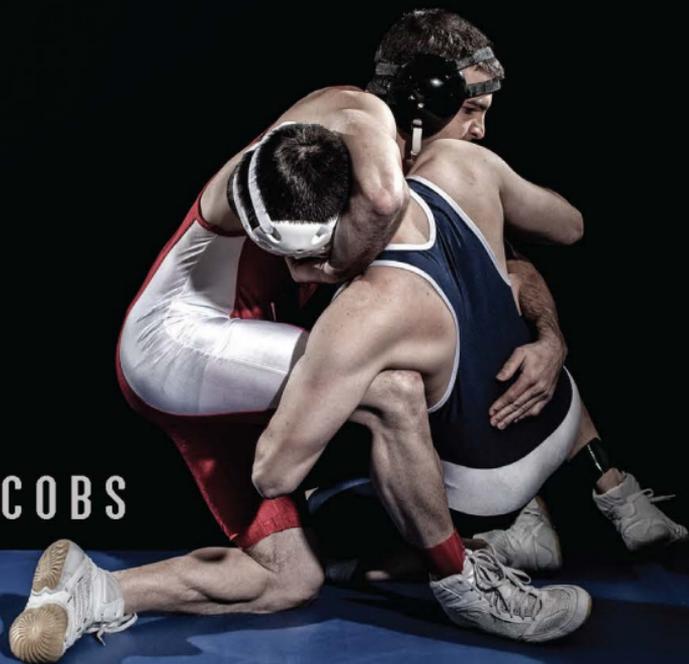


VARSIITY

170

EVAN JACOBS



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.

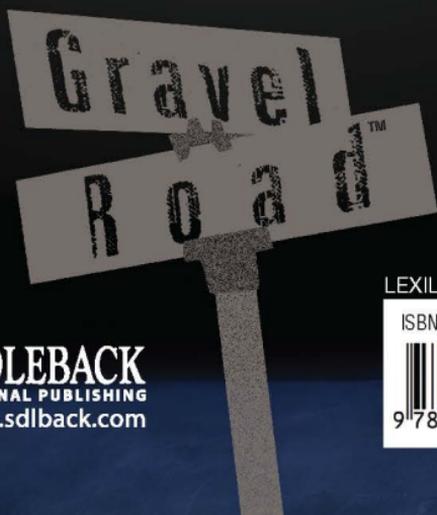
“Yeah! Old school. Love it.” Marcus

tapped out the beat on his chest as the song blasted.

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

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.



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