party everyone else was going to that weekend. The chance encounter occurred shortly before midnight, just as Matt was becoming bored with the party.

“Hey man,” someone cried from across the room. “I know you!”

Matt looked up and saw a skinny kid his age staggering toward him. He was holding a can of Molson beer and wore a dazed smile on his face. He was a neatly dressed, tall kid with a solid chin like a boxer. Matt first thought that the stranger’s hair was disheveled from a hard night of partying. As he drew closer, however, Matt realized that it was in disarray purposefully. He also noticed that he looked somewhat familiar.

The stranger reached Matt and plopped down on the couch next to him.

“You’re fast,” was all the stranger said.

“What are you drinking?”

“You can’t beat it.”

Matt, entertained by Tyson’s charisma, opted to stay at the party for a little while longer. The two talked for awhile, and Matt decided that he wasn’t only amused by Tyson, but he even liked the guy. At Kenwood, Tyson was almost Matt’s equal. He was a carefree leader who loved to have a good time at any expense.

“On a scale of one to ten,” Matt said about a half hour into the conversation, “how drunk are you?”

Tyson looked at his beer and then up to the ceiling, apparently counting how many drinks he had consumed to this point.
"I would say a four," he answered. "I've run meets worse off than this. I just sleep it off during the girls’ race."

That statement triggered something in Matt's head that made him remember why Tyson looked so familiar.

"I do know you!" Matt leapt from his seat and exclaimed.

"Yikes, how drunk are you?"

"Just a little." Matt answered, "but you're the guy with the pillow at the meets!"

Tyson pointed to himself and proudly nodded his head. "That's me."

Matt recalled that he was walking around before one particular race when he saw a runner, whom he now knew as Tyson McGrath, lying in the shade with a pillow. Matt questioned the lazy runner and he had explained that he always brings a pillow. Always had.

"You know," Tyson said after Matt's outburst, "my whole team brings a pillow to races now. I guess I'm a trend-setter."

That was it. That was all Matt needed for inspiration. He called Jamie the next day and told her to grab her world records book.

"Look up," he ordered, "the largest pillow fight ever."

"What? Like, the most people at one time?"

"Yeah."

Jamie thumbed through the pages and eventually found the answer: 623.

"You want to have a pillow fight at a cross country meet?"

"Yeah," Joe said, challenging Jamie to come up with a reason why not. "They'll love it. All we have to do is get it approved."
The approval part of the project was easier said than done. Because Mrs. Miles had been so accepting of Matt’s ideas, he went to her one more time. He was less coy this time, confident that this idea would be seen as his best yet. Mrs. Miles, however, didn’t see it that way. She said it wasn’t a bad idea; it would be good for publicity or as a fund-raiser, but a cross country meet was not the right time. Not only would Brown have to approve it, but so would all the other teams involved. There was, she said, no way that it could be done at the Martin Tuff Invitational. The athletic director’s rebuttal served as another hurdle, but the word was out.

Soon, Brown High School students in every class were questioning Matt. When was it going to happen? Where will we do it? How can we help? Matt, however, didn’t want any help unless it came from Jamie. It was their aspiration, their joint endeavor. When rumors began to spread that Matt was plotting a large-scale pillow fight without the school’s approval, Principal McWilliams called Matt and Jamie into his office. Jamie, who was terrified of being called to see the principal, decided that she would not speak out unless she was asked to do so. It was up to Matt to do all the talking. The principal, however, was the one who said the most.

“Okay, guys, here’s the deal,” he began after asking his pupils to have a seat. “You have this plan, and it’s a pretty darn creative one, if I may say so.” Matt didn’t dare say thank you, for fear that McWilliams was being sarcastic. The principal continued. “Mrs. Miles told you that it can’t be done at a cross country meet, but I’ve been hearing that you’re plotting something else behind our backs.” Again, Matt didn’t speak. “You two will be in a whole heck of a lot of trouble if that happens. Do you understand?”

“Yeah,” Matt said. Jamie nodded.
“Okay, but I like the idea.”

Matt then felt compelled to speak. “I just think tha—“

“Matt, I’m not through talking,” McWilliams said. “I want this to happen. I think it will be a fun thing for our school. And it has already unified everybody from what I hear. So, I figure it can’t hurt. But, in order for the school board to approve this thing, I need a reason to do it.”

At first, neither Matt nor Jamie responded. Jamie was too scared and Matt was too stunned. Principal McWilliams had just given permission for the two to enter the the chase for a world record, and Matt was speechless. After a long, awkward silence, Jamie spoke up.

“Well, maybe we can do it as something fun after a football game.”

“I’m listening.”

“You know, usually student council holds a dance after home games, but those always are dull anyway. So maybe we can have more interest and inspire more, as you said, unity by doing this.”

“I like it,” McWilliams said. “I’ll pencil it in for Homecoming. That game always has the biggest turnout.”

Jamie stood up to leave, but Matt was still in shock. She grabbed his sleeve and pulled him up. McWilliams laughed as the two turned and walked toward the door.

“Oh yeah, one more thing,” he said before Matt and Jamie could leave. “I consider this a personal favor to you guys: So you need to return the favor to me. How do the titles Junior Class President and Vice President sound to you?” The sophomores
looked at each other. “I’ll let you decide who will be who next year, but if you don’t
want to do it, then I don’t want us to have a pillow fight.”

Matt and Jamie immediately agreed to pay Principal McWilliams’ small ransom
and left his office beaming. And that is how the world record attempt came to be a big,
auscous pillow fight after the Homecoming game in their junior year: Joe first came up
with the idea of a nearby cross country invitational; almost thirty more schools joined the
bandwagon; Matt met at a party the ever-sleepy Tyson, who took pillows to meets;
rumors started to spread about the fight even though the idea was turned down; and the
brainchildren behind the idea consented to be class president and vice president. It was
not what Jamie and Matt had expected at all, but they would take it.

“We did it,” Matt said to Joe, Nathan, and Staci shortly after leaving the
principal’s office. “Next year’s Homecoming will mark our step into the record books.”

Staci and Nathan offered their most heartfelt congratulations. Joe, thinking too
much as always, opted to temporarily halt the celebration.

“Good luck getting seven hundred people to bring pillows to the game,” Joe said
with a smirk. Matt reached out to swat Joe in the back of the head, but Joe, who had been
swatted quite a few times over the years, dodged Matt’s right hand. Joe laughed at his
mood-altering comment. “I’m just saying, you have a lot of planning to do.”

At Joe’s elaboration, Staci reached up and swatted him in the back of the head.
He didn’t see that one coming.

Joe’s caveat was accurate, though. Matt and Jamie spent remaining months of
school planning the event. They were told that the fight had to be at least one minute
long, there had to be video evidence of the event, and each participant had to sign his or
her name after the fight was over. It sounded simple, but there was one glaring problem: Brown’s enrollment wasn’t much more than four hundred. If everyone showed up for the football game, which was unlikely considering the cliquish nature of high school, they would still be somewhere around 250 people shy of the record. Parents and teachers, he assumed, were more likely to chaperone than participate if they attended the brouhaha at all. If the word got out beyond the confines of Brown High School, they could count on a few graduates and friends from other schools. But no matter how they figured it, Matt and Jamie calculated that they needed to recruit at least 150 more participants – for cushion, if nothing else. For that, Matt turned to Tyson McGrath.

“You would do something like that,” Tyson said when Matt called him with the news. “I’m in, man. What do you need from me?”

“I need at least 150 people.”

“Well, that I can do. What we have to worry about is people killing each other. Whenever Kenwood plays Brown, one group of students leaves the game pissed off. Watch out for pillows stuffed with rocks.”

“My people will behave themselves if you can see that your do the same,” Matt said. “If not, we never do business again.”

“Well, I’d hate to lose this fine working relationship, so you’ve got yourself a deal. I’ll see you when I see you.”

The numbers were taken care of. Jamie asked all the teachers in the school to volunteer at the event. The faculty, eager to keep the pillow fight safe, quickly jumped at the chanced to pat down pillows and count heads before and after the battle. The football manager agreed to film the event with the camera used to tape the game from the press
box. A few police officers and the ambulance crew, which would be at the game anyway, agreed to stay an extra hour to monitor the fight. By the time all the pieces were in place, it was September of Matt, Joe, and Jamie’s junior year. Staci was a senior, Nathan had graduated and started attending the local technical college, and Marty Tuff was enjoying retirement as best as he could.
Chapter 14

On the day of the pillow fight, you could barely tell that there was an important football game to be played before the mêlée began. As was the tradition, the football team members wore their jerseys to school and the cheerleaders donned their outfits and passed out candy. On a typical Friday, the sports-minded students would talk about the game and what to expect and the social-minded would talk about where to meet before the game and where to go after. This was no ordinary game night, though. Both aforementioned cliques were focusing on the one thing that bound the school together more than any event in recent memory. The potentially largest pillow fight of all time was the athletic and social event of the year. To get an early start on the evening’s festivities, many students brought their pillows to school, a move that posed a problem for some of Brown’s most boring teachers. The girls decorated their white pillowcases with the names and football uniform numbers of their boyfriends, and the boys practiced for the big fight in between classes.

Matt silently wondered if there would be any stuffing left in the boys’ pillows by the time the fight was to take place. It was a satisfying day for him, though. From the moment he stepped foot into the school on that particular Friday morning, Matt was greeted with smiles, pats on the back, and only occasional slaps with a pillow. He went from being a run-of-the-mill popular kid to being a well-respected member of the high school elite. The faculty adored him for unifying the student body in a way they had never seen. The students simply thought that it was a great idea, one that would no doubt go down in the annals of Brown history. In uniting the school, Matt essentially fulfilled his freshman-year aspirations in a single day: he was becoming the school’s unofficial
favorite person all while getting his name placed in the coveted book of world records. And the whole time, Jamie was right at his side.

Matt walked into school on the morning of the pillow fight and headed straight toward Jamie’s locker. She was there, spinning the combination lock and looking generally unconcerned with what was happening around her. She glanced up and found her friend leaning against the row of lockers. He smiled a teenager’s flirtatious smile and she blushed severely. She looked down at her combination briefly, but raised her head again with a smile the size of a crescent moon. Not a word was spoken, but plenty was said.

It was almost comical that Jamie was at this point. She was a coy, reserved girl who hadn’t made much of a wave in high school up until then. It’s tough to make a wave when you are doing just a little bit of everything. Staying true to the first conversation she had had with Matt in high school, Jamie had tried a lot of things in her first two years. She had been a cheerleader for a little while before quitting the season early to focus on the academic team. She was an intelligent girl, but didn’t have the quickness that was almost a requirement for competing in the trivia-laden competitions. Next had come a stint on the women’s golf team that Jamie vowed would not last more than one season because it could potentially conflict with the drama club’s fall play. After golf, she dabbled in a few clubs such as the Spirit Squad, which decorated hallways to induce school spirit, and the Grizzly Gazette, the school’s irregularly published newspaper. The first semester of her junior year brought, via Principal McWilliams’ stipulation, a term as class president. Out of all Jamie’s endeavors, the pillow fight planning was the only one that had her a campus celebrity. It was a role that Jamie wasn’t expecting, wasn’t
comfortable with, and probably wouldn’t have survived if it weren’t for Matt’s experienced lead.

When Matt appeared at her locker the morning before the fight, Jamie truly felt different. She felt like the most popular girl in school being hit on by the most popular boy. And, essentially, that feeling was reality, even if it were only for a day. They were the superstars. Everyone else was running around like mad (that day at Brown ended up being a superlatively unproductive one), and it was all because of the unofficial Homecoming king and queen.

During fourth period – history time for Matt – Principal McWilliams poked his torso into the classroom and asked Matt to join him in the hallway. Matt’s heart plummeted into his stomach. The idea that McBill, as the likable principal was nicknamed, would cancel the pillow brawl somehow crept into his mind and sweat formed on his brow as he entered the hallway. McWilliams grinned and put an arm around Matt’s shoulders.

“My boy,” McBill said, “you have really outdone yourself on this one.”

That was all he said. Matt couldn’t muster a response, as his vocal chords were somewhere in his belly next to his heart. McWilliams started walking toward the main offices, and Matt slumped alongside.

“I thought you’d ask me what’s going on,” the principal said after a short while, “but it looks like you don’t have anything to say. So, I’ll just tell you that there is a news team here to talk to you.”

Matt’s brow dried up, his internal organs ascended back into place, and a smile crossed his lips.
“Don’t mess with me.”

“I’m not messing with you,” McWilliams said as they entered the office. “I don’t pull students out of class to play practical jokes. I already talked to them, and now they want you to do the rest of the talking.”

The reporter and cameraman introduced themselves and proceeded to set up for the interview. They attached a lapel microphone to Matt’s shirt, dabbed some of the shine off his face and began the discussion. Matt, who was the beneficiary of only about a ninety-second warning, was a natural. He was witty and he answered the questions in sharp, sound bite-friendly language. “This is B.Y.O.P,” Matt said at one juncture in the interview, “Bring Your Own Pillow.” The camera and the reporter loved him, and told him his story would be featured on the five and six o’clock newscasts. As the team wrapped up its interview, Matt spoke without prompting from the interviewer.

“If you put anything I said into this story,” Matt declared, “put this: don’t think of this as Matt Wade’s pillow fight. This is an event that wouldn’t have happened without my friend Jamie Boyd’s hard work, and the Brown students’ will to make this idea a reality. That’s it.”

The reporter smiled and nodded before telling her cameraman to put the equipment away. Neither Matt nor Principal McWilliams could have guessed what would happen next. Many Brown students and thousands of people in the viewing area tuned in to Channel 7 News at 5 o’clock that evening. They were treated to a lead story that billed the pillow fight as the event of the weekend.

“Students across the state of Indiana will celebrate Homecoming tonight with a football game and a celebratory dance,” the Channel 7 anchor said. “But a group of
students at Brown High School wanted to do something unique this year. What they came up with might knock you right out. Leslie Wilkes has the story."

The pretty reporter that Matt had met earlier in the day then took over. She gave the five W’s of the story and used quotes that turned Matt into a hero. “This school is blessed with a lot of strong leaders,” McWilliams said on camera. “Matt is one of them, and he and his friends have united this school in a way I’ve never seen.”

Matt, Joe, and Jamie arrived at the game earlier than usual, for no reason other than the fact that they were too excited to stay home. Jamie painted Matt and Joe’s chests, the three loaded up their pillows and a few extras and headed off to the school. About five minutes before the game kicked off, they realized that this was not going to be an ordinary game. The realization kicked in when Joe, who had been to every varsity football game since middle school, leaned over and stated the obvious in a stunned tone.

“Guys,” he said to Joe, Jamie, and a few other students who sat near them, “I’ve been to a lot of Homecomings, but I’ve never seen this many people at a high school game.”

Matt looked across the field and saw a wound-up Kenwood student section. They were on their feet, yelling and screaming as though Kenwood had made the Super Bowl. The student section, which took up a much larger percentage of the visitor’s, bleachers than usual, was surrounded by a sea of spectators – a sea that was swamped with pillows. Matt was sitting in the fourth row home team’s side. He stood up and turned his back on the field. The main bleachers were quickly filling up too. He turned toward the concession area, where elementary kids usually played an innocent game of two-hand touch. There was no room to play; too many people and pillows were crowding the
blacktop. He leapt off the bleachers and onto the empty area between the field’s fence and the spectators.

“Hey! It’s the man with the plan,” a voice coming from Matt’s right side said.

He spun around and was met by a teenager with his arm extended for a high five. “Big night, huh?”

Matt didn’t leave the kid hanging. “Who are you guys?”

“Oh,” the kid said. He looked behind him and motioned toward the twenty or thirty kids around him. “We go to Hazeldell Christian. We don’t have a football team, so we figured we’d come for the fight.” The kid barely finished his explanation before getting whacked in the back by his buddy’s pillow. Matt turned toward Jamie and shrugged.

Halfway through the first quarter, all the bleachers were filled and some eager teenagers were swinging their cushions freely. That ended, though, when the public address announcer said that anyone caught using their pillow for anything other than a seat cushion would be escorted out of the complex. Somehow in all the chaos, Matt found Principal McWilliams; he was leaning on the fence toward one of the end zones.

“What in the world happened?” Matt asked with bewildered excitement.

“Apparently, a lot of people watch Channel 7 News.”

Matt laughed but the conversation was cut short by yet another person who recognized him.

“Matt! What’s up?” Tyson McGrath hollered.

“Hey, Tyson. I see you brought your people.”
“I told you I could bring 150 people, and you know I don’t mess around. And don’t worry, our principal gave a nice lecture over the intercom today, and there will be no extracurricular violence on our part.”

“There better not,” Principal McWilliams said loudly without looking away from the football field.

“By the way,” Tyson said, “I saw you on the news today. Way to be.”

“Well, what can I say? The camera loves me.”

McWilliams overheard and rolled his eyes.

“Well, I’ve had at least three girls ask me about you tonight, so the camera may not love you, but it at least wants to get to know you a little better.”

“What are we waiting for? Let’s go meet them.”

Tyson and Matt headed toward the visitors’ bleachers to talk to girls. Meanwhile, Joe and Jamie were back with the rest of the Brown students. Joe was an avid fan of all sports. He watched the game intently, pointing out mistakes and good plays to no one in particular. Jamie certainly didn’t care. She was interested in learning a variety of things during her high school years, but football wasn’t one of them. Besides, she had something else on her mind that night. She sat forward, with her chin resting in her hands and a bored look on her face. She spoke just as Joe was pointing out a superior block thrown by the tight end.

“So is Matt ever going to ask me out or what?”

Joe dropped his arm, which was extended toward the field, down to his lap. He leaned back against the bleacher behind him and sighed.
“So we’re going to enter these waters now,” Joe responded as he tried to think of what to say. Jamie just turned her head and looked at her friend. Joe knew that particular look meant she fully intended to jump in. “Here’s the thing with Matt,” Joe continued. “He’s an idiot.”

Jamie smacked Joe on the thigh. She was not amused.

“What I mean is, he likes you just as much as you like him. But he’s just Matt: the center of attention, the party guy, the lady killer. Honestly, I thought he would ask you out this summer when he finally got his driver’s license, but whatever.”

“Yeah, we shouldn’t even be talking about this right now, but it’s really frustrating, you know?”

“Yeah.”

“We really were together a lot planning this thing,” Jamie continued. “We are great together, but now he’s this big celebrity and he’s probably somewhere flirting as we speak.”

“I don’t know what it is,” Joe said, trying to break the seriousness of the conversation, “but there’s something about football games that brings out these high school heart-to-hearts. Maybe it’s the night...or the stadium lights that glow like an artificial moon...or maybe it’s the blaring brass of the marching band, serenading star-crossed lovers with fight songs and victory marches.”

“Joe, shut up,” Jamie giggled. “You know, if you don’t become some sort of writer or something, I’m going to be really mad at you.”

“Oh, man,” Joe moaned, turning his attention to the field. “Stay home on the reverse, Mitchell! Stay home!”
Joe's aside was enough to bring the conversation to an end. The game soon followed. Despite Mitchell's inability to stay home on the reverse, Brown won the game. One would have thought, however, that the game was just a precursor, a teaser leading up to the main event. Matt and Jamie worked their way up to the announcer's booth when the game was almost over. Pillow fight participants were instructed to stay in their seats after the game and await more instructions. After the horn sounded, Matt delivered the instructions and a rousing motivational speech. The two leaders then grabbed their pillows, worked their way onto the field, and awaited the announcer's countdown. With cameras from all the local television stations rolling, sixty seconds were placed on the scoreboard and the public address countdown begun.

Five...four...three...two...one...Pillowfiiiiight!

At the signal, a flurry of feathers flew. The athletic, rambunctious teenage boys gathered near midfield, hoping to be in the center of the action and possibly earn some respect. Mighty blows to the head stung vertebrae and vibrated skulls. Just as a fighter conquered one foe, he would be swatted by another brawler. It was World War III on that battlefield. Men were going down, friends were coming to the rescue of their troubled comrades, and some scenarios pitted brother against brother. One group of Kenwood students gathered in a goose-like "V" formation and plowed through the mass of bodies and cushions. They made only a little progress before being forcefully separated by violent blows to the back and abdomen.

The high school girls stood on the outskirts of the boys' 50-yard-line melee. They swung at each other, but took the game less seriously than their male counterparts. They weren't interested in showing up at school Monday with remnants of a black eye or
chipped tooth. Parents of young ones stood far away from the mass in the middle. The group supervised their young ones as they swung at each other harmlessly.

Sixty seconds was soon over. The horn sounded, but only about half of the field’s population stopped swinging. Matt was one of those who stopped at the siren’s sound. He stood idle for only a split second, though, when a particularly heavy pillow spanked him across the shoulders, causing him to lose balance and fall. He put his hand over his eyes to shield them from the gleaming lights. A stout young man wearing a flannel shirt was standing over him, extending an arm. Matt grabbed it and pulled himself up. He realized that the man who unexpectedly whacked him was Huff. The two exchanged pleasantries and a one-armed hug, then ducked away from the crowd and began talking.

“How’d all this happen?” Huff finally asked with a glance around the field.

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.”

“Try me.”

Matt leaned close to his old running buddy and threw his arm around his shoulders. It was a strangely intimate moment in the fury of a flooded football field. Huff, who once had tried to tell Matt that he controlled his own destiny, was now being taught. You can argue both ways on how Matt actually became who he was. Huff would say that the now-popular high school junior had made a conscious decision to be what he became. But it is possible to see it differently. Maybe Matt was the amalgamation of all his friends. Maybe he had no choice, and he was influenced to be the person that he was. But all that didn’t matter in those few seconds on the football field in the midst of the biggest pillow fight in the world’s history. Huff wanted to know, truly, how it all happened. So, Matt told him.
“Cause and effect.”

“Baloney,” Huff shouted, wiggling his shoulders out of Matt’s arm’s grip.

Matt simply shrugged and smiled. He felt no need to defend his stance. It was what it was. Huff refused to go so quietly. This time, he planted his arm across Matt’s shoulders and began speaking.

“I’m glad to see that you remembered my ground-breaking theory,” Huff said. He wiped spit from the corners of his mouth with his thumb and index finger and continued his spiel. “But you have clearly not given it the credence that it most certainly deserves. Let me tell you some more.”

“Really, Huff, it’s okay.”

Huff tightened his grip on Matt’s neck and disregarded his objection. “Humans are trained to see things in sequence. It makes more sense that way. We’re thinkers. We try to make sense of a series of events that have no reason to be together.”

“And we’ve thrived because of it,” Matt interrupted.

“Perhaps,” Huff acknowledged. “Perhaps we have thrived because of it, but I believe that we have thriven in spite of it.”

“Is thriven a word?”

“Drive, driven. Thrive, thriven. You’re trying to change the subject. The bottom line is that just because we see things in sequence doesn’t mean they really are a sequence. By saying that you came up with a pillow fight because of cause and effect, you are saying that if any of a series of events had not happened, we would not be standing here tonight in the midst of history.”

“Maybe we wouldn’t be here.”
"Or maybe you just think that way because you've unconsciously tried to put things together." Huff spread his arms as wide as he could, his pillow dangled form his right hand. "This is just one big random event." Huff swung his pillow mightily and struck Matt in the side. "Nothing caused me to do that."

By the time Huff had climbed down off his soapbox, the fight had subsided. Only a few more flailing arms remained, and those were quickly stopped by the Brown and Kenwood supervisors. The participants then filed off of the field, signing their names on the registry as they exited. Matt gaped at the line that was beginning to form at the exits.

"Somewhere, somebody is doing something that will change my life," he said with a grin that only accomplishment can bring. "Cause and effect."

"Somewhere, God is laughing at your gullibility."
Chapter 15

Joe, who had somehow gotten separated from Matt during the battle, came bounding toward the student section, where Matt and the rest of student council was standing. Matt and Jamie were starting to organize the cleanup.

“Hey, Matt, we’re going to 29th Street,” he shouted without stopping his stride.

“Who’s going?” Matt yelled back.

“Me, Staci, the cross country team, the volleyball team…” Joe’s voice trailed off as he ran past Matt’s group.

The 29th Street Café was a favorite hangout for members of the cross country team. It was a homely, smoke-filled diner about twenty minutes away from Brown. The waitresses were cranky, the jukebox played nothing but country-western and 1970s rock music, and the food was reliably greasy. Even the name of the place was questionable. There was no 29th Street anywhere near the café. In fact, the streets in that part of town were named after kinds of trees, not numbers. “When I built this place,” the owner once said when Nathan questioned the establishment’s handle, “it was twenty-nine streets away from my house.” The diner was meant to be more of a haven for farmers and truckers than high school students, but Nathan had discovered the joint when he was a freshman, and eating at 29th Street immediately became an essential part of being on the cross country team.

Earlier on the day of the pillow fight, Matt and Jamie both asked Joe to stick around after the pillow fight to help collect the sign-in sheets, take down the tables, and clean the field of any stuffing that may have burst out of an unsuspecting pillow. Joe left the door open, but there was no question that he wanted to bolt when his classmates did.
Once the pillow fight adrenaline was pumping through his body, he completely forgot that they had even asked. He continued his run off the football field and into a rapidly emptying parking lot. He wrestled his keys out of his pocket while running and hit the driver’s side keyhole without any effort. He took a glance back at the glowing football field, opened his squeaky car door and sat down.

“Hey.”

Joe sprang out of the car when he heard the voice coming from the passenger seat. He slammed the door behind him and tried to calm his thumping heart. When he felt he was a safe distance away, he squatted down and looked into the car. His legs trembled as he struggled to see who had broken into his locked vehicle to sit and wait for his arrival. After a few seconds of squinting, the unidentified stalker reached up and turned on the dome light. Nathan Marx, with a stoic expression, was signaling for Joe to join him in the vehicle. Joe reluctantly obeyed.

“How—“

“The rear passenger door comes unlocked if you push up when you lift the handle,” Nathan said after anticipating the question. “I’ve known that since your sister had this car. We going to 29th Street?”

“I am.”

“Well, I am too.”

Joe had always had a special liking for Nathan. He was the first upperclassman, after all, to reach out to Matt and him when they arrived at Brown. Joe had cashed in on Nathan’s original offer to hang out with Nathan despite his decision not to run cross country during his freshman year. His acceptance was a trait that Joe tried to emulate.
Joe respected Nathan in that regard, but he did not try to be Nathan Marx the way Matt did. As he started the vehicle and pulled out of the parking lot that night, however, Joe was rethinking his stance. He did not find Nathan’s unlawful entry humorous or admirable at that point. Really, he was still trying to get his heart down to its normal beating rate.

“So I want you to know that I haven’t stopped drinking, I haven’t stopped cussing, and I haven’t stopped hooking up with girls,” Nathan began after they left the parking lot. “And I don’t plan on stopping.”

Joe was confused. “Ookay.”

“But I’m curious, Abner. I want to know what you believe.”

“Believe about what?” Joe knew exactly what Nathan wanted to hear, but he balked at the challenge to talk about his Christian faith.

“You know. Suddenly, Matt’s out there talking about giving up the party scene or whatever. He’s not giving it up either, you know, but he’s brought it up once or twice.”

“What are the parties like out there in Terre Haute?”

“They haven’t shown me anything I didn’t see in high school,” Nathan said proudly. “Tell you the truth, I can’t stand it out there. I’m not going back after this year. I might not even go back next semester. I’ll just come back, live at home, and go to the community college or something.”

“So why do you want to know what I believe?”

“There’s this guy out at ISU who stands on the corner and preaches that everyone is going to hell for not going to church or whatever. All we can do back is tell him to go to hell.” Joe laughed. “But I just wanted to know why you guys are like that. What’s so
appealing about going to church or whatever? I’d rather be drunk than holding hands and singing “Amazing Grace” or some shit like that.”

“I’m not going to tell you that you’re going to hell.”

“But you know I am.”

“I don’t know anything, man. I could be going to hell. It’s not my judgment to make. Most people don’t think like that guy out on the street corner. I’m saying that I do bad stuff, and you do bad stuff, and my pastor does bad stuff. That is why I’m a Christian: because I believe that we’re all screwed up and the only way to see heaven is with a little help.”

The car fell silent for a moment. Joe exhaled sharply, relieved that he had gotten the words out of his mouth. Nathan fidgeted with his rolled-up game program. Joe glanced over out of the corner of his eye. It appeared that Nathan was thinking and that words were ready to spring from his lips. Joe was excited to hear what those words would be.

“Well, like I said,” Nathan finally stated, “I don’t plan on changing. I just wanted to know some more.”

“Come on, don’t you realize this will all end in bitterness?”

“Towards who?”

“Towards yourself, mainly,” Joe was argumentative. “If you ever get saved—“

“Well, that’s a big if, Abner.”

“Well, if you do, you’ll hate who you are now, what you did. If you don’t get saved, you’re still going to taste bitterness at some point or another.”

“I already taste it, Joe. I might as well have a beer to wash it down with.”
Joe shook his head and gripped the steering wheel more tightly.

“Look,” Nathan continued. “I’ve got nothing but respect for you and what you believe. I don’t want you to walk away from here bitter towards me or whatever. I just wanted to discuss this stuff with you.”

Nathan and Joe were silent for the rest of the ride. Nathan continued playing with his program, and Joe gradually loosened his grasp on the steering wheel. When they pulled up to 29th Street, Nathan snatched the keys from the ignition and dangled them just out of Joe’s reach.

“We cool?” Nathan said, with the keys held hostage.

“Yeah.”

Joe and Nathan hopped out of the car and waltzed shoulder-to-shoulder into the eatery. Brown students occupied the entire south wing of the long, skinny dining room. Nathan smiled at the turn out. In just four years, the desolate diner he had discovered had gone from desert to hot spot. The staff rejoiced at Nathan’s arrival.

“Hey,” the owner bellowed. “There’s the kid that’s responsible for bringing me Friday and Saturday night business. Long time no see.”

Nathan separated from Joe’s side to converse with 29th Street’s employees. Joe found Staci, gave her a kiss and pulled up a chair next to her. They didn’t realize that the celebration had not yet begun.

By this time, the student council, with Matt and Jamie as their fearless leaders, had finished cleaning up after the slumber-party-like romp. Matt collected all the pages filled with signatures and rode with Jamie to 29th Street. There was an exhausted feeling of completion present in the vehicle. For several months, the two had planned and now
had executed an media-friendly event the likes of which the Brown school district – let alone Kenwood and surrounding areas – had ever seen. Jamie and Matt had to muster some extra energy just to make it to and from the café. As they drove, Jamie turned on some soft, soulful music. Matt began to tally the participants.

About halfway to the restaurant, Matt stopped his meticulous counting. He looked over at his fatigued friend and watched her drooping hair tickle her rosy cheek. Matt let his stack of papers fall onto his lap. He reached with his left arm and brushed the hair off of Jamie’s face. She flinched, then smiled contentedly. Matt didn’t let his hand fall from Jamie’s face. Her soft skin radiated warmth that he hadn’t felt before.

“You’re warm,” Matt said when he noticed that his mind had drifted but his hand remained on Jamie’s cheek. “My hand is freezing.”

Jamie giggled and pulled herself away. “Well, stop it. You’re making me cold.”

Just like that, the moment was over, but Matt struggled to focus again on his tallying. Jamie thought about the moment and nothing else as she drove. Soon, however, Matt interrupted the silence by simply stating what would have been an obscure number on any other evening.

“Six hundred and twenty-four,” he boasted.

Jamie turned her head towards Matt and smiled her brilliant smile. “Really?”

“We’ve demolished it,” Matt answered. “I still have a bunch of page left.”

“Well, stop talking,” Jamie said with rising enthusiasm. “Keep counting. We’re almost there.”

Minutes later, the bell that hung over the 29th Street Café entrance jingled, signaling a new customer. The crew of Brown students occupying the south end of the
restaurant cheered Matt and Jamie’s arrival. The pair, however, brought the cheering to a halt. They walked in with long faces and slumped shoulders. They dragged their feet toward the Brown section and said nothing. None of the students already seated dared to speak. Matt plodded over to Joe and placed his hand on Joe’s shoulder. He shook his head.

“How many people would you have guessed were there?” Matt asked.

Joe looked around the table, but no one was willing to make an estimate on his behalf. “I don’t know, buddy,” he finally sputtered. “I would have said eight hundred or so.”

“Way off.” Matt tossed the list of names onto the table and plopped down in an empty chair. “Nine hundred and fifty-four.”

Matt’s audience erupted with as much glee as they had shown at the commencement of the pillow fight. Guys gave high-fives. Girls gave hugs. The owner of the café leaned over the dining counter and got the crowd’s attention.

“Hey,” he hollered. “Dessert’s on me.”

The owner’s announcement brought another wave of cheers from the section of students. Glasses filled with cola and other drinks clinked together, and at that moment, it seemed like the entire school was toasting Matt and Jamie – their new champions. The atmosphere was electric, but Matt sat back coyly with a smirk etched on his face. The magician was quietly planning his next big trick.
Part III
Chapter 16

Matt’s next big event didn’t enter his mind while he was sitting at the 29th Street Café the evening he became a world record holder. He knew there would be something; he just wasn’t sure what it would be. Matt had no intentions of allowing his reputation at Brown to expire during the final year and a half of his high school career. While some might have considered a world record as a crowning achievement in high school, Matt was thinking larger. He needed something, he thought, to seal his place in local lore. That final idea didn’t come to him until he was on his first date with Jamie Boyd.

The date seemed meant to be from the pair’s first day of high school. It may indeed have been inevitable, but it might not have happened had Joe refused to ask Matt out on a date. Just more than a week had passed since the world’s pillow fighting standard had fallen. The paperwork was being processed in some office far from Pecksburg, Indiana, and the official plaque was nothing more than an afterthought. The only thought Jamie had had since Homecoming night was when Matt would take her out. She analyzed the situation as only a teenage girl could. First, she built up her own confidence, recalling even the minutest instances that could have added to the weight of her dream that Matt loved her. She evaluated sentences, deconstructed conversations, scrutinized rumors, and remembered glances that backed up her thesis. Then, after convincing herself that she was the one for Matt, she tore apart her own argument. She wondered why— if they were so perfect for each other— Matt hadn’t made his move. She forgot her previous justifications and suddenly remembered evidence that devastated her original case. She was a lawyer arguing against herself to a jury that existed only in her
hormone-saturated mind. She thought of the times when Matt flirted with other girls. She imagined situations that would have been perfect times to ask for a date, then wondered why Matt hadn’t seized those opportunities. Weary from her inner trial of the century, she one day stormed towards Joe in the school hallway. She slammed his locker as he was searching for a text book.

“You have to say something,” Jamie demanded with sternness that Joe had never seen from Jamie. “I can’t stand it anymore.”

“Why do you girls do this to yourself?” Joe asked, ignoring Jamie’s order. “Staci is the same way. She’ll think about one thing over and over and over until she practically explodes. Then who gets yelled at? The boyfriend.”

“That’s great, Joe,” Jamie retorted. “We’ll have your pity party later, but I need you to talk to Matt today. Now, even.”

“Fine. I will. But let me ask you a dumb question: Why can’t you ask him out?”

Jamie straightened herself up and transformed her demeanor. “Because I’m a traditional girl.” She turned sharply away from Joe, flipping her hair in his face as she left.

Joe didn’t answer Jamie’s call to speak to Matt immediately. Instead, he waited until he and his friend were the last two remaining in the locker room preparing for cross country practice. Matt stood at the sink and splashed some water on his hair, spiking it in various fashions before settling for the “messy” look. He continued staring at the mirror and picking at some stray strands.

“You about ready to run?” he asked Joe.
Joe was sitting on a bench half-dressed. He was waiting for the right moment, and this was it. “Yeah, but, um, before we go out there, I need to ask you something.” Joe fumbled through his sentences and wiped his sweaty hands on his shirt.

“Go for it.”

“Alright, um,” Joe sputtered, “this is stupid, so I’m just going to come out and say it. I... I think that me and you should go on a date.”

“Oh, dear God.”

“No,” Joe countered, gesturing for Matt to keep quiet. “I mean a double date.”

“With who? Siegried and Roy?”

“Funny. No. Me with Staci and you with Jamie.”

Matt grinned for a moment and shoved his school clothes into his backpack. “So what did she do? Threaten your life?”

“No, I just thought it was about time you asked her is all. I thought you might be more comfortable going with me and Stace. You’ve only been in love with Jamie for two and a half years now. It’s about time you grew some balls and took her out.”

Matt was silent. He wanted to argue, but couldn’t. “When?”

“Saturday,” Joe answered. “I’ll set everything up. Don’t even worry about it.”

“Hey,” Matt slung his backpack over his shoulder and put a serious look on his face. Joe was expecting some sort of thank you from his friend, but it didn’t come.

“Next time you ask me out, please put some pants on first.”

That is how Matt Wade and Jamie Boyd officially began dating. Joe scheduled a dinner for four and made plans to take the crew miniature golfing. The anxiety that both Matt and Jamie felt that night was normal for a first date, but the date itself was hardly
ordinary. What dominated the dinner portion of the date was that Jamie and Staci
discovered a number of striking similarities. Every place Staci had gone, Jamie had gone
as well. Every extracurricular club Jamie had joined, Staci had tried earlier. It started
when they ordered the same dish – the only thing they ever ordered from that restaurant –
and continued throughout the appetizer, main course, and dessert. Matt and Joe simply
looked across the table at each other and shrugged. They took the conversation over only
once, just after Staci and Jamie found a similar prank that each had pulled on their
friends.

“Best prank ever,” Matt stated edgewise. It was the only way to squeeze a word
into the girls’ conversation. “When Coach Tuff was in school, I guess they had this huge
senior prank. A bunch of guys went on the school’s roof with a bunch of tires. They
flung a rope from the roof to the flagpole. Then they shimmied all these tires down
around the pole.”

“Wait,” Jamie said. “I don’t get it.”

“The next morning,” Matt continued, “everyone showed up at school to find a
stack of fifteen or so tires on the flagpole. It was genius.”

“How’d they get them off?” Staci asked.

“Well, Coach told me that the school tried a bunch of different things, but they
simply couldn’t figure out a way. So, they brought the fire department out and burnt the
tires off. I guess it stunk up the whole town and melted the flagpole.”

The girls were not impressed. “Now I know why you guys got along so well,”
Jamie said with a wrinkled nose.
Joe wiped his mouth with his napkin and joined the discussion. “You know, we’ve got to start thinking about our senior prank. If it’s going to be big, a year and a half isn’t a long time to think of something and plan it. What are you guys doing this year, Stace?”

Staci thought for a second and then responded. “I actually don’t think we are doing anything. Just a big Senior Skip Day.”

“You’re skipping school,” Joe stated dryly. “That’s real original.”

“You know how much of a wuss I am,” Staci countered. “I might even be too scared to miss one day of school.”

“I’m the same way,” Jamie chimed. She was unsuccessful in recapturing the conversation from the boys.

“Joe’s right,” Matt added. “Skipping school isn’t a good prank, because you can’t see how people react. You can’t see the faculty or McBill in distress like last year, when all the seniors parked their cars on the grass in front of the school.”

“Only bigger,” Joe said. He could see Matt’s conniving wheels turning and tried to fuel the fire.

Just then, Matt slapped the table with his palm, leaned back in his chair, and pointed at Joe. “I got it. We’re friends with the Kenwood boys, right?”

“Of course,” Joe answered. “Tyson got half the school to come to the pillow fight.”

“Right, and we got almost our entire school to come. So here’s what we do: we switch schools.”

“Oh my word,” Staci gasped.
A smile crept across Joe’s face. Staci rolled her eyes, and Jamie leaned in closer to the table. She was trying to figure out what Matt had in mind. Matt foresaw her question and answered it.

“We have about a hundred kids in our senior class; they have about a hundred kids in their senior class. We both need a senior prank, so we conspire with them. One day in the spring of our senior year, Brown seniors will go to Kenwood and Kenwood seniors will come to our school.”

“Un,” Joe said with high praise, “believable.”

“I hope you guys get arrested,” Staci said with a half laugh.

“Who’s going to arrest a hundred people?” Joe retorted.

“It’s kind of a good idea, but surely somebody would let it leak so the schools would be ready for it,” Jamie added.

“Good point,” Matt said. “I guess it’s a good thing we have a year and a half to plan. This doesn’t go beyond this table, okay?” The group laughed and agreed to keep the magician’s next trick a secret.

Once the novelty of the girls’ similarities and the buzz about the potential prank wore off, Matt and Jamie had the chance to talk about abnormal first date topics. Having moved passed the introductory portion of the relationship long ago, the two were left to talk more deeply about their world record fetishes, their least favorite classmates, and the like. Things went smoothly until the seventh hole on the miniature golf course.

The foursome walked freely on the course’s turf on the unseasonably warm autumn night. The man-made brook babbled below as the teenagers chattered. The boys, as was typical, were fiercely competitive and focused during the round, while the ladies
were there simply to have fun. While Staci found her fun in verbally heckling her boyfriend, Jamie found it amusing to physically bother Matt. On almost every putt during the first six holes, Jamie reached innocently over and poked Matt in the backside with her putter. He would turn quickly and Jamie would just as quickly look the other way, twiddle her thumbs, or whistle nonchalantly. By the sixth hole, Matt and Joe’s competition was growing tighter. Matt had dominated the first holes, but faltered badly on five and six. As he tapped in for a score of five, he issued an ultimatum to his date.

“Jamie, I swear, if you poke my butt again, I will toss you into that pond.”

The body of water that surrounded the seventh hole could hardly be labeled a pond. It was a waist-high pool with water that was dyed blue with the intent of making Jimmy’s Putt-Putt Plaza look like Augusta National. The pond’s effect was minimal. Jamie initially heeded Matt’s warning. She offered an apology and swore a truce. When Matt stood over his first putt on the seventh hole, however, she had a change of heart. In one single action, she reached forward, poked her date, and blurted, “Sorry, Matt!”

Matt dropped his putter and turned to pursue Jamie. Her efforts to evade him and fend him off with her club were in vain. She cackled as he slung her over his shoulder, but began to plead as he marched toward the babbling pool. “Matt! No. What are you doing? You wouldn’t.”

“I warned you.” With those three simple words, he dropped Jamie into the blue lagoon. She landed on her feet and bounced up and down, trying to keep as much of her body out of the water as possible. She held her putter over her head as though she were a soldier wading through a river, trying to keep her weapon dry. Matt turned towards Joe and Stacie, who were literally on the ground laughing. He brushed his hands together
and took a step to the side with intentions of once again hitting the golf course. His sidestep, however, was miscalculated. He stepped on a loose rock, and stumbled. As he tried to regain his balance, Jamie once again jabbed him in the rear with her still-dry putter. Matt flinched, throwing him completely off balance and into the pool. Joe and Staci howled and gasped for air. Meanwhile, Matt unsuccessfully tried to keep his head above water. Both left the miniature golf course that night with clothes that were slightly bluer than when the kids had arrived.

Eventually, the date came to an end. Joe took Staci home, and Matt did the same for Jamie. He opened the car door for Jamie and walked her to her front door.

“In the movies, this is always the part where they say, ‘I had a really nice time tonight,’” Matt joked.

“Surely we can think of something better than that.”

“How about this,” Matt chimed in. “I sure hope blue water isn’t toxic.”

Jamie answered with a blank stare, followed by a burst of laughter when she could no longer keep a straight face. “That,” she said, “is so much worse.”

“I guess that’s why I don’t write movies.”

“I was thinking you should say something more like, ‘This date is going to be tough to top next weekend.’”

“Aha,” Matt said with a smile. He reached out to Jamie and pulled her in for a hug. Their clothes were still damp and pigmented from their seventh-hole tumble. They didn’t seem to mind. “Then you would be assuming that there is going to be a second date.”
Jamie leaned her head against Matt’s chest and sighed. “So there’s not going to be a second date?”

“Well,” Matt said as he exhaled, “I hope there is, but I just don’t know if Joe will have the guts to ask me out again.”

Jamie giggled as the two separated from their embrace. Jamie turned and walked from the edge of the porch to the door. She reached for the doorknob slowly, afraid that opening the door would thrust her back into a world where she and Matt were just friends.

“Jamie?” Matt said from the edge of the porch. She turned the knob half way and looked back at Matt. “I’m sorry I didn’t ask you out sooner.”
Chapter 17

About a month after his first date with Jamie Boyd, Matt stepped to the starting line at the cross country semi-state meet with determination in his eye. It was his first season running without the guidance of Marty Tuff, but he excelled. The new coach was a young, athletic junior high teacher who had done his share of running, but had never coached a team at any level in any sport. At Marty’s urging, Matt heeded the new coach’s demands and didn’t speak a word of disobedience. Matt was named team captain, and with a full team running behind him, he had the season that everyone expected. He hammered out hundreds of miles over the summer in hopes of improving his performance. When the season began in late August, he took the area by storm, winning his first seven meets before mustering only a fifth place finish at the inaugural Martin Tuff Invitational. He was disappointed that he couldn’t win for his favorite coach, but he accepted the defeat and moved on. He stormed through the sectional and regional meets in October, despite dealing with a world record and a new love interest, and found himself in the same place he was exactly one year ago: alone at the start line of the semi-state race.

The stomach-churning nerves that he felt before every race were stronger than ever that day. Last year’s race was icing on the proverbial cake. He wasn’t expected to be in that position, and therefore had nothing to lose. This year, however, he took the line as a favorite to advance to state. As he was pondering the situation, the starter raised the gun and fired a shot. Matt instinctively darted to the front of the pack without realizing that the race actually had begun. By the time he finished the race some sixteen
minutes later, Matt had hammered out every last detail of his legacy-ensuring senior prank.

Sometimes, random things pop into a runner’s head while he or she is churning away. Sometimes it is a song, sometimes it is a memory, but when Matt should have been thinking about his time or his opponents during the most important race of his life, the prank entered his mind. As he entered the first turn, the issue of anonymity came to him. That sparked a dialogue in his head.

“What happens if I get caught before the prank actually takes place?” Matt’s superego asked.

“You’ll be screwed,” his id responded. “Try to have someone else start it. Maybe have everything start at Kenwood.”

“That wouldn’t work,” the superego insisted. “It could still be traced back to you.”

Matt’s evil half apparently agreed. “Yeah, right now the only people that know about the idea were the people on that date. Somehow you have to keep it that way.”

By the time the first mile of the race was complete, Matt was thinking about typing an unsigned letter and distributing it among his classmates. He then realized that the letter might fall into the wrong hands and Principal McWilliams would stop the whole thing before it even happened. The planning, Matt decided, had to occur outside of the school. He decided to call a meeting. But how would he spread the word about the secret meeting? Matt’s stream of thought stopped at that question. He briefly remembered that he should be focusing on the race. He gathered his composure at the
race's halfway point, and passed five runners. He then settled back into his rhythm, and the scheming started again.

E-mail!

"Send an anonymous e-mail to your classmates," he told himself, "and schedule a senior prank meeting."

While trying to decide what to say at the meeting – which probably wouldn't even happen until next year – he realized that his plan had a fatal flaw: someone would have to speak at the meeting. If he did the talking, the blame easily could be placed on him if something were to go awry. So, Matt decided to cut out the meeting and just send his idea out via e-mail. He would state the idea, tell people to keep the plan among classmates only, and say to watch out for more details. Once he had settled on the method, he turned his attention back to the present. He needed to be in the top fifteen to advance to the state championship meet, but he was so wrapped up in his own planning, that he had not paid attention to how many runners were in front of him. He could count six, but knew there could be more out of sight. He was also fearful of the several runners creeping up behind him. His ignorance frightened him, and he surged like a racehorse.

Matt's breaths were short and heavy. The biting cold of the morning stung his thighs and fingertips, but he kept speeding up. In the waning meters of the race, he passed all six of the countable runners in front of him, and only one caught him from behind. After he crossed the line, a race official tore the paper number of his jersey and recorded his place – seventh.

The state meet came the next weekend, but Matt spent his best race at semi-state. At the state championships, he didn't think about the prank once. All he did was focus
on the race and the competitors that he had heard about but never seen. He was the first 
runner from Brown ever to appear at state, but the moment was forgettable. He cramped 
up with about a mile to go and finished fiftieth out of about 150 runners.

For the next few months, Matt put running on the side and completely forgot 
about the prank. He focused on Jamie. Six days a week, Matt was the ideal boyfriend for 
Jamie. He left flowers in her locker once a week. He wrote funny notes in class when no 
one was watching. He complimented her regularly, took her on a date every Friday night, 
and always met her at church Sunday morning. They fell in teenage love on those six 
days every week. Saturday, however, belonged to Matt.

He was different on that day of the week. Whether his real self came through on 
Saturday or if it was a façade is questionable. But on the seventh day of the week, Matt 
Wade went from sweet boyfriend and good friend to free-spirited party-hopper. When it 
wasn’t cross country season, he rolled out of bed Saturday morning just before noon. He 
would then play video games in his pajamas for awhile, possibly go for a run, and then 
get ready for that evening’s festivities. He showered, fixed his hair, donned his trendiest 
clothes, squirted some cologne on his shirt, and headed out the door at about 9 p.m. 
Destination? Wherever.

When he started hitting the scene, Matt would go where everyone else was going. 
As a junior, he was usually at the whim of the seniors. But as Matt’s popularity grew and 
his party reputation spread, he started becoming the decision maker. Everyone else 
would come to him. He was taken by surprise the first time he was asked where the party 
would be. He had yet to find out himself, so he gave a quick, “I’ll get back to you,” and 
then asked someone else. After a few weeks, however, Matt learned to find out as early
as possible where the alcohol would be that weekend. After a few weeks of that, he
started making his own decisions. Pretty soon, Matt was the one calling the shots. The
chairman of the keg committee.

Jamie and Joe were oblivious to much of the stuff that happened on the weekend,
but because they were around him so often, they knew he had gained a new reputation as
the life of the party.

“This is getting ridiculous,” Jamie told Joe one Sunday in April of their junior
year. Joe didn’t have to ask; he knew exactly what Jamie was talking about. She
explained anyway. “I have no idea where he goes on Saturday, what he gets into, who
he’s with.”

“If it makes you feel any better,” Joe responded, “I know he’s with guys, not
girls.”

“That’s hardly comforting. It’s not that I don’t trust him. It’s just that I don’t
understand him.”

“Yeah,” Joe agreed.

“I mean,” Jamie continued, “we have a great time when we’re together, and I
know he has a great time when he’s with you, too. So why does he have to go do
something stupid once a week.”

“That’s just Matt,” Joe explained. “He has to separate himself so he doesn’t
become known as ‘Joe’s friend’ or ‘Jamie’s boyfriend.’ If it’s bothering you that much,
maybe you should say something about it.”

Jamie shrugged off Joe’s advice at first. She was afraid to confront Matt, scared
that he would choose the wrong half of an ultimatum. Finally, as their junior year was
drawing to a close and another class of seniors was beginning their post-secondary lives, Matt and Jamie had a heart-to-heart talk. They were on a walk in a local park when Jamie summoned the courage to speak. It was a warm Friday evening in May. The moon illuminated the night, and the only audible sound was the hum of locusts and chirping of crickets.

“What are you doing tomorrow night?” Jamie asked.

“Going out,” Matt answered. He looked at Jamie and could tell that she wanted more details. “Senior party at Jeff’s house.”

Jamie built her own confidence with more questions. They were baby steps toward the conversation she actually wanted to have.

“Why are you going to the senior party? They don’t need you there.”

“James, I’ve gone out with these people all year long. They want me to be there. It’s like tradition.”

“Well,” Jamie countered, “I was thinking that you and I could do something—a final fling before summer starts.”

“Hey,” Matt said, “we’ll have all summer to spend together. This might be the last time I get to go out with the seniors. Why are you do—.”

“I’m tired of sitting at home by myself on Saturday nights,” Jamie said as she stopped walking.

“You can go out with other people,” Matt assured her. “You don’t have to stay home.”
“No.” Jamie paused and looked up at the glowing moon. She inhaled deeply and stated her case. “I wish you wouldn’t party so much. It really upsets me that you go and do that to yourself.”

“Do what?”

“I don’t know. Whatever you do at those parties. I know you drink. I know you drive around after you drink. Other than that, I have no clue what goes on.”

“Jamie.” Matt removed the hair from her face. “You can trust me. Ask anyone I party with.”

“It’s not that,” she said. “I just wish you wouldn’t do it so much.”

That simple statement ended the conversation. The couple continued walking in silence for a few more minutes before turning and heading back to Matt’s car.

The next evening, Jamie did exactly what she said she usually did. She rented a movie, threw on her pajamas at about 8 p.m., popped some popcorn, and watched a movie. Matt, likewise, went through his regular Saturday routine. He finished his run at about 7 p.m. He then jumped into the shower, cleaned off, and got ready for the evening. Before walking out the door, he grabbed Jamie’s favorite cologne and sprayed himself once. About ten minutes later, he pulled into the driveway, climbed out of his car, and knocked on Jamie’s front door.

Jamie opened the door, flinched, and then landed a long kiss on Matt’s lips. This is the way things went that summer. Matt seemingly left the party scene in the halls of Brown High School. That summer, he and Jamie did almost everything together. When he wasn’t with Jamie, he was no doubt hanging out with Joe. The change was a welcome relief to the two friends. Jamie was fearful that Matt would forget about her over the
summer because they didn’t have the luxury of seeing each other for several hours each
day. Matt made sure that didn’t happen. They ran around together like two neighbor
children, exploring their town and everything in it. Matt and Jamie visited every
interesting attraction in the school district: from the Pecksburg library, to the historic
Center Valley Cemetery. They watched little league games at Brown Field, fished in
Deer Drink Lake, and had a picnic at the top of Canopy Hill. When they ran out of local
attractions to visit, Matt, Jamie, Joe, and Staci piled into a car and drove to Indianapolis
for a day. A few weeks later, the foursome traveled to Chicago. It was a dream summer
that inevitably came to an end.

When the group’s senior year commenced, Matt could not keep himself away
from the lure of Saturday night parties. It was one of the many things he had planned to
do his senior year. Return to the state cross country meet, successfully complete the
senior prank, choose a college, and party at a different house every Saturday night. Jamie
didn’t say a word, but she shuddered every time she thought about Matt on a Saturday.

Their senior year was a whirlwind of activity. Between the parties, pep rallies,
and college visits, there was little time for rest. Matt and Joe’s year started with their
final cross country season. They had small hopes of team glory. All the team wanted to
do was watch Matt run at the state meet. They trained like they always did, but there was
a sense of urgency – a desire for the regular season to end so that the state tournament
could start. When it did start, all expectations were met.

Matt stormed through the first rounds of the tournament. He won both the
sectional and regional races. At semi-state, he placed third. He wanted to be in the top
ten at state. In mid-November, it happened.
Three years prior, Matt had been a new runner. He had tried to use the cross
country team for a ride home, but found a gift instead. He trained harder and harder with
each passing year, trying desperately to make use of his gift. His body was more mature
now, even if his attitude wasn’t. The rail-thin body that he sported during his freshman
year had given way to a trim, defined structure. Some facial hair sprouted at the bottom
of his now-square chin and his skin was tanner. He was almost a man. And at his last
state meet, he ran like one. He placed fifth, earning all-state honors and a medal shaped
like the state. He stood on the podium that afternoon with only one thought on his mind:
the senior prank.

The planning began almost immediately after the school’s Christmas break. Matt
signed up for a free e-mail address. On January 14, half the Brown senior class and a few
seniors from Kenwood received an e-mail from seniorprank@freemail.com. In the e-
mail, he explained the prank and asked the recipients to respond if they were in. Every
person he included in the e-mail answered affirmatively. Matt then set a date – May 17, a
day before his 18th birthday – and told his pawns to spread the word to seniors only. It
was an impeccable plan, and Matt was sure that Friday, May 17, 2002, would be the best
day of his life.
Chapter 18

Matt’s alarm went off that morning at 6:50, just like every other morning, but his manner of waking up was quite a bit different. Matt slept an anxious, sleep the night before. He woke up almost every hour on the hour, thinking he had overslept. His eyes would slowly open and then, after realizing where he was, he would quickly roll over and search for the red glowing numbers. When he saw a 3:00 or 4:00 or 5:00, he would remember to breathe and would roll over once again to sleep. When the alarm really did go off – at the correct time, of course – Matt shot up like a dart and headed for the kitchen. He was not tired, he was not lazy, he was not mopey, just determined to get ready and be out the door to the wrong school in a half hour. That was the longest half hour of his life.

“You got a quick start today,” Matt’s dad said as he walked through the dining room on his way out the door.

“Must just be one of those days,” Matt replied in between bites of his Cap’n Crunch.

“Good luck with that then.” Matt’s dad pulled his Windsor knot up to his Adam’s apple and was out the door. Matt was ready shortly thereafter and he sat on the edge of the sofa, waiting until Joe got there to pick him up.

What seemed like an hour later, Joe honked and Matt came trotting out the front door.

“You ready for this?” Joe asked, with his smile at full throttle. He was sporting a Brown cross country T-shirt.
“Jesus Christ, Joe,” Matt said with a laugh, “my whole high school career has been building up to this one moment and all you can manage to say at 7:20 in the morning is, ‘You ready for this?’ Of course I’m ready for this! I’m ready to see the look on the faculty’s face. I’m ready to see how many people will show up. I’m ready to be sent home for the day. I’m ready for the backlash back at Brown. I’m ready to get questioned by McBill. I’m ready to act like I don’t know what he’s talking about. I’m ready to get wasted tonight. I’m ready be congratulated by every senior from Brown AND Kenwood. I’m ready to become a legend. I was ready the moment I thought of the idea. I was ready when I was rounding up recruits. I was ready when we picked a date. I was ready at 2 a.m. last night, when I woke up in a panic. Then, I was ready at three and four and five a.m., when I kept waking up. And you ask if I’m ready now. Psh.”

“Did you forget to take your medicine?” Joe asked with a mouth full of Pop Tart.

“Right here, buddy,” Matt shot back, his middle finger extended upward. “Right here.”

The drive to Kenwood High School was beautiful. Everyone thought it was. Kenwood and Brown were separated by about ten miles, and the distance from Matt’s house to the rival school was even shorter. It was no less stunning, though. The road that led to Kenwood sported a name that was not worthy of its appeal: 900 North. That’s how roads in the county were named, though. Nine hundred north. That’s exactly nine miles north of Road 0 and eighteen miles north of 900 South. The system for naming roads in this portion of Indiana was not brain surgery, but the stretch of road from the edge of Brown Community School District to Kenwood High School was a local treasure that outsiders just happened to discover rather than intentionally visit.
The school district border lay at the top of an out-of-place steep hill, and those who reach the crest are staring down into what is known simply as “the Tunnel.” The Tunnel – as its name would imply – is a flat, winding valley of road that is covered by a tree canopy. The maple and oak trees on the south side of the road extend their limbs over the asphalt and grab hold of the catalpas and sycamores on the north side. At times, it is impossible to tell whether it is day or night because of the thickness of the foliage. Toward the end of the Tunnel, the road begins ascending a second conspicuous hill. This climb is not as steep as the one a few miles back, but it is at least twice as long. Then, when it’s least expected, the trees stop and give way to Indiana sky and cornfields. Anyone at the crest of this hill – Canopy Hill – and you can see for miles to the north, south, and west. Drivers have been known to stop at the top of Canopy Hill to admire the epitome of Indiana countryside below them, causing a line of cars to form behind the gawker. No one passes the vehicle that is holding up the line for fear that another car will be headed toward Brown from the clear side of Canopy Hill.

There was no such delay for Matt and Joe that morning, however. These seniors were on a mission. And judging by the traffic volume, so were all the other seniors. Matt had been through the Tunnel countless times, but this may have been the only occurrence when he didn’t stare at the trees around him. He was too focused on the onslaught of cars and trucks headed in the other direction. One vehicle after another was headed toward Brown High School. You could tell which ones were the high school seniors participating in the biggest senior prank of all time. Some of them laid on their horns as they passed cars headed to Kenwood country. Passengers in other cars leaned
their bodies halfway out of the car windows and pumped their fists in excitement. Matt simply took it all in. He had created this. He was going to enjoy it quietly.

Before long, Joe had pulled into the Kenwood parking lot and found a space that surely belonged to some unsuspecting junior. Or a faculty member, Joe wished. Even better. The two heroes waited for another car full of their friends to unload, then they walked into the wrong school together. They wore backpacks, school shirts and flip flops as they would on a normal day, adding – in their minds – to the hilarity of the moment. The Brown students were to assemble in the north hallway, which contained the lockers of all Kenwood seniors.

“And just go to any classroom at 7:45,” Matt had told everyone, “but don’t go alone.”

The Kenwood faculty wasn’t concerned about the first few students that they didn’t recognize. They were just guests for first period, they thought, or maybe siblings who were tagging along for the day. But soon a few unfamiliar faces turned into twenty. As the teachers first began to approach and question the Brown students, thirty more strangers arrived. When the teachers had left the students alone so they could fetch the principal, the total topped seventy-five and continued to grow. When the Kenwood principal and two vice principals finally made their way to the north hallway, all but two of the ninety-six Brown High School seniors had dispersed into the classroom of their choice. The remaining two never showed up that day, opting instead to be sick and avoid a potentially devastating punishment.

Some of the more aloof teachers at Kenwood began the lesson as planned, as they suspected nothing. Several other teachers began interrogating the new students.
"Who are you?" one teacher asked four Brown seniors who were sitting in on an English class.

"Oh," came a faux-confused response. "Um, did we come to the wrong room? How embarrassing!" The responder stood up and averted his eyes. "Come on, guys. This is only first period. I apologize, Ma'am." The group left and then ducked into another classroom to start the process again.

In the science wing of the school, Matt and Joe were being questioned.

"We're the new kids," Joe beamed.

"Yeah, the principal said you knew we were coming," Matt followed up.

"Are you sure you are in the right room?" the teacher asked.

"If this is 216, we are," Matt answered.

"Well, yes," replied the teacher. She put on her glasses and reached for her class list. "I'm sorry, boys, I just don't have you on my list. Maybe Mr. Stetson forgot to pass the information along. I'll get it worked out. Since we don't know you, why don't you tell us who you are?"

"Nathan Marx," Matt said.

"I'm Brandon Huff," said Joe with his hand raised sheepishly.

Other teachers were less gullible. A few of the menacing male teachers began moving from classroom to classroom, picking out the students who were not actually students and demanding that they come with them. Meanwhile, the faculty members had deduced that all the "new" students were from Brown and noticed that all the real Kenwood seniors were absent. When the news reached Kenwood principal Ronald Stetson, he made an immediate telephone call to Mr. McWilliams.
“Let me guess,” Mr. McWilliams said to Mr. Stetson as he picked up his receiver, “you have a hundred kids running around your school that should be in my school.”

“So they switched,” a despondent Mr. Stetson said.

“Yeah, and I have twenty teachers intercomming the office wanting me to do something about it.” Mr. McWilliams seemed more exasperated than aggravated.

“What are we supposed to do?” Mr. Stetson implored.

“No idea. I had the janitors lock all the outside doors.”

“That’s a good idea.” Mr. Stetson covered the mouthpiece of the phone and commanded his secretary to lock the doors.

“I guess we’ll herd them all into the gym and let ‘em have it, then tell them to go home. That’s about all we can do until they show up at school Monday.”

“This is a hell of a good senior prank.”

“Yeah, Ron, I would have loved to do something like this when I was in school, but it’s not so enticing from an administrator’s perspective.”

“Any idea who organized this?”

“I have a good guess,” Mr. McWilliams answered. “And I guarantee that he’s at your school today and not mine.”

“If he is a Kenwood student, he better pray that I never find him. If I did, I would...I would...”

“Hey wait a second,” Mr. McWilliams interrupted. “Do you think you can keep these kids having fun for another fifteen minutes?”

Chaos ensued outside the confines of the principal’s office while McWilliams and Stetson conspired. The teachers who were wandering around collecting out-of-place
students had gathered thirteen students from four different classrooms when Mr.
Stetson’s voice came over the intercom.

“Attention Brown High School students,” he began. He chuckled at his own
humor. “We have locked all the perimeter doors in the school. Welcome to Kenwood.
Now that you’ve come, you can’t leave. I would greatly appreciate it if you would make
your way to the auditorium so we can get this all straightened out. Of course, you don’t
have to come to our assembly, but if you choose to roam our halls or interrupt our
classrooms for more than another five minutes, I will have to notify the police. Kenwood
students, if you leave your classroom, don’t bother coming back next week because you
will be suspended. Thank you.”

The ninety-six Brown students who went to the wrong school that day trudged
into the Kenwood auditorium. Some hung their heads as if they had been defeated.
Others defiantly laughed and socialized with the other trouble-makers. Matt and Joe
slipped into the middle of the pack and marched stoically. The class took seats in the
back of the auditorium and awaited their fate. The room was quiet for the first few
minutes before the group realized that none of the Kenwood faculty was around. Sounds
of high school seniors soon filled the auditorium. For nearly fifteen minutes, they all
thought they were going to leave without punishment.

Then the auditorium doors swung open.

In strode the intimidating figure who had been corralling students minutes earlier.
He was a tall, muscular man with a scowl that seemed permanently painted on his face.
He wore blue jeans and a polo shirt that read KOUgar FOOTBALL. His biceps
stretched the sleeves of his shirt, and his shaved head seemed only to emphasize his brown and gray goatee.

“I am Mr. Kenley,” he announced in a voice that rang through the auditorium without much effort from the speaker. “In case you are wondering how the other half of your project went, there are about 120 of my students sitting in your gym right this minute. I have no idea who any of you are. You got us. Give yourselves a hand.”

The Brown class erupted with applause, shouts and high fives. Matt and Joe exchanged a smile and a handshake.

“But you aren’t home free,” a familiar voice from the back of the auditorium said. Mr. McWilliams then made his way down the aisle.

“I’ll make this short. I have a school to go run. But by my count, there are ninety-six of you here. That means two students decided not to play along with your game. I don’t think we’ve had 96 seniors at school in one day all year.” The students laughed nervously. “Mr. Wade, will you come up and stand by me.”

Joe’s heart sunk. Somebody ratted Matt out, he thought. Matt stayed calm and walked down the aisle with a smile on his face. He knew that no one that knew who organized the switch would tattle on him. Mr. McWilliams put his arm around Matt’s shoulders.

“Do you care to guess how it so happened that all the Brown seniors showed up here today and all the Kenwood seniors went to Brown?”

“Exchange program?” Matt supposed. His classmates approved. Mr. McWilliams didn’t.
“Nooooo, but good guess.” Matt tried to go back to his seat, but Mr. McWilliams squeezed Matt’s shoulder tightly. “Just so you know, the two girls that didn’t participate today will definitely graduate from Brown. The rest of you better hope I’m in a good mood when signing diplomas. You may go home now.”
Chapter 19

The majority of Brown seniors left Kenwood High School unconcerned. They were intent on enjoying the rest of the day – and weekend – school free. Each clique went its separate way, each with its own idea of how the day off should be spent. They were euphoric from the morning’s shenanigans, and they just wanted to enjoy this last prank. Matt, Jamie, and Joe gathered at Joe’s car to discuss the plan.

“Okay,” Matt began, “so you’re going with the girls and we’re going to meet you at the lake, right?” Jamie nodded. “Okay, I’m not sure who all is going to be there, but it’s going to be some good fishin’.”

Jamie was still concerned about what was to happen that night. She asked Matt again what his plans were.

“Jamie, we have to go to Tyson’s house for that party. Brown people will be there. Kenwood people will be there. It’ll all be one big prank reunion or something. Joe, you’re going, right?”

Joe shoved his hands in his pockets and tried not to look Matt in the eye. “They say it’s going to be pretty wild, right? Well, that’s really not our thing.”

“Come on, Joe,” Matt protested. “I went to church with you guys, and you know that’s not my thing.”

“You went to church with us freshman year. That’s hardly cause for negotiation.”

“All right,” he responded quickly, “but when was the last time you partied with me?”

Jamie looked at Joe. Joe hesitated.
“That’s right,” Matt continued. “You never have. Party with me tonight, and I promise that I’ll be next to you in church Sunday morning.”

Joe returned Jamie’s look. She nodded.

“Deal,” Joe said with an outstretched hand. Matt shook with his right hand, reached for Jamie with his left, and escorted her to her car.

The sunny day out on the lake seemed to fly by. The boys fished and played football while the girls sunbathed. After that time of segregation, the boys coaxed the girls into swimming in the lake, despite their reservations about the water’s temperature and cleanliness. The girls soon acquiesced to the boys’ firm persuasion. The water sparkled like a million jewels when the teenagers viewed it from the land, but felt like a million needles when they jumped in. The fresh air of spring had yet to charm the water into warmth, and the May swimmers paid the price. Smiles eventually crossed the girls’ faces as the boys splashed and they had to fight back. The entire group forgot all their concerns on that day. They were free from rules and structure and were having the time of their young lives. It’s strange how a few hours of freedom can break the chains of discipline and responsibility. The time, however, soon expired, and the individual students were back at their homes fielding questions from their parents like, “How was your day?” and “Did anything happen at school?” It was a brief culture shock, but the liberty continued that night at the Prank Party.

Jamie stood in the crowd at the party with her fists shoved near her mouth, trying not to touch any of the filth that she saw surrounding her. It was the party of the year. Almost every senior from Brown and Kenwood made an appearance at this large house near Kenwood that was surrounded by nothing but cornfields and trees. The music was
thumping, the patrons were drinking, and no one had any place to be the next morning. Matt gently grabbed Jamie’s elbow and led her toward the dining room, where his Kenwood friends were hanging out.

“Guys, this is my girlfriend, Jamie,” Matt announced as he entered the room.

The Kenwood group received her well, offering hugs and handshakes, but Jamie was leery of the whole situation. The first time that no one was paying attention, Jamie stood on her tip toes and whispered into Matt’s ear.

“I’m really uncomfortable here.”

Matt had no verbal response. Ignoring her, he snatched his bottle of beer off the table and marched outside. Jamie’s face grew red in front of the Kenwood students she now stood before. They tried to make her feel welcome, but she darted for the door behind her boyfriend.

“How could you leave me in there like that?” she asked in a harsh tone, considering her usually quiet manner. Matt gulped what was left in his bottle and tossed it on the ground.

“I thought you were coming here to have fun,” Matt countered.

“I came for you. You know I’ve never been to anything like this, but I came because you wanted me to.”

“Yeah, but did I ever lean over to you during church and say, ‘Gee, I feel really uncomfortable here’?”

Jamie said nothing. She crossed her arms and turned her back to Matt.

“You don’t even let me talk about my parties, Jamie.” Matt voice now rose to the level of a yell. It was the first time he had ever shouted at Jamie. “Every time I try to
talk about what happened on Saturday night, you change the subject. This is a big part of
my life that you completely ignore.”

“You want me to talk about it?” Jamie yelled. “Fine. You’re an idiot. Do you
see how stupid those people are acting in there? It’s stupid that you want to be friends
with them. And when you act like that, it’s stupid that they want to be friends with you.
You want to ‘leave your mark’ at this school, but people aren’t going to remember all the
good stuff you did. All they are going to remember is how great you were at these
parties.”

Matt stormed over to Jamie and grabbed her arms, pinning them to her sides. She
tried to wriggle away, but Matt squeezed harder. His thumbs were digging into her
biceps, and he yelled inches from her face.

“You don’t call me or my friends idiots.”

Jamie’s nose burned from the smell of Matt’s alcohol-laden breath. She shut her
eyes and tilted her head back. Matt shook her to make her look at him.

“I always defend you!” he continued.

Matt let go of one arm, and Jamie pushed him away. She bolted for the door and
yelled for Joe.

“Just go home!” Matt yelled. He turned, kicked a lawn chair, and walked toward
the tree line at the back of the yard.

Jamie opened the door to the house before turning back toward her first boyfriend,
the guy she was supposed to love. She couldn’t love him now. “We’re done!” she
screamed as tears of anger poured down her face.
This is where the tale began. Matt Wade at this point was seventeen years and 364 days old, sitting behind the wheel of his car on what was supposed to be the greatest night of his life. He had known the euphoria he felt after the prank would be temporary, but he hadn’t expected it to be so short-lived. He sat with his hands in his lap and a million things running through his mind. He was no longer totally drunk, but the things he saw still moved in frames and he would get dizzy with a sharp turn of the head. He sat, waiting for the buzz to wear off so he could drive somewhere. Maybe home. Maybe not. He replayed his confrontation with Jamie over and over in his mind. Rewinding. Pausing. Fast forwarding. He was like a losing football coach, watching film and trying to figure out what he could have done different. After careful analysis, he recognized what he should have changed: everything.

Matt, thinking he had finally sobered up, reached into the glove compartment and pulled out his keys. As he placed them in the ignition he was overcome with vertigo. The realization that he still couldn’t drive angered him further; he pounded his hands on the steering wheel and cursed at the top of his lungs. He threw his keys on the floorboard. Then he remembered the stack of mail his father had given to him that day. He hastily grabbed the envelopes and began to flip through them. Most were unimportant – post cards and brochures from small-time colleges seemingly begging for Matt’s enrollment. He tossed these aside and came to the only standard envelope in the bunch. There was no return address, only Matt’s name and address in shaky penmanship. It looked as if the letter had been addressed while the writer was driving on a gravel road. Matt tore the edge and pulled out the letter. The writing was barely legible, possibly
worse than that which marked the front of the envelope. Matt’s own drunken eyes made
the note even more unintelligible. Matt quickly scanned to the end of the letter.

Your Friend,

Coach Tuff

In the fuss of the prank, the party, and Jamie’s departure, Matt had forgotten that
Saturday was his birthday. He would be eighteen, and Marty would undoubtedly be
asking what progress Matt had made on his goals. Matt returned his teary eyes to the top
of the letter and began reading.

Dear Matt,

In my thirty-some years of teaching, I’ve sent out thousands of letters like these,
checking up on my former students. This is only the second one that has deviated from
the usual form letter. You’re a special kid, Matt, and I’m glad you came along when you
did.

On the first day of your freshman year – nearly four years ago – you recorded
your goals in my class. You bluntly wrote, “I want to make a dent at this place.
Thousands of kids have walked these halls, and thousands of names have since been
forgotten. I want to be remembered. How will I do it? I’ll live life to the fullest and have
some fun. I am going to make a lot of friends, date a lot of girls, and honestly party like
no one has ever partied. You may think it’s wrong, but that’s me. I want to do big things
here. Instigate my senior prank, join the Guinness Book of World Record, and do things
that I haven’t even dreamed up yet. Bottom line: when you have to write me in fifteen
years, you won’t be thinking ‘Now, who was this Matt Wade kid?’”
You don't have to tell me that you made good on all these goals; it's no secret. But your goals for when you turn 21 are far nobler. You want to settle down and make peace with God. Matt, I write this not as your teacher, but as your friend. Please make your peace now. I don't want you to miss your opportunity. You are hurting others and you are killing yourself.

There is a reason I am speaking so candidly: I won't be able to write you on your 21st birthday. I am writing this from a hospital bed, weak with more cancer than doctors can kill. It's been about two years since we last spoke. I want you to come see me before I leave.

Your Friend,

Coach Tuff

There was a rock in Matt's stomach. He threw the letter on the passenger seat, grabbed his keys from the floorboard, and started his car. He forgot his blurry vision and spinning head and pulled out of the driveway, headed straight for the hospital, which was well on the other side of Brown High School. He flew down the country roads as fast as he could. He had a sinking feeling that Coach Tuff was going to die before he arrived. So whether he showed up at the hospital during visiting hours or not, he was intent on somehow getting in to see his feeble friend. Matt's mind, which already happened to be in rewind mode, shifted from thinking about Jamie to thinking about Marty. He remembered the first day of cross country practice. He thought about the regular pep talks. He recounted the day Marty announced his retirement. Matt was now ashamed that he was so enraged. Thousands of thoughts flew through his mind as he raced down
900 North toward canopy hill. He somehow conjured up exact quotes from important conversations that he had had with his mentor.

"If you stay, you will be the best runner on a team that doesn’t exist. You will have no front runner to motivate you. You will be alone on the workouts, and you won’t see anybody wearing the same jersey as you during races. You’ll be too far ahead. You can’t gauge yourself by how far Nathan is in front of you. You’ll have to do your own running. You’ll have to do your own pacing. You’ll have to do your own motivating. I’ll be here, but I’m old. I can’t make you do anything. Your passion has to be intrinsic. You understand?"

" Doesn’t sound easy."

"Good things are never easy."

Matt gulped, tightened his grip on the steering wheel, and turned his thoughts to the day that Marty had announced his retirement.

"Remember what I said to you after Nathan was removed from the team? I told you that people come and go and that feeling sorry for yourself is no way to cope. That wasn’t just a pep talk or some bull that I just made up. I was trying to get you ready for this."

A tear tickled Matt’s cheek as he remembered those words. He wiped it off with the sleeve of his shirt just as he saw headlights coming toward him at the crest of Canopy Hill.
Chapter 21

It was too late for Matt to do anything, really. He was helpless at the top of that hill and the red Sundance that he collided with was clearly in the wrong lane. He made the best of the split-second he had, however, slamming the brakes to the floor while turning sharply to the left. The Sundance slammed into Matt’s rear passenger side, spinning him off the road and sharply into a small ditch. The other car’s landing wasn’t so soft. After careening off Matt’s rear, the car spun violently and met an immovable tree.

Matt had always pictured car wrecks as being more glamorous than that. Instead of the pure, blunt force that he felt on that night, Matt had expected a blow cushioned by the pounds of collapsible metal around him. It was not so. The harsh collision knocked the wind out of Matt’s lungs and violently jolted his neck. He crawled out of the vehicle in severe pain, but summoned enough strength to cross the road to the other vehicle. He collapsed, however, when he saw what – or rather, who – had just caused the wreck. Wrapped around a thick oak tree was the red Sundance. Not a red Sundance, but the very one that always escorted Nathan Marx.

Matt fell to his knees and his jaw dropped. He didn’t even notice a third car pulling up to the scene. The driver jumped out of the car, already speaking to an emergency dispatcher on his cellular phone.

“I see two cars,” the man said. He touched Matt’s shoulder, barely bringing him out of his trance. “Are you okay?”

Matt looked up at the man with his mouth agape. He didn’t say a word.
“One kid seems okay,” the man continued. “The other car is wrapped around a tree. Oh my God. Send somebody fast!”

Matt rose to his feet and plodded over to Nathan’s car. In the dark, he saw the metal, twisted in ways he didn’t know it could be twisted. Shattered glass blanketed the street. The Samaritan’s headlights shone on the scene, making some figures discernable. Matt smelled alcohol as he reached the Sundance. He looked through the window and saw the remnants of what looked like several glass bottles. He saw Nathan. Trapped. Unconscious. Bleeding.

“What happened?” the man asked.

A sudden rush of panic overcame Matt. He tugged at the passenger door, trying to free Nathan.

“That’s my friend!” he screamed. In the background, sirens screamed with him. Matt began kicking the tangled vehicle. “Help me!”

“We can’t move him,” the man insisted, “or we’ll hurt him more. The ambulance will be here in a second.

Matt ran towards the man, grabbed him by the wrist and tried to drag him to the car. “Help!” The man, who was much larger than Matt, didn’t budge. He uttered some quiet words of comfort, but they fell on deaf ears. Matt let out a cry, dropped to his knees and sobbed.

The next thing he knew, Matt was illuminated by glowing spotlights of red and blue. He was staring blankly at the rescue workers, who worked feverishly to free
Nathan. A policeman was asking Matt what had happened. Matt almost didn’t realize that he was answering the questions.

“We hit,” Matt explained.

“Where?”

“On the hill.”

“How did he hit the back side of your car?”

“I turned.”

“Were you across the yellow line?”

“He was.”

“Have you been drinking?”

“I’m sober.”

The policeman told Matt to blow into a tube. He did.

“Point oh-six,” the officer said. “You are under the legal limit, but you are also under age. Do you need to go to the hospital?”

“Yes.” Matt was still in a daze.

Matt only snapped out of his trance when the officer handed him a phone in the back of the ambulance. “You need to call your folks.”

Matt dialed the number and woke his dad.

“Hello?”

“Hey, Dad,” Matt began. “I’m okay, but I was in a wreck.”

His dad suddenly sprung up. “Okay, where are you?”

“On my way to the hospital, I guess.”

“Are you hurt?”
“No. I’m going to see Coach Tuff. He’s there, and I was on my way to see him when Nathan ran into me. But they are taking me there now.”

“Okay,” Matt’s dad was confused, but he didn’t ask questions. “I’ll meet you there.”

Matt was calm as the doctors examined him. His neck was no longer hurting, the air had returned to his lungs, and he was now fully aware of what was happening. Every time he heard an ambulance enter the hospital’s lot, he questioned his doctor. “Is that Nathan? Did they get him out? Is he alive?”

The doctor was mum on the subject. She assured Matt that they were doing everything they could, and said she was sure Nathan would be all right.

“You’re sure?”

“We have the best doctors in the state working on him,” she said before attempting to change the subject. “Where were you headed?”

“Believe it or not, I was coming here.”

“Oh?”

“I just found out that my coach has cancer. I was coming over here to see him.”

“Oh,” the doctor lit up, “Coach Tuff?”

The doctor explained that she was a runner at Brown years ago. She had visited Marty in his hospital room every day since he checked in.

“You’ve got to let me see him,” Matt insisted.

“Well,” the doctor bit her lip and looked at her watch. “It’s two a.m.”

“I know, but this might be the last chance I get to talk to him.”
The doctor looked down and to the left, then looked into Matt’s desperate eyes.

“If he’s not already asleep, I’ll let you talk to him.”

Meanwhile, the policeman on the scene was telling Matt’s dad what had happened. Matt’s dad listened intently, but didn’t say anything.

“We had to cite your son,” the officer said. “He blew a .06 and he is underage.”

Matt’s dad nodded, and then asked his only question. “Is the other boy going to make it?”

“We don’t know,” the officer answered.

“Is that the truth?”

The officer lowered his voice and looked Matt’s dad in the eye. “We don’t think so.”

A floor above where Matt’s dad and the officer stood, Matt’s doctor slowly opened the door to Coach Tuff’s room and whispered. “Mr. Tuff?”

“I recognize that voice even when it’s quiet,” a quivery voice said immediately.

“Shouldn’t you be working, Diane?”

“Well, I can always take a break to see you.”

“If you want to see me, then turn on that light. I can’t sleep in this metal bed anyway.”

She turned the light on and Matt got his first glimpse of his fallen coach. He was set up in a typical hospital room. A screen with a squiggly green line beeped regularly. It was a bothersome, high-pitched tone, but Matt knew it meant his coach’s heart was beating. There were tubes and bags and equipment everywhere. Matt’s eyes caught a small bag hung up on what looked like a coat rack. A tube from the bag led down to
Marty’s thin arm. He immediately noticed that the formerly stout Tuff was much thinner.
A single white sheet draped over his body, making the coach’s thinness apparent. Matt followed another tube from Marty’s nose to a small tank. Oxygen. It pained Matt to look any more.

“I brought someone with me,” Dr. Diane said as she checked Marty’s IV.

“Yeah,” Marty responded. “Who’s that?”

“Hey, Coach.”

Matt noticed a smile curl across his coach’s face. “Diane, this is my star runner. Went to state the last two years. And he’s a helluva kid.”

“I can tell,” she answered. “I’ll leave you two to chat.”

The doctor shut the door behind her, and Matt pulled a chair next to Marty’s bed.

“When I get out of here,” Marty said between difficult breaths, “Diane and I are going to run away together.”

Matt laughed. Breathing was a chore for Marty. Every breath was labored and loud. He wheezed when he talked and smacked his lips often, trying to cure his persistently dry mouth.

“How do you feel?” Matt asked.

Marty smacked his lips and responded with a question. “You know how you guys felt during those practices when you had to push my truck?”

Matt smiled again. “Yeah.”


“So you got...my letter.”

“I opened it tonight. A little early, I guess.”
“Well, I sent it early,” Marty wheezed.

“I think you’re right.” Matt broke down. Tears came falling from his eyes like rain from the heavens. He sniffed. “Everybody is gone. Jamie broke up with me. Joe will never talk to me again. I graduate in a few weeks. None of the people that I hang around now are going to care about me in a few months. Now you’re leaving.”

A tear trickled down Marty’s wrinkled cheek as he heard Matt’s confession.

“Your dad will always be there,” the coach said. “He’s a good man.”

“I just got nailed for drunk driving. He’ll be done with me. So you can tell me ‘I told you so’ or whatever, but my life was perfect until a few weeks ago.”

“Was it?” Marty asked. “Was it really?”

“I don’t know,” Matt crossed his arms on the bed, buried his head and sobbed.

There were a few minutes in the hospital room then when there were no words, just tears. When the tear ducts ran dry, Marty spoke.

“Your life has been building to this point,” he advised. “You’ve nailed your goals, son, and you will be remembered. But I think you see that being remembered is not so important. It looks to me like you have a decision to make. Revelation 3:20.”

Matt lifted his head away from his arms for the first time since he began crying.

“What was that?”

Marty had no time to answer. He began coughing, gasping, and hacking. Matt stood up abruptly and looked around the room, trying to see if there was anything he could do. He was worried that he might be watching his coach die right in front of him, but the coughing eventually subsided. The coach didn’t have enough energy left to talk,
though. He waved Matt out of the room but grabbed his pupil's shirttail before he actually left. Matt turned around and Marty spread his arms for a hug.
Chapter 22

The next day was the worst of Matt’s life. After getting home at 4 a.m., Matt went to his room and slept until the afternoon. The telephone woke him up. Matt reached for the phone next to his bed and heard Joe on the other end.

“I don’t want to argue with you right now,” Joe said without giving Matt a chance to speak. “Jamie’s done with you unless you can somehow get some help and settle down. Frankly, I have no desire to be around you either.”

“I think I need some help, too,” Matt admitted.

“Well, let me know when that happens.”

Joe promptly hung up the phone, and Matt did the same. Matt flopped his head back down on the bed with nothing else to do but think. He fell in and out of sleep for the next few hours. Finally, he woke up with the citation Revelation 3:20 echoing in his head. He dug through his closet and found the Bible that Joe had given him three and a half years ago. He flipped through the shiny pages for the first time since getting that book. Just as Matt found the verse, his father knocked on his bedroom door.