





# Raiders Night

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**Robert Lipsyte**

 HarperCollins e-books

For the team—  
*Kyle, Jessie,*  
*Sam, Alfred, Mimi,*  
*and Lois*

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The Back Pack hit the gym in the early afternoon, Matt in the lead, before the yuppies marched in from work, while the young moms were rushing out to pick up their kids from day camp. Matt liked the way their hot eyes roamed over him, wondered if they knew he was still in high school, wondered if they cared. He felt big and hard. Excited. Was it the moms or what was waiting for him upstairs, the iron weights that would make him even bigger, harder. And the juice.

Brody poked him from behind with the football he always carried. "Check the headlights on the one in blue."

"Someday I'm gonna stick that ball up your ass."

"Ooooh, don't tease me, big boy."

Matt led them through the downstairs crowd of designer spandex and pastel sweats, cuties perched on shiny machines jiggling away to love songs as they pretended to work out. What did they know about working out? He liked the sense of leaving their soft world behind as he led the Back Pack up the metal steps into the stink and clang of the second floor, the real workout room.

He was glad they had beaten the linemen to the gym today. Give us a chance to get our session going without Ramp's crap.

The ironheads were there; they were always there, older white guys screaming each other into one more pecbusting rep. They wore tank tops and bandannas that looked like they were soaked in diesel fuel. One of them called out a singsong, half-mocking "Rai-derz."

Tyrell raised two fists. "Raiders rule, niggaz!"

The ironheads liked that and banged metal plates. Some of them had gone to Nearmont High and played ball.

"Matt?" The gym owner, Monty, came out of his office and beckoned him over. "New shipment in."

Matt nodded and felt the excitement rise. Perfect timing. Load up just before camp so the juice kicks in during the two-a-days when we really need it. He flashed the Back Pack a thumbs-up. Hope they all brought their wallets.

They dressed quickly. They were jittery, psyched for the last heavy workout before camp. Tyrell, as usual, complained about the music on the upstairs speakers, a pounding mix of disco and heavy metal. The ironheads controlled those CDs. For now. See what happens if we win Conference this year.

Matt caught Pete sneaking peeks at himself in the mirror. Pete was more self-conscious than the rest of them about the pimples on his shoulders. Backne they called it. From the steroids. Price you pay. Pete's girlfriend, Lisa, wasn't so sure it was worth the price. She'd said as much, and Pete listened to her. Girls hear about the side effects, but how could they know the feeling of watching a muscle grow bigger and harder? Pete flexed his biceps when he thought no one was looking, as if to remind himself that Lisa didn't know everything.

Matt said, "Quads and glutes win games." He wondered if he was taking this captain thing too seriously.

"Tyrell says bicep curls win hot girls," said Tyrell. He mimicked Pete's flex.

Pete, embarrassed, snapped his shirt at Tyrell, who laughed and danced just out of range. They

loved to watch Tyrell move. He had radar. He glided like a phantom. He was the best running back in the conference. ~~If we stay healthy and tight, Matt thought, this could be our season. Maybe State.~~ Senior year, what a way to go.

Out on the mats, stretching, Matt could tell Brody's mind was heading to the same place.

"We got a shot." Brody's big freckly face had that dreamy look. Probably imagining himself winning the state title. With a quarterback sneak. Not a forty-yard bomb to me or a handoff to Tyrell, but a heroic scramble out of a collapsing pocket and a desperate lunge over the goal line. Behind his back, some of the guys called him All-Brody. Dad thought he didn't throw to Matt enough. But Brody was all right. Best friend on the team.

"One day at a time," said Matt.

"You're, like, channeling Coach Mac," said Brody.

"You ready to put the bar where your mouth is?" Matt held up the clipboard with their workout schedule.

"See what I mean?"

They started with squats, lunges, and power cleans to build up their legs and lower backs for the explosive starts off the line of scrimmage. These were the most intense exercises in the daily program the coaches had laid out in the spring. Matt had come to realize that if they left those exercises to the end of the session, they would slack off, especially Pete and Brody. They preferred to work harder on the lat pull downs, the curls and flys to build up their upper bodies for the beach. But they listened to Matt. He was their leader. Tyrell had named them the Back Pack, the four starting backfield seniors. Brody, Pete, and Matt had played together since PeeWee. Tyrell had joined them as a sophomore after he came out from New York, staying at his aunt's house during the week so he could go to Nearmont High.

The linemen stomped in, Ramp bellowing, "Yo, Rydek, your girls done yet?"

Before Matt could respond, Tyrell shouted, "Where you been? Stop off for lunch at the hog farm?"

Ramp cursed, raised a finger, and led the linemen into the locker room.

Matt waited until they were out of earshot. "Chill."

"Nobody cool says chill no more."

"Our last season, last chance to win Conference." He glared at Tyrell until he nodded and started pulling dumbbells off the rack. "Let's be a team."

"You always right, Cap'n Matt, sir."

Matt and Brody moved to the benches. It took a few reps to clear his head, but once Matt felt the blood pumping again, all the good feelings came back. He concentrated on visualizing his muscles swell and harden as he lay on the bench and pushed the bar up toward Brody's face. Familiar, comforting pains flooded his chest and shoulders as he fought his arms straight under 275 pounds.

"Up, c'mon, up, you pussy," growled Brody, spotting him. "You can do it."

Matt yelled as his elbows locked. Personal best.

"Good job," shouted Brody. "It's all you, man."

"Nice start," snickered Ramp, his big potato head looming above Matt. "Now put some weight on the bar." He swaggered off. The linemen would be lifting at least fifty pounds more.

They worked out for two hours, tapering on the rowing machines, cooling down on the treadmill. They watched Ramp and the linemen scream their way through fifty-pound flys while the ironheads nodded.

In the shower room, they checked each other out. You never look so good as after a heavy workout, thought Matt. Everything looks bigger. Tyrell's shoulders were black bowling balls, his butt was stone. Imagine if he juiced with us. Tyrell said he was afraid of losing quickness. They'd argued

over that. Olympic sprinters used steroids and growth hormone all the time. But Tyrell said they just blew ahead straight while he needed to cut and fade. Matt thought it might be about money. Tyrell never had much. In the city, Tyrell lived with his grandmother in a housing project.

Tyrell split when they headed for Monty's office behind the one-way glass mirrors. You couldn't see in but Monty could see out. He opened the door before Matt knocked.

"You're gonna love this stuff," Monty said as they filed in. He closed the door. "I got a new supplier, Canadian. He puts together stacks for NFL players."

"How much?" asked Brody.

"For you guys, I'm sticking with the old prices. This batch is \$220."

Monty took a FedEx box out of a metal locker and began unpacking bottles. He spread a clean white towel across the top of his desk and laid out the bottles, syringes, needles, and alcohol swabs. Monty was in his forties, but he still had the shape of a bodybuilder even if the muscles had shrunk and softened. As usual, Matt was fascinated by his precision. Monty stripped the paper wrappers off the syringes, screwed on the needles, and pulled off their plastic guards with his teeth. He stabbed a needle through the rubber top of a bottle and slowly drew out the oily yellow liquid.

Pete groaned softly. He was solid and dependable on the field, but he always started sweating and swaying about now. Still, he hadn't fainted in more than a year.

Monty flicked a forefinger against a syringe and pushed a drop of liquid through the tip of the needle. "Who's first?"

"Matt's number one in my book," said Pete, raising a middle finger. He was white as a ghost but trying to keep it together.

"Grab your ankles, Matt." Monty always said that.

Matt loosed the drawstring on his shorts and let them drop to his flip-flops. No underwear in this weather. He bent over the desk. Monty slapped him high on the buttock to numb the skin and rubbed with alcohol. Matt felt a pinch and a sting as he drove in the needle, then the sensation of something cold sliding into the big muscle.

"This is the Decadurabolin," said Monty. "Stacked with testosterone. Gonna rip you big-time, man. It's the all-pro cocktail. I'll give you some Danabol pills, too."

Monty slipped out the needle and pressed the swab on the puncture site. Matt imagined the steroids rushing through his system, finding the muscles, healing them, building them, making them stronger.

Brody pushed Pete forward. He was shivering as he gripped the edge of the desk. Pete closed his eyes as Monty drilled him. The weekly injections turned Pete to jelly, even though his big, soft backside swallowed the needle. Brody didn't seem to notice the shot.

Watching them, Matt felt a surge of brotherhood. He felt even closer to them in here than in the weight room or on the field. Taking the shots proved their commitment to the team and to each other. We'll do whatever it takes to get bigger, get better, to win.

There was a knock at the door, then Ramp's voice. "Yo, Doctor Monty. Ready for the men?"

"Just a minute." Monty grinned at Matt. "No excuses now. Gonna kick some this season, right?"

"Right," said Matt. This is our time, he thought.



The softball game had started by the time they got to the town field. The lights were on. From the parking lot, Matt could hear his father barking, "Let's get a hit, get a hit, no pitcher, no pitcher." Brody flipped Matt the football as they walked but didn't say anything. Brody's dad was a piece of work, too. They didn't need to talk about it. Matt rubbed the football between his palms before he flipped it back. The pebbly skin reminded him he was a football player, even here on Dad's turf. Brody had started carrying the ball everywhere two summers ago, after he went to a quarterback camp where an NFL coach told them that the great ones even slept with the ball. It was all about making the ball an extension of their bodies. The Back Pack joked about Brody shagging pigskin, but they understood. Wherever you were, the ball brought you back to who you were.

They took their time strolling to the stands, tossing the ball, letting the crowd catch sight of them. People waved. A few little boys ran up just to follow them like puppies. The boldest one tugged at their baggy shorts and held out his hands for the ball. Matt asked him, "What inning?"

"Second. No score, Matt." The kid sounded proud to say his name.

Matt felt good. Warm and hard and big. He avoided looking at his father, coaching at third base.

"Matt, Mattie, Matt, over here." His brother, Junie, large and loud, was bouncing on the grandstand, waving him over. Matt waved back and signaled him to sit down, be quiet. Too late. Dad had spotted Matt. He felt the where-you-been glare before he saw it. Dad wanted the whole family at his games. Mom would be up in the stands somewhere with her friends.

Brody asked, "You going to Lexie's?"

"You?"

Brody shrugged. "Might as well. Last party before hell."

"Pick me up after the game?"

"I'm driving?"

"Your turn," said Matt.

"What about Pete?"

"Who knows? Might have to paint Lisa's toenails tonight."

Brody laughed. "Okay."

"See you after. Gotta go sit with Junie."

"Gotta conduct a chassis inspection." Brody pointed the football toward a bursting red tank top. "Catch you later."

It took Matt a few minutes to work his way into the stands. Men wanted to say hello, ask about the coming season. Old ladies clucked over his sleeveless Baybodies T-shirt. He'd picked it up on a recruiting trip to Michigan State when he'd gotten wasted at a strip club with some of the college players. Dad hated the shirt, which was why he was wearing it.

He knew only a few girls in the stands, mostly the younger sisters of friends and the twenty-something girlfriends of players on Dad's softball team. Most of the better senior girls were still off on vacation or in college prep camps or getting ready for tonight's party. Mandy wouldn't be home from cheerleader camp until after he left for training camp. She'd been gone for almost two weeks. He rarely thought about her when she wasn't around. He'd started leaving his cell off when he thought she might call. Time enough to figure all that out after camp.

“Matt?” A short, bug-eyed kid he dimly recognized from school was hopping alongside. Looked like a frog. “Matt, I write for the *Nearmont Eye*, and...”

“The school paper?”

“No, we’re the alternate, online, totally independent.” He puffed up, just like a frog. “I’d like to interview you about the coming season, not the usual stuff, but the real—”

“After we’re back from camp, okay? I got to see my brother now.” He didn’t wait for a response.

Junie wrapped an arm around his neck when he sat down. “What’s up, CyberPup?”

It was a line from Junie’s favorite cartoon show. Matt groaned. “I’m in your power.” Junie’s arm was big but flabby. Got to get him into a fitness routine. Dad said he would but never did. Can’t blame him for that—he’s working all the time.

“Where you hiding the microchips?” said Junie.

“Right here with the potato chips.” Matt grabbed a handful of Junie’s belly through his blue Rydek Gourmet Catering T-shirt. Junie giggled and released his grip.

“Where you been, Matty?”

“At the gym.” No need to tell him we stopped for burgers.

“Dad’s been looking for you.”

“Here I am.” He tried to keep the annoyance out of his voice. Only make Junie nervous. “Let’s watch the game.”

Dad was stomping around the third-base coaching box, hands on hips, chest out, spitting sunflower seeds. Freddy Heinz, Brody’s older brother, dug into the batter’s box. Freddy had held all of Nearmont High’s passing records until Brody started breaking them. Freddy had torn up his shoulder in a bar fight his sophomore year at Iowa State and switched to defensive back, then lost his scholarship and come home. He did landscaping now and drove a truck for Rydek Gourmet Catering. Dad had built a powerhouse softball team out of old Nearmont jocks who’d come back home and needed jobs after busting in college or pro ball, like he did.

“Let’s do it, Freddy.” Dad was clapping and shouting. “Go yard, go yard.”

“What’s *goyar*?” asked Junie.

“Go yard,” said Matt. “Means go deep, hit a homer.”

“Oh.” Junie hated to feel dumb.

Matt squeezed the back of his neck. “Some TV guy made it up. I didn’t know it, either.”

“You didn’t?” Junie perked up. “Go yard, Freddy.”

Two on, two out, and Freddy grounded to short to end the inning. Dad shook his head and gave him the why-can’t-you-do-what-I-tell-you-to-do glare. Know that one, too, thought Matt. The softball team had a shot at the league title this year, and Dad had been calling extra practices. Brody said his brother was complaining, but when you worked for the guy, you had to show up.

I work for the guy and I have to show up for my football games and his softball games, Matt thought. That’s my work. Matt made a mental note to send Dad an e-mail invoice for catering work he hadn’t done. Dad would put more money on Matt’s debit card so he could pay Monty. They never talked about the steroids, although Matt knew that Dad talked to Monty. The Vicodin was easier because the orthopedic surgeon who treated Matt for back pain was pretty free with prescriptions and Dad paid the drugstore bill directly. Dad and the doctor both had to know how much Matt was taking and they didn’t care as long as he scored touchdowns. He swallowed down the anger that bubbled up his throat. Chill, Matt, tomorrow you’re out of here.

Rydek Catering took the field and Dad swaggered out to the mound. He was Monty’s age and still pitching. They’d gone to Nearmont High together, both got football scholarships, but Dad skipped college to sign with the Mets for a small bonus. He spent two seasons in the minors but never got the chance to find out if he was good enough to make it to the Show. When he was twenty, his dad died of

a heart attack and he had to come home and take over the family's small catering business, which he hated. He was married by then, and Junie was born. Years and years of doctor's bills there. He'd built up the business over time, but he was still pissed off at missing his chance.

"Mom wants you." Junie poked him and pointed to the top of the stands.

When Matt found Mom, she was mouthing the word, "Dinner?"

Matt shook his head and mouthed, "Party."

She rolled her eyes and turned to say something to Brody's mom, who smiled and waved at Matt. In the right clothes, from a distance, Brody's mom could pass for a high school girl. The guys agreed she was the hottest mom. He felt a warm splash run down from his chest. Feeling horny with Mandy away. The juice does it, too.

Dad's barking voice brought him back to the game. Chest first, he was marching toward the plate umpire, who had just called a fourth ball.

"Dad's really mad," said Junie. He sounded upset. He'd never gotten used to Dad's screaming.

"He's not so mad," said Matt. "It's just part of the game. He'll pretend he's angry so he gets his way." When Junie kept staring at him, he said, "He'll get over it before he comes home. Dad yells at the umpire so next time the umpire will be afraid to call a ball and he'll call a strike instead."

It took Junie a moment to digest it, then he smiled. "You know everything, Matt."

"Right about that, Ace." He punched his brother lightly, glad to make him smile, sad that Junie was seven years older.

The game dragged on. The score was tied. Swarms of bugs attracted by the lights dive-bombed spectators and players. Only Dad refused to slap them away, to acknowledge they even existed. Tough guy. Matt felt the old mix of admiration and anger. Dad teaching him to box by trading punches with him, always hitting back a little harder than Matt hit him. How many times had he heard Dad say, "Don't cry," and later, "Don't rub," and always, "Don't ever let them know you're hurting." Dad never showed pain, even when Matt started landing hard shots. Be good to get out of the house for five days.

In the seventh, Dad clubbed a looping fly into left-center and lumbered to first. Anybody else on the team would have gotten to second, maybe even third, but Dad stood proudly on the base, grinning for a moment before he finally signaled for a pinch runner. He really did want to win this game, thought Matt.

Back in the coaching box, he started screaming at the pitcher, trying to crack his concentration. But the pitcher was an older guy who ignored him. Wish I could do that, thought Matt.

Two outs, then Freddy Heinz was up again, working the count. He checked his swing on a pitch that Matt thought nicked the inside corner for a third strike to end the game, but the umpire called it ball. The pitcher lost his cool and started yelling. The ump turned his back. Dad grinned at the crowd. Maybe he had intimidated him after all. It had worked before.

Freddy lined the next pitch deep into right field. The pinch runner scored to win the game. Junie was jumping and shouting, "We won, we won." He knew the old man would be in a good mood. Ice cream tonight.

Matt and Junie went out on the field. Mom joined them for a group hug. Dad swaggered over, grinning, kissing Mom, ruffling Junie's hair. Matt stuck out his hand to Dad, who grabbed it and pulled him into a half hug, squeezing him. He whispered in his ear, "Got to rattle those pussy umps, what I tell you?"

"You told me." Easy way out, and it left a sour taste in his mouth. He always felt smaller around Dad, even now that he was taller than him.

Just want to get through this year and out of town, and away from him. Matt's chest and shoulders were aching from the workout. Some beer and Vicodin would fix that. Then the last party before hell.



He was looking forward to hell. It was out of town.

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## THREE

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Matt floated into the party a step behind Brody, who opened holes in the crowd with his smile. Brody reached out for guys to tap fists and girls to feel up. Ever since he was in PeeWee, All-Brody had acted like he was walking on a red carpet, but nobody ever seemed to mind. He could say anything to anybody. Guys trusted him in the huddle and girls couldn't keep their hands off him. He had left the football in the car. He was looking to score tonight.

The beer and Vic buzz carried Matt over the upturned faces. "Yo, Matt...Lookin' good, my man.... Where's Amanda?...Ready for hell, hoss?" He felt the words more than heard them, like hundreds of fingers plucking at him. Good thing Brody's driving tonight. Matt grinned back at people, winked, tapped a few fists, squeezed a few soft arms that came out of the crowd to encircle him like snakes and then fell away, brushing the length of his body. He smelled perfume and armpits. He waved back at Pete, in a corner with Lisa. They talked about everything. Pathetic, Matt thought, then wondered what it would be like to have someone you could really talk to.

"Start the party," Ramp bellowed. "Captains are here." His shoulders cleared a path and he was suddenly beside Matt, throwing a heavy arm around his neck, thrusting a can of beer in his hand. In this kind of crowd, Ramp always acted like they were buds. Otherwise, he made wiseass remarks and kept his distance. Been like that since PeeWee, teammates but never friends.

"Wassup?" Can't just blow Ramp off with everybody watching.

"Hear about the transfer from Bergen Central?" said Ramp.

Bergen Central was in another conference. He didn't know any of their players. "What about?"

"Sophomore tight end. Thinks he's just gonna show up and play." Ramp sounded angry. Ramp was a great linebacker, but only a so-so tight end. He didn't want any competition.

"He'll back you up," said Matt.

"We'll see what he's got." Ramp tightened his arm around Matt's neck. Matt thought of Dad squeezing him. "Where's Mandy?"

"Cheerleader camp." He considered ramming an elbow into Ramp's gut to loosen the grip. He was a little soft there. But it would take more energy than Matt had right now.

Ramp put his face close to Matt's ear. "Dog's night out? Find some strange meat, huh, woof, woof."

"Hey, is this like a same-sex thing?" Lexie glided up and made a big show of trying to separate them with her long bare arms. Matt could see most of her new breasts under her loose top.

"It's a three-way," said Ramp. He let go of Matt and made a grab for her but came up empty. She was quick. "Don't you want a test feel?"

She ignored him. "When's Amanda back?"

Matt's mind dragged, like a computer hard drive about to freeze. "Tomorrow?"

"Two of you come by?"

"Training camp."

Lexie tossed her blond hair. "So you boys can really get it on?" She cackled and danced away.

"Bitch needs more than new tits," said Ramp. "Who's she doing?"

Matt shrugged. He didn't keep up with that. Mandy's department.

"She needs a taste of the Ramp." He started after her. "Be a good dog."

Try to avoid him tonight, Matt thought, be enough of him in camp. Ramp was a good captain for keeping the troops in line, but he couldn't leave his mean streak on the field. He scared girls, hardly ever scored if they weren't drunk. Matt wondered if it was just the beer fogging his windshield, or if the pain pills were kicking, too.

He settled into the fog, let it wrap him in a soft bumper. With Ramp gone, more guys came up to shake his hand, girls to rub against him. He didn't have to say much, just smile, nod. Hard to hear anyway, the music was amped so high. Mandy loved these parties. She was the queen. Have to be cool. Her spies were everywhere.

He spotted Lexie coming toward him, trying to shake off Ramp. Better run a route. He sidestepped around a couch and into another room. A guy who resembled him stared at him blankly. took a beat to realize he was looking in a mirror. Someone offered the guy in the mirror a beer. He held up the one he had.

He followed a whiff of pot toward the back of the house, then out onto a deck. Tyrell was preaching to the stoners.

"Cap'n Matt?" Tyrell held out his blunt.

All I need, thought Matt, on top of the beer and pain pills. But he didn't want to wimp.

While Matt toked, Tyrell said, "Tyrell calls this man the Fre-quent Fly-er because he is the franchise, the stud. Matt Rydek could catch a hummingbird in a hurricane. His hands are softer than a baby's bee-hind."

A girl said, "You are a poet, Tyrell."

"Not Tyrell's only gift, juicy lady." He took the blunt from Matt and moved toward her.

A voice behind Matt, almost in his ear, said, "Your hands are softer than a baby's bee-hind?"

Matt turned, almost bumping a tall girl, short dark hair, full lips, big breasts. He dimly remembered her from last year.

"So, what do you use to keep your hands so soft?" She had a low voice.

"It's a football expression."

"Shut up." She had a tinkly laugh. Nice.

"Really." He wanted to explain that it just meant he could catch anything he could get his hands on, that footballs didn't bounce out of his grasp. But the words were stuck deep in his hard drive.

"You okay?" It sounded like a real question.

"Headache," he said. That was true.

"I've got something in my car that—"

"Thanks, I've had enough—"

"Ibuprofen." She laughed again and put a warm hand on his. "I'm maxed, too."

He angled for a better view of her. She had big eyes, nice teeth.

His cell vibrated. Be Mandy, he thought, checking up on me. Better answer. Get it over with quick. He mumbled something and turned his back on the girl. He flipped open the phone. "Eighty." was his jersey number, a code with Mandy.

"This sucks." It was Brody.

"I'll stay for a while."

"Need a ride?"

"Got one." And some ibuprofen, too.

"Tomorrow." Brody hung up.

When he turned back, she was gone.

He tried to remember her name. Had he ever known it? He tried to bring up her face, but all he got were lips and eyes. Now I need a ride. He punched #1 on his speed dial but got Brody's voice mail. Maybe he's still here. He started toward the door. He felt as though he were walking in waist-high

warm water, dense and salty. Ocean. Man, I am hammered. But the headache was okay, cottony, blotting out any other thoughts.

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Lexie was in the middle of the living room, crying. Girls fluttered around her, cooing, patting her. One of them turned to glare at him. Terri. The one Mandy replaced. Get over it already. Like Coach says, Get past the past.

“Score yet?” Ramp dropped a meat hook on his shoulder.

Lexie was wailing now.

“What’s her problem?” It was the kicker, Patel.

“Drama queen,” said Ramp. “She bought new boobs to get attention and now she got it.”

“Needs a pounding,” said Patel. He was okay, but he was the only Indian on the team and tried too hard to sound like the other guys.

“I need a beer,” said Ramp.

Patel scurried off. I need to get away from all this, thought Matt. Get out of the house, walk home if I have to. He shrugged off Ramp’s arm and made his way across the room. But he had lost the sense of where he was. Lexie’s dad was a contractor and the house was huge, a maze. Matt passed kids making out and then thought he passed them again.

Patel popped up and pressed a cold can into his hand. “Got you one, too, Matt.”

“Thanks.” It felt good rolled across his forehead.

It took forever to find the door. It was cooler outside. Did he really want to walk? Try Brody again.

“Ready?” The tall girl with the full lips came out of the shadows.

“Thought you left.”

“I was waiting for you.” Her hand on his arm guided him across the lawn.

Her car was on the road, a gray Jetta. She opened the passenger door for him. He strained to see her face. What was her name?

She started the engine, then reached across him to open the glove compartment. Her body was warm and soft on his lap. She rattled a little plastic bottle. “Take two.” She put the pills in his hand. When he hesitated, she said, “Ibuprofen, remember?”

He washed them down with a gulp of warm beer. His forehead had cooked the can. He turned to thank her but her lips were in the way.

“I have soft hands, too,” she said.



He was lost again in the maze of dark streets, voices murmuring at him from behind garbage cans and parked cars. He thought about putting up the convertible's top as protection, but the windshield was filthy and he needed to be able to peer over it to see where he was going. But he couldn't see anyway. A car wash. He needed to get to a car wash. Hands began rapping on the metal skin of the car, a drumbeat, laughter. He recognized voices but couldn't remember the names. His cell phone vibrated but he couldn't find it. He knew it was the call he was waiting for. He drove faster until the car wash appeared, then drove right onto the tracks. The machinery rumbled and moved the car into the spray. He couldn't get the top up. Huge wet rags from the ceiling were slapping his face, crushing his chest. He couldn't breathe. He was drowning.

"Romo." Junie was trying to drag the big dog off him, but she didn't want to stop licking Matt's face.

He sat up fast. Romo stepped backward onto his groin. "Romo!" Scared, she jumped off the bed. Junie followed to comfort her.

Dad stuck his head into the room. "Breakfast, let's go."

"Get outa here." Matt forced his eyes to focus on the clock. "It's eight twenty."

"Time to get up."

"Saturday."

"I'm going to be gone all day—"

"So what?" He was waking up and his head hurt.

"—and I want to talk to you before you leave for camp."

"What about?"

Dad took one long step into the room and reached for Matt's sheet. Romo howled. He had stepped on her tail. "Why is that dumb dog always in my way?"

"Not dumb," said Junie. He hugged her.

"Okay," said Matt quickly. He knew where this could go. "Be right down."

Dad stomped out of the room and down the stairs. Junie looked up at Matt. He and Romo both had hurt looks in their eyes.

"He didn't mean it," said Matt. Sure he did. "Go on down—be right there."

He closed his eyes, waiting for his head to quit threatening to roll off his neck. He had gotten home very late, after the sky had started to lighten. They had driven around, talking. The girl was a talker, although he couldn't remember what they had talked about. They had stopped to get some food then parked somewhere. She had soft hands all right, and a soft mouth. He couldn't remember her name.

He opened his eyes and got up slowly. The room shifted, the ceiling tilting down, the floor slanting up. Jerry Rice smiled at him from the big poster on the wall. No. 80, the greatest wide receiver of all time. Been wearing his number since middle school. Jerry must have been hungover a few mornings. Maybe not, the shape he stayed in for so long.

In big print over his signature, it read:

*The biggest enemy of best is good.*

*If you're satisfied with what's good,  
you'll never be the best.*

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By the time Matt got downstairs, Dad was at the kitchen table shoveling in waffles and glaring at Junie and Romo. Mom had on her bright and perky TV-Mom look. Dad must really be pissed.

“Waffles or eggs, Matt?”

“Just a shake.” He wasn’t hungry. “And some coffee?”

“Scrambled eggs,” said Junie.

“Waffles,” said Dad. “They’re mixed already.”

“It’s no trouble,” said Mom. She gave Dad a tight smile.

“This isn’t a diner,” he said. He turned to Matt. “I’m thinking of doing a meal at camp.”

“What for?” That woke Matt up.

“The boys like a break from camp chow. Remember the barbecue?”

Two years ago. He was a sophomore. It was harder to stand up to Dad then, keep him out of his space. “Do it when we come back.”

“Too many other people around, it’s not a team thing.”

“You’re not on the team.” That came out before he thought about it.

“Waffles coming up,” chirped Mom.

Dad’s face had lost expression, tightening into the bland mask he wore when he was getting angry. Eyes got cold. “I want to do the meal after the boys get settled. But before Raider Pride Night.”

“How come?”

“That night can get hairy.” Dad grinned. “You know which night that is?”

Last night of camp, everybody knows that, jerkoff. “Dunno.”

“Big-shot captain doesn’t know?”

“Ask Coach.”

“Ramp probably knows.”

“Ask him.” He felt the anger rise.

“You got a real ’tude this morning.”

“It’s too early.”

“Only if you’re up all night.”

Mom said, “Larry, it wasn’t a school night.”

“It was a football night,” said Dad.

“A softball night,” said Junie as he patted Romo. She was whimpering.

“Can’t you shut that dog up? Bad enough she’s dumb, she’s a pussy. World’s fraidiest rottweiler.”

“She’s not even half rottweiler,” said Mom.

“Well, that explains it,” said Dad.

Matt measured the distance across the kitchen table as if Dad were a tackler who needed to be avoided or leveled. He must know he can’t take me anymore, thought Matt. That’s why we don’t box anymore. Maybe it’s time for some hard proof.

Chill. In a few hours you’ll be on a bus out of here.

“When we come back,” said Matt. “A barbecue when we come back.”

“Can I go?” asked Junie. “I’ll help. Do burgers.” He mimed slapping meat patties on a grill.

“Wouldn’t that be nice,” said Mom.

“Can you drop Matt off at the bus?” Dad was changing the subject. Might have won that one.

“I’ve got a bar mitzvah all the way up in Bergen Lakes.”



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