

VARSITY 170

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Chapter 1

BEST FRIENDS

You have Miss Scalf for English. Right?” Marcus’s voice crackled a bit over Chad’s earbud.

“Yeah, you do too. Right?” Chad turned the steering wheel into Marcus’s tract.

The best friends were going to see each other in a few minutes. But they both saw no reason why they shouldn’t be talking on the phone now. One of their favorite ’80s songs, Journey’s “Only the Young,” was playing in the car through Chad’s iPod. They often worked out to this song. They first heard it in the movie *Vision Quest*. It was a wrestling movie, one of their favorites.

“Dude, I’m almost there. Don’t make me wait,” Chad said. He disconnected the call and cranked the music.

Chad Erickson and Marcus Pagel had been best friends since kindergarten. Today was the first day of their senior

year. They had worked their entire lives for this moment. It was going to be the best year yet.

It had to be.

In nine months they were going to graduate. Marcus was headed to a four-year college. He didn't know where he was going yet: Stanford, UCLA, Washington. But wherever he went, he was going to wrestle. Chad wanted to go to a four-year school too. He had applied to Stanford and a few others. But he didn't think he would get in.

"I'm going to college," he would tell his girlfriend, Maria. "But I might have to go to a community college first."

There was still an outside chance that a scout from one of the Pac-12 colleges would see him. He'd be impressed with Chad. Scoop him up. Give him a full scholarship. Then Chad would wrestle for that school. And win.

That was Chad's dream since his sophomore year. But so far, it hadn't happened. Chad's parents didn't have a lot of money. Neither did Marcus's. Chad knew going to a four-year school right out of high school would be too expensive. Marcus didn't seem to care about the money.

He pulled up outside of Marcus's two-story home. Chad had practically grown up here. He was another son. Just one of the family. He could help himself to their food, or get himself a drink. Nobody would blink. Not even Marcus's little brother, Dave.

Chad sat there for a second. He thought about turning off his car and going inside.

But he didn't. Instead, he pressed a couple of buttons on his iPod and replayed "Only the Young" from the beginning. This way Marcus could listen to it too.

They weren't late. Yet. But if he went inside, Marcus would no doubt try to show him some YouTube video that Marcus and Dave found hilarious. Chad was an only child. He envied the relationship that Marcus had with his brother. Dave was a cool kid for an eighth grader. And he idolized Chad and Marcus.

"I'm gonna wrestle when I get to high school," Dave would say. "Just like you guys."

Suddenly, the red door to the Pagel house flew open. Marcus bounded outside. He had his backpack slung over his shoulder, a huge smile on his face. He was wearing dark jeans and a Shepard High School sweatshirt.

"Sup, sup!" he yelled across the driveway.

Chad smiled and waved to him. Marcus's mom and Dave appeared in the doorway. Chad could tell by Dave's smile that Marcus was probably teasing his mom before he walked out of the house.

"Marcus," she called in a hushed voice. "You're gonna wake up half the block!"

"Sorry, Mom!" Marcus hollered back. His mom's face

dropped as he walked backward, looking at her. "I'm just saying hi to my boy. You and Dad always taught me to be a polite little boy!"

Dave started laughing even more, and this made Chad laugh too.

Then Marcus dropped to the ground.

Chapter 2

WORDS UNSPOKEN

Oh my God! Marcus!” his mom called.

But before she could rush over to him, Marcus hopped up. He was grinning from ear to ear. It had been a joke. Marcus was always messing around. Cracking jokes. Having fun. He wasn’t mean about it. He always seemed to be going for a laugh. Even when he gave teachers a hard time, they didn’t seem to mind. The cool ones responded in kind. This would egg Marcus on, but he did know there were boundaries.

“See you after practice!” Marcus got in Chad’s car.

Chad waved at Marcus’s mom so she didn’t think they were being disrespectful. Dave was laughing hard. Marcus’s mom started to scold him.

“Starting the day at second period was genius. Only having five classes is gonna be sweet,” Marcus declared.

They had both set up their schedules to match, with

fingers crossed that they would get the same teachers. But they didn't get every class together.

For the last three years, they loaded their schedules. Now that it was senior year, they wanted to take only five classes. It was actually just four classes because sixth period was physical education for varsity wrestling. Since they didn't start school until second period, they could stay up later and sleep in longer.

"I can't believe we're seniors," Chad stated.

"Yeah, it's awesome. We really gotta make this year sick. Totally blow it out." Marcus pulled a bottle of Coke out of his backpack.

"Maybe we should wait till we find out what colleges we're going to. In my case, what college I'm *not* going to."

"Don't be a such a stress case. You're going to a good school." Marcus took a sip of his soda.

Marcus always makes things seem so easy. How the heck does he do that? Chad wondered.

It was undeniable. Marcus was usually right about going with the flow.

"I hope."

"You will." Marcus stared out the windshield. There wasn't a hint of disbelief in his voice.

"How do you know this?" Chad smiled.

"Look, you're going to a good school. You wanna know why?"

“Why?”

“Because I say so.” Marcus smiled.

Chad saw something in his eyes. It was confidence. It was going to be this way because Marcus said it would be. Chad needed to hear it.

Their senior year had just begun. One of the things Chad couldn’t fathom—one of the things that Marcus never talked about—was what would happen when senior year was over.

What would happen when they were no longer together every day?

Chad knew there was no point in thinking about it right now.

“You’re right,” Chad said. “Senior year is going to be epic.”

He pressed play on his iPod and “Only the Young” started yet again.

“Yeah! Old school. Love it.” Marcus tapped out the beat on his chest as the song blasted.

They fist-bumped like they always did and continued on to school.

Chapter 3

THE GIRLFRIENDS

Maria Tullai and Debbie Dowland greeted the guys as they made their way onto the Shepard campus. Maria had long brown hair and dark skin. She never used much makeup. Chad liked her fresh look. She always wore jeans or shorts, never dresses.

Debbie dressed the same as Maria. Some people thought they were sisters. Marcus was always asking her to wear tighter clothes. He would beg her to show more skin.

The couples made a tight foursome.

Maria wrapped her arms around Chad as they gave each other a warm hug. That was what Chad loved about hugging Maria. She made him feel like he was the most important person she knew.

Marcus and Debbie always made out in public. This morning was no exception. Chad wondered if it was something they did just because they could.

“Let’s ditch school,” Marcus suggested. “We’ll go the beach.”

“Yeah,” Chad said. “Like that won’t get us in trouble with Coach Mustain.”

“We’ll be back in time for wrestling practice.” Marcus pulled Debbie closer to him and kissed her on the cheek.

“What am I gonna wear?” Debbie laughed. “I didn’t bring my bathing suit.”

“Well, I guess you won’t wear one.” Marcus leered at her.

“I think we should get to class before Marcus actually talks us into this,” Maria said.

Maria was the most levelheaded person in the group. Chad liked that about her. They had been together for almost two years. She always kept him in check if he started worrying too much.

The group started walking through the campus. Students sat or stood, talking to one another or texting. Some girls used their phone cameras as mirrors to spruce up their hair or makeup.

There were Welcome Back posters everywhere. Clubs had also posted sign-up flyers for new members.

As the four of them walked together, once again, Chad couldn’t believe their senior year was finally here.

“We rule this school, you guys,” he said loudly.

Maria looked at him. Chad didn’t normally say things like that. He left that kind of talk to Marcus.

“It’s gonna be a great year,” Maria added. “All of us together.”

Chapter 4

ENGLISH CLASS

Chad and Marcus had English second period with Miss Scalf. It was their first class of the day. They liked the English teacher a lot. She had also taught their freshman English class.

Miss Scalf was the coolest teacher. She gave challenging assignments that really made you think. But she also did a lot of review. She made sure her students understood before moving on.

Some kids found this boring, but not Chad. He didn't always have the easiest time expressing himself. Miss Scalf's examples made it simpler for him to understand.

The teacher had also worked with him a lot as a freshman on how to write essays. How to use the proper MLA format. And all the other things that made English a difficult subject for him.

Miss Scalf went over the syllabus. Next she wanted the

class to brainstorm a persuasive argument presentation. The project would be due in six weeks. The students could choose any topic to discuss. The whole class would judge how convincing they actually were.

She divided the class into groups of four students each.

“We need to come up with a great persuasive argument,” Eliza Choi snapped at Marcus. “I don’t suppose you have any ideas, do you?”

“Let’s make our persuasive argument about a movie. *The Hangover*,” Marcus suggested with a laugh.

Chad smiled and so did Joe Vasco. Chad didn’t want to laugh and upset Eliza. He’d known her since sixth grade. She was a little high-strung, especially when it came to school. She never seemed to understand Marcus’s sense of humor.

“We have to do it on something that’s real,” Eliza was starting to get mad.

“She said it could be a movie,” Joe offered.

“What do you think, Chad?” Marcus asked. He loved doing that. Marcus knew Chad hated being put on the spot. That was why Marcus always did it.

“What would we say about it?” Chad asked.

At that moment, Miss Scalf came over to their group.

“How are we doing over here?” their teacher asked. “I hear a lot of laughter.” Miss Scalf smiled.

“Not from me.” Eliza’s tone was stern. Her arms were crossed.

“We can make an argument about why a movie is good. Right?” Chad asked. He had no problem talking to Miss Scalf. He couldn’t always say that about most of his other teachers.

“Marcus wants to do our presentation about that nasty movie, *The Hangover!*” Eliza was hoping to sway Miss Scalf.

Chad and the others looked at the teacher.

“Choosing a movie is okay, and majority rules,” Miss Scalf said as she laughed. “So you can do it. Are you guys going to try to convince people that it’s worth watching? Or that it says something important about popular culture?”

“Yup, something like that.” Marcus beamed.

“Sounds great!” she said. “Can’t wait to hear it.” Miss Scalf smiled and walked away. Marcus eyed Eliza with a triumphant smile. Eliza frowned. She knew Marcus had won. Like he always did.

Better just suck it up, Eliza. Marcus always rules, Chad thought.

Chapter 5

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Chad and Marcus were walking to the parking lot. They ate lunch off campus. They'd been doing this since sophomore year. Freshmen had to stay at school. Being a senior made leaving for lunch especially cool.

"You know every time we do this," Marcus stated, "it's one of the last times."

"Isn't it always like that?" Chad asked.

"I guess I just now thought about it. We won't be doing this at the same time next year."

I know we won't. But why are you bringing it up today?
It's the first day of our senior year, Chad thought to himself.

"The girls want us to meet them at Debbie's car. Okay?" Chad changed the subject.

"Yeah." Marcus took out his phone and began to text.

Then Shawn Miller walked up. He was the manager

of the varsity wrestling squad. He was a nice guy. Chad thought he tried to suck up to Marcus too much.

“You guys ready?” he asked.

“Ready for what?” Marcus asked.

“I thought Coach Mustain told you at practice yesterday.”

“What, Shawn?” Chad was starting to get annoyed. Shawn was one of those people who had trouble getting to the point.

“Coach Mustain is trying to spread out the team’s strength this year. You know how you guys alternate for each other? Well, you two are gonna wrestle off for your spot. The one who loses is gonna go into the next weight class.”

“What?” Chad asked, stunned.

He and Marcus both wrestled at one hundred seventy pounds. But there was a weigh-in shortly before each meet. Whoever didn’t make weight would wrestle either one class up or down. This was usually Marcus. Chad felt that one seventy was his best match weight. He was always on weight.

“That’s what I heard Coach telling some of the other coaches. He wants it done from the varsity team all the way to frosh-soph.”

Chad tuned out. Suddenly the first day of the best year of his life was starting to be the worst.

Chapter 6

ELSEWHERE

Dude,” Marcus smiled as he stuffed some fries into his mouth. “Stop stressing. I’ll tell Coach that I’ll go up in weight.”

“Come on.” Chad eyed his untouched burger and fries. “There’s no way Coach Mustain is going for that.”

Chad picked up his soda. His mouth was dry from anxiety. The restaurant was packed with students from Shepard High School. Marcus and Chad were sitting in a booth with Debbie and Maria. They had been so engrossed in their own conversation they’d barely talked to their girlfriends.

“You’re worried for nothing—”

“It’s *not* nothing.” Chad was trying to show Marcus that he was upset without totally losing it. “If I don’t wrestle at one seventy, there’s no way I can win going up. Remember what happened last year? Coach asked me to try it. I got annihilated by that guy from Guerin.”

Guerin High School had the best wrestling program in the city. Shepard was a close second. But Guerin was known for being the best. Some of their wrestlers had won college scholarships, and a few had even competed in the Olympic Games.

“You were sick, remember?” Marcus finished his last bite of cheeseburger.

“Hey,” Maria broke in with a smile. “We’re here too, remember?”

“Yes you are!” Marcus smiled as he grabbed Debbie while she was drinking her soda.

“Marcus, I’m gonna choke!” she whined.

They all laughed. The first day of *their* senior year was still going great.

As Chad stared at his food, he realized that his best year might already be over. Before it even started.

VARSITY 170

Never in his wildest dreams could he imagine his best day turning into his worst. Chad and Marcus ruled the school. Smart. Athletic. Popular. A looming wrestle-off for their weight class made Chad jumpy. Marcus told him to chill. But with one slam to the mat, Marcus would be dead.

