sometimes it failed miserably, but both Coach Bill and I knew we were building a good foundation for all these boys as they progressed in their soccer pursuits. In the meantime, we discovered that the lessons we were giving them, under the disguise of practice fun, were carrying over into game situations. Our team average of goals scored per game was three, and the average of goals scored against us was just under one.

At the game later that afternoon, all the moms, along with a few dads, were crowded along the near sideline for the game. Some of the boys had brothers or sisters who were starting to catch the soccer bug, and there was an impromptu passing game going on behind the parents as Bill and I organized the warm-ups.

We had come up with the idea of using our criss-cross passing and shooting drill as our standard game warm-up. We called it our Warrior Warm-up Shuffle. It was a very efficient drill, in which we divided the boys into four groups of three or four players each. We had a group line up at each of the goalposts, with the other two groups about twelve meters straight out from the posts. Our starting keeper was in the net, and the balls were lined up by the goalposts. The boys at the posts were to alternate passing the ball across to the boys on the outside, diagonally from their position. Those players would trap the ball, set themselves up with a touch or two, then take a shot on goal. They would then rotate around until each player had passed from each corner, and everybody had taken a shot from each position. The drill not only warmed them up for the game by keeping them moving around from position to position, but it also helped them to practice kicking the ball where they intended just before game time, it gave them a chance to shoot on goal, plus it gave our keepers lots of opportunities to try to stop a ten-meter open shot. We could even vary the drill by making the players receiving the passes one-touch the ball across to the boy on the other side of the box, giving them an opportunity to practice their crossing passes.

By the time the referee came over to check equipment, the boys were warmed up and anxious to play. We announced our starting lineups, and let the boys know who the first substitutions would be. The team gathered around Bill and me for last-minute reminders, a routine we had developed early on in the season.

"How do we play the game, boys?" asked Bill.

"Zones and lanes!" they all shouted.

"And what does zones and lanes mean?" he continued.

"Lanes are up and down the field," said Justin, "and zones are back and forth."

"Right! Okay, can you cross into the zone or lane next to yours?"

"Yes!" came the collective shout.

"How far over?"

"Five steps!"

"Right! And can you cross two lanes over?"

"No!" came the resounding yell from the boys.

"Okay, boys," finished Bill, "go out there and have fun."

With a final "Go Warriors!" cheer from the boys, the starting lineup raced into their positions on the field and prepared for the opening whistle.

We had heard from some of the boys, and some of our fellow coaches, that the team we were playing, the Eagles, was a pretty good team, well coached with some talented kids. In particular, they had two of the best keepers in our league, plus they were rumored to have a very fast player who loved to play forward and score goals. However, Bill and I were confident enough in our team that we felt that our opponents had to figure out how to beat us, rather than us trying to change our game plan to suit an opponent's game. Besides, we really felt that the Warriors needed to face a challenge soon. Otherwise, practices were going to become less important to some of the boys if they thought that winning was so easy.

And the Eagles were good. Before we even had a chance to challenge their starting keeper to see how effective he was, their fastest player, a small Hispanic boy who controlled the ball as if it was lined with iron and his feet were magnets, took control of an early play. He seemed to know the limits we had assigned to our lanes, and managed to find the seams where our boys weren't supposed to double-team. One against one, not a single player of ours could keep up with him, and within the first five minutes of the game, he squirted through our defense twice, approaching our goal with the ball. The first time, his shot went wide as our keeper came

out, just like he was supposed to do. The next time, our keeper was a little slow in coming out to challenge the boy, and the ball slipped past him, and into the back of the net. For the first time all season, we were behind in a game.

Panic set in on our side of the field. All of a sudden, the Warriors were scrambling all over the field. Our lanes and zones got sloppier and sloppier as the players gave in to temptation and started stalking the ball, wherever it went. Oddly, it slowed down the Eagles after the game degenerated into swarmball. They only scored twice more on us during the first half. The Warriors, on the other hand, couldn't manufacture even one goal against their opponents. We couldn't even mount a serious challenge on their keeper. Bill was pacing the sidelines, calling out to his players, practically pleading with them to play their positions, but our team was beyond the reach of our coaching out on the field by then.

At halftime, the boys were panting and jittery about what was going on out on the field. Bill and I handed out water and orange slices, and asked the boys to sit around us and try to be quiet, instead of yelling at each other about blown coverages and missed assignments.

"It's not so bad," I said to the boys.

"It's terrible!" retorted Andrew. "They're really good. Better than us."

"So what?" said Bill. "Maybe they are better than you, maybe they aren't. Does that mean you're just going to give up?"

"No!" shouted Davey. "Warriors don't give up!"

Andrew looked abashed as the rest of the team reluctantly agreed.

"But what can we do about that kid?" asked Andrew.

Now we had their attention. They were frustrated, and ripe for some better playmaking decisions.

"Okay, here's what we're going to do," I said. "Devon, you're going to be our goalie, and our defensive co-captain." He nodded,

and reached for the keeper's jersey. "All the defensive players on the field, listen for instructions from Devon. A lot of the time, the keeper can see what's happening on the field better than the players that are involved with the ball, so he will be in charge of directing you guys around. Davey, you will be the other co-captain, in charge of the offense. You can move forwards and midfielders up or back, and I want you to play center-mid. That way you can direct everybody around you, if you need to. Zones and lanes are now expanded to overlap by half."

"What do you mean, Sean?" asked Kip.

"That means that you still need to play your lanes and zones," I said, looking around at all the boys. "But, you can cross over to as much as half the zone or lane next to you. But no more than half. All right? Everybody agree?"

There was a general mumble of agreement, until Bill's voice cut through.

"Everybody needs to agree to the plan, otherwise it won't work," he said. "Does everybody agree?"

With much more enthusiasm, the boys endorsed the plan. Bill and I got the boys standing, and we gathered together for a unifying cheer of "Go Warriors", and our second-half starting lineup took the field.

With Bill and I shouting encouragement and suggestions to our captains and the team, the second half progressed a lot more according to plan. Devon moved the defense around a bit when he thought it was necessary, but he was a little uncomfortable in the co-captain's role, afraid of being too bossy. Davey, on the other hand, reveled in his role as co-captain, and moved players up and back on his side of the field at whim. Bill finally had to send in a substitute with specific instructions for Davey to only move players when it was necessary. He looked a little disappointed when he glanced over to the sidelines after receiving our message, but he calmed down out

there, and let his teammates play the way they were supposed to play.

The expanded lanes and zones did the trick. Every part of the field, except for the sidelines, could now be double-covered, and our midfielders and defensive players did a great job in shutting down the Eagles. They got one more goal on us late in the game, but we managed to make up some ground on the offensive side. Their keepers were good, stopping eight of our ten good shots on goal. The score at the final whistle was Eagles 4, Warriors 2, but our kids still walked away from the loss feeling like they had played well, especially after Bill pointed out to them that they had won the second half, 2-1.

As I was helping Bill pack up equipment and clean up our bench area, Justin Marcus came toward us, dragging his mother along by her hand.

"Sean! My mom says it's okay!" he shouted, as they got closer.

I was confused. *Did he tell me something earlier that I don't remember?* "What's okay?" I asked.

"I'm sorry, Sean," said Mrs. Marcus. "Justin asked if he could join in when you were giving Davey and Kip their soccer lessons. I guess he just forgot to ask you first," she added sheepishly.

"No, that's fine," I said. "It's just been for about forty-five minutes before practices. I've been here anyway, working on my own game, and I'd be glad to have Justin work with us, if you can get him here that early."

"Oh, that's no problem, really. I'll call Lori, and we'll work out a schedule. Is that okay?"

"Sure, that's fine," I said. "It beats running by myself, too."

"Here's our number, in case something comes up," she said. She handed me a slip of paper with her address and phone number on it. She smiled at me, waved to Bill, and headed back across the field, Justin in tow. I shoved the paper into my pocket and returned to

picking up the rest of the orange peels scattered on the ground like so many lost Halloween smiles.

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Before going home to get cleaned up, I decided to swing by the DQ one more time, just to see if any of my friends were hanging around. Jorge was there, with Trent Abbott and Eric Johnson, two more friends from the varsity soccer team. I plopped down on the bench next to Eric. He lightly punched me on the arm in greeting.

"How you doing, Seanster," he said.

"Doing okay, I guess. The boys lost their first game this afternoon. Got outplayed in the first half, and couldn't make up the lost ground," I said.

Eric grunted. "Probably good for 'em, anyway," he said. "They was probably getting too confident."

"Probably," I agreed. "All in all, it wasn't a bad thing."

Jorge stood up. "You going to be here for a few minutes?" he asked me.

I shrugged. "Sure," I replied.

He walked over to the pay phone hanging on the side of the building.

Trent said, "Hey, are either of you signed up yet for the Olchick clinic this summer?"

I looked over at Eric. He looked as confused as I felt about the question.

"What's the Olchick clinic?" he asked.

"You know Duane Olchick, right?"

"As in Duane Olchick, the pro soccer player?" I asked.

"No, Duane Olchick the pro fry cook at Mickey D's," said Trent sarcastically. "Of course, Duane Olchick the pro soccer player. He's

running a clinic this summer. Two weeks of intensive training, high school and college players. I heard he might do some shorter clinics with some younger kids, too, right after. Anyway, me and Mikey Evanson were going to sign up. You guys need to ask Coach Neville about it. I'm sure he's got the information on it." Coach Neville was our varsity soccer coach.

Jorge walked back to our table in time to catch the last of what Trent was saying. "Are you talking about the Olchick clinic? Yeah, I t'ink Kristina and I are both going to go to that this summer."

"Who were you calling, Jorge?" I asked.

He pointedly ignored my question. "How about you, Eric? You going to go to the clinic?"

"I dunno," he replied. "Depends on how much it's gonna cost. I've got to work a lot this summer. Gotta start saving up for college. And Keisha's going to want me to spend some money on her this summer, probably."

"Man, you almost married," said Jorge disgustedly. "She's really got you by the *cajones*, doesn't she?"

Eric smiled. "Yes, she does, and sometimes that's every bit of okay, *amigo."*

We all laughed at that.

A small voice drifted to us from around the corner of the building.

"Jorge? Venido aquí, por favor."

Jorge looked around toward the front of the Dairy Queen, then glanced back at me a little guiltily.

"Wait here, Sean. I'll be right back," he said.

He walked over and around the corner. Trent and Eric and I just looked quizzically at each other. We could just hear two voices murmuring in Spanish from that direction. Finally, Jorge came back around the corner. He pointed at me, and gestured for me to join him. I got up and walked over to him. He silently pointed me around the corner, but he didn't accompany me over to where Kristina was

sitting, alone, at another table, her back to me. I looked at him. He just shooed me along, and turned to rejoin the other guys. I hesitated, and then walked over and sat down opposite Kristina. Her eyes were downcast, and they were red and teary. She was clutching a paper napkin nervously, and her shoulders were hunched. It was obvious that she didn't want to be here with me. I couldn't blame her.

"Hi," I said.

After a moment, she finally responded with a weak "Hi," still not looking up.

"Look, Kristina," I blurted out, "I know I hurt you. You can't beat me up any worse than I've been beating myself up. But it meant nothing to me. You've got to believe me!"

She looked up at me now, her eyes fierce and hard, pinning me down like a bug in an eighth-grade science project. "It meant *nothing* to you? Sean, it meant everything to me. *Everything!* You were so kind to me, so patient, I thought we were getting along really good, you know? I thought I might even have been in love with you, and I thought you might have felt the same for me. And I find out in the worst possible way that it was all a lie! And now you tell me it meant nothing to you? Is that how you valued me? You were willing to risk losing me over *nothing?* And this is supposed to make me feel better?" She just shook her head at my insanity, as tears began to stream down her cheeks.

Hoo boy. Now I've really stepped in it. All the arguments, all the rationalizations that had sounded so logical in my mind, slipped away like a deer through an early-morning fog. I slid out of my seat and moved around the table to sit next to her. I tried to drape my arm around her shoulder, but she shrugged it off, scooting away from me down the bench. I wasn't going to give up so easily, however, so I slid down next to her and grasped her hand in both of mine. She allowed this small comfort, at least.

"Kristina, I did feel the same. I *do* feel the same. What do you want me to say? That it did mean something? It's just not true. Molly

and I have a history, Kristina. I can't help that. I never meant for anything to happen. You have to know that. You know how she's been lately, Kristina. I just got caught up in a bad moment. If I hadn't been tired from the game with the kids, and worked up from the... studying..."

She flashed me a look that told me I was on dangerous ground. I knew I should go slowly, but I was getting pretty worked up, myself.

"Well, it's true, and you should know it," I said, more heatedly than I intended. *Too late to stop now.* "I promised I would take things as slow as you wanted, and I stopped when you said stop, didn't I?" She just looked at me noncommittally. "Well, didn't I, Kristina?" She reluctantly nodded in agreement. "I stopped when you said stop, but that doesn't mean that I wasn't going to feel a little frustrated," I continued. I was on unsteady ground, but there was no turning back. "It was late, and I was tired, and I think Molly just unconsciously took advantage of the situation, and I just got caught up in it without thinking. Christ, if I could take it all back, you know I would..." I trailed off, finally running out of apologies. At least she hadn't removed her hand from my grasp yet, which I took to be a good sign.

Kristina took a big, shuddering sigh. "I just can't pretend to still be Molly's friend," she said, almost to herself. "Not after what she's done. I can hardly stand to look at her anymore." She looked over at me again, her brown eyes large in her darkly tanned face. "I heard a rumor, Sean. Joey Amonte is telling people that Molly told him she's going to have a baby."

I was speechless. *A baby? Is it mine? Is it even true?*

"Sean?" Kristina brought me back out of my suddenly dark thoughts. "If it's true, if she's pregnant because of you, I could not accept that. It's just all too horrible. But if it's not true..." She left the sentence unfinished. I thought I understood: if Molly was pregnant, it was all over with Kristina, but if the rumor was false, maybe—just maybe—Kristina would be my girlfriend again sometime soon.

Maybe.

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TWO TELEPHONE CALLS

I spent the next week or so racking my brain, trying to figure out what to do. I finally decided that the direct approach was probably the best. I certainly didn't want to confront her at school, so I waited until I could get the nerve up to call her one evening. After pacing my room nervously, I finally called Molly.

"Hello?"

"Molly, it's Sean. Can I talk to you for a minute?"

She chuckled softly, a throaty sound even over telephone wires. "I thought I'd hear from you eventually," she said.

"Hey, all I want to know is if what I've heard is true," I said roughly. "Nothing more."

"And what have you heard, Sean?" she asked, almost playfully.

I took a deep breath. The next couple of minutes would have a very real impact on the rest of my life. "Are you pregnant, Molly?"

There was a long pause. At the time, it felt like it was about an hour before she said anything, but it was probably only a few seconds.

"What would you say if I told you I was, Sean? Would you be happy? Or would it upset you?"

I felt like my head was going to explode. "Is it mine?" I croaked.

I heard her sigh on the other end of the line. "I'm going to make your day, Sean, and maybe even give Kristina Mendoza a little gift in the process." I could hear her take a big breath before continuing. "There is no baby. I'm not pregnant. I've never been pregnant. I've been on the pill since last fall. If we hadn't broken up, I was going to tell you about it at Christmastime." She took a large, hitching breath before continuing. "Do you feel better now, Sean? Do you? I wish to Christ that I did." And she hung up.

I set the telephone back down gently. A great load had just been lifted from me. *I feel great!*

Or do I? But I was too buzzed to consider that thorny question.

My first thought was to call Kristina and tell her the good news. I dialed the Mendoza home, and Jorge answered.

"Jorge! I've got great news. Molly's not having my baby. I mean, she's not pregnant. I've got to let Kristina know! Is she home? Lemme talk to her, buddy."

"Hold on, man, take it easy. I'll go get her. You can tell her yourself. Thass great, Sean. Hold on a minute."

The handset thumped down and I could faintly hear his footsteps fading away. In just a few moments, I heard somebody pick up the phone.

"Kristina? It's Sean. Guess what? I just talked to..."

The deep, rumbling voice of her father interrupted me.

"Kristina cannot come to the telephone," he said. "You have disappointed me greatly, Mr. Porter. Do not call here again."

"Mr. Mendoza, please, I just need to..."

"No mas, Senor Porter. *No mas."* There was no room for argument in his voice.

"Yes, sir. No more," I agreed reluctantly. With that, the line went dead.

My buzz departed just as swiftly as it had arrived.

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TOURNAMENT WEEKEND

I kept up my schedule through the end of the school year. Since I didn't have a girlfriend to spend any time with, I kept on running, with and without a soccer ball. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, I worked with Davey, Kip, and Justin before the Warriors practices. I wasn't sure how productive these sessions were, but we had fun goofing around in the park, at least. And, at that age, any time spent working the ball was time well spent for a kid who wanted to be a better player.

The recreational leagues played through the first weekend of June, so I was kept very busy on Saturdays and Sundays until our summer break. During the second weekend of June, there was a huge tournament in a nearby community, and Bill had sent in our entry. The tournament was for recreational teams only, all age groups. All the teams played three games on Saturday, each one lasting forty minutes. All the games started at the same time, with an air-horn blast from the scorer's tent broadcasting the starting and stopping times. The top four teams in each age group would be invited back

for playoffs on Sunday. The organizers used a version of tournament scoring. Goals scored were only part of the way a team accumulated tournament points. Teams were awarded three points for a win, zero points for a loss, and one point for a tie. In addition, teams were awarded one point for each goal scored, up to a maximum of three points. If a team shut out their opponent, they accrued two additional points. Finally, the referees working any game, at their option, could award one more point to any team that displayed, in their opinion, outstanding sportsmanship and fair play. The maximum number of points a team could win in a game was nine, by winning a game by a score of at least 3-0 (three points awarded for the win, three for goals, two for a shutout, and one for sportsmanship). The top four teams in each division, the teams with the most points after the three Saturday games, would play two more games on Sunday. The winners of the semi-finals would advance to the championship game, and the losers would play a consolation game.

The community's soccer organization set up fifteen soccer fields around town, ranging from small fields, not much bigger than the width of a regular field, for the little kids, all the way up to full-sized fields at the schools for the older kids. The organizers also required each team entering the tournament to supply one referee, to be assigned games not involving their own teams. I agreed to be our team's designated referee, so I would be there all day Saturday, running from game to game to game.

Wendy Marcus, Justin's mom, arranged for a team party at their house for Sunday afternoon, win or lose. They had a swimming pool in their back yard, complete with a slide and a diving board, and the boys were just as excited about the party as they were about the tournament.

There were fourteen teams in our division, but only three of them were teams in our rec league, so we weren't familiar with any of our scheduled opponents. The Eagles, our only loss of the season, were

also entered in the tournament, but if we played them, it would only be because we had both made the playoffs. We had a lot of work to do before we could even begin to think about it.

Our first game was at nine o'clock on Saturday morning. Our team was assembled and anxious to play twenty minutes early, and we watched the last few minutes of the game ahead of ours. It was an Under-Twelve girl's game, and the hometown team was winning by a score of 3-1 when the final whistle blew. We organized our Warrior Warm-up Shuffle, while at the same time our opponents were running laps around the field, without balls, as their warm-up.

We started Devon in goal. Ever since our loss to the Eagles, he had taken on more of a leadership role for our defense while he was on the field, to the point where he really didn't want to play a forward position at all. Bill and I agreed that he was effective and comfortable staying on defense for the entire game, so there was no point in forcing him to play up. Besides, even when he wasn't in goal, he helped the other defensive players maneuver on the field, proving his proficiency.

And he was very effective during that first game. He moved his defenders around so efficiently that he only had to make one easy stop the entire half he played in goal. His midfielders, sweeper, and fullbacks stopped every other threat on our side of the field. We ended up winning easily, 4-0. Eight points for the Warriors went on the giant scorecard at the central scorer's table.

Right after our game ended, I had to jog over to another field to referee my first game of the day, an Under-Six boy's game on a half-sized field. Each team had about twenty-five players, so there were a lot of substitutions being made by both sides, on every available throw-in. It almost seemed like there was more standing-around time, waiting for players to either get on the field or get off after being subbed, than there was actual playing time, but eventually the game progressed as much as it could, considering that it was

Munchkin Swarmball at its ugliest. To almost nobody's surprise, the game ended up tied, 0-0.

The Warriors had another game at noon, and I got there just in time. Bill had already set the lineup, and the boys knew the routine by now, so I got to sit back and relax during the second game, chatting with Lori and Wendy and some of the other parents as our boys romped to a second shutout, 6-0. Even though this was a tournament, Bill still pulled one of our players after our fourth goal, in the interest of fairness. He promised the boys that he would play them at full strength again if the other team scored on us while we were down one player, but that was never necessary. Because of this sportsmanlike gesture, our team was awarded an extra point for fair play. We now had tallied seventeen points, and were looking good for returning on Sunday. A tie or a win would land us in the playoffs.

Our last game was at four o'clock in the afternoon. We took all the boys out for a good, relaxing lunch at a nearby pizza parlor, and let them run riot in the little game arcade that was there. By the time we got back to the field, around thirty minutes before the game was to begin, they were starting to tire a little. They were easily distracted, more into goofing off than getting ready to play soccer. They really didn't want to go through the Warrior Warm-up Shuffle, so we were a little disorganized when the referee came over to inspect our shoes and shin guards.

We sent our starting lineup onto the field, and within a few minutes after the opening whistle blew, the carbs and sugar from lunch finally kicked in, and the boys began to run and play their game again. Bill and I discovered, however, that their stamina was short by this third game, so we found ourselves keeping a close eye on everybody, substituting much more often than we normally did, and making sure the smaller kids got a little more rest before shuffling them back into the game. We won the game, but it wasn't pretty. The final score was 3-1.

Everybody went home exhausted. Bill promised to call everyone when he found out what time we would be playing the next day. I hoped it wasn't going to be an early game. I was supposed to referee the first playoff game for the Under-Six boys on Sunday, at ten in the morning, and I really wanted to sleep in a little.

By the time I got home and out of the shower, there was a message for me from Coach Bill. Our semi-final game was at eleven, against the Eagles. The championship game and the consolation game would be played simultaneously at two o'clock, giving all the teams a chance to grab some lunch before playing. I silently gave thanks to whichever soccer god was watching over me this particular weekend, and was asleep almost before my head hit the pillow.

* * * * * * * * * *

The next morning, Lori and Davey and Kip picked me up in plenty of time for my early game. It was going to be sunny and fairly hot. I had a small cooler full of ice and water for myself, and I was glad to see that Lori had packed a large, wheeled cooler full of drinks for the team. The Warriors were assembled and ready to play a couple of fields over from me, and as my game was finishing up, I could see Coach Bill working the Warm-up Shuffle with the crossing passes. He wanted them ready against the team that handed us our only loss of the season.

By the time I got over there, the boys were warmed up and enthusiastic about playing. Bill put together what he considered to be his strongest starting lineup, with Devon in goal, Davey in the center at midfield, Kip to his left, Justin playing right defender, and Joey at forward.

"Defenders!" he called out. "Listen for Devon's instructions, guys. He's your captain out there. And Justin? Stay close to that fast

kid whenever he's in your zone, whether he's got the ball or not. All the defenders keep an eye out for him. If he's in your lane and zone, I want you to stick like glue to him. If he zigs, you zig. If he zags, you zag. Try to stay in his way as much as you can, okay? The other defenders will try for the ball. You just keep him covered so they can't pass to him."

"Anytime he stops running," I added, "lean your shoulder on his. Let him know you're there. Just make sure you stay between him and our goal. You don't want him getting a head start on you. Maybe this way, we can keep him from getting a breakaway chance on us."

The referee blew his whistle. We huddled up and sent our players out onto the field to take their positions, and the Eagles did the same. The game was on.

Remembering the varsity team's experiences in the state playoffs, I reminded Bill to substitute often. We had a second game to play, either for the championship or the consolation game, and we didn't want to leave everything we had on the field during this first game. Our defenders, in particular, were going to get tired quickly, worrying about the Eagles forwards. On every throw-in we could, we substituted at least two players, even if they were protesting that they weren't tired at all.

Even though our defenders stayed on the kid as much as they could, he still managed to score twice. However, our offense was clicking, too. We got a lot of good looks at their goal, and managed to convert four good shots into goals by the final whistle. The Warriors were bound for the championship game.

The Eagles and the Warriors were, by far, the two best teams of our age group at the tournament. The only reason we didn't meet in the championship game was because another team had tied the Eagles on Saturday, a 1-1 contest, so they didn't score as many tournament points as some of the other teams. The team we played for the championship must have played some of the weakest teams in the tournament to get there, because they were hopelessly

overmatched against the Warriors. By the start of the second half, we were already up 4-0, and our keepers were never challenged. We ended up cruising to the tournament championship, 7-0.

After the presentation of trophies, everybody piled into cars and headed over to the Marcus house for the pool party. Justin's dad, Arthur, had the barbeque grill fired up, and was busy flipping burgers and turning hot dogs as the boys took turns running in and out of the house, stripping off uniforms and pulling on swim trunks, jumping into the pool and splashing anything that moved. A lot of the parents came along, content to sit around the pool, out of range of all but the most determined splashers, drinking sodas and beer after the long weekend out in the sun as they watched the boys play soccer.

I had ridden over with the Wilkinsons, and was very conscious of how sweaty I was. I was looking forward to getting in the pool and cooling off. When we got there, though, the pool was crowded and rowdy, full of seven- and eight- and nine-year-olds. I plopped down in a lawn chair, and wiped my face off with my damp shirt.

"You look hot and sweaty," said Wendy as she walked by. "Why don't you hop in the pool?"

"Maybe later," I said. "It's a little busy right now."

She smiled. "If you'd like, you can take a shower upstairs." She pointed toward the patio sliding doors. "Just go in there, through the kitchen. You'll find the stairs by the front door. Go on upstairs, the bathroom is the second door on the right."

"Thanks," I said, "but I'll be fine..."

"Don't be silly," she interrupted. "Go on. Towels are in the closet in the bathroom." She pulled me up out of the chair, and propelled me toward the house with a gentle shove. *A shower did sound good.* I headed into the house, and found my way upstairs. The bathroom was big, with a linen closet, double sinks, and a toilet in one room, a large shower and changing area through another door. I grabbed a towel, turned on the shower and let the water run until steam was

permeating the room, and stripped off my sweaty clothes. I had my swim trunks and a fresh t-shirt in a gym bag that I left by the sinks. I stepped into the shower, closed the Plexiglas door, and adjusted the water temperature, turning the showerhead until I got a needle spray that pounded into my neck and shoulders.

It felt so good, I never noticed the sudden swirling of the steam in the room as the outer door opened. In fact, I was standing there, eyes closed as the water streamed down my back, when I heard the shower door open. Startled, I opened my eyes, just as the outline of another person appeared through the mist. With a wide grin and a twinkle in her eye, Wendy Marcus stepped up to me, pressing her very naked body against mine, her large breasts mashing up on my ribcage.

"I thought you might need some help washing those hard-to-reach places," she said softly. She reached down with one hand and took control, sizing up my already hard cock, while with the other she pulled me down by my neck to press her open mouth hard to mine.

The assault on my senses had its desired effect. I kissed her back as the little head began taking control, and I reached up to squeeze one large boob, with its swollen and distended nipple. She was stroking me rhythmically, and my hips joined in on the activity, pushing my cock harder into her pumping palm.

She must have been somewhat familiar with a teenager's ability to last (next to none), as well as a teenager's ability to recharge after coming (second to none), because she didn't hesitate. Almost as soon as she felt my hips thrusting, she broke our wet kiss and dropped to her knees, unhesitatingly taking me fully into her mouth.

This was no foreplay. Her technique was a direct assault on her target, and the object was to get me off quickly. It worked beautifully. She took just about all of me into her mouth, her tongue working frantically on the underside of my cock as she bobbed up and down. One hand was caressing and squeezing my balls, the

other was stroking the base of my throbbing cock, working me into a frenzy. In record time, I grunted and thrust as deeply into her mouth as she would allow, and spewed across her tongue and down her throat. She kept sucking me, taking all I could give her, and when I was done and my poor abused cock was softening slightly, she continued to suck me hard, concentrating on keeping me erect.

Before I knew it, I could feel my heartbeat through my resurgent dick. Wendy felt it, too. When she was sure I had attained nearly full hardness once again, she gave me one last lick and stood. She never relinquished her hold on me, though, but instead took her other hand, ran it down my arm until she was grasping my hand, and then guided my fingers to her very wet, hairy pussy, her legs spread for me. With a moan, she turned around, rubbing her substantial butt against me, still holding and stroking my cock with one hand, and guiding my efforts with her other hand on my wrist. My fingers eagerly plowed through her pussy lips, releasing her oily lubrication in their search for her vagina, her clitoris, and all the hot flesh in between.

She began breathing hard, huffing and puffing in front of me, until she bent over and guided my pole toward her flooding hole from behind. I sank fully into her, my thighs slapping wetly against her ass, and I stroked deeply into her. She put her hands out in front of her so she could lean on the shower stall wall, and she let me willingly do the work. Each time I bottomed out in her, I drove the breath out of her in a breathy huff. Each time I pulled almost out of her, she wiggled her ass, trying to keep our connection, until I pumped back into her again, my hands on her hips, and the cycle started all over. With the shower pelting my back, refreshing me, I felt like I could stay like this, inside her, for hours.

Finally, though, Wendy's breath got ragged, and her movements became erratic. Her butt was moving from side to side, then front to back, then up and down, creating a lot more friction between us. Her fleshy walls were gripping me, and I could feel her vaginal muscles

clenching and unclenching against my intruding shaft, raising my temperature and bringing on my second climax. I felt a hot, oily flooding along my cock as she came, and it triggered my own reaction. I groaned as I flooded her spasming walls with hot jets of semen.

If she hadn't been leaning against the wall, and if I hadn't been leaning on her backside, we both would have collapsed to the shower floor. As it was, Wendy held us both up until, finally, she roused herself weakly. I pulled back, my thoroughly spent cock slipping from her. She turned, reached up to wrap both arms around my neck, and kissed me softly, tenderly.

"Thanks, Sean," she whispered. "I needed that." She pecked me on the lips one more time, turned, and opened the shower door, disappearing as suddenly as she had appeared just a few minutes before. I stood there, the water cascading down over me, in shock from it all, until finally I shook my head in disbelief. *Had it really happened at all?* I turned off the water, opened the door, and reached for the towel. I wasn't quite sure how I was going to be able to face her, or Justin, after this. And then there was her husband, blissfully unaware that his wife was upstairs schtupping his son's soccer coach, while he was busily cooking for the troops out by the pool.

I got dressed and reluctantly went back down the stairs and out to the back. Wendy was chatting with Lori, as if this was just an everyday neighborhood get-together. She glanced up as I came out the door and flashed me a quick, knowing smile before turning back to her conversation. Arthur was busy at the grill, and the entire soccer team was either carousing in the pool, or standing nearby, shoving down food before rejoining the fun in the water. There was typical suburban normalcy all around me, and yet I felt completely out of place and disconnected.

What a very strange day, I thought to myself.

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SMALL THREATS AND INVITATIONS

All the recreational leagues were finished after the tournament weekend. My soccer club wasn't starting for a couple of weeks, so I was a free bird the last part of June. I slept in a lot, until my parents noticed that I was unoccupied and put a crimp in my plans on being lazy. They left me a list each week of chores they wanted done around the house, such as painting the garage, weeding the flowerbeds, and mowing the lawn. It still left me plenty of time to keep up with my running and working with the ball. In addition, I was still working with the three boys twice a week at the park.

I was very nervous about seeing Wendy the first time after the tournament when she dropped Justin off at the park for our practice, but she was acting perfectly normal.

"Uh, Mrs. Marcus..." I stammered.

She whirled around, looking behind her and to the sides, a humorous glint in her eye.

"Is Arthur's mother here?" she asked teasingly. "She's the only person who fits the description of 'Mrs. Marcus' that I know."

I could feel myself blushing. “Okay, then, Wendy,” I reluctantly agreed. “The other day, at your house...”

“Oh, my, Sean, are you embarrassed? How cute!” She reached up, placing her palm against my cheek. “I could just eat you up!” She patted my cheek. “In fact, if the boys weren’t here...”

I backed up nervously, not wanting her touching my face. “Look, Mrs. Marcus,” I began, but she didn’t give me an opportunity to continue.

“Seriously, Sean, don’t trouble yourself over anything,” she interrupted. At least she didn’t try to move closer to me again. “It’s just me, you know? I just like to relive my youth occasionally.”

“But...”

“Besides,” she continued, “I really enjoy the... attentions... of younger guys. Their ability to just keep on going is, um, enjoyable, to say the least. And, if I remember correctly, you enjoyed yourself, too, didn’t you?”

“Well, yes, but...”

“Enjoyed yourself twice, if I recall.”

“Uh...”

“And I don’t remember any protests at the time. Do you?”

“No, but it was all so...”

“And I wouldn’t mind an encore sometime,” she steamrolled. “That is, if you enjoyed yourself enough to consider paying a visit on an *older* woman,” she continued with a mischievous smile.

“Well, yeah, but...”

“Ta, Sean,” she said, turning back to her car with a swish of her well-remembered backside, leaving me standing there, speechless and practically breathless. “Lori will pick the boys up in an hour,” she said, over her shoulder. She got into her car and waved gaily as she drove off.

Hoo boy, what a ride on a rocket this is turning out to be.

I turned back to the boys, trying to regain a little control over the moment, and over myself. I had to admit it. Wendy rattled me.

****

During those first few weeks, Jake Lehigh and I would go out in search of a pickup baseball game, or maybe meet up with some of our other buddies and just goof off, riding bikes through some empty lots across town, or hanging out at the DQ, during the early part of that summer. He had girl problems of his own, so it was easy for us to fall back into our old habits together. Oddly, I didn't see his sister, the lovely blonde Kayla, she of the *I Dream of Jeannie* costume, hardly at all at the time.

When I asked him about it, he looked at me with a funny expression.

"I thought you knew," he said. "Kayla's got a boyfriend."

Damn. Another prospect down the tubes.

"No, I hadn't heard," I said, trying to give away nothing.

"Yeah," Jake continued, "he's just a pimply-faced little punk she knows from school. I think she's been hanging around with him and his friends just to have something to do this summer. I already told him that if I hear any whisper about him getting too familiar with her, I'd take him out into the woods behind our house and break both his legs." He laughed out loud at the memory. "Kid nearly shit his pants when I got in his face. He got all sweaty and blubbery, promising me on his grandmother's grave that he would treat her nice, which was pretty funny, considering his grandmother's not dead. I think I scared him into actually keeping his word."

"Hell, Jake," I said, "I'll even be glad to help you out if it comes to that." I punched him on the arm companionably.

We were walking down the sidewalk, headed for Josh O'Toole's house to see if he wanted to go with us to the arcade, when we heard the throaty growl of a powerful car engine coming up from behind us. We turned and watched as Joey Amonte roared by us, one hand

draped insolently over the steering wheel, the other arm across Molly O'Toole's shoulder, holding her close to him on the bench seat. The windows were open, and the radio was turned up loud. Molly's long, strawberry-blonde hair was blowing around her face, and she was just reaching up to brush it off her forehead when she turned and saw Jake and me. She stared blankly at us, then turned and said something to Joey. He glanced at us, and we could just see him shaking his head as they roared out of sight up the street and around the corner, tires squealing.

"One of the oddest couples I've ever seen," mumbled Jake.

"Yeah," I agreed. "You know what, Jake? Let's forget about Josh. I don't want to run into Molly or her boyfriend today. Let's just go to the arcade, maybe we can call him from there."

"Okay," he said. "The less I see of Joey Amonte, the more I like it, anyway."

We spent the rest of the afternoon throwing dimes into the pinball machines at the arcade, enjoying the clang and clatter of steel balls hitting bumpers and ramps and dropping down into the wells of the tables. We didn't give Molly, or Joey, another thought.

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FIREFLOWERS AND SCREAMERS

Every year the town where we resided threw a big party for the Fourth of July. When the holiday fell on a weekend, like it did that year in 1981, the community put together enough events to fill the entire weekend. A traveling amusement park set up, the firehouses had water hose fights, there was live music and a food fest, and, of course, fireworks. Almost everybody in town attended something in the park by the lake over the weekend, and the place was always packed for the fireworks.

That year, walking around the park, I could see that all the little kids were being carted around by their parents, riding the merry-go-round and the kiddie cars, watching the magicians and the clowns, and eating gallons of ice cream. The teenagers tended to clump together at the faster rides, and sometimes hanging around the beer tent, hoping for a chance to sneak inside.

On Friday, Jake and I were supposed to meet a bunch of our friends at the carnival. Jake's parents had been lulled into thinking that Jake and Jaimie were no longer meeting up, even though, as

determined and sneaky kids will tend to do, they had managed to get together occasionally over the past several months. Jaimie was going to the carnival with Kayla and a bunch of their friends, too, so I fully expected to see them there, looking for Jake. It was a hot day, and the principal of our school, Dr. Osgood, was going to be sitting in the dunk tank, part of a fundraiser for the foundation that Skip Horvath's family had set up in his memory. So, of course, about half the school was there, taking a turn at trying to dunk Dr. Osgood at a dollar a throw.

We got bored watching, and the line was way too long for a chance at the booth, so we all just started hitting the other rides. Jake, Jaimie, Josh, Andrea, Becky Steinman, and I kind of stayed together as a group. Others joined us for a ride or two and then split off; sometimes there were as many as fifteen friends of ours in line, particularly for the Gravity Drop. This was a ride where everybody stood up inside a big cylinder. Once the ride was full, the cylinder started spinning you around, acting like a centrifuge, until you were pinned to the metal wall. At that point the floor dropped out, and you were literally stuck to the wall. It was a fun ride, especially when I got to be opposite a cute girl, because their tops would be plastered to their bodies, and sometimes would even creep up, revealing a wonderful width of bare skin at their stomachs. One lucky time, a girl's t-shirt literally flew up into her face, showing her pink bra to everyone on the ride. It was half the thrill of the ride, wondering what would be revealed each time you rode on it.

Just before dark we headed toward the food concession stands, and pigged out on corn on the cob dipped in a big vat of melted butter, and hot dogs, and cheeseburgers, and pizza, and fries, and onion rings, and sodas, and ice cream bars for dessert. We all moaned and groaned, too full to move from the picnic tables we had commandeered for our feast. Finally, we tired of doing nothing, so we wandered off again, in search of more carnie thrills.

One time, we were waiting for the Ferris wheel, and Jorge and Kristina came over by us. They were taking their four younger brothers and sisters around the carnival, so they all got in line with us. Since the Ferris wheel could sit two adults and one child, Kristina divvied up her younger siblings among us, so all of them would be accompanied by someone they knew. As we were getting ready to board the ride, Jorge suddenly stepped aside, effectively positioning me in line to get in the seat with Kristina and her younger sister, Lina. I was a little embarrassed by Jorge's maneuvering, and Kristina looked a little uncomfortable, but she accepted graciously when I gestured for her to get on ahead of me. We sat down, Lina between us, our hands in our laps, as the wheel lurched and moved so that the next seat could be loaded.

By the time we had stuttered our way to the top of the Ferris wheel, Lina had broken the ice for us. She was so excited to be so far above the rest of the carnival and the park, that she could hardly contain herself. She started pointing out landmarks to us, screeching and waving to friends she spotted far down on the ground, and turning around to laugh with Jorge, Becky, and Emilio, another of the Mendoza kids, in the bench behind us. As the ride launched for its prescribed time, Kristina finally smiled, and we took turns searching for other people and places throughout the park to point out to Lina, chatting and laughing like friends once again. Kristina even spotted my younger brother Stephen, running in a pack with a bunch of his buddies, as they raced toward the Tilt-A-Whirl. It was an easy pattern to fall into, and I remembered with a rush just how much fun Kristina and I had been having, just a few short weeks prior. *Maybe our friendship could be salvaged.* I hoped so.

The carnival stopped the rides at 11:00 PM, and by then, there were just the high-school kids left. The younger kids had all gone home, and the older ones found someplace else to have their fun. I was pretty tired from being outside all day, eating junk and sloshing it all around in my stomach from so many rides. Jake was ready to

pack it in, as well. Jaimie had already left to meet up with the friends she had come with to the park, so we waved goodbye to our friends and headed back toward our neighborhood.

The next day, it was more of the same. Most of us were pretty much burned out on the rides at the carnival. Besides, Saturday afternoon the entire place was going to be overrun by all the little kids and their parents, so a bunch of us decided to hit the beach, instead. I met up with Eric, Keisha, Becky, Trent Abbott, and Danielle Nickerson, who was Trent's new girlfriend, and we spent the afternoon being slothful in the sand and in the water. Keisha, of course, looked sensational and exotic, with her glistening dark skin and bright red bikini. Danielle was kind of plain looking, with mousy brown hair she kept cut fairly short and hips that were a little wide, but she was one of the nicest people I knew, and I was glad to see that she and Trent had found each other.

Becky and I had known each other since about the second grade. She was slender, with shoulder-length dark blonde hair that she nearly always tied back. She played recreational soccer, but wasn't confident enough in her abilities to try out for the school team. She normally dressed pretty conservatively, but I guess that didn't carry over to beachwear, since she was wearing a very small purple bikini. I couldn't keep my eyes off her. This was a brand-new Becky to me, and she was happy to hang out with me at the beach, which was just fine with me.

After spending a couple of hours on the beach, we all grabbed t-shirts and strolled up to the concession stand to get something to eat. We ordered greasy cheeseburgers and fries, all except for Danielle, who got a limp and sorry-looking salad with a virulent orange dressing. We crowded in around a wooden picnic table in the shade and dug in.

"What *is* that stuff?" asked Keisha, eyeing Danielle's salad warily as she gingerly picked up a wilted shred of lettuce and dipped it into the paper cup of dressing.

"It is disgusting, isn't it?" replied Danielle. "It's really good for my diet, though. One look at it, and my appetite disappears."

"Well," said Trent between mouthfuls, "this burger hits the spot."

"Thass 'cause you never met a hamburger you didn't like," retorted Eric.

"Hey, I can't help it if I'm a carnivore," replied Trent.

"Carnivore?" asked Danielle. "How about omnivore?"

"Yeah, there's very few things I won't eat," said Trent, giving Danielle his best Groucho Marx eyebrow wiggle.

He had to duck as Danielle threw a shriveled radish at him. "Pervert!" she said. Meanwhile, Keisha, sitting next to him, started pummeling him on his arm for the remark.

"Do you kiss your mama with that mouth?" derided Keisha as she pounded him.

Ducking his head and tucking his elbows to his sides to cover up against the assault, Trent replied, "Yeah, and she really likes it when I do."

"Ewww. That's completely disgusting!" cried Keisha as she renewed her attack. Trent had to finally slip down off the seat and slide under the table to get away from the two girls, laughingly apologizing from his hideaway.

Becky and I just watched the exchange with amusement. Her bare thigh was resting against mine, a warm and smooth, surprising connection between us.

After lunch we wandered back down to the beach, feeling full and lazy. Trent and Danielle decided to walk around the lake, so they slipped their sandals on and strolled along the shoreline. Eric and Keisha sat down at the water's edge and drew doodles in the sand, watching the waves lap up and erase their lines and drawings as they lazily talked.

Becky and I flopped back down on our towels spread out on the hot sand. She had her sunglasses propped up in her hair as she rolled

over to lie on her stomach. She reached up and flipped her sunglasses down onto her nose as she turned to me.

"Put some lotion on my back, Sean?"

"Sure," I said, reaching for the sun block. I squirted a dollop across her shoulders. The skin pebbled a little as she squirmed.

"Oh, that's cold," she complained.

"Sorry," I mumbled. I started spreading the lotion across her shoulders and down her back. I slipped my hand under the strap of her bikini top, but she apparently decided that wasn't sufficient, since she reached back with both hands and undid the strap, pulling the ends out and off her back wordlessly. I was now faced with an expanse of naked skin that I was supposed to rub lotion into. *Doesn't she realize what the sight of so much skin does to a teenaged boy?* I could feel blood being diverted into my crotch, making my trunks a little tighter, but there was nothing to be done about that. I bent back to the task at hand, squirting a little more lotion out into my palm, and rubbing it into her back and sides, trying to keep my fingers from noticing the supple feel of her skin, the ridges of her backbone from her neck all the way to where her bikini bottom covered her, and the softer flesh of her squashed breasts as she lay there. I finished by brushing my fingertips along the waistband of her bikini bottoms, wanting to slip under the elastic a bit further, but unwilling to take the chance. I took my time replacing the cap on the tube of sun block, kneeling on the towel and waiting for my erection to subside before standing.

I thought her eyes might have been closed. It was hard to tell through the dark lenses of her sunglasses. She seemed to know, though, when I was getting ready to move over to my own towel.

"You didn't get the backs of my legs yet," she said softly.

Uh-oh. Legs. I knelt beside her knees and reopened the lotion. I squeezed lotion into my hand and started on the left leg, at her ankle. *Yeah, I'm a chicken, but so what?* I was working my way up that long length of smooth leg, making sure I got every square millimeter

protected with sun block. Up her calf, to the crease of her knee, and even further, feeling the big muscles of her thigh at rest, smoothing the lotion into her skin. I made it all the way up to where her bathing suit covered her butt, and then started again at the ankle of her right leg, trying to ignore the way her legs had parted just slightly as I had worked on her thigh.

By the time I had worked my way up her right leg, I could just detect a slight quiver in her muscles, and her legs had definitely spread out a little more, allowing my fingers to work the lotion along her inner thigh. I made sure she was well covered, going over and over the area, from her knee to just below her covered crotch. Finally, breathing heavily, I collapsed down next to her. My painful erection was pushed into the sand, where I hoped it wouldn't be noticed.

Becky sighed contentedly, and then turned her head toward me. "Want me to do you now?" she asked.

My first reaction was probably what you would expect from the mind of a hormonally charged teenaged male. *What, do I want you to do me, right here and now? Absolutely, do me now. In fact, do me a couple of times.* But then, I realized that she was talking about putting lotion on me. I looked over at her, and she had an uncharacteristic, knowing grin on her face, seeming to be waiting for my reaction. I was sure she had read my mind, and found what little I keep in there to be inconsequentially amusing. I just nodded, afraid to open my mouth, for fear I would only be able to croak something goofy. Without lifting her body up, she reached back and refastened her top. She got up and crawled the couple of feet over to me, and then she knelt beside me and reached for the tube of suntan lotion, still in my hand. She tugged at it, trying to get me to let it go, but I was unconsciously gripping it tightly.

"Sean? The lotion?" she laughingly inquired as she finally pulled it from my grasp. She propped her sunglasses up onto the top of her head again, so she could properly concentrate.

She squirted a dollop onto the middle of my back. She was right. It was temporarily cold on the skin. But, once she started rubbing it into my skin, it warmed up fast. She rubbed slowly, using a circular motion that felt really good. When I was a kid, my mom would just slather the stuff on me, wiping me down in big, fast strokes to get as much coverage as quickly as possible, leaving me covered with white streaks of lotion. This was much better, more like what I thought a massage would feel like, as Becky methodically rubbed the sun block into my skin. I liked it a lot. I liked it so much, in fact, that if I hadn't been lying on my stomach, I probably would have caused a sensation, there on a public beach and all.

It was even better, and even worse, when she got to my legs. I had no qualms at all about having my legs spread out a little, and Becky took full advantage, making sure I was well covered by lotion, going over and over my legs, from my ankles to the hem of my swim trunks. By the time she finished, I was having trouble focusing, and I was breathing hard, as if I had just run a sprint. Finally, she flopped down next to me on her towel, smiled at me, and reached behind her to once again unfasten her bikini top. She nonchalantly closed her eyes so she could feel the full effects of the sunshine beating down on her, flipping her sunglasses back down onto her nose. I couldn't close my eyes. I just lay there, watching her relax. It was a fascinating view.

Finally, Trent and Danielle returned from their walk, dropping down to sit beside us. Eric and Keisha came up from the water's edge to see what was going on. Becky reattached her top, and we sat up to join in.

Everybody was tired of being in the sand, so we headed for the changing booths up near the concession stand. Both the men's and the women's sides had shower stalls, and we all had brought a change of clothes, so we took turns washing the sand off and getting into clean, dry t-shirts and shorts.

The six of us headed back to the park, and spent the rest of the afternoon and evening tossing balls at stacks of bowling pins, shooting targets with b-b guns, munching on popcorn and letting cotton candy disintegrate in our mouths. Later in the afternoon, we propped ourselves against the outside of the fence and listened to the live music coming from the beer garden.

By dusk, the entire town was starting to gather in the park. Families were staking out their spots on the grass in anticipation of the fireworks display, and groups of friends were gathering. We wandered around, looking for clumps of kids we knew, stopping to shoot the breeze with friends. We found Theo Jameson among the crowd, a fellow soccer teammate who was involved in a horrible car accident the previous fall, an accident that killed his best friend and our star player, Skip Horvath. It was an accident in name only, deliberately caused by Richie Del Toro, the leader of the gang of toughs at school known as the Bulls. Richie was still being held in the county jail, having been convicted of vehicular manslaughter, but his lawyers were attempting an appeal. Theo survived the accident, but spent several months in a wheelchair, and then underwent a grueling set of therapy sessions, just so he could walk under his own power to receive his high-school diploma in June. He still walked very slowly, but I could see he had made a lot of progress, even in just the last month or so.

"Trent! Sean! Eric! Man, it's good to see you guys!" he called out. He shuffled over in our direction as we veered over toward him. He gave each of us a fierce hug in greeting. "What are you guys up to?"

"We're just cruising the park," said Trent. "How about you?"

"I'm staying put right here," he said with a smile. He indicated his family, on blankets behind him, as he continued, "My folks wanted us to watch the fireworks together, like we used to do when my brothers and sisters and I were little. Besides, I think they're still nervous about how well I can move around, even though I'm back on two feet again."

"You'll be back on the soccer field by the fall," said Trent encouragingly.

He looked a little sad. "I don't think so, Trent. My playing days might be over." He brightened up then. "But, I did get some pretty good news this week. Seems that the soccer coach over at Western had been watching us play early in the season last year, and had been considering offering me at least a partial scholarship, until I got hurt. Anyway, when he found out that's where I was going to go to college anyway, he called me up the other day, and asked if I wanted to work on the sidelines with him and his coaching staff. He said he could offer me part-time employment as a coaches' aide, if I wanted it. At least it's a way for me to stay in the game, you know?"

"That's really great," I said. "You know, coaching just might be the right fit for you, Theo."

"Yeah," he agreed, "if I can't play, maybe I can at least teach the game to others. It's worth a shot, anyway."

We chatted for a few minutes more, congratulating him about the opportunity, and then headed off, so that Theo could spend this evening with his family. Trent and Danielle split off and went in search of some of their other friends, and Eric, Keisha, Becky, and I continued strolling through the crowd, until just before the fireworks were scheduled to begin. We hooked up with a big group of our friends from high school. Josh and Andrea, Jorge, Kristina, Toby Mueller, and Ashley Horvath were settled on some blankets. We wormed our way through the crowd to their spot and plopped onto the ground beside them, just as the opening salvos were set off.

I was watching the fireflowers and screamers flying into the dark sky, leaning back on my hands as I oohhhed and ahhhed over the colorful, fantastic display in the sky, when I felt Becky, on my left, put her hand over mine as she leaned back next to me to enjoy the fireworks. It was not entirely unexpected, nor was it unwelcome, especially after our afternoon on the sand. It was a warm and quiet invitation from a very good friend.

What was unexpected, however, was the warm body on my right, not merely resting her hand on mine, but actually leaning on me, pressing her side into my arm. I could feel the warmth of Kristina's body up and down my arm, her unspoken signal stabbing straight to my midsection.

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HE SAID/SHE SAID

"You know she likes you a lot, Sean."

"Yeah, I know, I've been working with her kids for awhile now."

"Not like that, stupid," she said. She was facing me, propped up on one elbow, doodling in the small line of hair that ran from my belly button to my crotch. It sort of tickled, in a squirmy way. "I mean, she *likes* you."

"Nah." I dismissed the thought. I had too many complications right now to be thinking of Lori like that.

"What?" She was persistent. "You don't think of her in that manner?"

"No. Yes. I mean... Well, she's really pretty and all." I sighed. This was an uncomfortable conversation to be having, especially when I was lying here, both of us naked atop the rumpled and sweat-slicked sheets. *Why does she insist on talking about someone else while I'm in bed with her?*

"And lonely," she added. "Her husband has been gone for almost two years. She's got to have a lot of pent-up emotions ready to come

flooding out. Wouldn't you like to be the right man in the right place at the right time?"

"Are you kidding me? She wouldn't think... I couldn't... she doesn't look at me like... Nah."

"What is the matter with you?" she asked, a little frustrated at my thick-headedness. "If she found you in her bed, you think she'd kick you out?"

Now I was starting to get a little irritated, as well as embarrassed. "Yes, of course she would. Not that I would be jumping in her bed so she would find me there, anyway. Come on, Wendy, can't we talk about something else?"

Her doodling brought her fingers within range of my more sensitive spots. She had already gotten me off twice, once with her mouth and once as she worked me from on top, while I suckled and squeezed her big breasts as they swayed over my face. Now she was very lightly running her fingertips along the skin between my legs and my balls, teasing and tickling, but never touching either my scrotum or my hard cock. The anticipation was making coherent thought, particularly about Lori Wilkinson, difficult. I decided that a decent defense was a good offense, so I reciprocated by lightly running my fingertips over her sensitive boobs, circling but never touching her ruby nipples.

"Is that what you want to do? Talk?" she teased. She blew at my ear. "You know, there's something else two people can do with their lips besides talk..." She leaned toward me, never stopping her teasing fingers, and kissed me softly on the lips. The soft kiss turned heated as she opened her mouth and invited my tongue in. Both of our hands relented at the same time, as I pinched a distended nipple just as she grasped my rigid cock. She stroked me as she kissed me, until she finally grabbed on and pulled me by my cock over onto her, spreading her legs and guiding my head toward her heated opening. As I sank into her soft and pliant pussy, she wrapped her short legs around mine, pulling me tighter into her.

She was very wet and slick as I pumped in and out of her in a rhythm, drawing almost all the way out of her as her legs relaxed, and then slamming back into her hard when I felt her flexing against the backs of my thighs. The air conditioning in her house couldn't keep up with our efforts, and we both were breathing very hard into each other's mouths, and sweat was running down my back. Her chest had a sheen of perspiration, her breasts mashed against me as she held me close.

Finally, she could take no more, and she broke the kiss and panted as she was pushed over the edge. I had already come twice that afternoon, and had started out feeling like I could ride her for hours, so I was pistoning in and out of her energetically. But when I felt her vaginal muscles contracting as she came, it triggered my own orgasm, and I clenched and pushed as far into her as I could as I pumped and spurted once again.

That was the end of the road for me. I was wrung out, exhausted as I collapsed down on top of her. I could feel her oils coating my cock and balls, and our combined juices leaked out and soaked the sheet beneath us again. I rolled off her, my shrinking dick slipping from her slippery passage, and I landed on my back next to her again.

"Mmmm, that was a good one," she said, mostly to herself. She indulged herself for a few more minutes, enjoying the aftereffects, and then she bounded up out of the bed.

"Get up," she commanded as she slipped into her robe.

I curled up into a ball, wanting to just slide into an easy slumber for just a little while. "No," I said, a little petulantly.

She started pulling the sheets out from under me, being none too gentle as she rolled me out of the way. "Get up, you lazy boy. I have to get these sheets in the wash and the bed changed before Arthur gets home."

I rolled over, propped my hands behind my head, and looked at her. "Why do you do it, anyway?" I asked.

She knew what I meant. She stood there a moment, arms full of soiled sheets, and I could see her about to give my question a flippant reply. I watched her expression as she changed her mind. "I love Arthur, Sean. Let's not forget that. I would never want to hurt him. But he can't provide certain... excitements... that I choose not to be without." Her face took on a harder look. "Don't get all dewy-eyed on me, Sean. You know it's just fun and games. You get to get your rocks off, I get to remember what it's like to go at it two or three times in succession."

That was my cue. I stood up and looked around for my clothes.

"Yeah, well, I'm not so sure I like it very much." Who was I kidding? I liked getting my ashes hauled, especially by someone as energetic and experienced as Wendy. But I still walked away feeling pretty slimy, a feeling that no shower in the world could wash away.

Her eyes got a little reptilian. "So? I'm not forcing you, Sean. If you don't like it, don't come back. See how simple it is?"

"Simple for you, maybe. You've got it all figured out. I don't have a clue about any of this shit. I'm just a kid. What do I know about love and relationships and behavior? I can't seem to keep it in my pants well enough to hang on to a girlfriend. I... ah, fuck, never mind," I trailed off.

"Love? Relationships?" Her eyes were flashing with anger. "Let me help you out here, kiddo. This ain't love, it ain't a relationship. It's sex. Boffing. Getting it on, getting your rocks off, lighting your candle, setting off your pocket rocket, it's the ol' in-and-out. It's fucking at its finest. Enjoy it for what it is, and don't try to read anything else into it, okay?"

Her look softened, and she dropped the sheets and walked over to me and reached up to take my face in her hands. "Sometimes I forget how young you are. You look grown-up, but there's still a lot of little boy in you, and I need to remember that." She pecked me on the lips, then grasped my shoulders and turned me toward the

bathroom. She smacked me on my bare ass to propel me toward the shower. “Now go get cleaned up quickly, please? I’m running late.”

She bustled back around to the pile of laundry as I shuffled off to the bathroom.

I leaned in and stared at my reflection in the mirror.

I looked grown-up? When did that happen?

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NEW TRICKS AND OPPORTUNITIES

My club team had started up again by mid-summer. Eric and I were joined by Jorge, who made the team as keeper. We had practices four evenings a week, and played either one or two games on the weekends.

At about the same time, the Duane Olchick clinic began. Olchick was a Czech player who had been playing for three years in the U.S. and was scheduled to go back to Europe in the fall to play. He had a couple of months of down time before he left, so he was running clinics in several cities in the Midwest. He had two weeks scheduled here for college and high-school players, and the organizers had announced that he would stay for one more week to work with a select group of younger players.

Trent, Eric, Mike Evanson, Jorge, Kristina, John Bennington, Tessa Navarrone, Ashley Horvath, and I were joined by a whole bunch of players from other schools. I didn't know most of them, but I was surprised to see that some of the kids from the All-State team that I had met at the banquet last winter were attending, including

Jesse Wilhoit and his sister Anna, Spencer Goldman from South High, and Harlan Corwin from Rock Falls.

"Jesse!" I jogged over to them as they were getting out of their car. "Anna! It's great to see you!"

"Porter!" Jesse dropped his gear bag and extended his hand. "Good to see you, man. I thought you'd probably be here."

I glanced over at his sister.

"Hi, Sean," she said shyly. She smiled at me, a smile I remembered very well.

"Hey," I said, "you got your braces off. You look great, Anna." And she did look great. In the eight or nine months since I had last seen her, she had filled out very nicely. She had been a tall, thin girl with dark hair and braces, seemingly a little awkward, even though she was a respectable soccer player. Now, she was even more attractive, having grown up a little more. She had been very self-conscious of her braces, but now, without them, she smiled much more easily, and when she smiled, her whole face lit up.

We started hauling their gear over by the fields. "I thought you'd be at school by now," I said to Jesse. Jesse had been the only All-American selection from our state in soccer, and he had a full scholarship to the University of Florida.

"I leave in three weeks," he said. "We've got conditioning workouts, skills drills, and scrimmages the first two weeks, and then formal tryouts after that. Our first game is only a week after that, so there's not that much time."

"Tryouts?" I asked. "I thought you were on the team."

"Nah," he replied. "Just because I've got a scholarship doesn't mean I'm automatically on the team. It just means that they think I'll be able to make the team, and even contribute eventually. But if I don't make the team, you know that the free ride will be yanked for the next year, so it's a true motivator. Besides," he added, "I don't think I'll have a problem making the team. Making a starting position will be a lot more difficult."

There were about seventy soccer players at the clinic. Most of the players were sitting in the bleachers, and a few kids were passing a ball around on the field. I introduced Jesse, Anna, Spencer, and Harlan to the kids I knew. Everybody knew who Jesse was, of course, so he immediately became the center of attention, until Duane Olchick and his assistants walked over and stood in front of the bleachers. One of the assistants blew a whistle, while a second one brought the kids who had been on the field over to the bleachers.

When everybody had quieted down and found seats, he began with introductions. He spoke with a slight accent that was quickly forgotten.

"Hello, everybody, and welcome. My name is Duane Olchick, and I am happy to be with you for these next two weeks. These are my assistants." As he named each one, they stepped forward and raised their hands. "Nicholas Arpente, Yuri Olchick, Anik Olchick, James Bricker, Katrina Sorenno, and Tasha Wallace. Yes, before you ask, Yuri and Anik are my brothers, very good players in Europe. James comes to us from Connecticut, where he is their starting keeper, and he will be working with all the goalkeepers here. Katrina plays for UCLA, and Tasha is a coach for the University of Arizona, after starting for that team for the past four years."

He did a quick head count, and nodded to himself. "Good. We are well represented here. Now, some of you who have attended clinics in the past might be wondering why there are both men and women players here. After all, most instructors at this level prefer to separate men and women, because of the differences in the speed of their games. My own philosophy about the game of soccer is that the same skill sets are used by all players, so there is no reason not to teach all players these skills. When it comes time to play as teams, most of the time we will conduct separate men's and women's games, though we will occasionally play combined, coed if you will, games. And, you may have noticed that I said 'men and women', not 'boys and girls'. Despite how you may think of yourselves, or how

your parents or teachers or other adults think of you, here you truly are men and women, not little children. I will expect you to behave as adults, work like adults, for the next two weeks. Does this meet with the approval of everyone?"

There was no dissention from any of us.

"Ya. Good. Now, I have seen film of some of the athletes here. Please raise your hand when I call you, yes? Jesse Wilhoit." Jesse, sitting next to me, raised his hand. "Ah, yes," continued Duane, "please stand, if you will. All-American forward from Planey, going to the University of Florida in the fall. A very good player, no real weaknesses in your game, except perhaps for a tendency to hold the ball too long. We will fix that. Thank you, please sit. Harlan Corwin? All-Stater from Rock Falls. Also a forward, from the team that won the state championship last fall. Good ball handler, but your shots on goal can tend to be soft. We will work on that. Thank you. Erica Yost?" A girl I didn't know raised her hand. "All-Stater from North, likes to play sweeper, co-captain of your team, excellent at anticipating passes and blocking lanes, but your clearing kicks are sometimes errant. By the end of the clinic, you will be rocketing the ball exactly where you want it to go, Erica. Thank you. Sean Porter?" I raised my hand. "Ah, yes, a classic defenseman, playing beyond your years, but with a tendency to pass a little too quickly, whether the situation calls for it or not. We can teach selfishness, no?" He looked around at his assistants with a smile. "Yes, I think we can. Thank you."

And he continued with his performance, calling on every player who had been chosen for All-Sectional or better honors, giving each a compliment on their game and pointing out an area for improvement, impressing us all that he had actually watched so much game film before the clinic that he could make these points right from the beginning. If nothing else, the astounding feat reinforced our resolve to do our best over the next two weeks.

During the next two days, Olchick and his crew mixed us around with conditioning drills and ball-handling drills, shifting partners or groups every fifteen or twenty minutes, keeping us moving around the four fields. Sometimes we were running sprints without soccer balls, sometimes we were doing circular relay races with balls, other times we were doing three-person weaves down the length of each field, running from one field to the next to the next.

By the third day, we were all fighting through complaining muscles, but they kept at us, only giving us a couple of quick breaks for water, until lunchtime. I had thought I was in shape from all the running I had been doing, but Olchick and his assistants quickly did away with that conceit. At the end of the morning session, we all limped toward our cars, panting and sweating, anxious to get to some air-conditioned restaurant to cool down for a bit.

When we had straggled back to the fields for the afternoon session, Duane had us sit in the bleachers.

"Good news," he said with a smile. "You have survived the first two and a half days of my torture session. Now, the fun begins." He outlined his plans for the rest of the week, which included brief classroom sessions, watching game films, and playing all-out games.

By the end of Friday's session, I had played more quality soccer than I had practically all season long the previous fall. All these players were better than good, both the guys and the girls. When Olchick and his team divided us up into two men's teams, we were so evenly matched that the scrimmages got more and more intense, until all of us were playing way beyond our abilities as individuals. We played two full ninety-minute games every day, one in the morning and one in the afternoon, and when we weren't playing, we were either stretching, dribbling, juggling, or watching film, and sometimes we were doing two of these activities simultaneously.

The film that Duane chose each day was either a tape of one of our own games, taped by his brothers, or it was a game from the European Leagues, or a World Cup classic match-up. He had a tent

set up for us to watch the film, and he put a film of plastic over the television screen so he could stop the tape and sketch a play or point out a pattern with chalk. He showed us how particular plays developed, and even threw in some bloopers for us, just to see if we were paying attention.

On Friday afternoon, he had a play that had occurred in our men's game the day before frozen on the screen.

"Do you see this?" he asked, tapping the image of Jesse Wilhoit on the television. "What happens here?"

Jesse answered. "I took a pass from Hap Stanford, there in the middle, and I tried to one-touch it back to him on a give-and-go, but Porter here," and he gave me a shove, practically pushing me over, "was all over me like white on rice, and I couldn't complete the pass."

"And why couldn't you finish the pass?" Duane persisted.

"Well, the pass came in front of me, and Porter was dogging me. It was all I could do to keep him from taking the ball away from me, so I couldn't control the ball well enough to touch it back to Stanford."

"Ah," said Duane with satisfaction. "Exactly. Now, what would have happened if you had sped up just a little, so that the pass ended up behind you?"

"I'd probably have tripped over Porter's big feet," said Jesse, eliciting a laugh from everybody. "Aside from that, I would have had to turn around to get to the ball."

"Really?" asked Duane, a look of pleased surprise on his face. "But perhaps not. I think Nicholas and Katrina can show you something new, yes?"

With that, he led us all back out onto the field. He set up Katrina as passer, Nicholas as receiver, about twenty meters apart. "Mr. Porter? If you would be so kind as to be our defender?" He gestured for me to join his coaches on the field, while the rest of the students

gathered along the sidelines. "Now, Sean, defend against the pass just as you did the other day, please."

Finally, he was satisfied with the preparations, and he blew his whistle. Katrina started dribbling down the field, and Nicholas paced her along the sideline. I stayed close to him, trying to block the passing lane to stop the give-and-go. I saw Katrina pass the ball behind Nicholas, and I stopped, certain the pass was going to miss us completely, when Nicholas planted his left foot, swept his right foot behind his left, and neatly used his heel to redirect the ball back toward the middle of the field, practically placing it on Katrina's foot as she ran by us. It was the slickest move I had ever seen, and the reaction from the sideline was similar to what I was feeling. Duane stood there, a smile on his face, his arms crossed, as he surveyed the murmuring crowd.

"Ah, I see I show you something new, yes? Good. But it takes practice. The pass must be good, the timing of the leg sweep is crucial, the angle of the ball will determine where it ends up after the pass. All must go well for it to work, but when it is done correctly, it is very difficult to stop, no?" He clapped his hands, and began breaking us into groups of three to practice the move. Everybody rotated from spot to spot, so that every player could experience the angle needed on the initial pass; then the timing needed on the sweep; and the defensive position that made the back pass necessary. Duane was right: it took a lot of practice, and the opportunities to use it were limited. When the time was right, however, there was a group of us who would be ready to try it.

Jesse and Anna had made plans to stay later on Friday, so they could go out to dinner with Eric, Ashley, Trent, and me. I brought them over to my house so they could take showers before we went out. My parents, along with my younger brother Stephen and my older brother Michael, were home, and happy to see Jesse and Anna again, having met them previously at the year-end banquet.

Ashley and Anna, being two of the youngest girls at the clinic, had naturally found each other, and had become good friends during the week. At dinner, they kept up a running commentary on the physical attributes of many of the boys from the clinic, keeping us amused, right up until they started in on the four of us boys.

"And Sean's got bony knees, don't you think?" asked Ashley, looking askance at me to see if I had heard her, as she had planned.

"Very bony," agreed Anna, a twinkle in her eye. "Bony and angular. It's a wonder he can run at all, with those legs. What about Trent?"

"A little old for me, but very hunky," said Ashley, looking over at Trent as if she was examining an interesting, if flawed, drawing.

"I don't know," said Anna. "His chin is a little too prominent for my taste."

Ashley grabbed Trent's chin and turned his face to examine it critically. "You might be right. Too big and clunky. Now that you mention it, it's so big it probably weighs him down and gets in the way. Now Eric, on the other hand..."

"Mmmm, yes, Eric. Great buns," observed Anna.

"Thass what Keisha think, too," murmured Eric. Both Ashley and Anna blushed a bright red as the rest of us laughed out loud.

"Be very careful, ladies, or we just might start our own comparisons here," warned Trent with a chuckle.

"You know," began Jesse, steering the conversation to a different topic, "that heel pass that Duane showed us today got me thinking."

"At least something has finally got you thinking," said his sister teasingly.

"Oh, don't worry, little sister, I get thoughts," he shot back. Again, Anna blushed as Jesse continued, "But these thoughts are about soccer. I'll bet..." He paused.

"You'll bet what?" I asked.

He wouldn't answer me. I had the feeling that he was planning a surprise for us for next week, and he didn't want to spoil it by talking

about it now. His idea was soon forgotten by the rest of us as the conversation veered off once again, until it was time for Jesse and Anna to start their long drive back home. We said our goodbyes outside the restaurant. I gave Anna a clumsy hug, and shook Jesse's hand. Ashley and Anna gave each other a fierce, sisterly hug, vowing to each other that they would call several times over the weekend. The rest of us just stood there, shaking our heads at the silly things girls thought were important.

What did we know? Nothing, of course: we were boys.

* * * * * * * * * *

On Monday morning, we were all back at the fields, ready for another week of intense drills and scrimmages. Our schedule called for the coed teams to play in the morning, and the men's teams to battle in the afternoon. When we played coed, the men's goalies played in the net the first half, and the women's goalies played the second half. Both Jorge and Tessa were on my coed team, so they alternated in goal for the first game. Jesse and I were always on opposite teams, and usually played near each other on the field, Jesse on offense and me on defense. The previous week, he had tallied the most goals of any of the guys, at six, but was far short of the top women's scorer, a girl from downstate named Posey Smith, who had scored eleven goals for her team, including two goals for her coed team. She was quick to the ball, deadly accurate from within eighteen meters, and unconcerned if she was stopped on a particular shot, knowing full well she would get lots of opportunities to score. I was glad she was on my coed team, so I didn't have to try to defend her. On the other hand, Kristina was on Jesse's team, and had tallied eight goals herself, though all except for one goal were scored during the women's games. Still, she was the second-leading scorer of all the

players, and I was proud of her. We sat together whenever we could, eating lunch together most days, and choosing seats near each other during Duane's lectures. I couldn't call her at her house, but at least we were able to spend a few minutes together during the clinic.

In the afternoon game on Monday, we were playing at 1-1, and the clock was ticking down to the last ten minutes, when Harlan Corwin passed the ball over toward Jesse. He trapped the ball and dribbled up a couple of steps as I closed toward him. He slowed, almost as if he wanted to wait for me to get right up to him, when I saw him sweep the ball with his trailing toe, lifting the ball up behind him. He cocked his leg, and whipped it up in back, making contact on the ball with his heel. He managed to direct the ball up, in a sweeping arc over his head, and over mine. I kind of stood there in shock, not sure I could believe that he did that on purpose, when he stepped around me, gathered up the ball as it bounced behind me, and raced toward the goal, leaving me in the dust. Jorge came out at Jesse when he saw what happened, and managed to deflect the ball in a panic dive just as Jesse took his shot, saving a goal. But Jesse's point was made: he had figured out how to give himself what he subsequently called an Alley-Oop One-Man Give-And-Go, and he had saved it for an opportunity to teach me, the youngster, that there were tricks yet to be discovered.

After the game, we were lined up at the coolers, refilling our water cups.

"Let me guess," I said. "Is that what you were dreaming up at dinner on Friday?"

He gave me a big grin. "Yep," he acknowledged. "Anna and I worked on it at home over the weekend. I wanted to wait to hit you with it as a surprise, and I think Anna was going to try it in her game today, too, if the opportunity presented itself."

"How the hell am I supposed to defend against that move?" I asked.

"I can show you how," said Duane from behind us. He had apparently been listening to our conversation with interest. "I am glad to see you came up with that move on your own, Jesse. It is a difficult maneuver to perfect. Come over here, men, and I will explain it to you." We all followed him into the tent. "Sean, anytime a pass goes behind your player, one of three things will happen." He moved to the chalkboard next to the television. "Either a heel give-and-go, or one of Jesse's Alley-Oops, as he calls it, will be highly technical moves you could expect. In either case, a good defense is to back off a little. If you think a give-and-go will occur, move toward the passer to try to intercept." He drew lines and squiggles to illustrate his point. "If you think an Alley-Oop is a possibility, by backing off a little, you have a chance at a header, taking away the ball." He dropped the chalk back into the tray and looked at me, wanting to make sure I understood his points.

"Okay," I said. "I understand those defensive positions. But you mentioned three possibilities, and you've only described defenses for two of them. What's the third?"

"Very good," he said with satisfaction, looking quite pleased. "The third possibility is that it truly was an errant pass, or your opponent is not skilled enough to perform the maneuver, in which case the ball will go behind the person you are defending, and you will be in a better position in any case to recover the ball. Simple, no?"

"Simple for you, I think. Difficult for me," I said with a smile.

He looked at me shrewdly. "If you say so, Mr. Porter. But I do not think that is so true."

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On Wednesday, at the end of the session for the day, Nicholas Arpente came up to me and touched my arm.

"Excuse me, Sean? Duane would like to see you for a moment."

He pointed me toward the tent, and turned away to help the other coaches take down the nets and corner flags. I walked over to the tent, and drew back the flap. Duane was watching a videotape of one of our games from earlier in the day.

"You wanted to see me, Duane?" I asked.

He whirled around. "Oh, sorry, I was engrossed in watching this game." He paused the tape, leaving an image of the women's teams frozen on the screen. "Sit down a moment, Sean." He indicated a chair. "My brothers must return to Europe to rejoin their own teams this weekend," he continued. "And yet we have made a commitment to continue here with another clinic, for the younger players, yes? So, I seem to have a couple of openings for assistants for next week. I understand you have been working with some of the boys who will be attending our clinic, yes?"

I nodded. I knew Davey and Kip were both enrolled.

"Good. I have been observing your play. You have made some remarkable improvements these past days, and I have conferred with Nicholas and James, as well as Katrina and Tasha. They all agree that you would be a fine addition to our staff for the next week. Are you interested?"

Am I interested? Working with Duane Olchick and his crack assistants? Teaching soccer and getting paid to do it? Am I interested?

"Absolutely," I exclaimed. "What an opportunity! Thank you very much, Mr. Olchick! Wow!"

"Please," he said with a smile, "I am Duane, not Mr. Olchick. Next week, for the children, I can be Mr. Olchick. But this week, with the players we have here, I am merely Duane."

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A WHOLE LOTTA WORTHWHILE

By the end of the following week, I was falling-down exhausted, both physically and mentally. Riding herd over sixty kids between the ages of seven and twelve wasn't the fun and games I had thought it would be when I accepted Duane's invitation to join his staff. But, on the other hand, I got to watch Duane, Nicholas, James, Katrina, and Tasha in action, and even provide a little help as they lectured, cajoled, whistled, directed, pointed, stopped, persuaded, maneuvered, and otherwise controlled the swarm, and actually taught some soccer in those moments in between. Davey and Kip were lost to me in the shuffle, even though they tended to try to hang around me the first day. By the end, they had assimilated into the group so well that I hardly got to say anything to them all week long.

On Friday, Duane took all of his assistants out for a nice dinner after the clinic had finished. I borrowed my brother Mike's car, and met them downtown at The Great Midwest Steakhouse, one of the most expensive restaurants in town. The others were already there, looking at their menus, when I arrived.

"Ah, Sean, welcome," said Duane. "No date tonight? I thought you would bring a girlfriend."

I shrugged as I sat down at one of the two empty seats at the table. "I'm not really dating anyone right now," I said.

"Really?" Nicholas queried in surprise. "Sorry, I just thought..." He let it drop. I wondered what he had heard over the past three weeks.

"Don't mind him, Sean," interjected Tasha. "Nick sometimes lets his mouth do his thinking for him." She looked over at Nick affectionately, and patted his hand to lessen the sting of her comment. "But he's a loveable old bear, and he means well," she added.

So, I thought to myself, *Nicholas and Tasha are an item, it seems.* But I didn't say anything.

The waiter took our orders for drinks and appetizers, and when the drinks arrived, Duane asked for our attention.

"If I may, I would like to propose a toast. To my friends, here at table, you have made these weeks fly by effortlessly. I could never have run these clinics without your help. Nicholas, my trusted assistant, who has been a part of my support staff for so long, and will be returning with me to Germany; Katrina, the lovely midfielder, returning to UCLA for her senior year; James, an extraordinary goalkeeper, who, I am certain, will enjoy a very successful professional career; Tasha, who is due to return to her duties at Arizona, I hope you discovered some new talent for your future teams, my dear; to my brothers, Yuri and Anik, who, even though they are not here with us tonight, still have been an integral part of the success of these past weeks; and, of course, to the newest member of our staff, the young defensive specialist, Sean, who has so many wonderful games yet to play over the next several years. You are, each and every one, special to me. Salud!"

We all clinked our glasses together, thanking Duane for his kindness.

"Ah, but I am not through yet, my friends." He reached into his jacket pocket and brought out several envelopes. As he passed them out to each of us, he continued, "Here is a small token of my gratitude for the help you have provided. And, of course, if you are ever in Bremen," he added with a smile, "My wife Francesca and I would be honored if you would stay with us."

The conversation around the table broke down into reminiscences about the clinics they had run, both here and in other locales. I sat and listened, content to sit and enjoy hearing the stories. Even though I was, by several years, the youngest person at the table, and even, in soccer terms, the least experienced person at the table, I wasn't uncomfortable, since everybody effortlessly included me in their circle of conversation. I really felt as if I were a comrade, a fellow player of the game.

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Jake Lehigh had been working out at the YMCA gym, trying to muscle up for football, and the time he spent with free weights was making a difference. He played tackle, on both sides of the ball, so he felt that he needed to work on his strength conditioning to be a better player. He had grown quite a bit over the past couple of years, and had bulked up from his workouts, and he now was a very big guy. For a kid who was just past his sophomore year of high school, he was nearly six feet tall, and weighed over two hundred pounds. All summer he had been bugging me to join him at the gym, and I had been trying to get him to go running with me. He hated to run, and I wasn't a weightlifting kind of guy, so we didn't get together much for a workout.

We finally made a deal, and decided that I would work out with him at the gym so I could work on my upper-body strength, and

then we would go for a run so we could work on his wind and his stamina.

He showed me how to use the machines in the exercise room, moving with me from machine to machine. He figured out a good rotation, and followed me around, explaining each machine's functions and the muscle groups they were designed to strengthen. We did two rotations around the room, and by the time I was done, my arms were shaking and sweat was running down my back. Jake still looked like he had barely started his workout, even though he usually doubled the amount of weight when he used the machines. When we were done with the machines, we went back into the locker room to change into fresh socks and running shoes, and then we headed outside to pound the pavement. I had mapped out an easy three-mile loop, staying on relatively flat ground, to ease him into it, and we headed out at an easy jog.

By the time we were back in sight of the YMCA parking lot, Jake was laboring, his weight shifting side to side and his strides shortened up, and he was gasping for breath. I was feeling like my legs were warmed up and ready for a workout, while my shoulders, chest, and arms were starting to tighten up from our previous workout. We slowed to a walk, using the last couple of blocks to cool down. We got to the front door and headed slowly toward the locker room. Jake staggered to a bench by our lockers and sat down heavily, head bowed, his arms resting on his knees as he caught his breath. I opened my locker and pulled out a towel. I sat next to him on the bench and began unlacing my shoes, the towel draped around my neck.

He glanced over at me tiredly and said, "You do that all the time? That's harder than I thought."

I shrugged. I could sympathize, since even shrugging was painful for me after the workout with the weights. "It's all in what you're used to doing," I said.

He just grunted. Talking hurt when you were that tired.

We stumbled to the showers and let the stinging spray do what it could to revive us. Wrapping towels around our waists, we shuffled back to our lockers to get dressed.

"Hey, Sean, remember that picnic in the field behind my house last year?"

Did I ever. Jake's little sister Kayla and me, hiding in the basement during the scavenger hunt, and the way the dim light played on her skin, creating alluring shadows in interesting places. I remembered. "Sure," I said.

"They're gonna do it again," he said. "Next weekend. You want to come over?"

Kayla. Basement. Dark.

"Sure," I said.

Damn, something to look forward to. I couldn't remember the last time I had that experience, and it wasn't connected to soccer. *Even if Kayla has a boyfriend, a guy can dream, can't he*?

"How's Jaimie?" I asked.

He was pulling on a fresh t-shirt. "She's okay. We have to do a lot of sneaking around to get together, though. It's kind of tough on her, going around her folks the way we have. And her sister's still irritating her."

"Oh, yeah," I said. "I remember last year, Tara had a bug up her butt about something."

"That bug is still there. Jaimie thinks she might know about us, and she's afraid Tara is going to start blackmailing her or something. There's a lot of sibling rivalry shit going on there, I guess. Anyway, it creates some tension between Jaimie and me, on top of it all."

"I can see how it would," I commiserated.

"Almost makes you wonder if this boy-girl thing is worth it sometimes." He hesitated, and then confessed, "But then she kisses me, and we're hanging out together, and..."

"Kinda makes it all worthwhile, huh?" I asked with a grin.

He smiled sheepishly. "Yup. A whole lotta worthwhile." He laughed out loud.

We walked out to the parking lot, toward Jake's car, when we saw Josh O'Toole pulling into the lot. He parked a few spots away from Jake's car, and was just getting out of the car and reaching back in for his gym bag when we came up to him.

"Hey, Josh," said Jake. "You going in for a workout?"

He backed out of his car and slammed the door.

"Yeah, I gotta work off some of this bullshit I've been accumulating," he said. He looked disgusted and upset about something.

"Why? What's going on?" I asked.

He gave me a sour look.

"Ah, it's nothing, Sean. Nothing that should concern you, anyway." He turned his head and spat at his front tire. "It's my delinquent sister and her hophead boyfriend. He gives me the jitters. I just don't like him, and I don't like the direction Molly's going, and I don't know if I can do anything about it."

"What are they doing?" asked Jake. He knew all about my last episode with Molly, including the pregnancy scare, but I didn't know how much Josh knew. And I certainly wasn't going to tell him.

"Ah, it's nothing specific, you know? It's just that she's getting home later and later, and a lot of the time she's a little wasted by the time she gets home. She's not real interested in spending any time with her own friends, she just hangs out with Joey's pals." He sighed. "You know, I really don't want my twin sister to be a Bulls bitch, but I'm afraid that's where she's headed. Only she can't see it."

Molly a Bulls bitch? That would be a stretch. We had all heard stories about the girls who liked to hang around Richie Del Toro and the Bulls. I'm sure most of the stories were gross exaggerations, but even so, some of the tamer rumors included things like slapping them around to keep them in line, strange initiations, certain tattoos indicating ownership, and even passing the girls around to all the

guys in the gang after their boyfriends got tired of them. I couldn't see Molly O'Toole putting up with any of that from anybody, much less from a social load like Joey Amonte.

Besides, we all thought the Bulls were kind of directionless, since Richie, their founder and Fearless Leader, was still in the pokey.

Jake and I walked over to Jake's car and tossed our gym bags into the back seat. Josh was trudging toward the front door as we pulled out of the lot. We were both quiet, thinking our own ugly thoughts about Joey Amonte and his friends.

Maybe we were wrong about the Bulls. I hoped not, but we had been wrong about them before.

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LUSCIOUS GIRL DILEMMA

I knew that there was no way that Kristina's parents would allow her to go to the block party with me, and I wouldn't ask her to sneak around against her father's wishes, so I decided to give Becky Steinman a call. *After all, why should I be the only kid there without a girl to hang out with?*

"Hi, Becky," I said when she got on the phone. "It's Sean."

"Sean? Sean who?" she asked teasingly. "Not Sean Porter, is it? I thought he dropped off the face of the earth."

"Nope," I replied. "Just been busy, that's all."

"Oh," she said. "And no telephones anywhere to be found, I suppose."

"Hey, you could have called me, you know," I said defensively.

"And what would you have thought of me if I had called? That's not my style, to be so forward."

"So," I said, "let me get this straight. You'd rather do nothing than risk having someone think you are too forward?"

There was a pause from the other end of the line. "I guess it doesn't make a lot of sense when you put it like that, does it?" she

said. "Okay, next time I'll call. Do you want me to sigh and swoon for your benefit, too?"

I laughed. "Sure," I said. "You'd better practice first, though. I get the feeling you're not very good at sighing and swooning."

"I don't have anything worth sighing and swooning over. Not yet, anyway," she added coquettishly. "I'm afraid that, even with practice, I wouldn't be very convincing in the swooning department."

"I think you're right, Becks. You're just not the swooning type, I'm afraid."

I told her about the block party on Saturday, and asked her if she would like to go there with me.

"Be still my heart," she sighed. "I think I might swoon."

It was almost too much to take, and we both started laughing.

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The next day I was working with Davey, Kip, and Justin at the park. We did some passing warm-ups and some stretching, and then I took them over by the baseball fields. We jogged around to the outfield fence, a wire fence about five feet high.

"Okay, men, here's the drill," I instructed. I took them out so they were about ten meters away. "I'm going to go to the other side of the fence, and I want you to kick the ball over the fence to me."

"Why, Sean?" asked Kip.

"Because, stupid," retorted his brother, "the fence is in the way. You can't kick it to him without going over the fence."

"Don't call me stupid!" cried Kip.

"That's right, don't call him stupid," I admonished Davey. "He's asking a good question."

"Okay, then, why?" asked Justin.

I lofted my ball over the fence, and then leapt up, grabbing the top bar, and hoisted myself over the top, dropping to the other side. I ran over to retrieve my ball, and tossed it back over the fence to the boys.

"I want you to learn how to pass the ball through the air, not just on the ground," I said. "There will be times in a game when you might want to pass the ball over an opponent's head, for instance."

"Or hit him in the head!" laughed Davey.

"Nope," I said. "Never deliberately kick the ball so that somebody nearby might get hurt, Davey. Okay?"

"I was just kidding, Sean," said Davey, by way of apology.

"I know you were, buddy," I said. "Anyway, can you think of any other reason why you might want to kick the ball into the air, instead of on the ground?"

"I know!" yelled Kip. "To kick it really far!"

"That's right," I said. "The ball goes further in the air than it does on the ground."

We were at the limit of instruction by talking, so I got them going on booting the ball over the fence. The three boys started out just kicking at the ball, with no sense of where it was going, and only about a quarter of the time the ball made it over the fence.

"Okay, hold up a minute," I said. I had three of the four balls on my side of the fence, so they couldn't continue, anyway. "The object of the game is not only to get the ball over the fence, but to make it a pass to me. Everybody got it?"

"Okay!" "Yep-sirree!" "I got it, Sean."

With a little more practice, and a little more concentration, they started being much more accurate about their drill. Most of the balls were making it over the fence, and quite a few were in my vicinity, as much or more than I could have hoped for on our first try at this drill.

After about fifteen minutes of lofting the ball, I called a stop to it. I tossed the balls back over the fence to the boys, and hopped back over to their side. We started dribbling back over to our gear.

"There's one more time when you might want to get the ball off the ground a little," I said. "Anybody care to take a guess at when that might be?"

They thought about it for a few moments, and then Justin said, "When you're shooting?"

"Right you are, buddy-boy," I said. "The best places to shoot for when you're attacking the goal are the four corners. Most keepers your age can't defend a shot aimed at the high corners. If you can practice lofting the ball accurately, you'll score more goals."

"All right!" shouted Davey enthusiastically. "Score more goals!"

"But," I admonished, "it has to be an accurate shot, otherwise it's just another wasted opportunity, and you've ended up giving the ball back to your opponents."

"Okay, Sean," said Davey.

I informed them that practice was just about over. "Okay, guys, I want two laps around the outside of the soccer field. First lap use just your right foot, second lap just your left foot. Ready? Go!" And off they went. I trailed behind them, also using only one foot to dribble the ball. If it was good enough of a drill for them, it was good enough for me. I never wanted to be the kind of coach who wouldn't do the exercises that I assigned to my players.

As we were finishing up the last lap, I saw Wendy pull up to the curb and park her car. She walked over toward our gear as we jogged up to her, each of us dribbling the ball with just our left foot.

"Hi, Mom," called out Justin.

"Hi, Champ," said Wendy. "Davey and Kip, your mom asked if I could give you a ride home. Okay?"

"Sure, Mrs. Marcus."

"If Mom says so, it's okay with me, I guess," said Kip.

"And you're okay with that?" she asked, turning to me with a smile.

"Sure," I replied. "I guess you and Lori know each other well enough, how could I object?" I rummaged around in my gear bag for a towel so I could wipe the sweat from my face.

Wendy sent the boys off to the car. She stepped up a little closer to me.

"Careful," I said. "I'm pretty sweaty and smelly."

"I like the smell of healthy sweat," she said. There was a little trace of hunger in her voice. "It's kind of sexy."

"Sexy? I don't think so," I said nervously.

"Arthur's working late tonight," she said quietly. "Lori would be glad to keep the boys for dinner. I'd be home, all alone. I might enjoy some... company," she continued.

"Uh," I mumbled, suddenly embarrassed. "Look, Wendy, I..."

She glanced around quickly. There was nobody else nearby, and the boys were involved in choosing who got to ride in the front seat of the car, paying no attention to us at all. Wendy stepped up to me, her large breasts pressing lightly against my chest. She reached down and ran her hand smoothly up my thigh, letting her fingernails lightly scratch me under the leg of my shorts. I could feel my cock beginning to rise, and the recognition of that fact was clear in her eyes. I stepped hurriedly away from her and crouched down by my gear bag, pretending to look for something that wasn't going to be found there.

"Look, Wendy... it's not that I don't appreciate the offer... or the attention, you understand... but I don't think..."

"I'm not asking you to think, Sean." There was an edge to her voice. I glanced up at her. She was standing there, hands balled into fists, fists perched on her hips, staring at me. "A simple yes or no will do. Do you want to fuck tonight, or not?"

Hearing her talk like that made up my mind for me.

"Nah," I said. "I guess not." I went back to packing my bag. She stood there a moment, no doubt shooting daggers at me, and then she turned and, without a word, strode back to her car.

* * * * * * * * * *

On Saturday afternoon, Becky and I got to the field behind the Lehigh house fashionably late. The softball diamond had once again been set up, and a tee was standing in front of home plate. The little kids were playing tee-ball, encouraged by their parents. We walked over to the tub that contained the sodas in ice, and each grabbed something to drink. Most of the teenagers were sitting or lying down on the grass in the outfield, waiting for the tee-ball game to end. Jake waved to us as we wandered over toward them. Jaimie was also there, in the crowd and not too close to Jake, in deference to her parents. I also saw Kayla, and the kid who I supposed was her boyfriend, a stick figure of a boy with spiky hair and acne on his chin. There were a few of Jake's football friends there, some with girls I knew from school, and there was a whole gang of younger teens, apparently led by Jaimie's younger sister Tara, who moved as a herd. I was surprised to see my brother Stephen among the group, following Tara around like a wounded puppy.

And it was no wonder he was panting after her. If I had been his age, I might have been on her scent, myself. For a girl who had just recently turned thirteen, Tara was acting and dressing way beyond her years. She had on denim cutoffs that were cut short, so that her ass cheeks were peeking out, making her slim legs look very long. She also wore a tube top that was tight enough to mash her small boobs together, giving her some cleavage showing from the strapless top. The clingy material molded itself to her, her nipples evident through the cloth. Her brown hair had grown out, and she had put some blonde streaks in it, but it was still an unruly mop, and she

wore too much makeup. She looked hot and ready for action. I wondered at the disparity of Mr. and Mrs. Jacks allowing their younger daughter to run around looking like she did, while keeping such a tight rein on Jaimie. It didn't make a lot of sense to me.

"Hey, Sean," said Jake, by way of greeting. "Hey, Becky."

"Hey yourself," I answered. "When's the softball game start?"

"Pretty soon," he said. "Just waiting for the kids to finish their game. Dad's cooking up hot dogs for them, so they'll eat while we're playing. Gonna be kind of an assembly line meal today, what with all the people here."

And there were a lot of people in the back yards and in the field. It was a much bigger gathering than last year's. It looked like it had expanded beyond the houses on this block. As I was looking around, I saw Mr. and Mrs. O'Toole come around the corner of a house. Heather and Josh were with them, and so was Josh's girlfriend, Andrea. The kids spotted us immediately, and headed over toward our group. Becky walked over to meet them, and she, Heather, and Andrea went off to join another group of girls over closer to the woods.

"What's up, Josh?" I asked.

"Nothin' much," he replied. "My parents wanted to make this some sort of family outing, but Molly took off this morning with that asshole Joey, and nobody knows where they are. Mom and Dad are really pissed off over her disappearing act." He spotted Tara and her group as they sped by us. "Whoa, who's that?" he asked, giving a low whistle.

"That's Jaimie's sister," said Jake. "I think she's a Molly-in-training."

Josh whipped around to stare at Jake. I thought it was an unfortunate remark, too, and so, apparently, did Jake.

"Sorry, man, I didn't mean anything by it," he offered by way of apology. He looked truly sorry, too.

Josh just shook his head, as if he had gnats flying around his ears. "Aw, shit, that's okay, Jake. I'm just a little uncomfortable knowing others are seeing the same thing in my sister that I'm seeing lately, that's all. It's not the kind of confirmation I was looking for, you know what I mean?"

"Yeah, I know, but I'm sorry my big mouth got going before my brain dropped into gear anyway," said Jake.

The tee-ball game broke up, and the parents guided the younger kids toward the grill, where Mr. Lehigh and Mr. Jacks were busy setting up plates of hot dogs. Us older kids, along with some of the other parents, started extending out the bases, collecting bats, and discussing team rosters. The girls came over, and the team captains were chosen. In the interest of fairness, the husbands and wives, boyfriends and girlfriends were going to play on the same teams as couples. Becky and I were on Jake's team, and we walked out to center field to play the position together.

By about the third inning, most of the girls had gotten bored with the game, and they sauntered off the field to look for other amusements. The softball game got more serious, now that it was mostly the jocks and would-be jocks playing.

During the sixth inning, one of Jake's friends from the football team stepped up to the plate. His name was Stanford Harrison, but everybody called him Tiny, because he was anything but. Tiny was about six feet five inches tall, and had to weigh over three hundred pounds. He anchored our school's front line, and was nearly impossible to move off his position by less than two opponents. All the outfielders moved way back when Tiny crowded over the plate, the softball bat looking very twig-like in his meaty hands. He swung at the first pitch, and there was a funny, soft sound as the ball ricocheted off the bat. The ball blooped over the shortstop's head and landed with a plop in short right field. As Tiny lumbered around the bases, the right fielder raced up to pick up the ball. He reached down, but what he picked up didn't resemble a softball very much

any more. Tiny had crushed the ball so hard the seams had split, and the stuffing was leaking out of the ball so badly it couldn't be thrown. Everybody gathered around to stare at the ball in amazement as Tiny kept on running around the bases until he reached home plate. He wanted to make sure he got the home run before jogging out to see what everybody was looking at.

"Well," said Josh, "I guess that's the game." He handed the ruined softball to Tiny. "Here you go, Tiny. Another trophy for your mantel."

Tiny bowed low as everybody broke out in applause at the feat they had witnessed.

Josh and I walked over to where Andrea and Becky were sitting, and the four of us headed over to fill our plates. We took our food and drinks over to one of the tables set up across the back yards.

By dusk the smaller kids were running around, trying to catch fireflies, and Mrs. Lehigh was getting the supplies for the scavenger hunt ready. Floodlights came on in the back yards, illuminating the tables and patios, and leaving the field and woods behind seeming nearly impenetrable in the deeper shadows.

"Scavenger hunt time!" called out Mrs. Lehigh. She gathered all the participants around to explain the rules. "I have a list of items you must collect," she said. "Everybody take one of these paper bags to hold your items. The Lehigh Drug logo on the bag will help identify you to the neighbors. No going beyond the neighborhood. There's a map on the back of the items list showing the boundaries. Everybody has to go out with at least one other person, so nobody wanders around all alone. Does everybody understand?"

"How long do we have?" asked a voice from the back.

"One hour," answered Mrs. Lehigh. "There will be prizes awarded, so do your best and hurry back. Any other questions? No? Okay, on your mark, get set, go!"

And the race was on, but I had other plans. I figured that I would probably find the front door of Jake's house unlocked, so I took

Becky's hand and quietly told her to wait for a few minutes, until the teams had left the immediate area. She looked a little puzzled as I led her away from the lights in the back yards, and peeked around the corner of the house. It looked to be all clear. I could see a few kids a couple of houses away, running down the sidewalk, but they were moving away from us. I pulled her around the corner.

"What are we doing, Sean?" she whispered.

"Ducking out of the scavenger hunt," I replied quietly. I led her up the stoop to Jake's front door. Sure enough, it was unlocked. There was light spilling from the kitchen, but the front of the house was dark. Putting a finger to my lips to indicate we needed to be silent, we tiptoed through the house to the basement door. We slipped down the stairs. Becky was moving hesitantly behind me, unsure about the steps, but I had been here hundreds of times, and knew this basement almost like I knew my own. I guided her confidently across the room to the corner furthest from the stairs, and we slid down the wall to the floor, sitting next to each other. Faintly, somewhere in the basement, I heard a faint ticking, but I couldn't identify what it was, or even where it was coming from. I ignored it. *Probably the furnace or something,* I thought. It was pitch dark, Becky's presence felt through warmth rather than sight.

"What..." she whispered. She wasn't able to finish her sentence, because I put my arm around her shoulder, pulled her over, and kissed her. As our lips pressed together for our first kiss, she squealed in surprise into my mouth, but then relaxed and kissed me back with enthusiasm. We stayed just like that for a few moments, our lips moving slightly against each other, getting accustomed to each other's ways. I felt her lips parting slightly, a clue that she was enjoying it, so I brushed my tongue very softly around her lips, letting just the tip gently caress her. She moaned, and her tongue darted out to meet mine, hesitant at first, but getting a little bolder as she welcomed the contact. She broke the kiss so she could plant little kisses around my mouth, her hand slipping up to grasp me around

my neck to hold me close to her. We heated up, our lips finding each other again. Our mouths opened wider, and the kiss got hotter and wetter. As our tongues writhed together, she pressed herself closer to me, bending her knee and resting her leg on top of mine as we sat there, and twisting her body for more contact. With one arm around her shoulder, my other arm slipped around her waist, and she put her hand on my shoulder, pulling me around toward her.

We stayed like that for a long time, letting our mouths and tongues learn of each other, kissing actively and holding each other fairly passively. I felt her upper body twist just a little, and my hand on her waist slid to her tummy. She was wearing a sleeveless shirt with lace at the hem, and I could feel the filigree of the lace against my palm. She began rubbing my upper arm, up and down, elbow to shoulder, as we kissed and sucked on each other's tongues. I was breathing heavily, and Becky would occasionally whimper or moan, especially if I unexpectedly thrust my tongue deeply into her mouth for a moment. Before long, she was rhythmically rubbing my arm from my shoulder down my forearm and back again, sometimes in concert with the jabbing of her tongue against my mouth as we kissed.

I must have been dense in picking up on her signals, because, finally, she ran her hand down my arm, grasped my wrist, and slowly pulled my hand up from her stomach to her covered breast. She held my hand there, pressing it against her, and moaned into my mouth, her desire evident.

I had learned from my past mistakes. I accepted her cue, and let my hand squeeze her breast, feeling the spongy firmness through the layers of cloth, detecting the nipple as it filled and expanded with my manipulation. She continued to press my hand against her, wanting firmer contact.

My own desire was painfully evident, standing up there in my shorts, as I explored the shape of her breast through her clothes. I could feel her nipple hardening as I kneaded her flesh, pressing

through the layers of her clothes and announcing itself against the palm of my hand. I slipped over to her other breast, squeezing and pinching that distended nipple, as she passively allowed her hand to rest on my flexing wrist. I reveled in the shape of her, the way her body sloped from her chest to the swells of her breast. I hefted the small weight of each breast, nesting them in the palm of my hand. Even through her shirt and her bra, it was an extremely erotic moment.

I tried brushing my hand back down to the lacy hem, so I could feel the soft skin of her middle and get closer to her, but she pulled my wrist back up to her boob, wanting nothing more than the contact we had already established. I acquiesced to her unspoken request, and continued to manipulate the soft flesh of her breast, capped by the rubbery hard point of her distended nipple, through her clothes, happy for even that much liberty.

Becky still had her hand on my wrist, in a tacit approval of my actions, as I fondled her boobs over her shirt. Our kiss was heating up to be very hot and wet, no subtlety at all in the movement of our tongues in each other's mouth. Even with all these sensory pleasures, though, I could still detect, just at the periphery of my hearing, that annoying ticking sound.

Becky was sliding down the wall, and I was laying over her, still pressing my mouth over hers, tongues dancing, and still clutching her boob through her clothes, when, jarringly, a high-pitched chime rang three times. It broke our concentration, and we both sat up quickly. It took a moment for the sound to register, and by the time I recognized it as one of those wind-up kitchen timers, I could hear other rustlings and sounds of movement from two other directions in the dark basement.

A light clicked on, over by the stairwell. It was indirect enough to cast only a dim light around the room, but compared to the total darkness it was banishing, it seemed harsh. I glanced over toward the light and saw Kayla there, her long white-blonde hair tousled,

holding her boyfriend's hand as they moved quietly toward the stairs, apparently unaware that Becky and I were in the far corner. As I heard them go up the stairs, I saw Jake's head peek up from behind the couch. He jerked in surprise when he saw us sitting on the floor, looking at him. He shrugged sheepishly and stood up. His shirt was off, and his cutoffs were unbuttoned. He reached down and helped his companion to stand up. Jaimie was trying to straighten out her t-shirt and refasten her bra strap as she struggled to stand.

"How long have you guys been down here?" asked Jake. "I didn't even hear you come down the stairs."

I chuckled. "I think you were probably a little busy, and not paying any attention to us," I said.

Even in the dim light, I could tell Jaimie was blushing a bright red.

"Ah, hell," said Jake. "We're all friends here, anyway, right?"

Becky and I stood up. Fortunately, considering the circumstances, we didn't have a lot of clothing to readjust, having a much milder make-out session than Jake and Jaimie had.

"Yup," I agreed. "Nothing but pals here in this room."

"Who set the timer?" Becky asked.

"I saw Kayla come down here with it earlier this afternoon," replied Jake. "I kind of figured what it might be for, so I made sure we were down here and behind the couch before she and her boyfriend got down here."

"We'd better get back out to the party," said Jaimie. "We don't want them missing us, and wondering where we've been."

"You're right, sweetie," agreed Jake. "Besides," he continued with a smile, "we've scavenged all we could for tonight, anyway, haven't we?"

Jaimie hit him hard on the arm as Becky and I laughed.

As Becky and I headed up the stairs, hand in hand behind Jake and Jaimie, some troubling thoughts were starting to rumble around

in my otherwise empty head. I really liked Becky, and obviously she liked me. But I was still powerfully attracted to Kristina.

Just because it's a luscious girl dilemma, doesn't mean it's any easier to solve.

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HAZING THE FRESHMEN

A couple of weeks before Labor Day, our school was holding team tryouts for the fall sports, including football and boy's soccer. Coach Neville already had several positions filled, from returning starters and reserves. Kevin Soranno, Trent Abbott and Mike Evanson were returning as seniors, and Eric Johnson, Anthony Rogers and I were returning juniors from the starting lineup of a year ago. In addition, Jorge Mendoza, a sophomore, was taking over the starting keeper duties from John Pennington, who had graduated in the spring, and there were a number of kids who had either sat on the Varsity bench, or had played as freshmen or sophomores on the JV team, who were ready to take the step up to be a starter on the Varsity team. I could tell that Coach felt really good about the team, starting out with so many returning players. Since we had won the conference title last year, and we were fielding quite a few veterans, we would be the team to beat this year. The seven of us were there first thing, the first day of tryouts, helping take the other hopefuls through their paces. We did a lot of running, so that Coach Neville

and his two assistants could evaluate fitness and conditioning, and we helped run the dribbling and passing tests they were using.

There were about fifty guys who were trying out for the Junior Varsity and the Varsity teams, and we would need about twenty players for each team. The first cut, after the second day of tryouts, took the hopefuls down to forty-three. Now, Coach had to decide which players would most benefit the Varsity team, and which would play better on JV.

There was one kid in particular, a freshman named Adam Prince, who managed to really get on my nerves, in less than a week at tryouts. He dogged me at every opportunity, during every drill he could. It was almost as if he wanted me to blow up at him. But I kept my cool, and kept my distance from him whenever I could.

By the end of the week, the rosters for both teams had been set, and we could start learning each other's strengths and weaknesses on the field. The only sour note was that Adam was assigned as the nominal freshman to the Varsity team. He was good, perhaps even good enough to play on the Varsity team, but I didn't like him.

On Saturday our club team played, and Eric, Jorge, and I got another couple of hours of soccer experience. By Sunday, I had had about four straight weeks of working with the ball, and I was looking forward to a soccer-free day. I slept in late, fixed myself pancakes for breakfast, mowed the lawn, took a nap, and washed Michael's car for him (I was building up favors for when I wanted to borrow it). Mom fixed an actual sit-down family dinner, since all of us were home for a change. Jake came over after dinner, and we went out to my driveway and shot baskets for awhile before deciding that was way too much like work. We grabbed some sodas and chips and flopped down on the floor of the family room and watched the tube for the rest of the night.

Monday afternoon, the day before school was scheduled to start, Coach Neville called an early stop to practice. We all walked off the

field and back to the school, where he led us into an empty classroom next to the gymnasium.

When we were all seated, he walked up to the chalkboard and quickly sketched half of a soccer field.

"Okay, boys, listen up here," he called. "Here are the starting lineups. Forward on the left, Trent Abbott. In the middle, Javier Perez. On the right, Jimmy Brooks. Midfielders will be Eric Johnson on the left, Robert Anderson in the middle, and Kevin Soranno on the right. Sweeper is Mike Evanson, defenders are Anthony Rogers on the left, Brett Oldman in the stopper position, and Sean Porter will be on the right. In goal will be keeper Jorge Mendoza."

"Coach?" came a voice from the back. Adam Prince stood up. "Can we challenge for a position?"

"After the first game, you can challenge for any position, Adam. We'll set up a two-on-two challenge ladder. The challenger will pick a teammate, and the man in the position being contested will pick a teammate, and they will play a two-on-two game. The first team to score five points will acquire the position."

"When can we start planning challenges"? The kid was persistent.

Coach sighed. "After the first game, Adam. Let's concentrate on starting the season on a winning note first, okay?" Coach still had the chalk in his hand, and now he tapped it against the desk to drive home the importance of his message. "This challenge ladder will not be used to divide this team, gentlemen. If I don't think the challenge has merit, I will not approve it. Understood, Mr. Prince?"

Adam sat back down. He didn't look the least bit admonished. "Understood, sir," he said.

Coach dropped the chalk back in the tray, anxious to get the meeting back on track. "Everybody will be expected to work hard this week," he continued. "Our first game is this Friday, against Oak Grove. They will play us hard; in fact, I don't anticipate we will have any easy games this year, but they still are one of the weaker teams

in the conference, so I'm confident that we will be able to control the pace of the game. All of you know how to play soccer, but our conditioning worries me a little, so we will concentrate more on strength and wind this week, and less on practicing set plays." There was a collective groan throughout the room at that news. It meant there would be a lot of running laps around the track that circled the football field. It was boring, but necessary.

"Quiet, now, please," he admonished. "The next order of business is to elect team captains. Last year," he continued, "we had some success using two captains, a defensive captain and an offensive captain. I think we should use the same configuration this year. Any comments?"

"Yeah," piped up Eric. "Kevin can be pretty offensive, I nominate him for captain."

After the laughter died down, Coach Neville said, "That's not quite what I had in mind, but I will accept the nomination, just the same." He wrote Kevin's name down on the board. "Any other nominations?"

Jorge said, "How about Sean for defensive captain?"

Before I had a chance to react, Coach Neville said, "Okay, good," and he wrote my name down.

I stood up. "Coach? As much as I appreciate Jorge's nomination, I think that the captains should be chosen from the seniors on the team. After all, they will be the real leaders of the team, and this is their last season. Because of this, I respectfully request that my name be withdrawn, and Mike Evanson's name be placed for nomination, instead." I sat back down, not looking around.

There was the murmur of whispered comments throughout the room. Coach considered my statement for a moment before commenting.

"Quiet, please," he called out. "I have always been of the opinion that the best man for the job should be considered, despite questions of age or class ranking. However, this is a team decision, and if the

rest of you concur with Mr. Porter's suggestion, I would have no objection. Shall we have a show of hands?"

And it was done. Mikey and Kevin were elected team co-captains, by acclamation. Coach Neville dismissed us, and as we were shuffling out of the room, he called, "Mr. Porter? Mr. Mendoza? May I see you both for a moment?"

Jorge and I hung back. Eric gave me a questioning look, but I just shrugged. His guess was as good as mine.

After everybody had filed out of the room, Coach leaned back against the teacher's desk in the corner of the room.

"Sean, that was a magnanimous gesture you made. On behalf of the other members of the team, I thank you." He removed his glasses, absent-mindedly polishing them against his shirt. "However, whether you like it or not, almost everybody on the team will be looking to you for leadership. Your awards from last season alone make you stand out, Sean, not only here at this school, but throughout the conference. You can expect that every team will be focused on your area of the field, putting their best players on you whenever possible. You are not the unknown quantity you were last season, when you were thrust into a starter's role." He paused, and put his glasses back on. He looked at me, examining me as if trying to see inside me, trying to see what I was made of. I wasn't sure I could stand up under that kind of examination for long. "Mr. Evanson and Mr. Soranno have been elected captains, but you must plan on taking on the role of team leader this season, anyway. Do you agree?"

I just nodded in compliance. I would try my best. How good I would be as a leader remained to be seen.

"Now, Mr. Mendoza," Coach continued, turning to Jorge, "as our starting goalkeeper, you will be in charge of our defense during the game. It will be up to you to recognize and evaluate the dangers as teams test our defense, right from the start. You must have the respect of your fellow teammates, or they will not react in a timely

fashion. This responsibility supercedes the captaincy bestowed upon Mr. Evanson, do you understand?"

Jorge also nodded.

"You, too, because of your position on the field, will be looked upon as a leader of this team. It's a lot of responsibility for a sophomore to carry, but I know you are more than capable."

Coach turned back to me. "Sean, I expect you to lead by example in this manner. Many of our players, particularly the younger ones, will be emulating you as much as they can on the field. Conversely, some of the upperclassmen might chafe at taking direction from a sophomore, no matter his position or ability. I will leave it to you, along with Mike and Kevin, to make sure any insecurities within the team will be properly addressed." Coach stood suddenly, and thrust out his hand to Jorge, who shook it. Coach then held his hand out to me to shake.

"Good. It's done, then. Good luck, gentlemen. Lead your team well, and I will help all I can."

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The first day of school was the next day. Actually, it was only a half day, each class shortened to about twenty minutes long, just enough time for the teachers to pass out books and let us know what we were to expect during the coming school year. It was also a day we could harass the incoming freshmen when they got lost and couldn't find their classrooms.

I hated it. It's not that I necessarily hated school, but when classes started before Labor Day, it meant, in essence, the end of summer. The weather was still warm, the leaves were still green—hell, it was still August, for God's sake!—but our independence was a thing of the past once again.

And, of course, there were some teachers who couldn't resist the temptation of assigning homework, even on the first abbreviated day of school, so by the time I got home after soccer practice, I had to hit the books.

And the telephone lines began humming all around town, right after the dinner hour. Kids were calling each other, comparing class schedules, catching up on summer gossip, and reconnecting with pals. Josh, Eric, and Jorge called me, and I called Becky, Trent, and Jake, and got their schedules, and we were ready for a brand new year of school.

By the end of the week, most of us were bored with misdirecting the freshmen, and we fell back into the routines that would carry us through the year. Most of my friends were in one or another of my classes. Molly was in my math class, and of all the kids I knew, she had probably changed the most. She had put a garish yellow blonde streak in one side of her reddish hair, and she looked pale and thin and unhappy. Curiously, she either skipped out on the math class, or maybe she had called in sick for the entire day, for two out of the four days of that first week. It was completely unlike her.

On the other hand, I found a bunch of friends in my study hall, including both Kayla and Jaimie, along with Eric and Tiny. Kayla was a freshman, and Jaimie, her best friend, was a sophomore. The five of us managed to commandeer a corner, circling our desks as if they were Conestoga wagons under an Indian attack.

Our game on Friday was an easy win for us. My summer spent running was paying big dividends. I was strong and energetic all game, and felt like I could have played another ninety minutes by the final whistle. Coach Neville left me in for the whole game, and we walked away with a 6-1 victory. The stands were more than half full, a huge turnout for a sport that was perceived to be boring to watch. It was a great show of support from our school for a team that had aspirations of a good showing in the playoffs in a couple of months.

Because of our success the previous year, our local newspaper was covering every soccer game, and writing up an article every week. Their reporter was a thin, nerdy looking guy with thick glasses, several pens sticking out of his shirt pocket, and baggy cotton slacks. I couldn't help thinking that they could have chosen a more athletically inclined reporter to cover local sports, but he was who they sent, so he was who I talked to, after the game. His name was Matthew Hartigan, and he was earnest and serious in the presence of a high-school team riding high on their first win of the season. It almost wasn't fair, and I almost felt sorry for him. Almost.

Still, I answered his questions, introduced him to our co-captains, and left him with Coach Neville before rejoining my comrades in celebrating our victory. It was the beginning of our long holiday weekend, and I was looking forward to it.

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GIRLS' NIGHT OUT

Our club season was finished, our school team had won its first game, and I had a long weekend ahead of me. I planned on being as lazy as I could be, all weekend long.

From what Lori and Wendy had been paying me for teaching the boys, and all the games I officiated for the past year, plus the money I had earned working for Duane Olchick during his clinic, I was feeling pretty damned wealthy. I was even thinking I might have enough to buy a good, cheap car for myself.

I brought the subject up during breakfast on Saturday morning.

"I've been thinking, Dad," I said.

"Uh-oh," warned my older brother Michael. "That's a real danger sign, when Sean's been thinking."

I threatened to flick a spoonful of cereal at him, and he ducked out of the way playfully.

"Cut it out, boys," warned my mother reflexively.

"I'm almost afraid to ask. What have you been thinking, son?" asked my father.

"Well, I think we need to go car shopping."

"Why?" My mother turned from the sink to join the conversation. "Our cars are just fine, aren't they? Is one of them broken?"

"No," said my dad. "Unless Sean got in an accident last night, and isn't telling us."

Everybody turned to look at me accusingly. "No, no accident or anything. Jeez! What I meant was, we should go car shopping for a car for me."

"Oh, I understand now," said my dad. "In a word, no."

"No?" I complained. "And why not?"

"You can't afford it, first of all," he said. "And, second, we already have three cars in our driveway. You can use one of them anytime you want."

"I can, too, afford it," I said. "And besides, you take yours to work every day, Mom needs hers to get to work and shopping and stuff, and Michael takes his to school."

"And you're in school every day, too," said Dad patiently. "In the evenings, there's almost always at least two cars here. If you need to borrow one, all you have to do is ask for it, Sean."

"It's not fair," I grumbled. "Michael's got his own car."

"And I didn't get it until my senior year, either," he reminded me. "You're just a junior."

"And it's not just the purchase price of the car you have to be able to afford, dear," offered my mom, as she poured more orange juice into my glass. "There's gas, and repairs, and tires, and insurance. It's not just a simple purchase of a car, Sean."

"Yeah, yeah, I get it," I mumbled, discouraged. Dad reached over and tousled my hair.

"Don't rush things, sport. You'll grow up fast enough. And in the meantime, if you need the car, just let Mom or me know ahead of time, and we'll do our best to make sure one is available for you. Okay?"

"Yeah, okay," I acquiesced.

I was disappointed that I wasn't going to be able to get my own wheels, but at least I got them thinking about being a little bit more liberal with the use of their cars. All was not lost.

After breakfast, I grabbed my mom's keys and headed out the door with Stephen. I was taking him to his football practice, and I figured I could swing over to Jake's house until I had to pick Stephen back up again. Jake was playing on the Varsity football team, and their game was later that afternoon, so I knew he would be home, doing essentially nothing until he could stoke up on carbohydrates at lunchtime, saving his energy for the game. We watched one of the college games on TV for about an hour, and then ate lunch together, until I had to go back and pick up my brother. I dropped Jake off at school so he could get ready for the game, and then went back and got Stephen. I dropped him at home, drove over to Becky's house, and picked her up for the football game, and got back to school and joined the mass of cars pulling into the parking lot for the game. Becks and I walked together into the stadium, and quickly found Eric and Keisha in the stands. They were sitting with Anthony Rogers and his girlfriend, Ayesha Ford, along with Trent and Danielle. We worked our way through the stands, sliding sideways down the row, through the crowd, to get to the seats they were saving for us.

It was a warm afternoon, and we were in the sun during the game.

"I should have brought some sun block," said Danielle. "I think I'm burning."

"Me, too," said Ayesha.

Trent laughed. "You, too? I didn't think that was possible."

Eric glanced over at Ayesha, and then turned to Trent. "Sure, it's possible," he said. "Ayesha's fairly light-skinned, but even Keisha and I have to be careful sometimes."

"No way," said Trent. "You're kidding, right?"

"Nope," said Anthony. "Just because our skin is dark doesn't mean we are immune to the sun's rays, man. We just don't turn pink and red and all, like you guys do."

"But it's still a burn, and it still hurts," added Ayesha.

"Hey, I'm sorry, Ayesha. I really didn't know," said Trent.

She didn't look at all upset. She just nodded, and put on her big round sunglasses.

"S'okay," said Anthony. "It's just another misconception about blacks, kind of like how we've all got great rhythm, or we're all hung."

"I thought that one was true," murmured Eric, just loud enough for us to hear. Keisha snorted, shaking her head.

"Anyway," said Anthony, "I can't dance for shit, so I know that at least the first statement ain't true."

We all laughed, even though Ayesha looked a little embarrassed by the conversation.

We were surrounded by fellow students, so we all did the yells and the cheers that the cheerleaders were coaxing out of the crowd, stomping our feet and acting silly. At halftime, Becky and I got up and wandered over to the snack shack, where we picked up sodas and popcorn for everybody. We got back to our seats just after the second-half kickoff, and we enjoyed watching our team pound the snot out of the Rockton Heights team, our biggest conference rivals.

After the game, we were all filing out of the stadium. Becky was in front of me, and Eric was directly behind me.

"Hey, Sean, you guys want to get together tonight? Maybe go get a pizza or something?" he asked.

"Sure," I answered. I tapped Becky on the shoulder to get her attention. "Becks, you want to meet Eric and Keisha for pizza tonight?"

"Okay," she said. "Where and what time?"

I turned back to Eric. "She says okay, too. Where, and what time?"

"I dunno, I'll have to call you. Trent has a place in mind, I think. I'll let you know."

I turned back up and said to Becky, "Don't know yet where or when. I'll call you after Eric calls me."

When we finally got to the exit, we still had to walk down the school driveway to the parking lot. Just outside the stadium, standing next to the chain-link fence, I saw Joey Amonte and Molly O'Toole, lounging around with Vinnie Arilio, Harold Barnes, Pammy Lipschutz, and another kid who looked like a younger incarnation of Richie Del Toro. The contrast between the grunginess of the Bulls, and Molly's All-American look in her cheerleading outfit, was jarring.

I thrust my chin over in their direction. "Is that Poo-Poo's younger brother over there?" I asked.

"Yeah," replied Anthony. "That's Angelo. They call him Jilly, and he's mean as a snake, from what I've heard. Meaner even than Richie."

"Shit," said Eric, "with a name like Jilly, anybody'd be mean and nasty."

"You can say that," warned Anthony, "but don't get in his way, bro."

"The Bulls leave me alone," muttered Eric, "and I leave them alone. Long as they don't mess with me, I won't get in their faces."

The crowd had thinned out by the time we got to the parking lot. We waved to our friends and hopped into the car. Becky leaned over and gave me a quick kiss before settling back and fastening her seat belt. I started the car, and we made our way slowly out of the parking lot. I dropped Becky off at her house, promising to call her as soon as I heard from Eric, and I headed for home.

I walked in the door and headed upstairs to take a shower. By the time I got done getting cleaned up, it was just after six o'clock. I came down the stairs, went into the kitchen, and opened the refrigerator to get a glass of milk.

"Sean?" I heard my mom's voice coming from the family room. "There's a note on the table. Mrs. Wilkinson called. She wants you to call her back." I picked up the note, but it only contained her phone number. Nothing to indicate what it was about. I picked up the phone and dialed Lori's number.

"Hello?"

"Lori? Hi, it's Sean."

"Oh, Sean, I'm sorry to bother you on a Saturday night," she said. She sounded sad, and maybe a little weepy. "But Mrs. Marcus—Wendy—insisted that I try calling you, to see if you can help me out."

"Sure," I said. "What's up?"

"Oh, I hate to even ask you this..." I could just make out another indistinct voice in the background. "It seems that, uh, my sister Joanie, and Wendy, they wanted me to go out to dinner with them tonight. Molly was supposed to baby-sit for me, but she hasn't shown up, and her mother doesn't know where she might be, and... well, I know it's an imposition, Sean, but I don't know who else I can call on such short notice... and I know you're probably busy anyway..."

Her voice cut off, and it sounded like somebody grabbed the phone from Lori's hand.

"Hello, Sean?" It was Wendy who was on the phone, now. "Could you possibly come over and sit with Lori's boys tonight?" There was no hesitation in Wendy's manner about asking me to do this. In fact, she sounded like she fully expected me to comply with her request, no questions asked.

I was just about to tell her no, when she cupped her hand over the mouthpiece and quietly said, "Please, Sean, could you do this? Joanie and I want to take Lori out to take her mind off this weekend. Kind of a girls' night out. It's the anniversary of her husband's accident."

Now I remembered. Lori's husband had been in a motorcycle accident two years before, and he was kept alive, on life support, for five days before Lori finally agreed to pull the plug. He died of massive internal injuries. It was just last year at this time that she had extracted a promise from me. She made me promise that I would never get on a motorcycle. I couldn't leave her in the lurch, just because I was in a defiant mood with Wendy.

I sighed. "Okay," I said. "Put Lori back on the line, would you?"

I could hear Wendy saying everything would be okay as she handed the phone back to Lori.

"Sean? Are you there?"

"Yes," I replied. "Let me see if I can borrow my mom's car, and I'll be right over."

"You really don't have to do this, Sean," she said.

"It's fine, Lori, really. I didn't have any plans for tonight, anyway."

After saying goodbye, I quickly called Eric, and told him I wasn't going to be able to make it. I explained the situation to him. He said, "Thass okay, man, you gotta take care of friends, I understand."

"Thanks, Eric. I'll see you on Tuesday."

"Okay. You call Becky yet?"

"No, I've got to do that now."

"Oh, man, good luck," he said as he hung up.

I called Becky, and gave her the bad news. She was not happy with me.

"You're going to what?" she asked.

"I've got to baby-sit," I repeated. "It's a long story, and they're good friends, and they're in a bind," I explained. She didn't know Lori, even though she was aware that I was teaching soccer to the Wilkinson kids.

"Okay, Sean," she said, but she still sounded pretty pissed. "If you feel you must do this, I understand. But you'll make this up to me, won't you?"

"Of course I will," I said hurriedly. *Let's see,* I thought to myself, *breaking a Saturday night date, an hour before I'm supposed to pick her up. This is going to cost me, big time.*

"All right, then," she said, somewhat mollified. "Have fun."

Have fun? I thought to myself as I hung up the phone. *Women. Can't figure them out at all.*

Mom said it was okay to take the car, so I hopped in and drove over to Lori's house. Wendy's car was in the street, and another car, presumably Joanie's, was in the driveway. I pulled in next to Joanie's car, ran up the front steps to the door, and rang the bell.

Lori opened the door, stepping aside to let me come in. My instinct about her was right. Her eyes were red, and even her artfully applied makeup couldn't completely conceal the dark rings under her eyes. She was dressed in a simple red silk blouse and a pleated skirt that came to just above her knees. A wave of affection hit me hard, not only for Lori, but for Wendy, too, for trying to ease her friend's pain by distracting her for an evening.

Wendy was in the kitchen, sipping on a glass of white wine. With her was another lady, who was obviously Lori's older sister, also with a wine glass in her hand. Wendy was dressed to kill, in a pastel pant suit and a flowery silk blouse that had the top three buttons undone, allowing her ample cleavage to be revealed. Her eyes were hard when I walked in, but softened immediately, in recognition of my efforts on Lori's behalf.

Lori, following me into the kitchen, made the introductions. "Sean, this is my sister, Joanie."

I strode over and held out my hand. Joanie shook it firmly, her grip lingering for just a moment as she looked me up and down.

"I've heard great things about you, Sean," she said. She had a low, gravelly voice that was oddly compelling. She looked a few years older than Lori. She had the same slim build as Lori, though she was a little heavier in the hips than her sister, and she cut her dark hair shorter, but there was a clear family resemblance. Her

clothes looked expensive, but they smelled of cigarette smoke, which might have explained the huskiness in her voice.

"Thank you, but these two might tend to exaggerate my virtues," I said. "When it comes to helping their kids, I've noticed that moms can get pretty fierce in their loyalties."

"It comes built-in," said Joanie with a smile. "It's all part of our maternal instinct."

Wendy took Joanie's glass and carried it over, along with hers, to the sink and rinsed them out.

"We'd better be going, or we'll be late for our reservations," she said briskly.

"Right," said Lori distractedly. "Oh, Sean, the boys are upstairs, taking their baths. They didn't know you were coming, so I'd better go tell them."

"There's no need," I said. "They knew a babysitter was coming over, right?" Lori nodded. "Okay, then, we'll let it be a surprise for them, that I'm their babysitter for the evening."

"But I don't know..."

"Oh, poo, it's fine," interrupted Wendy. She bustled around and grabbed Lori's arm. As she was firmly guiding her toward the back door, she continued, "Sean knows your boys almost as well as you do, for goodness sake. They'll be fine."

Joanie followed them out the door, closing it behind her. I could hear Wendy chattering on, all the way down the driveway to her car, engaging Lori in a barrage of conversation to help take her mind off everything. I watched out the open window as Joanie caught up with them and joined in. I could hear the buzz of their voices, but not their actual conversation, as they opened the car doors and climbed in, Wendy and Lori in the front seats and Joanie in the back. The car doors slammed, abruptly shutting off the buzz of their voices, and they headed down the road.

I sat down in the family room, waiting for the boys to come down. I thought about calling Becky, thinking maybe she could come

over after the boys went to bed, but before I could pick up the telephone, I heard two sets of little feet pounding down the stairs.

Davey and Kip came racing into the family room, and skidded to a stop when they saw me.

"Sean!" "Sean!"

"Hi, guys," I said with a smile.

"Are you our babysitter tonight?" asked Davey.

"Well, I'm your sitter tonight, but you guys aren't babies, are you?"

"No!" laughed Kip. "We're big boys!"

"Okay, then," I said. "I guess I'm a big boy sitter, then."

"And not a *baby* sitter," Kip exclaimed.

"That's right," I agreed with a laugh.

"Oh boy, oh boy, oh boy," said Davey as he ran around the couch.

"Whoa, there, pardner," I admonished. "Slow down, Davey, you're making me dizzy." I reached out and tried to grab him to stop him from running, but he swerved and avoided me. Kip thought it looked like so much fun, he started running after Davey, around and around.

I sighed. It looked like it was going to be a long, active evening. I got up and walked into the kitchen to fill glasses with ice and sodas. The boys got tired of chasing each other, and ran into the kitchen to see what I was doing.

"Okay, guys, here's the plan," I said. "You two stop running, and you can have something to drink. Then, we can find something to watch on television, or we can play a game. Your choice."

"Game!" cried Kip.

"Play a game!" yelled Davey.

"All right, a game. Which game? Let's go look at what you have," I suggested. We set our drinks down on the kitchen table, and they each grabbed a hand and pulled me to the front closet, where their games were stored.

"How about Life?" I suggested.

"Sissy game," complained Davey. "How about Snakes and Ladders?"

"Yeah," agreed Kip. "Snakes and Ladders!"

I pulled the box out of the pile, and carried it into the family room.

"Okay, guys, you get the game set up, and I'll bring our drinks in from the kitchen." By the time I got back with the three glasses of pop, Davey and Kip had the game set up. We sat on the floor, with the game on the coffee table, and spent the next couple of hours rolling the dice, letting our game pieces climb up ladders and slide down snakes, each trying to beat the other two to the finish line.

Finally, though, it got to be half past nine, way past their normal bedtime. It was dark out, with scattered pools of light thrown by the streetlamps and porch lights up and down the street.

"Okay, you guys, time for bed," I said.

"Aw, please can't we stay up?" "Just one more game? Please?"

"No. Your mom's going to tan my hide if she finds out you guys are still up. Now, march upstairs and get your teeth brushed, both of you." I pointed toward the stairs.

With much grumbling, the boys shuffled to the stairs, heads down as if I had severely punished them.

"Let me know when you're ready, and I'll come up and read you a story," I offered.

Their faces brightened. "Okay!" they shouted, nearly simultaneously, and they raced each other up the stairs.

I just shook my head at their antics as I cleaned up our mess. I carried the glasses into the kitchen and set them in the sink, and returned to the family room with a cloth to wipe the coffee table. I put the game away, and was just about to sit down when I heard them calling me from the upstairs landing. As I got to the top of the stairs, both boys raced to Davey's room and jumped onto his bed. Davey was clutching a paperback book of The Berenstain Bears in his

hands, and he handed it to me. They had their pajamas on, and Kip was holding a stuffed owl under one arm. They settled back against the pillows and waited for me to sit on the edge of the bed and begin the story.

"'It had been a wonderful summer for the Bear family,'" I began. By the end of the book, Sister Bear had found out that school really was fun, and she and Brother Bear were on the Big Yellow School Bus, heading back for another exciting day at school.

"The End," I finished. Davey and Kip just smiled.

"Another one?" asked Kip hopefully.

"To bed with you, ruffians," I said. I picked up Kip. "Oof. Did you eat bricks for dinner?"

He giggled. "No, I had pas-ghetti," he replied.

Davey laughed out loud. "Not 'pas-ghetti', stupid. It's 'spageddity'."

Kip and I both laughed. "That's not right," yelled Kip. "Tell him, Sean, 'spageddity' is wrong!"

"You're both wrong," I said, dropping Kip back on the bed. "It's 'noodles'." I shooed Kip off of Davey's bed. "Now skedaddle, you. It's past time you two were asleep."

Finally, I managed to get the boys into their proper beds, with the lights off and the doors closed. Both boys slept with their closet lights on, the closet doors cracked open just enough so that a small spill of light could be seen. Monsters didn't like the light, and there were no monsters allowed, according to Kip. I crept back down the stairs and collapsed on the couch. Babysitting was harder work than I had realized, especially when you were taking care of two boys as energetic as Davey and Kip.

I turned on the TV and flipped through the channels. *Saturday Night Live* was a rerun, but there was a station showing the 1943 Claude Rains version of *Phantom of the Opera.* My brother Michael was a huge movie fan, and he had insisted that I watch this with him one time. I discovered I had a taste for movie classics, especially

melodramatic horror movies from the thirties and forties. I refilled my glass and settled in to watch, plumping up the throw pillows on the couch and stretching out, my shoes kicked off and my t-shirt untucked.

I didn't last long. Sometime during the second reel, I fell asleep. The scenes being performed on the stage of the Paris Opera House in the movie were reflected in my dreaming brain, melding and creating odd, disjointed images that splashed against my closed eyelids. They coalesced, almost making sense, before scattering away into infinity, all in fractions of seconds.

I heard car doors slamming, and the sound of female voices laughing, counterpointed by the swelling organ music from the television, and my mind seamlessly worked these external sounds into a semi-cohesive scene in my dream. From somewhere in the same room, I heard quiet voices.

"Oh, God, that's just too cute."

"Shut up, Wendy, you'll wake him."

"I know how I'd like to wake him."

"Wendy!"

"Maybe you should wake him that way, Lori."

"Wendy! Please!"

A throaty giggle. "You don't have to say please, girl. It's there, on the couch, just lying there and waiting for you."

"You are really awful, do you know that?"

"Tell me you've never thought about it, Lori."

"Me? God, he's young enough to be my...."

"Your younger brother?"

A sigh. "Go home, Wendy. You're tipsy."

"You're a little high yourself, Lori. Inhibitions are lowered. Go for it. You deserve it."

"You are terrible. Go home. I'll call you in the morning."

"Okay, honey, but not too early, okay? Arthur's playing golf in the morning, and I need my beauty sleep. G'night. Good luck." That throaty chuckle again.

A door closed. Silence. Soft footsteps, and then the impression of the heat of a very close body. Soft hair, tickling my forehead and cheeks. Wine-sweetened breath hitting my nose, my mouth, my chin. Soft, so softly I couldn't be sure it was real or part of the dream, a soft pressure of lips against mine. The Phantom was taking his paramour Christine down into the catacombs of Paris on the television. Soft fingers were caressing my bicep, and the dream took a decidedly erotic turn. I was swimming up out of the dream, struggling toward the surface of consciousness, unsure if I really wanted to awaken, or sink back into the dream. The lips pressed again, soft and pliant and warm, with that odd, slightly waxy slickness of lipstick helping the two sets of lips to part slightly, finding a more natural fitting.

I didn't want to open my eyes, only to burst the bubble of this dream. My arms came up to the narrow ghostly shoulders I knew would be there, and I heard and felt a soft moan come from the faerie creature leaning over me. She pressed closer to me, her lips no longer a feather against mine, but a living, warm weight of promise and desire. I felt the soft weight of her hair against my forearms, silkily caressing.

My arms went around her neck, and I pulled her on top of me. I felt very real silk and cotton, real flesh and blood as she lay down on me. I felt the points of her breasts pressing into my chest, her knees inside my parted legs, her feet touching the tops of mine. Her hair fell like a curtain across our faces, and she tilted her head, opened her mouth against mine, and let her tongue brush against my lips as she held my head in both her hands.

She tasted of me as I opened my mouth and surrendered to her. Her tongue explored the shape of my lips, forayed into my mouth, and encountered my own tongue, lying in wait. She darted, withdrew, darted out again, always tempting, always teasing, testing

and provoking, until I could take it no more. Finally, our tongues writhed against each other, our passions released, our senses awakened. She moaned again, or maybe it was my own groan I heard, and she squirmed as she lay on me, creating an impressive weight and heat along the entire length of my body. I was startled to discover that I was at full mast, and her pelvis was pressed against the turgid length of my manhood, as if measuring how deep it would fit.

My hands slid down her back, smoothing the rumples of her blouse, slipping down the smoothness to her small waist, blindly searching for a hem. The fingers found the rolled seam, slipped beneath, and ascended again, this time tickling along the bare skin of her back and sides.

With a sucking sound, Lori broke our kiss and arched up, rocking back onto her knees. I opened my eyes then, and watched in fascination as she crossed her arms in front of her, grasped her blouse from the bottom, and lifted it up and over her head. The neck of her blouse caught in her hair, and lifted the mass up. It fell back around her face in soft waves as she tossed her blouse to the side, reached behind her, and unfastened her lacy bra. She let the white garment slide down her arms, inadvertently hiding the vision of her unfettered breasts from my sight for a moment, before tossing it in the direction of her blouse. She knelt there for a moment, a serious expression on her lovely face, allowing me to feast on the vision of her naked breasts. She gently took my hands, placed them flat on her tummy, and guided them up. My palms registered the soft feel of her skin, and the swell of her beautiful breasts, and the pebbly hardness of her nipples as she lifted my hands up her body. She pressed my hands against her breasts, leaning in to increase the pressure, and I could feel her nipples expand, dimpling my palm. Slowly, she collapsed back onto me, her mouth automatically seeking mine, to resume our high-pressure kisses.

As she fell back onto me, my hands slipped from her breasts, around to her back. I slid them down to the globes of her incredible butt, grasping the flesh and pressing her harder against my steely cock. She wiggled her hips as I clutched her to me, and I hitched up her skirt, rucking up the material until I felt the hem. I pulled the bunched-up skirt higher, until I could let my hands rest on her tight ass, with just the thin layer of her panties between her skin and my fingers. I let my fingers explore, from her hips to the juncture of her thighs, where a substantial heat and dampness was found, until I could contain myself no longer. My fingers spidered up the mounds of her bottom and grasped the elastic waistband of her panties. She lifted up her hips, and I slid her underwear down, off her hips and to her thighs. She reached down herself and pushed them further down her legs, until she could kick them off. I could feel her drooling pussy heating up against my crotch as she lay back down on me, my hands resuming their exploration of the moist folds between the cheeks of her ass. As I separated her nether lips, releasing a flood of hot, oily lubrication, she moaned once more into my mouth, and broke our connection once again. She knelt up again, dressed in only her skirt, and reached for my shirt. She worked it up and over my head, and then grabbed the waistband of my sweat pants, pulling them down, along with my underwear. Everything got hung up on my stiff cock, causing a momentary panic. Lori chuckled softly, a throaty and promise-filled sound. She lifted the material away from me, and continued shucking my clothes down my legs. She stared at my throbbing cock all the while with shining eyes, working my pants off each foot before throwing them aside. Almost absent-mindedly, she stood, pulled her skirt down, and stepped out of it, so that we were both completely naked.

She knelt back down, her knees straddling my legs, and reached with both hands for my cock and balls. As she tenderly grasped the stalk with one hand, and gently held my sac with the other, she sighed and whispered, “It’s been so long...”

She bowed down and slowly, agonizingly, licked up my shaft as she held it in her small hand. It was nearly enough to do me in. My hips involuntarily bucked up as my cock jerked at the touch, and my heart started beating faster. All I could do was watch her as she examined me, reacquainting herself with a male body.

She must have decided she couldn't hold off any longer, because she sat up, crawled up my body until her crotch was poised over me, and lowered herself slightly. The desire was shining brightly in her eyes as she held my cock in her hand. She rubbed the head against her pussy lips, stroking herself from her clitoris to her vagina for a moment, spreading her moisture around the sensitive tip of my cock. She held me still against her tight opening, allowing her weight to settle just a little more. I felt the head spreading her lips further apart, and entering her hot, flexible hole. She closed her eyes, threw her head back in pleasure, and slowly allowed herself to sink, impaling herself on my rod, until she settled down, and I was fully inside her. She ground down on me just a little, and groaned.

"Oh my God, so long," she whispered again, as her body accustomed itself to a welcome intrusion it hadn't felt in two years. She put her hands on the couch above my shoulders, leaning on them, her hair falling down around her face like a veil, and she started moving. I reached up and grasped her dangling breasts, pinching her nipples and hefting their weight, as she pumped her hips up and down, rotating slightly at the top and at the bottom of her pistoning action. The heat and the friction were incredible, and I knew I wouldn't last very long.

But it didn't matter. As soon as I reached up and pulled her down so that I could take a turgid nipple into my mouth, she screeched breathlessly, and her movements against me got a little uncoordinated as she quickly reached the summit. I pushed up into her as far as I could go, and bit down lightly on her nipple as I felt her walls pulse and squeeze my cock as she orgasmed. I came hard,

spurting several hard pulses deep into her, adding my own juices to hers at our joining.

Her eyes were squeezed closed, and her mouth was stretched in a rictus very much like pain as she worked for every last nerve ending to shiver and pulse with pleasure, until her arms could no longer hold her, and she collapsed down onto me breathlessly. The tension in her body drained out as I held her close. I felt the sweat of our exertions pop out on both of us, and I slowly ran my fingers up and down her spine, willing her to cool down a little. I was still buried deep inside her, and I could feel my cock wilting just a little, in spite of the tight grip of her honeyed walls. I planted little kisses on her cheek and her forehead, unsure if she was even aware of my ministrations.

At last she seemed to come to her senses, and she lifted her head up. She seemed to see me for the first time, the sudden recognition burning brightly in her eyes.

"Oh, Sean, I'm so sorry..." she began.

"Shhhh," I said. I gently pressed her head back down, until she acquiesced, and let it rest against my neck and shoulder.

She settled down against me with a small sigh, but her shifting caused an unexpected reaction from my heightened senses. Blood flow was diverted, and my cock began refilling. I was acutely aware of her breasts squashed against my bare chest, and the heat of her thighs against mine were practically creating burn marks. I felt the precise moment she realized what was happening. She stiffened as she felt my cock expand within her, and her hips began to tremble in anticipation. She lifted her head up, a questioning look in her eyes. I pulled her to me, and rolled her over, flipping her onto her back on the couch, with me nestled between her splayed legs. She smiled and sighed with anticipation, and held on as I started flexing my thighs, glutes and abs, pumping my now rock-hard cock through her slickness. She moaned then, and closed her eyes to concentrate on the sensations telegraphing from her center through her nervous system.

She pulled her knees up, wrapping her heels across my thighs and tilting her bottom up so I could get even deeper into her. I reached up and grabbed a flattened boob, squeezing and kneading it until the nipple was reddened and expansive, and then I reached down between us, thrusting my hand down until I could feel our connection. I dragged my fingertips through her swollen folds, and pinched her clit between my first and second fingers as I worked my cock in and out of her, and she flipped into another climax. She clutched at me as she came, throwing her hips up at me in complete abandon, but I was relentless. I continued to rub her clit as I pumped into her, and she rolled into a second orgasm, followed by a third.

It was all too much for me. Sweat was rolling off me, dripping off my chin and collecting unnoticed in the small of her throat. I pulled my hand up from our joining and grabbed her shoulder. I flexed my hips as hard as I could, feeling her vaginal muscles contracting against the inflexible tube of my flesh. I felt my own orgasm take over, turning me inside out in its intensity. I felt the plumbing pump and pulse three, then four, then five times, until there was nothing left to give, and I collapsed on top of her, tired to the bone.

Finally, naked and sweating and panting, we both came to realize where we were, and who we were. A not very comfortable silence descended as we shifted to take pressure off our intimate parts. I slipped out of her with a barely audible pop, and ended up kneeling on a very wet couch cushion, soaked with our combined juices. I rolled off the couch and knelt on the floor. I still had one arm draped across her, under her breasts, as we looked at each other.

"Uh, Lori..." I started.

She twisted so she could face me, still lying on the couch. She pressed her fingers against my lips to silence me. "No, Sean, please don't say anything," she whispered. "Not yet, anyway." Her eyes were shining.

We stayed like that, just looking in each other's eyes, for several minutes. Finally, I pushed myself to a standing position, and turned

away from her, suddenly self-conscious about my nakedness. I grabbed my clothes and pulled them on. Finally, unable to put off the moment any longer, I turned to her, but before I could say anything, she just shook her head.

"It's okay, Sean," she reassured me as she sat up. She reached down and picked up her blouse, and clutched it to her breasts. "Thank you for... everything. You've been my best friend, my best male friend, for a long time."

I was about to say something, no doubt something incredibly stupid, but she shushed me before I could open my mouth.

"Sometimes friends... comfort each other, Sean. It doesn't have to mean anything beyond an expression of friendship, if we don't let it."

Her lower lip trembled. She was doing her best to convince me, and I thought she was also attempting to convince herself of the truth of her words. She finally gave in to her feelings, however, and stood and came over to me. She put her arms around me, dropping her blouse to the floor, and rested her head against my chest. I couldn't resist putting my arms around her once more. *For comfort,* I told myself. Even though she was naked, and clinging to me, and her skin felt so incredibly smooth and warm against my palms. It was for comfort. *Comfort.* She took a deep, shuddering sigh when she felt me hug her. Her voice was muffled, but I still heard her clearly. "Okay?"

"Okay," I agreed.

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NICKNAMES CAN BE FUN

Someday, I thought to myself, *somebody will be able to explain to me how come I suck at relationships with girls my own age. And why I can't seem to keep any sense about me when it comes to older women.* Wendy was just too much of a hedonist for me. I had to look the word up in the Thesaurus, but I was pretty sure that was the right term for her. And now I was deathly afraid that I had ruined my friendship with Kip and Davey's mom, too. And, to top it all off, I always seemed to blow any chance of having a girlfriend for more than about five minutes.

I know, I know, it's my own damn fault. I was willing to admit it: I was extraordinarily stupid when it came to girls.

Why was I being so hard on myself? I could explain it in four simple words.

I never called Becky.

All weekend long, I agonized about what I would say to her, after Saturday. I have never been good at making small talk, that chatty, unimportant chitchat that comes so naturally to some people. I

would get tongue-tied, and my brain would freeze up, and the pauses in my already stilted conversations would get long enough to become uncomfortable for me, as well as the unfortunate I happened to be conversing with. My solution? Why, to avoid potentially troublesome situations, of course. Which, as we all know, only makes matters worse. But I was sixteen. Not facing up to my responsibilities in relationships was a specialty of mine.

Not that Becky and I had much of a relationship. It was kind of a budding one, I suppose, but I still had not given up hope that Kristina and I might be able to get back together, either. And Becks and I had never talked about boyfriends and girlfriends, and dating each other, and all that. But I had an idea of what her expectations might have been, and here I was, falling well short once again.

I was fucked up, and there was no doubt about it.

Monday was a rainy holiday, so Jake and I hid out at the shopping center. There was a new video game out, Pac-Man, and we spent all afternoon feeding quarters into the machine, taking turns with the joystick. It was mind numbing, and I thoroughly enjoyed it.

Reality came crashing back down on me on Tuesday, however. It was a mild, sunny day, but there were thunderheads inside the school, evident every time I saw Becky. If looks could kill, I would have been fried to a crisp several times that day. I took to walking the halls hunched over, as if I was expecting raining blows to land on my head and shoulders at any time. By the time school ended, I was relieved to be able to head for the locker room. I was looking forward to getting out on the track and running.

Normally, our weekly practice schedule was the same. Monday's practices consisted of an hour of drills, and an hour of watching film of our last game. Tuesdays were devoted to conditioning drills, Wednesdays were scrimmages. On Thursdays, we watched film of our upcoming opponents for an hour, discussing their strengths and weaknesses, and then we spent an hour working on plays we thought we could use in Friday's game. This week, being a holiday

week, meant that we would be practicing for three hours on Tuesday, so we could still see our game film and get in a full practice session.

When I met up with the other guys in the locker room, we were just buckling on our shin guards and lacing up our shoes when we heard loud voices coming from the direction of the offices. Eric, Trent, and I looked at each other quizzically, but none of us knew what the ruckus was about, and nobody was willing to venture over there. If Coach Neville or Coach Simonson, our assistant coach, wanted us involved, they would come out and get us. We filed out the door and headed out to the track to begin running our laps.

After about fifteen minutes, the two coaches came out the door, led by Adam Prince and Anthony Rogers, who looked pretty disgusted. Adam and Anthony started running around the track as the coaches began setting up the drills they wanted to work on this week.

Eric slowed down, waiting for Anthony to catch up to him, and the two of them trotted around side by side. I knew Anthony was filling Eric in on what had transpired, so we would find out in due time.

During the drills, I only had a chance to stop for a moment and ask Eric what was going on.

"I still don't know, man," he said quietly. "Tony was really ragging on, something about the challenge ladder. I still don't have it straight."

We finished our outside work, and we headed back inside to the classroom where the projector was set up. It had been an easy win for us, so there wasn't a lot that Coach Neville really had to say about the game, but he did stop the film several times so he could draw the developing plays out on the chalkboard, showing us where we might have improved our play, or where our opponents might have penetrated, had they been a better team. His real lesson during that session was that, no matter how well you thought you might have played, there was always room for improvement.

After the film was finished, Coach turned the lights back on, and called for our attention.

"The first challenge for position on the team challenge ladder has been issued," he announced. "Adam Prince is challenging Anthony Rogers for his starting position."

Adam stood up defiantly. "No, I'm not," he said. He looked over at me contemptuously. "You want me to challenge Anthony, but I still say I want to challenge Porter for his spot."

Coach Neville pushed his hands at Adam, indicating that he should sit, which Adam did, reluctantly. Coach removed his glasses, and began to absentmindedly polish them on his shirt.

"We have already had this discussion, Mr. Prince. Since you insist on being pugnacious about this, I will inform the rest of the team of our earlier conversation." He sighed, put his glasses back on, and then continued. "Mr. Prince, as he has indicated just now, was interested in pursuing an opportunity to earn a starting position, and he wished to play in our defensive position currently handled by Sean Porter. I have informed Mr. Prince, and I now inform you all, that there are certain positions on our team that I consider to be inviolable and unchallengeable, sacred if you will. Those positions are Trent Abbott's forward spot, and Sean Porter's defensive position. One other player will be, if I may use the term, protected, but still may be challenged if I feel the challenger has proven merit, and that is Jorge Mendoza's keeper duties. As far as I am concerned, any other position may be challenged, but these three, being the basis for our strengths as a team, are not subject to change through the challenge ladder. Therefore, I have refused Mr. Prince's request to challenge for Mr. Porter's position, and suggested that, if he wished, he could challenge for the left defensive position."

"But..." began Adam.

"But nothing," interrupted Mr. Neville. "Do you wish to challenge Mr. Rogers, or do you withdraw your challenge? Those are your choices."

I stood up. “Wait just a minute,” I said. “I’m not sure I want to be a sacred cow.” The entire team laughed. “I mean, if I can’t keep up with a snot-nosed freshman, maybe I don’t deserve the spot anyway,” I continued.

I could see Adam’s face turning red at the insult. He jumped up. “So you accept?” he asked eagerly.

I stared at him. “Sure, weasel,” I said.

The room went silent as we all watched Adam’s eyes bug out. “Weasel? Get ready to eat my dust, Porter. Then we’ll see who the weasel really is.” He stood up straighter, and looked around the room. “I choose as my partner,” and he paused, as if for dramatic effect, “Eric Johnson.”

Eric nearly fell onto the floor. “Uh-uh, no way am I helping the weasel to beat Porter,” he said. “Get yourself some other do-gooder. It ain’t gonna be me.”

That took a little of the wind out of Adam’s sails. I thought he had been planning on taking Eric so I couldn’t rely on him, and now he was stuck.

“Okay,” he said. “In that case, I choose Robert Anderson.”

“Sheee-it,” came a drawl from Robert. “If this quest ain’t good enough for my man Eric, it sure as shit ain’t good enough for me. Count me out, Weasel.” He slouched in his chair, a stubborn look on his face, his arms crossed in defiance.

Adam looked as if he had swallowed a bowling pin. His eyes were bugged out, and his face was beet red, his mouth opening and closing soundlessly.

“Have you had enough yet?” asked Coach Neville quietly.

“No!” shouted Adam. He looked wildly around the room at his teammates, wondering whom he could enlist. “I... I choose Brett Oldman, then.”

There was a snort from the front of the room. “Third choice, huh?” Brett stood and turned to face Adam and the rest of the team. “Under normal circumstances, I would let you crash and burn right

here and now, Weasel, but I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll be your partner, Prince. And I promise you I will play hard for you, and try to win with you. But if we fail, Prince, here's the deal. You will never challenge me for stopper. Deal?"

Adam was stuck with no place to go. "Deal," he muttered.

"Mr. Porter? Who would you like as your second?" asked Coach.

"Eric Johnson," I replied.

"Good. The challenge will be played tomorrow during practice." Coach looked around the room questioningly. "Any other comments? No? Good. Dismissed, gentlemen."

He gave me a significant look, so I hung back until the room had emptied.

"Are you sure about this, Sean?" he asked.

"Don't worry, Coach," I replied. "Eric and I will toast him good."

"I trust you are right about this, Mr. Porter. I would be very disappointed, and not a little embarrassed, if you were to lose this challenge."

"Prince is good, and Oldman is very good, Coach. But Eric is better than either of them, and I can hold my own against a freshman."

"Don't let his age lull you, Mr. Porter," he admonished. "Many a warrior has been taken down by underestimating a younger opponent."

"I'm not underestimating him. But I've got Rocket Johnson on my side. He'll torch Weasel so badly, he'll have burn marks on his ass."

"That's quite enough, Mr. Porter," said Coach. But I could see a smile twitching at the corners of his mouth, all the same. "See you tomorrow," he finished, dismissing me.

* * * * * * * * * *

The next day, we ran through our warm-up procedures. Coach Neville set up the scrimmages, leaving Adam, Brett, Eric, and me standing on the sidelines until he was done. He left Coach Simonson in charge of the scrimmage, and led the four of us to another practice field, where two nets were already set up across the width of the field.

"Okay, Eric and Sean, you take the far side. Adam and Brett, you defend the near side. No goalies, standard game rules. Challengers start with the ball on the midfield stripe. If the ball goes out of bounds, instead of a throw-in, the team with the ball gets a free indirect kick. If I blow this whistle, the game stops. Depending on why I stop the game, we will probably restart with a drop ball. The first team to five points, winning by two, takes the position being challenged. Any questions?" The look on his face discouraged questions, even from someone as thick-skinned and clueless as Adam, so we took our positions.

Coach blew his whistle to start, and the game was on. Adam dinked the ball to Brett, but it was a weak opening kick, and Eric took advantage by elbowing Brett off the ball, taking it away, and lofting it into the open field. I ran toward the bouncing ball, with Adam hot on my heels, and kneed it back over to Eric, who popped it into the net. One-nil for us.

On the second possession, Brett shot a strong pass over to Adam, right through Eric's legs, and just like that, it was 1-1.

At 2-2, our possession, Eric turned on the afterburners and streaked by Brett. Adam decided the threat was too great, so he left me, and tried to angle Eric off the goal. Brett caught up on the switch, but it was too late, and Eric's pass led me by about five feet, making it way too easy for me to hit the back of the net. We were up, 3-2.

On Adam's possession, I was all over him by his third stride into our half, so much so that, if it had been a real game, I probably would have been called for a foul. As it was, Coach let us play on, and Adam tried to force a shot past me, from too far away. It glanced off

my leg and went wide right and out of bounds. Our possession, from the goal line.

Adam and Brett were a little winded, so they backed off, allowing us to advance the ball across our half of the field unobstructed. Eric had the ball. He sped up, pressing Brett. Adam was crowding me, making sure he stayed between me and their goal, trying to impede my advance down the field. I thought he was thinking he could muscle me off the play, similar to what I had done to him on their last possession. I didn't mind at all, especially since I had worked out a couple of special plays with Eric on the phone, the night before. This situation fit right into one of them, and Eric recognized it, too. He allowed Brett to close a little, and then he passed across the field to just behind me. Brett followed the ball's direction, anticipating an errant pass rolling behind me. Instead, I cocked my right leg, swept it behind me, and gave Eric a heel-pass give-and-go that we had developed during Duane Olchick's clinic. He picked up the pass, and, since Brett was caught woefully out of the play, was all alone and wide open as he tapped the ball into the net. It was game point, at 4-2, and all over except for the shouting. An easy steal later, and our opponents only made a cursory try at defense, and Eric and I walked away with a 5-2 victory.

As we walked off the field, back toward where the rest of the team was still playing, Brett trotted up to Eric and me.

"That was a great play, that behind-the-back pass, Sean," he said.

"Thanks," I replied. "That was one of the tricks we learned over the summer from Olchick."

"Really? Can you show it to me sometime?"

"Sure," I said. "Maybe tomorrow after practice."

"Porter!" Adam sounded angry as he came up behind us.

I stopped and turned around, sighing. "What the fuck do you want, Weasel?"

Angrily, he said, "First of all, stop calling me Weasel."

Eric was at my side. “If you earn the name, Weasel, you better learn to live with it,” he said threateningly.

Adam took a step back, putting his hands up in front of him. “What did I ever do to you?” he asked innocently.

Before Eric could take a step toward him, I put a hand on his arm to stop him. He was breathing fire, and he looked like he wanted to tear Adam’s arm off and beat him unconscious with it.

Brett stepped up to save the kid’s bacon. Facing Adam, his back to us, he said through clenched teeth, “What did you do to him? You wanted to use him to take Sean’s position. You wanted to cash in on their friendship. You wanted to divide this team into pro-Prince versus pro-Porter. You wanted to bring a little spotlight onto yourself, at Eric’s and Sean’s expense. And, incidentally, you tried to drag me into the middle of all this, too.”

Adam had the good grace to look abashed. He mumbled what sounded like an apology, and then stood there, content to let us walk away and leave him standing there.

Eric was not quite finished, however. He turned back. “Weasel? Don’t do it again. Don’t challenge Sean, don’t challenge Anthony, don’t challenge Brett. And don’t even think about challenging me. Got it?”

Adam just stood, rooted in place, and nodded.

“And get used to the name, Weasel. It fits you, so it’s yours. Understand?” Again, Adam merely nodded. Eric looked a little less angry, a little more satisfied with the outcome of the afternoon. As he turned away from the freshman, he said, “See? Nicknames can be fun.” Eric stepped back to rejoin Brett and me, without waiting for Adam’s reluctant, assenting nod.

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BUILDING A FLOAT

We fell into our school routine through the fall. Becky decided I was dirt, and, except for when she had to, she stopped talking to me. Kristina seemed to work through her guilt and anger, and was pretty much back to her old self again. Molly was skipping school with some regularity, and on the days she did show up, she was looking paler and thinner than ever. I noticed that she had taken to wearing much heavier makeup, perhaps to try to cover the dark circles that were forming under her eyes. I had heard, through the school grapevine, that the cheerleading coach had tried to intervene on her behalf, even going so far as to call her parents, but it didn't seem to help much. I knew that Josh was very worried about her, too, but she wasn't listening to him any more than she cared about what Mrs. Halliburton, the cheerleading coach, had to say to her.

Homecoming was scheduled for the first weekend in October. A couple of weeks before that, a committee of students from each class, with faculty advisers, came up with float designs. The locations where these floats were to be constructed were supposed to be a

secret, so that there would be no sabotage raids between the freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors. The Junior Class float was going to be built inside a big old barn on some land owned by Shayna Gallagher's parents, located just a couple of miles out of town. The Gallaghers also provided a hay wagon for the float, and construction time was scheduled for every weekday night for whoever could come. It was a fun diversion to go over there and shape chicken wire over the wood framing, and to tie colored crepe paper into the wire. Because of practice schedules and homework, I wasn't able to go over there more than a couple of times the first week, but there were usually about twenty or thirty kids and adults there every night.

On Thursday, I was just sitting down for dinner with my family, anxious to be done so I could run over, pick up Jake, and head out to the barn. Both my mom and my dad were amused, watching me shovel food into my mouth in such a hurry. My younger brother Stephen was just picking at his food, acting distracted.

As I forced down that last mouthful, I dropped my silverware and asked, "May I be excused?"

Stephen piped up right after me, "Me, too, please?"

"All right," said my mom with a small laugh. "Go, before you explode."

I ran upstairs to change my clothes. I was pulling on my jeans when Stephen knocked on my door, and opened it.

"Come on in," I said as I tucked in my shirt. "What's up?"

"Sean, I... uh, can I ask you something?"

"Sure, pal," I replied. "What's bothering you?"

He had his head down, and one foot was tapping.

"Ah, never mind," he said uncomfortably, and he turned to leave.

I took two steps over to him and grabbed his arm and turned him back around to face me.

"Hold it there, Stephen. What's going on? I know it's something you don't want the parents to find out about, right?"

"Yeah, well, right," he reluctantly agreed.

"So talk to me."

He sighed. "I... well, I..."

I sat down on my bed and folded my arms across my chest.

"I'm not going anywhere until you spit it out, buddy," I said.

"All right, all right. It's just that I don't know... what I mean is... Sean, if somebody says they're giving somebody head, what do they mean?"

No wonder he doesn't want to talk to Mom or Dad. "Well, it means oral sex. They're sucking cock. Why? Who's giving head?"

"It's Tara. You know, Jaimie's sister? She told me she wants to do that to me, and I didn't know what she meant."

"Tara? I guess it doesn't really surprise me," I said.

"Yeah," said Stephen as he pulled out my desk chair and sat down. "She's kind of a wild kid, you know? My friend Tommy claims he fucked her. I don't know if that's true, but I know she's done some stuff."

"What do you mean, done some stuff? Like drugs? Or like sex stuff?"

"Well, maybe both. Like, I know she was, uh, like playing show-and-tell awhile ago."

"Show-and-tell?"

"Yeah, you know at that picnic and party a few weeks ago? With the baseball game in their back yard, in the field by the woods? Well, Tara took a bunch of us back into the woods there, me and Tommy and Carlos and Richie and maybe a couple of others, and she told us that if we all took our clothes off, she would, too. So we did it. And so did she. And she was laying down, and spreading her legs, and letting us look at her, and everything. And we were all kind of kneeling around her, looking at her, and Carlos reached over and touched her boob, and she kind of closed her eyes, and licked her lips, and we were all getting boners, you know? And she reached out and just touched the end of Carlos's prick with her fingers after he

started playing with her. I think if they had been alone, a lot more would have happened, but we heard some little kids shuffling through the leaves close by, so we all scrambled to get dressed again."

"Wow," I said. "That's weird."

"And later, after dark, Tara and Carlos and Richie kind of disappeared for awhile. I think they went back into the woods, but I don't really know for sure. Anyway, at school the other day, she told me she might give me head. I didn't want to ask Tommy or Richie or Carlos what it meant. I didn't want to sound stupid, you know?"

I nodded. *Nobody wants to sound stupid in front of their friends*.

He continued, "So I said, 'Sure, anytime,' and she said I should call her and meet her after school. She said that maybe we could do some homework together, or something. But I don't think she really was talking about school homework." He stood up. "Now I know what I'm gonna call her for, at least. Thanks, Sean."

"Hold on there, pardner," I said. "Just because she's kind of offered to suck you off, doesn't necessarily mean you should be going for it. I mean, yeah, it feels good and all, but what about the risks? Think about this for awhile, Stephen. It doesn't sound like you want to be caught up in being Tara's boyfriend, especially if she's out there experimenting a lot."

"Well..."

"Look, I'm just saying that she might be reading more into this offer of hers than you are." I grabbed my shoes and started putting them on. "And even if she isn't, it sure sounds to me like there are a whole shitload of issues tied to her, and maybe you don't want to get caught up in all that. So just think about it, okay?"

"Yeah, you may be right," he admitted. "Thanks, Sean."

"No problem, little brother. Take it from me, dealing with girls is a minefield. You've got to be real careful. Slow and steady, or you just might find something blowing up in your face. And sometimes getting your rocks off just isn't worth the price. Understand?"

"Got it. Thanks." He walked out of the room a lot happier than he walked in. I wasn't sure I had helped him much, but I hoped he would pass on Tara's offer, and wait for something better to come along.

I shook my head at myself. Here I was, giving advice to my little brother, and my own love life was in shambles. *Why should he listen to me?*

I finished tying my shoes, ran downstairs, grabbed the keys from my mom's outstretched hand, and ran out to her car.

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When Jake and I got to the barn, I was surprised at the progress that had been made on the float since the last time I had seen it. The wooden supports were all in place, and most of the chicken wire was stapled up and shaped. There were about fifteen kids working on tying crepe paper around the back of the float, while others were snipping wire. The teams playing the homecoming game were us, the Bears, against the Dover Hornets, and our float design was supposed to be a giant bear crushing a scared hornet in its paws, so there was a lot of smaller work to be done with wire and wood, shaping the figures. A couple of the dads were looking over a set of drawings, calling out measurements to kids with saws. Tiny was helping with carrying lumber, picking up impressive amounts of two-by-fours at once, and Jake walked over to give him a hand. There were a couple of picnic tables set up in a corner, away from the dust and commotion, and the remains of two pizzas were still lying out. There was also a big old refrigerator by the tables, and Kristina was over there, getting out a couple of cans of pop out of the refrigerator.

I walked over toward her, and reached for the door, just as she was closing it.

"Wait a second," I said, as I reached in and grabbed a Coke.

"Who did you come here with?" I asked, glancing at the two cans in her hand.

"Oh, this is for Tessa," she said with a smile. "I caught a ride with her and Austin." She pointed back toward the float. I saw them then, working with the crepe paper.

"Is that where you're working, too?" I asked.

She blushed just a little. "Yes," she said quietly.

I knew where I wanted to work. "Is there room for one more?" I asked.

She glanced quickly at me as we strolled toward the float. "Maybe," she replied with a smile.

She handed Tessa one of the cans, and scrambled up on top of the flatbed wagon. She bent over to pick up a roll of green crepe paper, and then looked over to me questioningly, a slight grin on her face.

I took the hint, and followed her up to work on tying paper to one of the forms.

Two hours later, my hands were dyed blue and green from the paper, and my fingers were cramping from shoving bits of crepe through the openings in the wire and tying them off. I stood and stretched my aching back muscles, and stopped, looking around in surprise.

It was quiet in the barn. Most of the kids had already left, and most of the ones still there were manning brooms to clean up the area a little. I hopped down from the wagon, and reached up to give Kristina a hand as she clambered down. Tessa and Austin were just finishing up the section they had been working on, and Jake and Tiny were sitting at one of the picnic tables, polishing off the last of the cold pizza. I walked over toward them, opened the fridge, and took out two cans of soda.

"Hey, Sean, if you're going to stay here and work some more, I think I'll catch a ride home with Tiny," said Jake.

"Yeah, that's fine," I said. "Maybe Kristina and I will help Tessa and Austin finish up that back part."

Jake smirked just a little, but he tried to keep a straight face. "Yeah, okay, you work on that with Kristina."

Tiny laughed out loud, and they both stood. They had to sit on opposite sides of the table, or it would have tipped over. Even at that, the table rocked when they both stood up. I could imagine it groaning in relief, after having those two big bodies pressing down on it.

I walked back over and handed a can to Kristina. We were content to stand there, watching Tessa and Austin as they tied the last few pieces of paper on. Tessa stood back and eyed their work critically.

"It looks like it could use just a little more over there, on that side," she said, pointing. "See?"

Austin got up off his knees and moved back to where Tessa was standing, draping an arm casually around her shoulder. He looked to where she was pointing.

"Yeah, I agree," he said. "But it's going to have to wait until tomorrow. I'm beat."

By then, there was just Shayna and her dad left in the barn, and it was obvious they were waiting for us to leave so they could lock up. The four of us strolled out into the night. Kristina reached out and held my hand as we walked slowly toward our cars.

"Goodnight, you guys," said Tessa with a smile. She and Austin walked to Austin's car. Kristina and I hung back for a moment before walking hand in hand to my car, parked about twenty feet away. I unlocked the car, and we climbed into the front seat. Kristina slid over to sit next to me, and I put my arm around her shoulder. She turned to me expectantly as I dropped my head down to her uplifted face, and kissed her softly, tenderly.

We stayed that way for a long time, enjoying soft, undemanding kisses. I glanced up once, and was not surprised to see that Austin's car hadn't moved, either. It was a nice, quiet, dark spot. Lights splashed across us briefly as the Gallaghers pulled out and drove away shortly after we had gotten in the car, but other than that, it was quiet and peaceful.

It was getting colder out, but I didn't want to start the car to run the heater. Besides, we were starting to generate our own heat. I slipped my arm inside her jacket, holding her waist as I kissed her, taking great care to keep my hand firm and steady along her middle, straying neither north nor south. She reached up and held my neck, opening her mouth just a little, letting her tongue creep out to teasingly brush against my lips. I let her taste my closed lips, waiting for her to indicate that she was ready for more. When I felt her pushing the tip of her tongue between my lips, trying to get me to open up just a little, I allowed her to push my lips apart just enough so that my tongue just touched hers, and we teased each other in an oral game of hide-and-seek.

We played these little kissing games, neither of us wanting to press any further and possibly spoil the moment. I knew I had to go very slowly with her now that she had taken this big step in my direction, and I was determined not to blow my chances with her again. We were warm enough, holding each other and kissing each other.

Again, lights flashed across my windshield. We instinctively ducked down, out of sight, in case it was Mr. Gallagher, coming back to retrieve something he might have forgotten. I caught a glimpse of Austin's car, still in the same spot, but I could see two heads through the windows, looking at the oncoming headlights. I got a bad feeling when I saw that there were two sets of headlights coming toward us. When the cars driving up got closer, their lights suddenly went out, and I knew it wasn't Mr. Gallagher. I had a sinking feeling we were going to be caught in the middle of something we really didn't want

any part of, and I was suddenly regretting that we didn't find a different place to park. I poked my head up, and was able to watch the two cars come barreling up the deserted road. They swerved, and almost missed the driveway to the barn, their tires kicking up dust and stones as they spun and finally caught, sending the cars careening up. I heard them come to a sliding stop, and then I heard car doors opening and slamming, and the sound of voices.

I didn't know what was going on, but I didn't want to get Kristina in any trouble. The problem was, if I started my car now, we would certainly be noticed, so we sat there for a moment. I saw a bunch of bodies moving from the cars toward the barn, until they disappeared around a corner. We heard the sound of pounding, metal on metal, and then the screech of the barn door being opened. Somebody was breaking in.

I opened my car door. Kristina's face was pale with fright when I looked over at her, and she shook her head at me, frantically waving her hands to get me to get back into the car. I motioned for her to stay there, but she scooted over, and slid out of the car and closed the door softly. I glanced over, and saw Austin and Tessa getting quietly out of their car, too. We met up, and tiptoed up to the barn, trying to sneak up on whoever was inside.

There was a long, dirty window that was cracked open along one side of the barn, on a wall facing a cornfield, so we snuck over toward it. The four of us could stand, side by side, and peer in. We could hear the drunken voices of the Bulls and some of their girls, holding flashlights as they examined our float. I could recognize Joey Amonte, Jilly Del Toro, Harold Barnes, and Vinnie Arilio as they walked around, and there were a couple of other guys I didn't recognize with them. Shockingly, Pammy Lipschutz and Molly O'Toole were also there, but rather less willingly, it seemed. In fact, both Molly and Pammy had studded dog collars around their necks, and leashes were attached. Harold held Pammy's leash, and Jilly was clutching the leash attached to Molly's collar. Every now and then he

would yank on the leash, pulling Molly stumblingly toward him. In his other hand he held a bottle in a paper bag, which he would occasionally lift to his lips.

"What the fuck is this pussy float supposed to be?" sneered Jilly.

"It's a real piece of shit," said Joey.

Jilly yanked on the leash. "You're a junior, bitch. You should know. What's this pussy float supposed to be?"

Molly's voice was weak and submissive. "I don't know. I think it's a bear and a hornet."

"What's the bear doing? Fucking the hornet?" laughed Jilly. All the other Bulls dutifully laughed raucously. He dragged Molly over to the other side of the float. "Shit, it don't look like nothin'. How long they been workin' on this?"

"Just a few days, I think," said Pammy, sounding anxious to please.

Harold snapped the slack out of the leash he was holding. "Shut up," he hissed. "You'll shut up unless you're spoken to, bitch."

"I think the bitch is askin' for it," suggested Vinnie.

Harold looked at Pammy's frightened face. "You think?" he said.

"No!" Jilly's voice cracked across the room. "Leave her alone, Vinnie. Maybe we'll all bang her later, but for now we've got work to do."

Vinnie said, "Yeah, maybe we can bang both these bitches later tonight."

Jilly just looked at him. Vinnie shuffled his feet and said, "Sorry, Jilly. I got carried away."

"Yeah, well, just watch your fucking mouth, Vinnie, or I'll make fucking sure you're carried away. When I'm tired of her, you'll get your fucking chance. Until then, just shut the fuck up."

"Okay, Jilly. Sorry." Vinnie moved a little further away from Jilly, just in case. He shot a glance at Joey, who had a very sour look on his face. Apparently, he wasn't too happy about losing Molly to Del Toro. I wondered if he gave her up willingly. I couldn't believe that

Molly would have agreed. In fact, I would say she probably wasn't consulted at all, from the looks of things.

The four of us dropped down to crouch below the window. Both Tessa and Kristina had tears in their eyes.

"Can you believe that shit?" said Austin incredulously.

"We've got to do something," said Tessa.

"I know, but what?" I said. "If they find us here, we'll be toast. But you're right, we've got to get some help."

We stood up again to peer through the window. We needed to know that they weren't coming out of the barn and stumbling across us.

They had found the supply of sodas in the refrigerator, and were loading up. They scavenged some paper grocery bags from the garbage and filled them with cans, setting them down on the ground just outside the door. Jilly stood to one side, directing the others, with Molly standing obediently to the side and a couple of steps behind him. After they got the refrigerator emptied, Jilly instructed them to squirt the float with lighter fluid. Vinnie and Joey pranced around the wagon, squirting the lighter fluid all over, while Harold, pulling Pammy along beside him, paced back and forth along one of the longer sides.

"Goddammit, they're going to set it on fire!" Austin roughly whispered.

"Shhh!" warned Kristina.

There wasn't really anything we could do. It was a helpless feeling. We watched as Jilly stepped up to the wagon, dragging Molly behind him. He dug into his jeans pocket, pulling out a Zippo lighter. We could hear the metallic snick as he flicked open the top and spun the wheel with his thumb. A small flame danced atop the lighter, and he slowly brought the flame over to a wisp of crepe paper. It must have been pretty well soaked, because it caught and flared, sending tendrils of flames up and out, until the entire section was burning. He tossed the lighter over to Joey, standing on the other

side, and he set another blaze opposite the first. Joey walked around the wagon to hand the lighter back to Jilly, apparently unwilling to trust his toss of the lighter back to his leader, and the boys, dragging the two girls along by the leashes, headed over toward the door. They watched, passing the bottle back and forth among them, as the float burned.

I was afraid that the flames might reach the rooftop, and the Bulls must have had the same thought. Jilly glanced up toward the roof, nudged Harold in the ribs, and said, "Okay, guys, I think our work here is finished. Let's get the fuck out of here." He threw the empty bottle into the middle of the fire, and they all turned and jogged to their cars. They piled in, and spun their wheels leaving the gravel parking area, heading down the empty, dark road.

As soon as we saw them drive away, Austin, Tessa, Kristina, and I raced around to the door. There was a fire extinguisher just inside the doorway, and I grabbed it, hoping against hope that it wasn't too old.

"I've got a little extinguisher in my car," shouted Austin, and he ran out to retrieve it. Meanwhile, I pulled the pin on the one from the barn, and squeezed the handle. Fortunately, it was fully charged, and it began spraying foam.

The paper was pretty much burned off, but the wood frame was still burning, and the floorboards of the wagon were smoldering. I aimed my extinguisher at the higher parts of the framework, hoping to douse the flames before the roof caught. Austin came running back in, and aimed his extinguisher at the floorboards of the wagon.

Between the two extinguishers, plus the four of us getting up on the wagon and stomping out the remaining sparks, we were able to put out the fire before the barn caught. But it was a close thing, far closer than we wanted to think about. We clustered around the open door, watching the last few tendrils of smoke rise up from the mess, tired and sweaty and nervous.

And now we had some real concerns. We weren't supposed to have been here, and, even though we saved the barn, we lost the float, and we couldn't tell hardly anybody about it. And, suddenly, we had some serious worries about Molly and the Bulls.

We knew we had to do something. But we had no idea what we were going to be able to do.

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SUBTLETY AND DEVIOUSNESS

Molly was at school the next day, but she looked terrible. No amount of makeup could cover up the big welt by her left temple. It looked like somebody had popped her with something abrasive, and she was walking around school slowly, as if her body hurt, too.

At lunchtime, I grabbed Austin, and the two of us went out in search of Josh. We found him outside, sitting under a tree with Andrea and a couple of other kids.

"Josh. I need to talk with you, man," I said.

He looked up, but made no move to stand. "Sure, Sean. What's up?"

"Alone," I said. I knew I was sounding like a bad spy movie, but I didn't have much choice.

He made a big production out of packing up the remains of his lunch, standing, and tossing the sack in the general direction of the trash bin. "I'll be right back," he said to his girlfriend, and then he stalked over toward the side of the building, obviously unhappy with the interruption.

As we caught up with him, he stopped and turned toward Austin and me. "Okay, we're alone. What's so freaking important?"

"Have you seen Molly today?" I asked.

His face fell. "Yeah," he admitted. "Looks like she took a hit yesterday."

Austin and I told him about what had happened at the barn the previous night. We held nothing back. We didn't want the blow softened at all. In fact, I wanted him mad, as mad as he'd ever been.

"Goddamnit. Goddamnit. *Goddamnit!* Now what?" He started pacing back and forth. He stopped and took two steps back to us. "What can we do about it? Have you got a plan?"

"No, I don't," I admitted. "But we don't have much time. It looks like she's the property of Del Toro now, but who knows what'll happen if he gets tired of her, or she pisses him off somehow."

"Shit, I know what'll happen to her. The same thing that's happening to Pammy right now," he said disgustedly.

"I don't know if we can do anything about Pammy, anyway, even if we can remove Molly from the situation," Austin said. "From what I've heard, she might be there willingly."

"Shit," I said. "What kind of a girl would want to get involved with the Bulls willingly?"

"Don't go there," warned Josh. "It cuts a little close to home."

"Yeah, sorry," I apologized.

"I've gotta get her out of this," he said, almost to himself. "But how?"

"I don't know, but we're going to need a plan," I said.

"And some help," added Austin.

"Yeah, you're right," agreed Josh. "You're both right. Man, I just want to kidnap her right now, but I know that's no good," he added.

"I would bet she's about ready to try to get herself loose of the Bulls," I said. "Molly's never been the kind of girl who would put up with that kind of shit. They've just got her beaten down right about now."

"Still, it's coming up on the weekend. What can we do quickly?" Josh asked.

"I don't know. I've got a game tonight, and you've got a football game tomorrow afternoon. The soonest we're going to be able to plan anything out is probably either tomorrow morning, or Sunday morning." I knew none of us wanted to wait that long, but it didn't look like we had a choice.

"And what if Jilly gets tired of her after tonight?" asked Josh sourly. "Does she become community property tomorrow? Fuck!"

"Josh, do you think you can talk to her, maybe find out what she's thinking?" Austin was thinking out loud. "If she's a willing conspirator, it might make it easier to get her out."

"I don't know. Wait a minute," he said. He looked over to where his girlfriend was sitting. I had noticed that she was glancing over toward us occasionally, and looking very concerned. "Andi, can you come over here for a minute?" he called.

"This is about Molly, right?" she asked as she joined us.

"Yeah, how did you know?" I asked.

She gave me a look, as if I was the dumbest creature she had ever had the misfortune to come across. It was a look I was getting used to seeing, unfortunately.

She turned to Josh, holding onto his shirt front for emphasis. "I didn't want to bring it up to you, not until you mentioned it first. But you've got to help her, Josh. She's in bad trouble, hanging around the Bulls, and the longer she stays with them, the worse it's going to get."

"Well, it's already started to get worse, according to Sean and Austin," Josh said.

We gave her the condensed version of the story. Andrea was a bright girl, and I knew she would be able to fill in the blanks without difficulty.

She listened without comment, until we finished. "So what are you planning?" she asked.

"That's just it, we don't have a plan," complained Josh. "Sean's got a game tonight, we're at an away game tomorrow. It looks like we really can't get together and work anything out until Sunday."

"That's okay," said Andrea. "Let's plan on meeting on Sunday afternoon. That'll give me time to find out what I can, and maybe recruit some help."

"Don't be talking up this story," admonished Austin. "We don't want too many people knowing about this. And we really don't want Del Toro and his thugs to hear about it."

I was gratified to see that Andrea didn't reserve those *you are an idiot* looks for just me, as Austin was rewarded with one.

"Gee, you think?" she said sarcastically. "Believe it or not, boys, I can be subtle and devious when I want to be."

"Of course you can, baby," soothed Josh. "You're a girl, after all."

* * * * * * * * * *

The soccer team had to leave school about an hour early. Our game was at Lincoln Valley High School, over an hour away by bus. We were undefeated so far, and we were determined to stay that way, all the way to the State Championships. About midway through the season, Trent Abbott was the leading scorer in our conference, and Eric Johnson had the most assists. Most of our opponents had opened their offensive sets by testing our right side, mostly to see if it was as strong as rumored. Between Kevin Soranno in the midfield, me as defenseman, and Brett Oldman and Jorge Mendoza minding the net, nobody had yet scored by attacking that side. Even after switching to the left, they still had to contend with Brett and Jorge, along with Mike Evanson plugging up the middle, and a very tenacious Anthony Rogers roaming the defensive turf over there. In six games played so far, we had only had four goals scored on us. By

contrast, we had never scored less than five goals, and our offensive production totaled thirty-eight goals. We were a scoring machine.

Even Coach Neville, a history teacher and a man prone to worry, seemed relatively relaxed and confident.

According to the scouting reports, Lincoln Valley had a moderately strong team. Study of the film at Thursday's practice had shown us that they had some weakness in the middle, but their defenders seemed capable, and they were especially strong at stopper and keeper, two key defensive positions. They were strong enough, it seemed, to be able to cancel out the deficiencies of their center midfielders and forwards, as they had only lost one game so far, to perennial powerhouse Rockton Heights.

When we got to the field, there was a slight drizzle falling. On the one hand, that would slow down the ball for our quick offense, but on the other hand, we might be able to press their middle harder in slower conditions.

We unloaded our gear and hauled it over to the playing field, and got ready to warm up. Eric and I liked to take a couple of quick laps around the perimeter of the playing field before we started, just to limber up a little, and we took off while the rest of the team stretched and finished putting on their shin guards and shoes.

On our first circuit, we were just passing the goal where some of the Lincoln Valley players were warming up, taking practice shots on an empty net. I heard one of them say to a teammate, "Look at that. Chocolate and vanilla."

His friend answered, "Yeah, all they need now is a freakin' Indian, and they could call themselves the Neapolitans."

This comment was apparently hilarious, as several of the players began laughing uproariously. I could sense Eric stiffening beside me, but we kept on jogging around, doing our best to distance ourselves from the other team.

On our next time around their net, I noticed that several of their players were clustered together. "I sure hope they don't try to play

us too close today," Eric said, just loudly enough to be overheard by the group. "Just in case their stupidity is contagious."

"Hey!" I heard one of the guys yell out to us. I glanced back, and a couple of the players were being held back by their teammates, apparently taking Eric's remark a little too personally.

"Way to go, Eric. Get them riled up before we take the field. Good plan," I said sourly.

He gave me a big, toothy grin. "You been gettin' it too easy lately, Porter. I'm just tryin' to ratchet up the competition for you, so the press will notice you again. You can thank me later."

"Did you notice," I pointed out, "that it wasn't me who was mouthing off to them?"

"Mmm...hmmm," he replied.

"And don't you think they'll target the one with the big mouth?"

"Uh-uh," he said with a smile. "They're gonna think twice about focusing on a poor token colored player like me. They hardly even saw me when we were going past them. Besides, we all look alike to crackers like those guys. But you..." He grinned, and nodded at me with satisfaction. "You, they'll recognize. And focus."

"Focus," I repeated disgustedly. "What a pal. Just what I need, a little focus."

"You're welcome," he said, even though I didn't remember thanking him.

They focused, all right. On their first offensive possession, they attacked our right side, throwing every available player into my sector. Kevin Soranno came back to try to help out when he saw them cluster, and I moved up to meet the ball handler. Two other Lincoln Valley players came up and sandwiched me, trying to take me out of the play as I moved on the ball. Brett stayed home, guarding his turf, but Mikey Evanson slid over to help out, trying to cut off a passing lane. Robert Anderson, from his offensive midfield position, dropped back to cover Mike's area, and Anthony, on the left, was all alone. He slid up to help Brett and Jorge protect the net.

As the two forwards converged on me, I put on the brakes, digging my heels in for traction. I stopped, but they didn't, and they ended up colliding with each other, falling over each other to the ground. I dropped and tackled the ball out from beneath the ball handler's foot, right past Mikey, who had the good sense to let it go. The ball scooted over to Robert, who deftly trapped it, and passed it up to Eric. Eric one-touched it over to Javier, our forward in the middle, and he juked the last remaining defender before tapping it over to Trent, who shot a bullet into the back of the net.

As everybody was untangling themselves from my corner of the field, I heard one of the Lincoln Valley players say to another, "We'll get him next time."

"Yeah," came the reply, "we'll have to work him on an angle next time, so he can't evade."

"Work it any way you want to, little boys," I said to them. "It'll still result in a goal against."

They spun around to glare at me.

I just shrugged at them. "Didn't you see what just happened? Play the ball, not the position. It's not that difficult a concept."

"Go fuck yourself, Mr. All-Stater," came the reply.

I sighed. "Or try it again, if you think it's such a good plan," I said.

They worked hard at ignoring me.

At the kickoff, they worked the same play back over to my side. I had seen how they operated, and I didn't have any worries that they would be a threat on goal, so I backpedaled as the same two guys came at me again, one down the sideline and the other from midfield. The ball was in play up by Kevin, and Brett and Mikey covered the passing lanes into the middle, so I kept moving back, until the two chasing me were well beyond where they intended to be. I stopped and waited for them to get closer, and then I sidestepped, quickly shuffling to my left a half-dozen times. By the time the Lincoln Valley duo realized that I wasn't there anymore,

they were a little confused. The ball handler, with Kevin harassing him, had two options. He could either do the conservative, and correct, thing by passing back so they could restart their offense, or he could do the foolhardy play by passing forward to the two bozos up by me, getting in each other's way. He chose to advance the ball, no doubt the echoes of his poor coaching ringing in his ears about moving the ball forward at every opportunity. He passed it to Bozo Number One, with Bozo Number Two at his side, and nowhere to go. He was pinned in the corner, with me, Brett and Jorge between him and the net, and nobody from his team anywhere in his range, except, of course, for Bozo Two, who was practically standing next to him.

I was crouched in front of him, knees bent and on my toes, ready for him to move. "Take the shot," I said to him.

He was jigging the ball back and forth, trying to find an opening. "What?" he said, unsure if he had heard me correctly.

"I said, take the shot," I repeated. "Shoot it now, or I'll come over there and take the ball away from you." Bozo Two, in the meantime, circled around me, no doubt thinking he would outsmart me by getting between me and the goal, even though I had plenty of goalside help. I moved to the side slightly, staying between the two of them, even though I was pretty sure Bozo Two wouldn't know what to do with the ball even if he was fortunate enough to be able to chase down a pass from Bozo One.

Bozo One hesitated just long enough, so I took a step toward him. He did the only thing he could do, which was to take a very weak shot at the corner post. It dribbled right to Jorge, who scooped it up, took four steps, and punted the ball to the midfield stripe, where, to almost nobody's surprise, Robert just happened to be waiting. He leapt up, and headed the ball over to Trent. Trent let the ball hit his chest, and it dropped to his feet. He moved down the left sideline another few meters, and crossed a pass across the face of the goal,

about ten meters out, and Javier knocked it in for our second goal in less than five minutes of play.

Bozo One turned to Bozo Two and said in amazement, "How did that happen?"

I laughed out loud. They both looked at me as if I had lost my mind, as they started jogging back to their side of the field.

"It must have been an accident," I said. "It just couldn't have happened on purpose, could it?"

They both stopped and stared at me. "You can't tell us that was a designed play," Bozo One said.

I just shook my head at their foolishness. "Are you two yutzes so inept you can't recognize the consequences of your own bad judgment?" I asked.

They both got stony looks on their faces. "Okay, Glory Boy," said Bozo One. "We'll see who's laughing last, asshole."

"You guys will be so out of breath by the time you get done running at me and getting beaten off the ball, you won't have the energy to laugh," I said. "Now shoo. I've got a soccer game to play. Join in, if you can figure out how to play the game."

I thought they might come after me at that, but the referee was looking right at them, waiting for them to get back across the line, and they had no choice but to fall back for the restart.

During the delay, their coaches must have sent out instructions for the offense to try attacking our left side instead, for the ball ended up over there on the next play. Bozos One and Two plunged their way up and into the middle, effectively keeping the ball out of harm's way for us. I watched them run around without purpose, and had to wonder at the shallow pool of talent that their hapless coach must have had available to him, to have to start those two. It almost made me feel sorry for them.

Late in the first half, the ball got knocked over toward the right side again, and somehow Bozo One managed to trap and hold it. Before he could move, I closed on him and got enough toe on the ball

to kick it out of bounds. Bozo Two came up to throw in, and the Poor Coaching Principle reared its ugly head for them once again. His instructions, I was sure, were to throw the ball upfield, no matter what, so that's what he set up to do. The only player upfield for him to throw to was Bozo One, and I was all over him. He threw it anyway, and I stepped in front of Bozo One, trapped the ball, juked around the slow and stupid Bozo Two, and carried the ball all the way up the field. Kevin dropped back to cover my assignments as I dribbled up, and Jimmy Brooks, our right forward, moved over to take the cross, pulling his defender with him. There was no one around me, and nobody challenging me. They probably were so drilled about staying in their positions or on their assignment, that they had no idea about improvisation on the field, which certainly made it very easy for me. A defenseman bringing the ball upfield was completely foreign to them, apparently, and they had no contingency plan for it. I knew my team was covering and supporting me as I took the ball in, just as I could observe that our opponents were moving indecisively in their positions. The defender stayed with Jimmy, and their stopper was forced to come out and challenge me. I head-faked him, moved around his flank, and challenged the keeper. He had to come out of the net to me, so that he could cut down on my shooting angles, but he was dead in the water, and he knew it. I passed the ball off the outside of my left foot over to Trent. The keeper scrambled over to cover Trent, giving him the opportunity to one-touch the ball back to me, leaving the keeper slipping in the damp grass, trying in vain to change direction. Trent put the ball right on my foot, and it was too easy to hit the back of the net. The goal put us up 5-0, and it wasn't even halftime yet.

By the end of the game, Coach Neville had pulled Anthony, Jimmy, Mikey and me, preferring to save us for another time. Since Trent was the conference-leading scorer, Coach left him in to score at will, which he did. He also let Eric continue playing, since he was

very proficient at feeding Trent. At the final whistle, the score was 11-0, and Lincoln Valley was demoralized.

After we had lined up to shake hands with our opponents, I heard Bozo One and Bozo Two talking as they passed me, heading back toward their bench.

"Could you believe that guy?" said One. "What did he score? Six goals?"

"Un-fucking-believable," said Two. "Shit, I'm the second-leading scorer on our team, and I've only gotten six goals all season."

I laughed, causing them to stop and turn to look at me. "Six goals all season, and you're the second-leading scorer for your team? Hell, I play defense, and I've scored four goals this season." I pointed to Trent. "See that guy? He had twenty-four goals, coming into this game. You want me to find you a calculator so you can figure out his current total?"

"Ah, fuck you, and the monkey you rode in on," said Two, but there really wasn't any heat in it. He was too tired and too dispirited to work up any real anger.

As I was walking back to our bench with Mikey and Eric, I saw the Lincoln Valley coaching staff trotting over toward us. Coach Neville saw it, too, and came out to intercept, thinking that perhaps they were upset over the trash talk during and after the game.

"Sean Porter?" inquired Lincoln Valley's head coach.

I nodded. He held out his hand. "My name is John Caruthers, Sean, and I'm the interim head coach here."

Coach Neville came up. "May I help you, Coach?" he asked, trying to head off any potential trouble.

"No, Coach," replied Mr. Caruthers. "I just wanted to bring my staff over to meet your star player. Sean, I had heard about you, of course, but your reputation has not been exaggerated. I just wanted to tell you that I was very impressed with your play out there against us."

"Well, thank you, Coach," I answered as I shook his hand.

"I gather you were doing a little teaching out there," he said with a smile.

"I'm not sure I understand what you mean," I said uncertainly.

"My left offensive team," he said. "They're a little thick-headed about taking instruction from me or my staff, I'm afraid. Think they know it all, seen it all, you know the type. They've been successful, in spite of themselves, so far this season. Anyway, I wanted to thank you for helping me, by showing them the error of their ways."

"I did that? What did I do?" I asked.

"Well," he said with a rueful chuckle, "aside from shutting down their movement of the ball, providing secondary assists to the first three goals your team scored, intercepting our throw-in and taking the ball all the way down the field unimpeded to score another goal, essentially plugging up your side of the field from the net to practically the midfield stripe, plus actually telling Bruce and Jack what to do to improve their play, you didn't do much." He paused, turned to Coach Neville, and said, "I don't suppose you'd consider a two-for-one trade, would you? My left mid and left forward for your right defender?"

I assumed that Bruce and Jack were probably the Bozo Brothers, and I was a little insulted that Coach Caruthers would think that I might be worth those two.

However, both coaches burst out laughing. Personally, I thought they were a little off their rockers, but maybe it was a coaching thing. Or an adult thing, of which I was just as oblivious. Eric and Mikey and I continued on toward the sidelines, leaving the coaches to their odd sense of amusement.

On the bus ride back to school, we were all in high spirits from our win. A bunch of us were in the back of the bus, laughing and swapping tall tales about our heroics on the field.

As we pulled into the school parking lot, Eric said, "Hey, Sean, I hate to bring up what might be a sore subject, but who you taking to Homecoming next week?"

I sat back in my seat, a little shocked. Homecoming was already only a week away? *And me, with no girlfriend, no date, and no prospects.* Becky hated me, and Kristina's father hated me. *Oh, great.*

"Thanks for reminding me that I'm going solo," I muttered. Eric was just barely hiding his smirk, and Trent was elbowing him in amusement over my predicament.

Practical jokers. You gotta love 'em, I thought to myself. *If you don't, you're liable to kill 'em.*

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A MALICIOUS PAIR OF EYES

A bunch of us got together over at Josh's house on Sunday afternoon. Austin, Tessa, Josh, Andrea, Jake, and I were in the basement. The television was on, tuned to a football game, but nobody, not even Jake, was paying any attention to it.

"So," said Austin, "what did you girls find out?"

"Molly's scared practically out of her mind," said Tessa. "I was able to talk to her for a few minutes yesterday, right after the football game."

Andrea added, "From what I could find out, the Bulls have been recruiting, both boys and girls, and Jilly's making them stronger than they ever were when Richie was running things. They might not be quite as visible, but they're a lot sneakier than they used to be."

"It's kind of odd, isn't it, that Jilly was able to take over the gang?" asked Jake. "After all, isn't he the youngest?"

"He's not the youngest by much," replied Andrea. "He's carried on the Del Toro family tradition of flunking a couple of grades. Even though he's only in the ninth grade, he's sixteen years old."

"And," added Tessa, "even though Harold, for instance, is a senior, the first thing Jilly did when he got to high school and joined up with his big brother's friends was to jump on Harold and beat the crap out of him, for no real reason other than he wanted to. He kind of asserted his dominance early by pounding on the oldest guy. He not only backed up his swagger, he also showed them that he might be just a little crazy. It impressed them, and they all got in line after that."

"A little crazy," I observed, "and also a little smart."

"Only within their circle," noted Andrea. "Basically, he's dumb as a rock, kind of like his big brother Richie. But among the Bulls, he's a rocket scientist. But, believe it, he's got mean covered," she added. "Whatever we decide to do concerning Molly, we're going to have to go through Jilly first."

"That's not such a comforting thought," said Josh, "but I'll do what I need to do to get my sister out of there."

"Josh," I said, "I know your parents have got to be concerned about this. Have you talked to them about Molly?"

"They want to call the police," said Josh. "I keep on telling them that the solution doesn't lie with the cops in this case." He sighed. "They know we're trying to do something here, and they've talked to Heather at school quite a bit about Molly, and Heather told them to let us give it a try first before they do anything further. She said that she thought Molly would be more receptive to us than she would to any authority figure, whether it's the cops, or a counselor at school, or even Mom and Dad. So they're going to let us do what we can. Reluctantly, but at least they're willing to give us a chance."

"Well, we can always fall back on brute authority figures if we fail," said Austin. For Molly's sake, I hoped it didn't come to that.

For all our good intentions, we didn't come up with a feasible plan that afternoon. We ended up ordering pizza, cracking open a bunch of sodas, and goofing off.

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The next morning at school, just before the first bell rang, I saw Josh at his locker. He looked like he had been up most of the night.

"Molly came home last night," he said quietly. "Her face was puffy, and she had a black eye. My parents were really upset, and they called the cops. They came over to interview her, but she wouldn't say anything to them, or to Mom or Dad. Refused to press charges, refused to even say what had happened. When she heard the cops at the front door, she ran upstairs and locked herself in her room, so they couldn't even see her."

"Yeah? Then what?" I knew there was more to the story.

"The cops finally left around midnight. They said they would have a talk with Del Toro and his parents. Jilly's almost as well known to them as Richie, apparently. Anyway, they told my folks that there really wasn't much they could do without cooperation from Molly, even though she's a minor." He looked around to see who else might be hearing our conversation before he continued. "They said that, under most circumstances, they could scare the suspect into stopping whatever they were doing wrong. In this case, they were pretty sure that wasn't going to work, but they promised to do what they could."

Josh slammed his locker door closed in frustration. "When I walked by her room, after the cops left, I could hear her crying in there, behind the closed door. I knocked, but she ignored me. I couldn't go barging in, you know?" He looked at me, wanting confirmation that he had done the right thing. Not sure if he had or not, I still nodded encouragingly. "Maybe an hour later, after Mom and Dad had gone to bed, I was still up. Couldn't sleep, you know? So I was reading, or at least trying to. What I was really doing was worrying about my sister." He took a deep breath. "Anyway, Molly

came into my room, Sean. She was still crying a little, and she was limping pretty badly, kind of shuffling along."

"Yeah?" I wanted to offer encouragement for him to go on with his story, because he needed to tell someone, even though I really didn't want to be the one to hear it.

"And she started taking off her clothes. She was wearing, like, a dirty t-shirt, and a scruffy pair of jeans, and she took off her t-shirt, and then sat on the edge of my bed and took off her jeans." Josh's voice was catching. If we had been alone, I knew he would have been close to tears, telling me about this. "She just sat there, without saying a word to me, Sean, in her underwear. And her whole body was marked up. Bruises, some of them looking kind of old, but definitely some fresh ones, too, all up and down her ribcage. There were scrapes on her shoulders and back, and hickeys and bite marks on her legs, her... her thighs, you know, up near... there." Now he was so uncomfortable he wouldn't even look at me. I put my hand on his bicep, hoping the contact would give him a little comfort. "She pulled the top of her... her bra down, just a little, and her... her boobs... at least the tops of them... had a bunch of hickeys on them, too..."

The bell rang, startling us both. He drew himself up to his full height, and took another deep, cleansing breath. We started walking down the hall to our first classes.

"So I helped her get cleaned up as best as I could, and put some antiseptic on her cuts, and put her back to bed. I told her to just stay in bed today, and I would get some help for her by this afternoon. She never said a word the whole time, Sean, but I could see it in her eyes, that she wanted me to help her. She was sleeping when I left this morning. Dad went to work, but Mom called in so she could stay home with Molly, in case she wanted to talk. I don't think she will, though."

We were outside Josh's classroom. "What do you want to do?" I asked.

"I'm not sure," he admitted. "Can you get out of practice this afternoon? I'm going to talk to the football coach, and let him know I've got a family situation."

"Sure," I said. "You want me to meet you at your house?"

"I don't know yet," he said as he turned to go into the room. "Let me think about it a little, and I'll talk to you at lunch."

The second bell rang. I was late for my class, but I didn't care.

"Okay," I said. "Lunchtime, then." I turned and sprinted down the hall to my first period class.

As I settled into my desk, the intercom speaker in the corner of the room crackled to life, and Dr. Osgood's voice came through, a tiny whine of feedback screeching as he moved the microphone around.

"May I have everybody's attention, please. I have received reports of an incident that occurred last Thursday. Apparently some vandals broke into private property where one of the Homecoming floats was being constructed. Anybody with information about this break-in is strongly encouraged to report their awareness to me or to Mrs. Ford in the front office. All information will be treated with the utmost confidentiality."

He paused, as if waiting for confessions from the masses. When none were received, he continued.

"In light of the damage done to the float and the personal property, construction on all class floats is to be stopped."

There was a collective groan in the room, and, I imagined, throughout the school. I knew that there were a lot of kids who had put in a lot of hours on all the floats.

Dr. Osgood's voice cut across the complaints. "In the interest of fairness, no class floats will be a part of this year's parade. Any school clubs or organizations that have been planning on decorating vehicles or trailers may continue. As far as class displays, I would encourage the various class officers to meet and choose an alternate project for the parade. Suggestions such as lawnmower drill teams,

mop and bucket brigades, and clowns and acrobats might be considered. All projects must be approved by the front office, so get your ideas together as soon as possible.

"Thank you for your attention."

Well, that frees up some evening time for me, I thought. But it also took away another opportunity to spend a little time with Kristina. I got the feeling that fate was working against us, and the clock was ticking.

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I met Josh, Andrea, and Jake after school in the parking lot. We got into Jake's car and drove over to Josh's house. We still didn't have a plan, other than to surround Molly with friends for support. When we got there, Tessa's car was already in the driveway. We walked in through the kitchen.

"Hi, boys," greeted Mrs. O'Toole. "Oops, I'm so sorry. And Andrea," she added with a bright, artificial smile. Her good cheer was forced, as she busied herself getting snacks ready.

"Hi, Mom," said Josh. "Where's Tessa?"

"Oh, she's upstairs with Molly," she said.

"I'll go up and join them," Andrea said softly. She headed for the front stairs.

"I'll bet you boys are hungry," said Mrs. O'Toole, as she set out some glasses and a gallon of milk and a bowl of apples. "Well, help yourselves," she added. "I'll have some crackers and cheese ready for you in just a minute."

"Has Molly been down?" asked Josh.

"No, not really," said his mother. "She came down for lunch, but she just picked at her food, and went back upstairs to her room." Her

upper lip trembled, and her eyes got teary. "She said she wasn't feeling very good, and she was going to take a nap."

"That's good," said Josh. He grabbed an apple, and we headed for the family room to wait for the girls to come back down.

Josh, Jake, and I were sitting on the floor, doing our homework, when Andrea and Tessa finally came back down a couple of hours later. We huddled together, and they let us know about Molly in hushed tones.

"She's doing better," said Andrea.

"She wanted us to let you know how much she appreciated your help last night, Josh," added Tessa.

"Tessa and I gave her a bath," Andrea continued. "She's really beat up. And it's not just the bruises that are hurting her."

"She wouldn't hardly talk to us at first," continued Tessa. "Answering our questions in monosyllables, if at all. But after she soaked in the tub for awhile, she started telling us a little more about what's been going on."

"Without going into detail," said Andrea, "let's just say that Jilly isn't the most... considerate... of partners."

"You mean Del Toro did all that to her?" asked Josh, outraged.

"Well, not exactly," said Andrea. "I think that, um, Joey might have helped."

Josh hopped up and started pacing the floor in agitation. "Shit!" he exclaimed.

I stood up and walked over to stare out the front window. It was getting dark out, and the streetlights had come on, casting lonely cones of illumination on the street corners. I had the bad feeling that I might have contributed to Molly's problems. It was me, after all, who had introduced Molly to the pleasures of the flesh. All right, I could admit to myself that we had kind of mutually discovered sex together, but still, I had the feeling that if it hadn't been for me, and our breakup, that she probably wouldn't be in the situation she was

in now. It was very upsetting to think that I might actually have been one of the bad guys here.

I was still standing there, thinking dark thoughts, when I heard the growl of an engine from down the street. I watched as Joey Amonte's car pulled up in front of the house. I couldn't tell if there was anyone else in the car besides Joey, but I had the feeling there was at least one other malicious pair of eyes, looking my way from the back seat. The car stopped for a moment, and then, as if the occupants knew they were being watched, it pulled back out and sped down the street, tires squealing.

I turned to the others. "They know we're here," I said. It came out sounding melodramatic, when, in reality, it should have come out sounding just the way I felt, which was terrified. I, for one, was scared shitless about what the Bulls might be planning.

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MY HOMECOMING DATE

Mrs. O'Toole called in for Molly on Tuesday, too. Josh told me that Molly was feeling better, but she didn't want to come to school limping so badly, so she wanted to wait until Wednesday. I had the feeling that she also didn't want to face Joey or Jilly, either, and I couldn't blame her. All the Bulls were walking around the school hallways like puffed-up peacocks, telling tall tales of glory and conquest to any fool that would listen.

Josh also said that he wanted us to meet again at his house, after dinner. He was hoping that Molly would talk to all of us about what she wanted to do.

Jake and I got over to Josh's house around seven that evening. Tessa and Austin were already there, and Andrea pulled up and parked behind Jake's car, just as we were knocking on the front door.

Josh and Molly were sitting in the family room together. They had a fire going in the fireplace, and it warmed and cheered the room, a nice change from the rainy, cold evening. Molly was wearing a heavy sweatshirt and baggy cotton pants, almost like pajama

bottoms. She kept her arms crossed, hugging herself, as if she was cold. Fuzzy slippers with bunny faces were on her feet.

Mrs. O'Toole came in and offered sodas and chips, and then discreetly left us to work on how we were going to get Molly back to school safely.

Andrea came in after hanging up her jacket, and walked over to the couch, where Molly was sitting. She put her arms around her, hugging her. I could see Molly tense up a little at the touch, but then she relaxed, and gave Andrea a weak hug in return.

"How are you feeling, Moll?" I asked. Her right eye was a rainbow of colors, red and blue and black and purple, but there was not much swelling. She gave me a small, sad smile, a smile that only barely touched her eyes, but she only gave me a slight shrug in reply.

We all settled down on the floor, loosely surrounding Molly and Josh on the couch.

Josh began the discussion. "We need to set up a schedule among us, so that Molly will be accompanied by a friend all day at school, from class to class." He glanced at a pad of paper in his hand. "Molly and I have listed the classes that she has with all of you guys, and I think this can work. I'll bring her to school with me, and I can be with her to her first class. Tessa, if you could meet her after her first period class, you can walk with her to second period, since you're in the same class. Then, Sean can pick her up and take her to math. Okay? After math, Tessa will meet her again, and I will take over from her. Andrea and I will stay with her during lunch, and then Andrea will walk her to the next class. Jake, can you meet them then?"

And so it went, until we had Molly accompanied for the whole day. All during the discussion, Molly just sat there, silent and looking inward, paying us little mind.

"Okay," continued Josh, "that will work for the whole day. Andi and Tessa will come home with her, and that will be that." He handed out tentative schedules for each of us.

"This weekend will be harder, because of Homecoming, but if we need to add people to help out, I'm sure we can find plenty."

"Molly?" Tessa touched her friend on the knee to get her attention. "Are you going back to cheerleading practice at all this week?"

Molly shook her head slowly. "I... I don't know," she whispered. "Do you think I should?"

"Yes, I do," said Tessa emphatically. "I'll stay there with you, and get you home afterwards."

"And I can be there, too," said Andrea. "I think you should, too, Moll. The activity will do you some good."

"Okay," said Molly quietly. "If you think I should..."

"There will be a lot of kids and adults around for the parade and the game on Saturday," said Josh, "but I'm kind of worried about after the game. Jake and I are on the team, so we can't be with her."

"That's okay," said Andrea. "Tessa and I," and she looked over to see Tessa's nod of confirmation, even before she finished her own thought, "we'll be there, right by her side. Okay, Moll?"

Molly looked at her and nodded, even though she looked a little scared, just thinking about it.

"And we'll bring you straight back home," finished Tessa.

"But right after that, we might have a problem," said Andrea. "We've got appointments to get our hair done for the Homecoming Dance. Josh, will your parents be home then?"

"Hey," I said, "why don't you see if you can get an appointment for Molly at your salon?"

Molly glanced over at me, and then looked down again. "But I'm not going..."

"You aren't going to want to spend Homecoming Saturday stuck at home with your parents, Molly, are you?" I asked. "You'd probably feel safer at the dance, with lots of kids around you, than you would by yourself here. Besides, I don't have a date, either, so we can go together."

That earned me another glance, this one with some pain in it.

"That's not a bad idea, Porter," said Josh. "What do you think, Molly?"

She took a big breath, and, keeping her head down, said, "If you think so, Josh, I guess it's okay with me."

And, just like that, I found myself with a last-minute date for Homecoming.

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On Wednesday, we carried out our plan. Josh walked Molly into school, and right to her first class. The rest of us were there, also, for moral support, and she looked like she needed it. She was very nervous, and kept glancing around anxiously, perhaps checking faces in the crowd for Jilly or Joey or any of the other Bulls. As we got to the door of her first-period class, she turned, and with tears glistening in her eyes, thanked us all.

"I don't deserve to have you guys as friends," she said, her soft voice wavering. She turned to Josh. "And I don't deserve to have a brother like you, Josh. I love you." She looked back at Tessa, Austin, Andrea, Jake, and me. "I love you all so much." With that, she turned and she walked to her desk in the classroom.

Tessa followed her into the room, knelt down next to Molly, and said quietly, "After class, you can just wait right here. I'll come for you as soon as I can. Okay?"

Molly nodded.

Surprisingly, the day progressed pretty much as Josh had planned. I met Tessa and Molly after second period in the hall, and Molly and I walked to our math class together. Looking at us, you would have probably thought we were just another couple of high-school kids, but a closer examination would have revealed two

flawed, wounded people, leaning on each other for support and comfort.

By the end of the day, everybody in school knew what we were doing, and rumors of how Molly got her black eye were running rampant through the hallways. Nobody confirmed or denied anything anybody told us, or asked of us. Our story was that Molly needed a little assistance because she was recovering from an illness, and that was all we had to say about it. Even though we heard some pretty outlandish rumors that day, all the stories and all the attention paid to Molly and her escorts kept Jilly and the rest of his gang away from her all day long.

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The next afternoon after lunch, I was walking through the crowded halls to a class when I saw Joey Amonte, Vinnie Arilio, and Harold Barnes swaggering toward me. Unfortunately, they saw me, too, and Joey grabbed me and shoved me back against a bank of lockers. His forearm was tight against my neck, lifting me up onto my toes. I could feel a combination lock digging into my lower back.

"Hello, Porter," Joey said quietly. He was leaning close to me, and his nauseating halitosis washed over me like a breaking wave of onion and garlic water.

"Let me go, asshole," I gritted.

"Asshole?" He turned to Harold, leaning insolently against the lockers to my right, blocking the view from casual eyes. Vinnie took up a similar position on my left, effectively boxing me in. Joey leaned his arm in a little harder against my throat. "You ain't in no position to be tossing out ugly names, Porter."

He had a point there, but I was having a little trouble breathing, so I couldn't answer him.

"What are you and your pussy friends doing with my girlfriend, Porter?" he asked. He loosened his grip just a little, enough for me to take a ragged breath so I could explain our actions to him.

"What girlfriend?" I said, perhaps unwisely. "I thought Del Toro took her away from you."

He popped me back up hard, against the lockers. His face turned a mottled red. Through gritted teeth, he snarled, "You thought wrong, pussy boy."

"Okay, okay," I croaked. The lock was starting to scrape the skin away on my back.

He loosened up again. I thought maybe he liked having the opportunity to jack me back up against the wall.

"So? What the fuck do you think you're doing? Protecting her?"

On either side of me, I heard both Harold and Vinnie chuckling. Vinnie gave me a vicious poke in the ribs.

"No, man," I managed, "we're just friends, walking down the hall."

He threw me back up against the lockers, getting some lift with his legs this time. I thought my feet were dangling off the floor, and I knew I was having trouble breathing.

"Wrong answer, pussy boy," he growled. "Let's try again, motherfucker." He let me down again, but kept too much pressure on my throat. I couldn't talk.

A voice from behind Joey startled us all. "Mr. Amonte?"

Joey whirled around, careful to keep a firm hold on me, pressing me back with his arm. Standing there was Coach Neville, his glasses lowered until they were propped on the tip of his nose, and he was staring at us over the frames. He wasn't a very big or imposing man, being a little soft around the middle, but his arms were muscled. This was particularly evident as he lightly tapped the baseball bat he was holding in his hand.

"I would suggest that, perhaps, you would like to let Mr. Porter go," he said, almost nonchalantly.

Reluctantly, Joey let his arm drop. I sagged back, grateful to be free of his grasp. I rubbed my throat, trying to get some feeling back into the area.

"Aren't you supposed to be going to class?" asked Mr. Neville, looking at Vinnie and Harold in turn.

"Yes, sir," mumbled Harold, as he turned to walk down the hall.

"Yes, Mr. Neville," said Vinnie. With a sour look, he turned and followed after Harold. Joey took a step toward his friends, but Coach pointed the bat at him, just touching his chest with the end. Joey acted as it he had been hit with it, falling back against the lockers. Coach pushed against him with the bat a little harder, and Joey's elbows hit the lockers, making them rattle and clang.

"Where are you going, Mr. Amonte?" he asked quietly.

"I... uh, I was just gonna go to class..." mumbled Joey.

"And what class is that?" asked Coach.

"Um, wood shop," replied Joey.

"Fine," said Mr. Neville, dropping the bat suddenly. Joey slid sideways along the lockers, away from Coach and me, watching us watching him. Just as he thought he would make it away clean, he turned to walk away, adjusting his collar.

"Mr. Amonte," called out Coach. Joey stopped dead in his tracks. He turned back around with a worried expression. "I expect to see you in my office exactly two minutes after the final bell today," said Coach.

"Yes, sir," said Joey unhappily. He waited a moment, perhaps to see if Mr. Neville had any more to add, and then he turned and stalked away.

"Thanks, Coach," I said, once Joey had gone.

He just grunted, already thinking of something else. I headed down the hall toward my class.

"Mr. Porter?" he called.

I turned. "Yes, Coach?"

He walked up to me, a concerned expression on his face. "For whatever reason you have gotten involved with Mr. Amonte and his ilk, I would strongly suggest that you sever those ties," he said.

"I wish I could," I said, "but I don't think it's quite that simple." *If he only knew how complicated it was*, I thought to myself. *Maybe, if he knew, he would have just let Joey beat on me for a little while.* I wouldn't have blamed him if he had.

When I told Josh about Joey and his buddies bracing me, he was very concerned.

"We're going to have to double-up on Molly's escorts," he said.

"Yeah," I agreed. "Maybe we should. But then again, they didn't make a run at her."

"That's true, but I think it was just opportunity that made them box you in. Now that they did it, even though they weren't real successful, they might be thinking that they could do it better if they planned it out."

"Those guys couldn't plan out a picnic in the park," I said.

Josh just looked at me for a moment. "Like they couldn't plan out destroying the float last week?" he asked pointedly.

"Yeah, you're right," I agreed, abashed. "Let's recruit some help."

Between the six of us, we gathered up another eight kids to help. Josh recruited a couple of friends from the football team, including Tiny, and I got Eric and Trent to help us out. Molly always had two friends escorting her, and everybody else tried to double-up and walk the halls with friends, too. Tessa and Andrea, in particular, made sure they were accompanied everywhere. The plan seemed to work, as nobody else was confronted all week.

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On Saturday, Josh, Jake, Tiny, and the others from the football team had to leave early to get ready for the game, so the rest of us all drove over together later. We walked into the stadium together, and Tessa and Andrea walked with Molly onto the infield, so she could join her fellow cheerleaders. I didn't see any sign of the Bulls anywhere, but we kept a sharp lookout all through the game, anyway.

We won the game by a field goal, and everybody started streaming out of the stands. Eric and Trent, along with Keisha and Danielle, took the point for us, watching out for any sign of the Bulls. Austin, Tessa, and I waited for Molly, and we piled into Tessa's car for the ride back to Molly's house. Austin had left his car there, and he dropped me off at home. I had a few hours to kill before I was to meet Josh and Molly, back at their house, for our double-date to the dance, so I washed and waxed my mom's car, in exchange for being able to drive it to the dance.

I took a shower, scraped off my peach fuzz, got dressed up in my suit, and drove over to pick up Josh and Molly. We were going to pick up Josh's girlfriend on the way to the dance. I hopped out of my car, and ran up the front walk and rang the doorbell.

Mrs. O'Toole opened the door for me. "Come in, Sean," she said in greeting. "Josh and Molly will be down in a moment." She gestured me in, toward the family room. "Can I get you something to drink? A soda, perhaps?"

"No, thanks," I replied. "How's Molly doing this afternoon, Mrs. O'Toole?"

"She seems to be in a good mood," she said. I could hear a little relief in her voice. "These past few days were hard on her, but I hope the worst is behind her now."

"With any luck," I agreed.

Josh came trotting down the steps. "Hey, Seanster. What's going on?"

"Nada," I answered.

"I heard Moll fumbling around up there. She'll probably be ready in another hour or two," he said with a smile.

"Oh, you boys," admonished Mrs. O'Toole.

"I'm just kidding, Mom," said Josh. He rolled his eyes at me. He grabbed the television remote and started flipping through channels, looking for a diversion while we waited. I settled back on the couch, content to watch the images flick on and off.

After a few minutes, we heard Molly coming down the stairs. Josh shut off the TV, and I got up to walk over to the bottom of the staircase. She saw me and stopped for a moment, five steps up.

Molly was wearing a long, light blue dress with a high empire waist, a darker blue ribbon tied in a bow just below her breasts. The dress had half-sleeves, coming to just below her elbows, ending in an explosion of lace, matched by frilly lace on the hem around her ankles. I knew she still had some faint bruises on her upper arms, and I was sure she had deliberately chosen this style of dress so she could hide them. It didn't matter at all. It was a gorgeous dress, and she looked spectacular in it. It looked like she had tried to get the yellow stripe out of her hair, and the hairdresser had helped by streaking the rest of her hair with a pale golden color that enhanced her strawberry-blonde natural color. Her hair was tied up in an elaborate ponytail, and, despite her too-thin face and arms, she looked beautiful.

She smiled hesitantly at me, and then continued down the stairs.

"Molly, you look absolutely fabulous," I said with a smile.

Her eyes got a little misty. "Thank you, Sean. For everything," she whispered.

In her high heels, she was almost my height. I held out my arm, and she slipped her hand into the crook of my elbow, allowing me to guide her into the family room, where her mother and father were waiting, cameras in hand.

"Dad, please," she begged. "No pictures."

"Sorry, honey," he replied with a grin. "Parents' prerogative. It's in the parent's handbook that we got when you were born, sweetie. It allows us to reserve the right to embarrass our children at any time." With that, he raised the camera, zoomed in on Molly and me, and snapped the first of what turned out to be about two dozen photographs of Molly, Josh, and me, collectively and individually.

We finally managed to escape, and Josh hopped in the back seat as I opened the passenger door for my date.

"Thank you, Sean," she said quietly, as she slipped into the car.

We picked up Andrea, and Josh had to endure another photography session with her parents before we could continue on to the school.

"Is there no cure for this?" Josh asked as we finally got on our way. "Couldn't they stop making film, or something?"

"I think it's a lesson," said Andrea with a laugh. "They're passing on some of their parenting skills to us. Those pictures will be in the mail to grandparents all over the country by the end of next week, I'll bet. And, in about twenty or twenty-five years, our parents will be sitting by the mailbox, expecting pictures of their grandchildren. We'll be the ones taking the pictures, and our kids will be the ones complaining."

"And on it goes," grumbled Josh. "Future generations cannot escape."

"I guess not," I said. "After all, it's in the handbook." We all laughed at that. Even Molly smiled a little. It was a good sign.

We pulled into the parking lot at school, and joined a big group of kids heading for the gymnasium, where the dance was being held. As soon as we entered the giant room, we circled the perimeter, looking for our group. We found them on the far side, where they had taken over about twenty folding chairs for us. Eric and Keisha, Trent and Danielle, Jake and Jaimie, and Tiny and his date Erica Frost were already there. Shortly after we joined them, Austin and Tessa came in, followed by Jorge and Kristina, with their dates for the

evening. It hurt a little to watch Kristina walking across the dance floor with another guy. On the other hand, she probably wasn't happy to see me here with Molly, even knowing the circumstances. It was a lose-lose situation for her and me, but we had no choice but to accept it for the moment. I hoped she understood.

The music was already blasting across the room. I turned to Molly and said, "Do you want to get out there and dance?"

She gave me a weak smile, and said, "I don't think so, Sean. I'm not quite ready for that, yet."

"Okay," I said, and I ushered her into a chair, and sat down next to her. Her hands were limp in her lap as she watched the few kids who were brave enough to chance the dance floor as they hopped and gyrated to the beat of the records.

"Why don't you go ahead and dance?" she asked, after a few moments.

"Nah," I said. "I'm content to sit here with you, and not embarrass myself out there."

She favored me with a small smile. "I've seen you dance, Sean. You don't embarrass yourself."

"Yes, I do," I insisted. "It's just not very obvious, I guess."

Slowly, little by little, more and more kids made their way out to dance. Most of our group ended up dancing, though they mostly stayed on our side of the gym, and, by some sort of psychic and unspoken agreement, at least two couples stayed on the sidelines with Molly and me, at all times.

I was comfortable, sitting there with her, watching the dancers. For one thing, it gave me a chance to see my fellow students all dressed up, and doing something other than trudging down a school hall. I saw Becky across the room, waving her head back and forth in time to the music, and, through the crowd, I caught glimpses of Jen Davies and Sam Loggins dancing together, Toby and Ashley were out on the edge of the crowd and holding hands, and Anthony and Ayesha were jumping and jiving to the music. Even through all the

bodies on the floor, though, there were two people that my eyes kept being drawn toward. Close by, Kristina Mendoza, dressed in a very short, svelte black dress, sinuously moved around her partner, a sophomore from the Junior Varsity soccer team named Paco Ochoa, one of Jorge's friends. Across the room, dancing in and out of my sight, was the pale-haired Kayla Lehigh, slim and ethereal in a white dress and white stockings, as she slipped almost magically through the other dancers, unaware that she was drawing my vision in her direction.

With an effort, I tore my eyes away from the dance floor, and turned to Molly, who was still passively sitting there, gazing at the dancers.

"Would you like me to get you something to drink?" I asked. I didn't know why, by my throat was dry.

She smiled at me and nodded. Since Eric and Tiny were sitting nearby with their dates, I gestured to them to stay put until I returned. Eric nodded once, and Tiny gave me a thumbs-up, so I walked off, along the perimeter of the crowd, toward the refreshment table. I decided that a stop in the men's room was in order, so I pushed open the door and stepped inside.

Bent nearly double over the counter was a kid I barely recognized. His hair was freshly trimmed, he was clean-shaven, his shoes were shined, and he had on a cheap, new suit. He was holding a tiny straw to his nose, snorting up a line of white powder laid out on the countertop. I took a left turn and hustled into one of the stalls and closed the door quickly, before Joey Amonte had a chance to look up to see who had come in. My hands were shaking as I sat down, nervous and scared as hell. *What the fuck is he doing here? And why is he all dressed up?* It worried me, worried me a lot.

I heard him snuffle and snort, finishing up his intake of cocaine. The sink started running, and I heard him ruffling some paper towels, no doubt cleaning up the evidence of his habit. He started whistling as he slammed the crumpled paper towel into the

wastebasket, rattling the swing top. I heard the door open, and then close onto silence.

I stayed there for a few moments more, until I heard the door open, and a rush of sound from the gymnasium came barreling in, to be cut off as the door swung closed again. Two guys walked over to the urinals, talking about where they were taking their dates when they left the dance. I flushed the toilet, for effect, and opened the stall door, stepping to the sink to wash my hands and splash some cold water on my face. *Think, Sean,* I told my reflection in the mirror. *Think.*

But nothing of any brilliance came to me. I opened the door and peered out, hoping that Amonte had moved off, away from the restrooms. I didn't see him, or anybody else I didn't really want to see, so I walked over to the refreshment table, picked up two Cokes, and threaded my way back to Molly.

I had to talk to Jake, and fast, without Molly's knowledge. This was the last thing she needed right now.

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FEAR

I handed one Coke to Molly. She smiled at me, and our hands touched momentarily as I passed the paper cup to her. I sat down next to her, and gestured for Eric to come over by me. He crouched down at my side, up close so we could converse above the music.

"What's up, bro?" he asked quietly.

"I think we might have trouble," I murmured. I was turned away from Molly, who had returned to watching the dancers. "Find Josh for me, would you?"

"Sure thing," he said, and he stood up and held out his hand for Keisha. Without a word, she took his hand, and they walked out to the dance floor. I watched as they slipped through the crowd, threading their way toward the middle. A few minutes later, Josh and Andrea came out, holding hands. Josh was sweating, but Andi was glowing. I still didn't know how girls did that, but now wasn't the time to be considering it.

Josh flopped down in the chair next to me, and Andi gracefully lowered herself into the chair next to Josh. *Girls did that mysteriously,*

too, I thought. I mentally shook myself. *Concentrate, fool,* I chastised my inner imp.

"Eric said you needed me," he said, leaning in close to me.

"Yeah, there might be a problem," I said. I leaned across Josh. "Andi, can you sit with Molly for a moment?"

"Of course," she said. "I think we need to powder our noses, anyway. Let me just go find Tessa, okay?"

She glided back out into the crowd, and a few moments later brought Tessa and Austin back with her. She leaned over to speak into Molly's ear, so she would be heard over the music. Molly nodded and stood up, smoothing her dress out by running her hands down her thighs, and the three girls moved around the gymnasium toward the restrooms.

Jake and Jaimie happened to walk up just then, and when he saw Austin, Josh and me huddling, he waved Tiny over, and they joined up with us.

"Okay, here's the deal," I said, looking around at all of them. "I was in the can, and I saw Joey Amonte, all dressed up in a suit, doing a line of coke."

Josh's face looked thunderous. "What the fuck is he doing here?" he spat.

"I don't know, but I had to look twice to be sure it was him," I said. "He was all cleaned up, dressed as sharp as trailer trash like him could come up with. I think he's trying to work his way around the dance, kind of incognito. You know, it's dark in here, with the mirror ball lights and all, who's going to give another kid in a suit a second look, if he's just wandering around? But anyway, he's here, believe it."

Jake glanced around, as if expecting Joey to be leaning over, listening to our conversation. I pulled him back around.

"Listen up, guys. I haven't seen any of the other Bulls here, but that doesn't mean they're not trying the same scam, so keep your eyes peeled. Okay?" I got affirmative nods from everyone.

"And make sure there are at least two couples sitting here with Molly and Sean at all times," said Josh. "Don't get lulled into thinking there's no threat here in this crowd, especially now that we know Amonte's sneaking around somewhere. If you want to go out and dance, or go to the shitter, or anything, make sure somebody else knows about it. Got it?"

"And don't leave your dates alone," said Jake. "Make sure you've got friends around."

"Good point," said Josh. "Is everybody okay with that?"

Everybody was okay with that. Austin and I sat down and waited for the girls to come back, and Josh and Jake headed back out into the dance crowd to let Eric, Trent, Jorge, and Paco know about the new developments.

Time to circle the wagons, I thought to myself. I tried to put on a game face, though, for Molly's sake.

There was a slow song just starting up as the girls were walking back toward us, so I stood, and held out my hand to Molly. She stopped, and just looked at my hand.

"May I have this dance?" I asked.

"Sean, I..." she began.

"Oh, go ahead, Molly," said Tessa brightly. "You'll enjoy it, I know you will." She gently pushed Molly forward a step closer to me. Molly acquiesced, and took my outstretched hand.

"Well... okay," she said, eyes downcast.

I led her out onto the dance floor, and stepped in to put my arm around her. She flinched just a little at the touch, and then she relaxed a bit, letting me hold her lightly and lead her around my little box-step pattern. Tessa and Austin were dancing right beside us, and I knew the others were very close by.

"Molly," I whispered, "you know I will always be your friend. If you need me for anything, I'll be there. You know that, don't you?"

We were dancing cheek to cheek, so I was whispering right into her ear. I couldn't look at her at the same time, but I heard her start to sniffle just a little, and she held me a little tighter.

"I know you've gone through some rough times," I continued, "and I wish I could just wave my hand and you'd be free of them. But I know it's not that easy. I'm not going to press you or anything, but if you need to talk about it, I'll listen. I promise."

The wetness on her cheek from her tears was being transferred to mine as we swayed to and fro with the music. Her breath was coming in small hitches that shook her frame. I thought I might have gone too far with my brave little speech.

"Thank you, Sean," she whispered, so quietly I almost didn't hear. "Thank you, but I'll be okay. I just need time."

The song ended, but we stayed that way, holding each other, until the next fast song started up. She took a deep breath, wiped her eyes, and held my hand lightly as we walked back to our chairs.

When we got to our spot, Josh stood. "Would you care to dance, little sis?"

Molly smiled, the first real smile of amusement I had seen from her in a very long time. "'Little sis'? You're about five minutes older than me, big brother."

Josh beamed. He was the one to break through with her, and he knew it. "So, that makes you the youngest in the family," he said. "Do you want to dance?"

Molly's smile faltered just a little. "I don't think I'm ready for a fast dance yet. At least, not in these shoes. Maybe the next slow one, though, okay?"

"Okay, your loss," he replied. He grabbed Andi's hand, and they boogied off to dance.

Josh did manage to cajole Molly into dancing after awhile, and she got more animated as the evening progressed, until flashes of the old Molly started coming through. Everybody was feeling terrific about the progress she exhibited, especially considering it had been

only five days since we first mapped out a disaster plan. Finally, though, about a half hour before the dance was to end, Molly hit a wall. She slumped in her chair, exhausted from the activity around her.

"Are you okay, Moll?" asked Josh worriedly.

"I'm okay," she said tiredly, "but I think I really need to get home, Josh. I'm so sorry. I don't want to end your evening so soon."

"Don't be sorry," he said. "You've been through a lot. I didn't think you would have the energy to last this long, to be honest." He stood up. "Andi, we're going to have to take Molly home."

"Okay," she said. "Let me just say goodnight to Tessa and Austin." She turned and went in search of our friends, to let them know we were heading out.

I helped Molly to her feet and started guiding her around the crowded floor, toward the door. Josh and Andrea caught up with us before we were even halfway there. Josh took up a position on Molly's other arm, and together we supported her as we walked.

There were just a few other kids walking toward the parking lot when we got outside. It was a clear, cold night, with no moon. The stars were brilliant diamonds splashed extravagantly across the night sky. We crossed the shadowy parking lot, each of us holding an elbow. We really needed to get her home quickly, it seemed, because she was sagging more and more, relying on our strength to hold her up.

I fumbled for my car keys, and unlocked the passenger door, opening it so that Molly could collapse down. Josh opened the back door for Andi, and then crawled in when she scooted over across the back seat. I closed both doors, and jogged around to the driver's side. Just as I was reaching for the handle, I had a sudden premonition that we had made an awful mistake.

"Hello, Porter," said Joey Amonte, standing in the shadows practically beside me. "Fancy meeting you here."

He took two steps toward me and slammed my car door closed, right out of my hand. Harold Barnes appeared by his side, and leaned on the rear door. On the other side of the car, Vinnie Arilio stepped up and leaned on Josh's door, preventing him from opening it, and Jilly Del Toro stepped up to Molly's door and peered in at her, staring at her frightened face. Josh's quick thinking saved her bacon at that moment, when he shoved the lock down on Molly's door, and quickly punched down the button on his own door. Andrea, seeing his reaction, did the same with her door, keeping the three of them temporarily safe. The only problem with this emergency plan was that I was stuck outside the car, surrounded by the Bulls.

Jilly and Joey looked at each other. Joey shrugged, as if to say he really didn't know what to do about the locked doors. It seemed to catch them by surprise. Jilly improvised by sauntering around the front of my car, and the two of them backed me up until I was leaning against the fender.

"Get out of my face," I warned, but they knew as well as I did that it was an empty threat.

Jilly stood about half an inch from me. "What are you doing with my bitch?" he asked.

"Your bitch? You mean Joey, here?" I shot back, unwisely.

He rabbit-punched me in the gut and I doubled over, gasping.

"Don't crack wise with me, pussy boy," he growled. "Answer me quick when I ask you a question, pussy boy, or else."

I tried to straighten up. "Or else what? Or else you'll go back and get more bad lines from old gangster movies?"

He slapped my right ear hard, and a ringing started out in a loud mid-range, and climbed steadily into the ultrasonic until I could feel it in my teeth. Joey grabbed my arm and spun me around, holding me from behind by my arms and stretching me backwards, making my midsection very vulnerable. I was still gasping, trying to catch my breath, and this position wasn't helping.

Jilly said, "I will ask you very nicely, one last time, Porter. If you smart off to me again, I will start asking you not so nicely. Understand?"

When I didn't respond, he cracked me in the ear again.

"Understand?" he said, louder. I could barely understand what he was saying through the noise of the siren in my bruised ear, but I nodded.

"Good," he said, sounding satisfied. "Now we're gettin' somewheres." He turned and looked around at his friends, and got some chortles in response, inconsequential sounds of approval from his cohorts, who were still guarding the doors. Behind him, I could see silhouettes of other kids walking toward their cars. I couldn't make out any details, though, which I took to be a bad sign. It stood to reason that they couldn't see what was going on over here any better than I could see them, which was too bad for me. I could have used some help.

"Okay, pussy boy, let's start over, shall we? What are you doing here with my cunt?" Jilly looked very relaxed as he settled in to question me. He had all night, after all. *No hurry here.*

"Just taking her to the dance," I replied. He backhanded me across my face. He had on a chunky metal ring, one with sharp edges. My lip split open, and blood started running down my chin and onto my white shirt. A small spray of blood and tissue hit my tongue, and the metallic taste as I reflexively swallowed was strong.

"Wrong answer, pussy boy," he said with a tight smile. "Didn't you hear me say she was my cunt? Why were you here with my cunt?"

My lip was swelling, making coherent talking a little difficult. "She's not yours, Del Toro. Slavery was abolished about a hundred years ago."

He punched me in the stomach again, but I was prevented from doubling up by Joey holding me tight. I groaned in pain, and Joey tightened his grip.

"She's mine, asshole. Didn't she tell you? I marked her, pussy boy, as my personal property. You can ask her, if you'd like." He leaned in toward the car windshield, malevolently staring inside, and raised his voice a little so that Molly could hear, tapping on the windshield for emphasis. "Didn't I, bitch? I marked you as mine, didn't I? My teeth marks are on your tits and on your hairy cunt, aren't they?" He pounded on the window. "Aren't they, bitch?" he yelled.

I felt Joey loosen up just a fraction on my arms, and I figured that was the only opportunity I was going to get. I dropped down as suddenly as I could, letting my weight break Joey's grip. I was hoping to slide my arms through Joey's hands, and escape his grasp before he had time to react. My only hope was to try that same slide tackle on Jilly that Jorge had used on his older brother Richie last year at school, and maybe I could buy just enough time and freedom to roll under the car to relative safety. I dropped down, out of Joey's hold, hitting the gritty pavement on my elbow. I lashed out with my leg as I hit the ground, but Jilly just hopped over my sweep. He took a step toward me as I was on the ground, and drop-kicked me in the ribs, driving the breath right out of me. I felt something inside me give, and I rolled over into a fetal position to protect my injured side. I struggled to regain my breath, but Jilly was right there on top of me. He planted a foot hard on my shoulder and turned me over onto my back. He moved his foot to step hard onto my chest, and pressed me flat on the ground. I was having trouble breathing, between my complaining ribcage and my swollen and bleeding lip, and the pressure of Jilly's big foot on my chest wasn't helping. I started thrashing around in panic.

"Nice try, pussy boy," he said, grinning. "My brother told me about how he got his assbone broke. You pussy soccer players are all alike." He casually reached into his jacket pocket, pulling out a switchblade. The snick of the blade was one of the loudest sounds I

had ever heard, slicing right through the ringing in my right ear. "I oughta cut your heart out right here and make you eat it," he snarled.

I heard one of the car's doors open. "Stop it, Jilly," said Molly's voice. He looked up, startled, and I heard Molly walking around the front of the car. "Let him up," she said.

"Why the fuck should I?" he asked angrily.

"Because he's not the one you want, anyway. Let him up, and don't hurt him anymore," she insisted. "Do it, and I'll go with you." I could see her now, as she stepped up closer to us. Tears were streaming down her face, but she was staring right at Jilly. The force of her look made him back off just a little, and I could breathe again.

"No, Molly," I croaked, but she didn't even look at me.

"Shut up, Sean. He means it. He'll do it, I know he will. This is the only way." The defeat was loud in her voice.

"Okay, doll. If that's the way you want to play it, it's okay with me," he said.

He closed the knife and slipped it back into his jacket pocket. He completely forgot about me as he grabbed Molly around the waist and pressed his open mouth to hers, forcing his tongue into her mouth. He grabbed roughly at her breasts, mauling them through her dress. Even though he was forcing her to bend over backward as he assaulted her, I saw her hand reach up and slip into his jacket pocket. Her hand came out with the knife. She shook her head to get him off her. He wasn't going to be discouraged quite that easily, and so she bit him on the lip, drawing blood, and pushed him away from her. As he let her go, she stepped back and pressed the button that released the blade. She held it awkwardly in her hand, brandishing it in front of her.

Jilly stumbled back a couple of steps, bringing his hand up to his bleeding lip. He wiped off his mouth, and then looked at the blood on his fingers. He looked at Molly in amazement. "What the fuck did you do that for?" he asked. He sounded honestly confused by it.

"You know I'm gonna have to teach you a lesson now. A painful lesson."

"Get away from me," she snarled. "Back off, Jilly, I mean it. I'll kill you if I have to." She held the knife out in front of her like a shield.

He just laughed insolently and, quick as a rattlesnake strike, snatched her wrist, yanking the knife away from her easily.

He sneered, "You think I'm afraid to die? You cunt, I ain't afraid of death. But I'll bet you are, aren't you, Princess?" He drew his hand back, ready to strike out with the sharp blade. His face was a mask of fury and betrayal. "Or are you afraid of getting that pretty little prom queen face marked up?" He flicked the blade before her eyes, just inches away, teasing her. I struggled to my feet, suddenly fearful for Molly's life, and afraid for my own safety. Joey and Harold and Vinnie were standing there, staring at the tableau as if transfixed, unmoving as they watched their leader continue on his path toward what was quickly deteriorating into a potentially deadly course of action. Jilly flicked the blade toward Molly's face again, and I stuck my arm out to ward off the attack. I felt the blade cut, but there was no pain. I had the odd sensation of feeling the sharp edge scrape against bone, a shuddering rasp that transmitted all the way up to my shoulder, and blood coursed down my arm, dripping from my elbow onto the pavement. I looked stupidly at the slash through my suit coat and shirt, which were quickly getting soaked with my blood. I had a moment to wonder at the sight before the pain hit. My knees got weak, and I got a little light-headed from shock. I saw Jilly pull back his arm for another thrust. With a curled lip, he snarled, "I ain't afraid of dying," and his arm came forward, the knife slashing toward Molly's terrified face.

And his arm suddenly stopped. Jilly's eyes bugged out in surprise and rage, just as a deep voice said from behind him, "You aren't afraid to die. But are you afraid of a little pain?"

Jilly turned around, his arm still held in a viselike grip, and looked straight ahead to see who had interrupted him. His eyes ended up level with a huge chest, and his head swiveled up to finally gaze at Tiny Harrison, who was towering over Jilly, dwarfing him as he held the hand with the knife up and away from them.

Tiny repeated, "Are you afraid of pain, Del Toro?" Jilly twisted, fury suffusing him. Perhaps he thought he could wrench his hand away, but Tiny was implacable as he held Jilly's arm perfectly still in his meaty grip. Jilly yanked harder, and then screamed as his shoulder separated, and his now useless hand dropped the knife. He still had enough fire and insanity in him to think he might still be able to fight his way out of it, though, so he stupidly stood straight up, holding his ruined shoulder, and spit in Tiny's face. Tiny's expression tightened, and as he wiped the spittle from his cheek, he took one step backward, reared back, and kicked straight up, as if he was kicking a field goal, catching Jilly square in the crotch. Jilly's body was lifted up about two feet off the ground by the force of the kick, and his eyes bugged out in shock. Jilly croaked, his eyes wide and unseeing as he landed roughly. He doubled over, his one good arm moving to cradle his crushed testicles, and he dropped to the ground in agony. He landed on his separated shoulder, making the bones grind together, but I didn't think he even noticed, the pain from his groin overriding all other receptors in his overloaded brain.

Joey Amonte took one look at Tiny, standing there over Del Toro, and he made an about-face to try to escape. He was only able to take one step before Jake, coming out of the shadows, grabbed him by the collar.

"Not so fast, motherfucker," Jake said threateningly. He grabbed Joey's arm and twisted it viciously back behind him in a hammerlock. Joey sucked in his breath in pain and stopped moving, knowing that Jake was only a few centimeters from breaking his arm. Meanwhile, Eric, Austin, Jorge, Paco, and Trent appeared, circling the car, surrounding Harold and Vinnie as they stood there, rooted

by the spectacle of their leader squirming on the ground, moaning in agony.

Molly cried out, "Does somebody know first-aid? Sean's bleeding!" She grabbed my arm, and rockets of pain shot up me. I fell to my knees, bleeding all over the parking lot, about to pass out.

"Somebody run back into the school, and call an ambulance," called Jake.

"No, wait," cried Tessa. "We won't be able to explain all this to anybody. Quick, get him in the car, and we'll drive him to the emergency room." Jorge and Eric each took one side, and as gently as they could, lifted me up and guided me to Eric's car, parked just a few spaces down from mine, and they helped me to slump down in the front seat.

As I was sitting there, holding my bleeding arm up to try to ease the flow, a small hand thrust a belt in through the open window. Eric, in the driver's seat, grabbed it and wound it around my arm tightly to help slow the bleeding. It hurt a lot, but everything hurt. I couldn't tell anymore what part of me hurt the worst.

"Thanks," he called out.

A pale, worried face, framed by white-blonde hair cascading down over her shoulders, appeared by the window.

"You're welcome," Kayla said, tears glistening in her eyes. "It's Jake's. I just took it from him."

I just had time to focus on her concerned look, trying to convey my appreciation, before I zoned out.

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MAD DREAMS AND VISIONS

We were at the hospital for a long time. Sometime after midnight, my parents showed up, with both my brothers in tow. Eric had called them from a pay phone in the vestibule, and a few minutes later the admitting staff also called them. My mother was hysterical, and my dad was furious. By that point I had been wheeled into surgery, but I heard about it from my friends later. Almost everybody I knew showed up in the waiting room that night, including Coach Neville and Coach Simonson, all waiting to hear how my surgery went.

Shortly after Eric had brought me into the emergency room, Joey and Vinnie brought Jilly Del Toro in. Coach Neville and Coach Simonson had to walk next to them as they wheeled Del Toro through the double doors in a wheelchair. If they hadn't, the three of them would have been jumped and beaten on by the dozens of kids who had heard about the fight, and had showed up at the hospital.

After the surgery, my parents and my brothers were allowed to come in to the recovery room and see me. My arm was bandaged up until it was twice its normal size, and I had a bandage on my mouth

covering the four stitches they put in my lip. Barely noticed among the cuts and scrapes was the tight wrap around my chest, protecting my bruised ribs. I was tired, uncomfortable, and in pain, and in no mood for company. But, considering it was my family, I accepted it, and even tried not to complain too much about it.

My mom was crying as she bent over me, examining my face closely, trying to determine the extent of my injuries by looking into my eyes. I was sure all she could see was the painkiller-induced dilated pupils, but she was not to be deterred. Even through the drugs, my eyes felt like they were dried out and resting somewhere on my cheeks. My dad kept on asking me what happened, and I thought I kept answering him, but maybe I only thought I did, because he would come back a few minutes later, after pacing the length of the small room, and repeat his questions. Michael looked bored, and Stephen looked excited. He kept on asking me if I would end up with any neat scars, a question that would invariably send my mother off into new freshets of tears.

The doctors conferred with my parents about my injuries, my prognosis, and my immediate care, and the police came in to interview me. The hospital had called them to report a knife injury, and they were investigating reports of a fight in the school parking lot. They were able to fit the two events together, and, since nearly everybody was at the hospital anyway, they sent over a detail to conduct interviews. Finally, around three in the morning, I was released. I was helped into a wheelchair, and a nurse rolled me out, through the swinging doors, and into the packed waiting room, where I was nearly overrun by the crowds of kids. The only ones I really wanted to see were the O'Toole twins, and Jake, and Kayla, and Andrea, and Eric, and, most importantly, Tiny, the man-mountain who saved my bacon. I was too groggy and doped up to pick them out of the crowd of faces and voices, though, and my mother was not about to let anything or anybody stop her from

getting me home and into her care, as she parted the sea of bodies so that the nurse could wheel me out into the parking lot.

Michael and my dad carefully put me in the front seat and buckled me in, taking care not to jostle my ribs and my arm as they wound the seatbelt around me and snapped it in place. I laid my head back on the headrest and closed my eyes, exhausted down to my toenails. I wanted nothing more than to just crawl between the cool sheets of my own comfy bed.

As tired as I was, and as drugged as I was, it was still surprisingly difficult to fall asleep. Part of the problem was that I kept on replaying the scene in the parking lot over and over, like a video loop in my head, seeing again and again Jilly's open hand whizzing toward me, making contact with my ear; feeling the creak of my ribcage as his foot made contact with my side; watching the knife blade flash as it streaked across space toward Molly's face and my arm; and looking through a reddish haze of pain and shock as Jilly's body was lifted up off the ground by the force of Tiny's kick. I also couldn't get very comfortable, throwing around the extra weight and bulk of the bandages all over my body. Finally, though, I fell into a fitful, exhausted sleep, full of mad dreams and visions. I didn't feel rested at all when I awoke at last on Sunday afternoon, even though the clock indicated that I had been sleeping for over ten hours.

I dragged my sorry ass out of bed and limped to the bathroom. The reflection looking back at me out of the mirror, bleary-eyed and sleep-swollen, was not a pretty sight. I ran my good hand through my hair in a haphazard attempt at establishing order among the follicles. It didn't do much. I finally gave up, and proceeded to gingerly brush the cobwebs off my teeth, moving the toothbrush carefully around the bandage on my lower lip.

My mom heard me stumbling around upstairs, and came up from the family room to offer some assistance. She insisted on helping me in getting a flannel shirt on, the left sleeve unbuttoned to accommodate the bandage, and she knelt down on the floor of my

bedroom to help me get a pair of sweatpants on my feet so I didn't have to struggle one-handed.

As she was pulling the sweats on over my feet, she said, "The telephone's been ringing off the hook, Sean. You have about a hundred messages downstairs."

I just grunted. There wasn't anybody in this world that I wanted to see, especially now, with my mother on her knees, helping me get dressed. For a sixteen-year-old jock, I didn't think anything could be more embarrassing.

I have since learned differently, of course.

A few minutes later, Michael came up to help get me down the stairs.

I gave my mother a baleful stare. "I can walk on my own, you know," I grumbled.

"Yes, I know, dear," she replied, unperturbed and relentless. "But there's no sense in taking chances, now, is there?"

Mom logic. There was no argument, and no cure. I could rail and protest, but it would be like complaining that the sun was making the world too bright. I accepted, with very little good grace, and they helped me slowly walk down the stairs.

Later that afternoon, I was sprawled in my dad's easy chair, watching a boring football game on television with my family. Dad had volunteered the chair, thinking that it would be more comfortable for me than the couch. I didn't want to uproot him from his favorite spot, but he insisted, so I lounged in it, squirming around until I found the least irritating position.

The back doorbell rang, and before anybody could get up to see who was there, the door opened. We heard two sets of feet on the linoleum in the kitchen.

"Hey, Porter, where are you?" I heard Jake yell.

"Hello, Jake, we're in the family room," called out my mother.

Jake and his sister Kayla appeared in the doorway. "How you feeling, Seanster?" asked Jake.

"Like I've been run over by a tank," I grumpily replied.

"Yeah, well, just think how Jilly feels today," he said unthinkingly. He suddenly looked abashed, glancing at my parents, but they did their best to ignore his comment.

Me, I had to laugh, which hurt my swollen mouth and my battered ribs. It felt good, nonetheless. *Yeah,* I thought to myself, *I'll bet he's in some pain today, too*.

"How does your arm feel, Sean?" asked Kayla softly.

"Not too bad," I said, "considering there's about thirty stitches holding the whole thing together."

Kayla's blue eyes got big and round. "Thirty?" she said, a little breathlessly.

"Something like that," I said, as if it was no big deal.

"Yeah," piped up my little brother Stephen, "he's gonna have an awesome scar, I'll bet."

"Stephen!" cried my mother. "That's a terrible thing to say."

"Oh, that's just boys talking," admonished my dad. "He didn't mean anything by it, I'm sure."

"What about your mouth?" asked Kayla, moving a little closer to look at the various bandages. Her hand came out, as if she wanted to touch the bandage on my mouth with her fingertips.

"Oh, I might be stuck with a permanent Elvis Presley sneer," I said jokingly, "but I'll get used to it."

"Hey, I might like one of those, myself," said Jake. "Be a good chick magnet. What do you say, Kayla? Would I look good with an Elvis Presley sneer?"

"Not as good as Sean," she said. She started blushing, and turned away, embarrassed. My mother gave her an appraising look, as if suddenly seeing Kayla as something other than the little kid she had known, practically since she was born.

"So, Porter, I suppose you're going to ditch school tomorrow, aren't you?" asked Jake.

Mom jumped in before I could answer. “Sean has a doctor’s appointment tomorrow morning,” she said. “He has to have his bandages changed, and the doctor wants another x-ray of his ribs.”

“In other words,” I said, “you’re right. I’m ditching school tomorrow.”

“Ah, you’re just a lazy slob,” said Jake laughingly. “Just because you got slapped upside the head, got your ribs stove in, and got your arm skewered, you’re going to take it easy for a couple of days? You’re a slacker, Porter.”

“He is not!” Kayla turned on her brother and slapped his arm. She turned back to me, stepping a little closer to my chair so she could lightly touch my good arm. “You don’t listen to this big dummy, Sean. You should take the week off.”

“Take the week off? I’d go stir-crazy, sitting around here by myself,” I said.

“I’ll come over after school to keep you company,” she said softly. “In fact, if you want, I can go to each of your classes after school, and pick up your homework assignments, if you’d like.”

“No, Kay, you don’t have to...”

“That’s not a bad idea,” interjected my mom. “You are going to have to keep up with your schoolwork, Sean, even if you are only out of school for a couple of days.”

“Too bad, Sean,” said Stephen scornfully. “For a minute there, I was envying you, not being able to go to school. But it sounds like school’s going to come to you, instead.” He laughed out loud at his own jest.

“I’ll call in to the school office in the morning,” said Mom. “I’ll try to get them to collect Sean’s work together. Then, if you could, Kayla, perhaps you might stop by the office after school and bring his work home with you.”

“Of course,” agreed Kayla.

“Either Michael or I will stop by your house to pick up Sean’s work,” Mom continued.

"No, you don't need to do that," said Kayla. "I'll bring it over in the afternoon."

"I'm not sure I..."

"No, really, Mrs. Porter, I don't mind," interrupted Kayla. "Jake can drive us over, when he gets done with football practice."

Mom looked at her speculatively, but could find no objection to Kayla's brother accompanying her over to our house. Besides, I knew she was thinking that, with this arrangement, she wouldn't have to take off the whole day from work, as long as I was going to have help available in the afternoon.

"Well," she said, a little reluctantly, "I suppose that would be all right..."

"Okay, then, that's what we'll do," exclaimed Kayla. She suddenly was very animated, now that she had a job to do to help me out.

Jake and Kayla left a few minutes later, with Kayla promising my mother that she would stop at the school office as soon as school was over the next day.

A little while later the drone of the television, along with the painkillers, made my eyelids droop, and I dozed in the easy chair, warm and reasonably comfortable in my home.

* * * * * * * * * *

I hadn't known it at the time, but Mrs. O'Toole and my mother had been on the telephone with each other a couple of times that morning, and around dinnertime there was a knock at the front door. My dad got up from the couch, walked over, and opened the door to admit the O'Toole family. Mr. and Mrs. O'Toole came in, each carrying a covered dish, followed by Josh, Molly, and even their older sister Heather, apparently home from college for the weekend.

Mrs. O'Toole and my mom did that funny kissing-the-air-near-the-cheek thing that had never made any sense to me, and my dad and Mr. O'Toole shook hands warmly.

"Hello, Bill," said my dad in welcome.

"Jim," acknowledged Mr. O'Toole. "How's the patient?"

They both looked over in my direction. "He's pretty darn grumpy," admitted my father.

Mrs. O'Toole came bustling over, ready to fuss over me. "Well, you'd be grumpy, too, if you had stitches in your lip like Sean," she cooed. She gingerly touched the bandage on my lip, and I flinched away. She *tsked* at me, reached over and firmly grasped my chin, and turned my face back and forth, gently pressing the edges of the bandage down. "Relax, dear, I'm just making sure the bandage is on there well enough," she said.

Satisfied that the doctors and nurses probably did a decent enough job, she stood and headed into the kitchen to help my mother get dinner ready. Meanwhile, Heather, Josh, and Molly came in and sat down. Josh had a big smile on his face.

"What are you so happy about?" I complained.

"I'm glad to see that she doesn't just mother her own family," he said with a grin.

Heather laughed out loud, and even Molly had to smile at my discomfort.

"How come you're home from college?" I asked Heather.

She glanced over at Molly, and then looked at her brother fondly. "Josh has been calling me almost every day, since last week, letting me know what's been going on. He called me again last night, and I knew I had to come home to see what I could do to help out my sister, so I took the train home. It wasn't until I got home this morning that I got the whole story about last night."

"I'm not sure I know the whole story about what happened last night, either, and I was there," I said.

"Well, for one thing, Del Toro's going to be walking funny and talking with a squeaky voice for a long time," said Josh.

It hurt my mouth and my ribs to laugh, but I couldn't help but join in as Heather and Molly started laughing out loud, with Josh's guffaw the loudest of all. The insanity of it all was just too much.

Both sets of parents were bustling around between the kitchen and the dining room, leaving us to ourselves, until, finally, my mom called out, "Dinner's ready!"

Josh hopped up and moved to help me up out of the chair, but I waved him off, and slowly, painfully stood up. Josh and Heather walked into the dining room, but Molly hung back and waited for me.

"Sean?" she said softly. She moved to my right side, taking my good elbow to support me. "I wanted to thank you for what you did last night," she continued.

"Molly, I..."

"No, Sean, let me finish. Please? You stood up for me, when almost everybody else was writing me off. And I know that Jilly would have cut my face up if you hadn't gotten in his way."

"Molly..."

"And you're hurt because you were protecting me."

"It wasn't just me, Moll..."

"I know, it was Josh, and Tessa, and Andrea, and that whole group, and I owe them a lot, but it was really you who saved me, Sean, and I love you for it."

"Molly, I can't..."

"I will always love you for what you've done, Sean. Promise me you'll always be my friend?"

"I promise, Molly, but..."

"And I promise I'll always be your friend, Sean." She reached up and kissed me on my cheek, a surprisingly sisterly kiss. "I'm swearing off boys for awhile," she said quietly, as she began steering me toward the dining room. I could hear the murmur of voices

through the doorway, but Molly was speaking too quietly for them to hear her. “I don’t think I could stand the tension of not knowing... knowing if they’re going to turn on me...” There was a sadness in her voice, a note of disappointment that I was sorry to hear.

“Listen, Molly, you know that not all boys are as intent on doing damage as Jilly, or even Joey.”

“I know, but even so, I’ve got some trust issues I need to work on, so no dating for me for now. You, though, are another story. So, pal, you want me to help you try to get Kristina Mendoza back?” she asked.

I stopped and stared at her. The defeated look that she had had for the past week or more was gone, and the old Molly was reasserting herself. Her healing processes were well underway, and yet I was thinking that my own healing had barely started. I had the feeling I had a long, long road ahead of me.

She smiled sweetly at me. I thought she was secretly glad she could still surprise me into speechlessness. She gently tugged at my arm to get me moving again, her arm looped inside mine as we stepped into the dining room and found our seats.

The dinner conversation stayed carefully away from the events of the previous night, and nobody even mentioned what had precipitated it all. Both the O’Tooles and the Porters were trying to recapture a previous existence, one in which there was no hint of Jilly Del Toro, no acknowledgement of Joey Amonte, no evidence of any troubles with the Bulls, or Molly, at all. I wasn’t sure that world had ever really existed for us, but I left it to better imaginations than mine to fabricate a happier time for all of us that evening. In fact, it wasn’t until Mrs. O’Toole produced a gigantic apple pie, and had cut wedges of pie and topped each piece with a slice of fresh cheddar cheese for us all, that any troubling subject at all was broached.

Molly’s father stood up. “Sean,” began Mr. O’Toole, “I just wanted to personally thank you for all you did for us over this past week.”

"Sir, I..." I wanted to relay to him my own feelings, including how I had just played a very minor role in helping Molly. In fact, I really wanted to let everyone know that it was my own stupidity that got me beat up and put Molly directly in the path of Jilly's psychotic rage, and that it was Tessa and Austin, Josh and Andrea who did most of the work, and all of the planning. It was my own lack of common sense that jeopardized everything. If anybody sitting at our table that night should have been the recipient of his thanks, it should have been Josh, for his hard work and planning and his selfless dedication to his sister, and even Molly, for helping herself to the best of her abilities. There was so much I needed to say, to correct his erroneous information, before he embarrassed us both by praising the wrong party. But before I could continue, and even before I could collect my thoughts well enough to speak of where thanks should be directed and where blame should rest, Mr. O'Toole just steamrolled right over my objections.

"Let me finish, Sean, please," he continued. "I know that there have been others who were involved in this whole mess. In fact, I owe a big debt of gratitude to my own son, and I publicly acknowledge it, right here and now." He gazed at Josh fondly, and patted him on the back. "However, there was only one person who put himself directly in harm's way for my daughter, and for that selfless act, I can only begin to express the gratitude that both Rhonda and I feel."

Mrs. O'Toole had tears in her eyes, and so did my mom.

"Uh, can I say something now?" I asked. I really felt like I had to set the record straight.

"Not yet, son," said Mr. O'Toole. He turned to my father. "Jim, I know you have been concerned about Sean and his injuries, as well as his involvement in this... problem, and I suspect he has not been very... forthcoming about how he got hurt. In fact, I don't know the whole story, either, and I probably never will. Suffice it to say, however, that your son has done something exceptional. You should

be proud. Both of you, Jim and Dolly, should know that you have raised an extraordinary young man."

With that, he reached across the table, extending his hand. I didn't want to cause him any further embarrassment, beyond his ridiculous praise, so I pushed myself up so I could reach over and shake his hand with my good hand. In the meantime, Rhonda O'Toole came around the table and gently put her arm across my shoulders, taking care not to bump my bandaged left arm.

"Thank you so much, Sean," she whispered tearfully.

This was all getting to be too much. As I sat back down again, I began, "You know, everyone has gotten entirely the wrong impression about what I did..."

"Sean?" interrupted Josh.

I looked over to him. "What?" I snapped, unhappy with the way he jumped in on what I needed to say. All these interruptions were beginning to really piss me off.

"Just shut up," he said. He tried to give me a hard look to back it up, but then he smiled at me, a toothy, goofy grin.

What could I do? I took his advice and just shut up. I made a mental vow to myself, though, in that moment. I knew one of my many great failings was my tendency to not follow through in sticky situations. I could easily think of lots of times when I made things worse by not acting. I should have called Kristina that long-ago Sunday. I should have called Becky that Sunday not so long ago. I was an idiot. Worse, I was an asshole, and I hurt myself, and too many others, by not doing the right thing at the right time. I needed to change, and that's what I vowed to do.

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SUSPICIOUS CHARACTERS AT THE DOOR

You can always tell when a doctor or a nurse is lying to you. It's when they are approaching you with a wicked-looking instrument or needle in their hand, and they say, "Now, this won't hurt a bit."

About twenty minutes after hearing just those words, they were still trying to scrape me off the walls of the examination room. They had changed all my bandages, and cleaned and drained all my wounds, performing all these tortures with the cavalier indifference to my pain and discomfort that probably caused them to go into medicine in the first place.

It was just before lunchtime when Mom and I finally were on our way home.

"Would you like to stop at McDonald's or someplace for lunch?" my mother asked with artificial good cheer. She was in the room with me while they poked and prodded my lip and arm, after all.

"No," I snapped. "I just want to go home."

"All right, dear," she replied sympathetically.

Two hours later, I was feeling almost human again. I had wolfed down two peanut butter and jelly sandwiches on spongy white bread, comfort food for the young, along with nearly a quart of milk, and I was cocooned on the couch in the family room, a thick quilt wrapped around me. The pain in my arm and my ribs was down to a dull throb, thanks in part to the painkillers I had taken with lunch, and I drowsily acknowledged my mom when she called out from the kitchen that she was leaving to go in to work for the afternoon, now that she had me back home, safe and reasonably sound.

It was just too easy to fall asleep that afternoon, and it was after three o'clock when I finally woke up. I got up creakily, and headed into the kitchen. I started rummaging through the cabinets, looking for cookies or crackers or something.

I was just in the process of fumbling open a bag of potato chips, trying to tear the bag open with my teeth without jarring my cut lip too much, when I heard a soft knock at the back door. Before I had a chance to see who it was, the door opened, and Jake and Kayla came in.

"Hungry, Porter?" asked Jake when he saw me struggling. He reached for the bag and tore it open for me.

"Hi, Sean, how are you feeling?" asked Kayla softly, her eyes glittering.

"Not bad," I replied. "I think I like taking naps in the afternoons." I stretched to emphasize the point, but I was a little too extravagant in my movements. I ended up pulling on my bruised ribs, which made me hunch down, clutching at my ribcage and grimacing in pain. Kayla came over and held my good arm solicitously.

"Did you hurt yourself?" she asked anxiously.

"It's okay, Kay," I assured her. "It only hurts when I move."

"And that's why he was taking a nap, Kay," said Jake, his big hand rummaging around in the bag of chips. "So he wouldn't move around and hurt himself any worse."

I gave him a look that he easily ignored. "What a pal," I muttered.

As we headed for the family room, it occurred to me that they were here too soon after school let out.

"Hey, Jake, why aren't you at football practice?" I asked.

"Oh, man, you missed the strangest day I've ever seen at school today," he said.

"Everybody was talking about the Homecoming dance," added Kayla.

"And, of course, you and Jilly were the main topics of conversation," continued Jake.

"Of course," I said disgustedly. I could see already that it was going to be tough that first day back.

"You wouldn't believe some of the stories I heard today," said Jake. "You were dead, Jilly was on life support, Martians had landed. You name it, I heard it today."

"Was Molly at school? Surely she could have straightened everybody out."

"Shirley could have straightened it out? Who's Shirley?" I scowled at him, and Kayla stuck her tongue out at her brother. "Actually, Molly was there, but it's much more exciting to spread rumors about what might have happened than actually learn the truth. Besides, she could only talk to a few kids in one day between classes, and stories expand a lot faster. And the fact that both you and Del Toro were missing today only fueled the fire," he said.

"Okay, but why aren't you at football practice?"

"Practice for both the football team and the soccer team was another casualty of the weekend," he answered. "Counselors were at school all afternoon, trying to get to the bottom of it all. They were on the phone with the cops, and they called in half the football team and most of the soccer team for interviews. So many kids were cooling their heels in the counselor's office that they had to cancel practices."

"Jake had to talk to them, Sean," said Kayla. That news didn't surprise me.

"Yeah, me and Tiny and Josh and about 10 other suspicious characters had to talk to the principal and the counselor. I saw Eric and Trent and Mikey and Jorge there, too," said Jake.

"I suppose it'll be my turn when I go back," I said. "How about Amonte and Barnes and those guys? Any of the Bulls at school today?"

"No, not really," said Jake. "Remember last year, after Skip got killed? The Bulls kind of hid out for a few days, and then came back all spiffed up, as if they were giving up the gang life, you know? I think they might be doing the same thing now. Besides," he continued, "their leader and chief bully is fallen. They've got nobody to tell them what to do right now."

"Del Toro may be out of sight, but I'll bet he hasn't given up the reins of his little terror squad quite yet," I surmised.

"Yeah, he's in a little cubbyhole somewhere, some rat's nest, licking his wounds right about now," said Jake.

The sudden laughter burst from me in a painful cramp. Both Kayla and Jake looked at me as if I had lost my mind. Maybe I had. When I got myself back under control, moaning at the pain in my ribcage as the laughter subsided, I explained. "The mental image of Del Toro having to lick those particular wounds is kind of funny, isn't it?"

Jake looked surprised, and then he remembered that it wasn't just a separated shoulder that Del Toro was hurting from. In fact, that was his secondary injury, and Jake started laughing, sending me off again. Kayla giggled, all the while turning bright pink as she recalled where Jilly was hurting the most.

We finally settled down. Kayla went out into the kitchen and got sodas for us all, and Jake and I cleared off the coffee table so we could work. Kay had done as she promised, and picked up my homework assignments for the day. There wasn't much, because of

the uproar in school all day, but I was certain that just meant the teachers would pile it on the next day.

And, as it turned out, it was a good thing there wasn't much work to do. There were so many visitors, my front door should have been a revolving door, each person coming in with a tale to tell about what had happened at school.

The first to drop by were Trent and Danielle, who just wanted to see how I was feeling. Dani looked stricken when she saw me all bandaged up, but I was able to reassure her that I was doing okay.

Trent sat down on the couch and helped himself to a handful of chips. "Coach is going to have a cow when he realizes you're out for a few weeks," he remarked.

"I hope it's not a few weeks," I said. "My arm shouldn't keep me out of the lineup. It's just a question of how fast my ribs will heal. As it is now, I'm having trouble taking deep breaths."

"Ribs can take a long time, buddy," said Jake. "Sometimes six or eight weeks, if they're cracked."

"I don't think they're cracked," I said. "I just had another x-ray today, but nobody seemed real concerned about my ribs." *Six or eight weeks? Oh, man, say it ain't so*, I thought to myself.

"That's because of your filleted arm, Sean. Ribs can heal themselves in time, but they've got to keep an eye on your cuts to make sure they don't get infected." Trent reached for the bag of chips again.

The doorbell rang again, and Kayla, playing hostess, hopped up to open the front door. Eric and Anthony came in and headed right for the bag of chips on the coffee table.

"How you doin'?" asked Eric. "Keisha wanted to come over with me, but she was afraid of how busted up you would look. I told her that maybe, if Del Toro rearranged your face a little, you'd turn out to be better looking."

"What a pal," I said disgustedly. "Here I am, in pain and needing a little sympathy, and instead I get a junior Richard Pryor."

Kayla jumped onto the couch next to me and snuggled up, putting her arms carefully around my neck. “Do you need some sympathy, Sean?” she cooed as she pressed herself in next to me. She gave me a quick kiss on my cheek, hopped back up, and declared, “Sorry, none to be found here!”

Everybody cracked up. I claimed I didn’t see the humor in it, but I was lying, and they all knew it. I finally relented, and smiled along with them all. I knew, deep down inside, that just by being there, my friends were showing their sympathy and support, and I was grateful.

I turned to Eric and Anthony. “I’m going to have to call Coach and let him know about what’s going on. He’s not going to be happy.”

Eric snorted. “Happy? That ain’t the word for what Coach is gonna be. Happy is about as far away from how Coach is gonna feel as you can get, I’d bet.”

“Especially when he realizes he’s gonna have to start Weasel in your spot,” added Anthony.

“Weasel? Christ, I didn’t even think about that,” I said. “And if that little freshman dirtbag does start, he’s not going to give up that position without a fight.”

“Hey!” admonished Kayla. “Just because he’s a freshman, doesn’t mean he’s a dirtbag. Watch your mouth, Mr. Porter, or you’ll be getting another fat lip. After this one heals first.”

“Listen, Luscious, he’s not a dirtbag because he’s a freshman. Hell, I like freshmen. Especially broiled. With barbeque sauce.” I smiled at her, to let her know that the present company was exempted. She stuck out her tongue at me. “Hey, don’t point that thing at me unless you intend to use it,” I warned.

Kayla blushed furiously, but it didn’t stop her from jumping back on the couch and snuggling up to me again. She put her mouth next to my ear. “So, you think I’m luscious, do you?” she whispered.

Now it was my turn to blush a bright red.

"Hey, leave the poor boy alone," teased Eric. "He's in a delicate medical condition, and can't take that kind of excitement." He pronounced it almost like three words, Dell-E-Kit, and managed to get a laugh out of everybody.

"Do you hear that?" I said to no one in particular. "See the respect I get around here? And in my own home, too."

"Awww, poor Sean," was the nearly unanimous reply.

"Yeah, the Rodney Dangerfield of the high school set," added Jake.

"Hey, by the way, who's Weasel?" asked Kayla.

"A kid on the team," said Anthony. "Do you know Adam Prince?"

Kay made a face like she was sucking on a lemon. "Oh, him," she said. "He's a friend of..." She glanced quickly over to me, looking a little abashed. "A friend of Brandon's."

"Oh? And who's Brandon?" I asked.

There was a long pause before she answered. "Just a boy I know," she said mysteriously.

"Ah," I said. "Is he the kid you were at the dance with?"

She just nodded, her head down as if she was embarrassed.

"And he's the kid at the scavenger hunt party," I said. The picture was a little clearer for me now.

"Oops," said Jake. He winked at his sister. She didn't look like she appreciated it very much, but I wasn't sure why she was uncomfortable talking about him. But it was obvious she was, so I let it drop.

By the time my mom got home, there was still a houseful of kids. My little brother had gotten home from school, and was mixing with my friends, loving hanging out with the high-school kids. Tiny and Josh had stopped by, and so had Austin and Tessa, and Toby and Ashley, and Kevin and Mikey and Brett from the soccer team. Trent and Danielle, and a couple of others, had already left, but it was still a pretty full house.

Mom stopped in the doorway of the kitchen, surveying the scene. "Well, I guess pizzas are in order for dinner," she said with a laugh. She tapped Jake on the shoulder. "Jake, would you be a dear and run out and pick up some more sodas? We must be just about out by now." She started rooting around in her purse. "Here, take this," she said, handing him a twenty dollar bill. "Just buy what you can. And maybe some more snacks, too. This looks like a hungry crowd."

"Sure thing, Mrs. P.," said Jake. He grabbed his coat and headed for the door.

It was a good thing there wasn't a lot of homework assigned that night. Nobody wanted to leave to go do something as boring as studying, and so the party went on. Jake returned with fresh supplies of pop and chips, and four pizzas were delivered. By that time, my older brother Michael was home from work, and Dad was there, too. Kids were coming and going, but the two constants all evening long were my best friend Jake, and Kayla, who stayed at my side, refilling my glass and making sure I was comfortable. If I had to get up to walk around, or go to the bathroom, she helped me to stand, unwilling to believe me when I told her I was perfectly capable of getting up by myself. I believed her mothering instincts were in full blossom, and there was no holding her back, so I submitted to her help with as much good humor as I could muster. Considering it was Jake's sister, I found that I was able to muster quite a bit of good humor. To be perfectly honest, I enjoyed her help. I never would have put up with the same amount of fussing from my own mother, but coming from Luscious Kayla, it was all okay.

Which, I was to discover later, was all part of the plan.

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By the time everybody had left, I was wondering if I had fallen through some sort of odd space warp. Just sixty hours prior, I had been a fit, happy, and healthy athlete. Two and a half days later, I was feeling like a truck had run me down, backed up, and aimed for me again, and I had done practically nothing all day. Jake and Luscious Kayla were the last to leave, friends to the end, but I was so tired I was cross-eyed. I couldn't wait to drag my sorry carcass up the stairs and fall into bed. Because of the bandages, I hadn't been able to take a shower since Saturday, and I was feeling pretty gross. Mom helped me stumble into the bathroom, and I stood there, too tired to be embarrassed, as my mother gave me a warm sponge bath. She wanted to wash my hair in the sink, just like she did when I was a little kid, but I was not going to stay away from my pillow any longer, so I managed to put her off to another day for that particular dispiriting activity.

I was asleep practically before my head hit the pillow, and I slept the sleep of the dead until midmorning the next day, waking to an empty and quiet house.

My mom had left me a note letting me know that she was at work, and would be home before five o'clock. I had the day to myself, something that was completely foreign to me. For the first couple of hours, I luxuriated in the idleness, flipping channels and discovering that daytime television truly was the vast wasteland that Newton Minow had declared in 1961. *No improvement in twenty years, no improvement in sight.* I was looking forward to Jake and Kayla coming over, even if it meant they were bringing homework. And, surprisingly, I was looking forward to going back to school.

Late that afternoon, the telephone rang. I had had the foresight to put the phone on the table next to the couch, so I didn't have to struggle up to answer it.

"Sean?" A familiar voice was making sure I was who she thought I was.

"Hey, Lori, how are you?"

"Well, I'm fine. I guess the bigger question is, how are you?" she asked, concern evident in her voice. Obviously she had heard some sort of story about the weekend.

"I'm doing okay," I reassured her. "I'm just taking a couple of days off from school, until I feel a little better."

"Sean, I heard about the fight... How badly are you hurt?"

I ignored the question for the moment. "How did you hear about it?" I asked.

She hesitated. "Actually, Molly called me. She said she wanted to apologize for some things, and she said she missed seeing the boys. She and I talked for a long time, Sean. She told me some things... about what she had been through... and she told me about what happened Saturday night, how you got hurt protecting her..."

"Molly's got a skewed perspective about what happened that night, Lori. I wouldn't take all she said as the gospel truth."

I could almost hear her smile. "She also told me you'd deny doing anything at all," she said.

"Hey, I'm not saying I didn't do anything. I got my ass kicked, and I got my arm sliced up. If some of the other people who were there hadn't shown up, I'd have been in even worse shape. Tiny and those guys are the real heroes, not me, despite what Molly says."

She laughed a little. "If you say so, Sean. Anyway, I just wanted to call and see how you were. The boys ask about you all the time."

"Hey, why don't you bring them to one of the games? Maybe I can get them a gig as a ballboy or something. They'd have a ball."

"That's a great idea. Let me know when the home games are, and we'll try to arrange it." She paused for a moment. "It's really great to hear your voice, Sean."

"It's good to talk to you, too, Lori. Thanks for calling. I appreciate it."

I no sooner hung up the phone, and it rang again. I thought it was probably Lori calling back.

"Lori?" I said, as I picked up the handset.

A gruff voice, with a heavy southern accent, said, "Uh, no, old son, this isn't Lori. My name is Cropper, Pickett Cropper. Is this Sean Porter?"

"Yes, Mr. Cropper, speaking. What can I do for you?"

Cropper chuckled. "Actually, I think the question to be asked is what I might be able to do for you, Sean."

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THE FIFTY-CENT BET

"Okay, I'll bite," I replied. "What can you do for me, Mr. Cropper?"

The gruff voice on the other end of the telephone line said, "Do you know a young man by the name of Jesse Wilhoit, son?"

"Yes, sir, I do. Is he okay?" I didn't think I could take any more bad news than I'd gotten over the past year or so.

"Oh, yeah, Jesse's just fine," said Cropper. "In fact, he's the one suggested I give you a holler."

"Um, okay," I said. I was still confused. "And how do you know Jesse?"

"Ah, I see now where I done went and took the wrong turn down this particular highway," he said, almost to himself. "I didn't introduce myself very proper here, did I? Son, as I told you a moment ago, my name's Pickett Cropper, but most folks just call me Pick. I'm the head coach of the University of Florida soccer team, down here in Gainesville, Florida."

"Oh, I get it," I said stupidly. *Hey, my mama always said I should work on my strengths, and right now, stupid is my main commodity.*

"Now, Jesse Wilhoit's been singin' your praises, son, and I would like to send up one of my assistants to talk to you, maybe watch you play."

"Uh, sure, that's great, Mr. Cropper. How's Jesse doing for you?"

"Well, son, I guess soccer news don't spread out quite as fast as football news across the country, but I've got to tell you, that Jesse Wilhoit's a fine player for us. He's been in our starting lineup right from the get-go, and he's helped us to the Southeastern Conference championships, and right into the NCAA Tournament. As a matter of fact, I believe he'll be the Southeastern Conference Freshman Player of the Year, I do."

"Wow," I said, impressed. "Good for him. I can't wait to talk to him."

"Now, son, as head coach, I've always got to be lookin' to the future, as well as herdin' these boys in the here-and-now, and I hear tell you've got a game that just might fit into our type of play here at Florida. But, just to make sure, I'm going to be sending up one of my best ol' boys, a fella name of Stan Harvard. He's gonna be up in your neck of the woods the next couple of weeks, and I'd like for him to watch your team play this Friday."

Uh-oh. Ninety seconds into a conversation with a Division One school coach, and I was in trouble already. There was no way I would be playing this weekend, and probably not the next, either.

"Coach Cropper, I think I might have a problem. You see, right now I'm... injured. I won't be playing for at least a couple of weeks."

There was a long hesitation on the other end of the line. "Oh? Is that right? What kind of injury are we talking about here, son?"

"Oh, it's really nothing," I said hurriedly. "Just some... bruised ribs... and some... cuts and scrapes."

"You've been to see the sawbones, right?"

I was puzzled. *What the heck is a sawbones?* "Sir?" I asked inquiringly.

"The doctor, son. Have you been to see the doctor about them ribs?"

"Oh, I get it. Sawbones. Yes, sir, I had x-rays and everything. No cracks or breaks, but I've got to take it easy for a little while."

"Well, that really shouldn't be a problem then. After all, you're only a junior, right?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, then, we've got a whole year to figure this one out anyway. And I know, if half the things Jesse was telling me were true, you're prolly gonna have recruiting scouts hounding you for some time to come. I just wanted to be first in line, is all."

"Thank you, sir."

"Let me leave you my number, Sean. You give me a call when you're healed up and playing again, and I'll see where ol' Stan is, and see if I can get him to drive over yet this year. That sound all right with you?"

"That would be great, Coach. Thank you."

I wrote down the number he gave me, a direct line into the athletic offices.

Now that was a great call to get, I thought to myself. I sat back on the couch smugly, basking in the warmth of the realization that there was a college out there looking at me for their team. *What a great feeling!*

However, as I replayed the conversation in my mind, I got restless. It took me a few minutes to realize what was making me uncomfortable. Here was another situation where I was not very honest with somebody who was trying to do something for me, and my deceptive description of my injuries to Pick Cropper seemed like it was another of those Sean Porter defects, and one that directly confronted how firm my resolve was going to be in keeping the pledge I had made to myself, just a couple of days ago.

My bruised ribs hurt like hell, and there was a dull throbbing in my sliced-up arm, but these pains were minor compared to the self-inflicted battering my conscience was taking.

I tried to tell myself it was all a fabrication of my own addled mind as I tried to find a comfortable position on the couch. The television was on, but it was just background noise to me. I turned the sound up, trying to drown out my own bitter thoughts, but it didn't help. I flipped through the stations, hoping for a good Bogart or Cagney movie to lose myself in, but no luck there, either.

I got up and rummaged through the kitchen cabinets, but nothing sounded good. What I was looking for wasn't going to be found in a cabinet or in the refrigerator, but I wasn't ready to accept that particular truth quite yet. I stalked through the first floor of the house, looking for something I knew I wasn't going to find easily.

Jake and Kayla came over again after football practice. Kay had my homework assignments, and, as expected, there was a ton of work. The three of us spread out in the family room, but I couldn't concentrate.

"Will you sit still?" said Jake, exasperated, after about the dozenth time I shifted on the couch, trying to find a decent position.

Kayla knelt beside me, leaning on the arm of the sofa. "What's the matter, Sean?" she asked, concern in her eyes.

"I got a call today," I began, and I told them about my conversation with the coach of the Florida Gators soccer team.

"But that's great, Sean," said Jake enthusiastically. "Maybe you'll get a scholarship to play soccer."

"Yeah, that part's great," I agreed. "It's the omissions that I'm worried about."

"What do you mean?"

"I think I know," said Kayla. She looked seriously at me. "You're afraid he's going to find out you were hurt in a fight, right?"

I slapped the arm of the sofa, making her jump a little. "That's just it," I said. "If he finds out I might be suspended from school for

fighting on school property, I'm afraid he's gonna be really mad. He's not going to want a troublemaker like me on his team." I could feel my eyes burning a little. *Damn it; don't cry like a little kid,* I admonished myself. *You've got to grow up sometime.*

And there, right before me, was the answer I had spent the last several hours searching for, practically tearing the house apart in my desire for some sort of solution. I had to be grown-up about it, stand up and face the music.

Kay had grasped my hand as I confessed my fear, holding it close to her in support. I gently disentangled myself and reached beyond her to the telephone. Pickett Cropper's number was on a scrap of paper on the end table, by the telephone. I picked it up and dialed. A female voice answered on the third ring.

"Gator Athletic Office, this is Eunice Adkins speaking."

"Uh, hello, I'd like to speak to Coach Cropper, please," I said.

"Pick is in a meeting right now with his assistants," replied Florence. "May I ask who's calling?"

"My name is Sean Porter," I said.

"Oh, of course, Mr. Porter, Pick has been expecting your call. One moment, please." And she put me on hold. I could hear the random pops of the long-distance connection through the receiver.

He was expecting my call? Why would he think I would be calling him back so soon?

After just a couple of minutes, Pick came on the line.

"Sean?"

"Yes, sir," I said.

"What can I do for you, son?" he asked. His attitude seemed to be one of pleasant surprise to be hearing so soon from me. I could almost hear a sense of amusement in his attitude.

"Well, Coach, I feel I need to explain to you just how I got my cuts and bruises in the first place," I said. I took a deep breath, closed my eyes, and leapt off the cliff. "You see, sir, I was in a fight over the weekend, with another student. In the school parking lot. And I got

my butt stomped, and my arm's kind of cut up from a knife, and my ribs are bruised because I got kicked. I've been home recuperating for the past couple of days, sir, after the doctors stitched me back up again, but I'm planning on going back to school either tomorrow or the next day, but I'm expecting to be suspended for at least a few days because of the fight."

I paused for a moment to catch my breath, having just spilled out my confession. I was expecting him to hang up on me, since I was giving him the opportunity to tell me to forget about meeting with his scout, but there was a long silence on the other end of the line. The silence was worse than my admissions, so I jumped into the void, and continued with my explanation. "I... I was surprised by your earlier call, sir, and I... I wanted to set the record straight... and... well, you deserve to know the truth about me, sir..." I finally wound down, nothing more to say.

There was a deep chuckle on the other end. "Son, I can't tell you how happy I am to hear from you, especially so quick," he said.

I was very confused. "You're happy?" I asked incredulously.

"Why, shore, son, a course I'm happy." He laughed again, evidently taking great pleasure in my humiliation.

"I don't know why you're so freaking happy," I grumbled. "Unless you like humiliating little kids."

He laughed even harder at that. "Hoo, boy, you are a one, Sean Porter," he finally managed to eke out. "I guess I owe you some sort of apology, son." His laughter had subsided to an occasional low chuckle, but by now I was pretty mad, and just about to tell him to go fuck off.

"I got to tell you, Sean, I been pullin' on your leg jest a little here. You see, I already knew about all that stuff."

"What?" Now I was puzzled, as well as pissed.

"I didn't jest call you up outa the blue, now, boy," explained Pick. "I've had several long conversations with your coach up there, Mr. Martin Neville. And after I got done talking with him, I had another

very pleasant conversation with a Dr. Osgood, who I believe is the principal of your fine school."

"Uh, yes, sir, he is, but..."

"Anyways, both those fine gentlemen were kind enough to give me some background on you and your soccer habits, abilities, dedication to the game, that sort of thing, and in the midst of our conversation, the troubles of this past weekend just happened to come up."

"Oh. Well, sir..."

"Now, before you go off and start apologizin' again, son, let me say a few things, and maybe my amusement will become a little more apparent to you, okay?"

"Okay, but..."

"Now you just set back and listen up for a moment, son, while I kind of talk my way through this. You see, I've talked to Mr. Martin Neville a few times, Sean. The first time was, oh, I'd guess maybe a couple of weeks ago. Your coach was kind enough to send me some film of a couple of your games, which, along with what Jesse was telling me, kind of piqued my interest, if you know what I mean."

"Yes, sir."

"Now, I always listen real close to what a feller's coach has to say about him before I decide one way or t' other if I'm a gonna pursue that feller for my team, you understand. And Mr. Neville, he's the kind of straight shooter I like to talk to, the kind of coach that, over the years, I've learned to respect and trust. And he told me about the altercation when I called him yesterday, and he explained all that he knew about it, and made no apologies on your behalf. Well, I got to tell you, son, that story shook me a little, so that's why I called up that Dr. Osgood fellow, and talked to him. Now, he had the preliminary reports from the police at his disposal, and he was quite open about sharing his information, let me tell you."

"Yes, sir."

"Now, I've got a pretty fair soccer team down here, son, and getting good players to come to the University of Florida is important to me, and to the University. But I got to tell you, son, I always got to look hard at a boy's underpinnings, if you know what I mean. If it comes down to a choice between a hard-nosed, upstanding player, and a hard-nosed, but ultimately morally questionable player, I will always take up the cause of getting the upstanding boy down here. Understand?"

"Yes, sir, but I..."

"Now, that's not to say I won't take a chance on makin' a bad boy into a good soccer player, now, and I've been known to take a project like that on a time or two, but my scouts and assistants had better be right on target with such a boy. But the ones who have already proven themselves, Sean, I most always can sniff 'em out myself. You know what I mean, son?"

"Not really, sir, but..."

"I already know quite a lot about you, Mr. Sean Porter. I know what another group of pretty fine players has to say about you, since I even went and spent near on half my month's telephone budget calling trans-Atlantic so I could speak personally to Mr. Duane Olchick, for instance. I know about your work with some of the younger kids in town, and I know how many games you refereed this past summer, all for the love of the game. I could probably even name who was involved in Saturday night's incident, and not be off by more than two or three people. I know you got four stitches in your lip, and near onto thirty in your arm, and I know you was standing up for a young lady who needed you to be there, standing up for her."

"I... I..."

"You don't have to say nothin' right now, Sean, but let me assure you of this: I like what I've been told, and I like what I've seen. And you have shown me that you got some steel in you, son, by callin' me

back the way you done, ready to give up on the University of Florida, all for the sake of tellin' me your story."

"Coach, I..."

"And that's why I was so amused, Sean. Made a bet with Eunice that you would be calling me back within twenty-four hours. I was tickled pink when she come barging into my meeting here, and plunked fifty cents down on my desk. She didn't have to say a word, because I knew what it was for."

"Fifty cents?" That was about the only thing I could make any sense of, out of all he had talked about. My head was spinning.

"Fifty cents," he confirmed. "Best damn can of pop I ever drank. It always tastes better when it's won fair and square. Let me tell you, son, that if you hadn't called, I still would have sent ol' Stanley Harvard up to see you play, and maybe talk to you some. Hell, I've seen your game films, and with another season of experience, you're going to be a helluva player. But your calling me now has convinced me, son. I ain't leaving this here project to one of my employees. Eunice is going to have to rearrange my schedule, because in a month or so, I'm coming up there myself to talk to you and watch you play. Is that okay with you, son?"

I gulped. "Yes, sir, that's okay with me," I said.

"Well, good, then," he said with satisfaction.

We said our goodbyes. My hands were shaking as I put the phone down.

"What the hell was that all about?" asked Jake. "We couldn't tell if it was a good call or a bad call from your stuttering."

"And what was that fifty cents thing?" interjected Kayla.

"Wait, give me a minute," I said, falling back into the couch cushions. "I've got to try to absorb all this."

The back door banged open, and Stephen came running through the kitchen. As he bounded up the stairs to his room, he called out a greeting.

"Hi, Sean. Hi, Jake. Hi, Kayla."

And, with a crash as his bedroom door rattled on its hinges, he was gone.

My mom was in the kitchen, having picked up my brother on her way home from work as usual.

"Hey, Mrs. P.," said Jake loudly.

Mom came out to stand in the doorway. "Why, hello, Jake. Hello, Kayla sweetie. Did you bring Sean's work home for him?"

"Yes, Mrs. Porter," said Kayla. "I said I would."

"I know you did, dear, and I thank you for it," said my mother.

"Hey, Mom, maybe you'd better come in here and sit down," I said. "I might as well tell you all at once about this phone call, so I don't have to repeat myself."

Mom looked concerned as she stepped into the room and sat down in the big stuffed chair. "What phone call, Sean?" she asked.

"Well, I got a call earlier this afternoon from this man named Pickett Cropper," I began. And I told them about my brief conversation with Coach Pick, and just mentioned in passing about my crisis of conscience, and Kayla's insight, that made me decide to call him back. I described my second conversation as best I could. I tried to emphasize Jesse's and Coach Neville's roles in influencing Cropper's interest in me, and tried to downplay the things he said about my moral character. He didn't really know me, after all.

"Woo hoo!" yelled Jake. "A scholarship, Sean! That's fucking incredible!" He glanced over at my mother, just as Kayla slapped his arm. "Oops, sorry, Mrs. P."

"That is wonderful news, Sean," said my mom, pointedly ignoring Jake's slip.

"When's he coming to watch you?" asked Kayla excitedly.

"I don't know," I said. "I don't even know if he'll call ahead. I'll just have to be prepared all the time."

"Which you were going to do anyway," said Jake.

I glanced over to him. "Yeah," I admitted. "I was. I've got a lot of work to do once I can get back on the field."

It was hard to buckle down and get back to work on our schoolwork, but we managed. Mom headed into the kitchen to get dinner ready, and by the time Dad and Michael got home, we were almost done. Jake and Kayla stayed to eat with us, and we finished our work afterwards. By the time we were done, and the story of the telephone call had been told another couple of times, I was exhausted once again. I fumbled around one-handed, trying to help Jake and Kay pick up and pack away books and papers, but I was just in the way, and I finally gave up the attempt, flopping down onto the sofa.

After the backpacks were zipped up, Jake hefted two of them onto his shoulders and headed out to put them in his car. Kayla stole a glance at the kitchen door, and slipped next to me on the couch, putting her arms carefully around my neck.

"I'm so proud of you, Sean," she murmured, her blue eyes sparkling as she leaned in close to me. She gently turned my head and gave me a soft kiss on the side of my mouth, taking great care not to press against my bandage. I desperately wanted to kiss her back, but I was in no shape to do anything except put my good arm around her shoulder, holding her near to me.

"Thank you, Luscious," I whispered.

She smiled delightedly, and kissed me again, a little harder. The tiny flare of pain from my stitches was worth it, matched by the tiny flare of desire in my solar plexus.

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TIME SERVED

I really was tired of sitting at home, so on Wednesday I went back to school. My dad dropped me off early, and made sure I got in the door without incident. I was still bandaged up, but I was feeling pretty good. I got a lot of greetings from kids streaming into school, good friends and kids I barely knew.

My first stop was to the school office. I knew I would have to talk to Dr. Osgood, so I thought I should get it done with early. I was hoping that I could talk him into counting the two days I had spent at home already as part of my expected suspension. I was also worried about having this suspension on my school record, for other colleges and scouts to see. I hadn't even thought about it before, but since Pick Cropper had called, I was afraid this incident might just scare off any other scholarship offers. My parents were going to be really upset when they found out I had probably blown my chances for a free college education with this fight. Perhaps Pick Cropper's offer was legitimate, but I had my doubts about any other schools offering me anything but the door, once the fight and my anticipated

suspension entered the dreaded Permanent Record. Even Pick would probably modify his offer to only a partial scholarship, at best.

Ayesha Ford's mother worked in the school office, and she was standing at the counter, writing down something on a notepad, when I walked in the door.

"Good morning, Mrs. Ford, is Dr. Osgood in?" I asked.

She looked up, saw me, and smiled. "Good morning, Sean. How are you feeling?" She certainly sounded friendly enough, not all scowly like she was known to act when she was talking to a troublemaker.

"I'm doing okay," I said. "It was pretty boring at home, with no friends to hang out with."

Her eyes crinkled as she smiled. "Another good reason to come to school every day, right?"

"Well," I replied, "I guess there had to be one good reason."

She laughed, a deep belly laugh that shook her large frame. "Just as long as there's one good reason, Sean." She was still chuckling as she opened the gate to usher me into the inner sanctum. "Dr. Osgood's in his office. Just knock on the doorframe and go right in."

I rapped on the frame, and Dr. Osgood's voice floated out of the office. "Come in, Mr. Porter."

"How did you know it was me?" I asked as I headed for his desk.

He smiled and took off his reading glasses. "I heard you talking to Mrs. Ford," he said. "Sit down, Sean." He gestured toward the pair of chairs in front of his desk.

When we had both settled into our chairs, he steepled his hands, the tips resting lightly against his moustache, as he gazed at me with an expressionless face. I felt fidgety, but I concentrated on sitting still, wondering why he didn't begin.

Finally, he dropped his hands. "What can I do for you, Sean?"

Now I was confused. Certainly he wanted to yell at me, tell me what a dunderhead I was, a troublemaker who was skating on thin

ice, in danger of being expelled for fighting on school grounds. *Why was he asking me this? Is he toying with me before he lowers the boom?*

"Well, uh, I'm back, and I... I'm here to apologize... and... Don't you want to tell me...?" I stopped, unsure of where to go.

He smiled, just a little. "I see," he said, almost to himself. "Let's start like this, shall we? How are you feeling, Sean? Tell me about your injuries, and how your healing is progressing." He slipped his glasses back on again, and pulled a piece of paper over to the center of his blotter. He picked up a pen in anticipation.

"Oh, okay. Well, my lip was split open, and I've got four stitches in it. But it really doesn't hurt, even though it's still a little swollen. I guess you can see that, though, can't you?" He nodded. "Anyway, it only hurts when I forget about it and bump it or something. My arm, you probably know about. It's all stitched up, too, but the doctors say it's all soft tissue damage, no tendons or anything were cut, so they're pretty sure it will all be okay. I'm supposed to get the stitches out early next week."

He wrote something down on the piece of paper. "Continue," he said.

"My ribs are just bruised," I said. "They're taped up, but it's just precautionary, according to the nurse." I paused, and considered my various other scrapes and bruises, and decided they weren't worth mentioning. "I guess that's all," I concluded.

He wrote some more stuff down. Without looking up, he said, "Is there anything you would like to say about how you acquired these injuries?"

I sat there, silent, until he finally looked up, removing his glasses once again.

I sighed. "What don't you know?"

He stared at me for a moment, and then he smiled, and settled back in his big leather chair. "And that's the question of the ages, isn't it? It's hard to figure out what we don't know. For instance, I don't know how the Del Toro family let their sons drift so far afloat

without guidance. I don't know why Miss Lipshutz is so attracted to such a dangerous lifestyle, and why her parents can't see the path she is on. I don't know if this community could have stood another tragedy, two years in a row, if Stanford and the others hadn't been so serendipitously present last Saturday night."

It took me a moment to realize he was speaking of Tiny. Only school administrators would call him by his real first name.

Dr. Osgood, gazing off into an alternate future, continued, "I don't know how this will affect our own school security assessment. I don't know if the school board agrees with the actions I have taken so far, or the actions I intend to carry out, concerning this incident. I don't know how safe I can make the school for the peripheral characters in this drama, without bringing in the army reserves to march the halls. I don't know what the psychological damage among the school population has been. The principal players in this drama will be assessed, of course, but the residual ripple effects are liable to be felt for some time to come, and probably will manifest themselves in seemingly unrelated forums."

He suddenly focused on me once again. "You see, Sean? There are lots of things I don't know, and the things I don't know are what are most worrisome. As to the fight itself, I know, second by second, pretty much what happened and why, from interviews conducted by our own counseling staff, by the police, and by my own inquiries. You, of course, carry a unique perspective, and I would be interested to hear your version of the incident. But will it add to the facts of the case? That's another thing I don't know."

So, with no small amount of reluctance, I told him all that I could recall about the dance and the fight. I could tell I was only confirming what he already either knew or suspected. The only time I surprised him, I think, was when I told him about seeing Joey Amonte snorting that shit up his nose.

"I see we're going to have to monitor the restrooms at these functions," he said, making another note on his paper.

After I had finally run out of story, he took his glasses off and rubbed his eyes.

"Thank you, Sean. I appreciate hearing your version. Since the first period classes are well underway, stop by the outer office, and Mrs. Ford will write out a permission slip for you." He stood, and leaned over his desk and held out his hand.

Puzzled, I stood and automatically shook it.

I made a pretense of gathering up my coat, and then broached the subject I had been dreading the most.

"Dr. Osgood? About my suspension. Is it possible to credit me, maybe, for the two days I've been gone? Call it time served or something?"

He looked at me, startled. "Suspension? What suspension?"

It was my turn to be surprised. "Well, I just figured... I mean, I was involved in a fight on school grounds, and I..."

He chuckled, shaking his head. "Ah, now I see why you seemed a little too nervous, Sean." He smiled at me. "Okay, it's a deal. Two days suspension, time served is credited, and, since it's still under investigation, I'll withhold the suspension from your records until further notice. Deal?"

Who could refuse? "Deal," I said. I headed toward the door.

"Sean?"

I turned back. "Sir?"

"I am anticipating that this investigation will take a long time. Several years, at least. In fact, it may never be closed, so there's no point in even noting anything on your records. Innocent until proven guilty, and all that. So don't be afraid to let any colleges ask for anything they want in the way of school recommendations and transcripts, okay?"

I couldn't help but grin. "Thank you, sir," I said. And I meant it.

"Oh, and one more thing, Sean," he added. "Our counseling staff has brought in some trauma psychologists this week. I want you to stop by and make an appointment to speak to one of them."

You have to take the good with the bitter, I thought. "Yes, sir," was all I said, though, and I left his office.

Mrs. Ford already had my pass written out, and she handed it to me as I came out, a big grin on her face.

I smiled at her sheepishly. "Thanks, Mrs. Ford," I said.

"Welcome back, Sean," she said, a genuine and open smile affirming her statement. She opened the gate for me, and waved as I headed out into the empty hallway.

Since I had my hall pass, and first period was more than half over, I decided to go to the counseling office, and I made arrangements to talk to a psychologist during my study hall.

During the scramble in the halls between first and second periods, I learned of my folly in thinking I was ready to come back to school. I was jostled by well-wishers, and my arm got bumped pretty hard, sending me into outer space from the sharp lightning bolts of pain that shot up into my brain. Fortunately, Eric spotted me, and he ran interference for me, protecting my left side as we made our way through the crowd. After that, I was pretty well insulated by having so many friends surrounding me from class to class. I saw Molly at our third period math class, but we didn't have time to do much except say hello. She looked great, and looked a lot happier than she had in a long time.

After class, she waited with me until the room had cleared out, and she joined Tiny, Jake, and Tessa as my bodyguard detail through the halls. I felt foolish, but it kept my various injuries protected, so I accepted it, however grudgingly.

At midday, Josh and Andrea accompanied me to the lunchroom. They sat me down at one of the long tables, instructing me to sit still and not move while they gathered food for me. While they were in line, Kayla found me, and sat down on my left. She decided that the best way she could protect my arm was to hold my left hand with her right, and we sat there, all through lunch, chatting with Josh and Andrea and dozens of others who stopped by to say hello. My hand

stayed where it was, resting comfortably in Kayla's warm grip, nestled in her lap.

After school, I took my time going down to the locker rooms. Both the football players and the soccer players were changing out of their school clothes into their practice gear, and as I walked through on my way to Coach Neville's office, the crescendo of greetings and shouts followed me. It embarrassed the hell out of me, but I still felt the need to acknowledge the support they were offering, and I turned and waved, shouting out my thanks to everyone, before turning and opening the door to the coaching offices.

Coach Neville and Coach Simonson were both leaning against their desks when I walked in. Mr. Simonson had a big grin on his face.

"Welcome back, Sean," he said. He stood, patted me softly on my right shoulder, and strolled out to begin organizing the day's practice.

Coach Neville held out his hand, and I stepped over and shook it.

"How are you feeling, Mr. Porter?" he asked.

"Right now, I'm exhausted," I said. "This school stuff is harder to do than I remembered."

He laughed. "It hasn't been that long, has it?"

"No," I admitted. "It just seems like it was months ago."

His smile faltered just a little. "Yes, it does, doesn't it?" He brightened back up. "But I hear you've been getting good reports from the doctors."

"Yep. No breaks or cracks in the ribs, no major damage in the arm. I hope I can start working out again next week."

"Well, don't rush it, Sean. I would much rather have you back and ready for the playoffs than I would want to rush you, just to play in the last couple of conference games."

"Are you going to put Weasel into my spot in the lineup?" I asked.

"No, I don't think so," he replied. I think I would rather start Rich Ingrams, instead. After all, he's a junior, and Mr. Prince is still a freshman."

"That'll work okay," I said.

"It makes our right side considerably weaker," he said, more to himself. "But Mr. Soranno and Mr. Evanson can patrol a little more into that area to shore it up."

"Weasel's a stronger player," I said. "You'd have fewer worries if you played him, instead."

He looked a little startled. "I'm surprised you're recommending Mr. Prince, Sean. I didn't think you liked him very much."

"I don't," I replied. "But he's a talented player, and putting him on the right side is a smart move, from a defensive standpoint."

"Yes, it would be," agreed Coach. "However, Mr. Prince needs quite a bit of seasoning before he's ready to be a starter on this team. You were thrust into the role last year, Sean, but I knew you would rise to the occasion, and play your game well. I'm not so certain about Adam Prince in the same role, as it stands right now." He rubbed his chin worriedly.

"He's not going to take the news well," I warned.

Coach's eyes flashed in anger. "It's not for him to decide," he said.

I thought about how Weasel would about have a coronary when he found out he wouldn't start. I really, really wanted to see that, I decided.

"Come on, Mr. Porter," said Coach. "You can at least set cones for me today."

I stuck around for practice, but I thought maybe Coach was regretting asking for my assistance. A one-armed helper can't carry many plastic cones. Besides, nearly everybody on the team wanted to hear my version of the Saturday night festivities, so nobody was paying too much attention to anything except gossip.

Even so, things got done. Drills designed to work against our Friday opponent were run, passing and shooting practices were held, and laps were run. At the end of the day's session, Coach Neville announced to the team that Rich Ingrams would be starting in my place. I nudged Eric and Trent, and pointed over to Weasel when Coach start talking. The three of us nearly cracked up, watching poor Prince swallowing the news that he wouldn't be starting. His face turned a bright red, and his eyes bugged out, but he wisely kept his mouth shut. He must have heard us tittering, however, because he looked around to see where the laughter was coming from, and he saw us looking at him, which made him even madder. I couldn't help myself when I saw that, and I started laughing hard enough to make my ribs creak and ache, and I sank to my knees, tears streaming out of my eyes, unable to stop laughing. Eric, and then finally Trent, knelt down next to me, laughing uncontrollably, and it was contagious. Before long, nearly all the players were laughing out loud, even though many of them didn't even know why they were laughing. Even Coach Simonson was trying to hold back a chuckle. Coach Neville just stood there, waiting for us to regain our composure, knowing full well what was going on, but unwilling to give us any indication that he approved or disapproved of the humor we found in the situation.

And poor Adam Prince was left standing there, hatred and embarrassment seething and oozing out of every pore, watching us laugh at him.

It was cruel, but hey, this was high school. Cruelty has always been a special ability of teenagers.

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WHEN I SAW HER THERE AGAIN

Jake gave me a ride after our respective practices on Wednesday and Thursday. We would stop and pick up Luscious Kayla on our way over to my house, where the three of us would spread our homework out on the family room floor. My family quickly got used to seeing us working in there. By Friday I was really tired of dragging my mummified arm around. Besides, it was itching so badly it was driving me crazy, so I unwound the wrappings and threw them away. I spent a few minutes in absolute ecstasy, scratching my tortured skin until it was an angry red. Even the stitches itched, which I took to be a good sign.

When I came down the stairs that morning, my mom almost had a cow when she saw that I had taken the bandages off. After examining the arm, however, she reluctantly agreed that maybe getting some air on it wasn't such a bad idea, so she helped me put a smaller bandage on the stitches, and she rubbed some moisturizing lotion into my arm.

At lunchtime that day, I decided that fresh air would probably do my lip some good too, so I got Kayla to gently peel the bandage off. She flinched a little when she saw the stitches in my mouth, but she quickly recovered, and she softly touched the swelling to make sure it wasn't too tender to go without being covered. She still sat on my left, protective as a mother hen, and held my hand in her lap.

The soccer team was playing a home game that evening against the Lakewood Huskies. I hung around the locker room with my teammates as they dressed for the game, laughing and joking. Rich Ingrams was so nervous his hands were shaking as he laced up his shoes. I sat down next to him.

"How's it going, Rich?" I asked.

He shot me a look of nearly pure terror. "I'm scared shitless," he admitted. "I've never been a starter in my life, Sean, not even when I was playing rec soccer when I was a kid. I've always come off the bench."

"It's no big deal," I said.

"Not for you, it's not," he replied. "You've been the kind of kid who's been a starter your whole life."

"I didn't start at all my freshman year, or the first half of last year," I reminded him.

"Doesn't matter," he dismissed. "You're a great player, Sean. You always started, and even when you didn't, everybody knew it was just a matter of time before you got into the lineup. Me, I'm a role player. I ain't never started. Don't get me wrong, I don't really mind, you know? I like to watch the game a little before I go in. It's how I've been trained to play. I'm gonna be cold out there, and slow, and they're gonna blow right past me into the goal."

"Try this," I suggested. "As soon as you get out onto the track, ask Eric to jog around the track a couple of laps with you, to help you loosen up. He likes to warm up that way anyway, he'll be glad for the company. And he'll talk to you, tell you jokes and shit, take your mind off the game."

"Yeah, okay, I can do that," he said.

"Then, when you're listening to Coach's instructions, just sit on the bench, like you normally do. Pretend the game's already started. When you hear your name being called, you'll think you're just going in to substitute for somebody, that's all."

"Hey, that's a good idea," he said. He looked a little less nervous, a little more in tune. "Thanks, Sean. I appreciate it."

"No problem, Rich. Have a great game." I thumped him on the back, and then went over to talk to Eric. I needed to fill him in on Rich, and make sure he talked him up as they did their laps around the track. The kid was a basket case. On our way out to the field, I walked out with Mikey Evanson and Kevin Soranno, and told them about my conversation with Rich.

"Just try to clear anything before it gets to him until he starts to look a little more comfortable out there, okay?" I looked at each of them, and got a confirming nod in return.

I would have loved to at least jog a couple of times around the track, but my ribs still were too creaky, so I contented myself to walking back and forth on the sidelines, dribbling a ball, right foot to left foot and back again, as I paced. The desire to get out onto the field was almost tangible.

Eric and Rich started out on their laps. Eric looked as relaxed as he nearly always did, but Rich was tensed up, taking very short strides. I watched as Eric slowed down a little, adjusting to Rich's pace. Eric's arms were waving as he talked, and apparently he was encouraging Rich to pick up speed a little, as they started moving out just a little more. By halfway around the first lap Rich looked a lot less tense, even though he was nowhere in the vicinity of relaxed. It was an improvement, though. As they passed me, starting their second lap, Eric shot me a look, never a pause in whichever joke he was telling to Rich at the time. That one glance contained one part irritation, one part bemusement, and a dash of worry. I shrugged, letting Eric know that I sympathized, but there was nothing more I

could do, given the situation. He gave me one last sour look over his shoulder, and then concentrated on jollying Ingrams.

I was bored, so I took to looking in the stands to see if anybody I knew was watching. Matthew Hartigan, the sports reporter from our local paper, was sitting in the front row, writing in his notebook. I knew that by the start of the game he would be in his customary seat, top row center. Just up from Hartigan was another group I knew. Coach Bill was there with a few kids from the Warriors, along with some parents. I saw Justin, Davey, Kip, and Joey, and another group, sitting on the row right above the kids, consisting of parents. Lori and Wendy were there, and there were a couple of other men and women I didn't know sitting with them. I waved to them all, and Davey and Kip came running down to the fence.

I jogged over to them, and knelt down so I could be face to face with them.

"Hey, guys, how are you doing?" I asked.

"We're good, Sean," said Davey.

"What happened to your arm, Sean?" asked Kip.

"Oh, I hurt it a few days ago. It's okay, though, the doctor said it was going to be fine," I told them.

They both looked at the bandage covering my cut with big eyes.

"Oh," breathed Davey. "Mom told us you got hurt and that you weren't going to be able to play today, but we said we wanted to come and see you, anyway."

What a pair. These kids were the best.

"Thanks, guys," I said. "It means a lot to me that you came. Tell your mom thank you for me, okay?"

"Yup," agreed Kip.

I glanced up into the stands. "Say, who are those other people with your mom, Davey?"

Both of them looked up to where Lori sat with the other grown-ups.

"You mean Mrs. Marcus?" asked Davey.

"No, goof, you know I know her. What about those others?" I pointed.

Davey and Kip both started giggling, looking at each other conspiratorially.

"Can't tell you," said Kip.

"Can't tell me? Why?"

"'Cause," was all he answered.

"Okay, guys, I've got to get back," I said. These kids always put me in a good mood. "Enjoy the game."

"See you later, Sean!" "Bye, Sean!" And they both raced back up the stands to be by their friends.

As I was walking back toward the bench, I looked back into the stands once again, curious to see who was here. I was a little surprised to see that Kayla was there, about halfway up the stands, sitting with a couple of girls I didn't know. I thought she would have been at the football game, watching her brother play. I was also a little surprised at who I didn't see, and after warm-ups, as the team was gathered around getting their gear packed up and drinking some water before going out to play, I knelt down next to Jorge.

"Hey, where's your sister?" I asked.

He looked at me a little sourly. "I think she gone to the J-V game to watch Paco play, man," he said.

That stabbed me a little, even though I really couldn't blame her for going out with somebody else.

"Papa, he still pretty pissed at you, Sean," he continued. "He still telling Kristina that she got to stay away from you, whenever your name come up. I fixed her up with Paco, just so she have somebody to go to the dance with, you know? But he really likes her, and he's been moonin' over her ever since she agreed to go to Homecoming with him. It's gettin' on my nerves, I got to tell you, but she's kind of digging it, you know?"

"Yeah," I said disgustedly. "I know."

"Besides," he said, looking at me critically, "I t'ink some other little *muchacha* is workin' on putting her mark on you." He glanced up into the stands to emphasize his point.

While that news didn't really surprise me, I was startled to know that others had recognized it. Oddly, it didn't displease me at all. In fact, it felt kind of good.

The announcer's voice came out of the loudspeakers with the starting lineups, and Rich started looking a little green again. He was sitting on the bench, like I had told him, but he was sweating as he anticipated hearing his name. Finally, the announcer said, "Playing right defense, a junior, Richard Ingrams!" Rich stood up quickly, intending to run out onto the field to join the starting lineup. He took two steps and tripped over a gear bag. He tumbled to the ground, rolling in a heap. He leapt up and ran as fast as he could out to his teammates, never looking back. The rest of us, the substitutes and the equipment manager and me, groaned over poor Rich's bad luck.

Unfortunately, Rich's troubles were far from over. By the end of the first half, he had been pummeled by our opponents, who had been able to penetrate from his side almost at will, even with Mikey's and Kevin's help, and they had capitalized on their opportunities twice. On the other hand, their defensive players were also fairly weak, so Eric, Javier, and Trent were able to keep us in front on the scoreboard, 4-2.

Rich slumped down on the bench at halftime, panting nearly uncontrollably. Exhaustion oozed from his pores, flowing out with his sweat, as he sat there, arms resting on his knees as he leaned forward, head down. There was no way he could go back on the field for the second half, and everybody, Rich included, knew it. Adam Prince was pacing back and forth, anxious for Coach Neville to give him the word that he would be going in. He was smart enough not to press things by bugging Coach, but his attitude of anticipation was obvious.

Finally, just before the referee blew his whistle to get the teams back on the field for the start of the second half, Coach gestured for Adam. He jogged over to Coach, who quietly told him to prepare to join the starters. Weasel was so giddy he was practically jumping in place. He hopped and jigged over to where the rest of the starters were standing, preparing to run out onto the field. Kevin, Mikey, Brett, and Jorge surrounded him, and started haranguing him about how to play the position. With the four of them in his face, he had no choice but to stand there and take it, but even from where I was standing, I could see he was mad about their instructions.

I walked over and sat down next to Rich. "Tough game," I said, by way of consolation.

He glanced up at me, misery in his eyes. "I fucking blew it, didn't I?"

"Don't worry about it," I tried to reassure him. "They saw a new player in that position, and they attacked. Nothing you could do to help that."

"That's not what I mean, and you know it," he said with some heat. "Don't try to sugarcoat it, Porter. They blew right past me, and there wasn't nothing I could do about it."

I shrugged. "What do you want me to say, Rich? You sucked? Okay, you sucked. So what? We all do, at one time or another. It's a game, that's all."

"Easy for you to say," he said disgustedly. "You weren't the one out there getting your ass torched."

"You'll do better next time, Rich. Look on the bright side. Maybe Weasel will do even worse."

"Now there's a thought to brighten even the darkest day," he said, but he didn't sound like he really meant it.

I stood up and paced up and down for almost the entire second half, watching as we played out the second half. Weasel didn't play very smart. He was all over the place, running around the defensive side of the field and chasing the ball at nearly every opportunity,

tending to get in the way a lot. The Huskies managed to score one more time by attacking the right side, but it was only a salve for them, since the final tally was 7-3. After the final whistle, I saw Kayla wave to her friends and come out onto the field toward me, but before she reached me, Matthew Hartigan found me. He eyed my bandages and my lip.

"Okay, Sean, I can see you're injured, and that's why you weren't playing. How did you get hurt?" He reached into his pocket and started up a small battery-operated cassette recorder.

"It was just... an accident at home," I said.

"Okay," he said dubiously. "What are your injuries?"

"I... uh, I've just got an injured arm," I tried.

"Uh-huh," he said, looking at me. "And the mouth?"

"Oh, yeah, and the mouth," I agreed reluctantly.

"And?"

"And that's about it," I said. I certainly didn't want to bring up the bruised ribs. What kind of accident at home could have accounted for three different and varied injuries like these?

"What is the injury to the arm, Sean?" he persisted.

"I just... it got scraped up pretty bad... when I... fell..."

Just then, Coach Neville stepped up. "Hello, Mr. Hartigan," he said, as he gently but firmly took his elbow and steered him over toward the bench, away from me. "Did you have some questions about tonight's game?" I heard him ask politely as he walked Matthew away. I smiled, grateful for his intervention before I found myself trapped into actually spilling the truth.

Meanwhile, Kayla skipped over and took my good arm in hers.

"Hiya, Sean," she said, tilting her head back to look up at me. *God, she looks so kissable.* But I was not going to do that in front of everybody. She had a wide, happy smile on her face, and the look in her eye indicated that she knew exactly what I was thinking, and was getting a big kick out of my embarrassment.

I will never, ever understand the female mind, I thought to myself, for perhaps the thousandth time.

Keisha, Ayesha, Danielle, and some of the other girlfriends of my teammates were going to wait in the school hallway outside the gymnasium for us to shower and change, and Kayla walked with them in that direction while I rejoined the team as they were headed toward the outside entrance to the locker rooms. I jogged to catch up with Eric and Trent, feeling the tightness in my ribs as I breathed a little deeper. I kept going, however, unwilling to give in to it, and unwilling to give Matt Hartigan anything more to speculate upon, just in case he was watching.

"Hey, Seanster, what's up?" Eric said with a smile. He glanced quickly over to where Kayla was joining up with Keisha and Ayesha. "Got another one on the line?"

"Hey, Eric," said Trent. "What was that joke you were telling me earlier? Something about cradles and robbers?"

They both laughed uproariously.

"Very funny," I mumbled. "She just happens to be Jake's little sister. She's a friend."

"Unh-hunh," agreed Eric with great humor. "If you say so, Porter." He chuckled. "If'n you say so, boss."

The post-game analysis from Coach Neville was brief. He was not happy with the way the entire defensive team had played, and though he carefully refrained from specifically mentioning the right side, nearly all of the players in question knew they were standing in the unwanted glare of his attention. The one exception to that awareness seemed to be Adam Prince, who was still acting like he was full of nervous energy. You could practically see him quivering as he attempted, and failed, to stand still. He was looking around the room, as if he was wondering why he wasn't being congratulated for playing such a stellar game, unaware that Coach was referring to him, along with the other defensive players. I had a feeling that the

thick skin he was exhibiting would do him ill among his teammates again sometime.

Rich Ingrams, on the other hand, was sitting on a bench. Even though he had Anthony sitting next to him on his right, and Jorge on his left, he still looked as if he was sitting all alone, hunched over and depressingly introspective.

Coach finally dismissed us. The guys who didn't play in the game headed out the door, while the rest wandered to their lockers, so they could strip off their sweat-stained game uniforms and get into the shower. I waited around for the guys to finish up, swapping jokes and lies with Eric, Jorge, Trent, and the rest, and pointedly ignoring Weasel's pathetic attempts to join in the comradeship.

I waited for Eric and Trent to finish up, and the three of us walked out to the hallway to meet up with the girls. As we all headed out to the parking lot, I couldn't help but look around nervously, on the lookout for potential trouble, but there were just a few cars in the lot, and no sign of any of the Bulls. Kayla, perhaps sensing my mood, took my right hand in her left, and we followed Eric and Keisha, also holding hands, over to my car. Kay and I hopped into the front seat, and I draped my arm around her as she slid over quite naturally, across the bench seat, next to me. Eric and his girlfriend got into the back seat and cuddled up close as I drove us all over to Mike's Pizza Palace, where we were meeting Trent and Danielle, along with Anthony and Ayesha. We commandeered a big round table, and the eight of us spent the rest of that Friday night stuffing our faces with fried mozzarella sticks, pepperoni pizza, and Cokes. I still had to chew carefully because of my lip, but I was willing to accept a little pain in exchange for the good times we shared around that table.

The other three couples were going to a movie, but since my evening with Kayla was kind of improvised, we decided that she should be getting home. She was just turning fifteen, and even though her parents knew she was out with a group of kids that

included me, she still had a curfew she needed to obey. Besides, even though I wouldn't have admitted it to any of my friends, I was looking forward to crawling into my own bed. I was pretty tired, and it wasn't even ten o'clock. I was beginning to feel old and creaky, and I didn't even play in the game.

We waved goodnight to the others, and got into the car. As we were waiting for it to warm up, Kayla once again slid over to sit next to me. She took my arm and purposefully wrapped it around her shoulder, and she leaned lightly against me in the car. I figured, *what the hell, now was as good an opportunity as any,* so I leaned down and gingerly, softly, kissed her willing mouth.

She put her hand to my neck and held me there, kissing me back very gently, ever mindful of my cut lip. She turned slightly to me, so I wouldn't have to contort myself to be kissing her, and we stayed that way until hot air was churning out of the vents.

We stopped kissing and just held each other closely for a few moments, each lost in our own thoughts.

"Kay?"

"Hmmmm?" she answered.

"Do you think your parents would let you go out on an actual date with me?"

She looked over, into my eyes. "Why wouldn't they?" she asked.

"I don't know," I said, looking away. "I'm older, and... I don't know..."

"Besides," she said with a giggle, "don't you think you should ask me first? Maybe I won't go out with you."

I whipped around to look at her, just a little panicky at her words, until I saw her smiling.

"Hey, Porter, I'm just teasing you. Why don't you ask me and find out for sure?"

"Uh, okay. Do you want to go out with me sometime?"

She hesitated, evidently enjoying my discomfort. "I don't know, what did you have in mind?"

Well, I didn't have anything in mind, just a general idea that I'd like to go out with her. Now I had to scramble to come up with something. "Well," I said lamely, "how about a movie? Tomorrow night?"

It was her turn to be embarrassed. "I can't, tomorrow night," she said quietly, turning away.

"Oh." I was very disappointed, and very confused. *Didn't she just indicate that she wanted to go out with me?*

"But next weekend I can," she offered, turning back to me, an anxious look on her face.

"Really? Okay, next Saturday? Because, like, I'll have a game again on Friday, and..."

"Saturday is good," she said as I fumbled for words. "And maybe we can meet your friends again after the game on Friday," she added.

"Sure!" Now I was excited. *She did want to go out with me, after all!*

Kayla sat back, looking satisfied about the arrangements, but something was still bothering me.

"Kay? Why can't you go out tomorrow?"

She turned away from me just a little. "I already have a date," she said quietly.

My heart thumped once, and then seemed to stop. I felt like I should pound on my chest to get it going again, but before I did, it started back up again on its own.

"A date?" I repeated stupidly.

She turned back to me, and put both arms around my neck. She gave me a soft peck on the lips, careful to stay clear of my stitches. "Yes, a date," she said, no longer embarrassed about it. "I just couldn't wait forever for you to notice me again, could I?"

"What?" I wasn't sure I understood.

"But next weekend is for you," she said with a smile. She disentangled herself from me, and sat back in the seat.

My mind was buzzing. “Say, is this date tomorrow with Bronson, or Branson, or whatever his name is?” I asked.

“Brandon,” she corrected. “And yes, it is.”

“You’ve been going out with him since the summer,” I said. “If you’re willing to go out with me next weekend, what about him?”

She looked at me coquettishly. “Drive,” she said. She pointed at the clock on the dashboard. *Yikes.* I had to get her home, and quickly. I dropped the car into drive, and we headed down the street. The time distracted me from getting an answer to my question, which might have been her plan. However, as we pulled into the driveway at her house, she leaned over one last time, gave me a soft kiss full of promise, and whispered, “Brandon’s okay, but I’ve just been using him for practice, and he knows it.”

I really wanted to kiss her back, but I also had to ask the question.

“Practice for what?” I asked.

She looked at me, a small and enigmatic smile on her lips, before she slid over to grasp the door handle on her side and open the door. “For when you finally saw me there again, waiting for you,” she said.

She slipped out of the car gracefully, held the door open as she gazed back in at me meaningfully, and then closed the car door. Without a glance back, Kayla walked up her driveway to her front door. She opened it and entered her house, never once looking back. The door closed, leaving me feeling unaccountably alone and a little emptier without her presence.

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A BETTER KISS

Monday was a really good day. My mom took the morning off from work again, and I took the morning off from school, and we went to the doctor's office to have all my stitches taken out. After examining my various healing wounds, the doctor pronounced me as progressing nicely, and he removed almost all restrictions from activities. He did caution me that my ribs would still need a lot of time, and he told me not to go into the weight room and stress my arm for a couple more weeks. On the other hand, he also told me that he didn't need to see me again unless a problem cropped up, giving me pretty much a clean bill of health.

I was at school by lunchtime, and I slid into my customary seat next to Luscious, who was happy to take my hand and hold it in her lap, as usual. I quickly got caught up on the main topic of gossip for that morning, which was the temporary return of Jilly Del Toro to school. Dr. Osgood, apparently having been tipped off to the return of Jilly, was standing at the main entrance, waiting for him, and he hustled Del Toro into his office as he entered school. There was a lot

of speculation about what Jilly's fate at school would be, especially when it was learned that his mother was called in to speak to Dr. Osgood, too. The smart money was on the prospect of Jilly being assigned to "Outreach Alternative Learning," our education board's euphemism for reform school.

The other members of his little band of outlaws, Joey Amonte, Harold Barnes, Vinnie Arilio, Pammy Lipschutz, and the others, were all staying after school each and every night for detention, in an open-ended sentence that was agreed upon by both the school administration and each kid's parents. They were watched over in one of the study hall rooms by Miss Gladys Epstein, a tough, no-nonsense, battleship of a schoolteacher who brooked absolutely no nonsense under her watch. Miss Epstein stood over each of them in turn, looking over their shoulders as they hunched down and did schoolwork. If, either through a lenient teacher or through some attempt at deception, any of them claimed not to have any schoolwork to do, Miss Epstein, a member of our high school's English Department for over thirty-five years, assigned her own work to do. The first time she did this, it was reported, Vinnie protested, threatening to go to Dr. Osgood to complain. The next day at detention, Dr. Osgood, himself a former history teacher, was in attendance with Miss Epstein, and supported her intent to keep the miscreants busy through additional assignments by giving each of them a history project they had to do for him, in addition to their regular homework and the work assigned by Miss Epstein.

If nothing else, Miss Epstein was bound and determined to teach the rascals something in an intellectual capacity before they left her sphere of influence, according to kids who had to suffer a day or two in the same detention room as the Bulls. She was steely in her determination, even if it meant having the bunch of them in the room with her five days a week, until the end of the school year. The mere prospect of enduring Miss Epstein's detention room for the foreseeable future was enough, according to the rumors floating

about, to make at least Harold and Pammy consider dropping out of school altogether.

The other interesting topic of conversation concerned the article that Matthew Hartigan wrote for our local paper. The top headline of the sports section read *Bears Extend Streak to 12-0*, not a particularly surprising headline about the soccer team. What disconcerted me, however, was the sub-head, just below the headline and in slightly smaller type, but still large: *Porter Injured; Sits Out Game.*

Jesus H. Freakin' Christ, I thought to myself. *Why is the fact that I sat out a game so newsworthy?*

The article started out: "The Bears soccer team, ranked as one of the best in the state, extended their unbeaten streak to twelve in a row, beating the Lakewood Huskies 7-3 on the offensive firepower of Trent Abbott and Eric Johnson. Surprisingly, the win was achieved without the defensive help of Sean Porter, the All-State defenseman for the Bears, who was sidelined with an injury. Worse news for the Bears is that Porter may be out for their next game, against the always tough Rockton Heights Jaguars."

Just great, I thought glumly. *Now the whole world knows.*

Determined to try to recapture my good mood, I asked Kayla how her date on Saturday went. She pointedly ignored my question, so I wisely let the subject lapse. Sometimes I was fortunate enough to remember not to stick my foot firmly between my molars, and that happened to be one of those times. We finished up lunch by not talking about the past weekend, nor mentioning the coming one.

That afternoon I suited up with the rest of the team in my practice gear, and joined them as they headed out to the track to run some warm-up laps. I had removed the bindings from around my chest, and I was feeling deliciously free and reasonably healthy, now that I was down to just a small covering over my healing arm. That feeling lasted about three-quarters of the way around the track, until reality hit. I started trying to take deeper breaths as I jogged, and found that my ribs still were going to restrict me from exerting myself too much.

I let Eric and Trent move out ahead of me as I slowed to a more sedate speed, trying to find a balance between my need for aerobic exercise and my efforts to keep from breathing too deeply. By the time I finished my second lap, I was down to practically a walk, and the rest of the team had lapped me at least once. Weasel, Eric, Jorge, and Anthony had passed me twice. Eric slapped my back each time he passed me by, almost like he was telling me that my betters were gliding on past, as if I didn't realize already that I was slowing down practically with each step.

As we gathered on the sidelines of the main practice field and stretched out, Prince jogged over to Coach Neville. I happened to be near enough to hear most of the conversation.

"Coach?" asked Weasel. "Since I played the entire second half of the game, are you going to keep me in the starting lineup?"

Coach didn't even look up from his clipboard. "No," was all he said.

Weasel's face got red, but his voice was calm. "Why not, Coach?"

Coach Neville now looked up, his face carefully neutral. "Because Mr. Ingrams is the designated starter in that position."

"But..."

"End of discussion, Mr. Prince," said Coach, going back to studying his notes on his clipboard.

Weasel's posture spoke of defiance. "Okay, then, in that case, I want to issue a challenge to Ingrams for his spot," said Weasel.

Coach looked up at him, over the rim of his glasses, and sighed. "You do insist on being an irritant," he said. "However, I can see that you will be persistent in this, won't you? All right, I will abide by the rules I set out at the beginning of the season. You may challenge Mr. Ingrams. Challenge match to be played tomorrow at practice." He looked hard at Weasel, conveying his displeasure. He spoke in chopped words. "Is. There. Anything. Else. Mr. Prince."

Weasel gulped, backpedaling a couple of steps. "No, sir," he said. "Thank you, Coach." And he turned back to the team, a satisfied

smile on his face until he saw his twenty teammates, all scowling at him. His smile faltered as he realized he might have a problem finding someone who would be willing to partner up with him on this challenge.

When Coach Simonson was done setting up the field for the day's drills, Coach Neville blew his whistle and explained the day's activities. I participated the best I could during the passing and shooting drills. After about an hour, we headed in to the physical education classroom to watch the film of our previous game. I knew a number of players who were not going to enjoy the analysis that was coming, especially Rich Ingrams, but for once, I didn't have to concentrate too hard on what the tape would show. I settled back to watch.

* * * * * * * * * *

After our warm-up laps on Tuesday, Coach Neville announced that it was time for the challenge to be played.

"Mr. Prince, who is your teammate?"

Weasel stood up. "Brett," he said, pointing to our stopper.

Brett looked pretty disgusted, but he stood, anyway.

"Mr. Ingrams?"

Rich stood, and said, "Jimmy Brooks."

Jimmy hopped up, having apparently agreed previously to play for Rich. Coach Neville took the four boys with him over to another field, and Coach Simonson got the rest of us to our feet to work on passing schemes. We all just kind of stumbled around, half-heartedly working at the drill, more interested in finding out how the challenge would turn out.

It didn't take long, and we could tell by the body language of the returning players that Weasel had won his challenge. Jimmy and

Brett were just walking along, as if nothing much had happened, while Rich was trudging behind them, head down. Weasel, on the other hand, was jigging and jogging up in front, next to Coach Neville, yelling and pumping his fist in the air. Eric turned to Trent and me.

"Shit. Now he's gonna be even more obnoxious to be around," he said sourly.

"Look on the bright side," said Trent. "We're playing Rockland on Friday night. Maybe he'll get burned even worse than Rich did last week."

Eric just looked at him. "That's the bright side?" he asked. "We could lose big against a strong team like that, if that's the case."

"So what?" said Trent. "One loss all season long? We'll still carry home field advantage into the playoffs."

"Only if we don't lose the next game, too," reminded Eric.

Trent's face fell. "Oh, yeah," he said. He turned to me. "But you'll be back for that game, won't you, Sean?"

"Maybe," I said. "But that might not mean much. The way I've been able to play so far doesn't bode well for a very successful return."

"Ah, I wouldn't worry too much about it, Porter," said Eric. "Even hurt and practically bled out, you'd still play stronger than Ingrams or Weasel."

"Maybe you think so," I said. "But from the inside looking out, let me tell you, it hurts."

"Well," said Eric, eyeing my face critically, "I'd say, by the look of it, from the inside your face must hurt like hell, because it's killing me to have to look at the outside of it."

I swung at him, but he easily stepped back, as both he and Trent laughed hard at my expense.

* * * * * * * * * *

Jake and Kayla were still coming over to my house after school most evenings, so we could all do our homework together. After practice on Monday, I had told them about how decrepit I had felt trying to run laps. Jake was getting enough of a workout at football practice every night, but Kay suggested that she could bring some running clothes, and she and I could go for short runs after we finished our homework. We decided that, beginning Tuesday, Jake would load up his car with Kay's books and backpack and stuff after we had finished our work and drive back home. Kay and I would jog together back to their house, where I would drop her off, and jog back home. I figured it was as good a way as I knew to get my legs and my wind back.

That first night, Kayla stepped into our downstairs bathroom and changed out of her school clothes into running gear. She came out and handed her duffel bag to her brother to put in his car. He took it and headed out the front door, while I just stood and stared. Her pale blonde hair was tied back in a ponytail that still reached to below her shoulders, with just a few wisps floating free to frame the sides of her face. She was wearing a shorty pink t-shirt that left her flat tummy bare, and baggy black silk running shorts that seemed to accentuate her long, lean legs. She had a zippered, hooded sweatshirt over her arm as she stopped, fully aware of my admiring gaze. She smiled and struck a pose.

"You approve?" she asked with a smile.

"Do I ever," I said admiringly, struck anew by how absolutely gorgeous she was.

"Sean?"

I started, having been caught staring. "Uh, yeah?" I said hoarsely.

"Don't you think you should change, too?"

"Yeah," I mumbled. "I'll go change." I stumbled toward the stairs. "But you, Luscious," I added, "don't you ever change."

She smiled at me, a bright and happy grin that made her even more beautiful. I found it difficult to turn away from her and clomp up the stairs so I could throw on running clothes.

By the time I got back downstairs, Jake had already taken off. I called out to my mom, in the family room, that I would be back from jogging within an hour. Kayla had already put on her sweatshirt, and we headed out the back door and walked down the sidewalk.

"An hour?" she asked.

"Well, it's only a couple of blocks to your house," I said. "We need to take the long way there."

So we started out, heading in the opposite direction from her house. We intended to jog about a mile, circling around in the direction of the park where I had worked with the boys, and coming back toward the Lehigh residence from the other side. We went slowly, and even at that, I had to stop every couple of blocks to walk for about one hundred feet to catch my breath. We would step it back up for another quarter of a mile or so, and then walk again, until, about forty minutes later, we were walking the last partial block to Kayla's house. I was wheezing, hands on my hips as I walked, trying without much success to get my aching ribs to stop squeezing, and yet Kayla looked relaxed and flush and ready to go a few more miles.

I walked her to her back door. The outside light was on, a pool of yellow light splashing across the wooden steps. She stepped up onto the first step, and turned back to me in anticipation. I leaned forward and up, now that she was just over my height, and kissed her softly. She put her arms around my neck, holding me close to her as she gave in to the kiss. After a few moments, we broke the kiss, but she held on to me, looking me straight in the eye.

"Is your lip okay now?" she whispered.

"Yeah, it's fine," I said.

"No pain? No swelling?"

"Nope. It's okay. A little tender, but no pain."

"So you can give me a good kiss, then?" she asked, a gleam in her eye.

"That wasn't a good kiss?" I asked teasingly.

She looked at me, her head slightly cocked. "I've had better," she said, a saucy gleam in her eye.

"Oh, really?" I asked. "From who?"

She gave me one last, quick peck on the lips, and let go. As she leapt up the last two steps and grasped the door handle, she turned back to me. "Whom," she said.

"What?" I asked, confused again.

"No, not 'what'. And not 'who', either. It's not 'from who', it's 'from whom'. Ain't you had no proper schooling?" And, with a giggle, she slipped through the open door, and I was alone again. I just shook my head, confused as usual, and started slowly jogging back home, wondering where my grasp of our conversation had slipped from my question to her slick evasion. It was like she was having a battle of wits with a woefully unarmed adversary.

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It was amazing how quickly a reasonably fit and healthy young body could recuperate. Between working with the team and jogging with Kayla, by Friday I was feeling more and more like I was supposed to. I still had to take it pretty easy, but I was able to control the spasms my ribs would create to make me slow down. I could run, slowly, for much longer, and I didn't have to concentrate so much on placing one foot in front of the other.

Our game was an away game, while the football team was playing at home. Kayla told me that she would be going to the

football game to watch her brother, and she would get Jake to drop her off at Mike's Pizza Palace after the game.

I sat next to Rich on the bus to the game. Even though he was disappointed that he had lost the challenge to Weasel, deep down he was happier that he could revert to his comfortable position as a reserve, ready to enter a game in progress and contribute.

About three rows up toward the front, Weasel and Brett were sitting by themselves. I thought Brett was a little taken aback by how quickly he was ostracized, aligned with Prince because of the challenge match, and how quickly most of the rest of the team stepped back, treating him with the same cool detachment that was given to Prince.

Rockton Heights was the team that handed us our only loss the previous season, up until the semi-finals of the state tournament. They were a big school, the biggest in our conference. They had a large student population from which they could draw their athletes, so all their sports teams were powerful, especially when they played on their home fields. In the last Metro Times, we were ranked third in the state, but Rockton was also in the Top Twenty. We expected a very tough game, but we were confident that they would have a hard time containing our offense. As long as our defensive players held to our game plan, we should be able to come home with our thirteenth victory of the season.

We unloaded our gear bags and moved as a group out to the sidelines of the field. The stands were about half full, a very respectable crowd for a soccer game.

Coach Neville called out, "Mr. Prince and Mr. Porter, please." He walked a dozen steps away from the rest of the team. Weasel and I followed him.

"Mr. Prince, this is a very dangerous team," admonished Coach. "Even though Rockton's big guns from last year have graduated, they still returned seven of their starters." He turned to me, placing a hand on my shoulder. "Mr. Porter had the opportunity to play this

team twice last year. He will tell you what you can expect in your area. Listen to him well, and heed his advice." With that, he withdrew to speak a few words to the rest of the team.

Weasel looked at me. "Well?" I could tell he was anxious to get back and get ready to play.

I shrugged. "I don't know what to tell you. Like Coach said, their best players graduated. But I'd bet that they've watched tape of our game last week."

"So?" He was playing at being stubborn. I was tempted to just let him learn while doing, so to speak. Trial by fire. Instead, I heeded Coach's unspoken request.

"Just shut up and listen for a moment." His face got red as his anger quotient went up, but he kept his mouth shut. "If they studied anything of last week's game, they're going to know that their best chance is on your side. You only played one half, so they really couldn't get a feel of your game. That, plus you were bouncing around the field like you were on a pogo stick."

"I..."

"Listen up, Weasel, I'm not going to tell you again. Stay home, be the guardian of your own borders. Kevin and Mikey will guard their own interiors, they don't need your help. Listen to what Jorge has to say, and don't poach into anybody else's areas unless you're invited. Okay?"

"But..."

"Ain't no buts about it. If you run around without purpose again, like you did last week, Coach is going to yank you out before you can work up a sweat. Understand?"

"Yeah, but..."

"Understand?" I growled.

His mouth snapped shut and nodded tersely. I nodded back, and did an about-face and walked back to rejoin my team. Weasel followed silently.

As visitors, we got the opening kickoff, and our offensive set started. I kept watch on the right side. Weasel tried to stay in position, guarding his own turf, but it was a struggle for him. When Rockton cleared the ball down the center, he ended up standing right next to Mike Evanson as he trapped the ball and started dribbling back up toward the centerline. Mikey passed it off over to Eric, on the left, and started yelling at Weasel to get back into his position. I couldn't hear his words, but Prince's body language spoke of an injured innocence. He was probably saying something like "What did I do?" to Mikey.

And, to make matters worse, he was still paying more attention to defending himself to Mikey than defending against Rockton Heights, as the ball came sailing through the air on a clearing kick from the Jaguars' sweeper. It flew over Kevin's head and bounced down the sidelines, being chased down by the left forward for Rockton, who gathered it up, angled in behind Mikey and Weasel, and took a shot at Jorge, standing watch in goal. Jorge dove at the ball and landed, arms outstretched, holding the ball in his fingertips. He scrambled to his feet, punted the ball, and then started jawing at both Mike and Weasel about being flatfooted on the play. He was so angry I could hear him lapse into Spanish in the middle of his tirade. Mikey turned away, embarrassed that he had lost concentration, and focused on the game again. Weasel, on the other hand, turned and began arguing with Jorge, until, finally, Coach Simonson's voice cut through the babble to grab his attention. Looking only a little more chastised, Weasel moved back into his position.

But, as far as Coach Neville was concerned, the damage was done. As soon as we had a throw-in, Coach called for a substitution, and he pulled Prince out. He played Rich Ingrams for the balance of the first half.

Coach Neville preferred to run his games with few substitutions, but in the second half he went to a different tactic. He freely substituted Weasel and Rich, keeping them rotated about every five

minutes, not letting either of them get too winded, nor too comfortable out on the field. It also changed the tempo of the game, and that worked, surprisingly, to our advantage. At the final whistle, we walked off the field with a 2-1 victory, feeling like we had stolen something and escaped.

By the time we had taken the long bus ride back to our school, and had sat through Coach Neville's post-game summary, showered and changed, it was later than I thought I would be. I rode over to Mike's Pizza Palace with Eric and Trent, half expecting to find that Kayla had gotten bored and gone off somewhere else with her friends. She was there, with Jake, Jaimie, Tiny, Erica, and a few others. The soccer girls, Keisha and Danielle and Ayesha, were holding another big table, right next to them. A bunch of kids from school walked in the door a few minutes later, and suddenly the place was filled up with friends, a warm and happy hangout for us on a cold Friday night.

Just before eleven o'clock, Kayla and I piled into the back seat of Jake's car. Jaimie got in the front passenger bucket seat, and looked a little sourly back at Kayla and me, cuddling on the rear bench seat.

"Not fair," she grumbled. "We can't sit close like that up here."

I smiled at her. "Maybe next week I'll drive, and you two can ride in the back," I offered. Her face brightened at that.

"Maybe a double-date?" she suggested. "To the drive-in?"

Kayla laughed out loud. "Like your parents would let you go to a drive-in movie," she said.

Jaimie looked a little crestfallen. "You're right," she grumbled.

Jake, meanwhile, had gotten behind the wheel and started up the car. "Hey, they don't have to know you're going to a drive-in," he said. "Just tell them you're going to a movie with Kay."

Jaimie's eyes lit up. "Now, that's an idea," she said. She leaned over and rewarded him with a quick kiss on the cheek.

"Yowzah!" he said happily. He dropped the car into gear and drove out of the parking lot and toward my house.

I had Kayla wrapped up in my arms, and she was contentedly bundled up, her head resting between my arm and shoulder, one arm hugging me around my waist. We had winter coats on, so our actual contact was minimal, but we were cozy anyway. We stayed that way, all the way home.

Jake pulled into my driveway, and I disentangled myself from Kayla, who grumbled softly, complaining about losing her nice, warm cushion. I gave her one soft kiss, too aware that her brother was sitting in the front seat, pointedly looking straight ahead. I opened the car door and bade them all good night.

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On Saturday night, Kayla and I went to the local movie complex. Fortunately, there was a kid from our school working the ticket window. He sold us two tickets to *Arthur*, a PG-rated comedy starring Dudley Moore, but then he told us quietly to sneak into *Body Heat*, an R-rated film, instead. Kayla turned to the door as I was collecting my change, and the kid behind the glass gave me a quick wink.

We slipped quietly into the room showing the movie, and found two seats near the back, against the far wall. I had heard *Body Heat* was a great date movie, but Kay didn't know anything about it. We took off our coats and settled back as the previews came on. Before the main attraction had started, I had my arm around her, and she was nestled up to me, her arm and hand resting along the top of my leg.

I could have stayed like that forever, but as the movie progressed, Kay sat up in her seat, still glued to my side, and watched the unfolding drama raptly. I still had my arm draped around her shoulder, and she was clutching that hand as the tension built. And

then, when that scene comes on (You remember the scene, don't you? The one where William Hurt and Kathleen Turner are staring at each other through the window, and he picks up the chair and breaks through the window to get to her?), and the two characters practically attack each other in their passion, Kayla squeaked just a little, and subconsciously pressed the palm of my hand firmly against her small breast. Her chest was heaving, and each breath she was taking was pressing her boob harder against my hand, giving us both electric thrills that seemed to match the fireworks being displayed on the screen.

We stayed like that for quite a long time, even after the movie settled back down into a noir detective story, until, at long last, my arm started cramping from being torqued around her neck. I gently removed my hand from its soft resting place, lifted my complaining arm from around her shoulder, and took her hand in mine. She grasped my hand with both of hers, nested in her lap, and we finished the movie just like that. We stayed in just that same position as the credits rolled and the house lights came up. People began filing out of the theater, until we were practically the last ones left. She turned to me with shining eyes.

"That was incredible," she said.

I smiled at her. "So you liked the movie? Good."

"Oh, the movie was okay," she said. "That part in the rain, though. I've never seen anything like that before."

"What part in the rain?" I asked teasingly. "It rained for practically the whole movie."

She slapped my arm. "Come on, I know you know what I mean." She sighed. "You're more of a romantic than you like to let on, Sean." She favored me with another smile as we stood and put our coats on.

She sat next to me all the way over to the pizza parlor, huddled up and holding my arm. The place was crowded with kids, but we managed to commandeer a booth near the kitchen, and we sat side-

by-side, sipping Cokes from big, clunky tornado-shaped glasses, and grabbing handfuls of fries dipped in ketchup.

Since Kayla's curfew was eleven o'clock, we couldn't stay there long, and it was after ten-thirty before we managed to say our goodbyes to friends we had run into at the restaurant. I started up the car, and we sat on the chilly vinyl seat, huddled together, waiting for the heater to kick in.

The fan was set to high, and warm air was pumping out of the vents as I pulled out of the parking lot. We drove aimlessly for a few minutes, content to be sitting close to each other, until the time forced us to turn toward home. With about ten minutes to go, I stopped on the street, a block away from Kayla's, and switched off the lights, leaving the car running. We turned to each other there, and I could see the light from a distant streetlamp reflecting off her bright eyes. Her mouth was slightly open, perhaps anticipating my touch, and I leaned down, enfolding her within my arms, and kissed her soft and pliant lips. I heard her make a soft sound of pleasure, and my eyes closed as I concentrated on the erotic pleasure of her lips moving slightly, adjusting to the pressure and the moisture of our kiss.

She let me take the lead, content to wait until I couldn't stand it any longer. I let my tongue slip out and brush against the slight gap of her mouth, licking and caressing her lips. Her lips parted just a little, and her tongue darted out to meet the tip of mine, and we played a sensuous cat-and-mouse game with each other, dipping and sliding and darting and testing.

I felt her shift slightly on the seat, and I slipped my hand under the flap of her coat, feeling the soft, fuzzy nap of her sweater against my fingers. She shifted again, and my hand found the harder material beneath the sweater of her bra, and the softer swell of her encased breast. My hand reflexively flexed, lightly squeezing her soft flesh, and her passion, demonstrated through a more insistent pressure of her kiss, got hotter.

Unfortunately, it was all over almost before we had begun, as we both were aware of the inexorable movement of time working against us as we worked each other up into fevers we would not be able to quench. Reluctantly, we broke our kiss, and we straightened up in our seats. Without a word, I dropped the car into gear once again, and drove the last, short block to her driveway, just as the hands of the clock on the dashboard moved to the top of the hour. Kayla slid over and opened the passenger door, and I got out the driver's side. I walked her to her front door. Just as we got there, Jake's car came barreling down the street, swinging into the driveway, next to my car. Jake hopped out and came up the sidewalk toward us, and our mood was broken.

"How you doing, Seanster?" said Jake, pounding my back in greeting, a big smile on his face.

"I was doing good, until you showed up," I grumbled.

"We'll talk about that another time," he said threateningly, but I knew he was joking. After all, it was Jake.

"Good night, Sean," said Kayla softly. Her mouth was smiling, but her eyes told me she was sorry for the interruption, too. She leaned in and whispered in my ear, "That was a better kiss." I thought she was blushing just a little when she turned back to open the door.

"Yeah, g'night, Sean," called out Jake. He pushed Kayla into the house and, with an evil grin, shut the door in my face.

My best friend, I thought grumpily.

But, on the other hand, I was lusting after my best friend's sister. So maybe he had a legitimate point, even if his methods were crude. I mentally shrugged, and turned and headed back to my car.

I had a hard time getting to sleep that night, thinking about the movie, and thinking about the body heat of the girl who had been sitting next to me, holding me tightly to her bosom.

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ANXIOUS TO GET BACK TO THE GAME

Just before practice on Monday, Coach Neville called me into his office.

"How are you feeling, Mr. Porter?" He sat back in his chair, taking his glasses off.

"I feel pretty good," I replied.

"Your doctors have given you their permission to resume playing?"

"Yes, sir. My only real restriction from the doctors was to stay out of the weight room for a couple of weeks after the stitches came out." He smiled briefly, knowing full well that I was only an occasional visitor to the weight rooms, anyway. "And they warned me that my ribs would take a long time to completely heal, but they would provide their own method of restraint."

"Which has proven to be the case," he said.

"Yes, sir, but I have been running more and more, and they've either gotten better, or else I've been learning to control it better."

"That's good. That's very good. Now, I don't want to hurry you into coming back into the lineup until you are ready, so I am relying on your judgment to let me know when you want to try playing. As you know, this week's game is the last game of the regular season. The playoffs start next week. I would like to get you into a game, if even for just a few minutes, by the first playoff game. We're going to need you to be as strong as you can be by the second round of the playoffs, so I'm giving you almost three weeks to get ready."

"I don't need three weeks, Coach. I want to play this Friday."

"Sean, I don't know..."

"Let me at least start the game, Coach, and if I'm having trouble, you can take me out. But I think I'm almost ready now, and I know I'll be ready by game day."

He sighed, and pinched the bridge of his nose, his glasses dangling from his little finger. "That's very optimistic, Sean, and I should tell you, I've been getting some telephone calls these past few weeks. There are a lot of scouts who want to watch you play. I've been trying to put them off, but it's getting harder to make them readjust their schedules to accommodate ours. You would best be served if they could see you at full strength."

"Scouts? You mean, besides Pickett Cropper?"

He looked startled. "You've talked to Cropper?"

"Well, yes, I have. He called me a couple of weeks ago."

He gave me a tight smile. "Coach Cropper is a very forceful personality," he said a little ruefully. "He squeezed a lot more information out of both me and Dr. Osgood than either of us wanted to give." He grinned openly. "He's got his sights set on you, I think. His interest will bring even more focus on you, and on your teammates. Hopefully, some of the spotlight will spill onto Mr. Abbott and Mr. Johnson, too. They deserve a chance at playing at the next level."

"Let 'em come, Coach. I'm ready to play. I can't tell you how buzzed I am, just thinking about getting back into a game."

"Well, you'll get your chance this Friday, Mr. Porter, if that's what you'd like," he finished. He stood up, and put his glasses back on. "Shall we go out to practice?"

"Yes, sir!" I hopped up, pumped about getting ready for Friday. I was really anxious to get back to the game.

It was painful, but I worked hard on Monday and Tuesday at practices, and Kayla and I increased our distances in the evenings. I was running or jogging the whole way around by then, with no rest stops. If I needed to catch my breath because of a short faster section, I just slowed my pace until I could jog comfortably and wait for my breathing to normalize. I felt great, a feeling that was no doubt enhanced by the presence of the girl I was now admitting, at least to myself, was my girlfriend.

Wednesday's practice, however, did not go quite so well as the earlier days. It all started at the end of practice for the day, when Coach Neville stepped into the locker room as we were taking off our soccer shoes and shin guards.

"If I may have the team's attention for just one moment," called out Coach. He waited for the general hubbub to quiet down. "For this Friday's game, we are reverting to our original starting lineup."

A lot of the players were looking at each other, not sure quite what Coach meant by his statement. He could tell that his announcement wasn't very clear, so he explained. "That is, Sean Porter will be returning to his customary position at right defense."

Kevin said loudly, "All right!" There was a buzz of happy agreement from my teammates, which made me feel pretty darn good.

"Bullshit!" barked Adam Prince. He was in the next row over from me and most of the rest of the team. "That's my position!"

Coach peered over toward Weasel over the top of his glasses. "It was yours on a temporary basis, Mr. Prince, and you know it."

"No, I didn't know it!" shouted Prince. "You gave it to Ingrams when Porter went down, and I won it from him, fair and square!"

That set up a lot of grumbling among my teammates.

"So?" said Eric. "All that means is that you won the temporary assignment."

"No fucking way," yelled Weasel. "I won the position, not the temporary assignment."

"One more outburst like that and you will be benched for the remainder of the season," warned Coach. "This is not your decision to make. Mr. Porter is our starting defenseman. End of discussion."

I stood up. "You know what, Coach? Maybe it would be a fair test for me." I walked over to the next row of lockers, where Weasel was sitting. He was, for all intents and purposes, sitting by himself. The nearest player was four or five lockers down from him, another bench player. Nobody else wanted to be near him, even just to change clothes. "Okay, Weasel, I challenge you for the position. If you can find another player who's willing to defend for you, that is. If nobody stands up for you, you lose by default. Deal?"

"You're fucking toast, Porter," he mumbled. He made sure he said it soft enough that Coach didn't hear him though.

"What did you say?" I asked. He was starting to really irritate me. I took a step closer to him, and Rich Ingrams, of all people, stood up and stepped in front of me.

"I said, you've got a deal," spat Prince.

"Tomorrow at the beginning of practice, then?" I turned to Coach, who gave a reluctant assenting nod. "Eric?" I looked over my shoulder. "You want to help me teach this young 'un a thing or two about the game?"

I got a chuckle from most of the team. Eric came around and stood next to me. "It will be my pleasure, my good man," he said in his best British accent. He flipped Weasel the bird, and sauntered back to his own locker. I followed him back to my own, and sat down to finish stripping off my sweaty uniform. I was committed. My starting position depended on beating Weasel the next day, and I felt I was ready.

On Thursday, Eric and I jogged out of the locker rooms and over to the track. I was pretty confident that Weasel wasn't going to be able to talk any of our teammates into playing with him on the challenge, especially after hearing from a lot of them during the course of the day, offering encouragement and support. After our first lap, however, Coach waved us off the track and over to him. He had a disgusted look on his face.

"Your challenge match awaits," he said. He gestured over toward one of the far practice fields. Eric and I looked over. One of the figures was definitely Weasel, but I couldn't tell who the second person was. Coach was silent as we walked over toward the field. Whoever Weasel had talked into playing was going to get an earful from me, and was going to be run off his feet by Eric, who was walking next to me, scowling.

I didn't even recognize the kid waiting with Weasel. Coach Neville did the introductions.

"Gentlemen, the defenders are Adam Prince and Larry Endicott. The challengers are Sean Porter and Eric Johnson." Coach turned to Eric and me. "Mr. Endicott is a freshman from the Junior Varsity team."

"What?" I asked incredulously. *Is he serious?*

Endicott turned to Weasel. "What's going on here, Adam? You said you wanted me to play with you, that it was a challenge match, but you didn't tell me I'd have to play against Sean Porter and Eric Johnson." His face was a little pale, and he was shaking with nervousness. "I mean, it's, like, the two best players in school. I don't belong here."

Weasel turned on poor Larry ferociously. "You agreed, Larry. Besides, didn't you want to show Coach Neville you're good enough to play Varsity? Now's your chance."

Eric turned to Coach. "This ain't right, Coach," he pleaded. "This kid's been roped in by Weasel, probably through no fault of his own. Call it off."

Coach looked at each of us in turn, his stare lingering on Weasel's face a moment longer than anyone else's.

"No," he declared. "Play the challenge."

He set out the simple rules, and gave Eric and me, as challengers, the first offensive attempt, from the hash mark denoting the midfield of our playing area. There were two temporary nets set up across the width of the field, our respective goals.

Weasel was still trying to talk persuasively to Endicott, standing next to him in the middle of their side of the field, their backs to us to keep us from eavesdropping. He was probably explaining what they might see from us, paying absolutely no attention to his opponents, or to Coach, who blew his whistle to start the match without waiting for Weasel to finish up. I tapped the ball forward to Eric, who immediately took off down the sidelines, leaving both Prince and Endicott scrambling to try to catch him, an impossibility with his speed and his head start. It took less than five seconds for us to tally our first score.

On the restart, Weasel tapped the ball to Endicott, but Eric had started less than ten yards from him, and as soon as the kid touched the ball, Eric dropped his shoulder and shoved him off the ball, easily taking it away. He lofted a pass over Weasel's head into open space, where I picked it up, and practically strolled to the goal, for a two-nil lead. Prince looked over at Coach, expecting a foul to be called on Eric, but Coach just stood impassively on the sidelines, arms folded as he looked on. I could see Prince muttering to himself as he trotted back to retrieve the ball I had left in their net, and he had a determined set to his face as he dribbled it up to reset an offensive try.

This time, Larry passed off to Weasel. Eric called for a switch, and he ran at Weasel as I moved over to cover Larry. Weasel had just taken a few steps with the ball when Eric reached him and pushed him down hard. Weasel tumbled as he fell onto the grass, rolling over a couple of times. He scrambled up, cursing, and looked like he

was going to run up to Coach and jaw at him for not calling the charge and the push.

"Play on," called Coach, signaling a legal play with his arms. Coach resumed his position, legs apart and arms crossed, looking at Prince, waiting for him to complain.

Seeing Coach standing there and staring at him changed his mind, however, but by then it was too late. Defenders were down 3-0, just like that, and had hardly even entered our territory, much less mounted an attack.

Before restarting, Weasel conferenced with Larry for a moment. I was sure he was telling Larry to get physical, since it was obvious that Coach was going to let us play a wide-open game. Larry was at least twenty pounds lighter than Eric, and shorter even than Weasel. He didn't look like he was very pleased about having to play more physically against us. He showed some grit, though, and stepped up to the ball and tapped it to Weasel. Prince took the ball a few steps down the field, and tried lofting the ball back over to Larry. Eric leapt up and tried to head it off, but the ball just glanced off the top of his head and behind him. Larry managed to corral it, and swept in and shot the ball at our goal as I tried to close with him. I could almost hear the sigh of relief from Weasel, that he wasn't going to be skunked, as I ran over and pulled the ball out of the net and took it up to midfield for our restart.

Eric tapped the ball to me and took off downfield, Larry hot on his heels. Weasel closed on me. I could see the panic in his eyes, and when he shifted his focus for just a second, I knew what he intended. I steeled myself for the elbow he threw into my ribs. I stepped away from him just enough to take some of the force off of his blow. A flare of pain drove up my side anyway, but I was able to absorb it, eat up the pain, and shake off the attack. As he closed with me, either intending to throw another elbow at me or to shove me off the ball, I stepped down hard on his instep, and he tripped over his own feet, crashing to the ground like a sack of potatoes. He rolled onto his

back and clutched his ankle in pain, but I wasn't about to stop. Unimpeded, I headed for their goal. Endicott came toward me, but it was impossible for him to keep the ball out of the net, and he knew it. He made his choice, going back to keep Eric from taking a pass, and they both stopped and watched as I powered the ball into the goal and through the bottom of the net from about five meters out. The ball skidded under the bottom edge of the net and skipped across the grass, and ended up resting against a parking lot bumper about twenty meters away. Endicott just looked at Weasel disgustedly, and walked back to midfield with Eric and me, pointedly leaving the ball for Weasel to retrieve. Prince stared at the three of us for a moment, and then limped over to get the ball. He carried it back and threw it down on the ground.

"Enough yet?" I asked him.

"No!" he spat. He flailed at the ball, just clipping it off the side of his foot, and he took two painful steps in the direction the ball had spun, when Eric knocked him to the ground again. Eric stood to the side, standing over Weasel, hands on his hips.

"Enough yet?" Eric asked quietly.

I could see anger flaring in Weasel's eyes, and he scrambled to his feet, only to be pushed back down again by Eric, who straddled him this time.

"Enough." This time it wasn't a question, but rather a statement.

Weasel's eyes were blazing, but then the uselessness of the situation set in. It was like somebody let the air out of an overfilled vinyl toy as he kind of collapsed in on himself. Lying there, he finally conceded defeat.

"Yeah, all right, enough," he acknowledged.

Eric stepped aside and held out his hand to help him up. Weasel looked surprised, but took the outstretched hand, perhaps half-expecting Eric to trick him and drop him as he pulled himself up. He got hauled to his feet, though. Eric brushed him off, and then clapped him on his back.

"Maybe next year," he said with a slight grin.

"Nope," I said. "But maybe the year after that."

Prince didn't look too happy about that, but he nodded in acquiescence, anyway. The four of us walked over to Coach, still standing stoically on the sidelines, as a group.

****

That evening, I told Kayla about the challenge match as we jogged around the neighborhood.

"I'm a little surprised Adam gave in like that at the end," she said.

"That's right, you know him, don't you?" I asked. "Isn't he a good friend of Bronson's?"

"Brandon," she automatically corrected. She knew I was doing it on purpose, but she wasn't about to give me the satisfaction of appearing irritated.

"How well do you know Weasel?" I persisted.

She glanced over at me as we ran. "Well enough to know that he has temper issues," she said.

"Yes, he does," I agreed. "But, judging from today's practice, maybe he can find a way to work through those issues."

"He's a nice enough boy," she said. "He just needs to find a way to redirect his anger."

"Hey," I said. "Maybe he can redirect his anger toward Kleenex."

She looked at me, a puzzled expression on her face.

"Well, that way, he'll have tissues issues," I said blandly.

She stuck her tongue out at me and sped up, leaving me to scramble to catch up to her.

"I told you before, don't point that thing at me unless you intend to use it," I said, puffing a little from the sprint.

She gave me a teasing glance. “Oh, I intend to use it,” she said. “Some day. Maybe. If you’re a good boy.” And she took off again. I didn’t have the reserves to chase her, though, and she sped ahead of me. She finally relented about a block later, and stopped, jogging in place while I caught up, smiling at my discomfort the whole while.

By the time I had dropped Kayla off and jogged home, it was almost too late, but I decided I could call over to Lori’s house before I jumped in the shower. She answered on the third ring.

“Lori? It’s Sean.”

“Sean! What a pleasant surprise! It’s great to hear your voice. How are you feeling?”

“I feel really good,” I said. She sounded really happy, happier than I had heard her, practically since I had known her. “I’m back playing,” I continued. “I’m starting in the game tomorrow evening, in fact. Do you think the boys can come?”

“Oh, they’d love to, Sean. Thank you for thinking of them.”

“I want them to be team ball boys, is that okay? They can sit on the bench and hand out water and stuff to the team, chase down balls that are kicked out of bounds, that kind of thing.”

“That’s just wonderful! I know they’d love it.”

I arranged to meet her and the boys by the gate to the field before the game, so I could take Davey and Kip with me into the locker room and introduce them around.

“Sean, that’s lovely. Thank you so much,” she said.

“Like I’ve always told you, Lori, they’re great kids. I like having them around, and I’ve missed them.”

“And they’ve missed you, Sean. And so have I,” she added. “In fact, I...”

I didn’t want to get into a conversation that might take us to places better left unvisited, so I quickly interrupted her.

“Have you seen Molly lately?” I asked.

“As a matter of fact, I have,” she replied. “She calls me every couple of days, and she’s back to being my regular sitter again.”

"That's great," I said. "Thanks for giving her another chance."

"She deserves it," she said. "And she knows it was you who gave her the opportunity."

"It wasn't me," I said. "She did it herself. All I did was walk with her sometimes. She did all the heavy lifting."

She laughed, a throaty sound full of amusement, with just a hint of interesting possibilities. "You are one of a kind, Sean Porter," she said.

"Yep," I agreed. "They broke the mold after they made me, but only because the cracks in it made it pretty much useless."

****

Coach Neville must have been a busy guy on Wednesday and Thursday. He also must have been quite confident about the outcome of the challenge match, because he called the list of scouts and coaches who were interested, and let them know what our schedule was for the next couple of weeks. He also called Matthew Hartigan, and gave him an interview over the telephone, casually mentioning that I would be in the starting lineup again for the last game of the regular season.

As a result, the headlines in the sports section of our local paper on Friday morning were just the opposite of the previous paper. The bigger headline read "Porter To Start Tonight", and the sub-head was "Bears Soccer To Try for 14-0". While every athlete loves to see their name in the sports section, I was a little dismayed that the emphasis was on my start, rather than on the team's undefeated season. I also knew that I would rake in a fair amount of good-natured grief from my teammates after school.

About an hour before the game, I met Lori and the boys at the main gate.

"Sean!" "Sean!"

Almost a chorus, Davey and Kip were jumping and waving as I walked up to them.

"Hi, guys! You want to come into the locker room with me?" I asked.

"You bet!" "Yeah!"

Lori took hold of both their hands, turning them to her as she knelt down to get their attention.

"Now you cowboys mind what Sean says, do you hear? He's the boss. Okay?"

"Yes, Mom," said Davey.

"Sean's the boss!" shouted Kip.

She stood and smiled warmly at me. "Thank you again, Sean, for being such a good friend to these two. And to me."

I took her hand for just a moment. "They'll mind just fine. Don't worry about them."

The boys and I headed back toward the school. They raced ahead of me as I turned back to Lori.

"Will you be at the game?" I asked.

She smiled, her eyes glistening. "I wouldn't miss it for the world," she said.

I took the boys in and introduced them around. They already knew Jorge, from when he had been helping their team's keepers, and they ran around the locker room in high gear, kicking soccer balls down the rows between the lockers, until the noise was just too much. I had to restrain their enthusiasm, especially when Coach Simonson poked his head out of the office to see what the ruckus was all about.

Davey and Kip jogged out onto the field with the team when it was time. I had instructed them about their duties as ball boys, and once we were into "game mode", they paid attention and did their

best. They walked around with cups of water, and asked each member of the team if they would like one, and they lined up the game balls off the sideline so they would be ready for use. They were friendly little kids, and the entire team took to them right away.

The announcer's routine of introducing the starting lineups began. I glanced up into the stands, and was surprised to see that they were full. Hartigan's article seemed to have brought out the crowds. I couldn't see Lori anywhere, but Kayla's pale blonde head was easy to find. She was sitting in the student section with some friends, talking animatedly, her hands in constant motion. I looked over into the parents' section, and my mom and my dad both waved to me. Michael was somewhere in the stadium, and I assumed that Stephen was there, also, probably mingling with the high school kids.

I was completely taken by surprise when the announcer got to the defensive players, because he seemed to skip right over my name. Normally he either went in alphabetical order, offense and then defense, or else by position, right to left, but this time, after calling out the players on the offensive team, he announced Anthony Rogers on the left, Mikey Evanson as sweep, Brett Oldman as stopper, and Jorge Mendoza as keeper for the defensive team. I thought maybe he had forgotten me, but then, with the volume cranked up, he announced, "And playing in the right defensive position," and the rest was nearly lost as the crowd started yelling and whistling and stomping their feet, the sound rolling across the field as the announcer finished, "A junior, Sean Poooorrrrterrrr!" I ran out onto the field, joining my teammates already there, stunned about the introduction. They were clapping and yelling, along with the crowd. I was grateful everybody was welcoming me back onto the field, but I wished they would hold their enthusiasm until they saw how I played. That was the real question, after all.

We took the field, and at the referee's whistle, our opponents, the River Oaks Lions, started the game with a pass back to their

midfielders. They spread out their forwards, trying to take advantage of the entire width of the field. Possession of the ball see-sawed back and forth, nobody mounting a real challenge, for the first ten minutes or so. I was feeling pretty good, loose and warm, even though the temperature was not that much above freezing, and I felt like I was seeing the field and the path of the ball very well. I relaxed a little, some of my worries dissipating with the plumes of my breath.

About midway into the first half, the left midfielder for the Lions sent a ball high down the sidelines, trying to hit his forward. I moved into place to try to intercept, and the forward jumped in front of me to keep me off the ball. I shuffled back around him, and we both went up for the ball, our shoulders and arms bumping. I had a height advantage, and I was able to overreach him. The ball came down toward my forehead while I was at the apex of my leap, and I snapped my head to the side to head the ball back over toward Kevin. Pain flared in my rib from the impact and the jostling, but by the time I landed back on the ground, I knew it was just a short spasm. It passed as quickly as it had hit, and another small, niggling worry was dispelled.

At halftime, Coach asked me how I felt.

"I feel good," I said. "Good enough to play."

"That's all I needed to hear," he said, and he walked over to talk to his offense. Davey brought me a big paper cup of water.

"Here you go, Sean," he said, handing the water to me. I drank it down gratefully.

"Thanks, Champ," I said. "Make sure everybody else gets some water, too, okay?"

"You bet," he said, and he raced off to grab some more cups to hand out.

I only played about twelve minutes of the second half. Coach pulled me out and put Weasel in the game. We were up 3-0 by then, and I only had about eight or ten touches on the ball. Coach was pretty confident we were going to win, and he didn't want to tax me

on my first outing back, so I kicked back and watched the rest of the match with Davey and Kip from the bench. The boys still had to keep an eye on the ball, since one of their duties was to chase down out-of-bounds kicks, but they still were able to sit with me for most of the time.

After the game ended, Lori came down out of the stands and collected her boys.

"Did you guys have fun?" she asked.

"Yeah!"

"It was great, Mom!"

She looked up at me. "You played well, as usual," she said.

"There wasn't much for me to do out there tonight," I replied. "Probably just as well, anyway."

"Thank you for giving Davey and Kip this opportunity to be with you, Sean."

"They were a lot of fun," I said. "Maybe, if we can get a little further into the playoffs, I can talk Coach into letting them sit by me again."

"I wouldn't want them taking away from your concentration," she said. "Your coach might not want the distraction."

"We'll see," I said. She gathered up her kids and, amid rowdy goodbyes, herded them off toward the exit. I was kneeling down, packing up my gear bag, when Coach Neville walked over. There was another man walking with him, talking to him in a deep southern drawl.

When they got to me, Coach said, "Sean, I'd like you to meet a fan of yours."

The man stuck out his meaty hand for me to shake. "How you doin', son? I'm mighty glad to finally make your acquaintance on a face to face basis."

I smiled and shook his hand. "Glad to finally meet you, too, Coach Cropper," I said.

"Ah, hell, son, everybody just calls me Pick, and you should, too," he said with a wide grin.

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VEILED IN CURTAINS OF ETHEREAL LIGHT

Coach Pick spent a lot of Saturday with my family and me. He came to the house about ten o'clock in the morning to meet my parents and my brothers, driving up in a rental Buick. He talked about Gainesville and north central Florida, about the University of Florida, and about his soccer teams. He left just before lunchtime, to go talk to another family about an hour away, but he promised to be back in plenty of time to go out to dinner with us.

"You know, in Florida it's pretty darned hard to get a good steak," he said. "I took the liberty of making reservations at that there Great American Steakhouse, down in the city. I hear it's a pretty good place."

"Well, yes, it's probably the best steakhouse around," confirmed my father.

"Well, good an' all, then. I'll be back to pick you all up around six-thirty, then, and we'll head on down there for a big, juicy steak." He shook my dad's hand with great enthusiasm, winked at my mother, and patted me on the back. "If you all can think up any more

questions to ask of me, well, let fly tonight. Okay?" And with that, he was out the door and on his way to his car.

I had to scramble to let Jake and Kayla know that I wasn't going to be available tonight. I hoped Kayla understood my having to break our date better than the last couple of girls did. Then, on the other hand, tonight I wouldn't be making the same kinds of mistakes I did with the others.

I called the Lehigh house. Jake had already left for his football game, but Kayla was still home.

"Hi," I said.

Even over the phone lines, I could hear the smile in her voice. "Hi, Sean," she said.

"Uh... Kay, I... uh... I have to postpone our date tonight."

There was a brief silence at the other end. "Okay," she said. The smile in her voice was considerably diminished, which distressed me.

"Look, Kay, I'm really sorry, but the coach from the University of Florida is here, and he's taking us all out for dinner tonight, and..." I paused, a thought occurring to me. It didn't happen often, so it surprised me every time one came along.

"And?"

"And I'm an idiot," I said. "Why didn't I think of it before? Why don't you come to dinner with us, Kay? We won't be able to go to the movie with Jake, but we'd still be together, even if it means having to spend time with my parents and my brothers."

The smile was back. "Okay," she said happily. "I'll just clear it with my mom, but I'm sure it'll be okay." She dropped the phone with a clunk, and I heard her voice fade away as she started yelling for her mother through their house. A few minutes later, she came back on the phone, a little breathless. "Mom says okay." She giggled. "She also asked if you and I were an item."

"An item? Like, a couple?"

"Yeah, I guess that's what it means. It's parent-speak for going out together, I think. Anyway, I told her that we were just friends hanging out together. I think she knows that's kid-speak for 'an item', though."

"Well, now you've got me wondering. We've actually only been on one honest-to-God date. Are we an item?"

She hesitated. "I don't know," she said cautiously. "Are we?"

"Well, a lot of the team thinks we are," I said.

"And a lot of my friends think we are, too," she replied.

Silence. "Kayla? I know we've never talked about this, and maybe it's too early, but would you consider going with me? Being my... 'item'?"

"Your item? I'm not sure I want to be known as an... item."

I was finding it hard to gather enough saliva to swallow the lump in my throat. "Well, then, how about my girlfriend?"

"You mean, like, exclusive?"

"Well, yeah, I guess. Uh... Wait a minute, no, I don't guess. I know. Yes, my girlfriend, exclusively, you and me."

"You mean I won't be able to see Bronson anymore?" There was a hint of a teasing tone in her voice.

"Bronson? Oh, you mean..."

"You know very well who I mean," she said.

"Well, right. I mean, yeah, no more Bronson."

"Okay," she said brightly.

I finally was able to swallow the lump. "Okay? That's great. So you'll tell Brandon you won't go out with him anymore?"

"I don't need to," she said softly. "I already did, two weeks ago."

****

We took two cars downtown, because of the number of people that were going to dinner. My parents and my brothers were in my dad's car, and I rode with Pick as I directed him over to Kayla's house. I walked up to the front door and knocked, and Mr. Lehigh opened the door and ushered me inside.

"Hello, Sean," he said, pipe in hand. He gestured breezily toward the sofa in the living room, inviting me to sit down.

"Hi, Mr. Lehigh."

"So, Kayla tells me she's going to dinner with your family and a scout from a school somewhere in Florida?"

"Yes, sir. It's actually the head coach of the University of Florida. A friend of mine named Jesse Wilhoit is playing on his team, and Jesse suggested that his coach come talk to me."

"Well, that's good news," he said. "Isn't it a little soon for schools to be recruiting?"

I shrugged. "I don't know, sir. He's the only one I've talked to, though, so maybe it is early."

Kayla came down the stairs, wearing a little dress that left one shoulder bare, and fit her athletic body beautifully. My mouth went dry just looking at her as she walked into the room.

"Hi, Sean," she said quietly, fully aware of how I was staring at her. She kissed her father on the cheek, and I scrambled to open the front door for her as she slipped on a heavy cloth coat.

"Have fun, kids," called out her dad as we walked down the sidewalk to Pick's rental car.

Kay scooted over to sit in the middle of the two of us. Pick shook her hand as I introduced them, and we were off.

By the end of dinner, Pick and my dad were acting like old, long lost college pals. My mom was watching their antics, occasionally shaking her head and smiling. Michael and Stephen were most interested in eating as much as they possibly could stuff into themselves, and I could only concentrate on Luscious Kayla, sitting

next to me, her hand in mine under the table. After desserts and coffee, Pick paid the bill, leaving a very generous tip.

"Hell, I'm on an expense account on this trip," he said with a wink at my mom. "Might as well be generous with Gator money."

By the time we got back to our house, Pick had assured us that Florida would be sending me an offer sheet that included paid tuition, room and board for four years, subject to the usual physical exams, etc., etc., etc. It put a big smile on my dad's face, realizing that my college education was going to be paid by somebody other than him and my mom. Pick thanked us all for our hospitality, and promised me he would be keeping in touch. He even said he would try to come back for the state playoffs, if our team made it downstate.

I borrowed my mom's car, telling my family that we wanted to meet up with the gang down at Mike's Pizza. Kayla and I hopped in the front seat, but I knew Mike's wasn't my preferred destination, and I was hoping it wasn't Kayla's, either. When I turned onto the highway away from the pizza restaurant, she gave me a grin and sidled up close to me, her arms around mine.

It was cold out, even for late October, and it was starting to drizzle as we drove aimlessly for a few miles. I happened to find myself driving along the country lane toward the Gallagher's barn, where the shell of the Junior Class Homecoming float probably still sat. I pulled into the small parking area, and shut off the lights, leaving the car running so the heater could keep the interior warm for us. The drizzle was turning to indications of the first snow of the season, but it was very light, and it was melting as soon as it hit any surface. I fiddled with the radio until I found a station playing some mellower music, and turned it down low.

I turned to the lovely girl sitting beside me, and put my arm around her, drawing her closer to me. She looked at me in anticipation, her lips slightly parted, her eyes half closed, and I succumbed to the unspoken offer, bending down slightly to kiss her. At the first contact of our lips together, she moaned softly,

surrendering to me. Her coat was unbuttoned, and I slipped my hand around her waist, along the silken material of her dress. She crossed her leg and gently rubbed her foot against my shin as we kissed, and she melted even closer to me, her lips moving against mine in sensuous pleasure.

I kissed her soft lips, and covered her cheeks, her neck, her ears, and her eyes with soft touches with my lips. She lifted her head and closed her eyes, giving in to the sensations, offering up her tender throat to my searching lips. When I reached the hollow of her throat, she whimpered, and shrugged out of her coat, reaching for my jacket to push it off my shoulders. I stopped kissing her just long enough so we could toss our coats into the back, and we reached for each other again, melting back together into a hotter, moister kiss, this one a tasting and teasing exploration involving lips and tongues.

With one hand wrapped around her neck and grasping her bare shoulder, I moved my left hand back around her waist to her tummy, the palm gliding along the slick material. My fingers slid along the material, heading toward the rise of her small breast, until I gently held that handful, feeling the shape of her through the dress and her strapless bra. I caressed her that way, feeling, through the layers of material separating her skin from mine, her little button-like nipple expand. She twisted in my arms slightly, giving me access to her back, the location of the zipper holding her dress together. I took the hint, abandoning the desirable mound of her covered flesh to work the metallic tab down from her shoulder blades to her waist, releasing the tension of her dress around her body.

My hand encountered the bare flesh of her back, and my internal temperature notched up a few more degrees. I caressed the soft skin of her back, and drew a path around her side, taking the material of her dress with me, and moved away from her just enough for her to slip her left arm through the sleeve, allowing the material to fall to her waist. She stared at me, her mouth slightly open as she breathed

heavily, and I put my arms around her again, and kissed her eyes and her lovely lips again.

When I slipped my hand beneath the elastic bottom of her bra and cupped her naked breast, she moaned into my mouth, and thrust her tongue hard and deep into my mouth, sending streamers of white-hot pleasure shooting into my brain. Her distended nipple felt like it was etching a pattern in my palm, and I never wanted it to disappear. I drew my hand across her chest, under the bra, and held her other breast in my hand, feeling its pliant flesh and hefting its small weight, warming and branding my palm just as the other one did.

Eventually, just touching wasn't enough. I had to taste them, lick and suckle on the delightful morsels my fingers were finding, and I broke our wet kiss, and scattered kisses and flicks of my tongue down the side of her neck, across her chest, until I encountered the cotton material of her bra, where I discovered the flaw in my plan.

Kayla chuckled, a low and throaty sound that sent chills up and down my spine, and she reached back with both hands, until, almost magically, the small bra loosened. She flung it off, tossing it to the side before opening her arms to me once again, offering herself up to me. She held the back of my head as I paid homage to the delights of her body, kissing and caressing and squeezing and lightly biting the wonderfully soft flesh of her breasts.

As I continued to suck and lick her nipples, I dropped one hand down her midriff, sliding my fingertips underneath her dress, until I encountered the elastic waistband of her panties. I felt her suck in her tummy a little, giving my hand some more room, and my fingers slipped beneath the silky material, sliding down until I touched her curly and damp triangle of hair near the juncture of her thighs. My fingertips explored further, moving slickly through the moist folds, releasing her oily moisture onto my fingers as they delved into her most private places. My fingertips found her vagina, and just the tip of one finger dipped slightly inside, covering itself with her

dampness, and then dragged upwards, opening her nether lips, until it discovered the tiny bump of her clitoris, peeking out from its hiding place. Kayla's sharp intake of breath, combined with the sudden tightening of her hold on my head, told me that she liked what was happening.

I continued to suck and nibble at each swollen nipple in turn, taking time occasionally to lick the soft and salty flesh of her boobs before returning to tease and play with her sensitive tips. At the same time, my left hand was exploring between her opened thighs, delighting in the warmth and the wetness emanating from her center. From her distended clitoris to her flooded opening, her folds moved to accommodate my fingers, and as I dipped first one finger, and then two, into her hole, her walls expanded and contracted against my intrusions, keeping pressure on my fingers as I worked them in and out slowly, in time to the small thrusting of her hips and the quivering of her thighs.

After a long and slow buildup, Kay finally arched her back, mashing her small boob against my mouth, and she pushed her hips up hard against my fingers, pushing two digits as deeply into her as they would go. My thumb was resting against her clit, and when she arched, the nub bumped against the ball of my thumb, and the resulting vibration pushed her over the edge. I could feel her walls clamping down on my fingers, and a small rush of additional moisture was hot as my hand was rewarded with rhythmic squeezes of her thighs and her vagina. She was clutching my head to her bosom, her arms contracting against me in an automatic reflex to her trip to the top of the mountain, followed by her leap over the cliff face, and she squeaked nearly breathlessly as the waves of pleasure cascaded over her.

Finally, her orgasm passed, and she loosened her grip on my neck. I looked up at her, and saw that she was gazing down at me, her eyes shining, a happy, nearly translucent look on her face. She lifted me up by my neck gently, guiding me to her, and I kissed her.

She gave me an open-mouthed tongue-lashing by way of showing her appreciation for my ministrations. My fingers slipped from her pussy, and I wrapped my arm around her, hugging her to me as we kissed.

My own internal furnace was burning white-hot, and I could feel her heat rising again, also, as we kissed. I felt her small hand touch my thigh, and she let it brush across my leg until it found the almost painful bulge in my crotch. Her tiny palm measured my erection, rubbing up and down my rampant cock slowly, her fingers caressing, gauging, teasing. I felt her fingers tiptoe up to my belt, and she struggled, one-handed, to unbuckle it. I was pretty frenzied by that point, so I broke our kiss so I could sit back and help her with the belt and the button. As she grasped the tab of my zipper, I yanked my pants apart and pushed them down and pushed my shirt up and out of the way. Kayla giggled, and worked on extracting my inflexible member from my briefs, pulling the elastic away from my hips and pushing the cotton underwear down, releasing my cock to the evening air.

As she grasped my flesh, she moved up onto one knee, and pushed me back against the seat, kissing me hard again. Her hand was pumping me as she kissed me, and occasionally she would slip her hand all the way down my shaft to caress and cup my aching balls. Finally, she took some sort of pity on me, and she leaned back just a little, breaking the contact of our lips, and, staring at me and smiling all the while, she dropped her head, settled into the seat just a little, and, still looking me in the eye, stuck out her tongue and took one long, loving lap all the way up my cock, from base to tip.

Just that small contact was enough to make my eyes bug out, and I lost it. Without warning to me or to Kayla, my hips bucked, the swollen head of my cock bumping her in the nose, and I started shooting, streamers of white-hot cum launching into the air in front of her face. She jerked back out of the way and then she didn't dare move, for fear of getting hit in the eye with a shot. She watched in

amazement as I shut my eyes tight, concentrating on the extreme pleasure of the hydraulics in action, squeezing out all my seed. I felt her hand grasp my spasming shaft, and she contributed by pumping me, jacking me off to keep the display going for as long as she could.

When I finally collapsed back against the seat, she whispered, "Wow. That was a lot," and she lay back against me, her head on my shoulder and her hand still caressing my slowly deflating cock, as we both looked at the mess I had made. She let go of my cock and doodled with the pools of semen on my bare stomach with her fingertips, making random patterns in the milky liquid.

I sighed, a contented and happy sound, and put my arm around her bare shoulder. I could feel her bare breast resting against my side, our cooling skin still feeling slightly feverish. It was a feeling I wanted to experience over and over again with her.

Finally, though, she stirred, perhaps getting chilled, and she sat up and rummaged around for her purse. She opened it, and took out some tissues, and began to clean me up. I took a couple from her and helped, wiping off the steering wheel where one spray had landed. I knew I was going to have to get out the soap and water first thing in the morning to try to remove our scent from my mom's car.

We struggled to get back into our clothes, and I opened the window to toss the sticky tissues out. I was surprised to see that the snow was still lightly falling, and the roof of the barn was sprinkled with white. It was nearly time to take her home, but we were both unwilling to break the spell completely, and we moved back together to cuddle for a few more minutes. I had both arms around her, and she was quietly nestled up to me, her head on my chest, her pale hair tickling my chin.

"Sean?" Her voice was quiet, introspective, as she lay against me.

"Hmmm?"

"Do you remember last fall? After your playoffs?"

"Mmmm... hmmm," I confirmed.

"When Molly broke up with you?"

I shuffled around a little nervously. I wasn't sure it was such a wise thing to be talking about one of my past failed relationships with her, so early in the game. She was leading this conversation, however, and so I followed, even though I was hesitant to do so.

"Yeah," I answered.

"And you found out about her and that other boy?"

Now I was just a little more nervous. *Where was this going?*

"Yes?" I replied.

"And you watched them from the tree behind her house?"

That made me sit up straight. I picked her up gently, and turned her so I could look at her face.

"How did you know about that?" I asked, a little panicky.

Her eyes were doe-like in the darkness, somber and huge as she looked at me.

"Because I was there, too, with you," she whispered.

I was shocked. "You were... Where were you? Not with Molly?"

"With you," she repeated softly. "I watched you watching her, and my heart was breaking for you." Her eyes were shining now, unshed tears at the memory of that painful night of nearly a year ago. "I followed you when I saw you walking across the field, through our back yard," she continued, her voice soft in memory. "I saw you in the tree, and I heard you. When you climbed back down, I was ashamed. I couldn't let you see me, so I left, hurried back home before you would find me. I thought you would have noticed my footprints in the snow, right beside yours, and follow them back to my house, but you didn't. I wanted you to."

I pulled her back to me, holding her close. "But why, Kayla? Why did you follow me? And why tell me about it now?"

Her tears were dampening my shirt now, but she didn't move. I heard her sniffle a couple of times before she answered quietly, so softly I almost didn't hear her.

"The snow reminded me. I went with you, because I knew what you would find, and I knew it would break your heart, and knowing

it would hurt you was breaking mine. But I also knew you didn't want anyone to know of your hurt, so I left, even though it was the hardest thing I've ever done."

I took a deep, shuddering breath. "But why, Kay? Why... Why was it hard for you? Why did you... Why?" I didn't know what to ask, much less how to ask it.

But she knew what I was asking, better than I did, just as she had probably always known.

"Because... you needed me to be there, even if you didn't really know, except deep down, that I was with you. And I needed to be there, too." She paused, and in her hesitation, I suddenly did know. And I probably knew it all along, at some level, so her next few words didn't really surprise me.

"Because I love you," she continued, getting stronger as she finally said the words she had waited so long to say. "Because I've always loved you, for almost as long as I've known you."

And she cried, tears of happiness and tears of release mixing together, as we sat there, holding each other for a few minutes more, as the snow settled around us, veiling us in curtains of ethereal light.

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THE ALL-STATE CHEER

Can a fourteen or fifteen-year-old girl really know what love is? Even in my own overheated and taxed brain, that question haunted me all night. Long after I had dropped Kayla off at her house, sharing another searing kiss full of promise, I was still bothered by what she had told me.

In the intervening years since, I have discovered that there have been exceptional children who have known their hearts early on. Joan of Arc was twelve years of age when she first heard the voices that put her on the path of martyrdom, and Shakespeare infused a thirteen-year-old Juliet with some of the most touching and memorable lines in English literature (even though his model for Juliet, from the Italian tale *The Tragicall Story of Romeus and Juliet,* was sixteen). I could not presume then, nor can I presume even now, twenty years later, that my Luscious was as resolute as St. Joan or Juliet. In fact, in my own mind, aside from the implications of having a girlfriend who was "in love" with me, I was still able to appreciate

the undeniable fact that Kayla was gorgeous, she had an uninhibited streak, and she was all mine.

Now I just had to figure out a way not to blow it.

As we did our homework each evening, there seemed to be more of an intimacy between us. Jake was well aware of it, and did his best not to interfere too much, or give me too much shit about it when Luscious wasn't around. Sometimes, though, he just couldn't help himself.

All the next week, every time he passed me in the hall at school, he would punch me in the arm hard.

"Keep your mitts off my little sister," he said one time.

"You can kiss, but you'd best not touch," came another warning.

"I'd better not find no fingerprints where none should be," he threatened another time.

I whirled and grabbed him by the arm that time, and pulled him off to the side. "And I'd better not hear about you searching for fingerprints where you shouldn't be looking," I said.

He looked a little surprised, then shocked, and finally, seeing my grin, he chuckled.

"Okay, deal," he said. But just for good measure, he gave my arm another pop. I didn't give him the satisfaction of seeing me rubbing the bruise he raised.

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Coach Neville worked on getting us prepared for the playoffs. We were seeded first, and had home field advantage all the way through the tournament, until the final four teams traveled downstate to play, still three weeks away. This was a change from the previous year, when the sectionals were held at a neutral field at a local college. We didn't mind not having to travel to our games. It

just meant that we could pack our stands with a good-sized crowd. If all went well, we would be playing two games a week until the state playoffs.

Our first game was against Lincoln Valley, the team we had absolutely pummeled earlier in the season, beating them by a score of 11-0. On the one hand, I was looking forward to playing against the Bozo Brothers one more time. On the other hand, it was a little depressing that their team actually made it into the playoffs. Surprisingly, they only had three losses all season long, which probably only pointed out to all and sundry that our conference was not particularly strong in soccer. Still, it was tempting to look beyond Lincoln Valley to see which opponents might be coming up for us to play.

Watching the film on Thursday, it was apparent that Lincoln Valley was playing a stronger game now than they did earlier in the season. Maybe their coach had been able to infuse some religion into their front lines, their weakest positions. Then again, considering the strengths of our conference, maybe it was just that they were shown playing weaker opponents.

On Friday the Metro Times, the big city newspaper, came out with their statewide prep rankings for all the fall sports, along with their All-Conference selections. The big news for us was the selection of Jorge Mendoza in the net, Eric Johnson as a midfielder, and Trent Abbott as forward joining me as All-Conference players, with Mike Evanson and Kevin Soranno also listed as outstanding players, even though they didn't make the All-Conference team. No other team in the area placed more than two players on their respective All-Conference teams, and in our conference, only Rockton Heights had two players named. All the other teams were represented by one player, including Lincoln Valley, whose stopper was selected.

As we were in the locker room getting prepared for the game, the mood was loose and light, with a substantial amount of good-natured ribbing aimed at all of us whose name had been in the paper.

Matt Hartigan was also in the locker room, talking with Eric and Trent, gathering up tidbits for his own article for the local rag about the game.

Eric and I did our customary laps around the field before the game, but we couldn't check out the opposition, because the Lincoln Valley team was still unloading from their buses. We rejoined our teammates and flopped to the ground to stretch out, taking our time and doing more joking and relaxing than stretching.

The football team was playing on Saturday, so the stands were filling up fast. The student section was already packed, and Jorge, Eric, Anthony, and I walked over to the fence to take a look at the crowds. Keisha and Ayesha came down to say hello, and Kayla came hopping down the steps to join them when she saw me there. She stuck her fingers through the fence, and I held them with mine as we stood there.

"Play well, Sean," she said, her eyes shining with happiness.

"I'll try," I said. "It might be a little tough out there, though, what with all these All-Conference guys wanting to hog the ball all the time." I glanced over to make sure Eric and Jorge heard me. I didn't want to waste a good opportunity to hand them some shit. Eric heard me, and was studiously ignoring me. Jorge was standing by the fence on his far side, and all his brothers and sisters, including Kristina, were gathered in front of him, talking excitedly to him, so he wasn't paying any attention to me at all. Kristina was concentrating on ignoring me, too. I certainly couldn't blame her. She had joined a growing list of females I had disappointed and failed over the past couple of years. I fervently hoped that my losing streak with women was at an end as I turned back to Luscious, still clutching my fingers.

"I don't think I'll have to worry about you not getting your touches on the ball, Porter," she said. "Somehow, you'll find a way."

I smiled at her. "During practices, I'm a ball hog," I said. "During games, the ball can stay on the other side of the field, for all I care. Fewer chances for me to fall down and embarrass myself."

"And us," said Eric, still ostensibly chatting with Keisha.

Jorge and Anthony were headed back toward the bench. I waved to Kay, and Eric and I ran up to join them. I put my arm around Jorge's shoulder.

"Hey, *amigacho*, I never got to congratulate you."

"Thanks, Sean. It was a surprise, I tell you."

"Not to me, it wasn't," I said. "You've been directing the defense like you've been doing it your whole life."

He grinned at me. "I have been doing it my whole life," he said.

"Yeah," I agreed. "I guess you have, at that." I dropped my arm off his shoulder. "Hey, Jorge, is Kristina still going out with Paco?"

He shot me a surprised glance. "I thought you was wrapped up with Jake's sister," he said.

"Oh, I am," I said hurriedly. "I still feel bad about how that all went, that's all. I just want her to be happy."

He shrugged. He was able to squeeze entire conversations into his silent gestures, a gift few kids our age had acquired.

"Yeah, she happy, I guess. At least she's liking the worship. Paco is completely whipped, man. He just walk around all moony eyed, staring at her all the time, hanging around the house until Papa, he tells him to go home. Gives me the creeps."

"You want me to help you chase him off?"

"Nah. Kristina's enjoying being the center of attention with him around. And he's basically a good guy. Hell, I'm the one got them together, why am I complaining? Let her have her fun. At least it's with somebody who treats her good."

"Yeah," I said grumpily. "Her last boyfriend didn't treat her so well."

He just looked at me for a moment, expressionless. "No, he din', did he?" he said quietly. "But I t'ink he learned from it pretty good now."

"Yes, he did," I reluctantly agreed.

We left it at that.

* * * * * * * * * *

Everybody has their own pre-game preparations that they go through, personal time to get them into game mentality, and I stepped away from everybody and started on my routines. I liked to stand with my toes on the chalk of the sidelines and stare out onto the field, setting up my own imaginary borders. I liked to think of myself as a benevolent dictator of my territory, allowing transgressors reasonably safe passage, unless they were carrying contraband in the form of a soccer ball. In that case, the dictatorship became considerably less benevolent, and stepped much closer to being militarily threatening. I pictured, in my mind, patrolling my borders, friendly and relaxed, but still oh so watchful, wary of any strangers who ventured across my invisible boundaries, ready to strike against any incursion.

I stepped back and grabbed a cup of water, just as the announcer started up with the starting lineup. He announced the lineup for the visiting team, and it took me a moment to realize, as he called out the Lincoln Valley left forward starting player as Bruce somebody or other, that the guy's name wasn't really Bozo One.

He used almost the same routine for calling out our team's starters that he used the previous week, except that he added the All-Conference honors for Eric and Trent. Once again, the crowd got louder and louder as he started with the defensive side, starting with Anthony, and then announcing Mikey and Brett. As they trotted out onto the field, the noise level went up another notch as the announcer's voice intoned, "Starting as goalkeeper, a sophomore, and an All-Conference selection, Jorge Mendoooozaaaaa!" And the grandstand started shaking as the entire crowd stomped their feet and yelled and whistled. The announcer paused to let the noise settle just a little before continuing, "And at right defense, a junior, also an

All-Conference selection, Sean Pooorrrterrrr!" I ran out and high-fived all my teammates, and clapped Jorge on the back.

"Welcome to Adulation Central, buddy," I said. "But don't get too used to it. Five minutes after our season is done, we're back to being plain old Mendoza and Porter, B-average students."

"Don't I know it," he replied as we jogged back to the sidelines. "Can't get a swelled head over playing a game."

The game was even easier than our regular-season game. The Lincoln Valley coaches had apparently instructed their players, under penalty of permanent substitution, to keep the ball out of the left offensive half of the field, where Kevin and I were patrolling. They repeatedly attacked our left, only to be rebuffed time and again. Because there was no pressure at all on our side, Kevin shifted over about fifteen meters, covering more of the middle, allowing Mikey and Robert, our center midfielders, to shift over a little, giving Eric and Anthony a buffer. Lincoln Valley was essentially playing a half-field game on our half, cutting down on their offensive options by more than fifty percent. Their only real scoring opportunity came on a corner kick late in the first half. Jorge boxed up everybody on the line, and put Anthony on the near post and me on the far post, and he positioned Brett five meters out and in the middle. The corner kick came in high and lazy, and we were able to block out all their players as Jorge went up and easily snagged the ball out of the air. He punted it down to the midfield stripe, where Javier picked it up, passed it over to Jimmy on the right, who dribbled it down the sidelines against the defender, stopped and crossed it about fifteen meters in front of the goal. Conference scoring leader Trent Abbott was right there, crowding out the stopper with his back and arms, and he took the pass with his right foot, sweeping the ball off his instep into the top left corner of the net, over the outstretched arms of the Lincoln Valley keeper.

It ended up as a 9-0 drubbing, and we left the field satisfied with the win, and looking forward to our next opponent, to be played on

Sunday. Whoever we played was sure to be more of a challenge than the hapless Lincoln Valley team.

And, at Sunday's game, they were more of a challenge, but it was still a pretty easy win for us. Coach even pulled his core group in favor of giving some of his bench players a little more playing time. Trent, Eric, Jorge, and I sat together on the bench for most of the second half, soaking up the weak sun and relaxing, for a change, as the second team held on to win, 6-1.

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The next week, we were surprised and a little disappointed when we learned that Rockton Heights, our conference rivals, got beat in their playoff game over the weekend on a power play when one of their players got a red card and had to leave the game. Playing short, they got beat off the ball, and the Shady Grove Orioles walked off with the win, 3-2.

"What the hell kind of mascot is an oriole?" asked Eric, when he heard about Rockton's defeat.

"Doesn't exactly instill fear in the hearts of their opponents, does it?" said Trent.

"Maybe all the good animals were taken," suggested Mikey.

"Maybe so, but orioles? Might as well just call yourselves the Yapping Dachshunds, or the Mighty Angry Turtledoves, or something. At least if you were the Fighting Statisticians, you could clobber your opponents with your briefcases." Eric just shook his head, chuckling, while the rest of us laughed.

"I wouldn't take the Orioles too lightly, were I you," warned Coach Neville ominously. "Shady Grove has two players in particular who are very good. All-Conference selections, in fact, in a conference full of fairly athletic teams." He took off his glasses and

casually polished them with his loosened tie as he glanced at me with a small smile. “Interestingly, both of their Conference players work the left offensive side. Perhaps Mr. Porter, here, will finally face a bit of a challenge.”

“Yeah, great,” I said. “Just remind Kevin and Robert to keep the ball on the offensive side of the field, okay?”

“By the way, I just got word of something that might be of interest to you, Mr. Porter, and to Mr. Abbott, also.” He stood, and the entire team quieted down expectantly. “Earlier this afternoon I received a telephone call from the State Athletic Board. I have just been informed that Sean Porter and Trent Abbott have both been selected for first-team All-State honors.”

The whole room erupted. Trent and I high-fived each other.

“Ah, but I am not finished,” interrupted Coach. “Second-team All-State honors are accorded to Eric Johnson at midfield. Congratulations to all three players.”

I grabbed Eric by the shirtsleeve and dragged him up to stand with Trent and me. We draped arms around one another, the three of us, basking in the show of appreciation from our teammates.

“Now, if I may continue for a moment,” called Coach. He had his hands in the air, calling for a little quiet again. “All of these honors for these individuals are fine, and well justified. However, those accolades will be all the sweeter if they can also be accompanied by a trip downstate. And to do that, we have some hard work to do this week.”

And, with that, Coach Simonson fired up the projector, and analysis of our last game began.

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On Tuesday, I called Lori to see if Davey and Kip would like to work for the team as ball boys again on Sunday. We had a game on Thursday, and perhaps I was looking too far ahead, but the way we were playing made me pretty confident we would at least be playing on the weekend.

"Oh, I know they would love it," she said.

"Great. It'll be easier for them this time, now that they know the guys, and they know what they will be expected to do," I said.

"Thank you, Sean. And I believe congratulations are in order, too."

"Well, the talent pool for defenders must be a little shallow this year," I said. "I really shouldn't have been picked, since I missed two games entirely, and half of a third."

"That's baloney, and you know it," she told me. "You deserved the honor, just as you earned it last year, too."

"Don't get me started on last year," I said. "The only reason I even got noticed is because of the publicity surrounding the situation that got me into the game in the first place."

"Maybe so," she said. "But that doesn't detract from the fact that you played well enough, in spite of the pressure, to earn that recognition."

"Well, thanks, Lori. I knew I could count on you to boost me up a little. I appreciate it."

Even through the low-fidelity of the telephone, I could hear the humor in her voice. "I'm just telling the truth here, Sean. Besides, I owe you more than you'll ever know."

"What? How do you figure?"

She hesitated. "I'll tell you about it sometime, Sean." She paused again, sounding unsure of herself. "Sean? On Sunday?"

"Yes? Sunday? At the game?"

"Yes. At the game." She paused once more, and then seemed to change her mind about something. "I'll just see you Sunday, Sean. At the same gate?"

"Sure," I said, more confused than ever.

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My confidence was not misplaced. Our game on Thursday was against the Apple Valley Tigers. They were a good team—they had to be, to make it this deep into the playoffs—but Apple Valley was a tiny community, and their high school was one of the smallest in our area. Their starters were decent players, but when they had to go to their bench, they were vulnerable.

Their strategy for our playoff game was to double-cover Trent as much as possible. It would have been a sound plan if Trent was our only offensive threat, but as it worked out, it was a courageous but foolhardy plan. Once their strategy was figured out, Eric and Robert stopped trying to feed the ball in to Trent, and shifted their focus to the other side, moving the ball over to Kevin, Jimmy, and Javier. Because of the double team, somebody was going to be open, and we were able to spread the field out all the way to the sidelines with passes, forcing the Tigers to scramble to cover. Eventually they had to pull their offensive middle guy back to help defend, allowing us to pull another player up to attack, while leaving their chances of moving the ball into our half on a scoring opportunity pretty minimal. The final result was another too-easy win, 5-0.

We found out the next morning that Shady Grove also advanced. Our Sunday game would be against the Orioles.

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On Sunday afternoon, about an hour before game time, I was standing at the gate, waiting, when I saw Davey and Kip come running up. Davey grabbed at the handle and swung the gate open, and they both dashed in and grabbed me around my waist.

"Hi, Sean!" "Hi, Sean!"

"Hi, guys, how have you been?" I asked, trying without success to disentangle myself. Lori came walking up, a big smile on her face. There was a man I didn't know walking with her.

"Hey, Lori," I said.

"Sean, I'd like you to meet David McMasters. David, this is Sean Porter."

McMasters was a big man, with a big, open face. He looked to be older than Lori, maybe around thirty years old. There were laugh lines etched around his mouth, evidence of a seemingly friendly guy. He stuck out his hand, and I shook it. He nearly shook my arm off with enthusiasm.

"Glad to finally meet you, Sean. Lori's been talking so much about you, I feel like we've been friends for a long time!" he practically shouted.

"Really?" I shot Lori a glance, but she was just standing beside him, smiling affectionately at David's introduction.

"Oh, yes," he continued. "And the boys! My goodness, they think you're the tops!"

"The tops?" *What the hell are the tops?* I had no idea, but apparently they were good things.

"Absolutely! Right, boys?" said David as he turned, looking around for Davey and Kip. They had already run down the path toward the door into school, though, and he just shook his head in bemusement. "Those boys move faster than just about anything else I've ever seen," he said with a smile. He held out his arm for Lori. "Well, come on, then, Mrs. W., we'd best be finding our seats in the stands, hadn't we?"

Lori was almost floating above the ground as she slid her arm through his proffered elbow. “Yes, David,” she said. She looked back to me, her entire face aglow. “And thank you again, Sean. This means the world to me, and to the boys.”

And they walked off together. David was almost a foot taller than Lori, but somehow it didn’t look funny at all. It looked kind of nice, especially when I saw him moderate his naturally longer stride to accommodate Lori’s shorter step. I smiled and shook my head, and then walked over to where the boys were waiting as patiently as they could, by the door to the locker room. It was time to prepare for the game.

Maybe the Shady Grove mascot was weak and goofy, but the team was not. At the referee’s opening whistle, they started an offensive set that was quick and effective in getting the ball down close to our goal. They were not afraid to use the sidelines, and they relied on their speed and agility to make crossing passes to their forwards in front of the net. Their first attack, on our left side, slipped by Eric, skirted the line, and their midfielders and forwards all attacked, leaving Anthony to scramble to stay with their right forward, who was handling the ball. Even so, Anthony was a step behind him when he lofted a cross into the box, and defenders and attackers alike went up to try to head it. Brett Oldman managed to muscle his mark off the ball, and he headed the ball over toward me, but I had two opponents on me almost before I got to the ball. I managed to knock it off the shin of one of their players, and it caromed out of bounds, skidding along the fence. Davey tossed me another ball as I stepped out to handle the throw, and I caught it and immediately turned and whipped it as far as I could down the line, hoping that Kevin or Jimmy would be able to snag it. Kevin trapped the ball, a defender right behind him with his hand on Kevin’s back, but he was still was able to sideswipe the ball into the center, where Robert picked it up, passing it over to Eric right away, who was momentarily open.

As soon as the Orioles defenders recognized that Eric had the ball, they dropped back, picking up their assignments, and their midfielders and forwards came back to assist, blanketing their half of the field with players. I thought that their forwards and midfielders were going to be exhausted by halftime, trying to play both sides of the ball like that. If they built up a lead by then, though, they could afford to play keep-away during the second half, without the need to mount any offensive charges. Eric couldn't advance the ball, so he passed back to Anthony, back across the midfield stripe, and we reset while the Orioles came back over to try for an interception.

Jorge and Mikey recognized the pattern at about the same time I did, so we spread out in the back and passed the ball laterally, Mike to me, me to Brett, Brett to Anthony, until we could find an opportunity to advance it. We were able to work the ball up to Kevin and Robert occasionally, but we didn't seem to be able to move it forward any further than that, and the ball kept on returning back to us. Then, on an unintentionally soft pass from Robert to Anthony, a Shady Grove midfielder managed to intercept. He split the field, running in the seam, as Anthony and Mike angled toward him. Brett picked up the center forward, but that left their right forward open, behind Anthony, and the midfielder threaded a pass over to him. He stopped the ball with his right foot, took two shambling dribbles, and launched a shot at goal.

Jorge was awake and paying attention, though. He trusted Brett to hold off the man in the center, and had kept one eye on the ball and one eye on the forward behind Anthony. When the pass was made, Jorge was as ready as he could be. He rushed out at the forward, cutting down on the shooting angle, and managed to block the ball, deflecting it over toward the right post. The Orioles forward on my side saw the opportunity, and ran hard toward the loose ball, but I was right with him, and I managed to shoulder him away, keeping my arms and elbows tucked. I took the ball out from his reach with my left foot, and popped it back toward the sidelines. My

opponent looked to the referee, perhaps looking for an obstruction call or a charge, but the referee indicated a legal play, telling him to play on.

The game seesawed back and forth like that the entire first half. By the time the referee blew his whistle for halftime, I was pretty winded. I looked at the rest of my team, and they were looking like they felt the same as I did, tired and blowing hard, but still coming off the field feeling like we had accomplished something, keeping them out of our goal. Their offensive lineup had to be even more winded than we were, and they had nothing to show for it. Of course, neither did we, but I knew that Eric and Trent couldn't be shut out for the entire game. Something would happen. In fact, Eric, Trent, Javier, Jimmy, and Robert were huddled together with Coach Simonson, trying to come up with just that something.

At the start of the second half, I was feeling pretty decent again. On our kickoff, we moved the ball back to Eric, and Trent took off downfield at a hard sprint, part of the play they had designed. Eric launched a high pass down the sidelines, leading Trent by about ten meters, and Trent picked it up from over his shoulder at a dead run, and kept on going. Eric, meanwhile, relying on his speed, ran as hard as he could, angling in toward the middle, with Javier heading toward the right side, in front of Eric, for a diversion. The Orioles sweeper loped out to cut off Javier, and their stopper warily came out to try to track Eric. Trent put on the brakes, and his defender scrambled to stop and reverse, but Trent was open for long enough. He powered a crossing pass to Eric, and the Orioles stopper closed on him, keeping him from a clear shot. He stayed off Eric, though, fully expecting him to try to make a move around him, but instead, Eric one-touched the ball back into open space in front of Trent, who was now in full stride, bearing down on goal, with his defender two steps behind him in a delayed reaction to the play. The ball reached Trent's left foot in stride, and he swept it off his laces, over the

keeper's head, and into the high far corner of the net, for the first goal of the game.

The stands erupted with cheers, and from the student section came the syncopated cry, "All State! All State! All State!" in honor of the offensive combination of Eric Johnson and Trent Abbott.

On the Orioles restart, it became apparent that they, too, spent halftime coming up with adjustments. They still loaded up the offensive side, but this time they sent more players into the middle and their left. The ball came over to their left midfielder, and his forward took the sideline route, so I was forced to guard the passing lane until Kevin could come back to pick up the man with the ball. The forward slipped ahead of me, back toward his midfielder, and got the ball, and then immediately passed it back over as the midfielder stepped closer to the center. They worked a two-man game against me, keeping the ball moving between the two of them and away from either Kevin or me, staying near the sidelines, moving constantly into open spaces. On the one hand, it was a clever way of keeping the ball down in our area of the field. On the other hand, it didn't really advance the ball, and eventually something would have to be done.

Mikey Evanson forced the issue by sliding over to make it three on two. He stepped in front of the midfielder and intercepted, but all he could do was knock the ball to the side, instead of control it. The ball was headed just behind me, with the Orioles forward in front of me. He stepped to the side, probably intending on retrieving the ball as it passed behind me, and so he was caught. I heeled the ball back to Mikey on a give-and-go, and took off upfield, knowing that Mikey would do the right thing, one-touching it back to me. I was just running up to the Orioles midfielder when the ball came at me from Mikey, and I stepped in front of it, still with my back to it, and let it run up my left leg. I boosted it up and over, and Jesse Wilhoit's Alley-Oop One-Man Give-And-Go looped over the surprised midfielder's head, landed bouncing on the other side for me to pick

up, and I headed downfield with just one defender between me and the corner of the box. I angled a hard pass just in front of Javier, and he feinted at it, making the keeper hesitate, and let it go past him so that it could hit Trent, who rocketed it past the diving Oriole keeper for goal number two.

Trent came running over to me, and jumped up and landed on me, and we both fell to the ground. Eric jumped onto both of us, and the pileup began as we yelled and screamed. The student section started up with their "All State! All State!" cheer again as we slowly extricated ourselves, and we jogged back to our side of the field side by side, Eric and Trent and me.

It was all over but the shouting. The Orioles coach had to substitute his midfielders, who had run the field as hard as they could, but they were scrambling to make something of nothing by then, and all their offensive tries were rebuffed. We were content to play the time out, and the clock worked in our favor, running the Orioles out of time before they could score.

We were headed downstate.

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THE END OF THE SEASON

The team was scheduled to take a bus down to the University campus, where the playoffs would continue, on Thursday morning. Our semifinal game would be played Friday night, and the winners of Friday's games would meet for the championships on Sunday afternoon.

After practice on Wednesday, Kayla and I were sprawled in my family room. On this last evening before I had to leave for a few days, Jake was being uncharacteristically sensitive, making himself scarce and allowing us a little alone time. We were supposed to be doing homework, but we really weren't in the mood, so we were blowing it off in favor of some down time. The television was on, but it was just noise. We weren't paying any attention to it at all. My mother was puttering in the kitchen, getting dinner ready. Stephen was upstairs, presumably doing homework, but probably reading comic books. Michael was still at work, and Dad was probably on his way home from work. Kay had become a fixture in our household, staying for dinner about half the time during the week, and my mom

was treating her more and more like a daughter, and less like her middle son's girlfriend. It was very weird.

With a quick glance toward the kitchen door, Kay came crawling across the carpet to me as I was leaning against the couch, the book I was supposed to be reading for English open in my lap. She kissed my cheek, her eyes wide open, and when I turned to kiss her lips, her eyes crossed as she puckered up. I couldn't help myself. I burst out laughing.

She kept her eyes crossed as she leaned back. "It's not nice to laugh at someone who's being nice to you," she said, trying hard to keep a straight face. She couldn't hold it, though, and she started laughing hard, holding her stomach.

Between gasps, I said, "If you keep on doing that, your face is going to freeze like that."

"But would you still love me, even if that happened?" she asked teasingly. Her eyes uncrossed, and she shook her head like a dog, getting her focus back.

"Of course I would. You're luscious even when you can't see straight," I said.

She wrapped her arms around my neck and leaned against me, resting the tip of her nose on mine, our faces so close I was seeing double. *Two of Luscious. Lucky me,* I thought to myself.

"And I'd still love you, even if you didn't have that adorable little scar on your lip," she said. She gave my scar a quick kiss, and then flopped back to sit next to me on the floor. She reached over and pulled her history book over and put it on her lap.

"Back to work, sluggard," she said. She opened the book and flipped through the pages, looking for the chapter she was supposed to be reading.

"You're right," I said, not moving a muscle. "I'm a no-good, lazy and stupid sluggard of a jock. I shouldn't be allowed to roam loose in public."

She peered at me. “That’s true,” she agreed. “Okay, no going out in public for you, jock. At least, not without a keeper. By the way, did you know that I’m a qualified keeper? Licensed and everything.”

“Really? Can I see?”

She reached for her purse and pulled out her learner’s permit for driving, which she had just recently gotten. She handed it to me. “See? Right there,” she said, pointing. “It says that I am authorized to accompany all lazy and no-good jocks at any time. Do you want to hire me?”

“How much would I have to pay you?”

“Oh, we can work out suitable wages,” she said, a promise implicit in her words and her knowing smile enough to make me break out in a sweat.

After dinner, I borrowed my mom’s car to drive Kayla home. I stopped for just a moment halfway between my house and hers and turned the lights off. She was sitting next to me, and when I stopped the car, she looked over into my eyes.

“You’re very bad,” she said with a saucy smile.

As much as I wanted a quick make-out session with her, there was something I really needed to ask her, though. I put both hands on her shoulders and turned her toward me. Her eyes were lidded, and her mouth was slightly open, anticipating a kiss. It was too much to resist, so I kissed her softly. Her lips nibbled and caressed my bottom lip, and her tongue traced the edges of my scar, sending bolts of light and heat through my nervous system, but I knew we didn’t have time to get carried away. I reluctantly broke away from her and held her so I could look into her face.

“What?” she asked, a little irritably.

“Kay, I need to talk to you for just a minute.” In the dark interior of the car, I could see her eyes picking up ambient light from the streetlight, a half a block away.

“Okay,” she said quietly. I saw her eyes soften as she realized how serious I was.

"I'm leaving tomorrow for the tournament," I said. "I'll be gone all weekend."

"Yes, I know."

"I... I just need to know that you'll be here, waiting for me, when I get back."

She giggled softly. "Sean, it's just for one weekend. You're not going away for a year."

I was a little flustered. "I know. It's just... last year..."

She leaned forward and kissed me softly, sensuously, a kiss full of possibilities.

"I'll be here," she whispered. "I'm not going anywhere without you."

"I had to ask, Kay..."

"I understand, Sean. I saw what happened. I'm not like her."

"I know you're not, it's just..."

She kissed me one more time to shut me up. "Go. Play well. Bring home the championship. Don't let anything break your concentration, especially worries about me. I've been here for you for longer than you know, and I'm not giving up on you, just because you're going to be out of town for a few days. Call me every night and let me know how it's going, if you'd like. In fact, you'd better call me every night, even if it's just to say hello."

She sat back, apparently satisfied that all was now settled. I guessed that it probably was, so I dropped the car back into gear, turned the headlights back on, and drove her home.

That night, alone in my bed, I made a secret vow to myself. *This girl is too precious to let slip away*. I knew I had to work hard to keep her on my side, and I was going to try my damnedest to not fuck up for a change.

* * * * * * * * * *

The bus ride downstate the next day was boring. Farm field after farm field, as flat as land could possibly be, and drearily cloudy and dim. I tried to sleep most of the way, but only managed to doze off and on for much of the trip.

There was a magazine being passed around among the guys, with a lot of whispering and laughing going on. I tried to ignore it as it moved around the bus, down the opposite rows of seats from where I was sprawled. I thought it was probably a *Playboy* or some similar contraband that somebody had managed to sneak on, and I was a little surprised when, about halfway through our trip, I glanced toward the front of the bus and saw Coach Neville reach out and take the magazine. He opened it and read something, and then smiled and handed it back to Brett, who was sitting right behind Coach and his wife.

There was an air of good humor, and I wasn't a part of it. Grumbling, I squirmed in my seat, trying to find a more comfortable position so I could go back to sleep. Coach saw my distress, and finally stood, holding himself steady by hanging on to seats on either side of the aisle as he faced the rear of the bus.

His voice was loud, carrying over the whine of the tires on the highway.

"What do you think, team? Should we tell him?"

Tell him? What the hell was he talking about? I sat up and rubbed my face. I was feeling pretty cramped and miserable.

"Nah," said Eric. He was across the aisle from me, and he was smiling like he had a secret he was dying to tell as he glanced over at me.

"What?" I asked him crossly. "What are you talking about?"

That set the entire bus to laughing. *They're all nuts,* I thought, but I kept my mouth shut. *See? I have learned something of value over the past few weeks.*

Coach came down the aisle toward me, swaying with the movement of the bus, almost pulling himself along with his hands on the backs of the seats. He got up to my row, and handed me the *Playboy* magazine.

"Here," he said, smiling. "Read and enjoy."

He stood there while I took the magazine from his hand. It wasn't a *Playboy*, after all. It was the latest copy of *Youth Soccer Today*, the official magazine of the American High School Soccer Association.

I thumbed through it, wondering what was going on. On page ten there was a big article about the YST All-American Team, but I had already heard that there weren't any players on the boy's teams from our state listed.

"Try page twenty-four," suggested Coach Neville.

I flipped open the magazine to page twenty-four. The article was entitled *The Top One Hundred Players To Watch*. It listed the players the author and the magazine considered to be the best players, aside from the All-American selections, in the country. The players were listed in alphabetical order, and a couple of pages further on, I found that somebody had highlighted the following listing:

> *PORTER, Sean: A junior defenseman on a high school team ranked in the Top 20 nationwide, Porter is the anchor upon which the team's strengths are attached. Incredible firepower in their offense (averaging over 7 goals per game) this season has been achievable because of the stifling defense that shuts down opponents, no matter how powerful (averaging less than 1 goal against for the season). In fact, no team has scored more than 2 goals against this team as of this writing, and Sean Porter is the key factor.*

"Is this a joke?" I asked, handing the magazine back to Coach Neville. Surely it was an elaborate practical joke. Somebody went to a lot of bother to print up this phony magazine.

"No joke, Mr. Porter," he said, a wide smile splitting his face. "I believe congratulations are in order." He began clapping, and everybody on the bus followed suit. I was in shock. I looked over to Eric for confirmation, and he was applauding along with everybody else, grinning at me.

"You the man, Seanster," he yelled.

It was very difficult for me to agree with that. I didn't feel like I had accomplished much this year. In fact, I felt like maybe I had cheated somebody somewhere along the line, to have them write something like that, something so obviously false about me. I leaned back in my seat and stared out the window desultorily, embarrassed by the attention I was getting when it was really the entire team who deserved the praise. Sure, maybe I contributed to the team's success at times during the past year plus, but to think that Eric and Trent were successful because of my play was just ludicrous. *How come nobody else sees how ridiculous this all is?* I closed my eyes as the noise in the bus died down again, but I couldn't persuade my brain to shut down, and dark thoughts to match the day were my companions for the rest of the trip downstate.

* * * * * * * * * *

It was cold and rainy when we got off the bus at our hotel. Both coaches had brought their wives along, and Mrs. Neville and Mrs. Simonson helped us sort out our room assignments for the weekend. We were staying four to a room, and I was rooming with Eric, Trent, and Anthony. We only had two keys between the four of us, and we decided that Eric and Trent would be in charge of them.

We had a practice session scheduled, and Coach had requested that we be in our practice uniforms when we met in the lobby of the hotel. The bus was idling outside the door.

"Okay, men, if I may have your attention, please." Coach Neville raised his arms for quiet. "Thank you. Coach Simonson will be leading you over to the practice fields. They are about two miles from here. I will meet you there with the bus."

There was a lot of confused murmuring. Finally, Rich spoke up.

"We're not taking the bus over?" he asked.

"No, you're not," he said. "Think of it as your warm-up." He was grinning as he turned and walked out to the bus, holding his clipboard over his head to ward off the rain.

It was uncomfortable running through the streets in the rain, and by the time we got to the practice field we were soaked through our uniforms and shoes. Coach didn't give us time to complain, though. He already had his scrimmage teams set, and he handed out knit jerseys, yellow for one team and red for the other, and sent us out onto the field.

We kept at it for about an hour. By then, we were dispirited, tired, uncooperative, and miserable. We trudged to the bus, where Coach handed each of us a plastic garbage bag to sit on.

"No point in getting the bus seats wet," he said cheerfully as we filed onto the bus.

By the time we got back, I was cold, wet, and very uncomfortable. Somehow, I got chosen to be last into the shower, so I changed into dry sweats to wait my turn. I was looking forward to having hot water pound on me for as long as I could stand it, and I was hoping the hotel wasn't going to run out of hot water by the time it was my turn. I lay down on the bed and silently wished that my three roommates would hurry up already.

In the morning, it was apparent that I was not well. My throat was scratchy, and I was starting to develop a cough. I felt a little feverish, and I could feel the beginnings of some congestion trying to establish itself in my chest. I ignored it as best I could, making do with some aspirin to take the edge off.

Our game was scheduled at four o'clock that afternoon, so we had most of the day to sit around. The rain had stopped, though it was still cloudy and cold. A bunch of guys went off to look around the campus, accompanied by some student guides. Coach Simonson and Mrs. Simonson took most of the rest of the team to a long lunch, but I opted to just order a sandwich from the cafe in the hotel and stay in the room, trying to rest. The television was on, but it was just background noise. From my few days staying home from school, I remembered too well what daytime TV was like, so I refrained from flipping through the channels looking in vain for something interesting.

At two o'clock we all gathered in the lobby, waiting for our bus to show up to take us to the stadium. We tossed our gear bags into the luggage compartment below, and shuffled onto the bus for the short ride to the locker rooms.

I was feeling pretty punkish as I changed into my uniform, but I knew I would be able to shake it off for the game. How long I would last running the field was a different matter, however.

The field was still wet from the previous day's rain, and the grass was slick. The areas around the nets were patchy with brown grass and mud, treacherous ground to work on for defenders. Jorge, Brett, Anthony, and I inspected both net areas, trying to map out in our minds where it would be most slippery.

There were just a few people in the stands at the start of the game. A combination of the weather and the distance from either our town, or from Watkinsville, our opponent in the semi-final match, kept nearly everybody away.

The game started out very tentatively, both teams seeming to want to test the quality of the field and the quality of the midfielders at first. The wet grass, even though it was cut short, still held up the wet ball, so bounces were lower, passes were shorter, and the ball couldn't roll very far on the ground. It tended to compress the width

of the field a little, pulling us into the chewed-up ground a little more than we would have liked.

I was just as glad the game started out slowly. I was feeling cold and lethargic, and I had to force myself to pick myself up and run at the ball, instead of waiting for the ball to come to me. Against weak teams from our conference I could have gotten away with waiting, but strong teams demanded decisive action on the ball. Any weak passes, any hesitation in attack or defense of an area, was quickly exploited at this level, so I concentrated on continually moving, jogging back and forth within my borders, staring at the ball movement to try to focus my concentration a little.

Anytime the ball entered my area, I pushed it off as soon as I could, either passing the ball over to Brett or to Jorge, or, if necessary, out of bounds. I didn't want to have to face any one-on-one challenges while I was feeling so slow and clumsy.

Fortunately, I only had a few touches on the ball during the first half, and at the whistle we were up 2-0 on goals by Trent and Robert. I sat down in a heap on the bench and draped a towel over my head to conserve some of the body heat I had built up during the first half.

Coach came over and crouched down in front of me. "Are you okay out there?" he asked.

"Yeah," I said. My nose was running, and my head was starting to hurt. "I just want to put this game away and go back and go to bed," I said.

"All right," he said as he stood. "Just let anybody on the sidelines know if you need to come out, Sean. Don't be a hero out there. It looks like we'll play another day." He went off to talk to his other players.

Kevin and Jorge came over and sat on either side of me.

"Hey, Porter, you gonna play the second half?" I glanced over at Kevin.

"Of course," I said. "Why?"

"Just checking," he replied. "I didn't want to have to baby-sit Weasel if I didn't have to."

I smiled ruefully. "Hell, Kev, you might just have to baby-sit me out there pretty soon, the way I'm feeling."

He snorted. "Don't you worry about it, Sean. It wasn't the babysitting I minded, it was having to do it for Weasel. You need help, you just let me know."

"Thanks, man, but I'll be okay."

Jorge said, "I got you covered, too, man. I can move Brett or Mike over a little if you need them."

"They're attacking Anthony more than they're working my side," I said. "Don't leave yourself with a hole they can squeeze through."

"Don' worry, man. They quick, but I know what I'm doin' out there, too."

"Yeah, I know you do, Jorge. Sorry."

"'S all okay, man. We got you covered. You just play what you can, we got the rest."

The referee called for the teams to take the field for the start of the second half. As the game progressed, Jorge and Kevin were true to their words. My borders got squeezed down, until I felt like I was defending an area about the size of my bedroom at home. I took a few throw-ins, and only had to run down one attacker, managing to kick the ball into his shin guard and out of bounds for a goal kick, and Jorge pounded the ball back upfield.

After about twenty minutes on the field, Coach subbed me out for Rich, and pointed me toward the bench.

"You're done for the afternoon," he said, patting me on the back. Rich, Weasel and Anthony would alternate on both sides of the defensive line for the balance of the game, and I was able to watch from underneath my towel as our midfielders and defenders played keep-away for the last several minutes, protecting our 4-0 lead that would propel us into the championship game.

As soon as we got back to the hotel, I staggered into the shower. I didn't even bother to brush my teeth or dry my hair, but instead I opted to skip dinner and crawl into bed. After my three roomies left, I remembered I had promised to call Luscious. I was sorely tempted to blow it off in favor of sleep, but my conscience, and the remembrance of the consequences of not calling people in the past, drove me to reach for the telephone on the nightstand between the beds and dial her number.

I only talked to her for a few minutes, begging off so I could try to get some rest. I told her a little bit about the game, and mentioned that I was getting a cold, so she relented and allowed me to keep our conversation short. Even so, I felt unaccountably better after I had talked to her than I did before. *Maybe she really is good for me.*

I felt pretty much like death warmed over the next day. I was achy all over, and my head felt like it had so much snot in it, it was likely to explode in a fury of mucous. Anthony and Eric had already gone downstairs to meet the rest of the team for breakfast, but Trent waited for me to get dressed so he could walk downstairs with me.

"Are you sure you wouldn't rather go alone?" I asked miserably. "It would be much easier on both of us if you would just leave me here to die."

"Sorry, pal, but you ain't dying on my watch," he said. He didn't sound very sympathetic. In fact, he sounded hungry. I, on the other hand, wasn't looking forward to watching everybody shovel food down, since I had no appetite. But he wasn't going to let me be, so I finished up, and we headed down to the restaurant.

It was an off day for us. Coach had just a light workout planned, really not much more than stretching, and then a film session to try to design some plays against our opponents for the championships, South High School, and their All-State midfielder, Spencer Goldman. I had met Spencer at last year's All-State banquet, and had met up with him again at Duane Olchick's summer clinic, playing both with and against him for two weeks of intense soccer. I knew his game

well, and he knew mine. I just wished I felt well enough to give him some game.

Mr. and Mrs. Neville and Mr. and Mrs. Simonson took the entire team out for pizza and soft drinks Saturday night. The place we went had an arcade room off to one side, and everybody spent all their dimes and quarters playing pinball, air hockey, Pac-Man, and the newest video game craze, Donkey Kong. I even forgot about my stuffy head while I was whacking away at the air hockey table, trying to beat Eric and Jorge. I got my butt whupped several times, but I managed to work up a little bit of a sweat playing, and I felt better by the time we trooped back to our hotel for the night. I thought that maybe, with luck, I might live through the night.

The championship game was scheduled for two o'clock on Sunday afternoon. I woke up in the morning feeling nearly human again. My body aches were almost gone, and so was the scratchy throat. All that was left was a congested head, and I knew a little medicine would help that enough to play.

We got to the fieldhouse about twelve-thirty, and took our time getting suited up. It was another cloudy, cool day, but it was dry, a good day for a faster game. We were on the sidelines, stretched out and warmed up, by one forty-five. There was a bigger crowd in the stands today, but, considering the stadium held over ten thousand people, good midfield seats were not hard to find.

South won the coin toss, and on the opening whistle, they began their first offensive set. Almost immediately they got the ball over to Spencer, who dribbled down into Seanland. I ran up to challenge him, but before I could engage, he passed off.

As I got up to him, I said, "Hey, Spencer, already you're attacking my side?"

He grinned at me. "I just heard you weren't feeling very well, so I thought I'd trot over and see how you were doing," he answered.

"Hummmph. I appreciate your concern, but I'm feeling good," I said.

He jogged off toward the middle, following the path of the ball. He gave me a small, unobtrusive wave as he turned away. “Maybe another time,” he called over his shoulder as he moved off.

We were confident enough in our game to not mess with our lineup, but I had the feeling South probably shifted players around, putting their stronger forwards on the left and their stronger defenders on their right, guarding against the one-two punch of Eric Johnson and Trent Abbott. As a result, the ball stayed pretty much in the middle of the field, without much encroachment one way or the other. The field was spread, so there was a lot of area to pass into, and both teams exhibited good ball control and accurate passing.

Finally, we created an opportunity. Mikey moved the ball to the left, passing it up to Eric. South loaded up that side of the field, moving their center players over to cut off passing lanes forward, but their right midfielder was a step behind Eric, and that was all he needed. He put on a burst of speed, creating just enough room, and launched a high pass all the way across the field to a wide-open Kevin, who immediately trapped the ball with his chest, let the ball drop to his feet, and passed it up to Jimmy. South’s left defender was caught flat-footed, and Jimmy was able to work the ball around him. He passed the ball over to Robert in the middle, who one-touched it up, threading the ball in between defenders, to Javier, who faked left, moved two steps to the right, and fired a missile into the back of the net. It wasn’t Trent, and it wasn’t Eric, but we took the goal anyway, and were glad to have it.

We jogged back to set up for the restart. Robert turned and reminded us that South would push hard to tie it up before the half, and to be prepared. With only about five minutes to play, I had the feeling it would be an intense stand.

They tapped the ball forward, and then passed back to set up. Instead of charging the ball, we maintained, only our forwards advancing. South spent a precious couple of minutes passing the ball back and forth on their side of the field before they decided to attack.

Spencer had the ball at the midfield stripe, and he took off, moving around Robert, and angling over to Anthony's side. His forward slipped in front of Mikey, who was tracking the ball, and Spencer threaded a pass between our two players to his forward. Brett was on him, though, and managed to harass him enough to keep him from shooting, until Mikey came over and stripped the ball away, clearing it back into South territory. By the time they collected the ball and passed it back up, the referee's whistle was blowing, and the first half was over.

I was breathing hard, laboring more than I wanted as I came off the field, but I hoped the break would give me enough time to rest and catch my breath for the second half. As soon as I could, I drank two or three cups of water. I didn't want to get dehydrated out there, especially with the decongestant working.

The second half picked up in intensity, with South running down every loose ball and pressing their attack in an effort to gain the upper hand. It was now or never, and they were well aware of it. On every attack, we managed to dodge the bullet, either by clearing the ball out on a pass, or through a takeaway, often as not passing the ball back to Jorge and letting him kick a high floater out to midfield.

We tried attacking, but they threw everybody back onto defense, and by sheer weight of numbers were able to retake the ball and try a new offensive set.

Finally, late in the game, South took a corner kick. In competitive situations, the standard procedure for corner kicks was to loft a kick from the corner toward the front of the goal, anywhere from ten to eighteen meters out from the net, and have your offense and your midfielders charge in and try to take either a header or a shot of some sort off the kick. Only in recreational leagues, and with younger players who can't get the ball up into the air very well, do you see two people setting up, one at the corner to start the play, and another inside, ready to take a short pass from the corner. South, however, set up just that way, and the defenseman passed from the corner to his

teammate. Jorge had set up Anthony at one post and me at the other. Mike Evanson should have seen the play develop and gone out to challenge, but he didn't. The player received the pass and one-touched it back to his teammate coming inbounds from the corner, who came in about ten meters. At that point, he could be a lot more accurate with his lofted pass, and he put it up in the air, right outside the goal. Jorge ran out and jumped up to make a play on the ball, but it was headed by one of South's players before he could get there, and he was forced out of the play. The player who jumped up and headed the ball knocked it about five meters over to Spencer Goldman, who was ready. As the ball dropped to him, he was moving forward, and he used his momentum as he cocked and fired at the corner I was defending.

To this day I would swear that I never got a clear view of the ball. The play developed too fast, and the ball came screaming off Spencer's shoe. I just happened to be in the right place at the right time. Purely by instinct I stuck my foot out, hanging onto the post. The ball ricocheted off my shin guard, straight out into the midfield area. It must have missed crossing the goal line by centimeters. Eric, the fastest man on the field, turned on the afterburners and raced after it, and gave the ball a big kick, sending it sailing past the startled stopper's head. Eric charged right by him, and had a one-on-one opportunity against the keeper. He kept going hard toward the net, and South's keeper came out to him, hands wide apart, staying on his toes as he approached. Eric took his shot while the keeper was still about ten meters away, but the triangulation between him, the keeper, and the goal was not good, and his shot went just wide. By the time everything reset on the goal kick, time was running down. Our defense kept the ball out of harm's way, and every time we cleared it out, precious seconds were burned up, and the final whistle ended the contest. We had won the state championship game, 1-0.

We piled on each other in the middle of the field joyfully, an incredible unbeaten season suddenly over. After we disentangled

ourselves, we lined up to congratulate South on the game, and then headed toward the sidelines. Spencer Goldman walked over and shook my hand.

"Great goal line stand, Sean," he said.

"It was pure luck. You should have gotten the goal, Spence."

He shrugged. "Right place, right time helps. You've also got to have the reaction time and the game to make it work."

"Thanks, Spencer. I appreciate it."

"Besides, there's always next year," he said as we walked together off the field. He smiled. "Watch out, Porter. We'll probably be right here, a year from now. Most of our team is coming back."

"Ours, too," I said. I stuck out my hand. "Okay, next year it can be your turn. But you'll have to earn it. We won't just lay down for you, you know."

He grasped my hand as we made a friendly pact. "I'm counting on it," he said. "By the way, I saw the magazine article. Congratulations on making the list."

"See what you can accomplish with just the right publicist?" I said facetiously. "But thanks, anyway."

"Hey, whatever. All I know is that there weren't a lot of juniors on that list, and no sophomores at all. It's pretty good company you're keeping."

"Yeah," I said, humbled a little. "You're right, it's just that I keep on looking over my shoulder, wondering when the little practical joker is going to pop up and say, 'Just kidding, Porter. Now back to being mediocre again.'"

Spencer laughed. "Ain't gonna happen, I'm afraid. Learn to live with it, Sean. You're on the list because you belong on the list. See ya at the banquet." And he veered off, heading toward his teammates.

I mulled over what he had told me. Maybe I belonged on the list, maybe I didn't. I knew I wasn't the best judge of my own game, and I probably wasn't the best judge of my character, either, but it just felt to me like I was somehow pulling the wool over too many people's

eyes lately. I just had to put my trust in my friends to keep me straight.

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SEARCHING FOR TRUTHS AND LIES

The soccer team returned home triumphant, and the recruiters started calling. Pick called on Monday, too, and told me that he had been at the championship game.

"Helluva stop, son, on that corner," he said.

"The kid who took the shot is a really good player," I said. "All-State selection the past two years."

"You mean that Spencer Goldman fella? I know, Sean. He's on my list to call on, too."

"Really? He'd be a great addition to your team, Coach."

Pick went on to let me know that the paperwork was in motion for his offer, and if my parents or I had any questions, to call him at any time.

"Now, I really mean that, son," he reiterated.

"I know you do, Coach, and I appreciate it. I've got your number, right here on the kitchen bulletin board."

"Okay, then," he said. "You take care, Sean. I'll be talking to you in just a few weeks."

"So long, Coach, and thanks for everything."

Trent, Eric, Jorge, and I were soccer heroes for a few weeks, just as Tiny and Alex Simmons, our senior quarterback, were the football heroes for the moment. We could all bask in the glory until basketball season started, and then it would be somebody else's turn, in this case Sam Loggins, our 6'5" sophomore phenom, to be the athletic Big Man On Campus. Personally, as much as I enjoyed the attention for a little while, I was just as glad to sink back into relative anonymity again, once the winter sports began.

By Christmas break, Kayla and I had become one of the student body Official Couples, and we had fallen into a general routine of doing homework, either at my house or hers, and then going for a run afterwards, time permitting. On the weekends, we would meet up with friends and go to the school basketball games, or perhaps head over to Mike's Pizza. We would have occasional make-out sessions in the car on the way back home, but nothing more serious than the kissing and petting we had experimented with before. The arrangement seemed to work well. I purposely didn't put any pressure on Kayla to go any further than she was willing to go, and yet she was happy to help me with my particular needs as the occasion arose, you should pardon the pun. She took our relationship seriously, and I so did I. Maybe I was finally learning from past mistakes. I hoped so.

While Molly certainly didn't enter a convent, neither did she get nutty again. She and I talked often, usually during school, but occasionally one or the other of us would call, and we would spend an hour or so on the telephone. At first, Kayla was a little concerned about these calls, wondering if Molly had an ulterior motive, but after watching the trusting friendship that Molly and I were developing, she wisely said nothing.

For Molly's part, it took her a long time, and a lot of gut-wrenching conversations with me, with Josh, with Tessa, and with her sister Heather, to regain her spirit and her positive outlook. It

helped that Joey and Vinnie were still serving detention every afternoon. With no leader to hold them together, the Bulls were pretty much finished. They had been a pretty rag-tag group to begin with, even considering the trouble they had managed to stir up over the past couple of years, so it wasn't really much of a surprise they couldn't hold together without a Del Toro in their midst. Harold and Pammy had both dropped out of school and gotten low-paying jobs after tiring of serving out a few weeks of their daily detention. A rumor flashed through school sometime before Christmas break that Pammy was pregnant and had gotten kicked out of her mother's house, that she had moved in with Harold, living in the basement of the Barnes house with him. A few days later, Jen Davies came to school and let her friends know that she had run into Pammy at a doughnut shop where she spent her days mixing dough, and it was all supposedly true.

Richie Del Toro was still in the pokey, and little brother Jilly was still in reform school. The Del Toro family was watched pretty carefully by our local law enforcement community, just in case.

One day, just a few days after Thanksgiving, I got an invitation in the mail from the Wilkinsons, about an open house holiday party that Lori was hosting. There was a handwritten note paperclipped to the invitation:

Dearest Sean,

Davey, Kip, and I would love to see you at our open house. Many of the parents and boys from the team will be here. Please come, and please bring a guest if you'd like!

Love, Lori

The date for the party was on a Saturday afternoon and evening. I assumed that the kids would probably be there during the

afternoon, and the evening would be mostly for adults. I called Kayla and told her about it, and we made a date.

The Saturday of Lori's party was unseasonably warm, almost a throwback to October weather. I had on casual pants and a short-sleeve shirt, and I took along a light jacket, for when it cooled off after the sun went down. I drove over to pick up Luscious, who came skipping out her front door as soon as I pulled into the driveway. She had on baggy green cotton pants, and a light green sweater. She had pinned a little gold Rudolph pin, with a tiny garnet for his nose, to her sweater, for a holiday accessory. She wore her pale, almost white hair down and loose, and it cascaded over her shoulders and fluttered in the breeze as she ran to the car. She was so lovely, my heart nearly stopped as I watched her.

As she opened the door, she tossed a backpack into the rear seat, and then sat down and shimmied over to sit close to me.

"What's in the pack?" I asked, but she just looked at me, a small smile on her face. Her only answer was to kiss me on the cheek before settling back into the seat.

There were a lot of cars parked in the driveway and in the street, and I had to go around the corner to find a parking spot. Kay and I walked up the sidewalk to Lori's house. The front door was open, and there was quite a bit of noise coming from the house as we turned up the driveway to the sidewalk, skirting the cars parked in the driveway.

I opened the storm door for Kayla, and as soon as we stepped into the house, I was bombarded by two bolts of lightning.

"Sean! You came to our party!"

"Mom! Sean's here!"

Kip looked up at Kayla, her silky blonde hair backlit by the sunlight streaming in through the glass of the door, a look of awe on his face.

"Are you an angel?" he asked breathlessly.

Kayla burst out laughing, and then knelt down and gave Kip a big hug.

"No, I'm not an angel. I'm just a girl," she said. "But thank you anyway, sweetie."

I bent down close to Kip's ear.

"She's fibbing, pal. She really is an angel. My angel."

She glanced at me, her eyes happy and shining.

Lori came out of the family room, and Kay and I hurriedly stood up to say hello. She gave me a hug, and when I introduced her to Kayla, she surprised her by giving her a big hug, too.

Lori held her for just a moment, looking into Kayla's eyes.

"Do you know how special this boy is?" she asked.

Kayla smiled, her eyes softening. "Oh, yes, I do," she replied.

Lori cocked her head critically. "Yes, I believe you do," she said seriously. She suddenly grinned. "Come on," she said, taking us each by an arm. "I should introduce you around." And she led us into the living room, where a lot of the soccer parents were standing or sitting in little pockets of conversation.

I knew most of them, having met one or both parents at one time or another over the course of the last couple of seasons, so we did the rounds, saying a few words to each as I introduced Kayla, and accepting congratulations from them for the team's season and for my individual awards.

We were holding hands as we walked toward the kitchen, hoping to find a soft drink. There was a big, booming voice echoing from the family room, and from the sounds of it, the owner of that voice had quite a crowd in there he was entertaining, because there was a lot of laughter and chatter coming from there. There were a couple of cooks and servers in the kitchen, caterers preparing little snacks and hors d'oeuvres, and one of them directed us toward the dining room, where a temporary bar was set up on the sideboard. We found plastic cups, ice, and sodas in there, along with liquor, beer and wine. We poured Cokes into cups for ourselves. I looked around, making

sure nobody was watching us. I picked up an open bottle of rum, and splashed just a little into each of our glasses. Kayla watched me silently, her face solemn but her eyes dancing. We stirred our drinks, and walked hand in hand toward the family room.

Lori sprang up from her seat on a footstool next to the big man with the big voice, the same man she had been with at the soccer game.

"Sean, you remember David?" She turned to David. "Dave, this is Kayla Lehigh. Kayla, this is David McMasters."

Kay's small hand was lost as it was completely engulfed in David's big hand. He was very gentle, however, as he bent down and greeted her. He motioned to the chair he had just vacated.

"Such a lovely creature should not have to stand," he said. "Please, Kayla, sit here. Mr. P., and how are you?" He shook my hand with appreciably more vigor. "That was a great game you played that Lori took me to see. I really enjoyed it. Can't say I really know much about soccer, but Lori's boys are teaching me all the time. Here, sit, right here next to your companion," he continued, indicating the footstool.

"No, thank you, I'd prefer to stand," I said. "Lori? Please sit and relax." I glanced around, and, to my surprise, sitting together on the couch were Molly and her twin brother Josh. Josh was grinning at me, and Molly looked like she was struggling to hold back a bellyful of laughter.

"What are you guys doing here?" I asked in surprise.

Now Molly did laugh out loud. "What, you're the only high school kid Lori knows? I've known her longer than you have."

I felt properly dressed down. "You're right, I'm sorry," I confessed. I stepped over toward them. Molly stood and hugged me fiercely. Even though she was one of my best friends, and our time together was past, my hormonally frenzied brain still recognized the weight of her breasts as they mashed against me.

Don't think about it, don't think about it, you are such a pervert, I repeated over and over in my head. Which, of course, made me focus even more on the feel of her body, to the point that I was reluctant to let her go, for fear of showing my awareness of her to the rest of the room, and particularly to Kayla.

Molly sat back down, and I sort of crouched over to the footrest next to Kay. She just glanced at me, a hint of amusement in her eye.

"Is Sean behaving, Kayla?" asked Molly.

"Oh, he's trying," she answered. "He still needs some work, though."

"It doesn't change much, even when they get older," said Lori with a small laugh, sitting in a stuffed chair next to me. David was standing behind her, arms resting on the back of the chair.

"Nope," said David in a booming voice. "Men want women to never change, almost from the moment they meet them. Women, on the other hand, seem to see men as a work in progress, with a finished project barely in sight." He laughed at his own joke, and it was so infectious and loud that you couldn't help but join in.

Kay and I finally left about three hours later, stuffed to the gills with goodies that seemed to pour nonstop from the staff working in the kitchen. Josh and Molly had left just a little before us. It took us awhile to make our way through the house, saying our goodbyes and wishing everybody a happy holiday season. Lori and David met us at the front door.

"Thank you so much for coming," said Lori.

"Oh, thank you for inviting us," said Kayla. They seemed to have struck up a friendship over the course of the party. I hoped they didn't go in for too much in the way of intimate girl talk.

"You know, Sean, you don't need an invitation to come over," said Lori, looking at me seriously. "The boys and I welcome you anytime. You and Kayla, both."

"Well, thank you," I said. "I appreciate it. And thanks for inviting us tonight. It was great seeing all the kids and their parents again." I

shook David's hand, and Lori hugged me as David wrapped Kayla up in his long arms and hugged her. Lori gave me a surreptitious kiss on the cheek as she whispered softly in my ear, "She's wonderful, Sean. I'm so happy for both of you."

Her eyes were glistening when we finally separated. I nodded to her, unable to say a word. I knew how lucky I was.

It was still a relatively warm night, and still early for us. Kayla and I strolled down the sidewalk to the corner, holding hands and swinging our arms in step.

We got into the car, and I just naturally started driving out of town, back out toward Gallagher's barn, which was rapidly becoming known to us as Our Special Place.

I pulled into the empty parking area and shut off the lights. It was warm enough in the car, and not too cold outside, so I killed the engine, turning the key back so that the radio would play softly. Luscious Kayla was sitting tucked up next to me, her head on my shoulder, and my arm was around her, holding her close. We stayed that way for a long time, just gazing out the window at the darkness, and listening to the music floating out of the speakers.

Finally, Kayla lifted her head up to me, and I leaned down and softly kissed her. No fooling around this time, she closed her eyes and gave herself up to the sensation of my lips pressing and melding together with hers as we kissed gently, unhurriedly.

She broke the kiss first, and began to nibble and nudge at my bottom lip with her lips, and bringing her wet tongue into play. Each nibble she took upped the ante just a little, creating an additional spark that added itself to the previous spark, until there was a pleasant heated tension surrounding us. My blood was circulating now, keeping me warm, and I could feel heat radiating from Kayla, too, as I put my left arm around her waist and she turned more toward me. She pressed herself harder against me, pushing me back a little until I was slightly jammed between the seat and the car door. I stayed that way, content to let her lead as her kisses got more

insistent, ranging now from my throat to my lips, but always returning, homing in on my lower lip as she nibbled and tasted from corner to corner, hesitating only to explore the scar that was barely perceptible, except to her. She loved to concentrate on that spot, and I loved to feel her focus.

She sat up suddenly, her pale hair gleaming in the dim light of the moon.

"Come on," she said, as she vaulted herself over the back of the seat. She hitched herself up into a sitting position in the back seat, and opened the zipper of her backpack.

She looked at me, a look that made my heart skip a beat. "Well?" was all she said.

It was enough to put me in motion. I clambered over the seat and landed next to her as she pulled out a thin blanket and began to cover the vinyl seat, shoving me out of the way so she could scrunch it underneath me and tuck it in.

"The seat's too cold otherwise," she said with a smile. She reached down and grasped the hem of her sweater and pulled it partway up and off her. Before she pulled it up over her eyes, she paused, watching me looking at her. The naked skin of her flat stomach was flawless, and looked dark compared to the small white bra she was wearing. I really wanted to stroke that soft skin, but I restrained myself. She smiled even bigger, and pulled the sweater the rest of the way off, tossing it into the front seat, and then reached back behind her and unfastened her bra, and sent it over the back of the seat, too. She settled back and crossed her arms beneath her small, delectable breasts.

"Your turn," she said, looking like she was ready to enjoy a show.

I almost tore the buttons off my shirt in my haste to shed it. I yanked it out of my pants and unbuttoned it as fast as I could, and flung it over the seat.

She almost imperceptibly nodded in satisfaction, and opened her arms to me. I accepted her invitation, and leaned over her to kiss her,

my hands finally making contact with the soft skin on her tummy, and then running up from her narrow waist to her fleshy boobs. Her nipples were puckered in the cooler air, and they expanded even further as my thumbs played over them. She opened her mouth, inviting my tongue to explore, and tilted her head so that our lips formed a better seal. She inhaled through her mouth, drawing my breath from me, throwing fuel onto the fire that was already burning hot within me. We stayed connected like that until the heat being generated forced us to break the kiss, both of us panting. I started feasting on the tender skin of her throat, working my way down while drawing out the tension that was building ever tighter in both of us, as I got closer to my goal.

I loved playing with her boobs, and could have died happy the moment I took her nipple into my mouth. She arched her back in pleasure, and I reciprocated by opening my mouth a little wider and sucking in as much of her breast as I could. The locker-room talk about girls seemed always to revolve around how big their breasts were, with many guys declaring that the bigger they were, the better. On the other side were the guys who proclaimed that more than a mouthful was a waste. While I didn't necessarily agree that more than what I could fit into my mouth was wasted, I also was willing to admit that I tended to be more appreciative of willing, soft female flesh that fit nicely in the palm of my hand. More than a mouthful, less than the mountainous kinds some guys seemed to drool over. And Kayla's fit well in my hand, a fact I was just then appreciating, as I caressed one boob while I nursed at the other, occasionally switching positions in the interest of fairness.

After several minutes of heated contact, Kayla started wanting more. She pulled me up to give me a searing kiss. At the same time she slid down until her head was propped on the armrest, and she was splayed across the car seat, her legs spread, with me lying on her, half kneeling between her legs. As I kissed her, I let my hand wander from the soft mound of her breast, down her quivering

stomach, to the elastic waistband of her pants. She sucked in her tummy in anticipation and invitation, and my fingers slipped beneath the elastic and continued down, encountering the silky material of her panties. I cupped her hot and moist mound, pressing all of my fingers against her, and then slid them back up to slither beneath the elastic edge of her panties. I felt her sparse and damp hair that protected her slit, and delved deeper, drawn by the warmth and the moisture.

As the tips of my fingers parted her folds, a flood of her oils were released onto my hand, easing my passage to her heated opening. I dipped one finger halfway into her, and left it there for a moment. I could feel her hunch against me, her body wanting more. When I slowly withdrew my finger, she moaned into my mouth, and held me tighter to her, already missing the presence of my finger within her. I plunged back into her, my finger tunneling as deeply into her flooded hole as it could, and she thrust her tongue into my mouth practically in unison, sending a flare of heat throughout me.

I cupped my hand to give myself more room against her confining clothes, and pumped my finger in and out of her vagina. My thumb found her clit, and rubbed back and forth against the little nub as it expanded, creating a wave of motion through her hips. I felt the tension rise, and the movement of her hips got a little more erratic, but I didn't want her to fall over the edge quite yet. I pulled my finger out of her opening, and pulled my hand out of her pants. She moaned in frustration, until she felt me tug at her waistband. She broke our kiss and helped me push her pants and her underwear down her, lifting her butt off the seat and pushing on them before shimmying them down her legs and working them off her feet, tossing them into the front seat to join her sweater and bra.

She lay back again and held her arms out, a smile on her face and lust in her eyes. I lay back down next to her, my leg over her knee, and ran my hand back down her body as I bent down to once again offer homage to her breasts. I used two fingers on her now, plunging

them in deeply, pulling out to spread her oils from her opening to her attentive clitoris, and then teasing her with just the tips for a moment before giving her the full length of my digits again. At the same time, I licked and suckled at her swollen breasts, alternately sucking and biting the nipples and licking the slightly salty skin of the undersides of her tender boobs.

She clutched my head to her bosom, running her fingers through my hair, as I worshipped her. Her hips were bumping up against my hand as I plunged in and out of her pussy, my thumb teasing her clitoris on each downstroke. Her breathing got more ragged as she climbed closer to the edge, and she let out a small, high sound as she suddenly grabbed onto fistfuls of hair and hung on tight, her hips churning against my probing hand. I bit down on her nipple when I felt the small discharge flow from her pussy around my fingers. She arched her back, her entire body trembling, and she fell off the cliff, coming hard.

As for me, I very nearly shot off in my trousers, untouched. I was subconsciously rubbing myself against her leg as I was working her, and when she climaxed, she almost took me with her as her leg quivered against my rock-hard dick. As she fell back to the seat, my own incipient crisis slowly passed. I lay down with her, casually stroking her boob as I watched the pink evidence of her orgasm slowly fade from her chest, throat and cheeks.

She sighed contentedly, her eyes closed, as she let the sensations wash away her cares. Finally, she opened her eyes and looked at me, a smile on her face.

"Why do you still have clothes on?" she whispered.

That was all it took to set me in motion. I sat up and yanked my shoes off, letting them drop with a thud to the car floor. I scrambled to loosen my belt. Kayla sat up to help, and four sets of fingers fumbled at opening my pants and shucking them off my legs. Once we got them off and tossed aside, Kayla started pushing on the waistband of my briefs, but the elastic kept on getting hung up on

my upraised and very stiff cock. With a small giggle, she managed to figure out a way, and my underwear went flying across the car, too. I sat back and watched as Kayla, with a hungry look in her eye, bent down and grasped my stalk with her tiny hand. She wrapped her fingers around it and jacked it just a little, while her other hand wormed its way between my legs to cup and heft my heavy balls.

I was dribbling pre-cum, and she used that moisture, spreading it around the head of my cock with her fingertips, rubbing it into my tight skin like a lotion. When more bubbled out, she stuck out her tongue and licked it off. With a glance up at me, she smacked her lips, smiled, and opened wide to take the sculpted helmet of my hard cock into her mouth. She sealed her lips around me, and sucked hard, her cheeks hollowing out with her effort.

Seeing the vision of Kayla kneeling there, naked and intent, her small breasts quivering with the movement of her hand working the base of my cock and her pale hair falling loosely around her, was almost enough, by itself, to send me off. I reached down and fondled her breast for a moment, and she moaned around my cock, which sent shivers of excitement through me. I could feel the vibrations of her vocal chords all the way from the tip of my encased cock, down through the steely shaft, into my scrotum, being kept warm by her hand, and up my spine and directly into my fevered brain.

It all happened so fast. One moment I was caressing her soft breast and feeling her moaning around my intrusion into her mouth, and the next I was tensed up, sending streamers of semen shooting directly down her throat. My eyes were open wide as I saw her throat convulse, trying to keep up with the discharge, as she reflexively swallowed. Even so, quite a bit of bubbly, white fluid leaked out around her lips and down my shaft, collecting on her fingers still wrapped tightly around me as they pumped and coaxed the spasms to continue.

Finally, I was drained, and I collapsed back against the seat as my muscles relaxed. Kayla lifted up off my slowly deflating cock, and

licked up the remains that had escaped during my climax. She even licked off the web of flesh between her thumb and her index finger, where a small amount had pooled. Finally, satisfied that she had gotten it all, she clambered up and landed on top of me, practically driving the breath from my lungs. Looking directly into my eyes from about two inches away, she deliberately licked her lips.

"I dare you to kiss me now," she whispered, the challenge making her eyes bright.

"Hah!" I laughed, and I wrapped her up in my arms and brought her down to me and gave her my best open-mouthed kiss, packing as much heat and desire as I could into it. If she was woman enough to take me into her loving mouth and accept all that I could give her, I was certainly going to be man enough to show her how much it meant to me.

It caught her by surprise, but she recovered quickly, and snuggled up against me into a more comfortable position. She settled down to enjoy my kiss, letting her tongue work its magic within the cave of our joined mouths, and letting my tongue tease and feint with hers.

As we kissed, I could feel the lubrication from her pussy leaking out and soaking my thigh. My restiffening cock bumped up against her leg as she lay on me, her knee between my legs. I dropped my hands down her back and grasped her delectable ass, clutching the globes between my fingers. She shifted her weight just a little, until she was directly on top of me, and I could feel the coarser hair of her pubis against my cock. Practically on its own, my body took over from my brain, and my hips started hitching up and down just a little. Kayla's body, perhaps in response, scrunched down just a little, and I felt her pussy lips part around the head of my seeking cock.

She rubbed back and forth against me, as my hips got a little frantic in my desire to feel her tight walls against my rigid dick. Her rocking up and down bumped the head of my cock against her clitoris, and I felt the heat of her folds encase just the tip of my cock

as she moved back up me. Then, suddenly, I was there, at the portal. The head slipped into her overheated hole and rested there, taking its measure of her, anticipating feeling the fullest depth of her body, the willing tightness of her walls.

Kayla broke our kiss with a gasp, and stared at me.

"I... I can't," she whispered. I felt her hips rise, and the contact between my cock and her vagina was lost. Tears began welling in her eyes. "I'm so sorry, Sean," she sobbed.

I held her close. After a moment's hesitation, she allowed me to press her back down onto me, only this time my hard cock was resting between us, away from her heated pussy. I brought one hand up to caress her neck, and she put her head down next to me.

"It's okay, Kayla," I said quietly. "Whatever you want. Remember when I told you that, before? Nothing's changed."

She sighed. "I love you so much, Sean," she said softly. "I wish I could do it. Maybe someday I can, but not yet. And I don't want our first time to be in the back of your mom's car, either." She sighed. I could feel her trembling. "But it's not because I don't love you. I do."

"I know you do, Kayla," I reassured her. "And I love you, too. That's why it's okay."

She lifted up and stared into my eyes, checking the windows to my soul for truths and lies. I suffered her examination, hoping she would see truth there, but afraid she might find deceptions that even I might not be aware of.

"Do you, Sean? Do you love me?" she asked, wanting to hear the words again, almost afraid she had been mistaken.

I took a deep breath. It was time to face my biggest fault and do something about it.

"Yes, Kay," I said seriously. "I love you. I will do anything for you, anything at all."

She looked deeply within me, searching. She must have found what she was expecting, because she suddenly attacked me, kissing

me hard, torn between mashing my lips with hers and talking to me while we were connected like that.

"Oh, I love you, I love you, I love you," she mumbled into my mouth. She wriggled against me, trying for as much skin touching mine as she could. My cock was almost painful in its rigidity, an iron shaft of flesh poking our stomachs. Her small breasts were pressed flat against my chest, her nipples poking into the skin on my chest, and she held both her hands against the sides of my face as she kissed me.

I couldn't help myself as my hips started lurching on their own, creating a delicious friction between our bodies. She felt it, too, and took a modicum of pity on me, reaching down between us, snaking her hand down to grasp my turgid cock. She lifted up slightly, breaking our kiss, and, a gamin look in her eye, watched me as she played me. I tried to retaliate by dropping my hand down her body, intending to probe her oily slit. I couldn't reach her the way we were laying, so I had to content myself with playing with her soft breasts, rubbing my thumb over her nipples and feeling them fill and extend.

After experiencing the talents she exhibited with her mouth and tongue, I didn't think she would be able to get me off by just jacking me with her hand, but I was pleasantly surprised. Before long I started humping into her fist as she squeezed me, and she recognized the look in my eyes when she got me close. She smiled, and stopped what she was doing.

"Uh... Kay?" I said, nearly panicky in my elevated condition.

"What?" she asked innocently, her hand wrapped around my painful cock, squeezing but not moving.

I grabbed her under her arms and lifted her up just enough so that I could wrap my lips around one swollen nipple, and I clamped down on it and sucked on it hard. She squealed, and reflexively began pumping me again, and that was all the stimulation I needed. I spurted out my seed onto our sweaty skin, and she worked her wonders by jacking me until I was done. Then she spread my warm,

sticky spend into the skin of both of our stomachs, all while she was allowing me access to her plump boobs, moving side to side so that I could minister to each in its turn.

Finally, she sighed, and climbed off me. She pushed my legs off the car seat and sat down, and then snuggled up to me once I had struggled back to a sitting position. I put an arm around her shoulder, holding onto her upper arm. I continued to caress her breast with my other hand, unwilling to give up on the contact with my favorite part of her body.

"We have to go soon," she whispered.

"Yeah," I replied. Neither of us moved.

After a couple of minutes of silence, she said, "I can't move. You have to do it for us."

"Yeah," I replied again. Neither of us moved.

More silence.

"I wish we could stay like this," she said.

"Me, too."

Silence.

"We really have to go soon."

Pause. "Yeah."

She sighed. "Okay, I can see I'm going to have to be the strong one here." She pushed me away, and I lost contact with her boobs. I missed them already, so I reached for her, but she slapped my hands away.

"No, you pervert," she said with a laugh. "Now get dressed. What if somebody comes along?"

"What, here? Nobody knows about this place," I said.

"Well, get dressed anyway. You have to take me home, and you need to look presentable, in case my parents are up and waiting for me."

"Ugh." Now there was an unpleasant thought. I liked her parents, but I really didn't think greeting them with the musky smell

of their daughter's secret scent on my fingers was such a good idea. I reached for my pants on the floor.

Kayla, in the meantime, leaned over the seat to retrieve her clothes. This put her enticing butt within my range, so I took advantage and first kissed each cheek, and then extended my tongue and slowly licked up her middle, tasting her oils and delving into her still moist middle.

She groaned, and wiggled her ass, burying my nose as I tasted her. "Oh, God," she moaned. But she had more strength, as well as a lot more common sense, than I did. With an effort, she pulled away from my questing mouth and turned around to face me, crouched down and leaning against the back of the front seat.

"You are so bad," she whispered with a smile.

I frowned. "And I was trying to be so good," I said.

She giggled. "You are good. And bad. Bad for me. You make me think naughty thoughts too often."

"And that's bad?"

She laughed. "You are unbelievable, Porter. You never give up, do you?"

I shrugged. "I think that's actually a compliment," I said.

She took my head in her hands and kissed me lightly on the lips. "Yes, it is," she replied. "Now get dressed, you sluggard. I'm just a kid, and I have a curfew. You won't like it if I get grounded, you know."

"Okay, okay," I muttered. I bent down to retrieve my underwear from under the front seat. Apparently, I exhibited too much of a target, because I heard Kayla giggle, and felt her kiss my ass cheeks, and then run her tongue over my scrotum from behind. It sent shivers up my spine.

"Hey!" I said, struggling to get turned back around. "You're just a kid, and you have a curfew. You don't want to get that motor started up again, do you?"

She gave me one of her small, secret smiles, which was all the answer I would get to my question.

I got her home with about a minute and a half to spare. She ran up the sidewalk, not wanting to wait for me to walk her to her door, and waved as she went inside, leaving me feeling alone and somehow incomplete once again, until the next time I could see her.

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THE ROLLING LOVEMOBILE

By Christmas, I had received so many offers and calls from scouts and coaches from around the country, that even I was convinced that I would be able to play college soccer on a scholarship. Pick's offer sheet arrived, and he followed up with several phone calls. Florida was offering me a full scholarship, room and board, reimbursement for books and fees, plus an employment package that would pay me for working about ten hours a week in one of the stadium gift shops.

I also got offers from Minnesota and Indiana in the Big Ten, from Creighton, Maryland, Rhode Island, Boston College, UConn, NYU, Texas, UCLA, Oregon, and Arizona. Some offers, I was sure, were a result of working with Katrina Sorenno, who played on the UCLA women's team, and James Bricker, the starting keeper for UConn, as well as Tasha Wallace of Arizona, all of whom I knew from working for Duane Olchick over the summer. I also got offers with incentives from other SEC schools, including some under-the-table offers that were very generous. My dad thought those offers were more to keep me from going to Pick's program than anything else. He said that one

scout from one of the schools had told him in confidence that they were afraid Pick was building up a dynasty, kind of like what John Wooden had built for the UCLA basketball program.

My parents knew, and probably Pick knew, but nobody else was aware that I had every intention of signing up with Florida. Pick Cropper was the first to show his faith in me, and he had Jesse Wilhoit playing for him. I thought I would fit in well there.

My dad, meanwhile, was so happy that he wouldn't have to pony up for my college education, that he broke into my college fund and bought me a nice used car for Christmas, a two year old VW Rabbit. No more begging rides to school from Jake or taking the dreaded school bus. *Freedom!* The only problem was that the Rabbit had bucket seats in front, so Luscious couldn't cuddle up next to me as we drove somewhere. The back seat was a little cramped, too, not that it mattered much. Kay and I were just fooling around a little. She had already made it quite clear that she wasn't about to give up her virginity in the back seat of a rolling lovemobile, though she was certainly open to considerable latitude when it came to other worldly pleasures. Yes, the Rabbit served us quite nicely.

Another big event among my friends came early in the spring, when Jaimie and Jake came out as a couple. Everybody at school already knew about it, of course, but, with Prom coming up, they both decided that it was past time for them to quit hiding their relationship from their parents. To that end, things were inadvertently made much easier for them by Jaimie's younger sister, Tara.

Tara had always been the wild child of the neighborhood, a tomboyish girl who wanted to play sports. She loved playing basketball, baseball, football, soccer, even hockey, but what she really excelled at was running. She could run faster than any other girl I knew, and was by far the fastest kid in junior high. She might even have been faster than Eric Johnson was when he was her age. Now, fourteen years old and in eighth grade, she still was a fast runner.

And, from what I had heard from my younger brother Stephen, Tara was getting pretty fast in other ways, too, having discovered the pleasures of the flesh. In fact, even her parents had heard or seen some things, and were trying to intervene to head off her pattern of behavior and experimentation. The two sisters, meanwhile, were in a stalemate. Jaimie knew some things about Tara, which kept Tara's mouth shut about Jaimie's involvement with Jake, around and around and around. After Mr. and Mrs. Jacks found out about some of Tara's activities, however, their concern focused on Tara, and somehow Jaimie's deceptions seemed pretty minor. Once they found out about it, when Jake and Jaimie went to them and told them about their plans to attend Prom together, they reluctantly accepted the fact that the two of them, next door neighbors, were dating.

One Saturday evening in April, Jaimie and Jake were sharing a booth with us at Mike's Pizza.

"So, Tara's been acting up again, Jaimie?" I asked. Stephen had told me that Tara was known as the Blowjob Queen of Central Junior High.

"I don't know what's going through the tiny brains of junior high kids," Jaimie said disgustedly.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I try to talk to her and all, and she's like, 'All the kids are doing it, it's no big deal.' I'm trying to tell her that it is a big deal, but she doesn't believe me."

"What, having sex and all?" asked Kayla.

"No, it's not like that," replied Jaimie. "They're not having sex. I mean, they're not, like, screwing or anything, but they are engaging in other sex acts. But she doesn't think oral sex and stuff is the same thing as sex. It's just like it's something casual and friendly, like a hug or something."

"Some hug," said Jake, waggling his eyebrows.

Jaimie slugged him in the arm, almost a reflexive action, and then continued. "She says that a lot of girls at her school treat it the same

way. It's not just her giving a boy she knows some head, it's mutual. She even says that some girls even go down on other girls, just so they can each get off. It's not sex, it's just fun and games."

"Wow. It seems like it could be a pretty dangerous game," said Kayla.

"Yeah. I just don't get it. I mean, I would feel really strange doing something like that with somebody I really didn't have any feelings about, you know? I mean, putting your mouth next to somebody else's genitals seems a lot more... personal... than they are considering."

Jake and I both laughed. "Yes, it seems pretty personal, all right," I agreed with a chuckle. Luscious kicked me under the table and gave me a quick look of warning.

"I agree with you," said Kayla after a moment. "But these kids don't see it the same way. It's what, social instead of personal? Something like that, anyway. I'm glad I'm not in junior high anymore. I just don't understand it."

"It's their method of birth control, maybe," suggested Jake. "I mean, if you're just engaging in oral sex, or even... um... mutual masturbation, you're really staying, technically speaking, a virgin. It's a way of having the pleasure, and at the same time escaping the possibility of getting pregnant."

"Birth control?" Jaimie was startled by the suggestion. Her eyes got wide as she looked at Jake, but I could see her concentration shift inward as she considered what he was saying. "Hmmm... maybe that's true," she murmured, almost to herself.

"And there's still the worry about passing around diseases," said Kayla. "I mean, VD is still around, and, unless they lied during Sex Ed, it can still be passed through oral contact."

"Hey, have you guys heard about this new disease they've been reporting about lately?" I had just remembered a news report I had seen on TV. "Something about a new gay disease, I forget what it's called, but it shows up as odd, rare forms of cancers."

"A gay disease?" Jake asked. "Some kind of fudge-packer's cancer?"

"Ewww. That's really gross," complained Jaimie, as she hit his bicep again.

"I don't think they know how it's passed, but it seems to be most common among gays, primarily in New York and London."

"Yes, I remember hearing about that," said Kayla. "And now it's showing up in Haiti, too, right?"

"Yeah, I think I heard that, too," I replied.

"Well, if it's a homo disease, so what?" asked Jake.

"Nothing," I said. "Unless it's passed through homosexual oral sex. I mean, how does a disease stay confined to a lifestyle like that? What's to keep it from spreading to girls, then?"

That wasn't a very pleasant thought for any of us. We could only hope that it stayed confined to the gay community, and that they found a cure quickly.

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Later that night, Kayla and I were sitting together, mostly naked in the back seat of my car, catching our breath after an intense session of touching and stroking each other to completion. I had my arm around her, and she was leaning on my shoulder, idly doodling with the arrow of hair running from my belly button down to my pubic hair.

"You've never done that, have you, Sean?" she asked quietly. "Been casual about oral sex like Tara, I mean."

"No, of course not," I replied.

She lifted up and looked into my eyes. "I'm not going to ask you about your sex partners, Sean. I know that you and Molly... had sex... I mean, you guys fucked. Right?" I simply nodded, wary about

where she was going with this line of conversation. “I don’t care if there’s been anyone else you’ve... done anything... with,” she continued. “I want you to know, Sean, that I...”

“Shhhh,” I said, putting a finger to her lips. “You don’t have to tell me anything, Kay.”

She shook her head, and gently pushed my finger away from her. “I know. You know that I’ve never... that I’m a virgin... at least, technically.” She giggled a little embarrassedly, perhaps thinking, as I was, that she certainly was an experienced virgin. “And you were the first boy I ever did... anything... with.” She put her head back down on my shoulder, perhaps so she wouldn’t have to look at me while she confessed. “But I also did a few... things... with Brandon.”

For some reason, my heart was trip-hammering in my chest. “Oh?” I said, trying to be nonchalant about this new information.

She looked up briefly, gauging my reaction, before resting her head back down and continuing. “Not much, really. I... I did take him into my... my mouth... a couple of times. And I let him... touch me... once or twice.”

She sat up, facing straight ahead, looking out the front windshield, but seeing something other than the trees and the starlight that was all that was visible through the glass. She crossed her arms beneath her breasts, hugging herself as if she was cold.

“It was kind of like what Tara’s doing, and that bothers me,” she whispered. “It didn’t mean anything. We were friends, that’s all. He knew I was in love with you, and I would drop him for you at a moment’s notice, but we did it anyway. I mean, at the time I didn’t think of it as anything more than... I don’t know, maybe using him to experiment on? Recreation? But now, thinking back, I feel kind of... slimy. Dirty.” She shivered.

I put my arm around her and drew her back to me. She resisted for just a moment, and then allowed me to comfort her.

“It’s okay, my luscious sweetheart,” I crooned. “It doesn’t matter to me at all. Don’t feel that way, Kay. I did stuff, too, but I was lost,

and didn't know it. Once I figured out it was you all along, nothing else mattered."

She hiccupped just once, an effort to hold back a sob, and buried her head against my chest, her arm holding my shoulder. I could feel her tears against my bare chest as I did my best to make her feel better.

She was very introspective on the drive back to her house, and a little distracted when she kissed me goodnight. I really hoped this didn't eat at her for very long. She was too important to me, just the way she was. I had to convince her that I really didn't care about her and Brandon. I only cared about her and me.

* * * * * * * * * * *

I started working with Davey and Kip again early in April, and I had called Coach Bill and let him know I would be glad to help out his team again this season. Davey was now ten years old, and Kip was nine, and their increased coordination and cognitive skills were becoming more apparent, and more important. I had to devise a bunch of new drills to ramp up their skills, commensurate with their abilities. It helped to keep me sharp, too, watching how quickly they were developing.

I never heard from Wendy about having Justin join us, like he did the previous couple of seasons, and I asked Davey about it at our first practice together.

"Justin moved away," he said.

"Oh, really? Where did he move to?"

"Don't know. Away. I think far away."

"Oh."

"He said me and Kip could come and visit him some day, though," he added helpfully.

"That's great," I said.

Some afternoons Eric would come along and help me with the boys, and other days Trent would come over. When either of them was there, we would play an active game of two-on-two, taking turns partnering with each of the younger boys. They quickly picked up on the hows and whys of passing into open space, getting rid of the ball fast, and moving from coverage into open field in anticipation. Their ball sense was getting to be very impressive, and I knew Coach Bill would be anxious to take advantage of their new skills.

Once practice with the full team started, I found out about one of the basic tenets of recreational sports, that of parity among teams. The Warriors only had four returning players from our old team. The rest were reassigned to other teams in the league, in an attempt to even out the competition. We had become such a powerhouse that it was only fair that our team was broken up. If it had been a competitive or club team, we could have stayed together, but in a recreational league, fair play ruled. It was fine by both Bill and me. I had the feeling that, once the other kids saw how Davey and Kip and the other two returning boys played the game, they would find their own skills improving, and the Warriors would be a strong team again.

We taught the newer kids the Warrior Warm-Up, and spent a lot of time on drilling the discipline of zones and lanes into them. We used cornstarch to mark lanes on the practice field, varying the width of the lane each time, but staying strict about the players staying within their areas. Once they had the lane concept down, we expanded it by marking zones on the field. Sometimes our cornstarch markers were straight, sometimes they bulged in the middle, sometimes the lines were narrower toward midfield than they were toward the net. We named these zones "even", "fat boy", and "funny funnel", so Bill or I could change the dimension of one or all the zones or lanes, just by calling out a new code name.

Another drill I tried with Davey and Kip worked so well that I persuaded Bill to use it during practice. After garbage day in our neighborhood, I borrowed a couple of big garbage cans from neighbors, washed them out, and took them, along with a couple of our own cans, with me to the field. I set them up about fifteen meters from the sideline of the practice field.

"Okay, guys, here's what you have to do." I stood next to them, my own soccer ball on the line. "You kick your ball in the air, and into the garbage can. Like this." I kicked my ball, and it went sailing over the cans. Jorge, who was helping out with the keepers again for us, ran it down and punted it back to me.

"See?" I said. "It's not that easy. Go ahead and try it." I ran down to help Jorge and Bill shag balls as all the boys on the team let loose, aiming for one of the four garbage cans I had set up.

After about ten minutes of yelling and laughing and trying to make a basket, the drill started to disintegrate. I stopped them for a moment.

"Hold on, guys," I yelled, waving my arms to get their attention. Once they had stopped, I asked Bill and Jorge to move the cans closer, so that they were about ten meters away.

"If anybody gets the ball into a can on the fly, I will owe them a pizza," I told them. And off they went, trying to win a pizza. There were a lot of shots that hit a can, either on the fly or bouncing against it, but nobody made it in.

"Have you ever made a basket this way, Sean?" asked Davey.

I grinned at him. "Nope," I said.

"So it's impossible!" shouted Kip.

"No, I didn't say that, either," I said. "I've tried it maybe a couple of dozen times, but I haven't done it yet. But I will, if I take enough shots and work on being precise. But that's not the point. The whole reason why we're even trying to do this is to get more accurate in our passes and our shots. You want the ball to fly over somebody's head

and hit the ground ten meters away? Just think about trying to make a basket."

"Hey, good trick!" exclaimed Jorge. He took a couple of steps and kicked one of the team practice balls, and it arced up and hit the rim of one of the garbage cans, nearly rattling in before the can tipped over.

I very nearly owed him a pizza, and I knew he would have insisted I pay up right then and there.

* * * * * * * * * *

There were many other events that spring that Luscious and I participated in, or attended. Prom, for instance, was a lavish affair, held in the ballroom of one of the fanciest hotels in the city the first weekend of May. It was pretty exciting to see everybody get all dressed up, including Dr. Osgood, many of our teachers, and even a few parents who chaperoned.

Kay and I went out to dinner with a big group before the dance. Twenty of us pretty much took over an entire room at Domenico's, an Italian restaurant in Monticello, one of the many bedroom communities surrounding the city. Eric and Keisha, Trent and Danielle, Anthony and Ayesha, Jake and Jaimie, Josh and Andrea, Tiny and Erica, Austin and Tessa, all of them joined us in a spaghetti extravaganza. Also in attendance were Jorge Mendoza and his date, Marissa Montoya, a junior who was on the cheerleading squad, and Molly O'Toole, accompanied by Alex Baumgartner, another member of the Junior Class. Alex was tall, with an unruly shock of bright red hair. He was so smart he was almost scary, and was generally considered the most likely kid in school to discover something that would change the world. Even with his grades and his appearance, though, Alex had just enough street smarts that he was able to avoid

most accusations of geekiness. He wasn't popular, but he wasn't picked on, either. Now, taking Molly to Prom, his stock would rise considerably. I wondered how they got hooked up; Molly hadn't told me anything, other than they were going to Prom together. It was a mystery I was determined to solve.

Even though our school was considered to be a medium-sized school, Junior-Senior Prom was only open to upperclassmen. Freshmen and sophomores could only attend if they were invited by a Junior or Senior. So, without Jake, or Marissa, or me, our dates would not be attending.

Not that it mattered at all. I wouldn't be attending, either, if Kayla wasn't allowed to be there, and I knew that Jake felt the same way about his date. All the same, I was glad we all could be together for this night.

There actually were two separate events planned around Prom. The dance, in the Grand Ballroom of the hotel, was scheduled for the evening, until ten o'clock. From there, buses were lined up to take those participants who signed up for the second activity, which was most of the kids, back to our home town.

The Parent-Teacher's Association, the organizers of Prom, had arranged for a lock-in at our local YMCA, a supervised overnight that took advantage of all the Y had to offer. The two swimming pools were open and staffed with lifeguards. The racquetball and handball courts, basketball courts, and weight rooms were all open, too. There were also rooms set up with board games, and crafts rooms, all supervised by teachers or parents. They even arranged for several classrooms to be used as quiet rooms, with dim lights and blankets on the floors. No hanky-panky was allowed, however, as these rooms were constantly monitored by at least four adults each. It sounded pretty lame, but it was actually a lot of fun staying up all night and goofing around with friends. The fancy clothes were exchanged for shorts and t-shirts, high heels were discarded in favor

of sneakers, and about two hundred of us spent the night in youthful pursuit of amusement.

The Junior-Senior Prom, even as big an event as it was, didn't compare with the weekend that defined that spring and early summer season of 1982 for us, however, an unforgettable weekend in early June.

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CELEBRATION

On a beautiful and sunny Saturday afternoon in June, Kayla and I were standing in anticipation, turned facing the rear of the church, waiting to catch our first glimpse. All the other participants were in their places, with the big man standing nervously in front. As the organ music swelled and segued into a traditional wedding processional, the bridal party started pacing majestically down the white runner that covered the carpeting of the center aisle.

After three bridesmaids and the matron of honor passed by, their escorts holding their arms through their crooked elbows, the lovely bride, clothed in a flowing white gown and a veil, seemed to float down the center aisle, accompanied by an older man I didn't recognize.

We settled down to watch the ceremony, and at the end, there were very few dry eyes anywhere I could see as the minister asked, "David McMasters, do you take this woman to be your lawfully wedded wife?" With his assent, the minister continued, "And do

you, Lori Wilkinson, take this man to be your lawfully wedded husband?"

Even those in the back of the church could see her nod, and hear her soft voice say, "I do." When they kissed, I glanced over at Luscious. Her eyes were shining with unshed tears of happiness, witnessing what she later described as the most romantic thing she had ever seen.

After the ceremony, everybody was milling around outside the church, waiting for the happy couple to emerge. We all had helium balloons we were going to release, an alternative to tossing rice on them. When David and Lori came out the door, we all cheered and let go of the strings, and a cloud of white balloons floated up into the startlingly blue sky.

Lori turned around, first quickly and then once more, much more slowly, taking in the whole spectacle, as if she wanted to imprint it forever into her memory banks. She stopped for just a moment when she saw Kayla and me, and she smiled so sweetly at us, it was an instant of time that I will remember for the rest of my days.

A couple of hours later, we were standing in line to greet the newlywed couple at the reception. Lori and David had booked a smaller ballroom at one of the lakefront hotels in the city. There was a bar set up in each of the back corners of the room, a disk jockey had his equipment lined up against the front wall in front of the small dance floor, and there were a dozen big round tables spread out through the room, each with eight chairs around it. The head table was a long rectangle against the left wall, with ten chairs, all facing into the room. I had the little card with our table assignment in the pocket of my suit coat. I had a tie on, but it was tight, and I wasn't very comfortable. *I must have grown out of my shirt collar sometime in the past year,* I thought. Kayla had on a dress that resembled a fancy sundress, a flowery thing that swirled around her knees as she moved.

Lori's sister Joannie was matron of honor. She didn't recognize me when I shook her hand. It was understandable, considering how many people were going through the line. We also had only briefly met once, nearly a year before. She automatically shook our hands and passed us on to Lori, turning back to greet the next people behind Kay and me.

Lori's eyes lit up when she saw us, and she hugged me to her tightly.

"Oh, Sean, thank you so much for coming," she murmured in my ear.

I put my arms around her, hugging her back. "I wouldn't have missed it for anything," I said.

She finally, almost reluctantly, let me go, and turned to Kayla, wrapping her up in an equally big hug. While she was greeting Luscious, I turned to David.

"Mr. P!" he cried out. He stuck his meaty paw out for me to grasp, and gave me a big, strong handshake.

"Congratulations, Mr. McMasters," I said.

"Mr. McMasters!" He shook his head in denial. "I don't think so. If you don't call me David, don't you call me anything at all," he said with a big laugh.

He was still shaking my hand. "Okay, then, David," I agreed. He let my hand loose from his grip, and gently, as if he was handling a china doll, took Kayla into his arms and gave her a kiss on the cheek.

"I'm so glad you two could make it here," he said to her.

Kayla, for her part, had tears of joy in her eyes. She couldn't say anything, so she just nodded. When he let her go, she grabbed onto my arm and held herself next to me.

David turned to the older gentleman standing next to him. He was the man who had taken Lori down the aisle at the church.

"Sean, Kayla, I'd like to introduce Tom Wilkinson." Tom held out his hand, and I shook it.

"So, this is the young man who has been teaching my grandsons how to play soccer," he said warmly.

"Tom is Lori's father-in-law, her late husband's father," David informed us. "He graciously agreed to give Lori away, as her surrogate father, at the wedding."

I must have looked a little puzzled. "Lori's father is deceased," explained Tom. "Even though my son, Lori's first husband, is gone, my wife and I love her as the daughter we never had. I was honored to be able to walk her down the aisle today."

David put his arm around Tom's shoulder, by way of thanks, before turning back to greet the next well-wishers.

A familiar voice caught my attention.

"Hello, Sean, honey."

I moved down to say hello to Wendy Marcus, standing next to Tom Wilkinson. She reached out to hug me, but I sidestepped her and turned to introduce her to Kayla, who gave me a curious, questioning look.

"Kay, this is one of Lori's best friends," I said. "Wendy Marcus, this is my girlfriend, Kayla Lehigh."

Wendy held out her hand, and Kay shook it. Distractedly, I wondered why women shook hands the way they did. *Another unsolvable mystery.*

"I heard you moved away," I said.

Wendy sighed. "Arthur and I are divorced," she said, rather too matter-of-factly. "Justin and I moved back east to be closer to my folks."

I looked around, suddenly missing seeing Davey and Kip. "Is Justin here, too?" I asked.

She smiled. "Yes, he's running around here somewhere," she confirmed. "I know he's looking forward to seeing you."

"I'll look for him," I said. Kay and I continued down the receiving line, until, finally, we reached the end. We wandered around, looking for our table. We found it, over close by the

speakers. Since we were the first ones from our table to arrive, we chose seats that faced the head table and the dance floor.

"Would you like a Coke or something?" I asked Luscious.

"Coke would be fine," she replied. She favored me with one of her patented smiles, and I walked over toward the closest bar. As I was standing there, waiting for the bartender to fill two glasses with soda, a triple tornado hit me.

"Sean!" "Sean!" "Sean!"

Davey, Kip, and Justin nearly knocked me down, running into my legs as the three of them swarmed me.

"Hey, guys, how are you doing?"

"We're having fun, Sean!" said Kip.

"It's pretty neat, isn't it?" asked Davey.

"What's that, champ?" I asked.

"That David is going to be living with us," he replied.

I smiled. "Yes, it is," I agreed. "You like him, I guess."

"Oh, yeah, he's pretty neat, for an old guy. Not as fun as you, but he's pretty fun."

"And how are you, Justin? I heard you moved away."

"Yeah, but I'm really glad to be back. I'm staying with Davey and Kip this week, you know."

"No, I didn't know," I said. "Really?"

"Yep," he replied. "Me and my mom are staying at their house, while Mr. McMasters and Mrs. Wilkinson... oops, I mean Mr. and Mrs. McMasters..." He covered his mouth and giggled. "You know what I mean," he continued. "While they go on their vacation."

"Ah. Your mom is staying and watching you kids," I reasoned.

"Right!" They all started leaping about in agreement. Wendy was going to have her hands full while Lori and David were gone. I just shook my head as I watched them race off in search of adventure.

By the time I got back to the table, another couple had joined Kayla. Molly O'Toole and her prom date, Alex Baumgartner, were just settling in next to her.

"Hi, Sean," said Alex.

"Hey, Alex, how's it going?" I handed Kayla her Coke as Molly stood back up and moved around her chair to hug me.

"How you doing, Molly?" I asked.

"I'm doing really good," she whispered, holding me tightly.

We sat back down and watched as the bars got busier, and the tables began filling. Alex had gotten drinks for himself and Molly, and the four of us made silly remarks about the other guests we saw. The little kids were all assigned to one table near the back, with a couple of girls who looked like they might be in college riding herd over the pack. I didn't know if they were friends of Lori or David, or if they had been hired for the occasion to watch the kids, but they were paying attention to all of them, even the ones, such as Davey and Kip, who would leap up occasionally and streak over to another table or group of adults.

Once they saw Molly sitting with me, the two of them ran over to say hello to their favorite babysitter. Molly was wearing a beautiful lavender satin dress, but she still let the boys climb up into her lap, accepting the wrinkles along with the love they were displaying toward her.

Our table filled up, but the only other people I knew were Coach Bill Blaisdell, who sat down next to me, and John and Mavis Christanapoulis, whose son, Joey, played on the Warriors team.

Bill introduced his wife. "Sean, this is Maryanne, my wife. Maryanne, this is the legendary Sean Porter."

I reached across Bill to shake Maryanne's hand. She was a small, mousy woman with a timid smile, but she shook my hand with a good grip.

"I've heard so much about you, Sean, it's a pleasure to finally meet you," she said.

I introduced Kayla, Molly, and Alex to the Christanapoulises, and to Bill and his wife. As the evening progressed, I was pleasantly surprised to find out that Maryanne, belying her plain, frumpy looks

and rather dour demeanor, was actually a very bright third grade teacher, and possessed a dry, acerbic wit that had me chuckling appreciatively throughout dinner.

There were a lot of people hanging around the bar and standing at tables, visiting with acquaintances and family, as the room filled up. There was no sign of any of the bridal party at all. I had been to a couple of weddings as a kid, when younger siblings of one of my parents had gotten married, but the activities and traditions of weddings and receptions were just beginning to make sense to me, so I was interested and trying to pay attention to what was happening all around us.

The DJ turned down his music, and grabbed a microphone.

"If you could all find your seats, please?" he requested. The noise level in the room elevated for just a moment as knots of people dispersed, conversations ended, and everybody not huddled around the bar trying to grab one more drink before sitting down moved toward their respective tables.

"I'd like to draw your attention toward the doors," continued the DJ, once the room settled down sufficiently. "First, I would like to introduce the parents of the groom, Mr. and Mrs. Ralph McMasters."

David's parents entered the room as everybody applauded. They waved to friends, and walked toward their table, holding hands.

"And, for the bride, introducing Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Wilkinson."

Mr. Wilkinson and his wife came in, and walked to the same table, looking as happy and proud as any parent.

The three bridesmaids and groomsmen were introduced next, but the only one I knew was Wendy. They entered the room and walked slowly, amid the applause, to the head table, where they remained standing.

"Now, the matron of honor, Mrs. Joanie Monfort, and the best man, Mr. Ronald McMasters."

Lori's sister, accompanied by a man who could only be David's brother, came in, and also walked over to the head table.

"And now, ladies and gentlemen, would you please stand, and welcome, for the first time, Mr. and Mrs. David McMasters."

The applause, along with a few cheers, got very loud as we all stood. Lori and David stepped into the room, paused for just a moment, and then, with huge smiles on both of their faces, walked slowly toward their table, waving to everybody. It was an amazing sight to see.

The happy couple finally sat down, a signal for the rest of us to take our seats, and almost immediately I heard the chime-like ringing of forks tapping against water glasses. David and Lori looked out into the room, and then leaned in toward each other and kissed.

Coach Bill, in the meantime, apparently knew what was coming up, because he stood and grabbed the champagne bottle that was on our table. There was also a bottle of white wine and a bottle of red wine, as there was on every table, except for the one with the littler kids. Bill started filling glasses, starting with the ladies at the table. When he moved around to Molly's setting, she demurred.

"No, thank you. I'm only seventeen," she said.

"Nonsense," said Bill. "It's for the toast. Just clink your glasses together and don't drink any, if you don't want." He gave her an exaggerated wink. "But a little sip probably would be okay, considering the circumstances."

Molly blushed just a little, and smiled. I couldn't remember the last time I saw her blush. It was further confirmation, to my mind, that she was nearly healed.

Bill moved on and filled Kayla's glass, and then mine, and moved around and made sure everybody at the table had a glass. I glanced around and saw similar activity at many of the tables.

After a few minutes, Ron McMasters stood up and came over to get the microphone. He stood in the middle of the dance floor, and the room hushed, anticipating the best man's toast.

"Since I'm the older brother, I can safely say I've known David his whole life. Which is something he can't say." He paused as laughter tittered through the room. He turned and faced the head table. "As kids, I used to tell you that I taught you everything you know. I'm here to confess something to you, though, David. I may have taught you everything you know, but that doesn't mean I taught you everything I know." Again, he paused and waited for the laughter to die down.

"David, for the longest time, I've known that you have been searching for something, something that you didn't even realize you were missing, searching for a long, long time. There are lots of people here tonight who know you as a happy, high-spirited soul, which is true. But those who know you best also recognize that, despite your laughter, despite your outgoing personality, despite the jokes and the hearty handshakes, there was something missing in your life, something essential, something that would complete you.

"Eighteen months ago, what was missing was now found, and you have changed, my friend and brother.

"And Lori, you beautiful and wonderful agent of change, you cannot know how you have built up this man, made him whole. For that alone, I would love you as a sister. But you also bring to him your two sons, Davey and Kip, giving him the stability and companionship of family. For these gifts and talents, and for your love of my brother, on behalf of my parents, on behalf of my own wife and children, I am honored to welcome you into the McMasters clan. *Slainte!"*

The clink of glasses raised and touched in toast rang throughout the room, along with the sound of sniffles over the sentiment of Ron's touching comments. Ron drank from his glass, and raised it once again toward David and Lori, who smiled and applauded in appreciation. Tom Wilkinson stood and walked over, taking the microphone from Ron, and the room hushed once again.

"I hate to follow such a wonderful speech with my own hastier toast, but there's something I need to say," he started. He cleared his throat. "For those of you who don't know me, my name is Thomas Wilkinson, Tom, and up until about four o'clock this afternoon, Lori was my daughter-in-law." He paused a moment, taking a deep breath to calm himself. It was obviously a struggle for him to make this speech.

"My only son, Tom Junior, was Lori's husband, and the father of her two boys. He passed away over two and a half years ago, and there's not a day goes by that my wife and I don't miss him terribly. Our consolation could be found in our grandsons, and in the wife he left. Lori, Evelyn and I have known you ever since Tom brought you home to meet us on that Thanksgiving Day, so long ago, and we have loved you as the daughter we never had almost since that day. It was so obvious to us that Tom loved you with all his heart, and you loved him. We are so glad he had such great happiness while he was with us, and I know that he is looking down upon this celebration with pride and great joy at seeing you able to find love again, after so long and such a trial.

"And David, your bride might be a McMasters now, but you, too, are welcomed into a new family, the Wilkinson clan." He raised his glass high, tears streaming down his seamed cheeks unnoticed.

"Congratulations to you both, long life filled with happiness. You compliment each other." And he drank, as the room burst into thunderous applause.

The bubbles in the champagne tickled my nose as I drank from the glass. I offhandedly noted that the carbonation in the wine was much stronger than in sodas, and wondered why. Kayla giggled just a little at the sensation, and I turned and laughed with her, just happy to be with her on this special evening. I happened to glance over at Molly, who was making a face after tasting the champagne, while Alex was looking at his glass critically, watching the bubbles appear, some of them sticking to the sides of the glass. He was

swirling a mouthful as he studied his glass. *Science geeks,* I thought to myself. *He'll have the whole process figured out by the time dinner's served.*

Kayla, perhaps reading my thoughts, reached up and kissed me on the cheek, pulling my attention away from Alex and Molly, back where it belonged. I put my arm around her and pulled her to me, and kissed the side of her face, near her ear. We sat down then, and waited for our dinner to be served.

Between courses, the newlyweds continued making their rounds, visiting each table. While the salad plates were being cleared, they came by our table. David had his best man with him. Lori came over and stood between Kay's chair and mine, a hand on the back of each of our chairs as she watched her husband.

"Is everybody having fun?" David asked. We all made appropriate sounds of agreement at once. "Great, that's wonderful. So are we, aren't we, Mrs. W.?" He shot an exaggerated wink at Lori, who smiled and blushed.

"Uh, sorry, David, but shouldn't that be Mrs. M. now?" Bill reminded him.

"Damn, you're right," boomed David. "Y'know, I've been calling her Mrs. W. for so long, it'll take me a little time to correct myself." He leaned in toward the middle of the table and whispered conspiratorially. "I'm still having a hard time believing that she agreed to this, anyway. I mean, why me? Do I really deserve having such a beautiful wife?"

We all laughed, but a chill ran down my spine. How often had a similar thought occurred to me, about girls I had dated? And, especially, the gorgeous creature sitting beside me right then. I reached for Kayla's hand, under cover of the tablecloth, and held it gratefully. I never wanted to let it go.

"Anyway," David continued, "for those who don't know my best man, this is my brother Ron." Ron nodded in acknowledgment. "He's got something he needs to let you all know about, concerning

this evening. Sweetheart?" He held out his hand toward Lori. She leaned down and whispered to both Kayla and me, "I'll be back after dinner to visit, I promise." She took David's hand in hers, and they moved off to the next table.

Ron said, "You might know that Lori's first husband died in a motorcycle accident almost three years ago. Because of this, she and David have reserved a block of ten rooms here at the hotel, and I have all the keys here in my pocket." He patted his jacket pocket, and we could all hear the jingle of keys. "Lori respectfully asks that anybody who feels like they have indulged a little too much tonight, please come to me and get a key, and stay overnight here, on them. They don't want to take the chance of anybody getting hurt because of their celebration. Okay?" He looked around the table, and especially at the four of us younger people. "Don't be embarrassed to ask. We want everybody to get home safe and sound, either tonight or tomorrow. This is very important to them, and especially to the bride." He stood, glanced to the next table, where David and Lori were talking, and nodded. "Enjoy yourselves tonight, folks," he said, smiling, and he moved off to join his brother and Lori.

"That's very generous of them, and quite thoughtful," said Bill.

"That's Lori," I said.

The main course was coming out from the kitchen, so David and Lori walked back to their seats at the head table. They no sooner sat down than some knucklehead started in with the fork against the water glass again, and very quickly, there were several copycats from around the room. David shrugged, and leaned over to meet Lori, and they kissed for the crowd.

Maryanne said, "It's too bad the tradition didn't develop requiring people to knock their wine glasses against their teeth hard enough to make them ring. Maybe then this foolishness wouldn't be so tempting."

I was just taking a drink from my Coke, and very nearly spewed soda all over the table. I had to agree with her. It was by far the most

irritating wedding reception tradition I had ever witnessed, considering the frequency that it happened.

"Here, Sean," John said, reaching for the bottle of white wine. "Try this, instead." He poured a glass for me, and about a half of a glass for Kayla. He pointed the bottle toward Molly and cocked his eyebrow, but she declined. Alex, always in the interest of discovery, held out his glass, and John poured some wine into it for him.

"Thanks," said Alex, pushing his wire-rimmed glasses back up on his nose.

By the time dessert was finished, the adults at our table had finished off the bottle of red wine, and Kayla, Maryanne, Alex, and I had killed the bottle of white. The DJ was getting ready to crank up the music for a few minutes before the obligatory dances, so John and Mavis got up and scavenged at a couple of other tables, grabbing half-empty bottles of wine and bringing them back to our table.

As we sat back down, Bill leaned over and said to me in a stage whisper, "I think we'd better grab a couple of those keys from the best man."

"Good idea," I replied. "But what about your kids?"

He grinned. "Staying with Maryanne's parents for the weekend."

"Good plan."

"Absolutely," he agreed. "Will you guys be able to stay over? What about your parents? I'd hate to see you drive home tonight."

"I'll call them later, and let them know that the party's going too late to drive home. They'll understand. I hope."

"Do you want me to talk to them?" he offered.

I thought for a moment. "I've got a better idea," I said.

I leaned behind Kayla and tapped Molly on the shoulder, and quietly explained what I wanted to try. She thought it was a good idea, too, so we agreed that she would call my parents, and I would call hers, and let them know that we all would feel safer if we stayed downtown. Kayla and Alex decided they would make their own calls, after seeing how Molly and I managed. We all figured that if

we could convince one set of parents, the others would fall in line, and Molly's parents would be most likely to agree, as long as they were under the impression that we would all be staying together, and that there would be adults staying, too.

We stepped out into the hall and found a bank of pay phones. I dropped a quarter in and dialed Molly's number. Mrs. O'Toole picked up on the third ring.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Mrs. O'Toole, this is Sean Porter."

"Hello, Sean. Is everything okay?" She sounded suddenly nervous.

"Oh, yes, everything's fine," I hurried to reassure her. "We're down here at the wedding, and it's been just great."

"Oh, good." I could hear her relaxing, just in her inflection. "What's up, Sean?"

I stumbled through an explanation about how late the reception was going to be, and the long drive, and how David and Lori had set aside rooms, and how Coach Bill and his wife were planning on staying, and about how the four of us could share a room to sleep in, so we wouldn't be driving all the way home so late.

She didn't sound very convinced.

"Why are you calling, instead of Molly?" she asked. *Oops.* We hadn't thought that far ahead.

"Well, I just wanted to let you know that the four of us would stay together for the party, and in the room together, so we would all keep each other... safe."

"Is Molly there?"

"Yes, Ma'am."

"Put her on the phone, please."

I handed the handset to Molly, and shrugged.

She put the receiver to her ear. "Hi, Mom."

After a moment, she said, "No," followed by a "Yes," another "Yes," and an "Okay." She hung up the phone, and grinned. "She said it was a good idea, as long as we all stuck together."

"All right!" I hesitated. "Do you still think you should talk to my parents?"

"Sure." She dialed the phone.

Fifteen minutes later, we were all set. My parents were just as glad that I wasn't driving home while the drunks were out. Once they found out that Lori and David had arranged for the rooms, and that Coach Bill and his wife were also staying, they were okay with it.

Kayla's parents were the hardest sell. They didn't want their fifteen-year-old daughter staying overnight with a boy, even under these seemingly innocuous circumstances. They even offered to drive down and pick us up after the party. It was only after pointing out to them that we would just have to drive all the way down again tomorrow to pick up my car that they started relenting, just a little. Finally, they told us they would call my parents and Molly's parents, to confirm what we were telling them. We gave them the number of the pay phone, and a few minutes later, they called back and reluctantly agreed that it did, in fact, make sense.

Alex's parents were the easiest. It sounded so logical when he called them that they immediately agreed. It made the rest of us wonder why we didn't have Alex call all our parents.

At the end, we all ran back into the ballroom holding hands, our own little conga line that threaded its way from the doorway back to our table by the speakers.

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THE GIFT

By the time we got back, the newlyweds' first dance was taking place. Everybody stood around the dance floor and watched David and Lori dance together, looking comfortable in each other's arms as they moved beautifully in harmony to *The Way You Look Tonight*. It was Thomas Wilkinson's turn next to dance with the bride, and he guided her around the dance floor with flair, proud as a rooster, as David danced with his mother.

Eventually the tempo picked up, and Kayla kicked off her shoes as we shucked and jived to the music. There were quite a few older couples jitterbugging to Elvis and Jerry Lee Lewis. I could never get the hang of it, so Luscious and I squeezed in between those who knew what they were doing, and waved our arms and stamped our feet to the beat pounding out of the speakers.

After about three songs I was breathing like I had run a couple of miles, and I was sweating right through my shirt. It was time to get rid of the jacket and tie. Kay and I headed back to the table, where John and Bill were deep in conversation. When they saw us coming,

John reached over and poured us each a glass of white wine. I also got us some water. Dancing was a lot more aerobic than just wine or soda was going to be able to overcome. We sat down for a moment, and I watched Molly and Alex, still out on the floor. Molly, from years in gymnastics and cheerleading, had a good sense of rhythm as well as a natural grace, but poor Alex looked like a scarecrow caught in a high wind. I chuckled, and then remembered that if it was as okay with Molly as it seemed to be, it was certainly fine by me. Besides, I knew I looked funny out there, too, and had no room to be making fun of Alex's dancing abilities. In fact, Eric once accused me of having Terminal White Boy's Dancing Disease, something I couldn't deny.

I put my arm around Kayla's shoulder and she moved in a little closer to me, her hand resting lightly on my knee. When the next slow song started, she stood up and pulled me out of my chair and back onto the wood floor, holding my hand as she led me. She twirled and ended up, quite naturally, in my arms. Her body just seemed to mold itself to me as she anticipated where my feet were leading us. I dropped her hand and put both my arms around her waist, and she wrapped hers around my neck and rested her head on my shoulder as we swayed to the ballad. We occasionally bumped lightly into another couple nearby, but we didn't care. We were cozy in each other's arms.

Another slow song started up, and I felt a tap on my shoulder. I let go of Kayla, and David swept her up into his arms as Lori, dazzling in her wedding gown, smiled at me. She held her arms out just a little, an invitation I was helpless to resist.

As she nestled in to me, I said softly, "You look absolutely beautiful, Lori."

I could feel her smile against my shoulder. "Thank you, Sean. I can't believe this is all real."

"Oh, it's real, and I don't know anybody more deserving than you."

She held me a little tighter. “Oh, Sean, you are such a great friend. I wouldn’t be here now, if it weren’t for you.”

That didn’t make any sense at all to me. *What did I do to bring her to this marriage with David?* “I don’t think that’s true at all,” I said.

She stopped us, right there in the middle of the dance floor, and looked me straight in the eye, a warm and kind expression on her lovely face. “It is true, my wonderful darling young man. I know it, deep down, even if you don’t recognize it.” She put her head back onto my shoulder, and we started slowly stepping to the music again. “You convinced me to take a chance in life again, Sean. After that night... I realized that I had been walking around half dead. I had too much missing from my life, living like I was, just trying to take care of the boys and all...” She sniffled just a little. “David had been asking me to go to dinner with him for a long time, and I kept on refusing him. I’m surprised he didn’t just give up on me. But then you... and I... anyway, the next week, when he asked if I would join him for lunch, I accepted.” She laughed just a little at the remembrance. “I think he nearly fell out of his chair when I said I would go out with him. ‘Persistence pays off,’ he said. And that was the start.”

The song ended. We let go of each other, but then Lori put both her hands on my upper arms. “I loved Tom with all my heart, Sean, and I will always love him. But it was time to move on. You helped me to see that. And, maybe, I accepted a little push from Wendy, too.” She blushed just a little. “But I owe you thanks, and much more, Sean.” With that, she hugged me to her tightly, and then let me go and, without another word, turned to David and took his arm. He gave me a big smile and a thumbs-up, and led his bride off the dance floor as Kayla came up and took my arm, a dazzling smile on her face.

“He is just the sweetest man!” she said as we walked off the dance floor.

I glanced over at her, startled. *What did he say to her?* Kayla didn't say anything more, however.

Alex and Molly finally took a break from twisting and shouting, and came over to sit out a few. Alex's face was a bright red, nearly the color of his hair, and he was panting heavily.

"That's a lot of work out there," he said.

"Yeah, girls like Molly and Kayla make it look easy, but it ain't," I agreed.

"Girls like Molly and Kayla make us look good out there," he said wisely.

Both Molly and Kayla smiled at that, and Molly leaned over and, despite his sweaty face, gave him a kiss on his cheek. Poor Alex turned an even brighter scarlet.

"Kayla, I think we wore these two guys out," said Molly. "Let's go find ourselves some younger men who can keep up with us."

Kayla nodded, and the two of them stood and walked away together. The prettiest girl in the Junior Class, strawberry blonde Molly, and a walking dream, perhaps the loveliest girl in the entire school, my own Luscious Kayla. Alex and I just gazed at them as they receded, both of us wordlessly appreciating our astounding luck. We picked up our wine glasses and clinked them together before taking a sip, silently toasting each other.

"Hey, Sean, we'd better go find the guy with the keys before he runs out of rooms," suggested Alex.

"Good plan," I agreed.

We looked around for David's brother, but didn't see him. We walked around the dance floor, looking for him. We didn't find Ron, but we did find his jacket, tossed carelessly across the back of his chair at the head table. On a saucer were four hotel keys, and a handwritten note that said that they were first-come, first-serve, and to help ourselves. I grabbed a key, and we turned to go back to our table, when Alex stopped, staring ahead. I glanced around, trying to figure out what he was looking at, but he wasn't looking at anything.

He spun back around, reached over, and took a second key, and put it in his pocket.

"You know, just in case..." He blushed, but I knew what he meant. *Just in case.* I fervently hoped Molly wasn't feeling *itchy* again. That was part of what got her into trouble before. On the other hand, I didn't think Alex was very experienced when it came to girls, and I couldn't imagine a better tutor for him than Miss Molly O'Toole.

As we slipped back around the perimeter of the dance floor, we saw Molly dancing with Davey, and Kayla dancing with Kip. Davey looked a little embarrassed, as befitted a mature ten-year-old, but Kip was staring rapturously up at Luscious Kayla as she moved him around. She was smiling happily at his attentions, looking as angelic for him as she could.

As soon as the song was over, Davey let go of Molly and ran away. Kip was a little more reluctant to let Kayla out of his sight, but the pull of following his older brother proved to be too much, and he raced after Davey. The girls spotted us, and motioned us over to them. Molly stepped over to me, and held out her hand. Kayla, not to be outdone, moved over and took Alex's arm. Ol' Blue Eyes started crooning about saying something stupid as Molly and I slid closer together. I wrapped my arms around her waist so we could dance close, box-stepping in our own little square of space.

"Did Davey enjoy his dance?" I murmured.

"I think I scared him," she said quietly, a smile evident in her voice.

"Maybe he doesn't like thinking that his favorite babysitter is really a girly-girl," I said.

"Maybe," she agreed.

"After all, he's never seen you this dressed up before."

"True." She rested her head on my shoulder. I could feel her muscles relaxing as I held her and we swayed together.

"This feels so nice," she whispered, almost to herself.

"You doing okay, Molly?" I asked quietly.

She knew what I meant. I knew she was doing okay tonight, being at the wedding with Kayla and Alex and me, but I was more concerned with how she was feeling about herself. I was hoping that the combination of the wine, the prospect of spending the night downtown, and dancing closely with me wasn't making her revert back into a more troubled Molly O'Toole.

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Her breasts pressed against me as her chest rose, but it was an unconscious action, no hidden trickery that I could detect, so I did my best to ignore it.

"I'm doing okay, Sean," she said. She hesitated, and then stopped moving with me. She took a small step back from me, keeping her arms around my neck as she stared up into my eyes, a serious expression on her face.

Suddenly, she smiled, a relaxed and happy and easy smile, and my good friend Molly was there, like she had never left. "I'm doing fine, Sean Porter. I'm doing just fine." And she hugged me fiercely, pulling me to her by my neck. She kissed me beneath my ear. "Now dance with me," she commanded.

Who was I to refuse?

* * * * * * * * * *

The four of us stayed until the DJ finally called an end to the music. We had gone through the Chicken Dance a long time ago, and *Hava Nagila* had been danced and sung. Garters were twanged like slingshots, and bouquets had been tossed. The room had thinned out quite a bit by then. All the old folks had escaped the loud music long ago, and the kids were all gone, too. The two college girls who were watching Davey, Kip, Justin, and the other younger kids turned out to be Ron's oldest daughter's two college roommates, hired for the evening, and they had rounded up their charges and taken them out

about an hour before things finally wound down. David and Lori were still there, making sure everybody had a good time, accepting last-minute congratulations, and posing with tired good nature for one last photograph.

Molly and Alex insisted we go with them to personally thank the disk jockey, and we all shook his hand. He looked a little surprised, and very pleased. Apparently this sort of politeness wasn't something he saw very often. We then walked over and said goodnight to David and Lori.

"Are you all staying over tonight?" asked David.

I jingled our hotel key, and hoped Alex kept his in his pocket. I wanted David and Lori to assume the four of us would be sharing a room to sleep in, nothing more.

"Good, I'm glad," said Lori. "I would be up half the night worrying about you guys, if I thought you were driving home so late."

"Nope, no need to worry about us," said Molly. She hugged Lori, and then gave David a hug. Kayla followed suit. Alex settled for shaking their hands, but I took Lori in my arms one last time.

"Thank you, Sean. Take care."

I let her go, and held out my hand to David. He grabbed it, and then pulled me in and gave me a big bear hug.

"Thanks for everything, Mr. P.," he said. "We'll see you when we get back from Hawaii. Won't we, Mrs. M.?"

He let me go, and clapped me on the back.

Lori laughed. "Of course we will," she agreed.

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Alex's key was for a room two doors down from us. They waved as they passed us by, holding hands on their way down the hall.

"Meet you for breakfast?" asked Molly as they passed.

"Okay," I said. "What time?"

Molly glanced at Alex. "Call us when you wake up," he suggested. Molly nodded.

"If you haven't heard from us by the time you guys are up and ready, give us a call, then," I said.

I opened the door, and stepped aside to let Kayla go in. She stopped in the doorway and looked around. I thought she was probably nervous. I knew I certainly was. The room looked small, and the two queen-sized beds looked huge, dominating the room. Or maybe it was just our focus.

I put a hand on Kayla's shoulder gently. "Are you okay with this?" I asked quietly.

She turned and smiled. "I'm okay. I'm just a little..."

"Yeah," I finished for her. "So am I."

We stepped into the room, and I closed the door and turned the lock.

Kayla carried her small purse with her as she walked to the bathroom door, and turned back to me. "Turn out the light, but let's leave the curtains open, okay?"

I glanced out the big window. We were up high, on one of the top floors of the big hotel. The city lights were spread out in a soft glow below us, giving us privacy while at the same time providing us with just enough dim light into the room.

While Kayla was in the bathroom, I tossed the bedspread over the stuffed chair in the corner, and turned down the blanket and sheet. I slipped my shoes off, hung up my suit coat, and took off my suit pants, hanging them up by a belt loop over the hook of a hanger. I took off my shirt, which was pretty wrinkled from all the sweaty dancing, and hung it up on another hanger. I switched off the light, and got into bed in just my underwear, nervous and jumpy as a mouse being chased by a hungry cat. My dick was as hard as steel, anticipating a whole night with my Luscious.

Finally, Kayla opened the bathroom door. She left the light on, but closed the door until just a sliver of light came through. She had taken off her gown, and was wearing just her bra and panties. She had taken down her hair, so that it spilled across her shoulders and down, the ends flaring across her covered breasts. She stood there by the door for just a moment, her hands curled into small fists, letting her eyes adjust to the dimness of the room, and perhaps subconsciously letting me see her, vulnerable and beautiful. She was smiling hesitantly, suddenly more shy and uncertain than I had ever seen her, and my heart went out to her.

"I'm over here," I said softly.

She came over and slipped between the sheets. I put my arm around her shoulder, and she quite naturally snuggled up against me, her arms clenched to her as she lay on her side, her head nestled against my shoulder.

"You're the boss," I whispered. "We only do what you want to do."

I felt her nod. "Okay," she said. She giggled and rolled over, away from me. "Goodnight, then," she said.

"What?" I asked, panicking. I turned toward her, a little shaken, and put a hand on her shoulder. She turned toward me and giggled again, her nervousness skittering away with her little prank as she took me in her arms and lifted up her face to kiss me.

Her lips were soft and pliant, moving slightly against my mouth as we made our tiny adjustments toward each other. She scooted closer to me, putting her arm around me, and I teased her with just the tip of my tongue, tracing the pattern of her lipstick. We kissed each other softly, unhurriedly, for a long time, just happy to be together like this. I could dimly feel the afterburners kick in somewhere deep in my midsection. I held her to me a little tighter, and started kissing her cheeks, her eyelids, and the corners of her mouth.

Kayla reciprocated by nibbling on my lower lip, concentrating on my scar, as I reached around her, searching for the hooks and eyes that were keeping me from being able to caress the parts of her I longed to touch. She turned a little in my arms, making it easier to release her bra. She sat up momentarily once I got it undone, and tossed it to the floor before settling back against me. I ran my hand up her flat tummy to her small breast, and clutched it as if it was a lifeline, marveling all over again at the wonders of the female form. As I held her breast in my hand, I felt the nipple thicken and swell, the nub poking my palm, a spot of concentrated heat that I knew would soon expand and consume me.

Kayla arched her back a little, pressing her breast harder into my hand, and she kissed me hard, her tongue on the attack. I heard a little moan escape her as she thrust her tongue into my mouth in search of my own. I squeezed her boob, kneading the flesh roughly before running my hand across her chest, my fingertips tracing the valley between her breasts, and taking hold of her other mound, my thumb rubbing across her distended nipple.

She broke the kiss and threw her head back, panting in desire. I took the opportunity to suck and nibble at her tender throat. She groaned and lay back, giving in to my attentions. I rolled with her, so that I was on top, covering her torso with my chest and arms, as I tasted the hot and salty skin of her neck and throat. I licked and kissed my way very slowly down her throat, to her chest, exploring and experimenting as my lips moved from her hard collarbone to the swells of her breasts. As my mouth got nearer her fleshy mound, my fingers were on the underside, gently pushing her boob up, so that her nipple stood out, proud and erect and ruby red as it anticipated feeling my lips and teeth. I pinched the distended nub, and was rewarded with her rubbing her knee up and down my leg, an unconscious reaction she felt in her center that caused her limbs to move in sympathy.

I licked around the areola of her breast, teasing as I circled her breast with my tongue and lips, but not yet ready to give her the momentary satisfaction of feeling me suck on her swollen nipple. She was still arching her back, pushing her chest up to try to increase our contact on her pressure point. Finally, I satisfied my own urge, and nearly sent her over the edge by clamping my lips onto her nipple and sucking it into my mouth. At the same time, I grabbed her pussy through her panties. I ran my fingertips up her slot between her parted legs, letting the cotton crotch of her panties soak up some of the moisture that was leaking from her. She squealed and bucked up against my hand, already close to her first orgasm of the night.

"Oh, God, Sean, please..."

"What, Kay?" I asked, a little panicked that she might want me to stop.

"Take them off," she gasped. "Please take them off. I want to feel your fingers..." She threw the sheet and blanket off us and kicked them to the foot of the bed.

I scooted down and grasped the elastic waistband of her panties as I knelt between her spread knees, and gently pulled. Kayla lifted up her ass to help, and then bent her knees and lifted her legs up together so I could shuck her panties down her legs and off. I got a good view of one of the most precious sights in the world: moist, rosy pussy lips that are flushed and swollen with desire, on a girl I loved.

I stayed where I was and ran my hands up her smooth calves while her legs were raised up, and I gently guided them apart as she lowered them around me. I let my hands slide up the inside of her thighs. *Could her skin really be that smooth?* I glanced up and saw that she was lying back against the pillow, eyes closed, her flattened breasts rising and falling rapidly as she concentrated on my fingers as they caressed her marvelous legs. Her leg muscles were quivering slightly, and I knew she was still close to coming. I wanted to prolong her pleasure for awhile longer, though, so I moved very

slowly, tickling her tender skin along the insides of her thighs, from her knees nearly to her juncture, up almost to her needy center, and then back down again, agonizingly slowly, building her up but not letting her crest. The soft skin of her thighs was giving off an incredible amount of heat, and it was having a dizzying effect on me as I touched her.

She unconsciously dropped her hand down to touch her sex, and when her fingers bumped against her swollen clit, she jerked. I reached up and took hold of her hand.

"No, sweetie," I whispered. "Let me do it."

She allowed me to move her hand to her side, and I took pity on her, pointing my tongue at her drooling lips and licking slowly, lovingly from her flooded hole up, until I just touched her little button. Her stomach muscles began to spasm, and her breath was beginning to hitch as her body anticipated her release, but I backed off until she calmed down a little. Instead, I concentrated on the layers of skin on the outside of her pussy lips, tasting and lapping up her lubricating oils. When her breathing stabilized a little, I teasingly blew onto her sensitive tissues, and used my thumbs to rub lightly along the tender isthmus of skin between her leg and her outer lips. Her muscles began twitching again, and I tasted of her oils again, this time with a broader stroke of my tongue along the length of her vulva. I dipped my tongue as far as I could into her heated opening, lapping up her hot juices, and then delved among her folds until I encountered her clitoris, poking out of its tiny sheath. I clamped my lips against her and sucked on her, drawing out the sensitive bump, and then I tried to grasp it with my nibbling lips.

Kayla huffed twice, her whole body clenched in anticipation, and she grabbed the back of my head and held my mouth tight against her, and she was flung over the edge. A tiny, breathless scream escaped her, and I was rewarded with a tiny discharge of heated fluid from her over-stimulated pussy, a slightly metallic, tangy taste that almost immediately set up an intense craving deep inside me.

My rock-hard cock, held in place by my briefs and pressed against the mattress, responded to the taste, pulsing and threatening to go off untouched.

Her body relaxed, and her hands fell from my head, back to her sides. I lifted up to take a look at her. She was lying there, dreamily unaware of anything except the last, fading explosions flashing behind her closed eyelids, a small smile on her lovely face. Her pale blonde hair was splayed around her head against the pillow, tousled from rolling her head from side to side as I licked and tasted her, and she never looked more beautiful. My cock twitched, the little head desperately wanting to take over and plunge itself deep within her steamy depths, but I managed to dissuade it by dropping back and taking one long finger and running it through her folds to her hole, and slowly dipping it into her, pausing as each knuckle passed her portal, until it was fully inside her.

"Oh, God," she whispered, as she felt her body ramp up again. She reached up and tucked her fists under her chin, her small breasts pressed together by her elbows, as I slowly withdrew from her, until just my fingertip was being held within her by her clenching walls Then I pushed back, all the way in, and twisted my finger back and forth. Her hips began lurching up, perhaps trying to get more depth out of my intruding finger. I stuck out my tongue and lapped up the juices that had begun to flow again, and I continued to pump my finger in and out of her slowly.

After about a dozen times plunging one finger into her, I doubled up, using both my index finger and my middle finger on her. Her vaginal walls expanded to accommodate the additional girth, tightening around my intruding fingers. Again my cock twitched, wanting to feel that pressure first-hand. Once I had reached into her as far as I could, again I twisted, this time rubbing her clitoris with my thumb at the same time as I lapped up the moisture that had leaked out onto her outer lips and across my knuckles.

The triple combination sent her off again. Her body tensed and arched, pressing her pussy harder against my face and hand. I rolled my eyes up and saw her clutching her breasts, twisting at her nipples as her hips started bucking up hard. She was breathing hard, little screeches escaping her on each exhalation, and I could see her stomach muscles tensing and spasming as she came. I kept my fingers buried deeply inside her, twisting them around as my thumb played a tune on her clit, and I was rewarded again with another flood of her tangy, orgasmic release against my tongue. To help her along, I ran my other hand up her tummy and slipped it under her hand on her breast, and she pressed the back of my hand hard against her swollen and sensitive breast as the waves of ecstasy flowed through her.

She fell back against the mattress bonelessly. In fact, she seemed to barely have the strength to reach down and take my head in her hands and lift my face up and out of her crotch.

"Oh, God, no more," she said breathlessly. "I think I died. No more, Sean."

I scooted up and lay down next to her. My little head, poking up out of the elastic waistband of my underwear, was pleading with me to lay down on top of her. I was desperately trying to do the right thing by my Luscious, so I ruthlessly pushed those invasive thoughts out of my head and moved to her side, wrapping her up into my arms. She cuddled up next to me, enjoying the afterglow of her double orgasm. She had her head tucked under my chin, and strands of her pale hair were tickling my nose and cheeks. I gently ran my hands slowly up and down her damp back, helping to wick away the sweat of her exertions.

After a few moments she must have opened her eyes and noticed the swollen and reddened head of my cock peeking out, because I felt her cheeks tighten against my chest as she smiled. The next thing I knew, she was reaching down and poking it. She pushed the front of my underwear down with one hand, tucking the elastic under my

balls, and poked at the dark red head of my cock, watching it bounce down and rebound off my stomach. She sat up just a little bit, and slid her left hand under her pillow for just a second before scooting down to examine me a little closer. With her eyes just inches away from the bobbing head of my dick, she pulled my underwear the rest of the way off and tossed them aside. She ran her fingertips down the length of my rock-hard shaft, watching as my cock tensed and jumped with my heartbeat. She explored the sensitive ridge of my cock, let her fingertips feel the hard tissues beneath the thin layer of skin, and then let them frolic in the light hairs between my splayed legs and my scrotum. She tickled my balls, making me groan, and I put my hand on her shoulder, trying to will her to touch me more, and maybe even take me into her warm and wet mouth.

She finally relented, and grasped my aching cock at the base, holding it upright so she could examine it. I lay there watching, unwilling to even blink, as she stuck out her tongue and lightly touched it to the bubble of pre-cum that was leaking out of the tip. Even that small contact was electric, and my cock jumped at the touch as my hips and stomach muscles involuntarily flexed. She glanced up at me and smiled, and then, still looking up into my eyes, let her tongue drag up my pole, from where her tiny fist was holding me, all the way up to the crown and across the tip. She cleaned off the head of my cock with her tongue, bathing it with her saliva, and then slowly, agonizingly slowly, she opened her mouth, and hovered over my cock, still looking directly at me. She paused, drawing out the suspense, and making me ache even more, until, finally, she oh so slowly lowered her mouth around my cock. There was still no contact, but I could feel the warmth of her breath on my sensitive cock. I think I was holding my breath in anticipation, and I know my eyes were bugging out, watching her tease me. Finally, just when I was at the breaking point, she relented, and closed her lips around me. Her teeth lightly grazed against my tender skin, and she sucked hard.

The sensations were so incredible I thought the top of my head would blow off. I knew I wouldn't last long at all as she bent to her task. She pumped with her hand at the base of my cock as she lowered her mouth to cover more of me, and just that quickly, I was close. I felt her reach between my legs with her other hand, and the moment she caressed my balls, I lost it.

I groaned and gasped, and could not give her any more warning than that. I felt my cock expand, and then I ejaculated hard into her waiting mouth. I felt her tongue licking along the ridge of my head, and she sucked in so hard her cheeks were concave. At the same time, one hand was pumping, establishing a rhythm that would keep me coming, while her other hand gently kneaded my balls, alternately squeezing and letting up. I tensed, pumped, tensed again, four times, then five, and six, sending jets of semen into her mouth, across the back of her tongue and down her throat. I felt the pressure against my spasming cock when she reflexively swallowed my spend, and still some of it leaked out around her lips to gather against her pumping fist.

Finally I collapsed back, and still she kept up her sucking and licking, even as my well-used cock deflated a little. The suction she was applying, combined with her continued manipulations and feeling her swallowing my load, kept me harder than I would have thought possible. It helped that she was persistent, wanting more. My cock only got slightly limp before her continuing attention had its desired effect. I started getting hard again, growing in her mouth. My heart rate, just beginning to settle, began to pick up steam again as I felt her hum, creating a vibration that started at the tip of my cock and traveled by lightspeed down nerve-paths right into my brain.

I closed my eyes as this new sensation overwhelmed me, so I was shocked when I felt her stop sucking me. She lifted off my cock, and her hands left me for a moment. I opened my eyes to see what she was doing, and saw her just as she fit a condom across the head of

my dick, and rolled it down my shaft. She glanced up, and saw that I was watching her. She smiled, lifted one knee over me so she was straddling me. She grabbed my cock once again in her small hand and held me upright as she squatted down. When she rubbed the head of my cock against her pussy lips, spreading moisture around both the latex and her swollen lips, she threw her head back and moaned.

I grabbed her by the waist, almost in a panic over this new development.

"Kayla, wait... Are you sure about this?" I squeaked.

She straightened up and looked down at me. "Oh, yes," she whispered. "I've been sure for a long time. I just needed a good opportunity to jump your bones." She smiled at me, and moved lower, until the head of my anxious cock was at the portal, nestled against her opening. She leaned down and gave me a soft and sensuous kiss. With her lips still against mine, she said, "It's just a little gift I've been saving up for you."

She sat up on me again and took a deep breath, her chest expanding enticingly. "Here we go," she breathed, and she let her weight settle just a little. I moved a couple of inches into her, and she paused, perhaps to accustom herself to the new sensation of being filled up with a warm shaft of flesh. She lifted up just a little, and then dropped down again, taking more of me into her. She had her hands on my chest, and I was still holding her waist, watching as she did it again. She lifted up just a little, taking some of the pressure off, and then dropped down even further Each time she did, more of my cock disappeared into her pussy, until, at long last, I was buried fully inside her. She settled down on me, a happy and clearly excited look on her face, as she wiggled her ass against me for a moment, creating an incredible feeling of pressure all through me.

She was tight, so wonderfully tight, my cock being squeezed all around by her hot walls. She was hot, and wet, and it was exactly where I wanted to spend eternity. I ran my hands up to her breasts

and squeezed, and she moaned and threw her head back in ecstasy, reveling in the direct connection from her nipples to her pussy. She started moving up and down on me, lifting up until I was about to pop out of her, and then sitting back down, impaling herself on my rampant cock. At the bottom of each stroke, she would twist just a little, making me see stars. When she did that, I tended to squeeze her breasts a little harder, which made her squirm a little more on me, round and round. On the upstroke, her boobs were a little further away from my grasping hands, so I would tweak her nipples with my fingertips until she started dropping down on me again, teasing the eraser-like buds and sending jolts of pleasure coursing through her.

Finally, after about a couple of dozen strokes, I put my hands on her back and pulled her down to me. I took one of her breasts into my mouth and sucked on her, trying to get as much of her boob into my gasping mouth as I could. After a few moments I released her left breast, and moved my mouth to her right, this time gently nipping at her distended nipple with my teeth.

She screeched nearly breathlessly, and started bumping up and down on me. Her hips raggedly moved from side to side as well as up and down, and it was all too much. I grabbed her ass, and pushed her roughly down onto me as hard as I could. I wanted to be deeper into her than I had been able to get yet, so I clenched her globes while, at the same time, I punched my hips upward, until our pubic bones were grinding together. When I could get no further, I spewed all I had into the latex covering my pumping cock. Her honeyed walls clenched and relaxed, clenched and relaxed, coaxing the last drop from me, and she collapsed down on top of me, giving in to her own release.

We were sweat-soaked, hot and panting, our skin plastered together wherever we touched. Our pubic hair was intermingled, soaked and matted from her abundance of lubrication, her vagina

keeping so much pressure on my cock that it was still expanded, if no longer as stiff as it had been. I never wanted the moment to end.

But, of course, it had to, as she groaned and lifted her head to look at me. She smiled wearily, happily, and bent down and gave me a soft and wonderful kiss, once again nibbling at my lower lip. I held her to me, and never wanted to let her go.

We stayed that way until we started to get a little chilled. She finally lifted off me, her eyelids drooping. When she lifted up her hips, my dick slipped from her pussy and wetly flopped against my stomach.

"Oops. 'Bye, Porter," she said with a giggle as she felt me escape from her body. "I just lost my new best friend."

She reached down and pulled off the slick, well-used condom from my spent cock. The magic touch of her fingers made it twitch just a little, but it was spent.

She trudged to the bathroom, and returned with a warm, wet washcloth, and gently, lovingly cleaned me up. She spent a few minutes in the bathroom, no doubt washing herself, before returning and lying down again with me. We snuggled up together on the tossed and rumpled bed, happy to be together. She nestled her backside against me as we lay on our sides, and I draped my arm over her and rested my hand on her breast. She held my hand there, and sighed contentedly.

"Is it always like that?" she asked in a soft voice.

"No, not always," I replied. My own eyelids were trying to close. "But with you, it probably always will be."

She wiggled her ass against me, giving my fried brain ideas, but before I could act on them, I fell asleep, still holding her as protectively as I knew how.

Sometime during the night, Kayla must have gotten cold, because when I woke up in the morning, we had the sheet and blanket over us. We were still close together, and Kay was still fast asleep. I had a morning hard-on, and I desperately needed to go to the bathroom.

My head felt stuffed with wet cotton, and my eyes were grainy. The sun was just coming up, so I got up as quietly as I could, and closed the curtains against the early morning light. I stumbled into the bathroom and stood there, waiting for my erection to subside enough so I could pee.

Mission accomplished, I slipped back into bed and snuggled up to Luscious Kayla once again, and fell back asleep.

Maybe an hour later, I was awakened when I felt the bed move as Kayla got back under the covers and moved over to be next to me. I put my arms around her, and we moved quite naturally into the same position we had fallen asleep in originally, with her butt pressed against me and my arm around her, my hand cradling her soft breast.

She wriggled against me just a little, perhaps getting into a more comfortable position, and all of a sudden I wasn't sleepy anymore. Feeling her ass pressed against my groin created a diversion in the flow of blood in that region, and my cock began to stretch and stiffen. It poked against her ass, and I hunched back and reached down to position it more suitably, so it was tucked between her cheeks.

"Mmmm... What's that I feel?" she whispered.

"I don't know," I replied as I began kneading her breast a little, wanting to feel her nipple expand against my palm again. "What do you feel?"

She reached down between her legs, moving away from me for just a moment, and grabbed my cock. She pulled it between her legs, and closed her thighs around it, so that it was pressing against her pussy lips, and sticking out between her legs.

"Why, hello, friend," she giggled, giving the head a little rub with her fingertips. She moved my hand to her other breast, and wiggled against me a little more. Her nipples were filling, branding my palm, as I squeezed and played with the soft mounds. Her hips started flexing, and my cock sawed back and forth across her pussy, the tender skin of my rod being tickled by her sparse hair. I could feel

her oils oozing out, coating my shaft, making its passage across her sensitive tissues hotter and slicker.

I hunched back reflexively, and the head of my cock started plowing through the furrows of her pussy, parting her lips in search of its home. Kayla bent forward just a little at the waist, and bent her knee, and I was there. All I had to do was move my hips forward, and I would be buried in her.

I moved up just a little, and the crown of my cock moved into her. Kayla moaned, and sighed, wanting more, but she was smarter than I was. By sheer force of will, she moved away from me, and turned to face me. She reached under her pillow, and handed me another condom.

"Hurry," she said, a hint of desperation in her voice. She lay back and watched with bright eyes as I tore open the foil packet and rolled the latex down over my steely cock, and then held out her arms to me in invitation, her knees bent and her legs parted. I scrambled to get on top of her. She reached down to my cock, placed the head against her heated opening, and then used both her hands on my ass to bring me into her.

I slid into place, her walls adjusting to accommodate my intrusion. When I was fully inside her, she wrapped her legs around me, locking her ankles together across my lower back.

"Oh, God, I love this," she whispered, almost to herself, her eyes closed as she concentrated on the feelings being telegraphed through her nervous system.

She opened her eyes and looked into mine, and smiled. "I love you," she said softly. "I love doing this with you."

She tightened her vaginal muscles around my cock, and watched for my reaction. My reaction was to nearly cream right then and there, and she saw it.

"Oh, man," I moaned. I had to stroke into her; I had no choice in the matter. I started slowly, trying to hold off as long as I could for her. She urged me on, holding me tight and flexing in harmony with

her legs. I paused on the upstroke, with just the head of my cock still buried in her, and I plunged down into her as hard as I could, trying to make sure I bumped on her clitoris as I bottomed out in her on the downstroke. We set up a good rhythm, and the bed began rocking with our movements.

Just when I thought I could take no more, I bent down and grasped one nipple in my lips and sucked on her, hard. She yelped, favored me with one of her breathless screeches, and came all over my buried cock. The heat and the pressure combined to send me off along with her. I pushed my hips against her hard, making her rock back a little, and I buried myself as deeply into her as I could get as I ejaculated hard into the condom. Her heels were pressing on me, keeping me in place, as I pumped and jerked, until there was no more left to pump. I collapsed down on her, and I felt her body relax, her legs falling to the sides, her arms holding me limply.

After a few moments, I was afraid I might be crushing her, so I lifted myself up to take the pressure off. She wrapped her arms around my neck and pulled me back down onto her, however.

"No, don't go," she whined softly.

"I'm not going anywhere," I said. "I didn't want to squash you."

I felt her smile against my cheek. "You're not squashing me. I like it."

I kissed her, our first morning kiss. "So do I. In fact, I love it. And I love you," I said.

She kissed me again, and then hugged me to her fiercely. "Oh, Sean, I love you so much," she whispered.

We stayed like that, until I started to feel my cock withering enough to make the condom feel loose, so I pulled out of Kayla's pussy.

"Oh, no," she groaned. "Goodbye again."

I rolled over and pulled the used rubber off and dropped it to the floor. Kayla snuggled up to me and put her head on my chest.

"Where did you get these things?" I asked quietly.

She smiled. “Did I surprise you?”

“Hoo boy, did you ever,” I admitted.

“Jaimie and I went to a free clinic,” she said. “I got them there.” She giggled. “I really couldn’t just go buy them at my local drug store, could I?”

Just the thought of Luscious Kayla standing at the register of her father’s drug store, a box of condoms in her hand, made me break out in a cold sweat.

“Good God, no,” I said.

She laughed again, a happy and satisfied sound that touched my heart. She snuggled up to me again, and we stayed like that until the phone rang. I reached for it and answered it on the second ring.

Alex’s voice on the other end of the line said, “Sean? You guys up yet?”

“Yeah, sort of,” I answered.

“Breakfast in a half an hour?”

“Yeah, okay, we’ll meet you downstairs at the restaurant.”

I hung up the phone. “Gotta get up and get dressed,” I said.

“Not without a shower,” said Kayla. She got up and headed for the bathroom door. She turned and looked back over at me, still lying there.

“Well?” she asked, one eyebrow cocked. “Are you coming?”

“I think I just did,” I replied. But I wasn’t about to refuse her invitation, so I got up and got to the bathroom just as she was bent over the tub, adjusting the water temperature. It was a tempting sight, but the floor was slippery, so I just stood there, watching her backside, feeling the synapses firing deep within my small brain again, sending faulty signals to my midsection.

We finally made it downstairs, about fifteen minutes late. I had washed Kayla off, paying particular attention to her nipples and between her legs, and even checked to make sure there was no soap residue by using my tongue to explore her hidden recesses. She

reciprocated by pleasuring me with her mouth, taking all I could give her.

We found Molly and Alex in a booth, coffee and orange juice already in front of them. As we slid into the bench across from them, I couldn't help noticing that Molly looked very happy, and maybe a little smug. Alex, on the other hand, looked like he had been struck by lightning, a dazed look on his face, and his eyes a little unfocused. Molly gave us a knowing look as she glanced at her watch, but didn't say anything at first.

After the waitress took our orders, Molly finally spoke.

Picking up her orange juice, a small and secretive smile playing across her lips, she said, "No wonder he gets such good grades in school. He's a very quick learner. And, boy, can he ever concentrate."

We all burst out laughing, and even Alex, the butt of Molly's loving joke, had to smile self-consciously.

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A VERY CRAFTY GIRL

Over the first part of that summer, Kayla and I didn't get the chance to share her gift very often. We still went out quite a bit, we were hanging out together as much as we could, and we still fooled around in the Lovemobile, but she was adamant about not wanting to make love in the back seat of my car. She did relent a couple of times, succumbing to her own desires as much as mine, but for the most part we satisfied ourselves with oral and manual stimulation and release. As my good but crude friend Jake would point out, it was better than going home and making love to Five-Finger Betty.

Besides, I had nothing at all to complain about. Luscious Kayla loved me, and I loved her, and we both knew that what she said was the law. I gladly accepted that, just as Jake accepted that Jaimie held the reins in their relationship.

Coach Bill and I had another successful spring season with the Warriors, finishing 7-1-1. Tournament weekend was the same weekend as Lori's wedding, so we couldn't take the team back to defend their championship. Other teams besides the ones from our

town, however, had seen our success, and I got calls from a lot of parents about working with their kids, ranging in age from six years old to junior high age.

I was concerned about my amateur status if I taught for money, and I even called Pick and talked to him about it. In the end, we decided that I could do it, as long as I was paid in cash, and didn't advertise or publicize my teaching. As Pick pointed out, I had already taken money to teach the game when I worked for Duane Olchick. Besides, the issue for collegiate scholarship players seemed to try to address playing for money, not teaching for money, so I was okay.

I recruited Eric, Jorge, Tessa, and Trent to help me out. I had enough kids who wanted to take lessons over the summer that I was able to run three sets of classes, one for younger kids, ages six to ten; another for ten to twelve; and another for competitive play, ages twelve and up. The parents paid me in cash weekly, and I split it evenly among the five of us. That is, all the parents paid me in cash, except for Lori and David. Being a poor high-school kid, I couldn't afford to buy them much, so my wedding gift to them was a summer of lessons for Davey and Kip.

We taught each group three times a week. The younger kids were with us for an hour and a half, and the other two groups played for two hours, and sometimes it spilled over, if our scrimmages were going well. The parents, for the most part, didn't mind if we ran over our time slot. They were happy to see their kids playing and having fun, and maybe even learning something in the process.

The division of tasks worked out well, too. Eric and Trent worked on offensive plays, and Tessa, Jorge, and I concentrated on defending and goaltending. I had arranged for Davey and Kip to join me a couple of days before our soccer camps started, so that Eric and Trent in particular could get used to the skill levels we would be working with, along with typical nine- or ten-year-old behaviors. Tessa and Jorge had worked with the Warriors in the past, and were a little

more clued in as to the types of questions and interpretations that might come from a group of younger kids, but we all benefited from the refresher course. Davey and Kip were excited to be singled out as my helpers, and they carried that badge of honor into camp with them.

Jake and Kayla had to work in their father's store that summer. Jake was restocking shelves and working in the back room, and Kayla was a cashier. It made it easier to buy condoms, since I stopped in to say hello nearly every day, and she was usually able to take a short break whenever I was there. She would ring up the sale whenever there was nobody else around, and I kept a supply handy in a pocket of my soccer gear bag, which pretty much stayed in my car all the time.

The Fourth of July that summer fell on Sunday, and, as usual, there was a big carnival set up in the park by the small lake in town. Our schedules didn't mesh very well that weekend, though. Kayla had Friday off, but I had soccer camp until four o'clock. I had Saturday free, but Kayla had to work from noon until eight. We made do the best we could.

The Lehighs invited me over for dinner on Friday. It had been really hot, over ninety degrees. I was feeling pretty washed out from running up and down the fields during two sessions of soccer camp. By the time Mr. Lehigh got the charcoal going in the grill, the day had cooled off to something a little more reasonable. Even so, I was happy just to slouch in one of their loungers on the deck, relaxing in the shade, watching as Kayla and her mother brought out trays of condiments, drinks, and chips from the house and set them up on the big round patio table.

Actually, I was watching Kayla, captivated by her. She had on a tight, sleeveless tank top that only came down to her ribcage, leaving her delectable midriff bare, and a baggy pair of gym shorts. Her pale blonde hair was gathered back loosely, and there was a sheen of perspiration on her neck that I really wanted to lick off for her.

Jake was in another lounger next to me. He must have guessed my thoughts, because just about then he pounded my arm.

"You're practically drooling, Porter," he growled. "Cut it out."

"Hey, you get to live with her," I retorted. "I only get to see her once in a while."

Jake snorted. "You think living with a little sister is such a treat?" He glanced over and saw my face, and began to laugh. "Okay, yeah, you would think of it as a treat, wouldn't you?"

I just cocked an eyebrow at him, feigning ignorance, an attitude I usually came by honestly.

"Time to eat, boys," called out Mrs. Lehigh. The hamburgers and hot dogs were arrayed on a big platter in the center of the table. Kayla was finishing putting napkins at each place setting. Jake and I got up, and Kayla took my hand and led me over to sit on her right, on one of the curved benches under the table.

We fixed up our plates, slathering catsup and mustard on burgers and dogs, refilling glasses, and grabbing handfuls of chips. When the dust settled, we sat back and started chowing down. I powered through a hamburger in about three bites. I was ferociously hungry, and hadn't really realized it until I started eating. Once the beast within was somewhat mollified, I slowed down, willing to actually take time to chew when I started in on my hot dog.

I felt Kayla's fingers touching my thigh, so I held my hot dog in my right hand, and dropped my left hand below the table to hold hers. The dinner banter was light, mostly shop talk about the drug store, which I was content to listen to, without feeling the need to contribute. Kay pulled my hand over to her leg, and pressed my palm against the top of her warm thigh, holding it there.

Putting down her glass of iced tea, Mrs. Lehigh turned to Jake and asked, "Are you and Jaimie going over to the carnival tonight, Jake?"

Around a mouthful of hamburger, Jake nodded and mumbled, "Yes, we're meeting up with a bunch of kids in a little while."

Kayla surreptitiously moved my hand up her thigh, until I felt the hem of her gym shorts on the backs of my fingers. Her skin was silky smooth and warm.

Mrs. Lehigh turned to us. "And what are you two planning on doing tonight?" she asked.

Kayla moved my hand even further up her leg. I could feel the edge of her panties now, as she slowly moved my hand up and down the crease of her leg and her crotch. I thought I could feel just a hint of moisture, and I knew it was nearly too hot to touch there. I could feel the sweat start to break out on my face, and my shorts were suddenly a lot tighter. Kayla looked at me, all innocence, waiting for me to open my mouth and croak out an answer for her mom's question.

Before I could embarrass myself, Kayla, still looking at me, said, "We're going over to the park, too."

I had to clear my throat before speaking, so I tried to cover it up by taking a drink from my glass.

"We'll probably go over with Jake and Jaimie," I finally managed to say.

Kayla pulled my hand out of the leg of her shorts, but my relief was only momentary. She pressed my hand firmly back between her legs, and clenched her thighs tightly against my fingers and held me there for just a moment. I nearly sputtered my soda out my nose when she did that, and I started coughing. She let my hand loose, and turned to me, a concerned look on her face, except where the corners of her mouth were twitching as she tried to suppress her smile.

She patted me on the back solicitously. "Are you okay, Sean?" she asked.

I could only nod as I reached for my paper napkin, my eyes streaming from my coughing fit.

"Yeah," I finally stammered. "I'm fine."

Jake just shook his head at me, chuckling under his breath at my predicament. I hoped he didn't know the real cause of my discomfort.

Mrs. Lehigh brought out some homemade chocolate cake for dessert, and Kayla stood up to help her pass out plates.

"So tell me, Sean, how are your soccer lessons going?" asked Mr. Lehigh.

"Really well," I replied. "We've got fifteen younger kids, eighteen middle ones, and twenty-five in the competitive group."

"That's a lot of soccer for you to be teaching," he said.

"I've got a lot of help. Eric Johnson, Trent Abbott, Jorge Mendoza, and Tessa Navarrone all work with me. I'm charging the kids ten bucks a week, so each of us gets a hundred dollars in cash every week. I'm using the extra money to buy supplies, and some I'm saving for a party for each of the groups at the end of the summer, before their leagues start up again."

"That's good money," observed Jake. "Maybe I should have started a football clinic."

"You've got your own responsibilities this summer already," said his father. "Working at the store should be enough."

"Yeah, I suppose," grumbled Jake. "It's just not as much fun."

"Well, it is fun to spend so much time teaching soccer, but it's more work than I thought it would be when I started," I said.

"How so, Sean?" asked Mrs. Lehigh.

"I started out thinking I could just work with these kids like I did with Davey and Kip," I explained. "You know, just go out and have fun working with the ball, teaching them how to dribble and pass and stuff. Then, when more kids signed up, I started realizing that I had to have a plan for each session, based on their experience levels and their abilities."

"And then you found out you had enough kids coming to break them into three different groups, and the workload tripled," said Mr. Lehigh.

I glanced at him. I was a little surprised that he figured that out so quickly. In retrospect, it shouldn't have surprised me. He was a very intelligent and precise man who ran a successful local business, in an industry that had quite a few national and regional players just itching to run small, family owned pharmacies like his out of business.

"I think it more than tripled," I admitted. "Each section requires their own set of drills and skill sets. There are a few drills, mostly concerning ball handling, that can be used for all three player skills, but for the most part I'm spending a lot of my off-field time working up drills and scrimmage plays for each section."

"It's too bad Duane What's-his-name isn't around this summer," mentioned Jake.

"I could use his expertise, that's for sure," I said with a rueful chuckle. "I didn't appreciate how much time he put in away from the players, just so he and his assistants would be ready each day."

"He isn't coming back to do clinics this summer?" asked Mrs. Lehigh.

"No," I said. "His schedule in Europe didn't give him enough time to set up anything in America this year. He and Nicholas, his right-hand man, are running programs in Germany and France this summer. He did write and ask if I could join him for a couple of weeks, but there was no way I could afford to do that."

"That's too bad," said Mr. Lehigh. "That would have been an opportunity of a lifetime."

"Maybe," I agreed, glancing quickly at Luscious. "But I would have had to have been gone for almost three weeks, right in the middle of everything, and it would have been tough leaving home for that long, and everything..."

"And leaving your girlfriend behind?" finished Mrs. Lehigh, a small, knowing grin on her face.

"Well, yeah. That, too," I agreed, a little embarrassed.

"He would have spent every penny he would have earned over there, calling me every night," said Kayla.

"Honey, would you really have expected him to call you all the way from France?" asked Mrs. Lehigh, a little incredulous.

"Of course not," said Kayla. "But he would have, anyway."

I could only nod in agreement. My Luscious knew me very well, indeed.

"By the way, Mr. Lehigh, I want to thank you again for donating that first-aid kit to my program."

"Oh, it's no problem, Sean. I was happy to do it," he replied.

"With the extra money I've been getting each week, I could just as easily pay for it," I said. I was still a little uncomfortable about taking free stuff from anybody, even if it was to help the kids.

"I know you could, Sean. And I appreciate the offer to pay for it, but it's really not necessary. The drug store sponsors a lot of teams in a lot of different sports here in town, and my suppliers know how important it is to me and to the community. In this case, I happened to mention to my salesman that you were running these clinics for the kids here, and he asked if you needed anything." He took a sip of his iced tea, and then smiled. "So you see, I couldn't take your money for it anyway, since it was really a gift from my salesman."

"Who wouldn't have known about Sean's clinics, if you hadn't told him," interjected Jake.

Mr. Lehigh smiled again. "True," he said. He looked at his son affectionately. "I might have been the catalyst for the exchange of this first aid kit, but the fact remains that I didn't buy it, so I wouldn't feel right about letting Sean pay for it, either."

"Not that you would have charged him for it, anyway, dear," said Mrs. Lehigh, patting her husband's hand.

He just shrugged and sat back. "True again," he admitted. "But this way, Sean doesn't have to feel like he's skipping out on an obligation to pay for it. Okay, son?"

"Okay," I agreed. It was easier than arguing with him, anyway.

After we helped clean up after dinner, Jake walked over to get Jaimie. Kayla and I piled into the back seat of Jake's car to wait for them. Even with the windows down, and the sun sinking lower in the sky, it was steamy in the back seat, almost too warm to sit next to each other with my arm around her. Almost.

We drove over to the park and walked around the carnival, catching up with groups of friends in line for rides or playing around at the carnie games. I was proud to be strolling around the park holding Luscious Kayla's hand, being seen by everybody in school with the most beautiful girl in town.

We stopped to watch Sam Loggins and Jen Davies shooting baskets for prizes. Sam, having grown to about Tiny's height but skinny as a fencepost, was talented enough that he was able to figure out that the basket wasn't set at the normal ten-foot height, and was able to adjust his shot to make eight out of ten anyway. Whispered suggestions to his girlfriend, also a basketball player, were enough to allow her to make six out of ten, still far above the typical for that booth. They both walked away with huge stuffed pandas, along with a warning not to come back again from the booth operator.

We joined Eric, Keisha, Ayesha, and Anthony as they tried their luck shooting b-b guns at targets. Kayla hit only one bulls-eye on her first try, but I managed to knock down quite a few targets, and won a poster. Even Kayla had to laugh when I chose that Farrah Fawcett poster as my prize.

On one of our circuits through the maze of walkways around the carnival rides, we saw my brother Stephen, along with his friends Carlos and Tommy and Richie, standing in line for the Gravity Drop. Along with them were Tara Jacks, and one other girl I didn't know. Jaimie stopped short, pulling Jake's arm as he took another step forward before realizing that his girlfriend had halted. She was staring over at the kids in line, who couldn't seem to keep still as they waited, dancing and hopping in place, shifting from person to person, always in motion within their spots in line.

"Shit," exclaimed Jaimie. "She's not supposed to be here."

"Who?" asked Jake. Jaimie pulled him around so that more people were between the kids in line and us. She didn't want Tara to see her, so we moved back with her, until we were pretty much blended into the crowd.

"Tara's over there, with Sean's brother and his friends," explained Jaimie. Jake stood on tiptoe so he could see over the crowd.

"Oh, yeah, I see her," he said. "I thought she was permanently grounded?"

"She is," confirmed Jaimie.

She sure didn't look grounded to me. She was wearing a bikini top that was about two sizes too small for her, and short-short cutoff jeans that had been washed until the edges were fringed and the seat was nearly transparent. The legs of the shorts were nonexistent. Her ass cheeks were plainly visible, so much so that I had to doubt that she was wearing any underwear at all. She was looking and acting as slutty as she could, and she had all the boys drooling over her.

The little girl who was with the group was dressed similarly, except that her top was just slightly more modest, a clingy tube top that molded to her small breasts. The way they jiggled as she moved only served to confirm that she, too, was going without underwear.

"Who's her friend?" I asked.

"Why do you want to know?" asked Kayla, a frown on her pretty face.

"I just want to know who to stay far away from when school starts," I said, putting my arm around her.

She resisted for just a moment, and then allowed me to pull her to me. "Well, in that case..." she said with a smile.

"That's Tracy Evanson," said Jaimie.

I looked over at her, startled. "Mikey Evanson's sister?" I asked.

"Yes," she confirmed. "Tara's not supposed to be here, and especially with Tracy."

"Are you going to say anything to your parents?" asked Jake, looking concerned.

"I think I have to," said Jaimie unhappily.

We headed back toward the parking lot. Jaimie wasn't in the mood to walk around any more, so we decided to head over to the Dairy Queen to see if anybody was there. We met up with Tiny and Erica, sitting at one of the picnic tables there, and spent the next hour in an ice-cream haze before calling it a night.

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On Saturday, Kayla had to work late. I got to the drug store at about seven forty-five and waited for her, wandering up and down the aisles while she finished up with her duties and punched out. Finally, at a few minutes after eight o'clock, she came skipping out of the back room. She ran up and jumped up into my arms and gave me a big, sloppy kiss on the cheek.

"Come on, boyfriend, take me away from here," she giggled. She hopped down and practically dragged me out the door.

When we got in my car, she leaned over and wrapped her arms around my neck and gave me a very hot, very wet open-mouthed kiss that almost immediately burned out my coherent thought processes.

"I've got an idea," she whispered throatily. "There's a sixties band playing in the park tonight, so my parents are meeting some of their friends in the beer tent. Jake and Jaimie are already over at the park." She stared into my eyes, waiting for me to make the connection.

It didn't take me long at all. I gave her a quick kiss, started the car, and peeled rubber on my way out of the parking lot. Destination:

Lehigh House. We would have the place to ourselves for at least a couple of hours.

I pulled into the driveway, and Kayla was out of the car before I could turn off the engine and open my door. We went around to the back of the house and went in through the kitchen, not bothering to turn on any lights. Kay led me to the basement stairs, and we went down to the rec room. There was a little light spilling in through the windows from the dying sun, enough to give the place a dim, amber glow, as Kayla took my hand and pulled me over to the couch in front of the television.

She sat down against the armrest and pulled me over on top of her. She let go of my hand and wrapped her arms around my neck. She pulled me down to kiss me, nibbling at my lips as I lay half on her, trying not to crush her with my weight. She loved worrying and playing with the tiny scar on my lip, and I loved the way she concentrated on that spot. It was becoming one of the places on me that was very sensitive to her touch, an erogenous zone she had created.

I managed to pull my legs up so that I was lying on the couch alongside her, and she naturally scooted down and swung her legs up so that she was lying next to me. I slithered my right arm around her head, giving her a cushion against my arm, and I bent to her, showering her mouth with small kisses in return.

Kayla's pale hair was tied back in a ponytail, and I reached up and pulled the elastic out, letting her hair cascade down around her head and across her shoulders. I grabbed a handful of her luxurious, soft hair, letting strands of her tresses drag through my fingers. Her eyes were closed as she concentrated on her kissing, so I closed my eyes, too, and gave in to the feelings she was inciting.

Our kisses got softer and slower, if no less urgent, as we both teased and advanced on each other until, finally, our lips locked together. As our tongues met, she moaned softly into my mouth, sending a flare of excitement through me. She was wearing a demure

white blouse, buttoned all the way up to her throat, and the fingers of my left hand started at the top, fumbling with buttons until they could twist them through the buttonholes. I wanted to feel her breasts, even through her clothes, but I forced myself to go slowly, moving from button to button, as gently as I could. She shifted slightly once I got about halfway done, making it easier for me to reach the rest of them, until, at last, I undid the last button of her shirt that I could reach. I pulled the tails of her blouse out of her skirt and found two more buttons, which I went to work on, until I could open her blouse up and work it off her shoulder.

She broke our kiss long enough to shrug out of the blouse, and then pulled me back to her, resuming the teasing and the playing of our tongues together. I ran my hand up her side, still resisting the siren call of her wonderful breasts. When my palm encountered the cotton and elastic of her bra, she turned slightly in my arms, giving me access to her back, so I could work on the hooks and eyes. Still I resisted, however, and contented myself with feeling the play of her strong back muscles, lying just underneath the soft epidermal layer of skin. I ran my fingernails down her back, along her spine, and she shivered just a little.

Again we had to break off from our kisses, each of us panting. My fingertips encountered the thick material of her skirt, and I allowed my hand to delve down to clutch at her ass for just a moment before returning to the bare skin of her lower back. In the meantime, Kayla started in on licking and sucking on my neck and my earlobe, pausing occasionally to blow lightly in my ear. She let go of my neck and dropped her hands down to pull at my t-shirt, pulling it up to bunch under my arms. I sat up for a moment, and she lifted up the bottom, pulling the shirt over my head and dropping it to the floor. Her hands went to my chest, and she started playing with my nipples for just a moment before wrapping me up in her arms once again.

She started kissing and licking my throat, moving from one side of my head to the other. She slowly moved up, eventually giving my other ear the same treatment she awarded to the first. All the time she was doing that, I was trailing my fingertips up and down her back, from shoulder blade to her hip, reveling in the heated, silky feel of her skin.

She kissed my lips again, then raised her head up so that I could pay homage to her tender throat. Her hands started echoing what my left hand was doing, caressing my back as I was caressing hers. My hand would travel up along her spine, hers would move along my spine. My hand would run down her side to her hip, hers would mimic my actions. She tapped her fingers against my hip, so I did the same along hers. She moved her hand halfway up my back, fingertips playing along the skin, and I did the same. Her hand dropped back down, and so did mine. She reached further down and clutched at my ass, so I did the same to her, all the time licking and sucking at her throat and her chest.

I had my head tucked down, and I started licking at the swells of her breasts, along the hem of her bra. She arched her back, encouraging me to explore further, so I started chewing on her breasts and nipples through her bra. Her hands scratched up my back, anticipating that my hand would mimic her action. I let my hand linger on its way up her spine, until it stopped in the middle of her back, just like hers had stopped. I felt her fingers flex, willing my fingers to work to loosen her bra, but instead I clutched at the fabric, crushing it in my fist. I heard her whine softly in frustration, so I bit down a little harder on the pebble of flesh poking up against her bra and my lips. She rewarded me by moaning and running her knee up my thigh, nearly touching my balls, and then letting it slide back down.

As much as I enjoyed teasing her, I couldn't hold out any longer. I fumbled with her bra strap, and finally was able to separate the two ends. My hand found its way underneath the loosened material,

around her side and over the swells of her soft breast, and I grasped the mound in my palm. She groaned as I squeezed her flesh, her distended nipple burning a brand in my palm. I moved my hand to her other breast, and she shimmied away from me so she could sit up enough to pull the straps off her shoulders and drop her bra to the floor. She settled back down again and put her hands on the back of my head, guiding my lips to her breast. I opened my mouth gladly and accepted her offer.

Of all the acts of love and passion, there are two things that I love above all others. The first was just this: that first taste of the slightly salty skin of my love's proffered nipple. I held Kayla's soft breast in the palm of my hand, hefting its small weight as I lowered my lips to the swollen nub at its peak, and drew the bud into my mouth and suckled. I opened wider, and sucked in as much of her breast as I could, my tongue working around the areola, teasing and playing with the sensitive tissues. She arched up, pushing harder against my mouth, and I was in heaven.

I paid homage to her right breast, and then gave equal treatment to her left, unwilling to favor one over the other. She showed her appreciation by pressing me to her, holding the back of my head with one hand and rubbing my shoulder and neck with her other. I tasted the skin between her small breasts, and licked the undersides of both mounds, holding one tenderly while I lovingly nibbled on the other.

I left my hand on her right breast and pulled my arm out from around her neck as my mouth descended, kissing and licking down her sternum to her quivering tummy, until I got to the elastic hem of her skirt. I sat up and scooted down, and grabbed her skirt and started pulling. She helped by lifting up her butt off the couch, and watched me with bright eyes as I pulled the skirt down her legs and off her feet, dropping it to the floor to join our other clothes. She was wearing yellow cotton panties with a flower print, and when she put her legs back down on either side of me, I could see that the cotton

panel had a big wet spot from her leaking juices. I inhaled deeply, loading up on her pheromones, and my mouth began to water a little in anticipation of tasting her. I bent down and teased her a little by licking around her belly button, and she squirmed just a little. My hard dick pulsed with the sight of her writhing beneath me.

I took hold of the waistband of her panties and pulled them down. She lifted up again, her arms clutched to her and her hands clenched into fists tucked underneath her chin, as I worked them down her legs and off. This time, when she opened her legs to surround me on the couch, her pussy lips gapped open just a little, rosy and slightly swollen. I bent down and once again noodled with her navel, working my way very slowly down her tummy to the top of her pale pubic hair.

I pressed against her thighs with my hands, encouraging her to spread her legs just a little more, and I kissed and licked a path through her thin hair until I encountered the moist top of her slit. I took one finger and enjoyed the second thing that I loved most: I dragged my finger through her pussy lips, releasing the well of lubrication that was trapped, feeling it coat my fingertip with her hot oils as I dipped just the tip of my finger into her hole, teasing her for just a moment before continuing up to search for her swelling clit.

At the same time, I used my tongue to lick and taste of her along her outer lips, spreading moisture around and lapping up her tangy overflow. I teased her, kissing and licking the soft skin of her inner thighs, and felt the responsive quiver in her muscles as I moved down her leg just a little, my lips playing a tune on the smooth musculature of her legs. Once I was satisfied I had her attention, I worked my way back up toward her center.

As I reached her flooded pussy again with my tongue, I slowly pushed my middle finger into her. She moaned and raised her hips, trying to get my finger deeper. I licked up through her vulva, separating her lips with my tongue as it dove in, lapping up her juices, searching for her swollen nub. I licked around her clit as I

started finger-fucking her, and timed my assault so that I grabbed her little distended clit between my lips at the same time that I used two fingers on her, plunging into her as far as they would reach.

Kay huffed and hunched on my fingers and mouth, her breathy exhalations coming faster and faster as I pleasured her. My fingers were working in and out of her, and I twisted my hand occasionally, feeling her pressing walls give and flex. At the same time, I licked up and down her slit, from where my hand was pumping her, to the top of her lips, flicking against her clit.

Finally, her whole body clenched. She grabbed my head and held me to her as she flew off into space. I reached up with my one free hand and clutched her breast, and she instinctively let go of my head with one hand and ran it up my arm to hold my hand tightly to her heaving breast as she gasped through her orgasm. Her legs flexed against my head and shoulders in her passion, and her pussy exuded a slight, very hot release of oily wetness against my intruding tongue, a little different in taste from her normal lubrication. My hard cock twitched in anticipation, wanting to feel that heat and moisture for itself.

At long last, she collapsed back down onto the couch, her tightened muscles relaxing after helping her crest the mountain. She let go of my hand at her breast and took hold of my head, gently bringing me up and off her tender pussy. I let her pull me up to her, and she hugged me tight, wrapping her arms and her legs around me.

"Oh, that was so good," she whispered softly as she held me.

I put my arms around her and was content to lie there with her as she came down from her orgasm. I could feel her body's tension drain from her, first from her extremities, and then moving into her body, until, finally, her heart rate began to normalize, and her breathing steadied. I felt her smile against my cheek.

"Wow," she whispered, this time more aware that she was communicating with me.

"Wow, indeed," I agreed. "I think she liked it."

"Yes, she did," she answered. She took a deep, satisfying breath, and squirmed loose from me. She pushed me back against the couch and moved down to kneel by my legs on the couch.

"I'll bet I know what he'll like," she said with a smile, a naughty gleam in her eye.

She started pulling down my old gym shorts. She lifted up the elastic from my waist so that she could get them down around my throbbing cock, and I lifted up my ass so that she could shuck both the shorts and my underwear off. I settled back against the couch, my head resting on the armrest so I could watch her. She held up my clothes and ceremoniously dropped them to the floor. She giggled when she saw my cock twitch in anticipation. She bent down so that she was eye-level to it, and so close I could feel her breath tickling the hair on my legs.

She ran just her fingernail up my cock along the underside, and I tensed up, already close to shooting. She must have known I was close, because she wrapped her small hand around the base of my hard cock and squeezed a little, and my impending crisis abated. She continued to hold me tightly like that, squeezing out droplets of pre-cum, and she used the tip of her tongue to taste it and spread it around the head.

It was a good thing she was squeezing me tight, or at the first touch of her tongue I would have gone off. As it was, all the muscles around my midsection, from my stomach to my thighs, were tensed in anticipation, and my dick was pulsing with my heartbeat.

She kissed the tip of my cock, and then, looking me straight in the eye, she smiled, pressed the tip against her lips, and pushed down, letting her lips slide open as my cock intruded. She stopped when she had the crown engulfed, and she sucked on me, her tongue working around the head, her hand still squeezing me. She pulled me out of her sucking lips with a pop, licked her lips, and then took me back into her mouth, this time dropping down and taking as

much of me into her mouth as she could. I felt the head resting against the back of her tongue, and I knew I was at the entrance to her throat. She let her tongue bathe my shaft, and she started working her head up and down, her fist pumping just a little in unison.

The pressure was enormous. She was alternately sucking hard and letting up, and the combination was moving me fast toward a crisis. With her head bobbing on me, and her fist pumping at the base, I knew it wouldn't be long. When she took her other hand and ran one fingertip up my scrotum, I was pushed a little closer to the edge. When she cupped my balls and squeezed gently, that was it.

"Kayla... I'm... Ahhh... K-K-K-Kay..." I tried to warn her. She glanced up at my face, and attacked even harder, sucking on my cock until her cheeks caved in, her tongue working relentlessly against my skin, and her fist engaged in activating the pump. I closed my eyes and gave myself over to it.

I blasted into her mouth. She squeaked and almost let go of me at the force of my first spurt, but she gamely hung on, and continued milking me. I felt my center contract and let loose, contract and let loose, five times, then six. Finally, nearly spent, the flow eased to a dribble. Still my Luscious kept her mouth sealed around me as best she could, swallowing and sucking and pumping and squeezing, getting the last little drops out of me. Dribbles of milky semen leaked out of the corners of her mouth and dripped down my shaft, and she used her loosened fist to work the hot liquid into the skin of my cock. As I collapsed back onto the couch, my well-treated cock began to lose a little of its hardness, and still she kept on, teasing it with her lips and tongue, unwilling to let it deflate completely.

I put my hands on her shoulders and pulled her gently up to me. She reluctantly let me pop out of her loving mouth and crawled up to be wrapped up in my arms.

"Unghhh," I finally managed to grunt.

I felt her smile again. "Was that a compliment?" she asked.

"Unghhh."

"I'll take that as a 'yes'", she giggled.

"Unghhh," I agreed.

She reached down and tickled the hair on my balls, idly playing.

"It's a wonder you can do anything with these things dangling down between your legs. Don't they get in the way a lot?"

"Only sometimes," I managed to reply. Her play was having an effect on me. I didn't know if it was intentional on her part or not, but I was enjoying it. "But I'd miss them if they weren't there."

She giggled. "So would I," she said. She let her fingers trickle up my scrotum to my recovering cock, once again proudly standing up off my stomach. It had only deflated a little before reacting to what she had been doing with her luscious mouth and her fingers.

"Oh, my," she said. "Somebody's still got a problem." She grasped my stalk and moved her hand up and down on me. "What can we do about this?"

I reached down and searched for my shorts. I had a couple of condoms in my wallet. *My emergency stash.* Before I could find them, however, she shook her head, the top of her head swiveling against my chin.

"Wait," she whispered. She threw her leg over me and sat up, still holding my cock in her small hand. She knelt over me and held me straight up, pointed at her drooling pussy.

"Kay?" I was a little panicky about fucking her unprotected. Ever since the Molly Experience, I was pretty paranoid about anybody's unprotected sex, and especially mine.

My nervousness didn't faze her, though. She rubbed the head of my hard cock against her pussy lips, distributing oily lubrication and starting both our engines. She then firmly pressed herself down, until the tip of my head was nestled against her, embedded in her hole. I watched as she slowly impaled herself on me, swiveling her hips just a little as she dropped, almost literally screwing herself down onto me. She rose up, and dropped down a little more, so that I was a little

deeper inside her, and then rose up again, taking her time as she worked on taking me all the way into her. I felt her ass settle on the tops of my thighs as she took my full length inside her, and she sighed, her fingers idly playing at our joining.

"Oh, God, that's so much nicer," she sighed, her eyes hooded in pleasure.

I agreed, but I was also so jumpy about this that I was in danger of losing my erection. Kayla leaned down toward me, guiding her breast to my mouth. As I instinctively took her nipple in my lips, she whispered, "Surprise, Sean my love. I went on the pill."

She did surprise me. Her nipple popped out of my mouth and I goggled at her. She grinned at the expression on my face, and wiggled her hips a little to get my attention back where she wanted it.

"Would you please make love to me now?" she asked.

I reached up my hands and hugged her to me. She was an amazing girl, and I was even more in love with her than I had been before, something I didn't think was even possible. I flexed my cock inside her, and felt her inhale in surprise, her eyes widening as she looked down at me, before tightening the walls of her vagina against me in response.

She pulled me over, working to not lose our connection. I helped by easing over, until I was on top and she was below me, gazing into my eyes as she wrapped her legs around me, locking her ankles at the small of my back.

I started pumping into her. She relaxed her legs on me enough so that I could pull back. When she felt me at the exit, with just the head of my cock still within her, she flexed her legs, pulling me back into her. We set up a natural rhythm this way, complimenting each other in a natural fit. As I bottomed out in her, she would wiggle her ass a little, giving herself a little extra rub of my pubic bone against her sensitive clit, and she quickly climbed the heights. After several minutes of pumping, our breathing got more and more ragged, the

synapses started firing out of synchronization, and our movements got a little more erratic. I could feel the tightening in my balls, and I knew I couldn't last much longer. I started shafting into her hard, moving fast in and out and pounding her. Her head was bumping up against the armrest, and when I lifted my eyes and watched her as she got closer to her orgasm, I was able to gaze in pleasure as her boobs jiggled while I rocked her.

Suddenly, her legs and arms spasmed and tightened, pulling me hard to her, and she started huffing against me, hunching her ass up as if she needed to get me in deeper to her. The skin of her face, throat, and chest flushed a rosy pink as her orgasm washed through her like a tidal wave. It was enough to trigger my own explosion, and I shoved down as hard as I could, wanting to be as far into her as she wanted me to be. I felt my cock expand, and her walls contracted at the same time. I might have screamed as I spurted my first jet into her. I pulled out and shafted back into her as I felt the pump contract and let loose again, and my cock was rewarded with her gift of heat and moisture as she came. Our combined fluids lubricated her tunnel even more, and I sprayed her womb with my seed three, four, five times more, until there was nothing left to give her. Kayla was hanging on tight, riding out her own climax, eyes shut tight as she gave in to the rush washing over her.

Finally, her grip loosened, and her feet untangling themselves so she could drop her legs back down to the couch, her knees still bent. I lay on her, exhausted to the bone, distractedly feeling my cock slowly losing its hardness and shrinking a little, her vaginal walls contracting to accommodate the lessening intrusion.

"Oh, God," she moaned softly. "That was incredible."

"You are incredible," I whispered tiredly. I lifted my head up off her shoulder. "When did you decide to go on the pill?"

She smiled in satisfaction. "Surprised you, didn't I?"

I grinned. "You always do," I said.

She chuckled. "Good," she said.

"So?" I persisted. I started to lift off her, afraid I was starting to weigh down on her uncomfortably. I pulled my hips up to slip out of her, but she grabbed my ass and pulled me back down, and my softening cock slid back into her slippery passage.

"Don't go," she pleaded. "I like feeling you inside me."

I let her pull me back. I liked it, too.

"When did I decide to go on the pill? Probably two years ago."

That surprised me. "Two years ago?" I asked incredulously.

"Remember that time we were down here during the scavenger hunt?"

Remember? Of course I remembered. It was one of my most cherished memories. "Sure," I replied.

"I probably decided about then. I didn't get the chance to get to the clinic until a couple of months ago, though."

"A couple of months ago? How did you get there?"

She laughed softly. "Jaimie wanted to go on the pill, so she made Jake take her. She wanted me to come along for 'moral support', which he was not happy about. But he couldn't say no, not to her. Jake had no idea Jaimie and I had planned this all out, so that I could go with her and get my own pills." She hugged me tighter, and wiggled her hips. Our connection was slipping away as my cock shrank and started sliding out of her. Our combined juices were leaking out, coating my balls and soaking into the cushion. I thought distractedly about how we had to clean off the cushions the last time we were down here, that summer evening almost two years ago.

"You are a very crafty girl," I said in admiration.

She nodded. "Once I make my mind up, I don't give up easily," she said with a grin.

"I noticed."

"Yeah. You were supposed to notice." She smiled again, happy and content. I hugged her to me.

"I know I was," I whispered. "I'm just glad I wasn't too stupid to recognize it."

We stayed like that for a time, happy in each other's arms.

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LOOKING OUT THE WINDOW

By early August I was dead tired, and even looking forward to school starting up again. The workload had to be less than what I was struggling with during those hot weeks in July and August.

The kids were learning too fast. Even with the help I had, and the amount of time we were spending with each group, it was hard for me to stay ahead of them. I was spending about twenty hours on the field with the kids and the coaches, running drills and supervising scrimmages and games, as well as coordinating my top-notch helpers. I didn't know what I would have done if I didn't have my four friends helping me out. They were able to fill in the gaps I inevitably left in my plans, covering for me over and over again.

In between the hours spent on the field, I put in another ten or fifteen hours a week trying to stay one step ahead of each group, planning out drills, strategies, games, and scrimmages. Whether we were playing three-on-three, four-on-four, or full scrimmages, I felt I needed to have an idea of the makeup of the teams beforehand. It was too easy to let the kids decide who they wanted as their

teammates if we left that decision until it was time to play. Too many times that created an imbalance among the teams.

I spent another ten to fifteen hours each week writing down my impressions. Each day, after camp, I would write down detailed notes of how that particular session went. I wanted to be able to refer to my notes and see where I could improve things, if I should do this again the next year. I also wrote down remarks about many of the players in camp, noting improvements in their play or in their skill levels, places that might need more work, and sometimes even predictions about how far they would go in their soccer endeavors. I even wrote down some of the funny stuff that happened, as a reminder. I made sure every kid enrolled got mentioned at least once a week in these journals. I was thinking that I might be able to distill the information I wrote down and make up a presentation for each player at the closing party for the kids and their parents.

The young kids took the least amount of time, because their skill levels were still pretty primitive, even after a few weeks in camp. The middle group was tougher, because their coordination and reasoning skills were more defined, so they progressed rapidly. From my work with Davey and Kip, along with my own experiences playing at that level, it was pretty easy to come up with plans for this group.

The real challenge was keeping up with the competitive group. By the end of July, the number of kids taking lessons in this group ballooned from twenty-five to more than forty students. Most of them were junior-high kids who were seeing this as a stepping-stone to playing on the high school teams. They were all fiercely competitive, and a few could even be called driven. I knew one thing: they were driving me nuts. After all, I was the one who had to do all I could to stay ahead of them, and they were fast. Capital *F* Fast. I even had a couple of kids who had played on the J-V team as freshmen, who were hoping that working with us would be the way they could get noticed enough to make the Varsity team during late summer tryouts. I repeatedly told them that none of us had any

influence over Coach Neville's decisions, but they didn't really believe me. Truth be told, I was probably lying. If Eric, Trent, Jorge, and I all came up to Coach with the same name of a player unfamiliar to him, he would most likely take a chance on the player. I just wasn't ready to put myself on that kind of firing line quite yet, though.

School was scheduled to start on the last Tuesday in August. I really wanted a week off so I could just sleep in and not worry about anything, so I scheduled our last day of camp to be Friday, August 20. We scheduled Saturday as the party day, and arranged to have access to the park and the main soccer field all day. We scheduled the middle group's party for the morning, the youngsters for about noon, and the older kids for around four o'clock. I devised some fun and easy drills, mostly based on a weaving passing drill, to showcase the kids for their parents. Watching them weave around each other down the field, in teams of three, was pretty impressive for the parents, who typically only saw their kids during games.

I also set up a thirty-minute full-field game for the first two groups before handing out awards. Parents loved that kind of thing, I had discovered, and every kid got to play. The younger group played seven-on-seven, since one kid was on vacation and couldn't make the party. The middle group played a nine-on-nine game, with Tessa and Jorge working the goals. Every kid played the whole game, and the parents were thrilled when the game ended up tied, 1-1. Tessa assured the tie when she deliberately slowed her steps in defending against a crossing pass, and Davey Wilkinson put the ball past her into the back of the net.

After the game, I handed out certificates to every player. I had recruited Molly to hand-letter the names on them, since she had the best handwriting of anyone I knew, and I used my journal notes to talk about how each player had improved over the course of the summer. The parents all applauded every kid, and there were a lot of very happy players, proudly showing off their certificates. It made it

all worth the hard work. I even got about a hundred dollars in extra tips from parents, by way of thanks.

For the competitive group, I knew that a weaving pattern wasn't going to do it, so during the last week of sessions, we worked on showy passes and schemes. Heel give-and-go passes, special signals for throw-ins, and taking high passes off their heads and then running upfield without letting the ball touch the ground, keeping the ball in the air with chest, shoulder, head and knee touches, were going to be the showcase for these players. After the demonstrations, we set up two half-fields. Between the instructors and the kids, we had enough players for four full teams, with no subs, so we played two games simultaneously, across the width of the field. Everybody could play, and all the parents could watch both games at the same time. It was a little chaotic, but it worked out okay, mostly because the kids all understood it was just for fun. They had gotten enough competition over the past few weeks, so they were able to put aside those drives for one afternoon.

After the game, I handed out certificates to the players, and once again used my journal to explain how each player's game had improved. These older players didn't hold the certificates with the same amount of pride as the younger ones, but that was okay, because they held their new skills proudly instead.

What made me the happiest, though, was the courtesy nearly every kid displayed to me and the other coaches. After the ceremony, the parents and kids were gathering up their belongings, and the five of us were underneath the awning I had rented to provide some shade for us for the day, finally relaxing after several weeks of work. I glanced up and saw Mariko Lee, one of our junior-high students from the competitive group, walking toward us.

"Sean?"

"Hi, Mariko. What's up?"

She looked around shyly at all of us. The five of us were standing or sitting in a loose semi-circle, and she looked like she was feeling a

little bit more on the spot than she liked, as the others looked on curiously.

"I... I just wanted to thank you all for what you've done for me," she said. "I really enjoyed this camp."

While I knew nearly all the kids had a good time, and they had gotten better at their games, I was still a little surprised that a kid this age, normally very shy and self-conscious around high-school kids, would be bold enough to walk up to us alone to thank us.

Mariko tentatively held out her hand, and I shook it gently. She stepped over and shook Jorge's hand, and then stepped up to Eric, standing leaning against one of the support poles, a cold can of Coke in his hand, and held out her hand.

"Ah, hell, ain't no handshake gonna do it," he said with a smile. He stepped up, towering over the little eleven-year-old, and wrapped his arms around her and hugged her. She was taken completely by surprise, but only for a moment. She put her arms around him and gave him a squeeze, a huge and happy smile on her face.

Tessa was next, and she hugged her, too, and so did Trent, and so the precedent was set. She moved back over and hugged Jorge, and then gave me a hug, too, before running off and rejoining her family. By the time she ran back across the grass, other kids were gathered around, jostling for position as they all started shouting out thanks and farewells. Lots of parents came up to join in the melee, and before we were finished, we had been hugged, thanked profusely, had our hands thoroughly shaken, and I had had another two hundred dollars pressed into my hand as tips.

After we had picked up the cones and flags, taken down the awning and packed it away, and gathered up our balls and jerseys and gear and packed it into our cars, I gave each of my friends their cut out of all the tip money I had received. Sixty dollars each made us all feel wealthy.

As we stood by our cars, almost unwilling to drive away from each other, I thanked each of them in turn for all their help.

"Hey, we had fun, didn't we?" said Trent.

"Oh, yeah, but I'm gonna sleep for a week," said Jorge. "These kids wore me out."

"Ah, you're just a slacker," said Tessa, smiling at Jorge affectionately. They had really gotten to be good friends over the past few weeks, only partly because of the position they played. "We could have gone another week."

"Maybe you could have gone another week," noted Eric. "Us guys, we've got tryouts and practice coming up next week for school, so we aren't gonna get a whole lot of rest."

"Oh, man, I forgot about that," moaned Jorge. "There goes my plan to sleep for an entire week."

Shit. So had I. The one I really felt sorry for, though, was Trent.

"Hey, buddy, when do you leave?" I asked.

He looked both excited and a little sad. "Tomorrow afternoon," he replied. "I've already got most of my stuff packed up. We're hauling a little U-Haul trailer down with us."

"Hey, Trent, I forget. Where are you going again?" asked Tessa.

"University of South Carolina."

"How long to get there?" she asked.

"A couple of days, I guess. We're leaving about noon tomorrow, and we're thinking we'll get there sometime Monday afternoon. I'm supposed to move into my dorm room sometime between four and six on Monday, and we've got team meetings and tryouts beginning Tuesday morning."

"Is your whole family going?"

"Yeah, me and my parents and my sister."

"What about Danielle?" asked Eric.

Trent smiled. "She's moving into her dorm next Saturday," he said.

"That's so great, that you guys were able to go to the same school, even so far away," said Tessa.

"It took a lot of convincing, but it all worked out," said Trent. "But, hey, I've got to get going. I've got to finish packing, and then Danielle and I are going out to dinner with all our parents." He gave Tessa a hug, and shook Jorge's hand. He grasped Eric's hand a moment longer, and they nodded to each other, silent acknowledgement of their connection to each other. He turned to me.

I put out my hand, and he grabbed it, but instead of merely shaking my hand, he pulled me in and gave me a friendly hug.

"Take care, Sean. Knock 'em dead this year."

"I'll miss you, buddy," I roughly whispered. There was something catching in my throat.

He let me go, and bent down to pick up his gear bag. He threw it up onto his shoulder, and we all followed suit. As we got to our cars, Trent called out, "See you at Christmastime!"

"Hey!" I shouted. "You won't be back before that? What about Thanksgiving?"

"Nope. We play right through November. It's warm down there, Sean, not like up here in the frigid north!" He waved from his car, and his wheels spun on gravel as he accelerated out of the parking lot.

Man, I thought to myself. *Trent and Danielle are leaving, team tryouts are starting, school is only a week away.*

Where has the summer gone?

* * * * * * * * * *

The Lehigh/Jacks summer party was held that same afternoon and evening. By the time I got there, the softball game was already history. It was just as well, since I was pretty wiped out from the

multiple soccer parties I had hosted. I was really looking forward to collapsing in one of the Lehigh lounge chairs on their deck, a frosty glass of soda close at hand, and Luscious sitting by my side. I wasn't going to move from that spot for hours.

Kayla squealed and ran over to me, and jumped into my arms when she saw me. I bent down and gave her a big kiss, even though most of the neighborhood was watching, including her parents. They just shook their heads at us, smiling indulgently, and went back to cooking and conversing. I flopped down in a lounger, and Kay sat on the edge.

"How did it go today?" she asked, her hand resting comfortably on my stomach.

"It went really great, but it was a long day," I said.

"I'm sorry I couldn't be there to help you today," she said.

"It's okay, sweetie. We were all there, and it went just fine. I know you had to work."

Jake came over and perched against the deck railing.

"Hey, Seanster, how's it going?"

"I'm hot, and sweaty, and tired, and looking forward to sleeping in," I said.

He laughed. "It's about time you had to work a little. Soccer players, they've got it easy. Run around a little, sweat a little, and they start crying about how tired they are. You ought to try a real sport like football."

I just looked at him. I remembered working out with him at the gym. I also remembered how wasted he got when he just had to run a couple of miles with me.

He grimaced, obviously remembering the same thing. *What the hell,* I thought. *Getting back into the weight room would probably do me good.*

Jaimie came over, toting a couple of cold cans of soda. She handed one to Jake, who gave her a peck on the lips as thanks.

"No scavenger hunt for us this year, big guy," said Jaimie as she popped open her can of pop.

Jake looked over at her, startled. "Why not?"

Jaimie thrust her chin out toward the volleyball nets, where a bunch of younger kids were playing, including her younger sister.

"I've got to stay with Tara the Bitch," said Jaimie irritably.

"What? Why?" It sounded like Jake had just had his plans for the evening ruined.

"Because my parents will be helping your parents, and since Tara's confined to the house at sunset, somebody's got to stay with her. That would be me."

Jake grumbled, "Ah, shit." He paused for a moment, and then said, "And she can't stay by herself?"

Jaimie gave him that look that girls are so good at, the one that says, *My boyfriend is an idiot.*

Jake sighed. "No, I guess that wouldn't be such a good idea, would it? Oh, well. Nothing to be done about it. We'll just watch TV or something." He turned to us. "You guys want to hang out with us tonight?"

I glanced over at Kayla.

"Sure," she said, surprising me. She looked over at me and giggled to herself. She gave me an almost imperceptible shake of her head, discouraging me from contradicting her. I knew what to do: *when in doubt, shut your mouth and trust the girlfriend.* All I had to do was remember it, treat it like a mantra, and I would probably be okay.

A little later, when we were in line to fill our plates, I leaned down and whispered into Kayla's ear. "Why are we watching TV tonight instead of going into the basement during the scavenger hunt?"

She smiled at me, and touched her fingers to the scar on my lip. "That wouldn't be enough time for us, anyway, love. Be patient, all will be well."

That simple touch, along with those simple words, was enough to get my heart racing. *Yes,* I thought to myself, *all is well already.* For Luscious, I could be very patient.

* * * * * * * * * * *

At sunset, a bitterly complaining Tara was sent off to her house by her mom and dad. Jake, Jaimie, Kayla, and I followed along behind her, as if we just happened to be going in the same direction, and Tara turned around and glared at us. We were older, and not under house arrest, therefore we were the enemy. I could see it in her angry eyes.

When we got in the house, Jaimie asked Tara if she wanted to watch television with us.

"HBO?" asked Tara hopefully.

"No, *Saturday Night Live*," answered Jaimie.

Tara grumbled, but finally flopped down on the couch and crossed her arms underneath her small breasts and scowled at the TV. Jaimie and Kayla headed for the kitchen to arrange some snacks and get sodas for us all, and Jake and I sat on the floor. Jake grabbed the remote and flipped through the channels, looking for some diversion to watch until *SNL* came on. Outside we could hear the squeals of the younger kids as they headed out on the scavenger hunt. A couple of times the doorbell rang, but we ignored it, and the kids at the door scrambled off in search of other houses with treasure.

We found a rerun of *Barney Miller* and settled in. Kayla nestled up to me, and I put my arm around her comfortably. Jake and Jaimie moved up to sit on the couch, arms around each other. As they settled in, Tara looked over at them in disgust.

"Oh, gag me," she muttered as she looked at us.

"If you don't like it, you can go to your room instead," said Jaimie with false sweetness.

"Oh, screw you," said Tara under her breath, but she stayed where she was, staring balefully at the images on the television.

The *Saturday Night Live* show was a rerun, of course, but we didn't care. We cuddled and enjoyed the air conditioning and the sodas and the chips and the warmth of being together. We also perversely enjoyed making Tara irritable, a task that was made much easier by Tara herself.

Finally, a half-hour into *SNL*, Tara stood up.

"I'm going to take a shower," she announced. She stomped out of the family room and down the hall. We ignored her as best we could, which proved to be not too hard to do.

About an hour later, we were figuring the picnic and party were probably wrapping up. We started cleaning up the family room, removing the detritus of our snacking, when we heard a loud thump from the back of the house, followed by a loud laugh. The four of us stopped and looked at each other, puzzled about the noise. As we listened, I thought I could hear more than one voice. There was another loud thump.

"Oh, shit," said Jaimie. She looked worried, and a little angry. She headed for the hallway, Jake right behind her. I looked at Kayla, who just shrugged, so we followed the other two and ran toward the back of the house. Jake and Jaimie were knocking on a door, presumably Tara's bedroom door. Jaimie rattled the doorknob, but the door was locked.

"Tara! Open this door now!" yelled Jaimie.

There was no response, except for an odd shuffling sound, muffled by the locked door.

"I'll get it," said Jake. He gently pushed Jaimie aside and put his meaty shoulder against the door, and he shoved.

The door popped open, banging against the wall and bouncing back, and Jake stumbled into the room. We all tumbled after him,

and stopped short to look at Tara, who was just locking her window, her back to us.

She was naked, and she had her head turned toward us, looking at us, a mixture of fear and triumph playing on her face. She turned around to face us, and walked back toward her tousled bed. She looked calm, but I could see her muscles quivering from fear or nervousness. Her face was flushed, and the rosy color bled down her throat and across her chest, fading by the time it reached her small breasts. Her nipples were red and damp, and it looked like somebody had dribbled sugar glaze from her breast to below her navel. Her pussy lips, peeking out of her sparse bush, were also swollen and red, and there was a string of milky white semen dripping out of her pussy and down her thigh.

"What have you done?" cried Jaimie, who took three quick steps toward her sister and grabbed her by her biceps and shoved her roughly down onto the bed. Jake strode over to the window and looked out, and swore.

"Jesus Christ, there's a stepladder here!" He shoved the window open and stuck his head out. "Hey!" he yelled. "You! Over by the garage! Get your ass back over here!"

He started climbing out the window, and Jaimie cried out, "Jake! Don't do that, it's faster to take the back door!"

He pulled himself back and headed for the door. He grabbed my arm as he started out the room. "Come on, Sean, let's run those bastards down."

We ran down the hallway, through the kitchen, to the rear door.

"Who did you see?" I asked as we threw open the back door and fanned out toward the garage. He was going to move around toward the back of the garage on the house side, and I jogged over to go around the opposite side. The field was behind the garage, and the woods were beyond that. If whomever we were chasing made it into the woods, they would be really hard to find. "Jake? Who was it?" I persisted.

I couldn't see his face, because of the dark and the distance, but he sounded pretty reluctant when he finally answered.

"I think I saw two of them," he said quietly. "I can't be sure, Sean, but I think one of them was Stephen."

That was not the sort of ugly surprise I was expecting. I raced around the garage and met Jake on the other side, but there was no one to be seen. We jogged across the field and ventured a little way along one of the many paths through the woods, but we both knew it was futile, and we gave up after a few minutes of searching.

Dark thoughts invaded my head as we trudged back toward Jaimie's house. I needed to find Stephen, and he wasn't going to be a happy camper once I got my hands on him.

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SENIOR YEAR TRYOUTS

Stephen was home and in his room by the time I got back to my house. My parents had already gone to bed, and Michael was out. I knocked on Stephen's door, and opened it before he could even answer. He was standing at his dresser, and he spun around when he heard me come in.

"What?" he asked, already on the defensive.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?" I asked angrily.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he tried bluffing.

I wasn't buying whatever bullshit he was peddling. "Jake recognized you," I said, sitting down on the edge of his twin bed.

He folded right away. He knew he wasn't going to be able to bluff his way out of this, and tears started filling his eyes.

"Damn it, Sean. Why me? Why can't good things happen to me like they do for you?" He came over and sat down on the floor by my feet and leaned back against the bed. *What did he mean about good things happening to me? What good things?*

"What's going on, Stevie?"

"Fucking Tommy," he mumbled. "Gets me in trouble all the fucking time." The tears were running down his face now.

"What did Tommy do now?" I asked. I wasn't feeling very sympathetic right about then, and his display of emotion didn't touch me at all.

He sighed, his breath hitching. "Listen, don't let Mom or Dad know about this, okay?" He looked up at me, beseeching, but I didn't say or do anything. I wanted my options open. I had the feeling this was going to be a doozy of a story.

He paused, but when I didn't make any move to agree, he just shook his head. "Fuck it, then," he said roughly. "Get out of my room." He shoved at my leg, but I didn't move. He was pretty half-hearted about moving me out, and he gave up after just that one shove.

"Tell me," I said quietly.

He stayed quiet for a long time, as if he was mulling over whether to tell me about it or not. Finally, he took a deep breath, and he started.

"There was a dude a couple of blocks over who was doing some siding work or something," he began. "Anyway, he left his ladder in his back yard, and Carlos found it. Him and Tommy dragged it over to Tara's house the other day. I think they were planning on sneaking into her room that night, or something, but they didn't. Anyway, they stashed it behind the garage over there."

"At Jaimie's house? I mean, Tara's house?"

"Yeah. It was mostly hidden behind some bushes and shit, so nobody found out about it."

"And?"

"And, well, we knew that Tara was like totally grounded, but she still got around it a lot, you know?"

"Like at the carnival the Fourth of July weekend?"

"Yeah," he agreed. "Like that. Anyway, you know she's... uh..."

"She's a real piece of work," I said.

He smiled just a little. “Yeah, a piece of... work. She likes to shake her ass around, you know?”

“So I’ve heard,” I said dryly.

“Okay, so she’s skanky. But a guy gets horny, you know? She’s been jacking me off or giving me blowjobs for a long time, and once you get used to gettin’ it pretty regular...”

“Okay, I get the picture,” I said. “Have you fucked her?”

“Sure,” he admitted. “Tommy got her first, and then Carlos ripped off a piece, but she wouldn’t give it up for me. Only handjobs and blowjobs. And then, one time last spring, we were all in the woods, me and Carlos and Tommy and Tracy and Tara. Tommy brought some weed, and Tracy had a pipe, so we passed it around. Before I know it, Tommy and Tara are rolling around on the ground, and she’s got her hand down his pants yanking on him and he’s pawing at her tits, and pretty soon they’re pulling clothes off of each other, and he bangs her right there, in front of everybody.”

“No shit?”

“No shit. And then Carlos decides he doesn’t want to be left out, so he grabs Tracy, and her top comes off, but she doesn’t want to fuck, so she starts blowing him while he’s got a finger stuck up her twat, and he’s finger-fucking her, you know?”

“And what are you doing while all this is going on?” I asked.

He had the good sense to look a little ashamed. “Tommy dumps a load in Tara, but her motor’s still running, ‘cause, you know, Tommy’s kinda quick on the trigger, you know?”

I just nodded. *Of course he was; he’s young and selfish and stupid, and he’s just looking to get his rocks off.*

“So she motions to me, so I crawl over to her, and she grabs my shirt, and pulls me down and kisses me, and then whispers, ‘Hop on and give me a ride’. So I did.”

“Yeah? Just like that?”

He wouldn't look at me. "It's not like I'm in love with her or nothin'," he said. "I just wanted to get laid in the worst way." He glanced up quickly, and dropped his eyes again. "And I think I did."

"Did what, Stevie?"

"Got laid in the worst way," he said.

"Yeah," I agreed. "Maybe you did. So then what happened tonight?"

"Oh, yeah. Well, we had this ladder, see? And we knew Tara would be sent to the house after dark, but she said to stick around, and she'd try to sneak us in somehow. Like, a signal with her bedroom light, or something. Tommy and her fixed it all up. Anyway, Carlos had to go home, so when we saw her bedroom light come on, Tommy says, 'Let's get the ladder, buddy,' so we grab the ladder from behind the garage and we lean it up on the side of the house by her window. By now she's got her window open, and she's hanging out watching us. Tommy shimmies up the ladder and crawls into her room through the window, and then he motions me to come up. So I climb up the ladder and practically break my freakin' neck falling through the window into her room, and I look up, and already they're lip-locked. Tommy's got his hand stuck down inside her panties, fingering her, and she's got his shorts down around his ankles and has his wang out, and she's yanking on it like she wants to pull it out by the root, you know?" He looked up at me again.

It didn't sound very romantic. In fact, it sounded painful. I nodded, encouraging him to continue.

"So anyway, they break apart for a moment, and she pulls her shirt off, and she's not wearing nothing underneath, and Tommy, he kneels in front of her, and pulls her panties off, 'cause that's all she's got on, you know? He pulls them off, and she puts her feet apart for him, and he starts jabbing his finger up her cunt again. She puts her hands on his shoulders to steady herself, you know, she's looking like she's really starting to get off on all this fast and furious shit, and

she's got her head back, and she's moaning and groaning and almost bouncing up and down on Tommy's fingers, 'cause he's using two or three fingers on her now. And when she's done coming, or whatever, she just pushes him away, pushes him backwards, you know? And Tommy, he falls down, he's so surprised, but he stands up again, and yanks his shorts the rest of the way off, and his boner is stickin' way out. Anyway, Tara, she backs up until she's by the bed, and then she just lays down, her legs spread and dangling over the side, and Tommy climbs on. Tara grabs his thing, just takes hold of his cock, and pulls it, pulls him over on top of her, and he just slides home."

He looked up at me in distress again. "It was really gross, Sean, and at the same time, it was really a turn-on, you know? I mean, being in the same room with your best friend while he's banging some bitch, only it's a girl I've known since forever." He squirmed a little, remembering. "Anyway, he's humping away at her, and she's taunting him, you know? Like telling him he's got a little dick, and he don't know how to use it, but he's in another universe. Pretty soon I hear him grunt, and he pulls out and shoots all over her stomach and her tits. When he's done, he just drops to his knees and kind of rolls out of the way, and Tara, she's just laying there, her legs spread wide and her pussy just winking at me, and she just watches me. So I dropped my shorts and grabbed my cock and guided it in, and took up right where Tommy left off. I didn't want to hug her or kiss her or anything, 'cause Tommy's splooge was all over her, so I just kind of leaned up against the bed and balled her. She had this smile on her face like she knew I didn't want to kiss her, and she moved her hips around on me, and before I realized it, I was shooting off inside her."

He looked up at me again, his eyes ten years older than they were just a few minutes ago. "I didn't mean to, Sean. I really didn't. But she's got to be on the pill, right? I mean, a skanky slut like that, she wouldn't take the chance, would she?"

I wished I could reassure him at that point. I knew only too well the terrors that came visiting when you were worried about such an unfortunate mishap.

"I don't know, Stephen. Maybe she is, but I don't know."

"Because Jaimie and Kayla are, so Tara probably is, too," he said.

I looked at him, dumbfounded. "How do you know about Jaimie and Kayla?" I asked suspiciously.

"Tara knew," he replied. "Tara told us one time that they were."

Hoo boy. This is not good news. One step closer to the parents finding out about the girls being on birth control. The more people who knew, the more likely the word would get out to the wrong people, namely moms and dads. And here, the four of us thought we had kept that particular bit of information a secret.

He sniffled, and wiped his eyes roughly with his palms.

"What am I gonna do now, Sean?" he asked miserably. "What's gonna happen now?"

"I don't know, buddy. I'll find out what I can." I stood up and looked down on him. I knew there was a scowl on my face, and I hoped it would put the fear of God into him. "You're going to have to stand up and face whatever comes, though. You can't run away and hide from it."

He just stared up at me, his eyes tearing up again. There were high spots of color on his cheeks, and his nose was red and streaming. Finally, though, he nodded, and looked down to stare at nothing, contemplating a dreadful future.

* * * * * * * * * *

The next day I called Jake, first thing.

"Hey," I said. "What's going on with Tara and her family?"

He kept his voice low and spoke very quietly into the telephone. "I don't know for sure. By the time I got back there, Mr. and Mrs. Jacks were home, and I only got to talk to Jaimie for a second this morning when I called over there. She told me she threw Tara into the shower to get cleaned up, but I don't know if she told her parents about it yet." He paused for a moment. "I took that ladder and carried it into the back of the field last night, just in case."

I slapped my forehead. "Great thinking, dude. I completely forgot about the ladder."

"Sean? Was Stephen one of the guys?"

I sighed. "Yeah. And it's a real dirt sandwich." I gave him the condensed version of what had happened.

"Jesus H. Fucking Christ," he muttered. "What is the matter with that little girl?"

"Well, not only that, but what is the matter with these little boys?" I added.

"Yeah, that too. Why is it that guys are so easily led around by their dicks?"

I laughed uncomfortably. "I don't know, Jake. If you can figure out the answer to that, you'll be a millionaire."

Jake just grunted.

"We might have another little problem," I said. I told him about Tara spilling the beans about Jaimie and Kayla being on birth control.

"We'll fix that right away," he said. "School starts in another week, and all these kids involved are going to be freshmen. We'll put the fear of the Senior Class into them right from the get-go."

"You want to wait that long?" I asked worriedly.

He chuckled. "I don't think a whole lot is going to happen between now and then. Between the four of us, we ought to be able to sit on these little dickheads without too much trouble."

"Five of us," I said.

"Five?"

"Yeah. Mikey Evanson is gonna have to be informed about his little sister, and it's not going to be pleasant. He'll help."

"Mike graduated. He won't be there," said Jake.

"He's going to community college for a year, living at home. He'll want to know about this."

"Okay, five of us. Good. So, I guess I'll see you later."

"Call me if you hear anything more," I said before hanging up. Even if Jake didn't call me back, I knew I could get more information that afternoon. Luscious was coming over and staying for dinner.

When she got to my house, she was carrying a gym bag, and wearing gym shorts and a baggy t-shirt, along with her running shoes.

"Oh, no," I groaned.

"Come on, you lazy bum," she said. She reached and pulled me up from my very comfortable slouch. "I don't want you getting all flabby. Besides, an older guy like you needs to take care of himself." She giggled and stepped easily out of the way when I tried to tickle her for that remark. She pushed me toward the stairs. "Go change," she commanded. "I'll be out in the back, stretching."

Well, that was a sight I really didn't want to miss, watching my Luscious stretch out, so I hustled upstairs and threw on an old shirt and slipped into my running shoes, and took the stairs back down two at a time. I would tie them when I got back outside, where the view was much better.

Kayla was bent over double when I stepped outside, her knees locked and her palms flat on the ground. She looked around her legs and held her position as I stopped and admired her form, and she smiled at me, knowing full well what she was doing. I almost missed the bottom step because I was looking at her ass as I came down the stairs.

She raised herself up gracefully. "Come on, clumsy," she said. She gently pushed me back so I was sitting on the concrete step, and she knelt and began tying my shoes. She glanced up at me and

smiled again, and leaned forward just a little more to concentrate on her work. Of course, when she did that, the neck of her t-shirt gapped, and I got just a glimpse of the top swells of her breasts, along with the edge of her white bra. As much as the sight fascinated me, I had to look away after a moment. It would be uncomfortable, and more than a little embarrassing, if I had to run with a hard-on tenting my shorts.

I stretched out my hamstrings, and figured that was good enough for an easy run. We started out, going down the driveway and heading over toward the park.

"How are Jaimie and Tara?" I asked.

She scowled a little. "It's a real mess over there," she said. "Jaimie got Tara cleaned up and into bed before her parents found out, but she's really afraid Tara's going to do something like that again."

"She can't very well nail the windows shut, can she?"

"No. She really doesn't want to tell on her sister, but she's thinking that might be the only way to protect her from herself, too."

We were jogging at an easy pace, breathing regularly and able to converse without gasping. We ran around the perimeter of the park and headed out through the surrounding neighborhood, intending on swinging around and coming back to my house by running past Kayla's, about a four-mile loop.

I gave her the sanitized version of what Stephen had told me, and also told her about my conversation with Jake.

"Will that work? Confronting those kids like that?" she asked, a little worriedly.

"Sure it will," I assured her. "They're just punk kids. They'll listen up." I hesitated for a moment, and then jumped in to see if I could help Stephen out. "Sweetie, do you know if Tara is on birth control pills?"

She glanced over at me. "I don't know, but I'll see if I can find out," she said.

By the time we got back to my house, our conversation had turned to more pleasant subjects, and I felt great. That run was just what I needed to clear my head of jumbled thoughts.

Everybody was home by the time we returned. Mom was fixing up platters of bacon, lettuce, and tomato sandwiches, cut into triangles, along with cut-up fruit and sweating glasses of soda and iced tea. Kayla grabbed her bag and ran upstairs to take a quick shower while I helped Mom lug the food out to the picnic table in the back yard. When Kay came back down, she insisted on helping while I got cleaned up. It would have been a lot more efficient if we had been able to shower together, but I didn't think my parents would be very accepting of that suggestion, so I didn't even mention it, except to Kayla as we passed each other in the hallway.

"I would have preferred to take my shower with you," I whispered.

She gave me a smoky smile. "We'd have run out of hot water," she murmured.

I came back from my shower just as my dad and my brothers were sitting down at the picnic table. Mom and Kayla were opposite the men. I slipped onto the bench next to my Luscious, and we all dug in.

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Tryouts for the school fall sports teams were held beginning Monday. Soccer tryouts were scheduled for Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday afternoons, and the team lineups would be announced after Wednesday's session. Full team practices began on Thursday, and our first game was to be a week later on Friday, during the first week of school.

Coach Neville met with those of us who had been starters on the previous year's team for an hour before tryouts were to begin on Monday. I looked around the room as we settled into desks in one of the health classrooms. It would be strange not seeing Kevin Soranno playing in front of me, or Mikey Evanson and Robert Anderson in the middle, but it was even more of a shock to realize Trent Abbott wouldn't be a part of this team. They all had graduated, and Trent had left for college on Sunday. He had gotten a soccer scholarship at South Carolina, and we had speculated excitedly all summer long on the prospect of playing against each other in another year.

On the other hand, our entire defense, with the exception of Mikey, was returning. Jorge was a junior, and Anthony Rogers and I were returning as seniors. Eric Johnson and Javier Perez were returning seniors for our offense, and Jimmy Brooks, our right forward, was a junior. We only had to fill four starting positions lost because of graduation, an enviable position for a ranked team.

"Gentlemen, may I have your attention, please?" Coach Neville smiled as he surveyed the classroom. "As you all know, these next three days will be open tryouts. All positions must be earned, no matter what your successes or awards in previous seasons. That said, I anticipate that the seven of you, unless your games have somehow gone horribly wrong during the past several months, will be returning to your customary positions on the field."

Brett spoke up. "Coach, do you have any idea who you might like to see in the forward and midfield spots that are open?"

His smile was tight and knowing. "We'll have to see how the tryouts go," was all he would say.

He handed out schedules, and talked about what drills he had planned for tryouts. He wanted us to meet with him again on Wednesday morning, so we could give him some input on what we saw during the tryouts. He emphasized, however, that the final decisions on the makeup of the team were his, making sure we all understood that.

We spent the entire Monday session on running and conditioning. We ran laps around the track; we ran forty-yard sprints, sixty-yard sprints, and hundred-yard sprints, all timed. We ran mile races, timed again, and then ran more laps.

It was brutal. There were maybe one hundred kids trying out for the soccer teams, and of those, maybe half made it through the running phase in halfway decent shape. A number of kids ended up on their knees, tossing their lunches along the fence at some point during the festivities. Even the couple dozen or so of us who had known what to expect, and had prepared over the summer, were pretty much beaten down by the pace.

At the end of the first day, those of us who had been on the Varsity team the previous year were sprawled around one of the benches on the side of the field. Eric, Jimmy, Javier, Anthony, Jorge, Weasel, Rich, and a couple of other subs were all there, sucking down water and trying to summon up the energy to walk a little to cool down before the muscles started tightening up.

Coach Simonson came over and harangued us to get up and move around. Moaning and complaining the whole time, we all finally managed to drag our weary asses up off the bench or up from the ground and take a one-lap walk around the track.

Rich Ingrams moved up to walk with me. "Hey, Sean, I hear you were running a clinic for little kids over the summer," he said.

"Yeah, I heard that, too," said Weasel from behind us. "That must have been boring."

Eric turned around and stared at him. "Maybe you should have signed up, Weasel. Might have been able to teach you a thing or two."

"Why do you say that? You weren't there, were you?" One thing about Adam Prince the Weasel. He was sure to get his motormouth going before he dropped his brain in gear.

"Actually, yeah, I was there. And it was fun. And educational. And it helped me to stay in shape. How you feelin', dipshit?"

Weasel actually had made it through the first day pretty well. He was limping a little, and he looked pretty washed out, but most of the guys looked worse. Eric, of course, looked nearly fresh, even with a bright gleam of sweat on his dark skin. His breathing had already normalized, and he looked like he was out for a stroll on the track.

"I feel all right," Weasel said rather defensively.

"Good enough to go one-on-one for a spot on the starting lineup?" Eric asked.

Weasel stopped and glared at Eric. The rest of us stopped and looked at the two of them. "What do you mean?"

"Simple," said Eric. "Full net size, you and me one-on-one. You get three chances to try to stop me from scoring, then I get three chances to stop you. Most goals wins."

"Wins what?"

Eric thought for a moment. "I win, you don't issue any challenges all season long. You win, me and Porter will recommend you for the sweeper spot in the starting lineup."

"Really? You'd do that?" Prince looked a little uncertain, as if he didn't believe we would live up to our end of the bargain.

"Sure. You beat me, you're good enough to start, far as I'm concerned. But here's the catch, Weasel. Just because we recommend you, don't mean Coach will listen. All we can do is whisper in his ear."

Weasel turned to me. "Do you agree to this, too?"

I shrugged. "Sure," I said. "You beat Eric, I'll let Coach know you want the sweep, and I'll give it my endorsement."

I could almost see the light shine in his eyes at the thought of starting in the middle.

"Hold on there, sport," I said. "If you win—and that's a very big if—and if you get the starting spot—another very big if—you listen to your keeper, your stopper, and your two defensemen. Listen and act as if your life depended on what they said. When Jorge says

'jump', you start jumping, and you don't stop until he tells you to stop. Got that?"

"Sure, but..."

"But nothin'. Agree to it, or you don't even get the chance to win the one-on-one. Okay?"

His face got red, but he must have been working on his anger management, because he didn't say another word. He just tersely nodded.

"Okay, good. As soon as Coach dismisses us, we'll grab a couple of balls and do it." I turned around and resumed walking around the track, and the others followed.

When we got back to the locker room, I quietly let Coach know what was going on. He tried to be serious as he listened, but I could see amusement dancing in his eyes as he let me know he would be in his office for another hour, going over the day's events with Coach Simonson.

The word must have gotten out, because there were about thirty kids hanging around the field when I got back out there for the challenge. Almost all the guys from last year's Varsity and Junior Varsity teams were there, sitting around and anticipating the contest, and there were a few kids from the summer clinics, incoming freshmen who knew Eric and me, and were intensely interested in what was going on.

I walked out, holding two soccer balls under my arms. Eric and Adam got up and joined me.

"The full half-field is in bounds," I said. "Play on, unless you hear me blow my whistle. Offensive player gets the opportunity to bring the ball up from the midfield line, and just about anything goes after that. Once the defenseman either kicks the ball out of bounds, or takes over control and dribbles away, or knocks the ball more than ten meters behind the offensive player, that turn is over, and you restart. Each player gets three opportunities on offense. Understood?"

I got nods from both players.

"Okay, who goes on offense first?" I looked at them both.

"Let's play our positions first," suggested Eric. "I'll take the first offensive set against the defensive specialist, here." He jabbed his thumb in Weasel's direction.

"That okay with you?" I asked Adam.

He shrugged. "Sure, I guess," he said.

I set them up, and blew my whistle to get them started. Adrenaline was working in Weasel's favor for the first point, and he managed to knock the ball away from Eric's feet and out of bounds pretty quickly. Just that small exertion, however, had him huffing and puffing. The day's excesses were going to take their toll on him quickly.

On the second point, Eric juked him badly, and got enough of an opening to pound the ball into the net. Eric walked nonchalantly back to the midfield stripe and waited for Weasel to retrieve the ball and toss it to him. Eric let the ball drop to his feet, and immediately took off at a dead run. Even I was impressed that he had that much speed and energy left in him after running so much during tryouts, and there was no way that Adam was going to be able to backpedal and stay with him. After three tries, Eric had scored twice, and Adam had made one stop.

They switched positions. Adam rested a moment, hands on his knees and sweat dripping from his nose as he tried to catch his breath. He looked up at Eric, who was standing hipshot on the eighteen-meter mark, waiting patiently, arms crossed and looking relaxed. Weasel sighed, took a big breath to fill his lungs with oxygen, and started out.

He was skilled with the ball, but there was no way he was going to be able to outrun Eric to the goal. He tried his best to feint around him, but Eric, from years of pulling stunts on opponents, knew what he was doing, and could play a defensive set very well. He kept his eyes focused on Weasel's stomach, letting his peripheral vision track

the ball. The feet, the arms, the shoulders, the head, even the hips could be used to fake out an opponent, but the midsection has to go where the body goes, and Eric was well aware of it. He kept watching Adam's core, and simply moved in the same direction his midsection moved. Adam was forced to concede the point.

On his second trip down, Weasel tried lofting a pass over Eric's head. Eric simply ran backwards a half-dozen steps and kneed the ball out of bounds, for the match. The only reason to play out the last point was for pride, and Weasel was out of gas, pride notwithstanding. He just waved his hand at Eric, conceding as he walked over to the sideline, clutching his side and blowing hard.

Eric came jogging over and took Weasel's arm. Weasel stood up straighter, perhaps anticipating having to take some shit from the victor, but Eric simply said, "Nice game, Prince. You played your hardest."

Adam looked startled. He searched Eric's face for a possible punchline. There wasn't one to be seen, so he nodded. "Thanks," he said hesitantly, still waiting for the other shoe to drop. Eric just nodded once at him and let him go, walking over to get his bottle of water out of his gym bag.

The crowd dispersed, clumps of players walking off together, no doubt talking about the one-on-one challenge they had just watched, and speculating on what it all meant. Eric, Jorge, and I gathered up our stuff and headed back to the door into the locker rooms, and knocked on Coach's door.

"Enter," said Coach Neville, and Coach Simonson opened the door for us.

"How'd it go?" asked Coach Neville.

"About what you'd expect," I said. "But Prince showed some guts out there, Coach. And quite a bit of restraint." I turned to Jorge and Eric. "What do you guys think?"

Eric just nodded, only now allowing himself to look as tired as he had to have felt.

Coach looked at Jorge.

"If you want to start him as sweep, I t'ink we can work with him. You agree, Sean?" asked Jorge.

I nodded. "Yeah," I agreed. "He's a more mature player than he was last year. I think we can play with him."

"Thank you, boys," said Coach Neville, giving nothing away. "See you tomorrow." And, with that, we were dismissed.

On Wednesday, after practice, Coach tacked up two pieces of paper on the bulletin board in the locker room. One had the names of the guys who had made the Junior Varsity team, the other contained the names of the Varsity players. I was glad to see all seven of the freshman players who had attended my clinic made the JV team. As far as the Varsity list was concerned, there was only one surprise, considering the number of returning players we had. That surprise was that the two sophomores who had been on the JV team last year, and had attended my clinic, were both on the roster. I was unaccountably pleased about that.

On Thursday morning, at our first team meeting, Coach would announce his starting lineup. Who would fill the four vacant spots? We all had to wait for one more day before we would find out.

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HER TWO BEST FRIENDS

Coach scheduled a team meeting after our Thursday afternoon practice to announce the starting lineups, and to hand out practice and game schedules.

Paco Ochoa, Kristina Mendoza's boyfriend, was going to be the starting midfielder on my side of the field. I had been watching him during tryouts, and he was a good ball-handler. And he was fast, maybe even faster than Eric. It was a great choice for that position.

As I pretty much expected, Weasel was given the starting sweeper position. When Coach announced his name, he looked like he had been hit with a brick. He had already resigned himself to coming off the bench again this year. He looked around gratefully at Eric, Jorge, and me, but we stayed carefully neutral. No use making a big thing out of it. Everybody knew, even the previous year, that he had the skills to play at this level. All he needed was a little tempering.

In Trent's spot, left forward, Coach assigned one of our solid bench players from the previous season, a junior named Alex Spivak.

He was a solid, if relatively unimaginative, player. I thought he would do a decent enough job with the ball, but I had the feeling most of the scoring duties were going to shift to our midfielders, instead of our forwards. As long as the defense held, I didn't care if we didn't have the offensive firepower we did the previous year. Winning by one or two goals, instead of by six or seven, still counted as a win in anybody's book.

The biggest surprise was the appointment of Hap Olson as our offensive center midfielder. Hap was a sophomore, one of the kids from the J.V. team who had attended my summer clinic. His skills had improved a great deal over the summer, but it still took me by surprise that our coaches thought enough of him to put him into a starting position.

We had a three-hour practice scheduled for Friday, and a marathon five-hour block scheduled for Saturday, beginning at nine in the morning, something we had never had before. I asked Coach Neville about it, as it seriously cut into my plans to sleep in every morning. He gave me a funny look.

"It's your own fault, you know," he said with a smile.

"Huh? My fault?" I didn't want the team thinking I was responsible for this long practice session on a Saturday.

"Of course. If you hadn't proved to be such an influential player on the field, we would never have found ourselves in this position."

"Sorry, Coach," I said. I was confused. "I still don't understand."

He laughed out loud, deriving genuine pleasure from my confusion. "Don't be sorry, Sean. I'm just enjoying the moment. Allow me to explain. We've gotten so many requests for interviews that we had to schedule a media day. We'll be just doing a fairly light practice, two hours or so, and then the team will shower and change into their game uniforms, and let the media do their interviews. We'll take the team picture for the yearbook then, too, since we'll have all sorts of professional photographers on hand, and we'll have a catered buffet lunch set up in the cafeteria."

"You're kidding. A media day?"

"We'll have newspapers and magazines represented, and there will be quite a few scouts and representatives from colleges and universities here. Most of those will be from the surrounding states, but our preseason ranking has generated a lot of interest in the team. And, of course, your reputation has fueled a lot of that interest."

"I hope those scouts aren't coming to see me, Coach. I've already committed to Florida."

"Oh, they are well aware, Mr. Porter. Many of them are coming to see what they missed, and to take a look at some of our other players. Mr. Johnson, for instance, seems to be a hot commodity right now, since he hasn't chosen a college as of yet."

I knew Eric had been contacted by some schools, and I didn't think he had decided on where, or even if, he was going to go to school. I was glad to hear he might be able to go on an athletic scholarship. The more exposure he could get, the better off he would be.

"And, of course, it's not too early for Mr. Mendoza or Mr. Brooks to start thinking about furthering their careers, either," Coach continued.

That's right, both Jorge and Jimmy are juniors this year. These high-school years were flying by. *Is this what happens to grown-ups, too?* The thought was startling.

So, on a sunny and hot Saturday morning, we went through our usual warm-up laps and stretching, only this time we had an audience. We also got to practice on the main field, a rare occurrence. There were more than one hundred people in the stands, and more were coming in as the morning progressed. The word had gotten out in town, and a lot of kids from school were there, no doubt as curious about the festivities as we were. I could see Dr. Osgood, our school principal, working the crowd, moving up and down the bleacher aisles and introducing himself to the reporters and scouts.

Around ten o'clock, as the coaches were setting us up for three-on-three scrimmages, there was a sudden commotion outside the gate. We stopped and watched in amazement as a television crew from one of the local stations pulled up and began to unwind spools of cable and snake it under and around the bleachers. *Coach Neville must have really put out the word,* I thought.

By the end of the day, I was all talked out. I had interviews with all of the local papers, including the *Metro Times,* and representatives from American High School Soccer Association and its magazine, *Youth Soccer Today.* I talked to a bunch of recruiters and scouts, and pointed them toward Eric, Jorge, and Jimmy. Right after practice, and then again during the luncheon, I did a television interview, and I saw Dr. Osgood and Coach Neville also being interviewed. I was told it was for an upcoming prep soccer program, one of their weekly high-school sports shows that they broadcast on Sunday mornings.

At one point, I had about four scouts surrounding me, talking to me about their schools. I tried to get them to go talk to one of the other guys, but they didn't seem to take the hint. Another man came up to our group, and his voice cut through the buzz around me.

"Mr. Sean Porter, I presume?"

We all turned to look at the newcomer. He was about thirty years old, slim and clean-cut, balding a little, but looking pretty fit. He looked like a soccer player to me.

"Yes, sir," I replied. The other scouts backed off just a little, apparently recognizing him.

He stuck out his hand and smiled. "I just thought I'd stop by and introduce myself," he said. He glanced around, nodding to a couple of the others, as if he knew them. "I'm Stan Harvard from the University of Florida, Sean. Pick Cropper wanted me to stop by and say hello."

I leapt up and pumped his hand. "Well, Mr. Harvard, I'm very glad to finally make your acquaintance," I said.

"It's great to meet you, too, Sean," he said, moving in next to me.

He managed to maneuver us away from the crowd with a polite but quite firm "Will you excuse us for a few minutes, gentlemen?" and we stepped over to a quiet corner.

He chuckled, glancing over to where the four others were shuffling around, unsure whether to wait for us to return or to go off in search of some other potential player.

"They weren't about to give up easily, were they?" he said, shaking his head.

"No, they weren't," I said. "I tried to tell them I was already committed, Mr. Harvard..."

"Oh, I know that, Sean. And call me Stan, please. I know those guys, and they know you've already signed your letter. They just were picking your brain a little, probably seeing how set you were on becoming a Gator."

"I thought once a letter of intent was signed, I couldn't change my mind," I said.

He looked a little scared when I said that. "Why, Sean? Were you thinking of changing your mind?"

"Oh, no, sir," I hastily assured him. "I'm Florida bound, and happy about it. I just thought you couldn't back out of it, once it's been signed, that's all."

He relaxed a little. "Oh, nothing's irreversible," he said. "You're right, it's a legal contract, but there are always provisions for voiding it. Both sides agreeable, and all that. But it's rare, even so."

We chatted for a few more minutes, as the time allowed for the media interviews wound down. Finally, Stan and I strolled toward the gymnasium door.

"Well, so long, Sean. I'll see you next fall, in sunny Florida," he said, shaking my hand.

"I'm looking forward to playing there," I said.

"By the way," he said softly, looking around a little conspiratorially. "I've got a bit of news for you. It's still pretty premature, but you might like to know."

"What's that?"

"See those people over there?" He pointed toward a group of three men and two women who were talking to Coach Neville.

"Sure, I talked to all of them at one time or another," I said. "They're from AHSSA."

His eyes crinkled as he smiled. "Yup," he confirmed. "And what do you suppose they're talking to your coach about?"

I shrugged. "Your guess is as good as mine," I said.

His smile grew even bigger. "I don't have to guess," he said. "They're talking to him about their short list."

I must have had a blank look on my face, because he laughed out loud. "See you later, Sean," he said, and he left me there, confused as usual. *What do I care about what they're talking to Coach Neville about?*

* * * * * * * * * *

Coach had given us Sunday off, but we were back on the field on Monday, our last day of freedom. The first day of school was Tuesday. Fortunately, it was only scheduled to be a half-day, just long enough for us to find our classrooms and collect books. We were scheduled for a full three-hour practice, beginning at one o'clock.

Tuesday, however, was a dark and rainy day, with thunderstorms rolling through the area. Coach called us together before we changed out of our school clothes.

"The practice fields are soaked," he informed us. "The groundskeepers won't allow us to practice out on the game field, so our practice today will be in the gymnasium. Change into your gym clothes, with shin guards, but wear your gym shoes."

There was a collective groan. Indoor practice meant running, especially numbing inside. As we filed out, Coach Neville

announced, "Mr. Porter, Mr. Mendoza, Mr. Johnson, Mr. Oldman, Mr. Perez, and Mr. Rogers, please wait a moment."

The names he called were all the juniors and seniors who had started last year. We waited until the rest of the team left, exchanging puzzled glances.

"Please sit for a moment," requested Coach. "Do the six of you feel like you need to run laps for conditioning?"

We all looked at each other, shaking our heads.

He smiled tightly. "I thought not," he said. "I have confidence in your abilities on the field, gentlemen. Instead of running in the gym, I would like you to spend an hour or so in the weight room. When you are finished, you may leave." He scowled at us. "No shirking, now," he warned.

Our little group was in a much lighter mood walking out of that classroom than our fifteen teammates had been, just a few minutes before.

About ninety minutes later, freshly showered and feeling loose and free, I was driving home through the downpour, when it occurred to me that I had a free afternoon. More importantly, so did Luscious. *Maybe I should surprise her.*

There was a florist's shop in a strip shopping center not too far from school, so I turned in that direction. I wheeled into a parking spot and sprinted from my car to the overhang, and opened the door.

The sweet nectar smell was so strong it was almost an assault. I stopped just inside the door for a moment, acclimating myself to the bright lights and the odors. I ended up buying one large red rose, and the salesgirl put a little bulb of water on the stem and wrapped it carefully in tissue paper to help protect it for me. I ran back out to my car and headed toward heaven, which was, in this case, Kayla's house.

I parked on the street and ran up to the front door. I knocked on the door and waited for a moment, and then rang the doorbell.

Finally, I saw my Luscious peek out the window to see who was there. She smiled and opened the door for me.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, looking as happy as I felt.

I whipped the rose out from behind my back and presented it to her.

"What's this for?" she asked, breathlessly surprised.

"Just because," I said as she stepped aside to let me in.

"Because? Because why?"

"Because I love you," I said. It must have been the right thing to say, because her eyes filled with tears of happiness, and she melted into my arms and kissed me.

Still holding me tight, she whispered, "What happened to practice today?"

I told her about Coach sending us to the weight room.

"Lucky me," she said with a smile. She took my hand and pulled me into the family room, where she had set herself up to do some studying.

"Did you get homework assigned today?" I asked. I hadn't, wonder of wonders.

"Just a little," she said. "We're supposed to read this book, *To Kill a Mockingbird,* and I thought I'd get an early start on it."

"Wow, you're ambitious," I said, flopping down on the couch. "I don't read anything until it's assigned."

She looked at me in amusement. "I know you don't," she said. "But it helps me." She held her rose up to her nose and inhaled. "Yum." She smiled at me. "I need to find a vase for this. Be right back."

I watched her walk toward the kitchen. *Did she put a little extra hitch in her walk for my benefit? Maybe.*

The rain picked up in intensity, running in sheets down the big picture window. There was a flash of lightning, and a few seconds later a deep rumble of thunder rattled the house. The light in the kitchen flickered for just a moment as the power grid seemed to

tremble, and then it flicked off. Kayla stepped into the doorway, holding two glasses of soda. She had stripped down to her bra and panties, and struck a pose there, one knee bent, holding one glass to her lips as she stared at me.

My throat was dry, but I wasn't thinking about sodas just then. I sat there on the couch, staring at her and lusting for her, unmoving.

She came over and set the drinks down on the coffee table, and then leaned over me and kissed me softly. I put my arms around her and worked at the hooks of her bra as we kissed, and the straps slid down off her shoulders once I got it loose. She lifted her arms off the couch and let it drop, her breasts dangling enticingly near me.

She broke our kiss and whispered, "We have this unexpected afternoon. What shall we do to keep from getting too bored?"

My voice was a croak. "Well, we could read *To Kill a Mockingbird* to each other," I said.

She rained soft and feathery kisses down on me. "Yes," she whispered in between kisses, "we could do that..."

"Or... um... we could work on our geometry..."

"That's a possibility," she whispered.

"Or... Physics? Biology? Sex Ed?"

"That would be... nice..." She lifted up just a little, and put her rosy nipple just out of reach of my lips. I tried using my tongue to coax her lower, but she stayed tantalizingly out of my range. As she teased me she continued, "I've heard that making love is a good aerobic exercise."

"Really?" I tried lunging up to capture her bud with my lips, but she was too quick, sitting up just enough to pull her breast out of my reach. She was kneeling on the couch by now, straddling me, so I couldn't move very much. I found I liked being Kayla's captive audience.

She backed off and kissed me lightly again, on my lips, my cheeks, my nose, and my chin. "But I forgot. You just got done in the

weight room, didn't you? So you probably don't want any exercise..."

"But it wasn't an aerobic workout," I reminded her.

"Good point," she conceded, and she kissed my lips, mashing herself against me. I had my arms around her, and I lay there and enjoyed the feeling of her breasts pressing against my chest and her lips moving on mine.

I felt the tip of her tongue against my mouth. I opened and accepted her, my own tongue darting out to meet hers in a teasing, tasting frenzy. As we kissed, I reached up and pulled the elastic keeper out of her hair. I ran my fingers through her soft mane, letting the strands flow through my fingers like silken water.

She was practically humming with happiness, little sounds of delight escaping her and vibrating within me. She started kissing and licking my neck, and the tender and very sensitive spot behind my ears, heating me up quickly. She sat up and reached for the bottom edge of my shirt, and pulled it roughly up my body. I struggled to sit up enough so that she could pull it off over my head while still trying to reach for her delectable breasts, but I was hindering her, so she slapped my hands away long enough to complete her task. Once she had my shirt off, she took my wrists and placed my hands back on her boobs for a moment, smiling at me lovingly. I rubbed both nipples with my thumbs, encouraging the blood flow into them so I would feel them expand to capacity, and she moaned softly at the signals being sent through her from my manipulations. She dropped down to kiss and nibble at my neck, slowly lowering herself until I lost contact with her soft fleshy mounds. Her lips found my nipples and began teasing them, licking and biting them, teasing me just like I loved to tease her.

She moved lower on my body, until she found my belly button. My stomach muscles were quivering in anticipation as she explored my navel and the arrow of hair that pointed down my stomach. She used her hands to open the snap of my cut-offs, and slowly pulled

the zipper down. My hard cock was putting an extra strain on the material, which made that task a little more difficult, but she managed, her fingertips rubbing lightly along my length as she lowered the zipper. There was a wet spot on my underwear from leaking pre-cum, and she let her fingertips explore that area just a little before grasping the elastic of my briefs and pulling them down. I lifted up my butt a little to assist her. She shucked my shorts and underwear off my legs before kneeling back down on the couch, straddling me at my knees, bent over so she could examine my throbbing cock and aching balls.

She ran just her fingernail up the underside of my thick rod, tickling me nearly to distraction. She did the same thing to my scrotum, teasing me by her soft touch until I thought I would cry out in frustration. She rubbed very lightly along the sensitive skin encasing my balls, along the sides of my legs, and around the base of my painfully hard cock.

Finally, she took some sort of pity on me. She grasped my stalk at the base and squeezed it just a little, and another bubble of moisture escaped the end. She stuck her tongue out and lapped at it, spreading the moisture around the sensitive tip of my cock. With her other hand, she hefted my balls, her fingers spread and gently massaging them. The fist around my cock began to pump me, and her tongue explored my length, from the leaking tip, around the sensitive ridge of the helmet, and down the shaft to her fingers.

She held my cock straight up and pressed the head against her closed lips. She glanced up into my eyes as she pressed down against my cock, slowly forcing me between her clenched lips until the head popped in. She paused and sucked hard on me, her tongue working around on my flesh, and then she slowly dropped down on me, taking me as deeply into her hot mouth as she could.

I watched, goggle-eyed, as her mouth spread open to accommodate my girth, and her lips moved down my shaft until they met her fingers, still holding me tightly. She moved up on my

rod, until just the head was still encased in her mouth, and then she repeated the action. Her saliva provided lubrication, and she began bobbing her head faster, her lips and tongue in constant motion against my fevered flesh, her right hand working on the base and her left hand flexing and hefting my balls.

She took her right hand away, and she dropped down as far as she could on me, trying to get all of my cock into her mouth. I felt the tip against the back of her throat. She gagged just a little, and picked her head up. My cock flopped out of her mouth and bounced against my stomach as she gasped.

"Sorry," she whispered. She bent back to her task, this time perching up on her knees and bending down over me. She bared her teeth and held them for a moment against my cock, pretending to bite me. She glanced up at me, a playful look in her eye, and then, making sure I was watching, she slowly closed her lips around me. As the heat from her mouth surrounded my cock again, and her lips sealed around my flesh, I reached down and was able to just reach her boob and its distended nipple. I used my fingertips to play with her, and she moaned her pleasure against me. She worked on getting me deep into her mouth again, and held me there, the head of my cock against the back of her throat and her tongue working its magic on my length. When I pinched her nipple, she began humming, her voice climbing the register and then dropping, louder and then softer. The vibrations emanating from her throat, directly into me, were enough to send me off. My hips involuntarily bumped up, and the tip of my cock slipped down her throat just a little. That extra pressure on my sensitive head, combined with her humming and the work of her tongue and lips, put the hydraulics in motion. I squeezed my eyes shut as I shot off, directly down her throat.

She coughed and backed off, but she never lost her seal around me as she sucked out everything I had. She put her hand back on the base of my shaft and jacked me, working the pump and accepting my seed into her hot and willing mouth. I felt her swallow reflexively,

and that put even more pressure on my cock. I squirted again, five times, then six, until, finally, I was dribbling the last I could give her. Still she sucked on me, concentrating on coaxing every last drop from my overtaxed system as I collapsed back, my tensed muscles finally easing.

She didn't give me any respite, but continued to suck on my cock. I felt it soften, relaxing its tension, and then it filled back up again, regaining nearly all of its previous hardness.

She felt it, too, and finally released me from the pressure cooker of her mouth once I had regained my full rigidity.

"It went down, and then got hard again," she said in wonder. She still had a firm grasp of me, and she was bending back down to lick at my cock some more. I took her by her shoulders and coaxed her up to be by me, and she came willingly. I kissed her softly on her salty lips, and then flipped her over, so that I was on top of her, and she was lying back on the couch. I took one of her nipples between my lips and nibbled on it, setting her hips in motion as I lay between her legs, my knee nestled up against her leaking pussy. I sucked in as much of her breast as I could, working my tongue over her nipple the way she had worked her tongue along my cock just a few minutes before. She moaned in pleasure again, and held my head to her breast with both hands. I played with other her soft mound with one hand while I sucked on her, reveling in tasting the distended nub of her nipple against my tongue as I drew in her flesh. I felt inexplicably grateful that two of her hot spots were the breasts I loved so much.

Finally, I relinquished her left breast and gave equal treatment to the right one, sucking and biting on it until it, too, was flushed and swollen. I licked and kissed my way down her body, until I reached the waistband of her bikini panties. I could smell her emanations, and the blood surged within me as the signals sent by her drooling pussy were received by my receptors.

Her hand was on the top of my head as I chewed and sucked on the cotton panel of her panties. I pressed the material against her,

letting it soak up more of her lubrication. I ran my tongue along the seams of the legs of her panties, teasing her, while at the same time I used my fingertips to lightly run up and down her covered slit. Her hips had set up a fluid, rhythmic motion, and her hand was coaxing me to do something more, but I was content to tease her just a little. I kissed and licked my way down her inner thigh, nearly to her knee, as my hand doodled with the hot and damp area around the elastic near her crotch, sliding underneath the leg band to feel her moisture and the short, sparse hair, but never settling into her center.

I worked my way back up her other leg, taking my time to make sure I tasted the entire expanse of skin before me. I could feel the big muscles of her thighs tensing and loosening as her hips kept up their movement, a layer of soft, incredibly smooth skin overlaying strong, flexing musculature that helped to give her those graceful lines I had come to love so much.

I could hear her moaning and whispering to herself as I played with her. Her hands went to the waistband of her panties and started pushing them down. I put my hands on hers to stop her.

"Sean? Please..." She sounded almost as if she was in pain.

"Please what, Kay?"

"Oh, God... take them off... take them off... I need you to..."

I held her hands and put my mouth directly on the soaked cotton panel and chewed on it. She started thrashing around at the onslaught, still trying to remove the intruding barrier of her underwear.

"Please... please... please..." she chanted, trying without success to climb that mountain and throw herself off the precipice.

She pulled her hands out from underneath mine and ran them up her body to pinch and squeeze her breasts and nipples. I used my fingertips to slide the edge of her panties over, exposing her swollen lips. I used the tip of my tongue to separate her folds and release the well of moisture that had been trapped, feeling the hot oils bathe my tongue as I delved into her flooded hole. I then allowed it to travel

up, through the sensitive tissues, to find and circle her distended little clit.

Her movement and her breathing got ragged. I took the opportunity of her impending orgasm to pull her panties off, and she readily complied, still concentrating on the signals being generated by her overheated pussy. I tossed the soaked garment to the floor, and gently pressed against the insides of her thighs with my hands to spread her legs so that I could be between them again.

I began to lick up her juices again, resuming my task, spreading her lubrication all around. At the same time, I used my fingers to spread open her folds so I could have better access to her most sensitive tissues. I took my middle finger and plunged it roughly into her. It was unexpected, and she gasped. Her hips jerked upward at the intrusion, wanting more, so I pulled out of her and used two fingers on her, plunging back in ruthlessly. At the same time, I tried to capture her clit between my lips, my mouth pressed against her, sucking up her juices. I twisted my fingers as I worked them in and out of her, and after a few times working her in this way the combination was enough to finish her off. She breathlessly screeched, her eyes open wide but unseeing. Her hips began humping up against my face and my hand as she gave herself over to her orgasm. I kept at her through her climax, my fingers acting as pistons for her engine, and my tongue lapping up the overflow. As she came, her center gave me that special lotion that she exuded during her climaxes, and I felt the tangy fluid flow across my tongue as I continued to work her.

Her body gave her no respite. Just as she started to relax from her orgasm, the signals being sent from her core revved her up again. In just a few moments, she was bumping her pussy against me again, already fast approaching a second climax.

She held her breath, her entire body tensed in anticipation, and I lifted up my head so I could watch her. My thumb found her oversensitized clitoris and rubbed it as my fingers continued their

work. She squeezed her legs together tightly, trapping my hand, as she came for a second time.

My hand was trapped in her pussy, unable to do anything. She reached down, her legs still clenched together, and grasped my wrist to pull my hand away from her.

"No more... I can't... no more, Sean..." It took a real effort just to squeeze those few words out as she gave herself over to the tidal wave washing through her. She clutched my hand with both of hers, pulling my arm up so that she could hold herself together, pressing my hand and hers to her chest.

As the sensations slowed, she rolled onto her side into a fetal position, her eyes closed as the fireworks inside her slowly faded to occasional random firings. I scooted up behind her and held her to me, molding my body to her. My hard cock nestled itself between the cheeks of her ass quite comfortably, and I put my arm around her. She quite naturally took my hand and pressed it to her breast, her swollen nipple dimpling my palm delightfully.

"Mmmmm," she hummed contentedly. "That was very nice..." Her voice trailed off, almost as if she was falling asleep, but I didn't think that was happening.

After a few minutes, I squirmed a little, trying to work myself into a more comfortable position with my rod sticking out in front. She squirmed back at me and pressed my hand a little more firmly to her.

"My two best friends," she murmured. "Sean Porter, and Sean Junior."

"Sean Junior?" I asked, puzzled.

She lifted up her top leg just enough to reach down between her legs and grab my hard cock. She hunched herself forward enough so that she could point it straight out, and then she moved back against me again, with my cock nestled between her legs, against her pussy.

"This 'Sean Junior'," she whispered. I could hear the smile in her voice, even if I couldn't see it.

The tip was sticking out from between her legs. I could tell she was looking down at it, maybe imagining herself as a boy, and she started playing with it with her small hand. She held it in her fingers, coaxing out a little pre-cum, and she used her thumb to spread the moisture around.

Her actions got my heart rate boosted up a little. My cock began to throb with my heartbeat, bobbing up and down just a little as she watched. She giggled at the sight, but she stopped when she felt my hips start to bump against her involuntarily. My hard cock began rubbing back and forth across her sensitive pussy lips, and I could feel her temperature rise in concert with my own.

We both started breathing a little harder. Her hips joined in with mine, so that the sawing motion against her tender folds was greater, more sustained. I squeezed her breast as she continued to hold my hand against her, my manipulations rougher, transmitting a greater need.

I felt the head of my cock starting to plow through her furrows as our hips flexed in time, her juices flowing once more, transferring lubrication from her pussy to my cock. I felt the tip find her heated hole, nestling itself into its home, and both our hips stopped their motion on that hot and wet contact. I rested there for just a moment, and then hunched up toward her, pushing my cock into her. She felt me enter her, and she pushed back, wanting more. She bent forward at the waist just a little more, offering herself to me. I pushed against her, feeling my length being squeezed by her giving walls. She bent one leg up to facilitate our joining, and I pushed toward her at the same time she pressed back against me until I was fully inside her, the base of my cock against her ass.

"Oh, that's so wonderful," she groaned softly. "I love feeling you inside me."

We lay there on the couch together, content to move slowly with each other, stroking easily, pausing occasionally, building a perfect fire that would, we knew, eventually consume both of us.

I held her tight, sometimes resting my chin on her shoulder, other times kissing her ear and the back of her neck. Occasionally she would turn her head in an effort to kiss me back, but the position didn't allow for it very comfortably. She accepted my kisses, and promised to reciprocate with kisses of her own another time.

Our hips stayed in slow, fluid motion. Sometimes I would shorten my stroke a little, teasing her by refusing to plumb her depths; other times, I stayed buried to the hilt, flexing my hips to try to drive just a millimeter or two further. Kayla, for her part, practiced flexing her vaginal muscles against me, alternately squeezing me until I could barely stand the heat and the pressure, other times relenting and allowing me to slide within her, our contact facilitated by our mixed lubrications.

Finally, I could hold back no longer. I started shafting into her, all the way in and all the way out on each stroke, setting up a dedicated rhythm. Kayla's skin was hot to the touch, and she was huffing each time I bottomed out in her, exhaling in a rush before drawing in another laboring breath. Moisture was leaking out onto both our legs as my pistoning action drew more lubrication out of her pussy on each stroke.

At the last, I pushed into her as far as I could go, and I grabbed onto her hips to hold her in place as the fuse lit and the machinery engaged. I could feel my cock trying to expand against her velvet walls, the pump reacting, and I constricted reflexively, and sent my seed to splash within her, spurt after spurt.

Whether she felt the warmth and the wetness of my semen as it sprayed inside her, or her vagina felt the expansion of my cock, or some other stimulus, Kayla was thrown into her own orgasm. Her whole body tightened, and a wave of heat started at her center and spread throughout her as she slipped into ecstasy, her passions escalating until they were spiraling out of control. She wailed through clenched teeth, her hands clutching my palm to her breast, and gave over to her own orgasm.

I held her there as my own orgasm wound down, helping her through her climax. As she calmed down, I felt happy to be there for her, happy to be buried deep within her. My cock was softening, but I was unwilling to pull out of the warm sheath, so I stayed as I was, caressing my Luscious.

We stayed just like that for a time, each of us content to be in the company of the other, my body possessing hers and her body accepting mine, basking in the afterglow.

I lifted my eyes as another flash of lightning raced across the stormy skies. In the aftermath of the flash, just as the rumble of the thunderbolt rolled across the sky, the image of a face was imprinted on my retina, a face outside the pane of glass, between the house and the bushes lining the front of the house.

Somebody was spying on us.

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AN ASSEMBLY

By the time Kayla and I scrambled off the couch and threw some clothes on, it was far too late to discover who it might have been outside looking in.

And, as it turned out, it didn't really matter at all. The person outside had bigger problems than the relatively minor issues represented by Kayla and me. When nothing came of our mysterious peeper over the next couple of days, we did our best to put it behind us. We quickly fell into the routine of school, practice, and homework that we had worked out the previous year. Kayla came over to my house, or I ended up at hers, and we did our homework together. Jake joined us most evenings, and Jaimie came along occasionally, too, when she wasn't being her sister's jailer.

At soccer practices, Jorge, Eric, and I made sure Weasel understood his position on the team, and Coach Neville reinforced our lessons. Weasel was being closely observed at his new starting position, and we would not put up with any dissension from him on anything. If Jorge signaled him to shift to the left, he shifted, no

questions asked. He might not have liked it, or he might have disagreed about why Jorge was telling him to shift, but he did it, which was more than we had really expected from him. Then again, Jorge or Anthony or I didn't move him around on whims, either; Weasel understood very quickly that we were concerned with defense, and not thinking about making him look silly or play badly. The game was everything, and once he figured that out, he was much calmer, and much more cooperative. He had the skills to play the game, and to play it to win. Now he was learning the patience it took to help the team to play at the highest levels to which a high school team might aspire.

Our first game of the season was an away game against one of the traditionally weaker teams in our conference, and we came home with an easy win, 2-0. In watching the tape of the game the next week, I noticed that the plays we had designed over the past couple of years for Trent and Eric didn't work very well with our current lineup. After we had been dismissed, I knocked on Coach Neville's office door.

As he opened the door, he was looking back toward his desk, staring at the papers strewn around the desktop. "Yes, what is it?" he asked gruffly.

"Coach, can I talk to you for a minute?" I asked.

He looked over to see who was at his door. When he saw me, he loosened up and smiled a little distractedly. Maybe he had been expecting somebody else.

"Come in, Mr. Porter. Your timing is excellent." He crossed back over to his desk and sat down. I could see he had field charts spread out, and it looked like he had different names plugged in to different positions on each chart.

"Uh... Coach, while we were watching the film, I noticed something that..."

"Ah, you saw it, too. Good." He took his glasses off, and set them down on his desk and started pinching the bridge of his nose. "I've

been toying with the idea of switching Mr. Brooks and Mr. Ochoa. Paco's speed might serve us better up front as a scoring threat. But I'm afraid that might expose our middle too much."

I hadn't considered the possibility of switching Jimmy and Paco. The more I thought about it, the less I liked it. I could tell Coach wasn't that keen on it, either.

I sat down and rested my chin on my hand, my elbow propped up on his desk. "I don't know that it's the guys in their positions, so much as it is the plays we've got don't work so well without Trent."

He looked up at me. "Go on," he said.

"Maybe we need new plays... Well, that's not what I mean, either, exactly..."

Coach was watching me, keeping his face neutral. "What are you trying to say, Sean? I know we need new schemes, but I'm still not happy with the way the entire offense works."

I stood up and began pacing in his small office. "I understand that, Coach. What I mean is that I think we've got good players up front, and I don't think you should change the lineup. But instead of relying on our forwards to provide our scoring, why not take advantage of the speed we have in our midfield, especially Eric and Paco, and let them attack the net? Use your forwards to advance the ball up the sidelines, and move Eric, Paco, and Hap up as your scorers."

He leaned back in his chair and laced his fingers behind his neck, his elbows sticking out like wings. He gazed at me for a moment, and then he smiled.

"Herb suggested the same thing," he said.

"Coach Simonson? He said that?"

"Yes," said Coach Neville. "He thinks I'm just being stubborn about not wanting to give up on the perfectly good plays we've been using." He gave a short, humorless bark of a laugh. "He's probably right."

He stood up suddenly, the springs of his chair complaining with a squeak. “Tell you what, Sean. I want you to get together with Coach Simonson and design a few offensive sets. Use your imagination. Nothing’s too outrageous to at least try in practice, okay? We’ll plug the best of them into our playbook, and surprise the hell out of our opponents.” He strode over and clapped me on the back, and steered me toward the door. “Can I count on you to come up with something outlandish?”

I smiled. “You know you can,” I said.

He looked at me affectionately. “Yes, I can,” he said.

I learned two good lessons that day, lessons I try to keep in mind even today: head coaches are human, too, and subject to fallibility; and the best coaches are willing to listen to others, even lowly high-school players.

I found Coach Simonson in the equipment room, putting away the cones and nets. I told him about my conversation with Coach Neville, and then suggested that Eric might be able to help us out, too.

“Okay, let’s plan on getting together tomorrow after practice, and the three of us will work on the problem,” he said.

Eric, Coach Simonson, and I worked out the bare bones of a few ways to take advantage of our strengths in the middle, and Coach Neville worked with us on implementing them during the next couple of practices. We didn’t have time to perfect them, but no set play works exactly as planned during a game situation, anyway. Eric, as our offensive co-captain, made sure his players on the attacking side of the field understood the importance of improvisation on the field.

At the same time, since I was defensive co-captain, I let my guys know that they could feed all the way up to our forwards when the opportunity presented itself. They needed to pay attention to the entire field, and not just their immediate surroundings.

At our game that Friday, our offense still struggled, but we could all see some improvement in our methods. We won the game by a score of 4-1, but the writing was on the wall. Another week of practice, and we would be back to being a scoring machine.

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During the first week of school, Jake and I roamed the halls and the lunchroom until we found Stephen's friends. Since freshmen weren't allowed to leave the building during the day, we concentrated on checking out the lunchroom during the lunch periods. Almost right away we found Tommy Allenton and Carlos Abbinante sitting next to each other, with Stephen across from them, eating together at a crowded table. We walked up to them. I moved to stand behind Stephen, while Jake moved over to the other side. Jake stared silently at the kids sitting next to Carlos. Everybody at the table had stopped eating, and was watching either Jake or me, their eyes darting from us to the boys and back again.

Jake growled and shoved the kid who was sitting by Carlos, and he scrambled to get out of the way, pushing against the kid next to him, until, in a chain-reaction, the kids on the end of the bench stood up and moved away. The kids on Stephen's side of the table all gathered up the remains of their lunches in a panic. They slid down the bench or found different places to sit, their lunches forgotten as they watched us avidly.

As Jake swung his leg over the bench to straddle it, Carlos decided that flight was the better option. He started to stand up, pushing himself up with his arms. Jake put one big hand on Carlos' shoulder and pushed him back down. I saw Carlos try to strain against Jake, thinking he could use his legs to power himself out of Jake's grasp, but it just wasn't going to happen. Jake's years of

football and weight training allowed him to easily keep Carlos pinned to the seat.

Stephen watched the whole proceedings nervously, not knowing what was happening, but sure it was tied to the conversation he had shared with me. He glanced over at me a little fearfully, and then looked over at Tommy, who looked like he was ready to fly out of there, too. Stephen gave him a little shake of his head, and Tommy stared at him for just a second before resigning himself to whatever fate held in store at that moment.

Jake glared at Carlos and Tommy, and then spoke to them through clenched teeth, just loud enough for them to hear.

"I hear you two faggots think you know something about some friends of ours," he grated.

"What do you..." started Carlos. Jake's paw tightened its grip on his shoulder, and he shut up.

"I'll let you know when it's your turn to talk, pinhead. Right now, your job is to listen. Your continued good health depends on it. Okay?"

No response from Carlos, who was staring straight ahead. Jake squeezed his shoulder again, and a spasm of pain rippled through Carlos' face.

"Okay?" Jake asked again. Carlos nodded tightly.

"Good. Now, this information you think you know, it's about a couple of girls. Girls very close to Sean and me. This information is something you might have gotten from your good friend Tara Jacks. As of this moment, you no longer know that information. Am I clear?"

Carlos hesitated only a second before nodding again. Jake squeezed.

"I can't hear you, faggot," he said.

"Yes," said Carlos.

"Yes what?" asked Jake.

"Yes, sir, I understand," gritted Carlos.

Jake glanced around Carlos, looking at Tommy.

Tommy sounded almost panicky. "Who, me?" he asked stupidly.

Stephen must have kicked him under the table, because he jerked, and quickly stammered, "Yeah, okay, I understand, I don't know nothin'."

I turned to Stephen. "Here's the deal," I informed him. "Either Jake and I can find your buddy Richie, or you can talk to him about this. What's it going to be?"

He didn't look happy about it. "I'll talk to him," he said sullenly.

Jake and I stood up. "Big brother Mike is going to be talking to Tracy," I said, looking down at each of them. "A word of advice for you all. Don't let him see you hanging around his sister. He's a little... how would you describe it, Jake?"

"I'd say he's angry, Sean."

"Yeah, that's about right. He's angry right about now."

The three of them sat there with their heads hanging down, unwilling to look up at us. Meanwhile, the entire cafeteria had gotten very quiet, with everybody watching what was going on at Stephen's table. Jake and I walked away and out of the lunchroom. Even before we reached the door, we could hear the sudden buzz of speculation rise up like a dome of steam from a suddenly uncovered boiling pot of water.

I didn't like bracing them like that, especially in such a public place, but I hoped the embarrassment would help them keep their mouths shut. Freshmen, especially during the first few weeks of school, were easily cowed. I was trusting it would be enough.

* * * * * * * * * * *

The next week, for our Wednesday practice session, Eric, Coach Simonson, and I devised a new practice drill. On a full field, we

pitted the starting offensive lineup, the three forwards and three midfielders, against the five starting defensive players. We also divided the bench players according to their typical offensive or defensive assignments. Coach Neville subbed one player every five minutes on both sides, so that everybody got a chance to be worked and a chance to rest.

We had rearranged our offensive priorities, trying to take advantage of our speed in the middle. During games, Eric, Paco, and Hap would have to cover both offensive and defensive assignments, but for this scrimmage, we were concentrating on getting their scoring potential going.

It was six-on-five, and it turned into a vicious and brutal workout. The offensive side always had at least one player open, and usually two, since the defensive side had one player, the keeper, who couldn't roam and mark an opponent.

The drill was designed to work on two things simultaneously. First, it gave the offensive team an opportunity to practice using the speed of the midfielders, working the ball into open space and letting Eric and Paco run it down. On the other side of the field, we had to find a way to keep them out of the net while playing a man short.

The first few attempts to bring the ball up, the defense was able to nullify the man shortage by concentrating on blocking up the passing lanes, taking away their opportunities to move the ball in toward the goal. It didn't take them long to figure out how to pass around to the open man, and work to create opportunities by utilizing the open spaces. Defense had to pick up on their thoughts, anticipate the passes, work angles, and run harder to try to minimize spaces big enough to allow the speedsters to gain steps on us. We managed to stop them six out of the first ten attempts. Then, as they got better at moving the ball around us, our stopping percentage dropped, until it leveled out at somewhere between twenty and thirty percent. Considering the competition, we were happy we were able to stop them at all.

After ninety minutes, you could have wrung us out and hung us up to dry. Everybody was fatigued and dehydrated, and most of the defensive players, me included, were stretched out on the ground, feeling like we'd been beaten up and left for dead. The guys working the offense didn't look much better, which was small consolation. Coach Neville and Coach Simonson stood off to the side, watching us and looking pleased as punch. We were too tired to care much.

On Thursday, I was still tired and sore. All my teammates that I saw in school looked the same as me, walking gingerly and dragging our sorry selves from class to class. Practice was going to be miserable.

Coach surprised us, however, and we had a light workout. We jogged a couple of miles on the track, and then did some ball-handling drills before being released early.

"You guys worked hard enough yesterday," announced Coach Neville when he called off practice a half-hour early.

That Wednesday torture session proved its merit during our game on Friday. We felt strong, fit, and confident, and the hapless Lakewood Huskies probably felt fortunate to be able to limp back home, licking their wounds, and taking small solace that they managed to score one goal against us, losing 8-1. Eric, Paco, and Hap had found their rhythm. Our defensive unit stopped everything cold, aside from one penalty kick that was awarded the Huskies on a hand ball infraction that was called on Brett inside the box, when the ball popped up on him and inadvertently brushed against his arm.

The next week, we were to travel to Lincoln Valley to play one of my favorite opponents. I was looking forward to renewing my acquaintance with Bozo One and Bozo Two. I sincerely hoped they hadn't been seniors the previous year.

Before the end of school that day, however, there was a last-minute assembly called. The team was scheduled to leave school before the last class, as Lincoln Valley was over an hour away by bus, and the assembly was gathered in the hour before we were to leave.

The entire school population filed into the gymnasium and squeezed into the bleachers. Teachers, administrators, and a few students had to stand, and they gathered at the ends, by the sets of doors. Coach Neville and Coach Simonson stationed themselves by the doors and grabbed members of the soccer team as we entered with our classes, until the entire team was standing to the side of the podium. Dr. Osgood was with our coaches, waiting patiently for everybody to come in and find a place to either sit or stand.

Finally, looking around at the packed stands, he tapped on the microphone to make sure the sound system was working. The thumps that reverberated through the room also had the effect of quieting down the noise. Everybody turned toward him, wondering why this assembly was called on such short notice.

"May I have your attention please?" Dr. Osgood paused, and most of the chatter stopped as his voice echoed off the concrete walls of the gym.

"I have three items of interest to the school," he continued. "First of all, I want to congratulate the football team on their season. In today's *Metro Times*, we are ranked at twelfth in the state."

The football players whooped and yelled, and the student body followed suit. Football was the money sport, and when they did well, everybody felt good.

"Thank you, thank you," said Dr. Osgood as a way to get the crowd back to order. When the noise level had dropped sufficiently, he continued. "I also have it on good authority that one of our players, who has already accepted a scholarship to Ohio State University, is slated for All-State honors. Stanford Harrison, would you please come down here?"

Tiny stood up, looking a little surprised, and worked his way down from the bleachers to stand at Dr. Osgood's side. He towered over our principal, and his huge hand completely engulfed Dr. Osgood's.

"Let's hear it for Tiny Harrison!" cried Dr. Osgood, caught up in the moment.

Tiny waved to everybody, clearly embarrassed to be singled out. I sympathized with him, even as he smiled and endured the cheers anyway. As he walked by me and my teammates, we all held out our hands. He slapped them all in good-natured acknowledgment on his way back to his seat.

"The next order of business is to introduce our soccer team to you. Coach Neville? Would you come up and do the honors?" Dr. Osgood stepped aside, and Coach stepped up to the microphone.

He cleared his throat as he leaned in toward the microphone, and the rumble bounced off the walls. He stepped back quickly, and turned his head and smiled sheepishly at us.

"Sorry," he mumbled as he moved back within the microphone's range. "Anyway, the *Metro Times* has come out with their statewide rankings today, and I'd like to introduce our starters on the team ranked number one in the state."

Another cheer went up. He went on to the team introductions, starting with the forwards. "Starting in left forward, we have a junior, Alex Spivak. At center forward, a senior, Javier Perez. Our right forward is a junior, Jimmy Brooks."

As each player was named, they stepped forward and stood behind Coach. There were pockets of cheering from friends of each player scattered around the gymnasium, and polite but relatively unenthusiastic applause from the rest of the students.

"At left midfield, we have a senior, who was an All-Conference selection and a second-team All-State player last year, Eric Johnson." There was considerably more applause for Eric. He was due the respect, and the kids knew it. His game was good.

"I'd also like to take this opportunity to announce that Eric has accepted an offer of a full scholarship from the University of Maryland," said Dr. Osgood, stepping up and leaning in toward the microphone. "Congratulations, Eric." Eric had a big smile on his face.

I knew he was relieved that his college decisions had been finally reached.

Coach Neville continued his introductions. "At offensive center midfield, we have a sophomore, Hap Olson. On the right, we have another junior, Paco Ochoa. Our sweeper, otherwise known as our defensive center midfielder, is sophomore Adam Prince."

Somebody in the crowd called out, "Weasel!" and there was a lot of laughing and clapping. I could see Prince flush, but he controlled it. Eric leaned over and whispered something to him, and I saw Weasel nod tersely.

Coach continued, "On defense on the left side, I would like to introduce a senior, Anthony Rogers. Our stopper, the man in the middle, is also a senior, Brett Oldman. In the net, our starting goalkeeper is a junior, and also was an All-Conference selection last year, Jorge Mendoza."

There was a lot of yipping and high, wavering ululations from Jorge's friends as he joined his teammates, giving each of them a high-five. I was the only starter left standing with the reserves.

Coach looked over at me, leaning in sideways to talk into the microphone. "I have one player yet to announce. Most of you know him by now, but let me introduce him, just the same. Playing right defense for us is a senior who was chosen last year as an All-Conference player, and as a first-team All-State selection. He was also chosen by the American High School Soccer Association as one of the top players in the country last year, and I'm proud to announce today that, for this year, this player has been awarded the AHSSA first-team All-American honors. Mr. Sean Porter!"

The room erupted, but I hardly heard it. I was stunned: *did I hear him correctly? Me? Couldn't be.* But there Coach was, stepping over to me with his hand held out. I automatically shook it, and he pulled me over to the podium, and we stood there, waiting for the noise level to subside enough so that he could continue.

Finally, he was able to carry on, his amplified voice overriding the noise in the gym. “Congratulations, Sean. I take it we pulled off our little surprise.”

He pulled the microphone out of the stand and thrust it under my nose.

“Uh, yeah,” was all I could stammer. I was completely unprepared for this, and a sudden case of nerves made me clamp my mouth shut before I said something really dumb.

Coach pulled out a fancy framed certificate, verifying his outlandish statement. I looked at it, seeing my name written there in fancy calligraphy, and still believed it was some sort of elaborate test to see how gullible I really was.

I don’t really remember much else about the assembly, other than my teammates gathering around and congratulating me. I remember that Molly and Tessa came up and gave me a hug, and Kayla jumped up into my arms, wrapping her legs around me as she gave me a big, sloppy kiss on my cheek. Coach Neville and Dr. Osgood both watched us, and they were trying to hide their grins as Kayla dropped back to her feet and went running back to rejoin her class. Even Kristina came up to me and solemnly congratulated me. Paco’s arm was around her shoulder protectively, perhaps lending her strength, as she shook my hand. Finally, the gymnasium emptied out, until it was just Dr. Osgood, the two coaches, and my teammates left.

“Congratulations, Sean, it’s a well-deserved honor,” said Dr. Osgood.

“It should go to the whole team,” I said. “This isn’t an individual sport at all. I couldn’t do what I do on the field without the other ten guys, or the coaches, or the players coming in off the bench with fresh legs, or anything.”

“Well, that’s true, son,” said Coach Neville. “But the converse is also true. If you weren’t the player you are, this team wouldn’t be as good as it is. Sure, there are some very talented kids on this team,

Sean, and you all play very well together. But it's your team. You are its leader. Where you go, everybody on this team follows."

"That's not how it's supposed to..."

"Oh, I know all that, Sean," Coach interrupted. "That's all great in theory, but theory doesn't win many matches. Collectively, this team is playing better than they should, given the individual strengths and weaknesses of the players in each and every position. And yet, here we are, ranked first in the state, fifth in the nation. Why? Because players like Mr. Johnson, and Mr. Mendoza, and you, Mr. Porter, make everybody else play better. In fact, Eric Johnson and Jorge Mendoza play better because of you, and you play better because of them."

"Well, okay, but..."

"And that's what makes it a team sport, Mr. Porter. And that's what individual honors try to recognize." He smiled, and put his arm around my shoulder. "Now, I have just one more piece of advice for you, Sean."

"Okay," I said. "What is that?"

"Shut up and enjoy it. Glory days don't last forever."

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The bus ride over to Lincoln Valley was raucous, and the coaches just let us go. They weren't too worried about Lincoln Valley's chances, and everybody was in such a great mood, it was bound to carry over to the game.

We tumbled out of the bus, gear bags slung over our shoulders, and walked onto the field and over to the visitor's benches. Eric and I dropped our bags and began our ritual jog, only this time, the entire team followed us, still talking and laughing as we warmed up.

Eric and I quickly moved ahead of the pack, and Paco and Jorge moved up to join us.

"Sean, I got to apologize to you, man," said Paco.

I glanced over to him, surprised. "Apologize? What for?"

"Earlier, at the assembly," he said. "Kristina didn't want to go up to you by herself, you know? But she wanted to let you know she was happy for you."

"Yeah, that's okay, but what are you apologizing for?"

"I might have give you the impression that I was treating her like she was my property or somethin', you know? But it ain't like that, man."

"Hey, Paco, that's between you and her. I don't have anything to do with it."

"I know, man, but you two got a little bit of history, and... I just feel better if I know that you know that I didn't mean nothin' against you, see?"

"It ain't nothing, Paco. It was a long time ago. You've been going out with her for a year, man, you got nothing to apologize to me about."

He shrugged. "I just wanted you to know," he finished.

He and Jorge dropped back a little. I glanced at Eric, and he just smiled.

"He young, he in love, he truly fucked up," he said. "She got him so fucking whipped, it's a wonder he can wipe his own ass without her okay."

"As opposed to us?" I asked, looking at him out of the corner of my eye.

He shrugged. "I can wipe my own butt. I may be whipped, too, but the biggest difference is Keisha makes sure I am well compensated. I bet you are, too, Porter. But Paco?"

He let the rest of that thought dangle out there.

We passed by the Lincoln Valley team, but they studiously ignored us. I was pleased to see both Bozo Brothers there, stretching and getting ready to play.

The next lap around, as we passed them, I heard one of them shout.

"Hey, you! Vanilla!"

Eric and I slowed down. I glanced over and saw Bozo One pointing at me.

"Yeah, you. I know you, don't I?"

"You prob'ly don't know him," said Eric. "I don't think his story's made it down to the comic book level yet."

That made most of the rest of their team look up at us.

"Nice going," I murmured as we slowed to a walk.

"Hey, I'm just trying to get them interested in you, that's all," he answered quietly.

Somebody said something to Bozo. He glanced over at his companion, and then looked back over at us.

"Who? Sean Porter? What the fuck's a Sean Porter?"

By then, the rest of my team had come to a stop around Eric and me. Brett stepped out in front. "I'll tell you who Sean Porter is, meatball..."

I pulled him back. "Come on, Brett. Forget about it. Let's just let our game show them who we are," I said. "It's just trash talk."

We walked off amid jeers and comments from the Lincoln Valley team. Quite a few of my teammates were grumbling. I tried to keep them calmed down, without losing their edge.

"Take it out onto the field, guys," I warned them. "They aren't that good. Let's keep them scoreless, and show them what fast midfielders can do to their defenders."

We got ready to play, and we took up our positions on the field. As visitors, we got the opening kickoff, and the first thing we did was pass back to Weasel. Our forwards headed up the sidelines, and our midfielders spread out behind them as Lincoln Valley's forwards

advanced to try to take away the ball. Weasel lofted a pass up to Eric, who headed the ball up to Alex. Alex moved a few steps with the ball, until he was only about twenty meters off the end line. As soon as Eric got rid of the ball, both he and Hap charged toward the net. Alex juked his flat-footed defender, and crossed a high pass about ten meters out from the net. Eric knew he didn't have a chance at it, but he leapt up anyway. His feint at the ball created a diversion for both the stopper and the keeper, who halted to defend against Eric's move. The ball sailed just over Eric's head. Hap, about ten feet away, let it hit his chest. The ball dropped down to his right foot, and he rocketed a shot past the startled keeper's diving body, into the back of the net. One minute into the game, and Lincoln Valley was already playing from behind.

By the twenty-fifth minute, we were up 7-0. Eric had scored three, Hap had two, and Paco and Jimmy each had one goal. The ball barely had a chance to get down into our end of the field. All their attacks had been to our left side, and all had been easily rebuffed. The only touches that Jorge had on the ball were when one of us passed it over to him, so he could kick it back upfield. The Lincoln Valley defenders were blowing hard, having been overworked already, but their forwards still looked pretty fresh. Of course, they hadn't done much, including helping out their defense by trying to plug up our passing lanes in a bunkering maneuver.

Even so, every time they ventured down into my territory, both Bozo One and Bozo Two had something to say to me. I ignored them as best I could, content to let them vent. After all, trash talk seemed to be the best part of their game.

Near the end of the first half, Bozo One was jogging back and forth along the sidelines as the ball was being worked by our midfielders on their side of the midfield stripe. He looked over at me.

"You ain't so special, Mr. All-State," he jeered.

I stopped and put my hands on my hips, shaking my head at him. "No, I'm not," I agreed. "But at least I'm not pacing the sidelines because I don't know what to do."

"What? I know what to do," he retorted.

"Sure you do, sport. You're doing your team a favor by staying the fuck out of the way."

"Hey, asshole, what's that supposed to mean?"

I sighed. "Here, I'll show you."

Our midfielders were still playing keep-away, biding time until the halftime whistle. I called up to Hap and Weasel, and told them to pass the ball back to me at their next opportunity. A few minutes later, the ball came back to me. I trapped it, and tapped it over to Bozo One. I heard Weasel behind me.

"What are you doing, Porter?"

I just waved at him, indicating that he should hold his ground and keep their centers out of the play.

"Do something with it," I said to Bozo One.

"What?"

"Show me your game, Bozo. You got a game? You know what to do? Let's see it." I was balanced on the balls of my feet, about four meters from him, giving him a little bit of space to make some sort of move.

His expression hardened, and he started moving down the sideline. I paced him, and stayed even with him all the way down. In the meantime, Bozo Two had moved down, but Paco was harrying him, staying between him and the ball, not letting him make a move toward the net. I knew, without needing to turn away to look, that Weasel and Brett were keeping their assignments well covered behind me. Bozo One kept on moving down the field along the sideline, until he was penned into the corner.

"That's it?" I asked. "That's your game?"

"I ain't done," he growled.

"Yes, you are," I said. I took three strides in and took the ball away from him before he could even react, knocking it between his legs and picking it up behind him when I stepped around him. I started running up the field with the ball, picking up steam as I went, feeling good about finally getting the chance to run all out as I dribbled. Bozo Two stepped back and away from Paco to try to challenge me, so I tapped the ball over to the wide-open Paco, and kept going at full speed. Paco passed me the give-and-go as I blew past Bozo Two, and I headed for their defenders. Hap was pacing me down the middle, and as their right defender and their sweeper converged on me, I used the outside of my left foot to move the ball over to him. The two defenders skidded to a stop and tried to switch direction, and I ran right past them. Hap gave me a hard pass, and their stopper came out to try to stop me. He was caught by surprise when I let the ball go past me, over to Jimmy Brooks, who scooped it up and moved in toward the goal. The keeper moved out to cut off his small angle, but by then both Hap and I were inside the stopper, so it was very easy for Jimmy to knock the ball over toward us. I took his pass and powered a shot off my shoelaces into the top left corner of the net. It was only my second goal of the season, but I never considered myself to be a scoring threat, except to Lincoln Valley. Even Jorge was a scoring threat to them.

As we trotted back for the restart, Bozo One was walking the other way. "All-State piece of shit," he growled.

"Hey!" I said. "That's *Mister* All-State piece of shit to you, Bozo."

Paco came up just then and looked at Bozo One disgustedly. "You got that wrong, anyway, dick breath," he said to Bozo. "That's Mister *All-American* piece of shit to you, bruddah."

We started laughing, and my teammates around me who happened to hear the exchange started laughing, too. By the time we got reset, everybody on our side of the ball had heard about the exchange, and we couldn't stop laughing. The referee, instead of

restarting, blew his whistle to signal the end of the half, giving poor Lincoln Valley a brief respite from the bloodbath.

Coach took pity on them for the second half, and he sat Eric, Paco, and me for the entire half. Even so, we walked away with a 12-0 win, our most lopsided victory ever. It was fun to play in, it was fun to watch. I didn't feel sorry for them at all.

After the game, the Lincoln Valley head coach, John Caruthers, came over to shake my hand. I remembered him from last year, and greeted him by name. He just laughed, shook his head, and thanked me for the show.

"It's too bad you couldn't do something about that kid," I said.

"He's the best I've got for that position, Sean," he replied. "I'm just sorry I didn't have anyone to give you a little competition."

"I wouldn't worry about it too much, Coach," I said. "Kids are picking up the game younger now, and by the time the ten- and twelve-year-olds get to high school, they'll play well for you."

He just smiled. "Playing well for me is one thing," he said. "Playing well against a defender like you is something else entirely."

"Don't believe it," I told him. "Kids coming up can run rings around me."

"Now, that frightens me," he said. "Congratulations, Sean."

"Thanks, Coach. See you in the playoffs."

He laughed. "You trying to give me indigestion?" he asked. He waved as he walked back toward his bench.

* * * * * * * * * *

The rest of the regular season went pretty much the same way. When everything's clicking, it all seems so easy. Our average margin of victory from that game on was five goals, and we never had more than one goal scored on us in a game during the regular season. We

were waltzing into the playoffs as the team to beat, and we felt we were ready for any challenge. Coach Neville was also very pleased with our progress. He continually had to look to the future, and what he saw with our team and the prospects beyond this season were good. After this season he would lose five starters to graduation, but the flip side of that was that six of his starters, including an All-Conference keeper, would be returning. From his perspective, it was a great foundation upon which he could build.

We prepared for the playoffs as confident as a team could be, but our success on the field, or the success of our playoff-bound football team, didn't rate as the hot news of the fall at our school. Someone else was grabbing the attention of just about everybody, attention that was very much unwanted.

One of the kids from the freshman class was in trouble, and it was striking close to home. As soon as I heard about it, I knew whose shadowed face I had seen outside the window that first day of school, watching avidly as Kayla and I made love on the couch.

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PLAYING THE GAME

One Sunday afternoon late in October, Kayla and I were in my family room. This time, we actually were doing homework, instead of merely pretending to. Stephen was in his room, presumably doing his homework, though in actuality he probably had his headphones on and was zoned out, listening to his new Van Halen album.

The telephone rang, but before I could struggle up from the floor, my mom answered from the kitchen.

"Sean! Telephone!" She waited until she heard me pick up, and then she hung up her phone.

"Sean? It's Jaimie. Is Kayla there?"

"Yeah. You want to talk to her?"

"No, it doesn't matter. I was just making sure you guys were together. I need to talk to both of you, I think. Can you meet Jake and me at Mike's Pizza in about an hour?"

I glanced over at Kayla, who was looking back at me quizzically. "Sure," I said.

"Okay, see you there," said Jaimie, and she hung up.

I shrugged as I stepped back over Kayla's outstretched legs. "Jaimie and Jake want to meet up with us," I said.

I walked over to the kitchen and saw my mom cutting up vegetables and putting them in a big pot.

"Mom? I don't know if it makes a difference with what you've got planned for dinner, but Jake and Jaimie want us to meet them at Mike's, so we'll probably eat there. Is that okay?"

She looked over her shoulder at me. "That's fine, honey. I'm just making a big pot of stew. We'll have lots of leftovers." She smiled at me, and turned back to her work.

Luscious and I worked for a little while longer, and then we packed up our stuff and I carried her backpack out to my car. When I came back in the house, Kayla was in the kitchen, saying goodbye to my mother. I stood in the doorway and watched my girlfriend and my mom together. They had come to really like each other over the past year. It was the oddest thing: I couldn't see how I would ever be a pal to Mr. Lehigh, but here Kayla was, with my mom, who was treating her like one of her best friends.

We got to Mike's a few minutes late, and Jaimie and Jake were already there, sitting in their favorite booth. They had soda fountain glasses filled with ice and Cokes on the table in front of them. As we slid in opposite them, I couldn't help but notice that Jaimie looked very worried. She held out her hands toward me, and I naturally took them in mine.

"What's up, Jaimie?" I asked.

Tears welled up in her eyes. "Tara's pregnant," she said quietly.

"What?" I was shocked. "How did it... Ah, forget that, what I mean is, she's been grounded since last spring. When?"

"We don't know for sure," she said. "She won't talk about it much."

"We all know she's found... opportunities," said Kayla. She looked as shocked as I felt. "Didn't she use any protection?"

Jaimie looked disgusted. "She must have fallen asleep during Sex Education," she grumbled. Now that the bad news was out there, shared among her friends, her grief over this family misfortune seemed to be lessened. "She said she thought she was too young to get pregnant."

"Too young? You'd have to be pretty young not to be able to be knocked up, a lot younger than her," said Jake.

"And thank you very much, Mr. Sensitivity," shot Jaimie.

"Sorry," Jake mumbled, abashed.

"So, who's the guilty party?" Kayla asked.

Jaimie looked down. She was acting like she was feeling a little bit responsible about all this, but I didn't see how any of it could have been her fault.

"She doesn't know," she whispered.

"What?"

"She refuses to even talk about who the father is to my mom and my dad," Jaimie said quietly. "But she told me she doesn't know who it is."

"How could she not know?" asked Jake incredulously.

Jaimie favored him with a look that said, *You really didn't say that, did you?* She turned back to face Kayla and me.

"Sean, she did tell me that Stephen was one of the boys she'd been with," she said.

My heart fell into my stomach. *Of course he was.* Didn't Jake and I chase him out of her room that night of the picnic and scavenger hunt? And then there was his confession the next morning. I didn't think Jaimie knew anything about that.

"But he's not the only one, I would guess," I said.

"No. Tommy, Carlos, Richie, Stephen. They seem to be the prime suspects. But she also mentioned three other boys she'd fooled around with one time or another during the summer."

"Man! When did she find the time to boink..." Jake stopped, and counted the names on his fingers. "What is that? Seven? For a girl who spent all summer grounded, she really got around."

"Boink?" Jaimie looked at him dangerously. "Is that how you think of it?"

He backpedaled swiftly. "Uh... no, sweetie, I just... uh... I mean, obviously she didn't take it very seriously... and..."

She ineffectually slapped at his hand as the tears started again. "Oh, never mind, you big oaf. I know you didn't mean anything by it. I'm just a little upset right now."

He put his arm around her and gently pulled her to him, kissing the top of her head lovingly. "I know, sweetie. I'm sorry."

Jaimie sniffled and reached for a paper napkin from the chrome dispenser on the table. She wiped her nose delicately, and dabbed at her cheeks and under her eyes to blot up the tears.

"Anyway," she said, after regaining her control, "do you guys remember the first day of school? That half-day Tuesday?"

Kayla and I glanced at each other.

"Sure, you do, don't you? You guys were being... naughty, weren't you?" She smiled at us. "I know because Tara told me she watched you."

"Ah," I said, that dim light bulb finally flickering on inside my thick skull. "The face in the window. It was Tara!"

"Yes," confirmed Jaimie. "She came home on the bus, but I had to stay after school to look stuff up in the library, so I didn't get home until later in the afternoon. Tara was home, but she was soaked. Remember? It was raining that day."

"Very stormy," murmured Kayla. She put her hand on my knee, and I dropped my arm below the table and put my hand on top of hers. She turned her hand over, and our fingers naturally intertwined.

Jaimie looked at us, a smile twitching the corners of her mouth. "Apparently. Anyway, I found out later that Tara saw you that

afternoon. By then she already thought she might be pregnant, so she was wandering around in the storm, worrying herself sick. Anyway, she saw movement, and she slipped between the bushes and watched you two." She started sniffling again, remembering her conversation with her sister. "She saw how much you two... cared... for each other while you were..."

"Making love?" suggested Kayla quietly. She glanced quickly at her brother to gauge his reaction, but he was focusing on his girlfriend.

"None of her experiences were even remotely like... making love," continued Jaimie. "It was always hard, quick, almost violent, she said. She thought that's how it always was. So when she saw you, she... she got mad. I think she's been angry ever since."

"So now what's going to happen?" Kayla asked.

"My parents wanted to have every boy she could name arrested, charged with rape. They were so angry, they drove her even further away from them. She refused to tell them anything. They were screaming at each other. Tara absolutely refuses to even consider an abortion. She wants to have the baby, raise it herself. She won't talk about giving it up for adoption, or anything."

"Do any of the boys know anything about it yet?" I asked. Stephen hadn't been acting any differently that I could tell.

"No, I don't think so," said Jaimie. She sighed. "I don't even know if she's planning on telling them."

"It's going to become a little obvious pretty soon," said Jake.

"Yes, but she's got several weeks before she'll really start to show," said Jaimie. "Hopefully, by then she'll have made some sort of intelligent decision about this baby."

The pizzas Jaimie and Jake had ordered for us arrived, and we spent the next hour or so chewing over the Jacks family problem while we consumed large quantities of sodas and pizza.

Finally, Jake sat back and patted his stomach. "I do believe that pizza is the world's most perfect food."

"How do you figure?" asked Kayla.

"Easy," he said as he reached for one last tidbit of pizza. "You've got your bread in the crust. You've got your vegetables of various colors, tomato paste and onions and mushrooms and peppers. You've got your meat, with the sausage and pepperoni. What are you missing? It's a perfectly rounded meal."

"Oh, I get it," I said sarcastically. "A perfectly *rounded* meal?" I indicated the empty pizza pans.

"Well, you know what they say. Mathematicians don't have all the answers. After all, they think 'pi r square', when everybody else knows that pie are round. Including pizza pie."

Kayla and I both threw scrunched-up napkins at him for that.

Jaimie said, "Pizza is missing at least one ingredient. Without it, no food could rationally be called *perfect."*

Jake looked at her, smiling. "And what's that, sweetie?"

"Chocolate, of course."

Just the thought of that made me a little queasy. *A chocolate pizza? Maybe not.*

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The next weekend was Homecoming. Because of all the trouble the previous year, float building was still not allowed, so the parade was not going to be very exciting, in anybody's mind. All the fall sports teams were going to walk the parade route in their uniforms, and the middle school teams would all be there, too. The marching band would be in the parade, and convertibles carrying the mayor and other local politicians were going to be interspersed.

The Homecoming King and Queen candidates would also be in cars in the parade. The student body had held elections a couple of weeks before Homecoming, separated by class, to choose class

representatives for the King's and Queen's Court. Two boys and two girls from each of the three younger classes had been chosen, and three had been chosen from the Senior Class, the theory being that it would be seniors who would be selected as Homecoming Royalty.

Partly due to her association with me, but mostly because she deserved to be there, Kayla was elected as one of the sophomore representatives. Ashley Horvath was chosen as a junior member of the Queen's Court, while both Molly O'Toole and Keisha Prescott were selected as seniors. For the King's Court, both Eric and I were picked as seniors, and Jorge was one of the elected candidates from the Junior Class. The final selection of the King and Queen would take place at the dance on Saturday night.

We all went to the football game after the parade. On a warm and sunny afternoon, we watched as our team bettered their record to eight wins and one loss. Kayla and I sat together in the stands, surrounded by most of the rest of the student body, enjoying the day, though I couldn't help but think about all that had occurred the last time our school was celebrating a Homecoming.

At the dance that night, we all once again gathered in the same area of the gymnasium, though this time around there were some differences. Molly's date was the red-haired math whiz, Alex Baumgartner, and my date was the luscious Kayla. Tiny was there, with Erica Frost, and so were Jake and Jaimie. Jorge was still dating Marissa Montoya, and Paco and Kristina stayed near them. Eric and Keisha were there, of course, as were Anthony and Ayesha, Tessa Navarrone and Austin Graves, Toby Mueller with Ashley Horvath, and Josh O'Toole and Andrea Coulter. We were a big, loud, boisterous group, and the combination of the loud music from the disk jockey and being surrounded by my friends kept most of my melancholy thoughts away.

Early on, Dr. Osgood stepped up to the microphone on the raised platform at one end of the room, and introduced the King's Court

and the Queen's Court. He called each of us to come up by him, and we stood there as he ceremoniously tore open the large envelope.

"The Homecoming Queen for 1982 is... Molly O'Toole!" He tried to make his announcement sonorous, but he couldn't help smiling as Molly was crowned.

After she had received her scepter and sash, Dr. Osgood stepped back up to the microphone. "Our Homecoming King is... Eric Johnson!" We all applauded as Eric moved up to join Molly, a huge and bright smile lighting up his face. They stepped down, Molly's arm tucked in his elbow, to take the first dance as Homecoming Royalty, and the DJ cued up a cassette recording of our school's orchestra playing our school song. It was corny, and it was completely memorable. Soon, the rest of the King's and Queen's Courts followed suit. By the second song, the rest of the kids at the dance joined us, and the ceremonial part of the evening was done. It was back to having fun again.

Kayla, Molly, Keisha, and Tessa kept me out on the dance floor most of the evening, and I didn't mind at all making a fool of myself. It was a wonderful evening, and when the dance ended, everybody streamed out of the school doors and moved as a crowd into the parking lot. We piled into our cars and headed out for a late night dinner to finish the evening, giving hardly a second glance around as a precaution against the previous year's mischief.

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Of course, it wasn't long after that weekend that the entire school found out about Tara's condition. Speculation and rumor raced up and down the halls for weeks about the whos, the whens, and the juicy details. Stephen and his buddies were found to be the prime suspects, so life within our little community became very difficult for

that entire group. Tara didn't want anything to do with Tommy, Richie, Carlos, or Stephen, and did her best to distance herself from them. Tracy Evanson stayed at Tara's side most of the time, trying to be the best friend she could, while the four boys banded together and stayed away from everybody as much as they could.

It was very unsettling for me, as Stephen's older brother, but it must have been sheer torture for him. Having a popular older brother, and having teachers expecting him to be more like me, only added to the pressure. I tried to talk to him, but for much of that fall he brushed me off. I was so busy with soccer and school that I didn't press the issue. I hoped that, after our season ended, I would be able to spend a little more time with him, and try to help him through this. For the time being, however, our fall season was what was taking up most of my time and energy.

In November, we entered the playoffs as the only undefeated soccer team in the state. Our national ranking had moved up to third, mostly because of the scoring firepower we were able to unleash out of the middle. Everybody was gunning for us, and we welcomed the challenges.

For the regional playoffs, the team seeded eighth had to play us, the top-ranked team, on our home field. That was the unlucky Lincoln Valley Bozos. They gave up about halfway through the first half, and we ended up playing all our bench players for a lot of the game, winning 9-0. Each successive game was against tougher opponents, but we still breezed through, winning 6-1 and 5-0.

David and Lori brought the boys to every game, and Davey and Kip sat on the bench with me during the Lincoln Valley blowout. Coach Bill was there for every game, too, and there were quite a few of his players and their parents who attended at least one of the playoff games. A number of my summer students were there, too, especially from the competitive group. I talked to a bunch of them before each game, and they were practically salivating at the thought

of playing varsity soccer at some point. Many of them were even more rabid about the game than I was.

After our victory over Lincoln Valley, the *Metro Times* released their All-Conference selections. Eric, Jorge, and I were selected, and so was Paco. Hap got an honorable mention, as did Weasel. Three first-year starters on the list was startling, even to Coach Neville.

Coach gathered the team together at the end of practice on Monday.

"Congratulations are in order," he said. "We have some new players who have been receiving some attention, it seems."

There was some good-natured cheering from our teammates.

"Hey!" Adam's voice cut through the noise. "Does this mean I can get a new nickname now?"

We all laughed. Eric put his arm around Adam's shoulder. "Sorry, man, but you're stuck with it now."

"Shit," mumbled Adam. "I hate being known as Weasel."

"You want us to call you 'Weasel-icious' instead?" asked Brett. "It'll just be shortened down, anyway."

Adam shrugged. "Nah," he said. "I guess I kind of earned it last year. So, I guess I'll just have to be... I don't know... maybe tenacious as a weasel on the field?"

"Yeah, that'll work," said Eric with a laugh. "We'll let ol' Hartigan know that's what it stands for, next time he comes around for interviews."

On Wednesday, I got home after practice and settled in to do some homework. Kayla had told me during lunch she had an appointment after school, so she didn't know what time she would be able to meet up with me. I had gotten my assignments for the rest of the week, since the team was leaving the next day to go downstate for the tournament, and I wanted to take the opportunity to work ahead a little. My full ride to Florida was all but assured, but I still didn't want my grades to slip during my senior year.

Mom came home from work and started on dinner. She poked her head into the family room.

"Where's Kayla?" she asked.

"She had something to do after school," I replied. "She might be over later."

"Should I set a place for her at the table?"

"I guess not," I said.

She gave me a funny look. "Is everything okay with you two?" she asked.

"Yeah, fine. Why?"

She stood up and leaned against the doorframe, a spatula in her hand. "It's not like you to be so unsure about whether she's eating here or not, that's all," she said.

"It's nothing, Mom. She has other stuff to do besides be with me, you know."

"I know, dear, it's just..." She paused, watching me, and then sighed. "Never mind, then," she said, and she turned back into the kitchen.

What's up with parents? I shook my head. *First, they're concerned that you're spending too much time together, and then, when they see you alone, they worry that there's trouble brewing. You just can't please them, no matter what.*

Michael and my dad got home at about the same time, and I went up to get Stephen for dinner. I knocked on his door, but there was no answer. I tried the knob, and it turned.

Stephen was lying on the floor, his eyes closed, his feet keeping time and his legs moving to the music pounding out of his headphones. Even from where I stood, I could hear Joan Jett snarling about how much she loves rock and roll, the heavy bass beat thumping into the floor.

I kicked his foot, and he scrambled up, pulling the headphones off.

"What?" he gritted.

"Dinnertime," I said.

"Don't want any. Go away."

A big part of me wanted to be obstinate. I sat down on his bed. "No," I said.

He just shrugged, and put his headphones back on. I stood up and hit the power button on his tape player. He scrambled to his feet, yanked off the headphones, and stepped up into my face.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?" he said loudly. He had to look up at me. He was just hitting his growth spurt, but I had a few inches on him. I grabbed him by his arm and pulled him over to the chair by his small desk, and pushed him down into it. He slumped there, the fight already flowing out of him.

"What do you want, Sean?" he asked miserably.

"You're my brother, Stephen. I want to help you, if I can."

"You want to help me? Stop being so fucking perfect," he said heatedly.

"What?" I looked at him in surprise. *Perfect? Me? Didn't he even know me?*

"Yeah. You think it's easy being your little brother? 'Hi, I'm Stephen Porter. Yeah, I'm Sean's brother. No, I don't play soccer, too. No, I'm not a fucking All-American athlete. No, I can't get good grades like Sean. No, I can't get the prettiest girls in school.'" His voice was derisive and bitter.

"Nobody's asking you to be just like me, Stephen."

He looked at me like I was the stupidest creature to grace the earth. "Oh, yeah? Spend a day in my shoes, Big Brother."

I was getting a little angry. "You think I'm living a charmed life? Well, maybe right now I am, but I worked pretty fucking hard to get here, Stephen. Sure, I'm good at soccer, but I started out as a crummy player, just like everybody else, but I worked at it, because I liked it. Easy being me?" I gave him a bitter, humorless bark of a laugh. "I've had my ass kicked more times than I like to think about. Last year I got beat up, kicked in the gut, and knifed, right there in the school

parking lot." I pointed to the scar snaking down my left arm. Even with my summer tan fading, the scar was stark white.

"Yeah, while you were coming to the rescue of Miss Homecoming Queen."

"You're kidding, right? Stephen, she rescued me. If she hadn't stopped Jilly, he would have skewered me. Molly put herself in danger because I was down on the ground, getting the shit kicked out of me." I really didn't want to relive that night, that humiliation, but I had no choice now. "If it weren't for my friends," I said roughly, "I might not be here now. Molly, and Tiny, and Eric, and Josh, and Kayla, they all had a hand in saving my butt. You think that was fun? You think I felt like Sean Porter, Big Man on Campus, then? Shit on a stick, Stevie." I wiped my cheeks. Somehow they had gotten damp.

"Sean, I..."

"And, yes, I'm dating the prettiest girl in school. Was it my idea? Stephen, I'm probably even more dense about girls than you are. Kayla nearly had to hit me over the head with a two-by-four before I figured out that she would go out with me. She was my best friend's sister, for God's sake! I had already fucked up two or three relationships. I thought I was dead in the water when it came to dating. Who would want to go out with me? I was poison."

"Yeah, okay, but still..."

Mom's voice drifted up from the bottom of the stairs. "Are you boys coming?"

"Yes, Mom, we'll be right down," I called out.

I stood over him, looking down into his eyes. Stephen was still sitting there, a little slumped over, but looking up at me. I hoped he saw me a little differently now.

"I've worked hard to try to improve myself, Steve. I've succeeded in some areas, and I'm still working on other parts. Be pissed off at me if you want, but don't be pissed because you think I've had everything handed to me. Sure, I've been lucky. But you know what

luck mostly is, Stephen? It's a lot of hours of sweat and worry. A little bit of being in the right place at the right time helps, but I've found that the harder I work, the luckier I get."

He didn't look like he believed me much, but at least he didn't bat my hand away when I reached down and held it out for him. He hesitated, and then took my outstretched hand, and allowed me to pull him up out of the chair.

"You've got problems. I know you do. But don't think you're alone in any of this. I'll help as much as I can, Stephen, but most of the hard work to fix these problems has to come from you."

"Yeah, I guess," he reluctantly agreed.

"Let's go eat, before Mom comes up here and tries to figure out what's wrong."

He shuddered theatrically. "God, please no," he said. Then he smiled. *A good sign,* I thought. *Maybe things would work out okay for him.*

We went downstairs and sat down with the rest of our family. I was gratified to see Stephen fill his plate. *Maybe our little talk had helped, after all.*

As we were clearing the dishes from the table after dinner, I heard a car pull into our driveway. I glanced up when the back door flew open, and Luscious came running in, a huge grin on her lovely face.

"Sean! Come with me!" She was very excited about something.

"Hello, Kayla," said my mother, a twinkle in her eye. "Would you like something to eat? We just finished up, but there are some leftovers."

"Oh, no thanks, Mrs. Porter," she said in a rush. "Sorry about just barging in, but I've got to show Sean something." She didn't even wait for my mom's reply before dragging me out the door.

"See?" she exclaimed, indicating her mother's car in the driveway.

"See what?" I asked, confused.

She looked at me, smiling excitedly. "What do you see, Sean?"

"Um, I see a car?"

"Yes," she said. "And what else?"

I turned to face her. "And nothing else," I said, confused as usual.

"Okay," she admitted. "Then, what don't you see?"

What don't I see? I shrugged.

She slapped my arm. "An adult driving with me," she exclaimed. She reached into her pocket. "I got it!" She was practically jumping up and down as she showed me her brand new driver's license.

"You got it!" I repeated, finally understanding. I took it from her and examined it. *Why did her picture turn out so good, but mine was so ugly on my license?* Of course, I didn't think it was possible for Luscious to have a bad picture taken of her.

"Where would you like to go?" she asked, pulling me toward the car.

"I'll go wherever you'll take me," I said, as I let her push me into the passenger side. She skipped around to the driver's door and opened it, sliding gracefully behind the steering wheel and reaching around to fasten her safety belt.

"Okay, buckle up," she said as she started the car.

She drove us over to the Dairy Queen, where Jake and Jaimie were waiting patiently, and we spent the next hour in a soft-serve ice cream haze. She dropped me off back at home, and we spent a few minutes making out in the front seat of her mother's car before she had to go home, time very well spent kissing my luscious girlfriend.

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The next day, the team left at noon for the long bus ride down to where our final games of the season would be played. We got to the hotel late in the afternoon, and checked into our rooms.

After spending the afternoon on the bus, I was feeling cramped and lethargic. Eric and I got permission from Coach Neville to go for a run before dinner, so we quickly changed and headed out to pound the pavement.

We decided to run the same route we had done the previous year, following the streets from our hotel to the practice fields, about two miles away. It was cold out, the weak and dying sun casting long shadows everywhere. We got to the fields just as one of the other teams in the semi-finals was packing up after a practice. We ignored them as we did a couple of circuits around the four practice fields and the main stadium, where we would play the next day.

"You think our team will be back here again next year?" asked Eric as we jogged easily along.

"I don't know," I replied. "They should be pretty strong, be able to win their way at least into sectionals, I would think."

"Be kinda fun to come back and watch them, if they make it this far."

"Maybe," I said. "Be tough to sit there and not want to be out on the field, though."

"True."

"Besides, I think we'll probably be too busy to be coming back next fall."

"Yeah," he agreed. "NCAA tournament being played all through November, and if your team of scrubs can make it that far, Maryland's gonna kick your Gator ass."

He flashed me a grin, and turned on the afterburners before I could react. He was already five steps ahead of me when I started after him, but there was no way I was going to ever catch him. He stayed seven or eight steps in front of me, and even taunted me by turning around and running backwards for a few yards before he finally slowed down and let me catch up. We had sprinted about a quarter of a mile, and we slowed to a more leisurely pace so that our breathing could stabilize as we headed back toward the hotel.

The next morning, we took the bus over to the fields for a short practice. We did some passing drills, mostly give-and-goes to keep us moving. It was very cold, the temperature hovering just above freezing, even though the sun was shining brightly. Nobody wanted to be standing around, getting cold. Everybody ran, just to keep warm.

We practiced for about an hour and a half, and then we piled back onto the bus. Our driver had kept the bus running the whole time, and it was wonderfully warm inside. We went off in search of lunch.

We were playing the evening game, under the lights, so we had the afternoon free. *Star Trek: The Wrath of Khan* was playing on HBO, so my roomies and I piled around the floor in front of the TV and watched Ricardo Montalban chew up the scenery, until it was time to go down for a light, early dinner.

The temperature had dropped when the sun went down. When we got to the stadium, I walked out onto the field. The grass, still green under the lights, was crisp and a little crunchy under my feet.

We were playing Forest Glen High School, a big suburban school. We had never lined up against them before, but we had studied film of their game. They played a similar game to ours, in that they believed that strong defenses win games. While their defensive players, including three All-Conference players, were very good, their offense didn't seem to match up to ours. We were confident that if we could hit them hard and fast, right from the opening whistle, and make them play from behind, we would be able to advance to the finals.

On their opening offensive set, their midfielders tried to move the ball down the sidelines while their forwards angled in toward the goal, trying to skate along the creases in our coverage. Paco quickly covered the ball-handler, and managed to kick the ball off the opponent's leg and out of bounds. I raced over and picked it up, and rifled it downfield, hugging the sideline, before Forest Glen had a

chance to recover. Our right forward, Jimmy Brooks, picked it up, and crossed the ball over to Hap, in the middle. Hap had three choices: he could keep the ball and try to go past the sweeper, who was coming up to challenge him; he could pass it back to Jimmy, who by then was being covered by the left defender; or he could work the ball over to our left, to Eric and Alex. He used his right foot to square pass over to Eric, who one-touched it back into a little bit of open space behind the sweeper. Hap stepped around his defender, picked up the ball, and faked a shot on goal. The stopper and the keeper both bit on the fake, and Hap tapped the ball back over to Eric, who now had a clean shot at the near corner of the net. He fired a hard shot into the top corner, and our game plan was in action as we took an early 1-0 lead.

Forest Glen didn't get this far by being a team prone to panic, and our quick goal didn't scare them off. Perhaps it was the cold, or maybe it was tournament jitters, but they were a step behind us on our scoring drive. They got warmed up quickly, however, and their defense tightened up and started playing our midfielders tougher after our goal. The game played pretty even for the rest of the first half.

At halftime, Coach Simonson called for our offensive players to gather around. He motioned for me to come over and join him.

"What are you seeing out there, Sean?" he asked.

I looked around. I knew what I saw, but since I was a little removed from the action on the offensive side of the field, I wasn't sure how accurate my observations were. I turned to Eric.

"I'm seeing something, but you tell me what you know, from your vantage point," I said.

He shrugged. "They're playing tight on us. If they was any closer to me, we'd be sharing underwear. Their midfielders are gonna get tired if they insist on playing such tight defense."

"Assume they've got a deep bench," said Coach Simonson. "They're a big school, they're going to be able to insert fresh legs. Sean? You saw it, let them know."

"Okay," I said, a little reluctantly. I didn't want to seem like I was ordering them around, but Coach was insistent that I contribute. "They're on you hard, but that's okay. We're letting them play close by staying a little too bunched up. When they're playing that tight, they're leaving a lot of open space. We need to spread out a little more, and work on getting the ball into the open quicker, and relying on our speed in the middle." I turned to Paco and Hap. "They're focusing on Eric, because of his reputation. That means you guys have got to recognize when he's being suffocated, and don't try to work the ball in to him. Find another outlet. There's always more than one option out there."

They nodded in agreement right away.

Eric picked up on the suggestion. "Good, Porter. And another thing, guys. Keep in mind that we don't always have to be advancing the ball. I know that scoring opportunities come better if we're aggressive, but passing back to Weasel, Porter, or Anthony isn't a retreat, it's just a reset."

The players all nodded, the enthusiasm building again.

Coach said, "We've done a good job of keeping the ball in their half of the field. Don't let up, but keep in mind that the open spaces work in our favor, too. Okay?"

We just had time to grab a little more water before the second half began, so our impromptu meeting broke up. A few minutes later, the referee blew his whistle to get the teams back on the field, and the second half was set to begin.

Our strategy session seemed to help us play a little better, a little smarter. Forest Glen had made some halftime adjustments, primarily in their offensive looks, but we didn't give them much of a chance to put them into action. We started passing the ball back and resetting our own offense, passing into space, utilizing give-and-goes and

relying on Paco, Hap, and Eric to be able to run down leading passes. The field opened up, and we got more good looks at the goal. Their stopper and keeper stepped up their games, though, so we were only able to convert two of those opportunities, but it was enough. We advanced to the finals on a 3-0 victory.

The weather improved a little for the Sunday afternoon championship game. It was sunny and warmer, though spectators still were bundled up against the chill. For the players, it was almost ideal playing conditions. South High School, and their star player, Spencer Goldman, had advanced to the finals, also, so it was to be a rematch of the previous year's championship game.

Spencer, Eric, and I met up on the sidelines before the game. Eric knew him from last year's championship game, and from the All-State banquet.

"Well, here we are again," said Spencer.

"We said we'd be back," I said.

"But this year it's our turn," he reminded me.

Eric snorted. "Your turn? We ain't layin' down here, boo. It's your turn to try."

Spencer smiled. "Fair enough. But be prepared, Johnson. I'm going to run you all over the field today."

"You can run, but you can't hide," retorted Eric.

We shook hands and headed back toward our respective benches.

The game started out slowly, each team probing the other for openings. South's coaches knew very well about our strength in the middle, and did their best to keep the ball out of reach. The problem they faced was working the ball from the back, all the way up front, bypassing the midfielders. To do that, they had to rely on longer, less accurate passes into the true strength of our team, our defense. We were able to rebuff every attempt to penetrate, and every time they gave up the ball to us, we moved it up to our midfielders, exactly where South didn't want it.

Again, our game plan worked to our advantage. We were able to control the ball better than South, and because their midfielders were forced to bunker and play defense, their offensive sets were ineffective. On the other hand, we, too, had difficulty moving the ball into shooting range. South always made sure they had numbers on their side, dropping their midfielders back to smother the field.

Toward the end of the first half, Spencer headed a high, long pass upfield, and managed to knock it into open space behind Adam, who was defending against him. Spencer moved around and picked up the ball, and dribbled it up. Sensing an opportunity, South's left forward tried to move around me along the sideline while Spencer threaded his way along the seam of our coverage, between Brett and Anthony. South's right forward kept Anthony's attention sufficiently to allow Spencer to challenge Brett and Jorge, with his two forwards in position to take side passes from him, and his middle forward weaved around, trying to get open for a crossing pass. Weasel was coming up from behind, but Brett still had to make a decision about whom he should cover, and he opted to stay with the ball-handler. He came out to challenge, but that left South's center forward open enough for Spencer to get the ball over to him. The forward one-touched it as Brett dove after the ball, trying to slide-tackle the ball away. Spencer found the ball on his foot, with only Jorge blocking his access to the net. He took a high shot, and the ball hit the top rail of the goal, and dropped straight down. It hit Jorge on his calf, and dribbled into the net behind him. For the first time all season, we were playing from behind, as the half ended with South up, 1-0.

Once we got cups of water, Coach Neville had us huddle around him.

"There's no need to panic, gentlemen. We've been here before, and we've come from behind before. Stick to your game plan." He pointed at each of us, pinning us with his stare. "You got here by playing smart. Continue to play smart, and capitalize on their mistakes."

"They aren't making many," grumbled Hap.

"They're making them," said Eric. "We're just not recognizing it when they do."

"I've got an idea," I said. "Weasel, how are your legs?"

He looked a little puzzled. "Fine, I guess. Not tired, if that's what you're asking."

"Okay, here's my thought. Goldman's their primary threat, right?" Everybody pretty much agreed with that. "How about if we put Prince on him? Adam, if you can stick to him like you're his Siamese twin, maybe we can knock him out of his rhythm." I looked over at Anthony and Brett. "If Adam is marking Spencer, he could be anywhere on the field. That means we've got to fill in, expand our patrolling areas."

"I can mark him," said Weasel.

"Okay, good. Anthony, you and I will have to work into the diagonal to help cover his ground. We'll take the sides, and Brett, you'll have to cover more of the middle."

"That will leave us pretty vulnerable right in our midsection," warned Coach Neville.

"I know, but if we shut down Spencer, take him out of his game, I think his forwards won't be able to cope very well. Adam, you mark him, stay on him tight, and we'll double-team him wherever he goes. The three of us will cover your turf, and one of us will help you pick him up when he's trying to attack. That means that you guys in the middle, Hap and Paco and Eric, are going to have to drop back on defense a little more and cover any open men. Okay?"

"Sure, man, we can do that," said Paco.

"Last game of the season." said Eric. "No sense savin' up. Let's leave it all on the field today."

Coach interjected, "If anybody starts to feel like they're losing a step, signal the sidelines, and I'll sub you out for a rest as soon as I can. Don't forget we've got some fresh bodies we can throw at them."

I pointed to Weasel. "That means you, too," I said. "If this is going to work, we need you on Goldman tight. If he's wearing you down, let us know and we'll put somebody else on him long enough to give you a breather."

Weasel nodded. "Let's do it," he said.

I put my hand out, palm down and flat. Weasel put his hand on top of mine. Eric's hand went on Weasel's, and the rest of the team joined in. We all shouted, "Team!"

We jumped up and ran out to take our positions on the field. Now that we had a game plan, we were anxious to see how effective it would be.

The referee started the second half, and we were off. Adam proved the worth of his nickname. He was as obnoxious as a weasel, staying in Spencer's face. He pushed against him, got in his way, stuck his feet out and tripped him up when the ball was on the other side of the field, and generally made Spencer's afternoon miserable. As a result, Spencer wasn't able to handle the ball, and his teammates eventually stopped trying to pass the ball to him.

We attacked whenever we could, worked on keeping the ball on their side of the field. Spencer dropped back to play defense, hoping he would be able to get away from Adam for a while. Weasel followed him back deep into their half of the field, however, never giving him a moment's rest. It threw South into a turmoil. They couldn't recognize our weaker middle, because they couldn't control the ball long enough to probe. By the sixtieth minute of the match, they were on their heels, falling back under the slightest pressure, battling to maintain composure. In the meantime, we had tied the game up on a goal by, of all people, Alex Spivak, and we were getting more and more looks at their net. Our energy level was climbing at a rate similar to South's deterioration.

At the last, Spencer tried dropping all the way back, into their stopper's territory, and Weasel was right there with him. Eric sent up a high, arcing Hail-Mary type of kick, and Weasel leapt up, his hand

on Spencer's back to help give him some boost, and he headed the ball toward the net. South's keeper dived for the save, and just managed to knock it down. The ball bounced twice, right to Jimmy Brooks, and he was able to hit it with his laces, rocketing a shot past the kneeling keeper, and into the net. We had a 2-1 lead, with less than five minutes to play.

South reset, and tried to attack, but we were able to repulse it, and we managed to play keep-away until the final whistle. We had successfully defended our state title.

We piled up in the middle of the field, laughing and shouting and deliriously happy. We managed to disentangle long enough to line up and slap the hands of the South players, and shake hands with their coaches.

Afterward, Spencer came up to me. "That was your idea, wasn't it?"

All innocence, I replied, "What do you mean?"

He laughed. "Yeah, I thought so. Nice going, Porter. It was a good trick."

I laughed with him. "I hope you're not too pissed, Spencer. I told you we wouldn't lay down for you."

"Yeah, you did," he said. "You guys won it, fair and square. I'm pissed, but I'll get over it. See you at the banquet."

"Save me a seat," I said.

"Hey, and I'll see you next fall, too. Finally, I won't have to play against you."

I looked at him, puzzled. "Why? Aren't you playing college ball?"

"Sure I am," he replied, chuckling. "At Florida. I can't wait to take the field with you and Jesse Wilhoit. We'll have a team, won't we?"

We shook hands on that. It was great news. He was a great player, and a good guy. It was going to be nice having another friendly face at college.

I trotted back to rejoin my teammates, who were still celebrating on the sidelines. Everybody was happy, and both Coach Neville and Coach Simonson looked very pleased. The most pleased of all, however, especially when Coach Neville solemnly presented him with the game ball, was Adam Prince, the weasel of the soccer field, and hero of the championship game.

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STRONGER THAN YOU KNOW

Tara Jacks absolutely refused to consider any option other than keeping her baby.

By Christmastime she was starting to show, and she took to wearing baggier tops and sweatshirts. The spotlight on her at school was intense, but she was strong, stronger than anybody realized. She stood up to the pressure with her head up, willing to meet anybody's gaze straight on. Whispered conversations followed her everywhere in school, but she acted like she didn't care at all.

It was all a lie, of course. Jaimie told us in confidence that Tara would come home and run up to her room every afternoon in tears. Jaimie did what she could for her, comforted her the best she could. Tara had a huge burden to bear, however, and most of the weight she carried alone.

Mr. and Mrs. Jacks had finally come to terms with their impending grandparenthood, and reluctantly accepted Tara's unequivocal decision. After the holidays were over, they began fixing up their dining room for the baby, setting up a crib, a cradle, and a

changing table. Their dining room set was temporarily exiled to the basement.

Tara had two other friends who stepped up for her, and she ended up relying on their support more and more as the winter wore on. One was Tracy Evanson, who seemed to have taken to heart her brother's criticism on her behalf. She also took away some wisdom from the harsh lesson that Tara was living. Tracy sat with Tara at one of the long tables in the cafeteria at lunchtime, willing to be ostracized from any of the "cooler" groups of kids by hanging out with the pregnant girl. She spent as much time each weekend at the Jacks house as her parents would allow, too, helping Tara with homework, providing friendship to a girl who was sorely in need. On the occasional mornings Tara was too sick to come to school, Tracy picked up her homework assignments for her, and made sure she got them that afternoon.

Tara's other loyal friend was my brother, Stephen.

My parents nearly hit the roof when they found out Stephen was one of the suspected fathers. They cried, they wailed, they gnashed their teeth, they grounded him until his twenty-first birthday. They calmed down a little when Stephen finally told them Tara had already been pregnant when he had been with her in her room at the end of summer. Tara had told him that she didn't think he was the father of her baby, but he still shouldered some of the responsibility. He knew his actions had been less than honorable, and his upbringing, despite occasional setbacks, would not let him duck out of what he considered to be his duty to Tara.

Michael and I acted as mediators between Stephen and our parents, until all the angry words and hurtful accusations were behind us, and some meaningful discussions could take place. Stephen insisted on helping Tara as much as he could, and it was eventually agreed that he could go over to the Jacks house, under supervision. Tara's parents had to be there, no exceptions.

Stephen helped Mr. Jacks repaint the dining room and set up the crib. He and Tara did homework together, sitting at the kitchen table while Mrs. Jacks or Jaimie prepared dinner, and Tracy came over to be with them when she could. Stephen goofed off with Tara, told corny jokes, and helped to remind her that it could be fun to be a kid. Tara was learning one of life's harder lessons as she trod the path toward her own parenthood at the age of fourteen, but she wasn't alone. Her two friends, her parents, her sister, and her sister's friends did what they could to ease her way.

By our school's Spring Break, the last week of March, Tara had gained nearly thirty pounds. For a girl who stood just a little over five feet tall, and who probably only weighed around one hundred pounds normally, it was a huge change. She lumbered around, seeming to take up even more room than her expanded hips and tummy demanded. Stephen would massage Tara's feet and calves almost every evening, trying to bring a small dose of comfort to her complaining muscles and joints, doing what he could to make her feel better, physically and emotionally.

Tara didn't return to school after our break. By the first week of April, she was eight months pregnant, uncomfortable in her body and uncomfortable enduring the continuing stares in the hallways. Stephen wanted to stay with her at home until she delivered, but both sets of parents vetoed that idea. He reluctantly went back to classes with the rest of us.

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In the weeks after we had won our second consecutive state championship, my teammates and I were treated like royalty at school and in town. Pick Cropper called to congratulate us, and I talked to Jesse Wilhoit several times. He had first called when he

learned of the AHSSA All-American honors, and we talked every couple of weeks or so. Jesse and his sister, Anna, came up and spent an evening with Kayla and me when he was home for Christmas break, and we made plans to get together during the summer, so he could let me know what to expect when I got to Florida.

Jesse was going to try out for the Under-Twenty National Team in the spring. I was planning on running my summer clinics again after I graduated. I knew, from the response I had gotten the previous summer, I could fill three or four age groups without a problem. Eric, Jorge, and Tessa had already agreed to help me out, and Trent was also planning on being home most of the summer to work with me. I thought I would also be able to get a couple of other kids, both guys and girls from the school teams, to assist. I was excited about the prospect of going off to Florida to play soccer and go to school, but I really couldn't think in real terms beyond getting through my senior year of high school, and planning for the summer.

By the tail end of winter, almost all of us were looking forward to Spring Break and not having to think about school for over a week. The weather still was not very consistent, but at least we could spend some time outside. Kayla and I picked up our mileage on our runs. The soccer season, followed immediately by winter, had forced us to cut down on the frequency we were able to get out. The weather also curtailed our distances, since we didn't feel much like running far when it was so cold out.

We also managed to find a couple of opportunities to make love, but we were beginning to feel a little inhibited with each other. We tried talking about it, but we were both uncomfortable even addressing the problem. We each tied it, at least in our own minds, to Tara's pregnancy, and to Stephen's continuing involvement.

For the Junior/Senior Prom, our plans were a little disjointed. I had once again made reservations for ten couples at Delmonico's in Monticello for dinner before the dance. Alex and Molly drove down with us on a double date. When we got to the restaurant, Josh and

Andrea, along with Tiny and Erica, were already there. Eric and Keisha, doubling with Anthony and Ayesha, came in right behind us. Austin and Tessa were driving down with Jorge and Marissa, and they came in a few minutes later. The busboy was just filling our water glasses when Toby and Ashley came in.

"Where's Jake and Jaimie?" I asked. They were supposed to be with Toby.

Toby shrugged. "Jake called about a half an hour before he was supposed to pick us up," he said. "Something came up, said they'd be late."

"I wonder if it has something to do with Tara," murmured Kayla.

We carried on without them, and we ordered our dinners. There were a couple of other prom tables scattered through the large dining room, so we cruised back and forth between courses, visiting with friends and classmates. We got some sour looks from some of the other patrons and families who had chosen this unfortunate evening to go out for a nice Italian dinner, but our mood was jovial and exuberant, and attitudes from fogies weren't going to bother us at all.

After dinner, the restaurant pretty much emptied out as all the prom parties headed out, packing into cars for the drive downtown to the dance.

We got to the ballroom in the hotel fashionably late, and we joined the rest of our schoolmates on the dance floor. I even managed to coax Mrs. Neville out to shake her booty a time or two. Coach absolutely refused to be persuaded, even by somebody as irresistible as my Luscious, to join us. Personally, I didn't see how he could refuse the prettiest girl in school, but he managed, contenting himself to watching his wife and me gyrate to the music.

In the middle of dancing to Billy Idol's *Hot in the City*, there was a small commotion as a big body came swarming through the dancers. Kayla and I stopped and watched as Jake, pulling Jaimie along by the hand, came bullying his way through the crowd. He stuck out his hand, clutching a bunch of chocolate cigars.

"Congratulations, Porter! We're uncles!"

"What?" I asked.

Jaimie was practically jumping up and down. She was so excited, she was nearly bouncing out of her low-cut dress. "Tara had her baby!" she cried. "It's a boy!"

Kayla squealed, and leapt up into Jaimie's arms. "How wonderful!" They squeezed each other tightly, sharing the news as best friends should. Kayla dabbed at her eyes, wiping away small tears of joy, once she let go of Jaimie.

"Well, maybe we're step-uncles or something," I said.

"Yeah, whatever," said Jake, obviously enjoying the moment. He handed cigars to Tiny and Eric, who happened to be near us when Jake came barging in. "Anyway, that's why we missed dinner, because Jaimie's folks were taking Tara to the hospital."

"And I didn't want to miss it, even for Prom," said Jaimie.

"Right," agreed Jake. "So there I was, half-dressed already when Jaimie called."

"Which half was dressed?" asked Eric with a smile.

Jake grimaced. "You probably don't want to know," he said. "Anyway, so I hurried, and Jaimie and I stopped at your house on the way, but you guys had already left, so I picked up Stephen, and he went with us to the hospital."

"Really? Stephen was there, too?" I guess the news didn't really surprise me all that much.

Jake looked at me kind of funny. "Of course he was," he said.

"It turns out that Tara had been in labor most of the day, but didn't tell anybody," continued Jaimie. "She thought it was false labor or something, she said. "I think she just was in a little bit of denial, personally."

"So by the time we got there, she was already in the delivery room with her mother." Jake picked up the story. "We were only there a few minutes when Tara asked if Stephen could come in and be with her."

"Really?" That surprised me. I thought Stephen would be too squeamish to want to be in there. I certainly would have been, especially at his age.

"Of course she did," said Kayla, giving me a look that said I was being dense again.

"Okay," I said doubtfully. *Why did everybody else know more about my brother than I did?*

"So we stayed there until Mom came out and made the announcement," continued Jaimie. "A boy, eight pounds ten ounces, Kyle Allen Jacks, born at 7:39 PM on May 13, 1983." She stopped, her eyes bright.

"Oh my God, I'm an aunt," she whispered, almost to herself. "My little sister's a mom."

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Much later that night, Kayla and I were in one of the quiet rooms at the YMCA, during the all-night post-Prom lockdown, sharing a Coke.

"You know, when we start having children, you're going to have to be in the delivery room with me, too," she said. There was a glint of humor in her eye.

"Yeah, I know," I said a little defensively. "I was just a little surprised about Stephen, that's all... I mean, it's not even his kid."

"Maybe it's not his kid," corrected Kayla.

"Okay, maybe," I conceded. "Tara didn't think it was his."

"But Stephen thinks it is," she pointed out. "And Tara's just not sure. She's willing to take the love and support that Stephen is offering, though."

"So maybe I really am an uncle," I said in surprise.

She smiled at me. "Maybe you are," she agreed.

We went off in search of entertainment, and found Eric and Keisha in the hallway, looking a little furtive.

Eric smiled. “Come with us,” he said, motioning for us to follow them.

He led us confidently past the locker room doors, and through another, unmarked door. We came to three closed doors on our right, and Eric reached into his pocket and pulled out a ring of keys. He smiled, and selected one key off the ring. He looked up at us as he slid the key into the lock.

“Good to have friends in high places,” he murmured. He gestured us into the room, and closed the door behind us, leaving Luscious and me alone in one of the massage rooms. There was a low massage table in the middle of the room, and a lounging couch along one wall. A stereo was on a shelf above the couch, and on the other side of the room was a locked cabinet.

I looked at Kayla. “It’s good to have friends who have friends in high places,” I said.

She smiled, and reached up and switched the stereo on. Soft, relaxing music came out of the speakers mounted in the corners of the room.

“Would you like a massage?” I asked, indicating the table.

“I don’t know,” she said. “I’ve never had one.”

“Well, then, you’re in for a treat, ma’am,” I said. There was a stack of towels on a rack next to the cabinet. I took one and handed it to her.

“Here you go, miss,” I said, trying to be all business. “Kindly remove your garments, and lie down on the table, face down, and cover yourself with the towel.”

She smiled at me, and pulled her sleeveless shirt off over her head as I busied myself with putting another towel down for her on the table. I kept my eyes averted as she took off her jeans and underwear, and boosted herself up onto the table. She put the towel across her like a blanket.

"Are you ready, miss?" I asked.

Her voice was muffled. There was a padded hole in the table, and she had her face resting in it. "Yes, but aren't you a little overdressed?"

"Ah, the madam would like to experience our patented Naked Massage, I see," I said in my most proper tone. "That can be arranged."

I stripped off my t-shirt as I wedged my shoes off. I sat on the couch for just a moment so I could yank off my socks, and then I stood and shucked off my jeans and underwear. Kayla had her head turned on the table, watching me the whole time.

There was some body oil in a squeeze bottle on top of the cabinet. I grabbed it and squeezed a dollop onto the palm of my hand, and then rubbed my hands together. I gently pulled down the towel covering my girl, baring her back, and ran my hands along that long expanse of flesh, spreading the oil across her body.

I hopped up on the table and crouched on her thighs so I could work better. My balls nestled against her legs, and my cock stretched out and rested against the towel covering her ass.

"Mmmmmm," she hummed as I began working the oil into her skin, applying a little more pressure, starting to knead the muscles of her back and shoulders. I worked up and down along her spine, from her neck down the slope of her back to her waist. I pushed the towel down a little more, and worked the oil into the top swells of her buttocks, and then worked my way back up again, running my hands up along her sides to her shoulders, kneading the big muscles there, and then working from her neck back down to the valley of her lower back. My thumbs played along the ridges of her vertebrae, bumping along as my palms pressed harder along the connective tissues.

After working on her back up and down, I slid down off the table. Standing to the side, I started working across her body, from her backbone down and around her side, rolling her a little on the

table. I could feel the swells of her squashed breasts, and my fingers tended to linger there, relishing in the feel of her marvelous body. Once I had worked all the way down her body, from her shoulder blade to her waist, I stepped over to the other side of the table and worked the right side of her back the same way, slowly manipulating the musculature just beneath the softer layer of skin.

Kayla was making occasional soft sounds of appreciation as I worked on her. As she was relaxing, though, I was tensing up. Just looking at her flawless, pale skin, knowing she was naked under that one small towel, was enough to get me hard. Added to that were her soft moans, and my temperature was rising.

As I worked across her back, I also worked from her shoulders down her body. My hands reveled in the soft feel of her along the small of her back and across her tiny waist, and I kept on moving down. I slid my hands beneath the towel and kneaded the globes of her ass, from her crack to her hip, still rolling her body slightly as I worked. Finally, I threw the towel down to the floor, leaving her naked and beautiful on the table. I worked on her thighs, kneading and manipulating her flesh, and occasionally allowing my thumbs to delve between her legs just a little as she parted her legs for me. I was gratified to feel moisture there, and though the temptation to abandon my massage in favor of more carnal pleasures was great, I steeled myself to continue what I had started with her.

I worked on her legs from her butt to her ankles, refilling my palms with the body oil as I went. I massaged her feet, paying special attention to her arches and her cute little toes. When I was done with both feet, I picked up the towel and draped it over her calves and feet for warmth.

I moved up to the front of the table, and started again on her shoulders. I hadn't heard a peep from her in several minutes, and I thought that perhaps she had fallen asleep. As I leaned over her to massage her shoulders and neck, I felt her hand reach up and touch my thigh. I ran my hands through her hair, giving her a scalp

massage, and her hand slid up my leg to my balls. She hefted the weight, and then moved her hand up further to grasp the base of my hard cock. My hips involuntarily hunched forward into her hand, and she tugged on me a little, making me crouch so that I could flex my hips. She was able to pull my cock over to the hole in the table, and was just able to lick the head of my steel-hard dick as I continued to use my fingertips against her temples and her ears.

I stopped to enjoy the sensation of her tongue on my cock. She held the base in her fist as she treated me like I was an ice cream cone, lapping up the bubbles of pre-cum that were oozing from me. My mission of imparting a nice, relaxing massage was all but forgotten in the wake of her active tongue and hand upon my rampant cock.

Eventually, I wanted more. I wanted to give her more, and I wanted to experience more, so I gently extricated myself from her grip, and moved back down to the foot of the bed. She turned her head to watch me as I grasped her ankles. I pulled her toward me, until her legs were dangling straight out, off the table. Still holding her ankles, I spread her legs and bent down, resting my elbows on the table. I lowered my head down and licked slowly, lovingly along her drooling pussy, eliciting a moan from her.

She allowed her legs to spread even more, opening herself up to me. I concentrated on using my lips and tongue to lap up all the lubrication I could find, dragging the tip of my tongue through her folds and into the well of her oils. I stuck my tongue as deeply into her hole as I could, and ran it along her sensitive tissues, working it under her to diddle with her hooded clit, and then delving through her engorged outer lips, to circle her flooded opening again. I licked and spread moisture up her soft and trembling ass. I found her little rosebud of an asshole, and paid attention to it, moistening her tender skin, reveling in the tangy taste of her.

She folded her left arm up underneath her and was clutching at her swollen breast. She brought her knees back up onto the table so

that she could lift up her butt, giving me greater access to her pussy. I took advantage, and worshiped her the best I could, using my lips, my tongue, my fingers, and my thumb to pleasure her. I could feel her muscles quivering as she climbed closer to the precipice. I nibbled at her clit with my lips as I stuck two fingers into her vaginal opening, and finger-fucked her to her first orgasm.

Her breath came in hitches as she was carried over the cliff wall, and she had trouble holding herself up in that same position. As her emotions carried her away, her body took over, and the electrical pulses firing within her hit the proper sequences. Her pussy walls exuded a tiny flood of extra lubricant, and my tongue was there to receive it.

In the meantime, my own body was receiving the stimuli that were as old as mankind, the pheromones entering my system through my taste buds, through my nose, and through my fingertips, directly into my bloodstream. My cock twitched in anticipation of feeling firsthand the heat and moisture she was letting loose, so I lifted up, and pulled her off the table a little more, until she was bent at the waist. Her torso was still resting on the table, and her feet were firmly on the floor. I stepped up behind her and grasped my straining cock. I aimed it directly at her middle, rubbing the head against her pussy lips to spread moisture around, and then nestling it against her overheated opening.

She groaned and moved back against me just a little, and the head of my cock popped into her. It was all the stimulus I needed. I plunged fully into her, rocking her body against the table as I thrust as deeply as I could. Kayla huffed when she felt me bottom out in her, and I started pumping in and out of her, fucking her hard.

She rocked back and forth on the table as I worked her, and she was panting and breathlessly screeching every time I felt myself hit against her cervix. Her walls were very tight against my cock, and the combination of the heat, the pressure, and the oily lubrication coating my shaft were having an effect on me. I was sliding in and

out of her easily despite the tightening of her sheath, and I could feel the tip of my cock scraping along the sensitive tissues of her vagina on every thrust.

I held her by her hips as I pounded into her, pulling her back onto my cock as I flexed to push my sword into her scabbard. More than ever, I could see the narrow pinching of her waist flaring out to the feminine swell of her hips beneath me. I could look down and watch her ass as my cock moved in and out of her, the fleshy globes quivering each time I bottomed out in her, or I could look at her face contorting as she concentrated on the sensations firing along her nerves like lightning bolts, from her overstimulated pussy, connecting through her sensitive nipples on the way to the overtaxed pleasure centers in her brain. I leaned onto her for a moment, and worked my hands beneath her body so I could squeeze her breasts. She groaned as I pinched her nipples, and wiggled her ass on me. I stood back up and took her by the hips again, and I thrust into her as hard and fast as I could.

Finally, she cried out, and pinched her own nipple hard. Her walls involuntarily clenched down on me, squeezing me so hard my movement was constricted. Her orgasm hit her, and her pussy contracted even more. Her extra lubrication coated my shaft, and I pressed against her, wanting to be as deep inside her as I could possibly be when I shot off. My cock expanded against her contractions, and the hydraulics kicked into action. I felt my balls tighten, and I spurted into her hard, the intensity of my orgasm turning me practically inside out. I felt my rushing semen splash against her walls. She must have felt it, too, because she hunched back against me hard, trying to impale herself on me just a little more, dragging out the sensations that were washing through her. Five times, six, and seven times I felt my release. Finally I collapsed down on her back, giving in to the sensations.

We stayed that way for a time, as our breathing began to stabilize and our pulse rates retreated out of the red zone. My cock lost very

little of its firmness, buried as it was within her tight and welcoming pussy.

At long last, she groaned.

"Porter? Can you get off me for a minute?" she asked tiredly.

It was an effort, but I slowly pulled out of her. Mixed fluids seeped from her once my plug had been removed. I stood up as she shimmied up to lie on the table. I used the towel to blot up our combined spend, and then tossed the soiled towel into a corner of the room. She motioned for me to join her, so I lay down next to her. She turned onto her side to make room for me, and we put our arms around each other and touched foreheads together.

"That was pretty incredible," she whispered, her eyes smiling.

"You liked it that way?" I asked.

She gave the question more consideration than I thought it deserved. *Of course she liked it. She came hard, didn't she?*

"I liked it a lot," she said seriously. "I've never felt... fuller... than that time. You hit places inside me..."

I rubbed her back, and watched her marvelous breasts quiver a little as she took a deep breath.

"How can I describe it?" She was almost talking to herself. "It was great sex, but it was... recreational. It wasn't the same as when we make love." She looked up at me, a little imploringly. "Don't get me wrong, Sean, I really, really enjoyed it. It was spontaneous, and different, and... Obviously, I liked it a lot. I don't think I've ever come that hard before. But I prefer being able to kiss you, to see your face, when we... I like the loving, the tenderness, even more than I like the climax..."

I hugged her to me. "So do I, baby," I reassured her. "So do I." I left it at that. She smiled at me, one of her patented thousand-watt smiles, and I felt suffused with love for her.

We dozed for a few minutes, and then she showed me what she meant, by taking my recovering cock in her hand as we lay side by side, kissing as I gently played with her wonderful breasts. When my

cock returned to its full hardness, she rolled over onto her back, and pulled me over onto her. Her hand, still wrapped around my rod, guided my cock to her heated pussy. She rubbed my head against her wet slit a few times to spread our moisture around, and then placed it against her flooding hole, and let go as I shafted into her. She kissed me hard, her tongue probing deep as she moaned into my mouth while she felt me plumb her depths. She wrapped her legs around me, crossing her ankles in the small of my back.

As we made love, she broke our kiss, and looked into my eyes. She was smiling happily.

"See? Isn't this nice?" she whispered.

My brain was occupied. Being male, I couldn't be in the throes of sex and, at the same time, make intelligent conversation, so I just nodded.

She giggled, making her pussy tighten against me momentarily, and gently pulled my mouth down to her distended nipple. I gladly took the proffered morsel into my mouth. After all, I was male, and could handle two similar tasks such as these at once. I paid homage to her left breast, and then kissed and licked my way over to her right breast, and gave it equal attention. When I felt my impending climax, I used my hand to pinch her left nipple, and at the same time, I bit down lightly on her right. The additional stimuli set her off, and we humped at each other hard, both rushing toward our finish lines.

I felt my cock expand against her constricting walls, and at the same time, she cried out softly. Additional heat and moisture coated my invading cock as we both came, my cock spilling my seed deep inside her for the second time, as her own orgasm took her by storm.

I lifted up my weary head and kissed her softly, and she held me to her by the back of my neck as she gently returned my affectionate kiss. Her legs dropped to the table, and I pulled my shrinking cock from her. She didn't want to let me go, however, for when I shifted, intending to lay beside her again and get my weight off her, she

moaned, shook her head, put her arms tight around me, and put her feet around my calves to keep me in place.

"I'm afraid I'm going to crush you," I whispered.

She held me to her. "He ain't heavy, he's my lover," she said quietly. I could hear the smile in her voice.

"And besides, she's strong," I said.

"That's right," she agreed. "Stronger than you know."

Of course, we had no idea at the time, but that strength would be tested.

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POINTS OF THE COMPASS: NORTH AND SOUTH

The next few weeks were the most hectic of my life. We were on the home stretch toward graduation, and the pace was picking up.

Two weeks after Prom, there was a banquet scheduled for the athletes who competed on all the school teams. It was held in a large banquet hall, and there were about a thousand people in attendance, students and families, coaches and administrators. The Athletic Banquet was one of the highlights of the school year, because it was the only time all the teams were assembled in one place, and because it heralded the end of the school year.

My sophomore year, my family and I had attended the banquet, and I had watched as Dr. Osgood and Coach Neville solemnly retired Skip Horvath's soccer jersey. Now, this year, I stood with these same two men at the podium and observed them, both in much better moods than that other, sadder time, as they retired Sean Porter's jersey. Nobody else would ever wear my Number Twenty for our school on the soccer field. There was generous applause from the crowd, and raucous cheering from my teammates as Coach

showed off the glass-encased jersey, with my name arced on the back, that would be put in a place of honor on the wall of the school, the trophy cases on one side and Skip's jersey on the other. It was only then that it finally hit home: I would never again wear the uniform of my high school team.

Two weeks after the banquet was graduation, in all its pomp and circumstance. All of the seniors lined up in the gymnasium, dressed in our caps and gowns, and marched two-by-two out into the football stadium, where our families were roasting in the hot sun. We listened to a bunch of boring speeches, the words buzzing in and out of our ears without ever landing coherently. It was excruciatingly dull and long, until, quite suddenly, it was time to toss our caps into the air. And, just like that, our high school careers were over.

Concurrently with all these activities, life within the Porter family unit was in turmoil. Stephen's involvement with Tara and the baby continued unabated, so much so that I really did start thinking I was little Kyle's uncle. My mom insisted on helping Tara and Mrs. Jacks plan for Kyle's baptism, working on menus and guest lists as if the baptism were a dress rehearsal for a wedding. And, in a way, I suppose that's what it was. Stephen, Tara and the baby were together as much as they could be, splitting their time between our house and Tara's house. While they were at our house, my mom would watch Kyle, and Tara and Stephen would go over Stephen's homework. They did the same thing over at the Jacks house, too, I knew.

Tara wanted to try to take the finals of any classes she could. Some of her teachers were supportive, no doubt having gotten reports of her progress from her parents. Stephen and Tracy made sure Tara's homework assignments got handed in on time, so the only thing she was missing were scores on classroom quizzes.

The teachers at school also saw a marked improvement in Stephen's grades. Working with Tara on schoolwork paid dividends for him, too. Seeing this improvement made many of their teachers

much more willing to give Tara an opportunity to move on to tenth grade with the rest of her class.

And, just to make sure I had absolutely no time for anything at all, my summer soccer camps filled to overflowing. All during May I was scrambling around, recruiting more instructors for the clinics. I called my friend and former adversary, Spencer Goldman, and invited him to join us. I also got in touch with a girl I had met at Duane Olchick's clinic who had impressed me with her play. Posey Smith was from Meadowdale, had been an All-State selection all four years of high school, and was chosen as a second-team All-American her senior year.

Hap Olson, the starting center midfielder on our team, had been enrolled as a student for my summer clinic, but I persuaded him to join my staff as an instructor. His play had matured so much during our season, I knew he would be able to relate to what the competitive kids were trying to accomplish.

Brett Oldman, our stopper, also signed on, as did Anthony Rogers, so I was well represented on the defensive side. The only real gap in my instructor coverage was in the middle positions.

One day after school, I was shooting the shit with Eric and Keisha. Luscious was in the library, and we were lounging on the front steps of the high school while I was waiting for her to come out. I told Eric about my plan for the camps.

"Man, you gonna be one overworked sorry excuse for a defenseman by the time you get to Florida," said Eric. He didn't sound all that sympathetic, however.

"Yeah, well, I think I've got most of the spots filled. I just wish we were a little better represented in the middle," I said.

Keisha was leaning with both her arms on Eric's shoulder, looking bored with our soccer talk. "Why don't you hire on that Weasel kid?" she said.

Eric glanced at her in surprise. "That's a good idea, babe," he said.

"It is?" I asked.

"Sure," said Eric. "You've said yourself that Weasel's a good player, he just needed some calming down."

"True," I admitted.

"He played just like we wanted him to, all through the playoffs," he pointed out.

"Again, true," I said.

"He got the game ball in the finals," Keisha reminded me.

"You're right. He's good. You think he'd do it?"

"Ask him and see," said Eric.

I called Adam that night, and just like that, my team of instructors increased to ten members.

Once I had that nailed down, I could work on scheduling the groups and organizing my worksheets. Once the news got out among the soccer-playing crowd that my summer clinics would be instructed by two All-Americans, three All-Staters, and the core of the state championship team, the telephone began ringing off the hook. Parents from all over the metro area were calling to see if they could enroll their kids. I took as many of them as I could, until there just wasn't any more room or time slots available.

Trent and Danielle were back for the summer by mid-May, and they helped me get ready. It quickly became apparent to me that I needed a hierarchy to make it all work. Trent and Eric became my senior instructors, and the other instructors would work for them.

My dad and Mr. Lehigh both gave me some help and suggestions as I was setting it all up. Mr. Lehigh helped me open a checking account at his bank for my school, and he gave both Danielle and me some basic accounting instruction. Danielle had worked a couple of summers as an assistant bookkeeper for a small construction company, and she became my bookkeeper and office manager. We set up a small office in our basement, with a desk, a calculator, and a file cabinet, and Danielle spent a lot of time down there with me as we geared up. After the first couple of weeks, we were confident she

would be able to keep up with her end of things by coming over two or three times each week, spending maybe ten hours working on my stuff.

As it turned out, my brand-new organization, facetiously called Sean Porter Enterprises, created more spare time for me than I had the previous summer. We had a lot of drills and scrimmage plans that we had painstakingly created that first year that we were reusing. Posey and Spencer brought new drills with them we were able to incorporate, and Trent also brought some new ideas from his first year playing at the college level that we could use, especially with the competitive groups. With Danielle keeping the paperwork straight, and Trent and Eric moving the instructors around as needed, I actually had less to do than before.

I rented a tent that I could open up the sides on, and set it up on the sidelines between the fields we were using. I had a cooler that I filled with ice and stocked with water and sodas every morning for the instructors, and I had a card table with folding chairs. I was able to spend my day observing the kids, making notes about each of them, and dropping in to help the instructors. I could pull one or more kids out of practice so I could work with them on a more individual basis, and I still had the time to organize my notes from each day. That first year, all that paperwork had to be done after the day on the field was over, but now, with more instructors and better lines of communication, I could get that work done during the clinics. It was less work and more fun for me, and the instructors seemed to work well under the new organization, too.

By the end of June, Spencer and Posey had fit right in with my local friends, and we were all enjoying our summer outside, teaching the game we all loved so much. All month long, I kept on getting calls from all over, asking about openings. Some callers even were willing to enroll for a week or two, if any of our campers were headed out on vacation. The way we had our drills set up, working on progressively more difficult skill sets based on proficiency in

earlier practices, I didn't feel it would be fair to anybody if I agreed to plug in players for just a short time, so I turned them all down. It did get me thinking about setting up clinics beyond our own little community, however. During one of our weekly meetings, I broached the possibility of branching out to my management team. Danielle, Trent and Eric were surprised that I was thinking ahead already, but they thought the idea was workable. I made a note to talk to some of the others about the possibility.

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The Fourth of July that year fell on a Monday, so we all got a nice, long weekend out of the holiday. Kayla had to work at the drug store on Saturday, but she had Sunday and Monday off, and we spent both days at the beach, being lazy with friends. We staked off a section of beach for ourselves, and people would wander in and out as they wished, with at least a couple of people manning the barricades all day long. Usually, Eric and Keisha were there with us, and Trent and Danielle joined us for most of the day on Sunday. Stephen and Tara came for a few hours on Sunday, too, and they set up a portable swing under a beach umbrella for little Kyle. Kayla and I watched Kyle so that Stephen and Tara could splash around in the lake for a while, reverting easily back into teenagers as soon as they stepped into the water.

Again, my minor celebrity in town paid off for something. Any undue stares or rude comments that might have been directed at my brother and his girlfriend, along with the baby, were usually cut short when the gossipers saw they were there with me. It was a small advantage, but we took it. Stephen accepted it, too, though he was not about to embarrass himself by acknowledging it, which was

altogether all right by me. If my small amount of local fame could give them a curtain of peace for a time, I was all for it.

By dinnertime on Sunday, I had had enough of being outside. I wanted nothing more than a nice, air-conditioned room to spend the evening in, with my Luscious by my side. We drove over to DQ and grabbed a burger on our way out to the mall. We spent that evening at the movies, my arm wrapped around Kayla's shoulder as we watched Tom Cruise dance in his underwear, Rebecca de Mornay run an enterprising home business, and Joe Pantoliano, as Guido the killer pimp, take it all away in *Risky Business.*

As we were walking back to my car after the movie, Kayla said, "I dare you to drown your car in the lake, like Joel did."

"Maybe if my dad had a Porsche, I would," I retorted.

She stood aside as I unlocked the passenger door. "Maybe we could reenact the subway scene sometime," she said with a smile.

I waggled my eyebrows at her. "Anytime, my dear, anytime at all," I leered. "All we need is a train, a night, and a drunk to watch us."

"Ugh. Maybe not, then," she said as she slid smoothly into the car.

On Monday, after another day playing in the water and in the sand at the lake, we skipped the carnival and opted to go out with friends to Mike's Pizza. Now that I was done with high school, I was ready to put activities I associated with those days behind me, including hanging out at the carnival. It really didn't occur to me that Kayla, in the middle of her high school years, might not be ready to do the same. That thought wouldn't intrude and cause trouble until a couple of weeks later.

Eric and Keisha were among the group already at Mike's when we got there, along with Anthony and Ayesha, and Trent and Danielle. There were two pitchers of Coke on the table, and as Kayla and I sat down, Ayesha poured us each a glass.

"You guys look thirsty," she said with a smile as she set the full glasses in front of us.

"It's warm out there," I said. I took a big drink of soda, and almost immediately started hiccupping.

Kayla pounded on my back. "Are you okay, there, tiger?"

I gasped. "I'll be okay in a minute. Damn, that's cold," I wheezed. Eric and Trent just laughed at me, friends that they were.

"Are you going back for the fireworks?" asked Anthony.

"I think I'm experiencing them right now," I coughed. Kayla slapped on my back a little more, laughing.

"Don't expire on us, Porter," said Eric. "Paramedics charge time and a half on holidays."

"Yeah, if you're gonna die, at least have the good grace to do it after midnight, when the rates go down," said Trent. "We're just poor college kids, you know."

"Thanks for all the sympathy," I grumbled as I stared at them balefully, each in turn. "Always good to know who my true friends are."

"Hey, we're just asking you to be a good friend, and keep our wallets in mind as you're giving up the ghost," remarked Anthony. "Is that really too much to ask?"

"Yeah, I think it is," I said. I could still feel the onset of a hiccup attack hiding in my chest.

"Oh, all right," said Keisha with a dramatic roll of her eyes. "If you're not going to cooperate about waiting to kick off, here." She handed me a packet of sugar. "Open this, and eat it."

"Why?" I asked.

"You look like you're in pain, Sean," she said. "It's a cure for hiccups. Just eat the damn sugar."

I tore open the paper, tilted my head back, and poured the sugar into my mouth. As it melted against my tongue and dribbled down my throat, I felt the hiccups draining away.

"Hey, neat. I didn't know that worked like that," I said. "Thanks, Keisha."

Now it was her turn to give me the Groucho eyebrow waggle. "You can thank me better during the fireworks," she vamped.

"Hey! What about me?" said Eric, feigning unhappiness.

Keisha rested her chin on her hand and her elbow on the table, leaning in toward Eric and batting her eyes. "You? I done tried that. Now maybe I want to sample something a little paler."

"Sheee-it, girl, you go," drawled Ayesha, and the whole table broke up in laughter.

Just before dark, we all left Mike's and headed back over to the park. We had to leave the cars in a shopping center parking lot across the street, since the lot at the park was full. I opened the trunk and grabbed my cooler, and Kayla took the big blanket out of the back seat. We walked across the street in a big group, and started looking for a spot for the eight of us. We managed to squeeze in between a couple of families, over near a small stand of trees, and we spread our blankets out and lay back against the prickly grass poking up through the cloth, anticipating the fireworks display.

Kayla snuggled up against me, resting her head comfortably on my shoulder, and we oohed and aahed through the first salvos. We pointed at displays we particularly liked, and I could hear my friends doing the same.

About halfway through the show, there was a lull, presumably as the workers were reloading their charges. I heard Keisha, laying next to me, groan softly. I turned to look, and she turned toward me at the same time. There was just enough ambient light for me to see that Eric's fingers were busily exploring up the leg of Keisha's shorts. Keisha stared at me for just a moment, and then reached up and pulled my face to hers. Our lips met, and I felt her mouth open, and her tongue snuck out and wriggled into my mouth, searching for my tongue. I instinctively opened up, and our tongues engaged in an ages-old battle of dominance. She broke our kiss just as the next

rocket flared up, and turned back to watch, a small and secret smile on her face. By then, Eric's hand was just resting on her thigh, the very picture of innocence. Confused, I turned toward Kayla. She was watching me and smiling, but she, too, turned to watch the continuing display without saying a word.

Whatever was going on was way beyond my limited faculties to understand. I watched the rest of the fireworks in silence and confusion.

After the grand finale, Eric and Keisha seemed anxious to go, so they gathered up their things and, after hurried goodbyes, strode off toward the exit hand in hand, melting quickly into the crowd. I was sure they had some unfinished business they were intent on addressing. Trent and Danielle and Anthony and Ayesha started picking up their blankets, but Kayla, with a gentle hand on my arm, encouraged me to remain sitting.

"See you tomorrow, Sean," said Trent, and they all waved as they departed.

Now that the fireworks display was over, the only lights in the park were walkway lights and the floodlights in the parking lot, away from us. All the families around us had already gathered up their belongings and were headed out. Kayla stood, and I scrambled up to pick up our stuff, too. She bunched up the blanket in her arms, but instead of walking toward the exit, she stepped away toward the trees. She glanced back over her shoulder and smiled at me. Her pale hair was the last of her I could see before she blended into the darkness. I grabbed the cooler and followed her.

She had only gone a few yards into the protection of the trees, and she had spread the blanket back out again. She was kneeling on it, watching as I approached. As I set the cooler down, she reached down for the hem of her tank top, and pulled it over her head. Her movement froze me in my tracks, and all I could do was stand there and watch. Her unfettered breasts quivered slightly with her movement as she placed her shirt on one corner of the blanket. She

shimmied out of her tight shorts, pulling her panties down at the same time, and she gracefully shifted her legs over so she could push them down and off. She lay back, propping up her head with her arm, and raised her eyebrows in a questioning look.

The spell was broken, and I shucked off my shoes, my shirt, and my shorts as quickly as I could. My briefs got hung up on my swelling cock, and I struggled for just a moment to extricate it. I heard Kayla softly giggle at my predicament, but I finally managed to get completely undressed. I dropped down onto my side, facing her. She reached up and put her hand on the back of my neck. She pulled my head toward her, and she kissed me.

I reached out and pulled myself closer to her. My hand went from her back quite naturally around to her soft breast, and I kneaded her pliant flesh with my fingers. She twisted slightly in my arms to give me better access to her charms, and her soft kisses got hotter as she opened her mouth in invitation. The tip of my tongue met hers at the portal, and our kiss was suddenly hotter, wetter, and more demanding.

Kayla reached down and took my hard cock into her small hand, gauging my length and girth, and then allowed her fingers to slither down to caress my tight balls. She hefted them in concert with the way my own hand was hefting the small weight of her wonderful breast. If I squeezed, she squeezed; when I caressed the underside, she let her fingertips delve down further between my spread legs. The only action for which she opted not to reciprocate was when I pinched at her nipples. Instead, she pinched at the base of my cock, her fingernails raking and tickling the tender skin of my scrotum on their way toward their target.

We broke away from each other, gasping for air. Kayla began nibbling at my earlobe, and continued down my neck. I lay back, and passively let her take her time.

And she did take her time, tasting and licking the salt from my skin as she slowly made her way down my neck to my collarbone,

part-way down my sternum and across to nibble and bite at each of my nipples in turn. She knew what she liked when I played with her, and she applied that knowledge on my body, spending a lot of time playing with a part of me I had never really realized was so sensitive.

All the time she was exploring with her mouth, her hand stayed busy, working my stiffened shaft, spreading pre-cum around the head, and playing with my balls. Her efforts had their desired effect, as I was sure she could feel the beating of my heart through the pulsing in unison with my swollen cock.

She finally relinquished her oral ministrations to my chest and continued on her journey, nuzzling my stomach until my abdominal muscles twitched. She bent at the waist, looking directly at my cock as she held it in her hand, her head resting for a moment on my stomach. I had my hand on her shoulder, and as she stuck out her tongue for her first taste of my fluids, she let go of my cock just long enough to reach up and grasp my hand on her shoulder. She gently pulled my arm across her, and pressed my palm against her breast. She sighed contentedly, and then went back to concentrating on teasing my cock some more with her tongue, taking my length once again in her fist.

She took long, loving licks up and down my rigid shaft, and alternated between licking across the head and flicking her tongue around the edge of my helmet. Her hand pumped me intermittently, more to keep my hardness from decreasing than to provide me with any anticipation of release. That's not to say that I was in any danger of deflating, of course, not with my Luscious doing all she wanted to me. I was happy to let her have her way with me.

In fact, I wordlessly encouraged her by playing with her soft boob, just the way I knew she liked. I squeezed her, pinched at her distended nipple, and caressed the small weight with the palm of my hand. I tickled the swelling mound of her other breast with just my fingertips, but couldn't reach it the way we were lying together, so I contented myself with teasing her the best I could.

After licking off my pre-cum and tasting the entire shaft, Kayla took the head into her warm mouth, and sealed her lips against my stiff rod. She kept on teasing me with her tongue as she applied suction. Slowly she dropped down, taking more of me into her mouth. Her fingers were wrapped around my cock at the base, and she jacked me just a little as she took me as deeply as she could, my head hitting the back of her throat. When I felt the tip against the constriction of her throat, I pinched her nipple hard, rolling the nub between my thumb and index finger. She moaned, and the vibrations from her vocal chords raced through my shaft and directly into my aching balls, nearly setting me off.

She pulled her mouth back off me, and then began bobbing her head fast, her lips scraping along the taut skin of my cock. Up and down, deep and then back, alternately sucking hard and letting go, her tongue in constant motion against me. She would take me to her throat, and then back off, occasionally lifting off me altogether I could feel her teeth just pressing against me as she took a couple of quick, shuddering breaths before plunging back down on me, resuming her intense suction.

Before long, she achieved her goal. I managed to stammer out, "K... Kay... I'm gonna... uh..."

It was just enough warning. She backed off quickly, until just my little head was still encased in her mouth. My hips pumped up, pushing my cock a little deeper into her mouth, and I shot off.

That first spurt must have been a powerful one, because she coughed twice, and my come spilled out of her mouth and down her flexing hand. She clamped back down on me, however, and took the rest that I had to give her, another six or seven pulses of seed. Her jaw clenched and she reflexively swallowed each time I jetted into her mouth. She worked my cock with her fist, pumping every last drop out of my system and into her mouth. When I was finally done, she sucked on me for a moment longer, making sure she had coaxed the last of my spend from me, and then she tenderly licked up the

remains that had escaped when she coughed. She even cleaned off her hand, swallowing every pearly drop of my semen.

She scooted back up to lie with her head back on my shoulder. I put my arm around her and held her to me. She dropped her hand and touched my shrinking cock for just a moment before cupping my balls possessively as she snuggled up against me.

"I think he liked it," she whispered with a smile.

I rolled over toward her and showered her eyes and cheeks with tiny kisses.

"He liked it," I confirmed. "He liked it a lot."

It was my turn to give. I kissed her softly on her lips. She closed her eyes, smiling, and let herself relax under my attentions. I nibbled on her ears, just the way she had done to me, and took care to lick at the tender spot behind her earlobes. I had one arm still around her, and my other hand began circling her boob, exploring her soft flesh. I took my time tasting her skin along her neck, and showered the hollow of her throat with kisses. I teased her skin across her chest with my tongue and lips, traveling back and forth, inching ever so slowly toward her rosy peaks, until my arm slipped from behind her neck.

My fingertips spiraled around her soft mound, closing in on the goal of her swollen nipple, as I dropped my head down between her breasts and tasted her salty flesh. I licked around her left breast as my hand teased her right one, circling her swollen areola and nipple, but never giving her the satisfaction of my touch. I sucked at her soft mound, moving my lips around and around, getting closer to the prize. She moaned, and arched her back, trying to will her breast into my mouth, but I resisted for as long as I could.

Finally, in a last assault, I clamped my lips on her nipple at the same instant I grasped her other swollen bud between my fingers. I pinched and bit simultaneously, and she screeched and tensed up as the sudden onslaught washed in waves of pleasure through her. Her leg began rubbing up and down my body, but I didn't think she was

even aware she was doing it. I put my leg between hers, and pushed my knee up against her crotch. Almost immediately I could feel her hot oils leaking from her pussy, dribbling onto my knee. She unconsciously hunched her crotch against the hard bone of my knee, imparting lightning bolts of pleasure from her middle up into her brain.

She clutched my head to her breast, and I opened my mouth and sucked in as much of her breast as I could. Kayla was panting hard, unable to catch her breath, and I didn't want to give her any respite. I could feel her distended nipple against my tongue, and I worked that rough nub back and forth as I sucked.

I let go of her other breast and let my hand wander down her tummy. I found her belly button, her stomach heaving as she panted, and I tickled her a little there. I abandoned her breast and let my mouth follow my hand down as I repositioned myself between her outstretched legs. My fingers found her patch of sparse hair, and continued down until my fingertips felt her dewy slit. I stuck my tongue into her belly button as I spread my fingers and lightly rubbed along the outside of her swollen pussy lips, tickling the tender skin of her inner thighs, from the top of her opening to her little puckered anus.

Her leg muscles were quivering by then, and I hadn't even gotten to the really sensitive spots yet. She was on edge, and just the slightest stimulation was going to send her over, so I slowed down and let her ease back from the precipice just a little. I wanted to keep her balanced on the pinnacle for just a little while longer.

I ran my palms up and down her inner thighs, from her drooling pussy to her knees, and followed my hands with my lips. I kissed the soft skin of her legs, and used my thumbs to press against her big leg muscles just a little, trying to ease her twitching tissues. Once I felt the tension in her lower body relax just a little, I started working my way back up that long expanse of leg. This time, I didn't retreat from my goal, though. My lips continued tracing a path along her sensitive

skin until her short pubic hairs were tickling my nose, and my tongue was exploring her outer lips.

I cupped my tongue and delved in, searching for the well of her hot lubrication. I found it, and lapped up that tangy oil, breathing deeply of her clean, intoxicating scent. I used my fingers to spread her open just a little. My index finger traced a path from her vagina to her hooded clit, picking up a coating of moisture on the way. My tongue followed my finger, and when I got to her swelling clitoris, I played with the little nub with the tip of my tongue.

At the same time, I drew my finger back down her, and twisted it into her tight opening, to the first knuckle. She hunched at me, perhaps trying to get my intruding finger deeper into her, and the movement of her hips bumped her sensitive clit against my mouth. She cried out softly, and nearly toppled once again.

I halted all my movement, keeping tongue and fingers and lips still until she retreated from the precipice once more. Her breath was still hitching, and her hips were still in motion, but after a few moments I sensed that she was again a few steps away from spilling over. With her calmed down just a little, I cautiously continued playing with her. I crooked my finger within her, and rubbed my fingertip against her tight walls. I slowly pushed it further inside her, stimulating the nerve endings within her. I nibbled at her clit, and then used my tongue to lap up more of her flowing juices.

After a slow intrusion to the second knuckle, I withdrew my finger, and then plunged back into her. Her honeyed walls tightened on my finger, and I felt my cock twitch. It was as if my finger was communicating about how it felt to my cock, which desperately wanted to be where my finger currently resided.

I finger-fucked her a few times while I gathered up her oils with my tongue, and then I used my index and my middle finger together. I worked them in and out of her, feeling her pussy exude more heat and more lubrication to accommodate the thicker intrusion.

At the last, I plunged my fingers as deeply into her as I could, and then rubbed on her distended clitoris with my thumb, my fist pressed firmly against her pussy. The combination was enough to send her off, and she came, spectacularly.

She screeched breathlessly, and pinched at her nipples, her eyes squeezed shut. Her hips bumped at my hand and my face, and I kissed the top of her damp slit as my thumb played its tune on her sensitive organ. I twisted my fingers just a little, and she raggedly flexed her hips in concert as wave after wave of pleasure coursed through her. Her knees were splayed out, and her legs were quivering as her body worked her through her rolling orgasms.

Finally, after surfing through several hills and troughs of her ultimate pleasure, Kayla blindly reached down and grabbed my wrist.

"Oh, God, Sean, no more, no... no more..."

She lifted my hand away from her center and pulled on my arm to bring me back up to her. Her eyes were still closed, and random synapses were still firing behind her eyelids. The sensations were so powerful she was almost grimacing. I flopped down beside her, prouder than I should have been for being able to impart so much pleasure to her.

Kayla was on her back, her legs still splayed, and I lay on my side and let my arm drop across her stomach. She distractedly reached for my hand and moved it up to caress her swollen breast again. After making sure my palm was positioned properly, she dropped her hand down and took my hard cock into her fist.

"Ah," she sighed. "That's so nice."

"Better than nice," I agreed.

We stayed still together like that for several minutes, until I felt that her systems had stabilized. I experimented by lightly squeezing her breast. She wordlessly replied by squeezing my cock. I rubbed my palm up and down across her nipple, she answered by moving her hand up and down my shaft. I used my fingers to jiggle her

pliant boob, and she reciprocated by jiggling my balls. Action, reaction. Give and take. Measures and countermeasures.

She giggled, and turned her head to look at me. I could see a twinkle of mischief in her eye as she took the initiative. She tapped her fingers against the base of my rod, and I followed by lightly drumming against her nipple. She used her fist to jack me, and I pinched at her nipples, each one in its turn.

She smiled, and rolled over onto her side. She let go of my cock long enough to push me on my shoulder, so that I rolled onto my back. She reached back down to grasp my hard dick again, holding it up straight as she swung her leg over me to straddle me. She perched over me, still holding onto my rod, and grinned down at me as I anticipated feeling her warmth as she took me into her body.

She wiggled my cock up and down, rubbing the head against her pussy lips, transferring moisture from her to me, from me to her. I groaned, and my hips flexed, but she lifted herself up out of the way, prolonging my anticipation, doing unto me as I had been doing unto her so recently. She allowed her weight to settle down just a fraction, so that just the tip of my cock felt her tight entrance. My cock twitched in need, but she didn't allow it to ascend any further. My brain froze up from the suspense, and when she saw a look very much like panic in my eyes, she judged that it was time. She bent her knees a little more, still holding onto my shaft as it slowly entered her.

Slowly, agonizingly slowly, she dropped lower, until her hand was in the way. She let go of me, and put both her hands on my shoulders to steady herself as she allowed her body to accept my flesh. She swiveled her hips just a little, almost literally screwing herself down onto me, until I felt her ass cheeks settle against my thighs. I was fully inside her, and the feeling was exquisite.

She was every bit as tight as my fingers had promised, and my cock swelled against her constraining walls in remembrance. I saw her eyes widen as she felt me flexing inside her, and she grinned at

me as she tightened her muscles against me in reply. If I hadn't already come once, just that little bit of extra pressure might have set me off.

As it was, I felt like I could stay there, imbedded deeply within her, forever. I reached up for her, and pulled her down for a kiss. She opened her mouth against mine, and our tongues danced an ancient dance, the echoes reverberating through both our bodies and creating harmonious movement between us at our connection point.

She rose and fell on me, impaling herself over and over, and I flexed my hips in unison. We moved as if we were made for each other, and in those moments, I could almost believe in the concept of soulmates. *Surely Kayla and I were meant to be together? How else could two people fit so well, so naturally, together?*

These and other timeless questions shattered into millions of shards of crystal as the demands of our bodies took over. Suddenly, it was a race. Our kiss was forgotten in our concentration of the sensations being created, as we loved each other. I felt my impending climax rushing toward me, inexorable in its intensity and its commitment. I pulled her down toward me, but she was arching her back in the throes of her own ecstasy, her head thrown back. It put her breasts in range of my mouth, and I took the advantage. I locked my lips around her right nipple, and sucked hard on her.

She screeched, and practically bucked herself off me as she pumped her body up and down on me, lost in the throes of her orgasm. I pushed up with all my might, trying to bury myself inside her warm and inviting tunnel, and I shot off, my seed splashing against her walls and her cervix, the overflow leaking out around my invading cock. I grabbed her ass cheeks and pulled her down hard, trying for even more depth, but I was as far into her as I could get. We clutched at each other, lost to the intense feelings that were coursing through us, and we rode out the storms together.

After I had emptied myself into her, my tired muscles gave out, and I fell back to the blanket. Kayla's nipple popped out of my

mouth, and she collapsed on top of me, exhausted and sweaty, her chin resting against my shoulder. I folded my arms around her and held her there, happy to be with her, happy to have shared with her.

I felt my cock beginning to wilt inside her. She must have felt it, too, but she didn't move at all.

"I love you so much," she whispered.

"And I love you," I murmured softly.

We stayed that way for what felt like hours. Finally, the dewy night air began to chill the sweat on our tired bodies, and we were forced to move. She sat up, and my well-used member slipped from her pussy, landing on my stomach with a wet plop. Kayla giggled tiredly.

"'Bye, Porter," she said, with just a touch of regret. "Thanks for visiting."

"Thanks for having me," I replied.

"Actually, I think you had me," she came back with a smile.

"Well, thanks for letting me have my way with you," I replied. I gave her a soft kiss. She threw her arms around my neck and reciprocated with a kiss of her own.

"You can have your way with me anytime you want," she said, her lips still pressed to mine. She looked at me cross-eyed for a moment, and then let me go.

"Clothes," she muttered. "They're here someplace, I know they are."

"Here they are," I said, holding up her tank top and her shorts. "Just do me a favor?"

She nodded, smiling.

"Don't cover up my favorite parts, okay?" I asked.

She laughed. "I think I'd have to go naked, then," she said.

"Okay, if you insist," I replied.

She grabbed her clothes out of my hand. "You're a lecherous old man, Porter," she said.

"Mmmm...hmmmm," I agreed.

"And I love it," she finished.

* * * * * * * * * *

The second week of July, I was scheduled to fly down to Gainesville for orientation. I was looking forward to going, and getting away from soccer camps for just a little while. My dad accompanied me down, and we had a really good time. We stayed in one of the dorms, and the university had activities and tours set up from about nine in the morning until ten or later at night.

Aside from the typical campus tours, they also had scheduled a pig roast outside the student union on the first evening. There was a big crowd, and the scenery was fantastic. Even my dad couldn't help ogling the college coeds, and I had trouble even walking around without stumbling. My head seemed to be on a swivel as groups of gorgeous southern lasses walked by. Some were even giving me the eye right back.

College, I thought. *The best time of our lives.* Temptation abounded, but would I be strong?

I also had an afternoon scheduled with Pick Cropper. He showed me around the athletic fields, the locker rooms, the weight rooms, and the fitness center. He gave me a list of all the players for the coming season so I could familiarize myself with names and positions. He introduced me to his secretary, Eunice, and we talked about his plans and his expectations for the upcoming season. Eunice filled me in on my job in one of the stadium gift shops, working during football and basketball games. Of course, it meant that I got into all the games for free, also, including the ones I wasn't working, so it was all okay.

Pick and my academic counselor also let me know what my schedule for the first semester was going to be like, and it was tough.

My class schedule was heavy on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and I had mostly labs on Mondays and Wednesdays. I had no classes or labs scheduled for Friday, but there was a reason for that. Soccer took up all weekend, including Friday.

My soccer schedule for the fall was brutal. There were only occasional days off scheduled, never more than one at a time, and no breaks from school or soccer until Christmas. No Labor Day time off, no October mid-semester break, no Thanksgiving at home. We played straight through, from mid-August until November, when the NCAA tournament began. Pick had a calendar marked for the three weeks of the tournament, with tentative locations of games, right up to the Final Four in Seattle the first week of December. He brooked no thoughts of not making the tournament, and everything he did for the team was directly attributable to that three-week period. He fully expected his team to make the tournament, and would accept nothing less from his players or his assistant coaches. He impressed this attitude on me the entire time I was there for orientation. It was scary, but it was also exhilarating. It would be a complete change from Coach Neville's style, and I was excited to be a part of it. Pick's enthusiasm was contagious.

I talked excitedly to my dad about the program during most of our flight back home. I was keyed up, really looking forward to getting to school and starting in on college-level playing. My orientation visit had triggered a desire in me to get started. It wasn't until we were nearly home that it suddenly occurred to me that Kayla, with two more years of high school remaining before she would feel this same excitement, might not share my joy in leaving for college.

Mom and Stephen picked us up at the airport. By the time we got home, I had pretty much convinced myself that the best thing for Kayla was to let her go out with others while I was gone. I just couldn't see how a girl as vivacious as Luscious would want to sit at home every night, just because her boyfriend was away at college.

No Homecoming, no Winter Festival, no Turnabout, no Prom, no Saturday nights at Mike's Pizza Parlor. It wasn't fair to her. I knew it, even if she didn't. There was just one flaw in my logic: I didn't know how I was going to be able to tell her it was okay with me if she dated somebody else while I was gone.

When you're twenty-seven or twenty-eight, a two-year difference in age with your partner, one way or the other, doesn't mean much. At sixteen, seventeen, or eighteen, it can be a huge difference. I started looking ahead toward college, while Kayla was still going to have to labor through her junior and senior years of high school at home. Something would have to change. I knew it, even if Kayla hadn't yet recognized it.

From that point on, for most of the rest of that summer that I was home, Kayla knew something was bothering me. Many times I was very irritable with her, and I was sure I was cruelly hurting her, yet I didn't say anything to her about it. She assumed it was the work schedule I had arranged for myself, or perhaps anxiety about going away to school, and I didn't correct her. I was chicken.

Finally, though, I was running out of time. I arranged to take her out to a nice dinner at a quiet, out of the way restaurant on a Saturday night early in August. I was really nervous on the drive to the restaurant, and Kayla knew something was up. She held herself together, though, until we were almost through with our main course.

"So, Sean," she said, setting down her fork carefully, "do you want to let me know what's going on?"

I picked up my water glass, but my hand was shaking so much, I thought I would spill all over myself, so I set it back down again. I took a deep breath, and threw myself to the wolves.

"I think you should date while I'm gone," I said without preamble.

"Really? Why?" She was calm, at least. Much calmer than I was.

"Kay, look. You're sixteen. You've got two more years of high school. I can't expect you to just sit at home, just because I'm not around," I said.

She glared at me a little. "So you're telling me what I should do?"

"No, of course not," I said. "I'm just saying..."

"You want me to go out while you're gone," she stated flatly. Not a question, but a statement. "Is this your way of saying you want to be free to go out when you're away?"

"No, I..."

"Because you can," she interrupted.

"That's not what I..."

"But I can't, Sean."

"Kay..."

"I love you," she said simply. "I won't compromise that."

"I'm not saying you should compromise... Look, sweetie, I'm just afraid you're going to get too lonely, and I would worry about you. That's all."

She sat there quietly and looked at me. I thought our conversation was going reasonably well, and was just about to silently congratulate myself on my magnanimous gesture on her behalf, when tears began flowing down her cheeks. She didn't seem to notice them as she sadly looked at me.

"Oh, damn it, Kayla, I'm just trying to make it easier for you," I said miserably.

"Easier for me? When have I ever asked you to make it easier for me, Sean?" There was a little hitch in her voice now. She shook her head as she finally noticed her tears. She absent-mindedly wiped at her cheeks with her palms. Her head dropped, and she put her hands in her lap. "Are you breaking up with me?" she whispered.

"God, no! No, Kayla, absolutely not!" I was desperate now. I had, once again, fucked this up royally. *How could I fix it?* "I love you, Kayla. You've got to know that."

She stood up abruptly. “Pay the bill, Sean. I’ll be in the car. We’ll talk there.” And she walked out, her back stiff as she turned away.

Our check was on the table. I glanced at it, and tossed enough money onto the table to cover it. I stood up and hurried after her.

Kayla was already in the car, hugging the passenger door when I got to my car. As soon as I closed my door, she turned to me.

“Don’t you dare give up on us so easily,” she said angrily.

“Me? Kay, I’m not giving up. I’m just facing facts.”

She snorted. “That’s not what it sounds like.”

“I’ve never been happier than when I’m with you, Kayla. You’ve got to know that. But two years is a long time...”

“It’s not so long,” she said defensively.

“When you’re a teenager, a month is a long time,” I said. “Two years is almost incomprehensible.”

She smiled weakly. *At least she smiled,* I thought. It was a positive sign.

“I can wait two years,” she whispered.

“So can I,” I said. “But you still should be able to have fun while you’re stuck here.”

“I can’t have fun if you’re not here,” she said quietly.

“Yes, you can,” I said. “But it had better be the right kind of innocent fun.”

She burst out laughing, in spite of her tears.

“You really are a piece of work, Porter,” she said, wiping her eyes with a tissue.

“It’s a work-in-progress, I’m afraid,” I said.

“Slow progress,” she remarked. She sat up and slipped her seatbelt around her waist. I started up the car and headed for her house.

When we pulled into the driveway, she unsnapped her seatbelt and knelt on the seat. She reached over and grabbed me by my ears. She pulled me painfully over toward her side, and kissed me hard.

“Ow,” I complained, though I really didn’t mean it.

"Don't you ever scare me like that again, Sean," she warned. I wasn't really sure how I had scared her, but if I ever figured it out, I promised myself I wouldn't do it ever again. She let go of my ears and opened her door. Without another word, she walked up her driveway to her back door, and went inside.

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On the surface, our conversation that evening seemed to end up okay, but there was a tension between us from that point on that we just couldn't seem to dissipate. We were still struggling to repair the damage the last week I was home.

My dad had rented a U-Haul trailer for our trip down to Florida. I spent my last couple of days figuring out what I should take, and what would fit in my small dorm room. Stephen helped me load my stuff into the trailer. With Michael gone most of the time, and me leaving, he was going to be more like an only child. He seemed like he was looking forward to it, but I didn't think he would be able to stand all the attention Mom and Dad were going to give him, now that he was the last kid home.

Kayla came over for dinner on my last night. After we finished eating, she helped my mom clear the dishes and rinse them. The two of them were talking girl talk in the kitchen, no men allowed.

When they finished, Mom and Kayla came into the family room, where Stephen, Dad, and I were watching television. My mom stepped over and shut off the TV.

"What would you say to a movie, Jim?" she asked my father.

Dad looked at her in surprise. "Sure," he replied. He stood up.

"Stephen? Why don't you come with us?" Mom suggested.

"But, Mom..." he started.

"Stephen? Why don't you come with us?" Mom insisted. The look on her face said she would brook no disagreement.

He got the hint. "Okay," he mumbled, and he tromped up the stairs to get some shoes.

I said, "Mom, I don't want..."

"Sean, we won't be home until midnight," interrupted my mother, giving me a significant look. "Not a minute before. Now, remember, we're leaving promptly at eight tomorrow morning, so get your rest."

She hustled my dad and my brother out of the house, leaving Kayla and me alone.

We watched out the front window as my dad's car pulled out of the driveway and rolled down the street. Once it was out of sight, Kayla took my hand, and silently led me to the staircase, pulling me along the hallway to my room. It looked oddly empty, with most of the posters and pictures down, my closet mostly empty, my everyday stuff packed up and moved out.

The sun was getting lower in the sky, and the room was bathed in a golden light. Kayla pulled her shirt off over her head, reached behind her and loosened her bra, and shrugged it off. She draped her shirt and bra across my desk chair, and unsnapped her shorts, shimmying to get them off. She took off her panties, and set them on the chair, on top of her shorts. The pale triangle of hair at the juncture of her legs was only slightly darker than the hair on her head as she stood there, waiting patiently, uninhibitedly, for me to get undressed.

The lump in my shorts made it harder for me to get my clothes off smoothly, but I finally managed. After dropping my shorts to the floor, I stood before her, my manhood standing up in anticipation, and looked at the loveliest girl I would ever know. She glanced down at my erection and smiled a little, and then reached over and turned the bedspread down. She slipped between my sheets, and held out her arms to me.

"Come make love to me, Sean," she said quietly. Her voice cracked just a little, giving away a hint of the emotions that were just under her surface calm.

I lay down next to her, and took her into my arms, and just held her to me for the longest time. I desperately wanted the clock to stand still, so that moment could have been preserved forever.

Kayla's lovemaking that night was alternately tender and fierce, demanding and giving. We pleasured each other, rested, and began again, each of us scaling heights we had never dreamed existed before. It was somehow a fitting farewell, exhilarating and sad.

At the last, we were holding each other, heedless of the sheen of perspiration that coated our skin. I brushed the pale hair from her forehead, and kissed away the glistening and salty tears from her cheeks. At a few minutes before midnight, we finally got up, and dressed silently. I walked her out into the warm night, to her car, and stayed there on the sidewalk, still watching long after her taillights had disappeared.

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The next day, I dozed and daydreamed of my beautiful girl, my own Kayla Lehigh, as we drove through boring, flat and unchanging farmland, heading south away from just about everything I had known in my life. I sat in the back seat, wedged against the car door across from my sleeping younger brother, and watched as cornfields and beanfields rolled past the window in a nearly endless procession. I held a soccer ball in my lap, a physical reminder of one of the two constants I could use to navigate through the treacherous waters of the future. I was moving on, and soccer was the southern point of my internal compass.

The northern point of that compass of mine was the pale-haired girl I was leaving behind.

THE END

PLAYING THE GAME II: PLAYING TO WIN