Breaking up the Flock

by GrownUp90s

Summary

The Ducks have returned to Eden Hall for sophomore year; but with the graduation of several seniors from the previous year, the scrappy newcomers can no longer remain intact as a single team. Divided between JV and Varsity factions, the Ducks will also have to contend with old rivals as they fight to preserve their hard-won status while grappling with teenage drama.
Minnesota is Where the Heart is

Julie 'the Cat' Gaffney awoke to a gentle tug on her arm.

"Julie? We'll be landing soon," Steven Gaffney informed his 15-year old daughter.

The girl yawned and stretched her arms over her head. She and her father had endured a very early start having to fly from Bangor, Maine to Minneapolis with a crossover in New York; but the comely all-American teenager was happy to be on the flight that was taking her back to her team, the Eden Hall Junior Varsity Ducks.

As the plane began making its final descent, Steven grabbed his daughter's hand in anticipation of landing.

Julie smiled, unsure if this gesture was more for her sake or her father's, but aware of the fact that she had a wonderful dad. Not many parents would allow their daughter to give up a full scholarship to a prestigious prep school, but Steven had made it clear to Julie that she was free to walk away at any time if she didn't like Coach Orion. And this year, he was bringing her back to Minnesota early because she had found Maine so stifling.

There was a thud as the plane landed, followed by the screech of the tires as Steven's stomach made what he hoped would be the last of its churning. Flying was the least favorite aspect of his job, though this business trip was made sweeter by Julie's presence. It tore him up letting her leave nearly two weeks before the end of summer vacation, but he knew that it was for her own good.

After the plane came to a halt, Julie and Steven grabbed their carry-ons and gradually made their way toward the plane's exit as passengers closer to the front began disembarking. They then made their way out of the terminal and Julie began looking for a familiar face.

"Julie, over here!" Connie Moreau called out to her teammate and friend.

Their freshman year had been a baptism by fire, but the Ducks pulled through and became a formidable two-way hockey team that went on to be the first JV team in school history to beat Eden Hall Varsity in the annual scrimmage. So impressive was the JV triumph that even the stuffy old trustees agreed to ditch the classic Warrior name in favor of the Mighty Ducks.

Julie followed the sound of the excited voice and saw a beaming Connie waving and practically jumping up and down in excitement. Next to her stood a woman who looked to be a well-dressed older sister, but Julie knew was Mrs. Elizabeth Moreau. Like mother, like daughter, the two Moreaus shared the same porcelain complexion, chestnut hair, honey brown eyes, and radiant smiles.

"Thanks so much for letting me stay with you guys," Julie offered with a smile as she greeted the two with hugs.

Julie's summer back home in Maine had been boring at best and awkward at worst. Her time in Minnesota made her feel alienated from her New England friends, as if the world back home had moved on without her; in many ways, it had. The agreement between the Gaffneys and the Moreaus to let Julie return to Minnesota nearly two weeks before classes began came as an enormous relief to her.

"Not at all, sweetie," Elizabeth replied before turning toward Julie's father. "You must be Steven," she figured, extending her hand, which Steven promptly shook.
"Yes, ma'am. It's nice to finally meet face-to-face," he replied with a polite smile.

"Absolutely," she agreed before turning back toward Connie and Julie. "Come along, girls. This way to the baggage."

The blonde goalie's curious green eyes looked around as she and Connie followed the adults to the baggage carousels. Connie noticed this and raised an eyebrow.

"Looking for someone special?"

"Oh, just the old ball-and-chain."

Connie couldn't help betraying a grin. As close as she and Julie had become, getting the latter to talk about boys was like pulling teeth.

"Really?"

"I meant yours. Where's Guy?"

At that, Connie deflated somewhat but quickly regained her composure.

"You know we're not together anymore. We weren't all of last year, don't you remember?"

"Yeah," Julie replied with her lips twisted to the side. "I guess I just figured you'd work things out," she explained as her eyes scanned the bags that had begun sliding out onto the carousel.

Connie shrugged.

"It's better this way. What about you? You've got someone special, let's talk about him."

Julie looked puzzled. Over the summer she had gotten to know Adam Banks better, courtesy of AOL. In fact, she suspected that her hogging of the phone line was no small reason why her parents were willing to send her back to Minnesota. Her mind raced furiously as it sought an explanation for Connie's strange and cryptic assertion. Recalling that some of her exchanges with Adam had come dangerously close to revealing the truth, Julie worried that he had discovered her feelings towards him...and shared the revelation with Connie.

*He wouldn't really do that, would he?*

Observing her friend's increasingly tense body language, Connie gave Julie a playful clap on the shoulder.

"Oh you know, Scooter!" The brunette forward exclaimed. "Leave it to the Cat to get the hottest senior and totally forget about it."

Julie let out a barely-perceptible sigh of relief as she lifted a hunter green bag off the carousel and inspected its tag.

"If you say so," she deadpanned before setting the bag on the floor. "One down, one to go. Keep your eyes peeled for a red bag."

Connie chuckled upon recognizing Julie's classic stonewalling tactic. No boys, stick to the task at hand.

"Right, red bag."
The next afternoon, Elizabeth Moreau dropped Connie and Julie off at the front door of a sprawling mansion in Edina. As soon as Charlie 'Captain Duck' Conway learned of Julie's early arrival, he generously volunteered Adam's house for a Duck pool party. Adam had begun to show lawyerly persuasiveness inherited from his father when he convinced his indignant parents that a pool party was essential for team chemistry, and no hockey team could be successful without chemistry.

But his argument was not merely a rhetorical ploy, he genuinely believed it. So the tall, sandy-haired forward eagerly waited on an ivory-colored settee in the foyer to greet his teammates and guide them back to the pool.

Upon hearing the doorbell ring, Adam stood up and opened it.

Seeing the pair of female Ducks dressed in loose-fitting T-shirts and denim shorts over their swimsuits, he flashed a pearly white smile that looked a lot easier than its owner felt. As his sapphire eyes briefly locked onto Julie's emerald orbs, he could feel the tips of his ears get hot.

She quickly looked down.

"Uh, hey guys," Adam greeted the pair. "Come on in."

"Thanks, Adam," Connie replied with a polite smile, ushering Julie ahead of her as they walked into a grand foyer.

This was not even a proper room, but the softly-lit entry complete with hardwood floors, paintings, ornately upholstered sofas, grandfather clock and elegant chandelier indicated that the Banks Family had more money in their foyer than most people had in their living rooms. An imposing staircase complete with a landing and two side stairways gave the place a bit of an old hotel lobby feel.

Julie half expected a bellboy to greet her with a tip of the hat before showing her to her room.

"The pool's back this way, just follow me," Adam announced before turning and leading the girls through a door to the left of the staircase and past several well-furnished rooms. The trio passed through a spacious a kitchen before coming to a stop in a brilliantly sunlit dining area that looked out onto the patio and in-ground pool.

"I believe they call this a 'solarium,' darling," Connie declared in an affected English accent.

Julie laughed, causing Adam to blush.

The affluence of his family had always made him feel separate from the rest of the Ducks; not in a snobbish, but rather, a self-conscious way. It certainly made him the butt of many jokes, and Julie was laughing at him before the party had even begun. He cursed himself for not just taking the girls around the side of the house.

"Why did I have to lead them through it?"

Eyeing a large blue cooler, he figured he had an excuse. After all, the drinks needed to go outside.

"I just wanted to get some pop," he explained. "Could one of you get the door for me please?"

Julie nodded and slid the door open as Adam lifted a tub full of ice and soda pop before going out to the patio.

"Charlie, go help him," came a female voice from outside.
"He's got it, Linda," Charlie replied.

Julie and Connie made their way out to the large patio with its cool white flagstones and saw Charlie and his girlfriend, Linda Tompkins, laying by the pool in loungers. Linda wore a purple tankini and Charlie was topless in black trunks.

"Besides," Charlie continued. "You keep telling me how muscly Banks is."

Linda scoffed.

"I'm not even going to dignify that with a response."

Charlie stuck his tongue out, prompting Linda to roll her eyes.

"Hey, lovebirds," Connie greeted the couple.

"Connie, Julie!" Linda exclaimed as she got up to greet the girls. Despite her prejudice against jocks, Linda had warmed up to the Ducks as fellow outsiders at Eden Hall. She also appreciated their role in getting rid of the hated Warrior name and colors, and admired Connie and Julie as girls who could beat the guys.


"Mister Spazway," Connie replied in kind, eliciting a group laugh.

"Well, I'd love to stay and chat but the pool is calling me," Charlie announced before spinning around and diving into the deep end from the side of the pool.

Linda and Connie followed, Connie in her black one piece. Immediately, Charlie and Connie found an inner tube to fight over while Linda swam on a noodle. Julie had slid off her T-shirt and noticed, as she unbuttoned her shorts, that Adam had disappeared. Buttoning back up, she retraced her steps through the house and found him sitting on a settee in the foyer reading an issue of *Sports Illustrated* between occasional glances at the sidelights by the front door.

"Why do I get the strange feeling that you didn't want to have a party?"

Adam looked up with a start.

"Oh, hey there," he replied, setting his magazine aside. "No it's cool, I just wanted to be here when the rest of the guys show up. You know, so they can find the pool. This floor is kind of a maze."

*I already gave two private tours. Can't play favorites with teammates*, he reasoned.

Julie smiled and sat down next to him.

"I guess it is. I found you though."

"Yeah, how did you do that? Sometimes even I get lost in here."

"I just followed the smell of your cologne," she explained. "Michael Jordan, isn't it? My dad likes the same stuff."

Adam let out a nervous laugh. It was one thing to be a rich prep, but to wear cologne to a pool party was a bit much. After all, who was he trying to impress? Only the girl who made his heart skip a beat. The girl in denim shorts and a white one piece that made her skin glow. The girl just inches away from him.
Uh, yeah. Michael Jordan...the cologne that is.

Well put, Yoda.

Adam's heart skipped a few more beats as Julie grinned.

"I like it," she offered.

Without full awareness of what she was doing, she reached out and brushed his toned forearm, causing his skin to tingle.

"Uh, thanks," he replied. "It's actually on my neck."

His eyes widened at his own words.

Why did I just tell her that?!

Julie withdrew her hand but leaned in toward Adam's neck to breathe-in the elegant scent.

The look on Adam's face was a strange tapestry of horror and delight as Julie got closer to him. He had no idea what to do — but he knew that he didn't want to push her away. Should he lean in? Wrap an arm around her? Or kiss her right then and there? Paralyzed by nerves and indecision, Adam continued to sit ramrod-straight when the familiar, melodious jingle sounded.

Ah, saved by the bell.

He shot up like a rocket to answer the door, leaving a dazed and confused Julie behind.

After a raucous few hours in the pool, the Ducks went inside for pizza with Adam's parents and sandy-haired younger brother Eric. Two years Adam's junior, Eric was not the athlete his brother was; but he was intelligent, and in true Banks form, the 13-year old was pushed to be the cleverest honors student that he could possibly be.

After dinner, the Ducks made their way to the Banks' finished basement. The basement was suitably vast and well-furnished, boasting a fitness center that housed a treadmill, several Nautilus machines, and a full complement of free weights; a separate rumpus room contained a billiard table, a foosball table, a surround-sound theater, and a bar whose collection of pricey single malts was securely locked.

Over in the theater area, the 1993 baseball film Rookie of the Year played on the big screen. Though her teammates noticed an uncanny resemblance between Julie and the film's Becky Fraker, Julie just couldn't see it. And in any event, she found her foosball game with Connie more absorbing.

At the pool table, Fulton Reed displayed a surprising lightness of touch, sinking four balls in a row against an unamused Charlie.

"This is crap," the Duck Captain sulked.


Recalling his early shooting and passing struggles, Fulton figured that Coach Bombay could have hammered home his 'soft hands' lesson more effectively if he had simply likened it to pool — as opposed to the less-than-orthodox methods of the Minnesota Miracle Man. But Fulton managed to learn, and he had developed into a highly effective defenseman over the past few years — with far
more subtlety and nuance than the dark-haired boy's tall frame and powerful build indicated at first glance.

Once it was Charlie's turn, he proceeded to lose the game by prematurely pocketing the 8-ball.

"We should get going anyway," Linda suggested before her boyfriend's mood could turn sour.

"Yeah," he agreed. "Good game, man," he gave a congratulatory high-five to his most loyal teammate before turning to the rest of the group.

"Later guys!"

"BYE CHARLIE!" The team chorused back.

After saying goodbye to their captain from their positions on the carpeted floor, Les Averman and Greg Goldberg returned to their high-stakes Pogs: the game of flipping round cardboard disks with a metal 'slammer.'

Eric Banks wasted no time stepping in for Charlie; his knowledge of geometry made him a formidable pool player and he rarely had anyone around who could give him a challenge. Fulton Reed presented such a challenge, and Eric seized it.

"That's game!" Julie declared in triumph at the foosball table.

"Best two out of three Jules," Connie replied.

She looked over toward the theater area to see Guy Germaine staring at her. The blond forward quickly turned his attention back to the screen.

*Heh, I really don't know why Julie can't see the resemblance,* he noted, observing the goalie's doppelganger in the baseball film.

"Hey, Guy. Come over here, let's play!"

Guy looked back to see a grinning Connie beckoning him over to the foosball table, and he quickly obliged.

"Two on one? You guys know that's not fair," Julie protested.

"Then find a partner," Connie replied with a shrug.

Julie scanned the vast room for a 'foosball buddy.' Everyone seemed to be engaged in something else, and she was reluctant to disturb any of them. She was about to suggest that Connie and Guy play by themselves when her eyes settled upon Adam. The tall, quiet forward was standing to the side of the pool table with a bored look on his face.

*Why does he always frown?* The goalie wondered as she observed Adam's natural expression from across the room.

"Hey, Banksie!" She called out with a playful grin.

It was a well-known fact that Adam hated being called 'Banksie,' but Julie earned herself a surprised smile as he looked back at her.

"Come over here!" She continued. "Connie and Guy are ganging up on me!"
"Uh, sure!"

Adam did not notice the tiny, knowing smile on Fulton's face as he began crossing the room towards Julie.

"What are you so happy about?" Eric asked in a high, pre-pubescent voice after he sank a ball.

"Ah, nothing man," Fulton replied, recovering a neutral expression.

Adam took his spot next to Julie, opposite of Connie and Guy, and the four of them began to play. Though competitive people never like to lose, Connie and Guy accepted defeat graciously enough.

"Re-match?" Connie asked.


Connie cocked an eyebrow as she observed Julie grasp Adam by the upper arm and lead him away from the foosball table.

"Hey," Julie began softly after she and Adam had separated from the rest of the group. "I just wanted to make sure that we were still cool...I'm sorry I invaded your space upstairs. We're still on for the art gallery, right?"

"Huh? Oh, of course!" He replied a bit too eagerly, recalling the trip he had promised Julie earlier in the summer. "I mean, if you're still up for it."

"Would I have asked if I wasn't?" She asked with a teasing grin.

As Adam racked his brain for a clever reply, Julie continued.

"Anyway, let's get back to the team."

A relieved Julie led Adam toward the home theater, pleased that he didn't seem freaked out by the encounter in the foyer...but disappointed that he declined to sit next to her when they began watching the movie.

She managed to keep her feelings well hidden, however. 'The Cat' had always been able to put on a cool face, even when she felt like a bundle of raw nerves. This ability had given her a reputation as a fearless goaltender even in the most pressure-packed moments; but it also made her feel misunderstood by those who couldn't read her — most people, in other words.

Flashing a quick glance at Adam, she observed his small natural frown; she had never been able to read him, though it was not for a lack of trying.
Julie was so engrossed in the art notes compiled earlier that summer by her brother Mark, that she didn't hear the doorbell to Connie's house ring. Adam was due to pick her up any minute for their long-promised trip to the local art gallery, and Julie needed every second to cram as many artistic terms into her frontal lobe as possible. She didn't know or care a whit about art, but Adam had asked her out during a chat on AOL and she leapt at the opportunity.

But she refused to make a fool out of herself in the process. She was determined to impress Adam, and had secured the learning materials from her artsy and difficult older brother with a bit of groin-related coercion.

The bell rang again.

"Uh, Julie? A little help, please?" Connie called out from upstairs.

The goalie felt a spike of adrenalin at the thought of Adam waiting for her on Connie's front step. Looking up at the digital clock on the cable box, she noticed that it was still early.

*I guess he really wants to see me,* she thought with a slight grin.

Setting her notes down on the coffee table, she got up from the sofa and sped-walked to the foyer.

"Hi…" she began with a huge smile before looking up. "…Guy," she added with less enthusiasm.

The blond forward rolled his eyes.

"It's nice to see you too, Cat. Is Connie around?"

"I sure am!" Connie called out from the top of the staircase.

Julie turned to watch her best friend descend the stairs. As much as she liked Connie, the goalie found herself resenting her graceful movements; and as she observed her summer hostess in a flattering pair of designer jeans and a black silk blouse, Julie realized that her own outfit – navy mesh shorts and a white T-shirt – probably were not the best 'date clothes.'

*But is this really a date? Adam never used the word.*

In any event, Julie had failed to pack anything dressier for the end of summer vacation, and the rest of her wardrobe would not be in her possession until the moving company shipped it over from Maine ahead of the start of classes.

"Don't you look nice," Guy greeted his still-ex-girlfriend with a smile as she reached the foyer.

"Are you asking me or telling me?"

Julie chuckled.

*She's not going to make this easy, is she?*

"Definitely *telling* you," Guy insisted.

He hoped that he had sounded confident, but he could feel his cheeks burn. As he began to internally curse his fair skin and the blushes that it augmented, Connie graced him with the sort of
smile that teachers occasionally give dim students just for trying.

"Well, come on now," she began ushering the forward into the living room. "What can I get you to drink?"

"Tequila," Guy deadpanned.

Connie laughed out loud as she made her way to the kitchen, and Guy felt his swagger return.

"I'll get you a sarsaparilla that Dwayne likes," she called back.

_Stupid cowboy and his cowboy drinks_, Guy sulked.

Dwayne Robertson, an affable Texan and rodeo enthusiast, had been with the Ducks since the Junior Goodwill Games. He had an unconcealed crush on Connie, which also appeared to be unrequited. But Guy was in no mood for competition – real or imagined.

As the blond forward waited for Connie to return, Julie grabbed her notes from the coffee table and took a seat on the red leather armchair to resume her studies.

"What are those?" Guy asked.

"Oh...just scouting notes from Coach Orion," Julie lied with an ease that surprised herself. "The season opener's right around the corner."

Guy nodded in agreement.

"It sure is. But what makes you so sure that Orion's gonna be your coach? You're good enough to make Varsity…and possibly take Scooter's starting position," he added with a teasing grin.

Julie's green eyes shot daggers at him. Sure, the Varsity goalie was plenty handsome, and he seemed nice enough. But the little peck on the cheek that the entire world seemed to notice had amounted to exactly nothing in the months that followed. And she was getting tired of people constantly mentioning him.

"Of course Julie could take Scooter's spot," Connie spoke up, carrying a glass full of what appeared to be root beer with ice and handing it to Guy before taking her seat next to him on the sofa. "He's got a thing for her, ya know. He'd never be able to focus during tryouts."

Julie got up from the armchair with an audible sigh, notes in hand.

"What?" A worried Connie asked. "Something I said?"

"I just need to focus on my notes," Julie declared. "You guys are only gonna distract me."

"We'll be quiet, Jules!" Connie promised. She had been hoping to have Julie around while Guy was visiting and followed the goalie's departing figure with some apprehension.

As Julie made her way up the stairs to the guestroom that she had been staying in, Guy took a sip of the sarsaparilla and began to gag.

After Connie gave her ex a few hard slaps on the back – partly to relieve his choking, and partly to punish his freshman-year transgressions – Guy set his drink down on a coaster.

"I have to say," he began once he recovered his breath, "Cowboy has lousy taste in drinks. But his taste in women is impeccable."
Connie rolled her eyes at Guy's latest attempt at suavity, but her involuntary grin proved to him that winning back her affection was not a lost cause.

Upstairs, Julie repeated to herself like a mantra: "Impressionist paintings are blotchy up close, but gain definition with distance."

*I don't know, Impressionist paintings look blotchy far away too,* Adam thought as he studied an art history book in his family's library. This particular book was not kept with all the stately Moroccan leather-bound volumes that lined the cherry walls of the library like row after row of soldiers standing at attention.

Instead, Philip Banks' copy of *Gardner's Art Through the Ages* was kept discretely hidden in a cabinet beneath one of the shelves. It was bad enough for men of his class to be caught with instructional books, but it was especially uncultured to own books that betrayed ignorance of subjects that members of the gentry ought to be acquainted with – like art.

Adam had torn through the pages of his father's dirty little secret like a man on a mission, which he certainly was on this occasion. Like father, like son, the Banks men knew nothing of art. But recalling his emails and instant messaging conversations with Julie, apparently the goalie had been taking art lessons from her brother – and he was desperate not to come across as an ignoramus on his first date with her.

*Or is this really a date?*

Like Julie, Adam wasn't quite sure what the exact nature of this outing was. And like Julie, Adam hoped to impress his crush with knowledge he did not possess.

"Ready to go, Adam?"

The forward looked up from the solid oak desk that he had cluttered with handwritten notes and study aids derived from the textbook and saw his mother, Charlotte, standing at the doorway.

She was a tall, slender woman of forty-three whose flaxen-colored locks were assiduously dyed to eliminate grays.

"Oh, really Mother," Adam replied. "You don't need to drive us, we can take a bus."

"A bus?" Charlotte asked incredulously. "You haven't been reading Marx, have you?"

"Who?"

"Never mind, darling. And it's not a problem for me to drive you two," she assured her son. "I'm looking forward to meeting your friend. Julie's her name, right?"

Adam nodded.

"Well, come on. You mustn't keep Julie waiting then!"

As the boy stood up from the desk, his mother cast a disapproving glare at his choice of clothes.

"The polo shirt is acceptable, but cargo shorts…really?"

"It's summer, Mother."

"And you're going out in public."
He gave his mother a resigned nod.

"I'll go and put on some slacks then."

Satisfied that her son was not turning into a proletarian, Charlotte brought her white Jaguar XJ6 round to the front of the house and Adam hurried into the backseat, his khaki slacks blending into the sedan's leather upholstery. As Charlotte drove from Edina to Minneapolis, she peppered her son with questions about Julie and her family.

"Her dad…I mean, father…is a consultant, I think," Adam said.

"Yes, so your father tells me. Apparently he is quite good – very successful," the Banks matriarch added approvingly.

Knowing the standards of his parents, 'successful' could only mean 'wealthy.'

Charlotte's eagerness to chauffer Julie and Adam around suddenly made sense to the boy.

Looking out at a red-brick Second Empire house, Adam asked his mother to stop.

"Yes, I know the Moreaus' home, dear."

The evident 'success' of Mr. and Mrs. Moreau was another reason why Charlotte didn't mind the trip.

"I'll just be a minute."

And with that, Adam stepped out into the humid August afternoon.

*A pair of shorts and a pair of sandals would be really nice right about now.*

Like most 'successful' people, the Moreaus had their house set back a considerable distance from the road, and Adam managed to work up a bit of sweat by the time he reached the front door.

Reasoning that it had to be Adam this time, Julie dropped her notes on the bed and raced down the stairs to answer the door – a mixture of nerves and genuine excitement fueling her sprint.

"Adam, hi!" She beamed, prompting him to grin shyly.

"You surprised to see me?" He asked while rubbing the back of his head.

"Actually I am," Julie confirmed. "I thought you rang earlier, but it was only Guy. That was very inconsiderate of him."

Adam's laugh came as such a sweet surprise to Julie that she joined in. But as she looked over her painfully-handsome companion in his navy polo, khaki slacks, and shiny brown oxfords, her smile faded away.

Embarrassed by her own clothes, Julie looked down at the ground – giving Adam the chance to look over her in her white T-shirt and navy mesh shorts.

*She's so beautiful…especially in white.*

"We shouldn't keep Mother waiting," he spoke up, gesturing toward the white sedan off in the distance.
Julie nodded and got into step with Adam, keeping pace with his long stride with an ease that would elude anyone less fit.

"You call her 'Mother?' That's a bit formal, isn't it?"

Adam shrugged.

"Calling her 'Mom' will never be worth the hassle."

Julie knew all about difficult mothers, and was about to share when she stopped dead in her tracks. Having walked closer to the car, she could make out that it was a brand new Jaguar – complete with hood ornament.

"What?" Adam asked, concerned.

"I'm really under-dressed."

"You're dressed for the weather," he replied. "Unlike this idiot," he pointed at his chest with a thumb.

"I'll go and see if I can borrow something from Connie."

Before Adam could reply or Julie could make her escape, Charlotte's voice spoke up.

"Ah, you must be the famous Miss Gaffney."

Charlotte placed a disapproving note of Julie's appearance into her internal filing cabinet, but was determined to maintain a polite and friendly air. Commenting on clothing was just too coarse and frivolous. So considerable were Charlotte's social graces that Julie had felt completely at ease by the time they arrived at the parking lot behind the art gallery.

"Thanks for the lift, Mother. See you in a bit."

"Yes, bye dear. Julie, it was lovely to meet you."

"Same, Mrs. Banks."

As Charlotte drove off, Julie threw a light elbow into Adam's ribs.

"A Jaguar? What, was the Rolls Royce in the shop?"

"You guessed it."

Julie's eyes widened.

"Really?"

"No, not really," Adam chortled, drawing a fiercer elbow to the ribs. "Hey!"

"Sorry," Julie offered in a voice and smile that could get away with murder. "Anyway, the paintings aren't going to look at themselves."

"Would you mind if we grab a bite first? I'm starving. And there's no way that I was going to have Mother drop us off in front of Mickey's. It's only a couple of blocks away. We could go for a walk. Walks are nice, don't you think? I like them, anyway – they're good for clearing the head. And along the way…"
"Sure, let's eat," Julie cut him off. "Were you going to keep talking until I gave a response?"

Seeing him blush in reply, she decided not to press the point.

"So what got you into art, anyway?" He asked a minute or two into the walk.

"Heh, I guess you did. Remember your email when you said we should try to get along better with our brothers? Well, Mark's teaching was a bonding experience."

_In that it bonded us further apart._

"They say Impressionist paintings become sharper when you step back," Adam offered.

Julie looked over and up at her tall, preppy companion. He was wearing that natural frown of his.

"I've heard that too," she replied. "I've also heard that the IHC is going to eliminate neutral zone line changes on faceoffs."

"Thank friggin' God!"

Julie grinned as a suddenly animated Adam began explaining the virtues of the proposed rule change.

"I mean, some players won't like it because it means they might get winded. But that's what conditioning is for, right?"

Before Julie could respond, Adam continued.

"And losing teams took advantage of neutral zone line changes in the worst way. They'd use them to disrupt the flow of the game and delay faceoffs. It's _so_ ridiculous! Now if they were to follow it up by eliminating substitutions ahead of faceoffs for intentional icing, they'd really be putting an end to all sorts of monkey business."

He paused for a quick breath, but lost his train of thought.

"What were we talking about?"

"Impressionist paintings."

Adam laughed as Mickey's Dining Car came into view.

"Well, naturally. What else do you think could inspire the IHC rule changes?"

"Your powers of persuasion?"

Adam brushed off the compliment with the characteristic modesty that his upbringing demanded, but Julie could tell that he was pleased. As he held the door open and ushered her in, his spirits continued to rise. None of the other Ducks had dropped in for lunch at their favorite off-campus hangout.

He would have Julie all to himself.

But the lack of teammates also hammered home an unpleasant realization.

"Four seniors graduated last June," he spoke up as they took their seats across from each other in a booth.
"Good," Julie replied. "Four fewer jerks to rub our noses in it."

"I was thinking that four Ducks would have to replace them. And the rest would stay on JV."

Julie could see the worry in Adam's blue eyes. He had endured a lonely exile during his freshman year on Varsity; though he had returned to the fold for the Varsity/JV showdown, he spent the rest of the season away from the Ducks at his father's insistence. Though the prank wars had not resumed, the truce between Varsity and JV was an uneasy one.

"Well…that's probably a good thing too," Julie tried to look on the bright side. "You'll have three buddies with you on Varsity. And the more Ducks there are on Varsity, the more friendly the teams will be to each other."

He did not share her optimism, but he nodded anyway as Casey Conway brought over their menus. After placing their orders and exchanging a few pleasantries, Adam asked where everybody was.

"Heh, over at Goldberg's Deli," the waitress explained. "After I limited the team to one free lunch per month, they've been hanging out there more often."

"Where there's free food, you'll find Ducks," Adam mused.

Casey laughed as she took their menus and departed. After her own son of course, Adam was easily her favorite Duck.

As Spin Doctors' hit single *Two Princes* began playing in the background, the conversation switched to music – where Julie and Adam found plenty in common. His revelation that he liked to annoy his parents by playing Nirvana's *Come As You Are* drew a surprised laugh.

"Your mom seems nice though," Julie declared. "You shouldn't torture her like that."

"She's not bad," Adam agreed. "Once you understand her code, that is. My father on the other hand…"

Julie waited for him to finish the sentence, but he didn't oblige. She didn't know him well enough to realize that references to Philip Banks were to be kept to a minimum. Eventually, she spoke up.

"My mom has her own little code too, I guess you could say. I just wish I understood it better. Dad's really sweet though. He's not around much, he travels a lot for work. But when he's around, he's awesome."

Not wanting to dwell on dads, Adam changed the subject.

"You know…I kinda wanna see Goldie at work."

Julie laughed out loud at the thought of Greg Goldberg actually doing work.

"That would be a sight for sore eyes! And the rest of the Ducks – or at least the in-state ones – would be there too. Wanna go there next time?"

"Yes," he answered immediately and with a goofy grin.

He wasn't thrilled about sharing her, but he had secured a 'next time.'

*A next what though,* he began to wonder. *Can we call this a 'date?'*

"Good," Julie returned the grin, though Adam regarded it as 'perfect' rather than 'goofy.'
As Casey returned to the booth with their meals, a tall, strongly-built teenager with dark hair and dark eyes entered the diner. His black leather jacket was not exactly summer gear, but it made up a sort of uniform for him along with the blue jeans and black army combat boots. He took a seat at the counter.

"Hey there," a waitress greeted him. "What'll it be?"

"Black coffee and a slice of cherry pie, please."

"Comin' right up."

Adam let out a happy laugh after washing down his club sandwich with some cola.

"If my parents saw me right now, they'd each have a stroke. I asked Mother for a club sandwich one time; and she asked me why I needed a club sand wedge, because I never golf."

Julie laughed too – not so much at the joke but more out of relief. The quiet tension, the small frown and all the rest had disappeared as Adam blossomed in the diner. She had the sense that he hadn't been thrilled about the trip to the art gallery, even though it had been his idea in the first place. But now he was happy and at ease, and so was she.

*Who needs galleries, anyway?*

Eventually, they finished their meals. As Casey moved to take away their plates, she asked if they were interested in coffee and dessert.

Looking up at Casey, Adam could see the dark-clad teenager sitting at the counter. Sensing that he was being watched, the teen turned and faced Adam. The corners of his dark eyes formed a smile that looked sinister even without the crimson-stained lips.

He raised his coffee mug toward Adam and gave a nod.

"No, thanks," Adam responded to Casey. "We better get going. Like Julie said, the paintings won't look at themselves."

"Oh…okay," the goalie agreed softly.

"Please, keep the change, Mrs. Conway."

His natural generosity notwithstanding, Adam was desperate to leave, and he didn't want to wait around for change.

"You sure know how to treat a lady," Casey replied with a smile. "Have a nice day, guys!"

As soon as Casey left, Adam shot up from the booth and began walking toward the exit before Julie had even gotten up. But she caught up with him outside.

"Adam, what's wrong?"

"Mother will be expecting us at the gallery. I don't want us to be late when she arrives."

"Oh, okay."

As quickly as the flower had blossomed in the sun, it shrank and closed with the sudden and unexpected arrival of frost.
"Come on, Goldie!" Julie exhorted her fellow goalie. "I'm starving!"

Underneath the paper hat he wore at his family's deli, Greg Goldberg rolled his brown eyes. When Casey had laid down the law back at Mickey's, part of him was happy to have stolen Charlie's thunder. After all, Goldberg's would be the new Duck hangout, not Mickey's.

And if there was one Duck who was even more Duck than Charlie Conway, it was Greg Goldberg: the hero of the JV/Varsity game who scored the lone goal. With this change in hangout for the Ducks, Goldberg felt he was finally in the position to receive his long overdue recognition as the team's most valuable player. He was tired of being 'chopped liver,' after all.

But his teammates in general – and one blonde goalie in particular – had a way of making the king feel like a servant in his own castle. This he simply could not abide.

"Look, Cat Lady…I know you like seein' me move and all, but take it easy. You might make Banksie over there jealous."

"Ooooh," came a faux-shocked chorus from the Ducks.

Julie blushed and looked down at the table in the booth that she was sharing with Adam. Ever since they had begun frequenting Goldberg's, Adam had replaced Scooter as her public 'boyfriend.' This would have bothered her a lot less if Adam had taken it upon himself to act as more than just a friend during this final stretch of summer vacation. Though they had grown undeniably closer, Adam remained impossibly far away to Julie.

He was close enough to sense her discomfort, however, so he leapt to her defense.

"Go on, Goldie," Adam began with a malevolent smile. "Give the people what they want. Shake that thang!"

Coming from someone as straight-laced and prim as Adam Banks, the word 'thang' was riotously funny to others. As the Ducks began laughing, Goldberg saw that the only way to bring this spectacle to an end was to 'give the people what they wanted' quickly, then forget about it.

As Averman began humming a racy tune, Goldberg set the plates he had been carrying down on the counter and began to shimmy. Then, after a minute or so, he began to gyrate while folding his arms.

"That's not a real dance!" Charlie protested. "That's the Macarena!"

Sensing that his teammates were laughing with him rather than at him, Goldberg felt confident enough to stop.

"So it is," he agreed, returning to his work.

With the show complete, the Ducks returned to their meals and conversations. Julie, who had been sitting next to Adam in a booth, grasped his hand beneath the table. The boy thought he was going to faint at the sustained contact.

"Thank you for that, Adam," she offered in a voice just above a whisper.
"F-f-for what?"

He honestly had no idea.

"For getting Goldberg off my back just now."

"Oh, that," Adam replied with an awkward snort. "Don't mention it."

She didn't mention it. But she continued to hold his hand while they sat next to each other in silence. In that moment, Adam felt completely and blissfully alone with the girl of his dreams – the girl whose summer glow was impossible to miss in her white tank top and stone-washed denim shorts; the girl whose emerald eyes were as big and as beautiful of the forests of Maine; the girl whose cool confidence on the ice and in the classroom was complemented by a warm generosity of spirit everywhere else. His long fingers gave her soft, silky hand a firm squeeze.

She responded by leaning in and resting her head on his shoulder.

"Hope you don't mind. I'm a little tired."

"Not at all."

"Oh, hey guys!"

Julie sat up straight and withdrew her hand from Adam's grasp as Connie joined them in the booth with Guy in tow.

"Did we miss anything good?" Connie asked.

"Just a little shimmy from Goldie," Adam replied.

Guy snapped his fingers with an exaggerated frown.

"Oh, darn."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!" Connie exclaimed. "Language, Mr. Germaine."

The group laughed at Connie's mock-prudishness, but Julie did so only with considerable effort. After that first day at Mickey's and the gallery, she had never been alone with Adam. Here she was, back in the Twin Cities, surrounded by her fellow Ducks – exactly where she wanted to be during those dreary months back in Bangor.

During that lonely stint back home, Julie figured that she would have it made if only she could be surrounded by Ducks. Having now gotten her wish, she realized that she wanted to be with one of them above all others.

Adam was about to speak when his pager chirped.

Retrieving the device from his pocket and studying the phone number, he let out a worried sigh.

"Excuse me guys, I need to make a phone call."

He slid out of the booth and made for a payphone. Although he had one of those new-fangled cell phones, he disliked the bulk and the weight of it, so he rarely carried it. Given how small the pager was, Adam had no excuse but to carry it, and find a payphone.
It's not like payphones are going anywhere, he thought as he approached the lone AT&T phone that was lined against the far wall of the deli. After sliding in a quarter, pounding in his home number and waiting for a few minutes, the voice of Charlotte Banks came on the line.

"Hey…I mean hello, Mother. It's Adam. Is there something wrong?"

"Nothing too dramatic, just a slight change of plans," she replied. "Your father will be picking you up from that…delicatessen…in a few minutes. Be ready. Bye, darling!"

Adam knew that it was best not to make Philip come inside to look for him, so he suggested to Julie that they wait outside on a bench. While seated, the goalie didn't leave any space between them, but the forward didn't read too much into this. She was tired after all. Eager to get his mind on something other than those long, sun-kissed legs that seemed to mock his 'Friend Zone' status, Adam spoke up.

"So…you all ready for move-in day tomorrow?"

Julie nodded.

"I can't believe how fast these two weeks have blown by."

"Me neither."

He couldn't help thinking that he had allowed his time with Julie to go to waste, and that his dithering had landed him in the dreaded Friend Zone – a desolate and inhospitable land from which there is no escape. Now he was looking forward to the start of school, despite all the hazards of academics and a potential war between the hockey teams. At least there was the possibility – however remote – of other girls and the chance of getting Julie off his mind.

The pair of overachieving Ducks continued to make small talk when a shiny hunter green Range Rover pulled up to the sidewalk. As the driver's window rolled down, Philip Banks stuck his balding head out.

"Well? Are you two just going to sit there and admire my good looks, or are you going to get in?"

Julie giggled as she stood up, while a stunned Adam lingered for a second or two.

"Did Dad just make a funny?"

Adam was definitely ready for school to begin. This summer only seemed to be getting weirder and weirder.

Though Julie had the jump on him, Adam shot up and closed the distance in time to open the back door for her and usher her in like a gentleman – earning himself an approving nod from his father in the rearview mirror.

"Bought yourself a new toy, Dad?" Adam asked after going round to the passenger side and taking his seat next to Julie in the back.

"For now, anyway," Philip replied. "A brand new '97. I got a deal on it because the '98s are coming out next month. This'll be your birthday and Christmas present if you make the Dean's list this autumn and lead your team in scoring."

Adam's eyes widened at the news. Given that his birthday was December 20th, his father had always used it as an excuse to combine birthday and Christmas gifts; though they were never
anything as nice as a brand new luxury SUV. But then, he had never turned 16 before either.

He's gotta be joking.

"No joke," Philip replied, reading his son's thoughts. "Straight-A's and lead-scoring, and this puppy is yours. If you fall short in either then it's mine. Deal?"

"Deal!"

Finally, a bit of summer weirdness that's good!

With move-in day out of the way, returning members of the Varsity and JV hockey teams met at Eden Hall Arena with several aspiring walk-ons the Sunday morning before the start of classes. The arena's furnace had kicked-on just minutes before the hockey players had hit the ice, creating a chilly fog with a foreboding ambience.

Scanning the ice, Adam looked for the two walk-ons that he had been dreading all summer long.

No familiar faces. That's a relief.

"Hey, Judas," came a nasally voice from behind.

Adam spun around to see the sardonic blue-gray eyes of Jake McGill. The sandy-haired ex-Hawk had a natural expression that made it look like he was always enjoying a laugh at some poor sucker's expense.

"Now, now," came a deeper voice that Adam recognized as belonging to Paul Larson. "Play nicely, Jake."

Adam craned his neck –an unfamiliar sensation for him – to look up at the former Hawk defenseman. Larson, formerly the shortest member of their little trio, had shot up past his fellow Hawk alumni and was easily the tallest and strongest of the boys in black. His obsidian eyes looked as dead as ever, but he was affecting friendliness in his tone of voice.

"I think I ran into you a couple weeks ago, Adam – at Mickey's. Too bad you couldn't stay and chat. You seemed to be in an awful hurry."

Adam fixed a cold gaze onto his former Hawk teammate.

"You were with that pretty little blonde number over there," Larson continued, indicating Julie with his head. "Is she single?"

"You stay the hell away from her," Adam snarled, grabbing the defenseman by his black shirt and drawing back a clenched fist.

A small group had started to crowd around the pair in anticipation of a fight.

But before Adam could take a swing, a whistle pierced the air.

"Hey! Knock it off!" Coach Orion barked.

Adam released his grip at once.

The hockey coaches – Varsity's Ron Wilson, and JV's Ted Orion – had arrived, indicating that tryouts were about to start. Wilson, still donning his red and black Warriors coaching gear, had the
air of a Napoleon Bonaparte on ice; and he had noted Adam's apparent aggression with approval.

Standing tall and erect—in sharp contrast to his stocky Varsity opposite—Orion still looked like he could play professional hockey. His naturally stern countenance belied a heart of gold, and he was already on alert to prevent Wilson from letting things get out of hand.

"Alright, ladies," Wilson began, prompting Orion to elbow him and indicate the presence of Connie and Julie with his head. It looked like the old Varsity coach's macho speech needed to be modified. Not that he had any intention of ever allowing a girl onto his team.

"Excuse me," he corrected himself with a coffee-stained smile. "Ladies, and gentlemen…"

Adam had heard this spiel before. Eden Hall Academy boasted the strongest high school hockey program in the Midwest. The Varsity squad was perennial state champions (excepting the 'fluke' that was last year's underperformance). Over a dozen current and former NHL players had skated on this ice. To be an Eden Hall Warrior…check that…Eden Hall Mighty Duck, it wasn't enough to be 'good.'

Only the 'great' should bother trying out.

"Anybody who can't handle that can back out right now," Wilson announced. "No need to waste our time or yours."

The Varsity coach stared ahead at the group of hockey players, trying to tease out any sissies. But the players had all remained perfectly still.

"Confident group," he declared. "Let's hope for your sake it's justified," he added before raising his whistle to his lips. "Laps! Go!"

At the sound of the whistle, the players moved to the perimeter of the ice and began doing a prodigious—but undefined—number of laps. These laps weren't merely for warm-ups; they were a means of weeding out the poorly-conditioned.

Five aspiring walk-ons had to fall out, and Goldberg felt like his heart was about to explode when the coach's whistle mercifully sounded.

"Alright, suicides! Let's go, move it!"

"So much for the breather," Goldberg mused bitterly while getting into position.

The whistle sounded again, and the gassed players sprinted across the width of the ice. More walk-ons fell out and eliminated themselves from further consideration. Larson and McGill, along with four others remained standing. All of the returning Varsity and JV players had survived the cardio onslaught, though Goldberg and Varsity's Brian Cole were beginning to look purple.

Then came the skills drills. The orange cones set up for directional skating seemed like a cruel joke to the winded players, who were expected to zigzag and remain upright on legs that had been reduced to rubber.

But the players soldiered on with no fallouts, continuing through stickhandling and blocking drills. McGill leveled Connie with a ferocious shoulder check, drawing the approval of Wilson and the ire of Orion.

"This is not a contact drill!" The JV coach protested.
"All drills are contact drills," Wilson fired back. "This is hockey goddammit! If you all want hugs and compliments, go out for soccer!"

Dwayne was about to help Connie to her feet when Guy pushed him away.

"I got this, Cowboy. But thanks."

Larson quietly observed this exchange and filed it away for future reference.

Wilson blew his whistle.

"Alright, scoring drills!"

There was an audible sigh of relief from the skaters, as things were finally about to get easier.

"Vanderbilt, in the net! Everyone else, line-up alphabetically. Averman…"

The players began to fall-in as Wilson read out the roll.

Once the players were in place, Wilson dropped a puck a few yards in front of Averman and blew his whistle.

Standing just inside of the blue line, the Varsity coach scowled as one of JV's more mediocre players got the puck past his starting goalie. Scooter, a once-dominant goalie, had been a bit jumpy ever since he had given up that goal to Goldberg during the previous year's JV/Varsity scrimmage. Though Wilson's squad had made the state playoffs that year, they fell short of the championship – and his antsy goalie had been a major factor in that disappointing result.

The entire line had taken shots at Scooter, with the senior goalie managing to stop just over half of them.

"Parker!" Wilson barked at Cam Parker, a returning junior. "In the net!"

The drill resumed with Varsity's backup goalie in the net. Parker's performance was by no means lockdown, but it was good enough to give Wilson a ray of hope for his team's chances.

"Alright, everybody! Count off in two's. We'll finish with a scrimmage."

"Uh, Coach?" Orion asked. "Don't you want to see what Gaffney and Goldberg can do?"

Wilson flashed a contemptuous look at the pair of JV goalies.

"That won't be necessary, Ted. I'll let you keep those two," he then turned toward the remaining players. "Count off!"

As the players began counting off, Larson seized Ken Wu rather violently and planted the diminutive forward between McGill and himself – thus ensuring that Larson and McGill would be paired together.

"One's with me, Two's with Coach Orion," Wilson instructed.

The pair of coaches hastily assembled their lines, and at the drop of the puck, war began. McGill and the returning Varsity players proved to be the most violent, though Fulton and Larson got into a near-brawl after the latter hooked the long-time Duck.

The former Hawk had no qualms about driving his fist into Fulton's face. It sounded fun, actually.
But the presence of Dean Portman by Fulton's side deterred him. The two Duck defensemen seemed awfully loyal to one another – more information that Larson filed away for further reference.

Play resumed, and as Connie drove the puck toward Scooter, McGill barreled into her again.

"Nice, toughness McGill, nice toughness!" Wilson roared his approval from the bench as Connie struggled to return to her feet.

It was obvious which team the former Hawk would end up on.

Guy gave McGill a violent shove.

"Hey, same team man!" McGill replied with his hands up. "Same team!"

"Take it easy, man," Adam warned Guy, pulling the blond forward away from McGill.

Though in all honesty, Adam thought he would do a 'Happy Gilmore' and use his skate to stab anybody who tried to hurt Julie.

Play resumed, with Julie giving up her only goal to Adam while Scooter gave up 8, much to the consternation of Coach Wilson. But the Varsity coach was confident that his goalie could be coached and trained back into his previous dominance. After four brutal hours, the players who had remained standing were dismissed and instructed to check outside the coaches' office for roster postings the next morning.

As the exhausted and battered hockey players made their way to the locker room, Adam felt a sinking feeling in his stomach. Not only would the Ducks not remain intact, but Larson and McGill were going to end up somewhere.

Looking around at his longtime teammates – who, true to form, had found something to laugh about – Adam feared the worst.

The cold, metallic clank vibrated throughout Adam's body. Someone asked him if he was 'okay' before it all went dark.

He jolted awake.

It had been a long time since he had relived that moment when Jake McGill drove him headfirst into the goalpost. Almost as much time had passed since he last relived the moment during his first practice with the newly-minted Mighty Ducks where he drove Jesse Hall into the boards and nearly injured him – at the behest of his supposed 'friend' Paul Larson. The quiet defenseman always seemed more reliable and loyal than McGill, and had even offered friendship to Adam despite being forced onto separate teams.

But Paul Larson always exacted a price. And in this case, it was the well-being of Jesse and the playoff prospects of the Ducks.

Adam had never forgiven himself for being Larson's pawn all those years ago. And he saw right through the defenseman's occasional friendly overtures. There was no way that Adam would ever allow himself to be taken in again.

But that didn't mean that the old boys in black couldn't do real damage at Eden Hall.
Deciding that he couldn't fret about the Hawks all day, Adam proceeded to make his bed, shower, and dress – taking care to leave plenty of hot water for his mercurial roommate Charlie – before making his way to the dining hall for breakfast.

After grabbing a couple of sausage patties, some scrambled eggs, and some fresh fruit, Adam approached the JV table. Given that they were two hours behind, he was surprised to see that the California-based Ducks, Russ and Ken, were already up and at the table. Ken had hit a growth spurt, but had remained quite short. He was solidly-built, however, and had retained his figure skater's agility, enabling him to avoid the most punishing hits from tryouts.

Russ, though thickly-built, was beginning to slim down.

"Hey guys," Adam greeted the pair, sitting down across from them.

The two murmured greetings before returning to homework. Though classes would only officially begin in a few hours, Russ had taken it upon himself to get in some extra math practice – as it was the subject that most threatened to sink his GPA below what Orion would allow.

"Russ, look at you hitting the books," Adam spoke up. "Your father would be so proud!"

"You think my trash-talkin' lessons are free, Cake Eater? Kenny has his uses, and one of them is teachin' trig."

"Yeah, you gangly…not observant guy," Ken added, drawing a laugh from Adam.

"Well, it's a good thing you're not paying in cash for those trash-talking lessons, Ken."

Adam ate quietly while Ken explained the functions of $\sin$ and $\cosine$ to Russ. The preppy forward thought it odd how Dwayne wasn't around. Despite being opposites in every way, Russ and Dwayne were good friends, and the affable cowboy clung to the streetwise LA native to interpret what their peers were saying.

"Morning guys," came a cheery female voice that made Adam's heart leap. Taking her seat next to Adam – and apparently reading his thoughts – she asked where Dwayne was.

"Sleeping it off."

Russ could not hide the bitterness in his voice.

"That jerk really hurt him yesterday," he added.

"Yeah," Julie sighed. "Connie went right to bed as soon as we got back to the dorms. But at least she's up and moving now. She should be here soon."

Right on cue, Connie entered the dining hall hand-in-hand with Guy. The blond forward had sought her out immediately after tryouts and had stayed the night holding her; but the couple did not need to worry about Julie sharing that little tidbit with anyone.

Gradually, more Ducks trickled in. Goldberg, Averman, along with the Bash Brothers Portman and Fulton took their seats. Luis Mendoza was on a break with the gorgeous cheerleader he had stolen from Rick Riley; so the Latino heartthrob was on the prowl, and took a seat with the Beautiful People after acknowledging the Ducks.

Then, a worried Linda arrived with a miserable-looking Charlie.
Oh, great, Adam cursed.

As much as he liked Charlie, Captain Duck could be unbearable when he was in one of his darker moods.

All the Ducks knew that it was best to keep their distance when Charlie was this way, so no one asked what was up. But the Captain did not leave his friends in the dark for long, and he got straight to business.

"The rosters have been posted," he announced glumly.

An ominous silence washed over the group before Charlie continued.

"Fulton, Guy, and Banks are all on Varsity."

What little color Adam had in his face washed out as he absorbed the news. He felt the hand resting on his lap get squeezed by Julie. He looked at her and managed a faint smile that he hoped looked reassuring. Guy looked confused. Having been knocked out of last year's scrimmage by the brutal Varsity squad, he never imagined that he was Varsity material. He absorbed rather than inflicted the blows. Fulton, an imposing defenseman with a devastating slap-shot seemed like a more natural fit, although the gentle giant off the ice was a long way from dirty while on it. The Bash Brother and original Duck looked crestfallen.

"Right, so we lost our three best skaters," Averman attempted to lighten the mood. "Big whoop."

The rest of the group glared at him.

"I'll shut up now."

"Y'all are quieter than an empty prairie," Dwayne drawled as he gingerly made his way to the Ducks table. "What gives?"

"The flock's broken up, Cowboy," Russ informed him. "No more Ducks."
The morning dragged on as the Varsity and JV Ducks attended class. Concentration was a problem for all of them. Lunch hardly turned out to be any more chipper; and as the group silently ate, Zach Henderson, the new Varsity captain approached. He lacked Riley's smarm, but the tall, powerfully built defenseman oozed meanness with his steel blue eyes, dark brown crew cut, and strong, square chin.

"Banks, Germaine, Reed," he called out. "Yous guys are comin' wid me to da Varsity table. Let's go."

Guy shot him a look of death, prompting the Varsity captain to give a snakelike smile in reply as if to egg him on.

"Just go," Connie whispered. "Don't make any enemies."

The hard look on Guy's face remained, but he complied as Henderson gave sharp glances to Adam and Fulton – both of whom had remained fixed to their seats.

"C'mon, I don't got all day!"

"Screw this."

Fulton got up; but rather than head to the Varsity table, he left the dining hall – his back drawing a glare from his new captain.

This ain't over, Henderson fumed to himself.

But rather than chase after the burly defenseman, he turned to Adam.

"Well?"

"If we're all Eden Hall Hockey, then what difference does it make where I sit?"

"Teams sit wid teams, ya mook."

Averman chuckled at Henderson's gangster vocabulary and accent. The Varsity captain appeared to be selling the 'tough guy' shtick a bit too hard to be convincing. But when the gigantic senior trained his angry blues directly on Averman, the latter ceased his impudent chortling.

Given that Adam hadn't budged, however, Henderson realized that he had to try a more subtle approach.

"It'd really be a shame if you weren't up on our gameplans, Banks," he began, dropping the gangster vernacular. "You can't expect Coach to let you play if you can't tell the hole in your head from the hole in the ground you're about to dig for yourself."

At the prospect of being forced to ride the pine pony, Adam stood up and gave his chair a violent shove back into place before hoisting his backpack over his shoulder and stomping over to the Varsity table with Henderson in tow.

Julie, who had been sitting next to him, froze in place. She had never seen Adam so angry. In the time they had known each other, his emotional range varied little between silent determination and gentlemanly solicitousness. This was her first exposure to his quiet but formidable temper. And it
unnerved her.

"Well, well, well," McGill crowed from the Varsity table as Adam approached. "Look who it is! I see that your time with the Little Duckies hasn't affected your game too badly."

Noticing Larson's absence, Adam flashed his tormenter a smile that brimmed with malice.

"Where's your boyfriend?"

McGill shot up from his chair. Despite – or perhaps because of – the constant presence of half-naked dudes in the locker room and celebratory butt-slapping, there was no greater insult to a hockey player than the insinuation that he was gay.

Before McGill could vault over the table and prove his heterosexuality by laying his hands on Adam, he felt the beefy hand of Brian Cole grasp his shoulder and shove him back down into his chair. The role of peacekeeper was not a natural one to the Varsity enforcer, but he preferred violence that was purposeful – like in the service of driving the pretenders from campus and restoring the Warrior name.

Seated once more, McGill continued to glare at Adam.

"You didn't answer my question," the latter persisted. "Where's your better half?"

"He's not my better half or any half!" McGill seethed.

"Where's your buddy, then?"

"Paul is just paying his dues on your craptastic old team. So cheer-up. Your old squad's got a bit of talent after all."

"They've got talent," Scooter interjected. "They've got a really good goalie."

"Quit droolin' over sophomores," Henderson rebuked his goalie. "After that performance yesterday, you should be grateful that you even made the team. Focus!"

Scooter looked down sheepishly. He was painfully aware of his mediocre performance at tryouts; and he knew that only Wilson's unfounded contempt for Julie had saved his position. His confidence had yet to fully recover from the trauma of giving up the game-losing goal to Greg Goldberg of all people. As result, he had become jumpy and ineffective between the pipes.

Aware of Wilson's goaltending priorities, Henderson spoke up.

"Banks, Germaine – yous guys got good shots. This year, the two uh-yous and Lover Boy over dare are gonna be best friends. He needs all da help he can get, so I want yous two to run scorin' drills wid him every day."

Adam had to fight back the urge to laugh out loud at Henderson's affected gangster voice.

*He's such a lame-ass.*

Rather than laugh, Adam managed to smile and nod.

Henderson returned the gesture, satisfied that he was sufficiently badass to bend Adam Banks to his will. He then turned to Guy, who stared back without saying a word.

"You'll find that I make a better friend than enemy, Blondie," the Varsity captain blustered. "Just
do your part for the team, and we'll get along fine."

"If that's what the team needs me to do, then fine."

"Good."

And with the commitment from two of the newbies to hand over a large chunk of their free time, a self-satisfied Henderson returned to his meal.

As Scooter flashed a grateful smile, it occurred to Adam just how much his team commitment would deprive him of quality time with the Ducks – and with one Duck in particular. Casting a wistful look over at the JV table, Adam felt his heart sink.

Fulton had decided to spend the rest of the lunch period outside. It was a gorgeous day in early September, and the leaves in the trees were still plenty green. Despite being a lifelong Minnesotan, the sheer rapidity of the onset of winter never ceased to amaze him. In just a few short days, the summer emerald of the trees would give way to autumnal scarlet and gold.

And in less than a month after that, the bare-limbed trees would stand stark naked in the long, snowy winter of the Upper Midwest.

Plenty of other students were certainly keen to take advantage of the agreeable weather. They knew full well how rare it was during the school year, and milled around outside the main academic building with their lunches on their laps. As he looked around for a place to sit, a deep voice spoke up.

"Yo, Fulton!"

The Duck defenseman spun around and looked up to follow the sound.

Paul Larson took a long drag on his unfiltered cigarette. He had been chilling with a few Goth kids in the Smoker's Corner. Student smoking was forbidden on paper; but the school prefects only made a fuss when the kids didn't think to share their smokes, so the rule was seldom enforced with any rigor.

"What's up, Fult?"

Fulton – no shortie himself – looked up at the tall, dark figure in the black leather jacket and blue jeans. The two of them had gotten into it a bit during tryouts, but Fulton was willing to let that go. Hockey was a violent sport, and there was no sense in holding grudges over a bit of rough handling. Sizing up his companion, he estimated that Larson stood at about six-feet-four-inches. Possibly six-five.

"Don't you know that smoking stunts your growth?" He teased the former Hawk as he met the latter's gaze.

Larson gave a genial laugh – though his smile didn't reach his eyes.

"Yeah, these things don't do me any favors," he agreed, grinding-out his cigarette with the heel of his boot. "I probably could have made Varsity if I hadn't dogged it on the cardio. Congratulations, by the way."

"Heh, it doesn't feel like I've won anything," Fulton replied. "But thanks, man."

"I see you've still got your lunch. Let's find a place to sit."
Larson wrapped a long arm around Fulton's shoulders and guided him to an open spot on a short grassy hill between the main academic building and the dormitories. The veteran Duck knew that he was dealing with an ex-Hawk, but the gangly smoker seemed friendly enough. Fulton remembered when the gangly smoker was a short non-smoker who came out to help an unconscious Adam during the Pee Wee Championship.

*He seems cool.*

"Heh, you're Varsity and I'm JV," Larson declared. "I'm not sure if we're allowed to talk to each other, but you seem cool. I dig the shirt," he indicated Fulton's Red Hot Chili Peppers T-shirt with his head.

"Yeah, they're awesome."

"Almost as awesome as Pearl Jam."

"Pearl Jam's sick. But there's no need to make it a competition."

"True," Larson agreed. "A bit like JV and Varsity. We represent the same school. We play the same sport. Most of us have played with each other on other teams."

Fulton snickered.

"What?"

"You said 'played with each other,' dirty boy."

Larson gave another one of his dead-eyed laughs.

"You're too quick for me, Fulton. But the point is, there's no reason for JV and Varsity to be enemies. We all need to do our bit to coexist."

"I guess you're right."

Larson flashed a small, reptilian smile.

"Then let's learn more about each other. Tell me all about my new teammates, the Ducks. And I promise, I'll dish on McGill."

"Well..."

Although Fulton was quiet, it was a lack of ego rather than shyness that led him to keep his mouth shut most of the time. And it wasn't like there was a shortage of talkers on the Ducks. The quiet defenseman appreciated the rare opportunity to have an attentive listener, and he was proud of his friends, so he plied Larson with as much Duck info as he could cram into the remainder of the lunch period.

"Let's do this again, Fulton," Larson proposed as he helped his Varsity opposite to his feet. "Stop by my dorm room after practice. I've got Pearl Jam's *No Code* album in case you need to give your pipes a rest."

"Sure thing, man."

---

The JV Team assembled in their locker room for their mandatory study hall while Varsity had the ice. Over the din came the sound of a loud finger whistle, prompting the Ducks to look up from
their notebooks.

Coach Orion had entered with three young men who the rest of the team realized were the new Adam, Fulton and Guy.

One of the boys looked like a dead ringer for Rick Riley – the pale blue eyes of his patrician profile contrasting with his jet black mane. Another boy had a mop of red hair and brimmed with nervous energy as his green eyes darted around the room. The third boy was even bigger than Portman. His dark hair was slicked back in a pompadour, and his obsidian eyes revealed nothing while absorbing everything. Given his size, it was obvious that he was Fulton's replacement.

"Good afternoon, Team!" Orion called out.

"GOOD AFTERNOON, COACH!" The Ducks chorused back, aware that they'd have to greet their coach again if they weren't enthusiastic enough the first time.

Satisfied with the response, Orion took hold of the Riley doppelganger by the shoulders and led him forward.

"Alright, Team. It's time to meet the newest Ducks," he began before turning toward the shorter dark-haired boy. "Introduce yourself, son."

_Cake Eater, 2.0_, Russ mused.

"Uh, hi. I'm Tim Riley. I was actually supposed to be on JV last year, but then you guys showed up."

There was some muffled laughter as the Ducks remembered the original JV hockey team of '96-'97 being forced to give up their spots to make room for Gordon Bombay's crew. The-then Varsity captain, Rick Riley, was particularly galled that his kid brother had been given the boot; and he went out of his way to drive the new arrivals off the campus.

Tim let out a nervous laugh.

"You guys probably know my older brother, Rick."

The Ducks stared back at him in a way that made the younger Riley feel utterly alone.

"But I'm not Rick," he insisted. "I'm proud to be a Duck, and I'll play like hell for you guys."

At that, Tim was greeted with one or two slow claps from his skeptical new teammates.

_Well, that went over like a lead balloon_, he felt.

"Alright, Ducks," Orion spoke up. "Introduce yourselves to your new teammate."

The JV coach gave his new forward a light shove toward the rest of the team, who in turn went down the line and shook hands with each of his new teammates. Julie was the last stop on the line, and the goalie seemed even more aloof toward Tim than the others were. But he noticed that she had a bench all to herself. Settling where there was room, Tim planted himself next to Julie while Orion brought the red-haired boy forward.

_A ginger Guy-ger_, Averman thought with a chuckle.

"Ryan O'Neill's the name," the newbie declared in an Appalachian twang. "I'm pretty laidback, but make any hillbilly or ginger jokes and I'll rip out yer tonsils and flush 'em down the terlet!"
Ryan hastily made his way down the line, dropped his hockey bag in front of an empty locker and tore it open. Rifling through the contents, he relaxed once he discovered a fresh 12-pack of Surge. He cracked open a green can and began to replenish the supply of the sugar-and-caffeine-loaded drink that he constantly kept in his bloodstream.

Orion looked up at Larson, dressed in the biker gear that he wore off the ice as a uniform.

"You're up, James Dean."

The defenseman nodded and stepped forward.

"I'm Paul Larson," he announced – his deep voice husky with tobacco smoke.

All eyes were fixed on the large figure who gave the appearance of being a 15-year old trapped inside a 25-year old body. The original D5ers among the Ducks had recognized the Hawk name during tryouts, but were unable to recognize him. But seeing the familiar dead eyes up close confirmed that the big bad Hawk had gotten even bigger.

And possibly badder.

"What's there to say, really?" Larson asked rhetorically. "I'm a Capricorn; and I like hockey, long walks on the beach, and romantic candlelit dinners."

The newer Ducks laughed at the defenseman's dry humor, but the original Ducks felt uneasy. Charlie in particular could not forget or easily forgive Larson's past acts of bullying.

He stepped forward and squared up against the ex-Hawk.

"Just don't pull any of your shit here," Captain Duck laid down the law. "That's not the Duck way."

"Language, Conway!" Orion snapped.

"Sorry, Coach."

As he looked up at Larson, Charlie thought he saw a flicker of a smile. For better or for worse, they were now teammates. And it was Charlie's job as captain to make it work. Setting aside his reservations, he extended a hand for Larson to shake.

"I suppose a 'welcome onboard' is in order."

The defenseman simply nodded at Charlie's outstretched hand.

"I only shake after games."

_Awkward? Not at all!_ Goldberg thought as he observed the snub.

Larson looked over at the rest of his new teammates. Opting against the handshakes and individual introductions that Tim and Ryan had gone for moments earlier, the former Hawk gave a quick chin-nod toward the others before settling in at a rickety old locker some ways away.

Connie bit on her lower lip as she observed the mysterious bad boy take off his leather jacket and expose his long, sinewy arms.

Julie noticed that Tim had taken a seat next to her on the bench that she previously had to herself.
With his dark hair, bright blue eyes, flawless skin and six-foot-two-inch frame, Julie's new teammate was awfully handsome.

And awfully Riley.

Rather than risk Duck disloyalty, she turned her focus back to her chemistry homework and away from the Rick Riley-lookalike.

Tim grunted as he rubbed his temples in frustration.

"I used to like history – back when it was all multiple choice. But all these essays we have to write are so annoying."

Riley or not, Julie had to agree with him there. She was more of a numbers girl.

"Yeah, I don't like them either. Required length is a load of BS. How is my answer any less correct if I said what I needed to say in a single paragraph?"

"Amen, Sister!" Tim exclaimed, studying the goalie's face. "Julie's your name, right?"

She nodded.

"Everyone around here calls or 'Cat,' or 'Cat Lady'," Goldberg volunteered.

"Or Jules!" Averman added.

Tim ignored both of them and flashed a straight set of pearly whites at Julie, causing her cheeks to flush.

He's a Riley. Do. Not. Like him.

Unaware of the civil war raging inside of Julie, Tim spoke up.

"Maybe history essays would suck slightly less if we bounced ideas off each other?"

"I don't think that's such a good idea," she replied. "I'd only drag you down. I suck at brainstorming."

I don't, but that should shut him up.

She returned to her homework. But Tim wasn't giving up just yet.

"Uh, would you mind if I ran ideas by you, and you can tell me if they're any good? You don't have to brainstorm anything."

Julie let out a frustrated sigh as she slammed her textbook shut, annoyed with the younger Riley's persistence. But if indulging him a bit was what it took to get him to stop talking, she would go along with it.

"What have you got?"

Tim cleared his throat and sat-up erect, pleased with himself for winning the attention of the comely goalie.

"How about this on the Russian Revolution: the Russians revolted in 1917 because the people were penniless, and the Tsar was Nickeless."
Julie was a sucker for wordplay, and couldn't help giggling.

"Well, none of that's technically wrong. Go for it. But you might want to spell 'Nicholas' the proper way."

"You've got a great laugh, you know that?"

Julie's cheeks turned scarlet yet again, so she doubled-down on her Riley contempt.

"Oh? I didn't know that white trash girls could have nice laughs."

Tim gave a puzzled look in response.

"Sorry?"

"Oh, it's nothing," Julie replied, embarrassed. "Your brother called us all 'white trash' last year, that's all."

The bemused frown on Tim's face sunk into a regretful one, as his arrogant older brother's reputation continued to precede him.

"I'm sorry about that," he offered quietly. "Rick can be a real piece of work. It would be a lot easier being his brother if he was nicer to people."

"Don't worry about it," Julie replied. "I'm sorry for even bringing it up. I shouldn't have. You're not your brother and I shouldn't treat you like you are."

"It's okay. More than a few people thought I was Rick when I first arrived on campus. The most embarrassing thing about that is that they think I was held back from graduating."

Julie giggled again. And with that, her 'Riley Wall' came tumbling down.

They continued to make small talk with occasional pauses to do a bit of homework for the remainder of the study hall when Orion returned to the locker room.

"Alright, suit up," he ordered his team. "Varsity's off the ice in 15 minutes."

As Connie and Julie got up to go to their private changing area away from the boys, they were followed by two pairs of newbie eyes.

Varsity had begun wrapping up their first practice with a scrimmage. Scooter had been showing flashes of his former brilliance along with breathtaking give-ups. As Cole took a pass and thundered down into Scooter's zone, Wilson figured that his starting goalie would make a save. As much as Wilson appreciated the thuggish skills that Cole brought to the table as an enforcer, the senior was built like an ox and was twice as dumb.

No way could Brian Cole fake-out Scott Vanderbilt.

Wilson's eyes widened to the point where his glasses nearly fell off his face as he watched Cole tap it in with ease.

"GODDAMMIT!" The Varsity coach roared from the bench, prompting a stoppage in play.

"Is the occasional save too much to ask for, Vanderbilt?!"

"I'm sorry, Coach," Scooter meekly offered. "I'll get the next one!"
Returning his bifocals to their proper position and taking a deep breath, Wilson motioned for his captain, Zach Henderson, to approach the bench.

"Yes, Coach?"

The defenseman always spoke properly and respectfully around faculty. He saved the gangster dialect for his minions – the entire student body, in his view.

"You told Banks and Germaine that they needed to drill Vanderbilt, right?"

"Yes, Coach," Henderson replied. "Banks told me that he would run drills for half an hour after JV finishes their practice."

Wilson shook his head in disapproval.

"No, that's not enough. He needs a full hour. Everyday. Including weekends. I don't care if there's a game, I can keep this place open afterwards, got it?"

"Got it, Coach."

"Alright, get outta here then."

Henderson returned to his team and the scrimmage resumed with Adam facing off against McGill. Adam took possession of the puck and passed it to Guy, who eluded an opposing forward named Williams with some fancy footwork. He closed in on the goal, faked to Scooter's glove side, then fired stick side.

Scooter's jumpiness finally paid off, as he moved to block his left, but recovered in time to block his right and slapped the puck away.

"Way to go, Scooter!" Adam congratulated his opposing goalie, drawing a glare from Guy.

Adam shrugged in response. He figured that they were all teammates and that Scooter could use a bit of encouragement.

McGill cleared the puck from his zone and bore down on Parker, the backup goalie, with Adam in hot pursuit. As Adam closed the distance and positioned himself for a steal, McGill shoved a hard elbow into his rival's stomach, causing Adam to crash belly-up onto the ice.

Upon witnessing this gratuitous display, Fulton knew that he had to protect his fellow Duck. So he made a bee-line for McGill, lowered his shoulder as he gained speed, and launched himself like an artillery shell.

The force sent McGill flying back into the boards.

As the dazed, semi-conscious Hawk struggled to regain his bearings, half of his teammates decided that Fulton was out of line. Sticks, helmets, and gloves began hitting the ice as half of Varsity moved to impose hockey justice on the Bash Brother. The other half cared little for Fulton, but simply could not resist a fight. The prospect of broken noses, black eyes and blood had a similar effect on these sadists as the *Sports Illustrated Swim Suit Edition* had on most teenage boys.

Fists flew, along with a generous helping of 'F-you's,' 'suck my...' and a host of other filthy epithets. The price of Wilson's affinity for aggressive players was that their aggression turned on each other far too often – even during the best of times. As the first nose began to crunch, the Varsity coach waddled onto the ice and made a furious penguin-walk toward his players.
"Hey, knock it off! Break it up! That's enough!"

The brawling started to die-down as Wilson peeled Fulton off of a bloody-nosed Cole.

"Grab your gear and let's go!" The Varsity coach called out. "Practice is over!"

Eventually, the sullen Varsity squad lined up to head into their locker room. Before they began to move, they could hear laughter and boisterous talk. The JV practice was about to begin.

Looking over at the gregarious JV team, Adam felt a world apart from his friends – on a team full of players that would leap at any excuse to kill each other. He noticed Julie laughing at something that a Rick Riley lookalike had said. Then, a jumpy redhead began to lead the quacking.

The enthusiastic quacking from his old friends had never sounded so bitter to him.
A little privacy, please

Charlie glanced at ten neatly-typed pages of Latin text, and plunged the depths of his imagination for an excuse to get out of reading them. The assignment was to write a modern heroic story set in the present, but written in Latin. Linda took to the assignment like a dog to steak, and she had already gone to the trouble of typing and printing her rough draft in the computer lab.

The JV captain was still in the hand-written stage of his project. And he barely had a full, wide-ruled page committed to paper.

"I don't know how you can write so much," Charlie declared.

Linda shrugged.

"I guess it's hard to stop once I really get going," she replied. "Well go on, read it! Let me know what you think!"

"Tell ya what," Charlie began, casually tossing Linda's pages onto his desk before sitting next to her on his bed. "Why don't we act out my heroic story, right here, right now?"

She cocked an eyebrow.

"The one where a woman fell madly in love with a kind man who gave her the last ticket to a flight she needed to be on?"

Charlie wrapped an affectionate arm around her shoulders, drawing her close.

"And?" He asked with a grin.

"And they made-out in the terminal for so long that she missed her flight, but found her soul mate."

Linda giggled at the absurdity of the story as Charlie gently pressed his forehead against hers. She felt her pulse quicken as yet another study session in her boyfriend's dorm room was about to take an amorous turn.

"I should really get you to do the audio version," he teased with a flirty grin.

She laughed as she pulled away and gave his arm a playful slap, but didn't resist as he pulled her back and planted a kiss on her lips. Running her fingers through his hair and grasping the back of his head for support, she gave Charlie's tongue room to dance as the kiss deepened. Captain Duck was charming, funny, infuriating, brattish, and princely. These traits seemed to balance in just the right combination to keep Linda coming back for more – as opposed to running for the hills.

As he gently laid her down on the bed, the door opened.

"Oh, shit – I'm sorry!" A wide-eyed Adam offered as the couple snapped into an upright position. "I'll go."

"No, Adam. It's okay."

Linda got up and retrieved her Latin assignment before adding that she needed to get her paper reviewed, and it wasn't going to happen with Charlie around. But she gave her boyfriend a quick kiss goodbye before taking her leave, indicating that she wasn't too annoyed by his hormone-induced antics.
"I'm really sorry."

"Adam, don't." Charlie replied, holding up a hand while he stood up. "It's fine. And it's just as well anyway, cos I never get to see you."

Despite living together, the separate hockey and academic schedules of Charlie and Adam meant that few of their waking hours were spent together. As the month of September drew to a close, Adam estimated that he couldn't have had more than an hour's worth of conversation with the guy who shared his living quarters.

"So how are things, anyway?" Charlie asked.

Adam shrugged, setting his backpack on his desk.

"I guess it could always be worse. I'm on a team where half the team hates the other half, but at least we're not at war with JV. How are your new guys?"

"So far so good," Charlie nodded, reaching into the mini-fridge to grab a can of pop. "O'Neill is always hopped-up on Surge, but he plays well. Riley's brother Tim is surprisingly cool, and very good at his position. Larson hasn't been a barrel of laughs – he hardly ever talks. But he's behaved himself so far. Team chemistry's really good, actually."

Adam plopped down on his neatly-made bed with a sigh. He messed up the tight hospital corners in the process, but he was well past the point of caring as his sapphire eyes drifted up to the popcorn ceiling.

"What's wrong, man?"

"It's happening again, Charlie. We were all friends, and now I'm on the outside looking in…again."

"Don't be so dramatic, Adam. Everyone still likes you. The problem is that you're not around."

"Yeah, because Scooter forgot how to play goalie. So on top of everything else, I have to spend an hour every day shooting at him."

"Well you're here now, so let's do something," Charlie made a twisted face in concentration. "I got it!"

"What?"

Adam didn't bother sitting up.

"Guy mentioned how he was going out with Connie tonight. That leaves poor Julie all alone. Why don't you go and keep her company while I track down Linda and finish dramatizing my heroic story?"

Adam sat up with a bemused look on his face.

"What's this about a heroic story?"

"That's the wrong part of the sentence to be focusing on."

Setting his can of pop aside, Charlie grasped Adam by his forearms and yanked him off the bed.

"You just go on over to the girls' dorm. I'll call ahead to Julie so she'll let you in."
"Are you crazy?! I can't just go over there, I need some sort of excuse. Like help with homework or something."

"Okay, what do you need to work on?"

"I'm already done with it," Adam sulked. "How am I supposed to go over now?"

Charlie batted away the question like an annoying insect.

"You're overthinking this. You and Julie are friends. Friends visit friends. Ergo, you can visit Julie," Charlie explained, pleased with his use of Latin.

*Linda would be so proud right now*, he thought with a slight smile.

"I still think this is a dumb idea."

*And people say I'm moody*, Charlie mused with a roll of the eyes before taking a seat at his desk and pounding Julie's phone number into the keypad.

"Hello, Cat Lady? This is your captain speaking…"

Adam ran a pair of nervous hands through his hair. Charlie actually expected him to visit Julie. Alone. In her dorm room. Part of Adam wanted to give Charlie a big wet kiss. Another part wanted to strangle the life out of him.

"...I'm just calling to inform you that Adam is on his way over to your dorm. Would you be kind enough to let him in?"

Charlie paused to listen to Julie on the other end.

"Yes, Adam Banks. Yes – he was just so eager to see you that he walked right out the door without even thinking to call ahead."

Adam rolled his eyes, but decided that he had better get going. Taking care to straighten his hair back into the neat curtains that were popular at the time, he added a splash of Michael Jordan cologne to his neck before exiting. Venturing out into the crisp late September evening, he noticed that the leaves on the three oak trees in the courtyard separating the sandstone dormitories reflected the time of year perfectly – one green, one red, one amber.

Early autumn. Hockey season was just two weeks away.

He wiped a bead of sweat from his brow after making the short walk from the boys' dormitory to the girls'. It wasn't the journey on foot that brought on the perspiration, but the destination. He began to cool down, however, as he waited outside the front entrance of girls' dormitory for Julie to show.

Several minutes later, he began to wonder if Julie was at all keen to see him.

Letting out a disappointed sigh, he turned to head back and nearly collided into her.

"Hey, stranger!" She beamed, pulling him in for a quick hug. "Gosh, you always smell so nice. Listen, you can come in – but you have to go around to the side entrance, that way Ms. Stewart won't see you."

After Charlie had hung up, Julie nearly fell down the stairs in her flip-flops as she raced to the side entry to let Adam in. Several minutes had gone by, so she decided to try her luck at the front
entrance. Though surprised that a hunk like Adam Banks didn't know the procedure for visiting girls at their dorm, she was thrilled to see him.

But it hadn't occurred to Adam that he was breaking the rules.

"Uh, maybe this wasn't such a good idea," he declared, rubbing the back of his head. "Charlie wanted to get me out of our room – something about Linda and heroic stories."

Julie giggled, embarrassed by her own giddiness, but unable to control it.

"Yeah, he's crazy – but you gotta love him."

"Anyway, sorry for disturbing you. I better get going. Goodnight."

Adam turned to leave, only for Julie to grab him by the arm.

"Why don't you come in and stay with me for a while?" She suggested. "Something tells me that Charlie and Linda are up to something that you don't want to walk in on."

Adam flashed an appreciative smile that caught Julie's breath in her throat.

He had always looked handsome to her, but a genuine Adam Banks smile was almost too much for her. The perfect arrangement of his flawlessly white teeth, and the way his eyes glistened like sapphire diamonds was just too perfect. He was so earnest and so serious that the rarity of his smile made it extra spectacular – and so easy to get lost in.

But the pause proved too long for comfort to Adam, and his smile transformed into his more natural look of concern.

"Everything all right, Julie?"

"Just go around to the side," she instructed after regaining her composure. "And I'll open the door for you."

Within a minute, Adam was being led up the stairs to the room that Julie shared with Connie. The goalie already looked dressed for bed – her white tank top that ended just below the navel was separated from her plaid pajama bottoms by a taut ring of cream-colored skin.

God, why did she have to wear white?

Dressed in slate-gray slacks, black wingtips and a burgundy cashmere sweater, Adam was unable to escape Charlotte Banks' dress code even on campus. He felt like a tool.

Julie thought he looked perfect.

"Here we are!" She announced, opening the door to her room.

The small, tidy room had a layout identical to the one Adam shared with Charlie. Two desks against one wall, two closets opposite the desks, and single beds up against the windows; a combined fridge and microwave unit stood at the foot of one bed, and a TV at the foot of the other.

Julie's side of the room looked slightly confused, with her Boston Bruins bedding and her large poster of Martin Brodeur, the star goaltender for the New Jersey Devils.

After sliding-off her black Bruins flip-flops, she rolled the gray chair from her desk over to the gap between the twin beds – motioning for Adam to sit, which he promptly did.
"So, how are things on Varsity?" she asked as she took a seat on her bed.

Adam shrugged.

"We hate each other, and I'm Scooter's designated training buddy for an hour a day, every day. But apart from that, okay I guess."

"Man, that sucks," Julie replied with a sour face that soon turned to curiosity. "So you and Scooter are training buddies?"

"Yes..." Adam replied slowly, unsure how to proceed.

He was almost certain that Julie and the Varsity goalie were not an item. At the present. But he was always afraid to ask about the nature of their relationship. There could have been a messy history. They may even have gone all the way. Adam was horrified at the prospect of Julie being with a presumably-experienced upperclassman. How could he be expected to measure up?

If she even wants me anyway.

"That's cool," Julie interrupted Adam's worried train of thought. "He always seemed like a nice guy. I thought he was going to ask me to the junior prom last year, but that didn't happen. There's been the rare email, and the even rarer phone call, but that's it. I think he's had a girlfriend this whole time but he's afraid to break it off with her."

Adam knew that he was grinning like an idiot, but he couldn't help it. He was just relieved that Scooter hadn't set an impossible standard for him to live up to.

"What?" Julie asked, returning the grin.

"Oh...I was just thinking about that scene in Ace Ventura when Jim Carrey talked out of his butt."

She let out a surprised laugh before declaring,

'I've missed our random chats on AOL, but they're even better in person."

Seeing his crush laugh, Adam recalled the episode at the beginning of the month when Julie had appeared to hit it off with that new Riley-lookalike who Charlie referred to as 'Tim.' Having cleared-up the Scooter mystery that had bedeviled him for so long, Adam was determined to find out how Julie felt about Tim Riley.

"You haven't told me about your new teammates," he pointed out. "How are they?"

"Good I guess. Ryan's crazy, but nice. Pretty standard combination in a hockey player, really."

Adam laughed, despite his experience led him to doubt that niceness was a universal quality in hockey players.

Julie continued.

"He's also really fast – almost as fast as Luis. And there's this guy named Larson – he kinda gives me the creeps. It's not anything he's said, or done...it's just a vibe he gives off that's rather unpleasant."

"Yeah, I was on the Hawks with him. Not a nice guy."

That left only one newbie – the one who Adam was most keen to hear Julie describe.
"Oh, and there's Tim."

Julie paused, not knowing where to go with this. She thought that she had detected some romantic interest from the younger Riley. Apart from believing him to be cute, she wasn't sure exactly how she felt about him. She had a long talk with Connie about all this, and the extraverted brunette encouraged Julie to ask him out – then work out her feelings.

"It's the '90s, Jules. Girls ask guys out all the time, it's not a big deal."

But Julie had not acted on that advice. And 'girl power' or not, she was not at all inclined to ask guys out. Julie was tempted to ask Adam his thoughts, but having seen him so rarely, she lacked the opportunity. Now that she finally had the preppy forward to herself, she didn't want to risk boring him with talk of other boys.

Finally, she spoke up.

"He's nice. Tim, that is. Great center, great sense of humor."

As Adam tried to figure out what to make of that cryptic description, Julie got up from the bed – a ring of scalloped white lingerie peeking over her pajama bottoms.

Feeling his cheeks go up like a forest fire, he looked away. In an effort to cool down, he got to his feet, took off his cashmere sweater and tossed it onto Connie's bed.

A startled Julie looked over at him.

"Oh."

"Just getting warm, a bit," Adam replied, internally cursing the 'Yoda voice' that made an uninvited appearance whenever he was nervous.

Julie was unable to take her eyes off the white undershirt that clung tightly to Adam's lean, muscular figure. He actually looked bigger and stronger without all the hockey pads. And his hair had gotten just a little bit messy as result of him lifting his sweater over it. Combined with his slate gray trousers and black leather belt, he looked like the boy next door with a secret wild side. She felt herself getting warmer at the thought of an untamed Adam Banks, and continued to stare – completely unaware of what she was doing.

Adam moved to break the silence.

"Sorry," he offered, reaching for his sweater. "I'll put this back on."

Julie snapped out of her stupor.

"Oh, no – it's okay. Take off your T-shirt, if you like."

Thankfully, he had been putting his sweater back on – so he missed her embarrassed facepalm.

"I'm sorry, did you say something?"

"Never mind," Julie shook her head. "I was just thinking we could watch a video."

She turned and drew back the red Eden Hall curtain that concealed her closet. The school colors had changed from Warrior red, black and white to Mighty Duck eggplant, teal, and white; but the school had yet to replace the closet curtains in the dormitories. Looking over the stacks of VHS cassette tapes that rested on the top of her bureau, she was joined by Adam.
"Let's have a look-see," he said, scanning the tapes with his eyes. As they settled on Batman Forever, he snickered. "Batman Forever, really?"

"It has a certain...endearing stupidity," Julie defended her taste in film.

"Kinda like me then."

"Exactly."

As the pair laughed, the tension of only a few moments earlier melted like ice cream in the Sahara.

Recalling his allusion to the 'butt scene,' Julie pulled out her Ace Ventura tape and presented it to Adam, who gave his nod of approval.

"Want me to fast forward to your favorite scene?" She asked with a teasing grin.

"Why rush?"

"Well, alllrighty then!"

Adam laughed out loud at Julie's impression of the title character and returned to his seat by her bed while she slid the tape into the VCR. As the end credits appeared on the screen, Adam clicked his tongue in disapproval.

"I see that the words 'be kind, please rewind' mean nothing to you."

"That only counts for rentals," she replied, taking a seat on her bed.

"Heh, fair enough."

As the tape rewound, Julie let out a loud yawn.

"Sorry," she offered.

It was already dark when Adam made the short trip across the courtyard, and sleepiness had slowly crept up on Julie until it made its presence known with a start.

"I probably should get going," Adam said as he stood up from the chair.

"No, it's okay – really."

He felt bad about keeping Julie up, but good about being wanted. As he returned to his seat, he felt a pain in his lower back. Being a hockey player, he was used to all these little aches and wasn't too concerned.

"Ooh, the movie's ready!" Julie declared with an enthusiasm that gave way to annoyance.

"Previews? Really?"

"Well there you have it," Adam declared. "'Be kind, please rewind' is just a ploy to make us buy more stuff."

"Those dirty sneaks."

"Quite."

As the feature film finally began, Julie propped her pillows up so she could lay down without
missing the movie. Adam noticed that the bottom of her tank top rode up, exposing her taut tummy.

_Eyes forward, Banks._

The pair of Ducks shared some loud laughs through the first twenty minutes of the film when the pain in Adam's back had returned – only sharper. As he stood up and began twizzling and writhing in the hopes of making his back crack, Julie looked on in concern.

"Bad back?"

"It's nothing really."

"Shush."

She slid over on her bed, leaving half of it open before patting the empty space.

"Lay down."

Adam's eyes widened a country mile.

"I...I couldn't do that," he stammered.

"Adam, you're hurt. You need to take pressure off your back. In other words _lay down_. Don't make me come up there."

Tempting though it was to have Julie come up and force him onto her bed, Adam complied and laid down next to her.

"I said 'lay down,' not _hog my pillow_;" she teased.

"Oh, sorry..." he slid away from her and nearly fell off the bed.

"Relax."

She pulled him back before resting her head on his strong chest.

"This'll do."

Though he knew little about girls, Adam knew enough about cats not to disturb them once they were comfortable. As the movie continued to play, Julie's laughs became increasingly muffled before ceasing completely. Looking down at her, Adam discovered that she had fallen sound asleep.

She looked like a sleeping angel to him, and wrapping an arm around her waist felt like the most natural thing in the world at that point. So he went ahead wrapped a cashmere sleeve around the exposed flesh.

As Julie stirred, he froze in terror.

But she simply nestled the side of her face into his chest.

Strengthening his grasp, he settled in and watched the rest of the movie in attempted silence – though he couldn't help snickering on occasion. As the end credits began to roll, the door opened. Connie entered.
"What the…"

"This isn't what it looks like, Connie," Adam insisted, shooting up like an Olympic sprinter and making for the door.

Adam’s sudden movement had the effect of waking Julie, who felt icy without his warmth. Sliding under the sheets, she pulled them over her head to avoid an interrogation from Connie. And to hide her own disappointment.
A Hawk Invades Bashland

Dean Portman's teeth gritted as he went about the arduous task of finding a joke in Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream* while Pearl Jam blared from Fulton's stereo. Ever since Fulton moved up to Varsity, Portman had found everything about his Bash Brother irritating, even his taste in music. He was a loyal Duck to the core, and the fact that he was sharing living space with the enemy disgusted him.

While the angsty lyrics and heavy beat continued to rattle the clustered dorm room, Portman snapped the pencil that he had been using for his English notes in half.

"Turn that shit off," he demanded.

"Since when is Pearl Jam shit?" Fulton asked, defiantly turning up the volume to the CD he had borrowed from Larson.

Portman got up from his desk and stomped over to the fancy CD-player whose speakers dominated an entire wall. The Bash Brothers had always been a terror to their dorm supervisors, and Fulton's big woofer was no small reason why. Portman had thought the sound system was pretty badass, but his patience – thin at the best of times – had snapped.

Raising a clenched fist, the Chicago-born defenseman brought it down on the stereo.

"WHAT THE FUCK, MAN?!"

Fulton shot up from his bed and rushed to his fatally-wounded sound system.

"I told you to turn it off."

Having channeled his fury into the hapless stereo, Portman had become calmness personified. He returned to his desk while Fulton ran worried hands through his thick dark mane. It had taken him two miserable summers of caddying at a stuck-up country club to save enough dough for his cherished sound system.

And his best friend had casually destroyed it without a tinge of remorse.

As Portman resumed his studies, he felt himself roll backwards in his desk chair before being deposited onto the hard wooden planks that made up the floor.

"Goddammit."

He staggered to his feet and gave Fulton a hard shove, knocking him backwards.

Fulton got back up and was about to lay into his Bash Brother when he stopped himself.

"You know what, I don't need this," he declared. "Go screw yourself."

He threw a few things into his backpack before stomping out the door, desperate to clear his head. He was in such a rush to get out that he walked past Larson in the hallway without even noticing his new friend. During the past several weeks, Larson seemed like the only person on JV who was willing to treat him like a human being.

Not that the other Ducks – aside from Portman – had been overtly hostile. But their pointed aloofness was a painful blow to Fulton.
As Larson watched Fulton barrel down the stairs in pursuit of the exit, he had a change of plans. Originally, he had intended to get his Pearl Jam album back. Now, he had bigger fish to fry.

*Or Duck…rather,* he mused.

Approaching the Bash Brothers' room, the ex-Hawk noticed that the door was open.

*Hmm, not a door-slammer this Fulton. Definitely a cool customer, even when mad.*

Leaning his long frame into the arch of the doorway, Larson peered in and thought he had stumbled into a disaster zone. The Bash Brothers had been living in that room for just over a month and it was already a veritable pig sty. Clothing, half-eaten food, notebooks, textbooks, and used tissues were strewn about all over the place; and a zoo-like smell saturated the stale air.

The overpowering environment was nearly enough to break Larson's legendary stoicism.

But it held.

Laying on his bed, Portman had abandoned note-taking and had begun a straight-read of the text. He hadn't seen his visitor in the doorway, but he could tell that a foreign odor was visiting Bashland. Following the smell of Aqua Velva, he looked up.

"Friends like that, huh?" Larson met Portman's gaze.

"Heh, I didn't know you talked."

"I'm a better listener than talker. Can I come in?"

"Whatever, dude. Free country."

Larson carefully waded his way through the pungent – and occasionally soggy – debris on the floor with his sharp eyes desperately seeking uncorrupted wooden planks. He was tantalizingly close to the window when he slipped on a pair of boxers and fell face-first onto Fulton's bed.

The crunchy yellow sheets had a musty smell that made his skin crawl.

But the ex-Hawk kept it together as he got back to his feet and reached for the window, fearing that he would suffocate without the fresh air.

"Ah, let's see here."

He struggled to get the narrow pane to budge, and when it became clear that the window would remain clamped shut, Larson gave a rare display of emotion.

"Son-of-a-bitch!" He cursed.

"I know, right?" Portman agreed. "No way that thing's gonna open. I got a hammer though. I could smash it open if you like."

"No, leave it…you keep a hammer in your dorm? Never mind, leave it."

"So what's up?"

"I should be asking you that," Larson replied, rolling-up Portman's desk chair and taking a seat on what looked like the least-filthy surface in the room. "Your Bash Brother just stormed out of the building. He looked pissed."
Portman let out a loud sigh as he set his book down and sat up.

"What's eating you?" Larson persisted.

"Nothing man, it's just…I'm the big defender of the Ducks, ya know? Anything or anyone that's a threat to the Ducks, I smash. And Fulton…he's my best friend, and now he's on Varsity. And everything he's said or done ever since just pisses me off."

Portman ran a hand through the greasy mop he normally kept concealed with a bandana. As he explained his circumstances out loud, he realized that he was being unreasonable. Sensing possible hesitation in his prey, Larson spoke up.

"Sounds like Fulton hasn't been much of a friend. Being on different teams is no excuse to be a bad friend. Jake's on Varsity, and I'm on JV, but we're still cool."

"Who?"

The ex-Hawk gave a quick chortle.

"You probably know him as 'McGill.' I think I'm his only non-parent who actually calls him by his first name."

"Yeah…I haven't been a good friend," Portman thought out loud. "I should go apologize to him.

Larson jumped to his feet and blocked Portman's path to the door.

"You should do nothing of the sort," he insisted, laying his long, icy fingers onto Portman's shoulders. "He was the one who told you to go screw yourself. He was the one that stormed out. He's the one that insists on all this dumb drama. And you think that you owe him an apology?"

Larson tried to laugh, but the noxious air made it come out as coughs.

"Yeah, but I broke his stereo," Portman replied, ignoring his companion's coughing fit.

The ex-Hawk held up an index finger as if to say give me a minute.

"A broken stereo is a fair price for a broken friendship, if you ask me," he declared once his coughing ceased.

Portman raised a pair of curious eyebrows.

"Look, you're upset," Larson insisted. "Why don't we take it out on some bowling pins, my treat?"

The Bash Brother shrugged, curious about his new defensive partner's sudden interest in him. During practice, Larson and Portman exchanged little more than a few hockey-related words. Now the quiet giant wanted to be his buddy. Setting aside his uncertainty, Portman spoke up.

"Sure man. I always like to knock shit down."

His atheism notwithstanding, Larson sent up a mental prayer of thanksgiving for being delivered from Bashland. He was confident that he could work Portman over once he was in a more comfortable setting. Not that the ex-Hawk was particularly high-maintenance, but he preferred being in places that didn't demand a fresh round of vaccinations.

After making a mental note to visit the doctor's, Larson wrapped a long arm around Portman's shoulders and led him out of Bashland.
Alone in her dorm room, Julie tried to focus on preparations for her upcoming chemistry exam, but her eyes kept drifting up at the photo collage on her corkboard. Looking up at the most prominently-positioned photograph, she couldn't help but smile.

It was Team USA posing for their Wheaties photo. Julie had 'ruined' this particular snap by reaching up and planting bunny ears behind Adam's head. Though tall for a girl, she still felt like it was quite the achievement being able to reach over the top of his head; Adam's perfectly serious expression made the effect of the bunny ears even more humorous.

The photographer disagreed however, and took another shot that didn't include any shenanigans. But Julie always kept this one instead.

That's it. You have to talk to him.

Julie nodded in agreement with the voice in her head. After that awkward movie night, she needed to know that Adam was still cool with her. And she needed to get to the bottom of his feelings toward her. Though part of her argued that he was only trying to get in a comfortable position by wrapping an arm around her, part of her entertained the heavenly possibility that he actually liked her.

She reached across her desk for the phone and dialed the number to Charlie and Adam's room.

The phone rang. And rang. And rang. And rang some more.

Realizing that Charlie and Adam must both be out, she placed the receiver back in its cradle with a sigh. But she wasn't about to give up. Throwing a denim jacket on over her white T, she locked the door behind her and went off in pursuit of Adam.

Recalling his 'Scooter duty,' Julie figured that Adam was probably at the arena, so she made her way to the school's athletic complex. There had been frost early that morning, but it melted away in the early October sunshine. The air retained a distinct chill, however. Autumn had only just arrived, but Old Man Winter was already getting impatient for his turn.

Looking through an open door into the stands, she saw a few skaters gliding counterclockwise around the perimeter of the ice. As she made her way down into the bleachers, it became apparent that this was a public – or at least general student – skating session. No Adam.

"Hey, Jules!" Came a voice.

She spun around and saw a grinning Fulton crouched in the bleachers. He motioned for her to approach, which she did.

"Hey, Fult. What's up?"

"I just needed to clear my head," he explained. "I went skating for a little while, but all those novices crashing into me got old. So now I'm watching them crash into each other. It's surprisingly soothing."

Julie chuckled, recalling how Fulton's poor skating was the stuff of various Duck legends. Now that he was so good at it, he could mock others.

"Say, have you seen Adam anywhere?"

Fulton shook his head.
"Nah, not today. Saw him at practice yesterday, obviously. He's getting good with his fists, believe it or not. Good thing too. Part of being Varsity means beating the crap out of each other."

The goalie flashed a nervous expression at the defenseman.

"Don't worry," he offered. "I protect him. Guy too. We're a tight unit, the three of us."

"Well good."

Recalling Adam's back pains, Julie felt a surge of anger toward the Varsity neanderthals who were hurting him. She was beginning to worry that she had added to his discomfort while they lied together on the bed when Fulton spoke up.

"Why don't you sit down, stay a while?"

"Uh, no. Thank you, Fulton. But I really need to find Adam."

"Oh, okay."

Julie turned and moved to leave. As Fulton returned his lonely gaze to the skaters, he called back to her.

"If you see Portman, tell him I'll play my music quieter."

He doubted if she had heard him, as she departed in a flash.

_I hope it's nothing too serious_, he worried – Julie's mysterious problem replacing his own in his mind.

Julie instinctively put her hands in her pockets as she stepped outside – the briskness of the air contrasting with the sunniness of the sky. She decided to try the dining hall next; even if she failed to find Adam, at least she could take care of her growling tummy. As she was about to leave the athletic complex, a now-familiar voice spoke up.

"Hey, Julie!" Tim Riley called out from the direction of the track.

He jogged up to her in a plain white T-shirt and a blue pair of Michigan shorts. The cool air had kept most of the sweat away during his laps.

The goalie turned and greeted the new JV forward with an amiable smile.

"You know, you're one of only two people who calls me by my actual name. I'm Jules, Cat, or Cat Lady to everyone else."

"Oh? Who's the other person?"

"Banksie…I mean Adam Banks," she replied. "As you can see, I don't return the favor."

Tim gave a quick nod.

"I think I've met him once, very briefly. It was at a booster dinner for Varsity last year. He probably doesn't remember me. But I'd love to meet him again, he's supposed to be an amazing player."

"He is," Julie replied with a small frown. "And I'd love to introduce you, but I can't find him anywhere."
"I'm sorry to hear that," Tim gave a sympathy frown. "You know, I just got back from running laps at the track, and I've worked up a bit of an appetite. Would you like to go to Mickey's with me?"

She flashed a teasing smile.

"A diner, really? With all of those commoners?"

"It's a guilty pleasure of mine," he acknowledged with a chuckle. "If you'd like me to look the part of the snob, I could shove a silver spoon up my derriere. But that sounds rather déplaisant."

Julie let out a shy giggle. Like the title character in *A Fish Called Wanda*, she was a sucker for a man who could casually switch between languages.

"You're fine just the way you are," she offered. "No need for the silver spoon."

"Merci beaucoup," he replied with a courtly bow before switching back to English. "Seriously though, I need to change. Could you meet me at the bus stop in about twenty minutes?"

Julie nodded.

"Great! See you soon!"

As Tim jogged toward the boys' dormitory, Julie made for the bus stop – having forgotten all about her urgent mission to find Adam and set the record straight. She took care to stick to the walkway, having noticed a few of the prefects chew-out kids who were tossing a frisbee on the perfectly-trimmed grass.

*For a pack of cigarettes, they'd be allowed to run around on the grass with metal cleats.*

Given her own aversion to that smelly and unhealthy vice, she lacked the currency to bribe school officials into looking the other way. Not that she was in the habit of making trouble. But Eden Hall was one of those places with a million obscure little rules, and the enforcement of those rules tended to be selective and arbitrary.

So it did not surprise her to see that the bus circle was packed with students desperate to leave the campus, if only for a few hours. The only reason why there weren't even more kids at the loop was that the upperclassmen could escape in their own cars.

She could hear the rumble of an approaching bus. Standing back from the scrum of students pushing and shoving for an opportunity to board, Julie noticed Larson and Portman alight from the back – away from the ruckus and near her.

"And he's such a friggin' slob!" She heard Portman exclaim.

Larson gave a dead-eyed laugh.

"Yeah, I didn't want to say anything – but your room totally reeks."

"I mean, I got a certain look, ya know. I'm not one of those squeaky-clean trust fund babies..." Portman gestured toward the other students at the loop. "But I've got nothing against basic hygiene either."

"Well I'm sorry that Fulton's let you down," Larson began. "But I'm glad you're ridding yourself of that deadweight. You'll be better off, trust me."

"You're right, bro."
Julie's jaw dropped upon hearing Portman agree to Fulton being 'deadweight.'

What kind of voodoo is Larson working on him?

"I'll go with you when you tell him off," Larson offered to Portman. "I know it'll be difficult. Fulton has manipulated you for so long, you'll need a buddy for moral support."

Besides, I have a Pearl Jam CD to grab, he thought greedily.

"Thanks, bro."

"Hey – look out!" Julie warned before the pair of defensemen could crash into their goalie.

"Oh, hey Jules!" Portman greeted her.

"Dean," Julie acknowledged the Bash Brother with a short nod.

His grin gave way to a worried frown. Julie only invoked his first name when she was upset. Or in one of her mother-hen moods.

What'd I do this time?

"So," Julie the Schoolmarm continued. "You two are friends now, huh?"

"Yeah, babe. This dude's alright!" Portman replied, giving Larson a friendly slap on the back. "Shitty bowler, though. But nobody's perfect."

"That's right," Julie agreed. "Nobody's perfect. If you and Fulton are having problems, you two can always talk to Charlie or me. We'll understand."

"No need, Cat. Dr. Larson over here is the best sounding board there is. You should hit him up some time."

Julie looked up into Larson's eyes and felt her blood turn cold.

"I'll pass."

"Suit yourself, Jules. The two of us have gotta run anyway. We need to go give Fulton his walking papers, right Paul?"

"That's correct," Larson agreed, giving Julie a wafer-thin smile. "So you'll have to excuse us. Enjoy the rest of your day."

Julie felt numb as she watched Portman go off with Larson. She couldn't believe that anyone could actually set the Bash Brothers against each other. They weren't perfect, but they had always been loyalty personified – especially toward each other. And they certainly didn't deserve to have someone like Paul Larson sink his talons into them.

Heh, a Hawk indeed, she mused bitterly.

As Adam emerged from the student parking lot with Scooter and made his way toward the bus loop, he spotted Julie.

She's just standing there – what gives?

His concern and curiosity outweighing any nervousness, Adam approached the denim-clad girl
who appeared to be lost in her own little world. Not at all the hyper-focused goaltender and honors student who never seemed to miss a thing.

"Uh, Julie…are you okay?"

She blinked rapidly, as if snapping out of a trance. Then she took sight of Adam Banks in his teal-and-eggplant Varsity jacket with khaki slacks. He looked more like a hockey coach than a hockey player.

*He's even got a coach's pad!*

Julie giggled at the sight, which only confirmed Adam's suspicion that something was off.

"Julie, what's wrong?"

"Huh? Oh, nothing. I guess I was zoning just now. Sorry about that. What's up, guys?"

"Adam and I grabbed a bite after drills," Scooter explained, brushing his dark bangs away from his face. "He was in full-blown coaching mode at the diner, he even borrowed Coach's dry-erase pad."

Adam looked embarrassed. He imagined that his reputation as a hockey-bot with no personality could only be confirmed if word got out that he walked around with a coach's pad. He jerked up as he felt Julie grasp his forearm.

"Really? That's great!" She beamed, turning toward Adam. "Maybe you could run plays by me sometime?"

He graced her with another one of his rare grins that made her feel weak in the knees.

"You're already the best, Julie. There's nothing I could possibly add to your game. Besides, you didn't really answer my question. Are you sure that you're okay?"

Not wanting to burden Adam with a bit of Bash drama that she hoped would soon pass, Julie offered a half-truth about fretting over her chemistry exam.

"If I was a chemistry exam, I'd be fretting over you," she offered before turning to Scooter. "You were in honors 10th grade chemistry, weren't you?"

"And I'm in AP Chem now," the senior goalie boasted.

"Well look at that, a study partner!" Adam exclaimed. "Scooter and I are done for the day, so he can tutor you if you like."

*Ugh. This day is so not going according to plan.*

"Julie?"

She lit up at the sound of Tim Riley's voice.

"Hey, Tim! You wanted to meet Adam Banks, well here he is," she nodded in the star forward's direction. And Scott Vanderbilt – you probably remember Scooter though, don't you?"

"Oh, hi. I'm Tim Riley," he extended his hand toward Adam, which the latter shook. "It's nice to meet you, Adam. And good to see you again, Scooter."

Before the younger Riley could chat with the pair of Varsity players, the next bus pulled up.
"I'm sorry guys," he spoke up. "But this is our bus."

"That's right!" Julie eagerly confirmed, grateful to get out of an afternoon of chemistry review. "So thanks, but I'm going to have to pass on the tutoring. See you guys!"

With that, Julie turned toward the bus. The movement was quick, but Adam felt a pang of jealousy as he saw Tim's arm usher her forward. To Adam, it was strange how Julie could go from spacy to happy so quickly. After that night when Connie walked in on them, he wasn't sure how he would speak to Julie going forward, but seeing her uncharacteristically dazed had gotten him out of his shell.

Taking an instant disliking to her male companion and assuming the worst, he decided that 'Slick Timmy' must be messing with her.
Bunny Ears

With the start of the new week came Guy relieving Adam from 'Scooter duty,' much to the Varsity goalie's disappointment. He had learned more from play-reading with Adam than he had in nearly 12 years of playing hockey under some of the most exacting coaches in Minnesota. Though the days had been getting shorter, Adam felt like he finally had all the time in the world as he closed his biology textbook on a Monday evening.

Stretching his arms over his head and peering around the dorm room for something to do, his eyes were drawn to the corkboard that overlooked his desk. Unlike most of the Ducks – who used their corkboards entirely for photo collages – Adam had only one picture amid his various to-do lists, semester goals, and inspirational quotes.

It was the infamous 'Bunny Ears.'

Having given him bunny ears while they posed for the cover of the Wheaties box back in the summer of 1995, Julie later gave him the only other surviving copy of that moment in time as a gift for his 15th birthday.

Looking over at Charlie's empty, messy bed, Adam grinned.

I could have Julie all to myself tonight.

Resolved that he was going to man-up and settle the romantic question once and for all, he reached for the phone on his desk and dialed Julie's number. After two rings, it picked up on the other end.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Julie – it's Adam."

"Oh, hey Adam! What's up?"

He grinned again, the enthusiasm in Julie's voice acting as a powerful confidence-builder.

"I'm free tonight," Adam announced. "I was thinking that maybe we could hang out? Charlie's got that dinner with Linda's parents tonight…so…you know. Maybe we could have a movie night over here?"

I did it! I really did it, all by myself. No Charlie or Luis prodding me this time!

"Oh, that sounds nice," her enthusiasm had waned noticeably.

His confidence began to deflate upon hearing her tone.

"I'm actually going out to see a movie with Tim tonight," she continued.

And with that simple, brutal announcement, Adam no longer had any confidence to deflate. There was a brief pause on the line before Julie spoke up again.

"Hey, why don't you come with?" She suggested "We're getting dinner first, so hopefully you'll be ready to go soon."

"Uh…no. Thanks though. I don't want to be a third wheel."
He couldn't believe that Julie had suggested that he tag along on her date with another guy. Having already ripped his heart out, it felt to him like she was keen to stomp on it with as much gusto as possible.

"Aww, you wouldn't be a third wheel," she assured him. "It's just going to be a night out with three friends from Eden Hall Hockey. Besides, Tim is really nice. I think you two would really hit it off."

_Oh, I bet._

"Thanks, but really – it's okay. Anyway, you're about to go out. I shouldn't keep you."

"You know," Julie began, ignoring Adam's move to end the conversation, "Connie doesn't have anything going on tonight. She also has third wheel issues. What if both of you joined us?"

His heartache gave way to laughter at the thought of posing as Connie's date. Attractive and likeable though she was, Connie always felt like such a cousin to Adam. Ordinarily, Julie was quite happy to make Adam laugh; but she was being serious and resented his flippancy.

"Really, Julie? Connie?"

"Yes, really," the goalie huffed. "Just what did you plan on doing with her exactly, anyway?"

"Nothing – I mean, even if I just held her hand the two of us would probably just burst out laughing"

"Well, it's nice to know what you really think about my ideas."

The icy tone in her voice seemed to travel through the receiver and into Adam's bloodstream. It occurred to him that she really wanted him to join them.

_Could it really be just to stomp on my heart?_

Adam now dismissed that possibility. He began to suspect that Julie wanted him around for protection from 'Slick Timmy,' just in case he wanted to go further than she wanted to go. After seeing her in that bizarre state at the bus loop and connecting it to Tim, Adam felt like the younger Riley was bad news.

_I guess she wants me to be her big brother._

"Julie…I'm sorry about laughing at your suggestion just now," he offered. "That was really nice of you to invite me. Of course I'll go. And let's bring Connie. The more, the merrier!"

Though he couldn't see her face, he could tell from the inflection in her voice that she was beaming.

"Great! This is gonna be really fun – see you in fifteen minutes at the loop!"

"Yes, see you in fifteen," Adam agreed before placing the receiver back in the cradle.

"Good news, Connie!" Julie enthused as she got up from her desk. "I got you a date for tonight."

Connie had been lying on top of her bed, propped against the pillows and reading the latest copy of YM, not appearing to hear her roommate.

"I said, I've got you a date for tonight," Julie repeated.
"Huh? Oh, you were serious about that," Connie replied, not looking up from her magazine. "I guess you really don't trust Riley enough to be alone with him, do you?"

"His name is 'Tim,' and I trust him plenty," the goalie insisted. "I just want him to be friends with my friends. This is a good chance for you guys to get to know each other."

"So who's going to be my co-chaperone for tonight? Averman, Goldberg?"

"Banksie."

Connie dropped her magazine and looked directly at her roommate.

"What?"

"Jules, Adam is crazy about you. Do you really think it's a good idea to bring him along while you're out with another guy?"

Julie gave Connie a dismissive look before affecting to laugh.

"Really, Connie? You're still on about that little movie night we had? Look, Adam came over here to give Charlie and Linda a bit of privacy. While we were watching a movie, I invited him onto my bed because his back was bothering him, and I fell asleep before it ended."

"I realize you're sticking to that story, but he had his arm around you."

"Oh for crying out loud, it was the most comfortable position for him! You try lying perfectly straight-armed next to someone on a twin. It's just more comfortable to put an arm around them. I'm only surprised he didn't do it sooner."

"We'll have to agree to disagree, I guess," Connie declared. "But whatever happens with Tim, just be careful not to hurt Adam."

"You know I'd never hurt him – or any of my friends. So are you coming or not?"

"Sure," Connie agreed, rising to her feet. "Banksie could use a friendly face."

Julie winced at the use of her pet name for Adam by someone else, but Connie did not appear to notice. The goalie had actually been awake for much of the time that Adam had held her that night. She could not forget how strong and gentle he felt; or how heavenly he smelled; or the warmth of his chest; or how he even bothered to stay when he could have easily left. But she also believed her own rationalization that she had explained to Connie.

*Just get over it Julie, he's not into you. He can't be…that would be too perfect.*

Adam had already been feeling out of his element by the time he had arrived at the bus loop. Given that Connie wasn't really his 'date,' going to pick her up at the girls' dormitory didn't seem right. But neither did walking ahead of her. Standing alone at the uncharacteristically desolate Eden Hall bus loop, he could hear the sound of female laughter carry in the distance.

Following the sound, he observed Tim make his way toward the bus stop with Connie and Julie each looped on an arm of his.

"Ah, Mr. Banks," the younger Riley called out. "I thought I was going to have these lovely ladies all to myself tonight. Didn't your parents ever explain the importance of meeting a lady at her door?"
Adam glared at Tim. His opposite on JV had gone and played the 'gentleman card' on him – normally Adam's trump card.

"Didn't your parents ever explain the importance of paying your restaurant bill?" He shot back, recalling Rick Riley's shenanigans at the Minnesota Club.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Your brother thought it would be hilarious to leave the Ducks with an $800 restaurant bill last year," Adam explained, drawing a frown from Julie and a smirk from Tim.

"Well, now…if memory serves me, you were on Rick's team last year," the younger Riley replied. "Not me."

"Yeah, well…"

Adam put his next shot back into his holster as Julie flashed a death glare at him.

Connie moved to detach herself from Tim's arm and join Adam, hoping to cool him down. It was obvious to her that Tim grated on Adam, and she knew that given the right circumstances, hot and sudden flashes of temper could burn through the latter's normally-cool exterior.

"Adam, you didn't dye your hair Guy-ger blond for me," she began with an easy smile. "How very disappointing."

Fortunately, the Varsity forward took the joke in the spirit that it was intended.

"You know, they were all out at the drug store," he replied. "All they had in stock was Joker green."

"And you didn't get it?" Connie let out a mock sigh. "You know I'm gaga for green."

"I'll have to remember that when it's Guy's turn to run drills with Scooter."

Julie observed the pair of original Ducks continue to joke and make easy conversation. Watching the ease with which Connie had settled Adam down made her feel a tinge of jealousy. The goalie could only read opposing forwards on the ice. Connie, on the other hand, could read them in real life – and knew exactly the right thing to say to them.

_And was he really serious about dying his hair for Connie?_

She made a mental note to ask Connie if she and Guy were 'official' at the moment.

The bus arrived and the four hockey players got onboard for their double date. Seated three rows behind and to the left of Julie and Tim, Adam could get a good view of the pair from his seat by the aisle. Connie did her best to keep Adam distracted, but his eyes kept drifting toward Julie – who kept on laughing at just about everything Tim said.

Studying the subtle shifts in Adam's facial expressions during the trip, Connie determined that the temper had passed. But the diminishing probability of Adam challenging Tim to pistols at dawn – or however preppy guys fight – was only a small consolation to the kindly brunette, who watched as Adam's heart began to break.

"So…I hear that Mike Modano's on the trade block," she blatantly lied, hoping to draw his attention with a false story about his favorite hockey player.
"Oh?"

He continued staring at Julie and Tim.

"Yep," Connie persisted. "And all the Stars want for him is a bag of peanuts. Literally, a bag of peanuts. You know that expression 'only for a bag of peanuts?' Well they mean it for real this time. The Red Wings think they can win a bidding war by throwing in some cashews as well."

"That's nice."

"Of course, the deal is off if they can't get Mo to walk again," Connie escalated an already-absurd lie to epically fantastic proportions. "Cos, you know. After that shark attack, Modano's been having some mobility issues. I mean, nobody wants to give up good peanuts and cashews only to end up with a paraplegic."

"Yeah."

Connie suppressed a gasp as Adam turned to face her, his glossy sapphire eyes locking into her soft honey browns.

"Do you think she likes him?"

"Well…what kinda hockey girl doesn't like Mike Modano?"

"Connie…"

He made a swift motion with his head toward Julie and Tim, as if to say those two over there. Don't make me try to say it out loud.

"It looks like it, doesn't it?" She offered softly.

"Yeah…yeah, it does."

Connie's sympathetic gaze turned to a hard, indignant frown.

"Julie shouldn't have made you come along."

"No, she definitely should have," Adam dissented. "Now I know for sure."

At the Ruby Tuesday's in the mall, Adam hardly breathed a word. Not that it mattered, as Tim proved quite eager to carry the conversation. The younger Riley regaled the group with wild tales of his freshman year at Blake – where he had transferred at the last minute when the Ducks had moved into Eden Hall.

"Oh dear, just when the Ducks were starting to like you," Julie teased. "Now they're going to find out that you played for Blake. That tie last year was traumatic, man."

"Well, I guess that will just have to be our little secret, right?" He replied with a confident grin.

Looking over at his vanquished rival, Tim decided to show Adam some mercy and engage him in conversation.

"Scooter tells me that your drilling has been a lot of help," the younger Riley declared before taking a sip of Dr. Pepper.

Adam shrugged. Ever since the bus trip he had been feeling fatigued. Exhaustion wasn't far off at
"I'm just doing what Coach wants me to do," he replied. "As for Scooter, he's smart, works hard, and has a good attitude. All of that makes coaching him pretty easy."

Ever since Julie had confirmed that she had never been with Scooter, Adam had found much to like about the Varsity goalie. Though he disliked losing so much of his free time, he found Scooter – a senior who was willing to learn from a sophomore – very easy to work with.

"So you keep in touch with Rick's old teammates?" Adam asked Tim.

"Heh, more than I do with Rick," the younger Riley replied. "It would be easier being his brother if he dropped that God Complex of his. People see me and they dislike me before they even get to know me."

"Like me," Julie interjected with a playful grin. "When we first met in the locker room, I wasn't at all impressed. Then I got to know you," she added with an affectionate pat on Tim's arm, prompting Adam to look down at the meal he had hardly touched.

Glancing at his Rolex, Tim set his napkin down.

"So, ladies…and gentleman," he began. "What movie did you want to see?"

"This isn't really my date," Connie replied. "So I don't feel like it's my call."

Julie twisted her lips in a slightly self-conscious manner.

"I don't actually know what's playing."

Tim looked at Adam.

"Any suggestions?"

"Well, there's that new Kevin Kline movie playing," he replied. "In and Out, I think it's called."

Hearing the name 'Kevin Kline' brought a smile to Julie's lips. A Fish Called Wanda was one of her all-time favorite movies; and the hammy antics of Kevin Kline was the main reason why. She was about to voice her enthusiasm for Adam's suggestion when Tim spoke up.

"A movie about a gay professor in the closet? Bor-ing. Why don't we see The Peacemaker? I know the people at the theater, so the R-rating won't be a problem for us getting in."

"Sounds settled then," Adam deadpanned.

"Good man," Tim replied with a Rick Rileyesque smile before moving to get up. "Well, the cinema awaits!"

---

Adam and Tim walked the girls to the front entrance of their dorm building. The crispness of the autumn combined with the darkness of the night made the return journey a frigid endeavor. Adam had chivalrously loaned his Varsity jacket to Connie to keep her warm, and Tim loaned his suede jacket to Julie – while pulling her in and walking with his arm around her for good measure.

As Connie returned Adam's jacket, he gave her a mock-salute in reply, drawing a giggle. Tim went for the more conventional farewell by leaning in and giving Julie a kiss on the cheek.
"I had a wonderful time tonight, Tim," she offered.

"The pleasure was all mine," he replied – cool as a cucumber, his smile flawless.

Connie gave Adam a sympathetic look; he replied with a half-hearted smile.

He knew that he had never wanted to fall asleep any more than he did at that moment. As far as wanting to wake up afterwards, he was less certain.

With the goodbyes out of the way and the girls safely inside their warm dormitory, Adam and Tim walked across the near-deserted courtyard to the boys' dorm in perfect silence. Someone was smoking like a chimney, and it made Adam's head spin.

"Steady now," Tim linked his arm into Adam's to keep the latter upright.

"Thanks," Adam replied once indoors and able to keep his balance.

"Don't mention it."

The pair of patrician forwards continued to walk in silence as they made their way up the stairs to their rooms.

"So that was some movie, eh?" Tim asked.

"There certainly were plenty of explosions."

"I know, right!" The younger Riley enthused as they walked down the empty hallway. "We really should do this again sometime. Only we need to find you a proper date first."

Adam stopped, prompting Tim to stop.

"Not that there's anything wrong with Connie," Tim hastened to add. "No, she's great! I just think it would be more fun if…"

"This is my room, Tim. Goodnight."

"Oh, yes of course. Goodnight, Adam."

Adam made his way into the dark dorm room – Charlie had returned and was sound asleep. The Varsity forward flicked on his desk lamp and looked up at the corkboard. Pulling out the pushpin that held 'Bunny Ears' in place, he removed the photograph and placed it in the bottom of a drawer – underneath several textbooks.

Well, at least I know for sure.

After taking off his wingtips, he turned off the light, and went over to his bed. Sliding under the sheets, he went to sleep in his gray cashmere sweater and khaki slacks.
Mid-October had finally arrived, and with it, the start of hockey season. After a month and a half of practices and a couple of exhibition games, the JV Ducks were about to play for real stakes. Having stunned the hockey-crazed student body with their upset win over Varsity the previous fall, JV now had expectations to live up to; and at a prep school that boasted elite teams for a wide range of sports, there was no shortage of intra-school competition for prestige.

The loss of offensive explosiveness in the form of Adam, Guy, and even Fulton had become apparent during the previous six weeks; but the JV locker room brimmed with excitement as the Ducks suited-up and got ready to face the visiting Huskies from Minneapolis North. Ryan O'Neill, the new Guy Germaine, was particularly amped-up.

After quaffing a liter's worth of Surge, the excitable ginger began pounding his fists against his locker while screaming "let's go!"

Charlie took the half-full bottle and discretely tucked it into his locker, worried that his new linemate would explode if given any additional stimulant.

Larson gave the copper-haired forward a look that mixed mild amusement with even milder sympathy. Though the defenseman lacked Ryan's affinity for Surge, he had his own vice.

"I could really go for a long, cool drag right now."

As the ex-Hawk lusted after his post-game smokes, Portman strolled in.

"Sup, bro?"

Larson looked up at his new pet. Portman had abandoned his Bash Brother bandanas and had taken to slicking his dark hair back in a pompadour – just like the former Hawk.

"Cutting it a bit close, aren't we?" Larson asked, indicating the clock on the wall with his head.

"Yeah…sorry, man. I got held-up. Fulton was looking for more of his stuff again. I think he's got everything now. If not, too bad. I told him not to come back to the dorm."

"Good," Larson offered with an approving smile. "You can't expect to live your own life if you can't have your own space. And we both know how much Fulton intruded on yours. Anyway, suit up and pull up a stool. We have game strategy to go over."

"Roger, Dodger!"

Portman left Larson – who still occupied a locker away from the others – and headed for his own. Julie was already suited-up and had taken a seat on the bench in front of it. She was going through her pre-game ritual of listening to Bon Jovi's *Lvin' On a Prayer* when she looked up and saw Portman approach.

Removing her headphones, the goalie flashed a wry grin at the defenseman.

"You just step off a time machine from the '50s or something?" She asked, noting Portman's new – and decidedly retro – hairdo.

"You mock the do, but I'll have you know it got me three new digits."
"911?"

"No!" He shot back. "Three chicks – I mean broads – from the cheerleading team."

Julie rolled her eyes. The now-former Bash Brother seemed to think that his '50s hair and '50s vocabulary made him appear more sophisticated. Portman had always seemed like a clownish figure to her, but this was all a bit much. Putting her headphones back on, she returned to her Bon Jovi-centered meditations.

Several minutes later, Portman had suited-up and joined Larson over at the ex-Hawk's locker. As the chorus played, Julie jumped as she felt a hand grasp her shoulder. But her surprised consternation gave way to happiness as she discovered the source.

"Hey, Tim!"

"What's up?" He asked, removing his hand and taking a seat next to her on the bench.

"Oh, just the pregame ritual. It's amazing how Bon Jovi can fire me up and calm me down at the same time."

"You nervous at all?"

"Maybe a little…okay, a lot," she confessed. "The Huskies have a lockdown defense, and we've lost half our scoring power. I feel like I'm going to have to do a headstand if we're going to win this thing."

Tim waved a dismissive hand.

"Oh, pisshaw. You'll do fine, and you won't be alone. After all, Ducks fly together."

Julie winced upon hearing the team's old motto. Given the circumstances, it sounded rather contrived. Adam, Fulton and Guy were on Varsity and hardly ever around; the Bash Brothers now despised each other; and Julie could not shake a pervasive feeling of unease about having Larson defend her zone. Thinking about her new defenseman of questionable loyalty, she couldn't help thinking about her old defenseman of unimpeachable loyalty.

He must be terribly lonely, she thought with a frown.

Resolving to visit Fulton after the game, Julie felt a strong arm wrap around her shoulders and pull her in.

"Hey now," Tim began. "No need to look so glum. After we take care of business against the Huskies, let's do something – anything you want."

She looked up at the handsome new center. They had been out a few times since the double date, but she had only just noticed the paleness of Tim's blue eyes. Handsome though they were, nothing could compare to the deep sapphire of Adam's orbs.

"What if I want to hang out with Fulton?" Julie asked.

"Heh, I'd say that he could use the company," Tim replied. "I could go with you if you like. Your call though."

"Thanks," she replied with a grateful smile. "I think it'd be better if I went alone though."

"Fair enough," Tim agreed, removing his arm.
"Alright team!" Orion called out, striding to the center of the locker room.

He had abandoned his ubiquitous NHLPA jacket and black sweatpants for more formal gameday attire. Dressed in a navy blazer, a white dress shirt adorned with a teal Duck necktie, and khaki slacks, the retired hockey player resembled a GQ model.

"Bring it in!" He ordered his players, who duly grouped around him.

Orion's speech followed his traditional formula: playing-up his team’s opponents while urging his players to be smart, before wrapping it up with a fiery stinger.

"Those public school boys think you're a bunch of wimpy preps who can't play blue collar hockey…"

"Who are they callin' preppy?!" Russ demanded.

Several of his teammates chirped with indignant agreement.

"Well, show them what you can do then," Orion exhorted his players before extending a flat hand. "Now bring it in…quack, quack, quack…"

"QUACK, QUACK, QUACK, QUACK…"

The quacking continued as JV lined-up and hit the ice. They were greeted with a packed home crowd who quacked right back at them while the visiting Huskies stood quietly in their all-black uniforms – affecting cool indifference to the team in white and eggplant.

After both teams warmed-up on opposite ends of the ice, they respectfully stood for the National Anthem before leaving their first lines on the ice – who wasted no time in taking up their positions ahead of the opening faceoff.

With the starting forwards consisting of Tim at center, and Charlie and Ryan on the wings, Larson and Portman rounded out the first line on defense. Stationed between the pipes, Julie looked over the five skaters responsible for scoring and keeping the puck away from her.

*Most of them are the same size as the other team... for once*, she noted happily.

Though she didn't trust Larson, the fact that one of her defensemen towered above all the other skaters gave her a feeling of security that came as a genuine surprise to her. Looking beyond the Ducks' zone, Julie fixed her gaze onto center ice. Then, the puck dropped.

Tim took possession of the puck and passed it to Charlie. The Huskies wasted no time living up to their defense-first reputation by congregating around their net and clogging up the scoring lanes, forcing the Duck forwards to pass it back and forth – with none of them able to get in a good position for a shot on goal.

This back and forth continued for some time before a Husky forward anticipated the pass to Ryan and intercepted it.

He fired-up the jets and took off in Julie's direction with Ryan furiously chasing after him. Before the Husky could get a shot off, he was greeted with a surprise hip-check, courtesy of the speedy ginger before losing control of the puck.

Charlie recovered it and passed to Tim, who took off and fired a slap-shot before the Huskies could catch up and get in position. The puck sailed into the top left corner of the net, and the crowd
at Eden Hall Arena erupted as the siren and red strobe lights went off.

Julie's fear of needing to do a headstand proved unfounded, as Larson and Portman ruthlessly – but cleanly – harassed any Husky who dared to cross the Duck blue line. If the Ducks had found shooting difficult, the Huskies found it impossible. Despite frequent Husky activity in the Ducks' zone, Julie struggled to stay focused, as the puck seldom came her way.

Even the Duck forwards proved formidable on defense, with Charlie having re-doubled his efforts to become a two-way player, and Ryan chipping away at his opposite with a manic energy that could not be replicated. Tim proved to be more than just a pretty face; he had sent his opposite into the boards several times with a ferocity that his delicate features belied.

As the game progressed, it was actually the Duck second line that opened things up, with Connie and Dwayne scoring goals and Ken getting both assists, having drawn double teams with his baffling footwork.

The third period began with the Huskies desperate to get something going on offense and a heightened sense of aggression. Unfortunately for the Ducks, the refs appeared to have swallowed their whistles as the Huskies shamelessly elbowed, hooked, and boarded.

Portman was so furious with the lax officiating that he was about to give one of the men in stripes a piece of his mind when Larson put a hand on his shoulder and stopped him. *Maybe he has some redeeming qualities*, Julie thought, realizing that the former Hawk had prevented the volatile Portman from getting ejected.

But all of the dirty play from Minneapolis North seemed to make them sloppy, and the formerly-disciplined squad missed a few golden scoring opportunities while giving up another goal to Tim, with Ryan on the assist. The final siren roared as the third period clock ticked down to zero.

The Ducks had triumphed 4-0.

Electricity coursed through the JV locker room as the Ducks celebrated their victory. Though he hated to see his Surge go to waste, Ryan sacrificed some of his cherished supply so his teammates could enjoy a mock-champagne shower.

Orion was so giddy at his team's unexpected 'goose egg' that he decided to look the other way on this messy celebration – *just this once*, he resolved. After admitting to his players that they scored three more goals than he was expecting, his eyes were drawn to the locker room's open door.

"It looks like you guys are so good that you even have your own fan club," he declared before beckoning the familiar visitor to enter.

"Guy-ger!" Charlie greeted his former teammate with a man-hug.

Soon, the Varsity forward was engulfed by the JV team. After all the greetings and hugs died down, Charlie spoke up again.

"Where's Adam and Fulton?"

"Don't worry, they were with me in the stands the whole game cheering you on," Guy assured his old teammates before glancing at Portman. "But Fulton didn't think it was a good idea for him to come here. Adam's keeping him company right now. I think they went back to his house."

Happy that Fulton wasn't alone, Julie smiled before Guy continued.
Anyway, it was awesome seeing you guys again – and congrats on the win. Now do it again in a few days! Quack, Quack, Quack…"

"QUACK, QUACK, QUACK, QUACK!"

"Hey now, that's my job," Orion teased his former player as the quacking died down.

"Sorry," Guy replied. "But you gotta admit, the motivational part of coaching is pretty fun."

"But all the game tape, scouting, and strategizing is boring?"

"You said it, not me."

Orion laughed genially as he patted Guy on the shoulder.

"Go on, get outta here. But thanks for visiting."

"There's just one more thing, Coach."

"Oh?"

"Just a bit of boyfriend duty, nothing that you'd find interesting."

Orion chortled.

"Go on then, Mister Germaine."

Leaving the JV coach, Guy approached Connie – who had emerged from the private changing area she shared with Julie and was all ready to go.

"Hey, sweetie," the Varsity forward greeted the brunette with a kiss on the cheek. "Wanna go for a walk?"

"Wanna carry my bag?" Connie asked, handing the heavy hockey bag over to Guy before he could respond.

"Heh, nothing would make me happier."

As the couple departed, Julie made her way over to Charlie.

"Hey, Cat!" He greeted her. "Nice goose egg!"

The goalie chuckled. It amazed her how in just a few short months Charlie had gone from utterly despising Coach Orion to adopting his vocabulary.

"Thanks, Charlie – nice assist. Hey, this is gonna sound weird, but do you have Fulton's home phone number?"

"Uh, yeah…it's in the back of my planner. Just give me a minute."

After rifling through his things, he found what he was looking for and rattled the number off for Julie, who scribbled it into her pocket-sized phonebook.

"Why do you need his number…if that's not too much of a personal question?"

"I just want to see how he's doing," she explained. "It can't be easy, this beef with Portman."
"Yeah…we should all be a little nicer to Fulton now," Charlie agreed. "So, see you at Mickey's for the celebration? Mom can't deny a free lunch to winners!"

Julie shook her head.

"No, I think I'll head out to Edina. Guy said that Fulton is over at Adam's, so that's where I'll be. But enjoy your celebration, you definitely earned it!"

As Julie took her leave, Larson flashed an evil grin.

Despite her hoodie, Connie shivered in the brisk mid-October weather as she followed Guy toward Lake Eden. Setting the hockey bag down, he took off his jacket and put it over her shoulders once they stopped near the shoreline of the small campus lake. It was cold, but the sun was out and the trees surrounding the lake were magnificent shades of amber and scarlet.

"So, what's up?" Connie knew that her boyfriend had a weakness for romantic settings, even for discussing the most banal things. For all she knew, Guy was about to announce what he ate for breakfast that morning.

"Do me a favor and reach into my left coat pocket."

She did as instructed and felt an ovular box. Removing it from the pocket, she found it rather clumsily wrapped in green tissue paper.

Ah, the Guy-ger special.

Having been on and off with him for so long, Connie could recognize the Varsity forward's sloppy giftwrapping from a mile away.

"You're three days early," she declared with a smile, remembering that her birthday was coming up.

Guy grinned back.

"I know, but I couldn't help myself."

Connie removed the wrapping paper, taking care not to litter by putting it in one of Guy's jacket pockets. Upon opening the black velvet box, she discovered a silver necklace with an opal orb.

"Oh Guy," she gasped. "It's gorgeous!"

"May I do the honors?"

She nodded, handing over the box.

He removed the necklace and carefully set the box down on the ground, before gently wrapping Connie's birthstone around her neck and securing the clasp.

"Ah, fits like a dream," she declared as she released her hair.

Pulling her into his warm embrace, Guy planted a tender kiss on the lips of the girl who had haunted his dreams since their days on D5.

But as a cold wind blew in from the lake, Connie pulled away from him.

"Could we maybe do this some place more comfortable?" She suggested.
He smiled and nodded.

"The dorms should be perfect. I imagine Charlie's taken the team to celebrate on the back of his mom at Mickey's."

Connie giggled at the truth of that and nodded.

"Ok, let's go," she reached her hand out for Guy to hold, which he instinctively did as they began to make their way back indoors.

The jubilant Ducks plus Linda crammed into the tiny diner car that Charlie's mother worked at. Now that the school year was upon the team, they took most of their meals in the campus dining hall; but their opening day goose egg was a special occasion that demanded a special celebration, so they piled into their old haunt in St. Paul.

As the boisterous group got settled, Casey sent a massive order to the kitchen before observing Charlie and Linda side-by-side in a booth. Noticing how much her son had matured during the past year, she attributed much of it to Linda's stabilizing influence. She was hopeful that this new school year would see a lot less drama than the previous one.

After the team received their drinks, Ken looked around and noticed that both girl Ducks were missing. He knew that Connie was out with Guy, but Julie's absence was a mystery.

"Where's Cat?" He asked to no one in particular.

But given that he was in Charlie's booth, the Captain was expected to answer.

"She's just taking care of a few things," Charlie explained, choosing his words carefully to avoid the Bash Brother hornet nest.

"Yeah, she's taking care of a few Varsity guys," Larson spoke up.

Given that the ex-Hawk seldom spoke to any Duck aside from Portman, his words drew the immediate attention of the entire team.

Charlie glared at the enigmatic newbie before responding.

"Yes, she's visiting Fulton and Adam right now. Like I said, it's no big deal. They're all our friends. And if I had it my way, they'd all be here right now."

"Speak for yourself, Captain." Portman practically spat out Charlie's title. "Fulton's a slippery traitor; and if you think he won't try to turn our goalie against us, think again."

Larson pointedly nodded in agreement, sensing a possible wedge between Charlie and the rest of the Ducks.

Though Varsity and JV were not in an official state of war, they lacked an official peace treaty. Tension between the teams had remained even after the graduation of Rick Riley and his subsequent enrollment at the University of Michigan.

The Ducks argued amongst themselves whether or not Julie's presence amongst Varsity players was a big deal. Given his consistent history as a Duck from their D5 days, JV was more willing to give Guy – and by extension Connie – the benefit of the doubt. But Adam had multiple past allegiances. And Portman was convinced that Fulton was a dangerous manipulator. And Julie was
now fraternizing with both of them.

Charlie's temper continued to fray as the team indulged in this ridiculous and paranoid debate before he could finally take no more.

"Julie is a good teammate and a better friend – and I'm not going to hear another word against her, alright? We beat the Huskies! We should be celebrating, not gossiping behind each other's backs."

"Whatever, dude," Portman shot back. "If Gaffney likes Varsity guys more than she likes us, I'll say whatever I want about her."

Linda grasped Charlie's hand beneath the table as his teeth gritted.

"I think you should take a walk, Dean."

"You know what? I agree."

Portman slid out of his booth and stomped out of the diner with Larson in tow, the ex-Hawk grateful for the opportunity to finally light-up.

*And support my good friend, of course.*

With the first line defensemen having stormed out, the remaining Ducks were awkwardly quiet for what felt like eternity. Eventually, Ryan broke the silence by teasing his linemate.

"That was really sweet of Charlie sticking up for your woman like that, Tim. You didn't even have to say a thing!"

But Riley the Younger did not appreciate the ribbing.

"Whatever," he declared, rising to his feet. "I've lost my appetite anyway."

Shortly after Tim's departure, Casey and two other waitresses brought out platters full of burgers, hot dogs, club sandwiches, French fries, and other goodies. But as she distributed the plates, she noticed that three Ducks were missing. Looking over at Charlie – who was fuming in a corner booth – Casey let out an unhappy sigh.

*And I thought this year was gonna be easier.*

Julie made her way up the long driveway to Adam's house in Edina. Looking over the expansive and leaf-covered front lawn, she noticed the boy that she remembered as Eric – Adam's younger brother – raking leaves.

*Poor boy has his work cut out for him.*

She walked over to greet the 13-year old, and as she got closer, the familial resemblance between the Banks boys was impossible to miss. Although Eric was a good bit shorter, had a rounder face, and a bit of baby fat, the sandy hair and sapphire eyes practically screamed 'Adam.'

"Hey, Eric!"

The boy looked up with a start.

*Even his reactions are Adamesque,* she thought with a surge of affection for the boy who reminded her so much of her longtime crush.
"Remember me?" She asked. "I'm Julie, a friend of Adam's."

Stretching his sore back, he looked up at his visitor and studied her face.

"Yes...I remember you. You're the one everyone calls 'Cat Lady'."

"Heh, yep. That's me! Why are you raking anyway? I figured your parents would hire landscapers for that sort of thing."

Eric looked down with a bit of embarrassment.

"Normally they do. But I got a B on a math test, so Father says that I should get used to manual labor if I keep getting marks like that."

Julie wanted to reach out and hug the boy, but thought better of it.

"Oh," she felt stupid for not knowing what else to say. "Um, can I go in and visit Adam?"

"You should ring the bell," Eric advised. "Father doesn't like it when we invite people in without checking with him first."

"Right," Julie replied, unsure if she was up to seeing the formidable Philip Banks. "Well, I shouldn't keep you occupied. Keep your chin up, Eric. Your dad wants the best for you, even if he has weird ways of showing it."

The boy smiled shyly before returning to his raking.

Julie took a deep breath before making her way to the front door. She had heard all sorts of Duck stories about Philip's harsh and demanding nature; and he wasn't exactly a barrel of laughs during the pool party when his house was taken over by a pack of rowdy teenagers. The only other time she had met him was when he promised a new Range Rover for Adam's birthday in return for making the dean's list.

He seemed nice on that occasion.

*But who knows?*

Taking another deep breath, she rang the doorbell – unsure of who exactly she was about to deal with.

A minute or two later, the door opened to reveal a tall, trim man in pleated charcoal slacks and a pale blue dress shirt open at the collar. Julie could see where the Banks boys got their eyes, but the rest of Philip's sharp-featured face combined with his thinning brown hair gave him a far less inviting appearance than his sons possessed.

He looked down at Julie, and upon recognizing the star goalie, his stern countenance softened into something that appeared smile-like.

"Julie? Julie Gaffney?"

She nodded, unable to find her voice.

"Come in, please," he opened the door wider to allow her in. "Here to see Adam, I presume?"

Julie nodded again.
"Well, right this way," he motioned her to follow. "You know, it's a real disgrace that dinosaur Wilson decided not to have you on Varsity. I'll have you know that I made my displeasure known to the Board of Trustees at Eden Hall. He could be out by the end of this year if they fall short," Philip added with a grin, relishing the opportunity to show off his influence.

"Umm…thanks."

"No need to thank me, young lady. I still remember that save you made against Iceland. And how you shutout Varsity last year. If Wilson can't recognize young talent when it's right under his nose, then he's in the wrong business."

Philip opened the door leading down into the basement.

"Adam and Fulton are down there," he announced. "I'm sure they'll be pleased to see you."

And with that, the formidable Philip Banks gave a surprisingly affable smile before taking his leave.

"Um…thanks?" A stunned Julie said to the departing figure.

But she got it together enough to make her way down the stairs, where she could hear the clanking of billiard balls.

Adam let out a bitter chuckle as he watched Fulton sink yet another one.

"And I thought Charlie was just really bad at pool."

"Nope," the defenseman grinned. "I'm just really good."

"Hey guys!" Julie called out with a smile.

"Cat Lady!"

Fulton dropped his pool cue and rushed toward Julie, lifting her off the ground and sweeping her into a giant bear hug.

"I haven't seen you in like…forever," he declared, setting her back down.

"Yeah, these team scheduling conflicts suck; but that's really no excuse. I'm sorry for not being around more, Fulton."

"Yeah, I could have done better too," he offered before turning toward Adam. "Uh, Banks? Aren't you gonna come over and say hi?"

Adam, who had not seen Julie since the awkward double date two weeks earlier, had been standing by the pool table in stunned silence. Not having her around made the already strong effect she had on him even more powerful. He wiped the goofy grin off his face with some effort and tried to appear cool.

"I'm coming, hold your horses," he replied, setting his cue down.

As he approached Julie, he extended his hand for her to shake.

The goalie looked at it like a bizarre object.

"You dork," she declared affectionately before pulling him in for a hug.
The hug was a good bit closer and longer than either of them realized, and was only broken up when Fulton began to make mock kissing noises.

"Honestly Fulton, you're worse than Connie," Julie declared, affecting to be annoyed.

The gentle giant shrugged.

"I'm not tellin' you guys to fight it."

The goalie gave her erstwhile defenseman a hard slap on his arm.

"Okay, okay!" Fulton raised his hands in surrender. "Point taken. So what do you wanna do?"

Julie reached into her bag and pulled out a video cassette with the title *A Fish Called Wanda* on its sleeve.

"I remember your movie suggestion from the other night, Adam," she began. "I think you'd get a kick out of this. So would you, Fulton."

Adam had been trying his best to forget about that double date. Not having old Bunny Ears around to mock him had definitely helped. But he was delighted that Julie had remembered his suggestion and had thought to do something with it.

"I'm sure we'll like it," he offered. "Let me just make some popcorn, then we can set up the VCR."

"Later Banks, Jules," Fulton said goodbye as he rose from his seat on the bus. "And thanks," he added as he was about to get off.

"Don't mention it," Adam replied. "That's what friends are for."

Fulton left and the bus rolled out of the stop near his neighborhood in Stillwater, bound for Eden Hall. As the bus rumbled through the quiet evening, Adam racked his brain trying to figure out what Portman could possibly have against his former Bash Brother.

"I don't get it," he declared. "Fulton is a big teddy bear. How Portman or anyone can hold a grudge against him — much less believe he's a bad influence, I don't know."

"I don't know either," Julie replied. "But I bet Paul Larson has something to do with it."

Adam frowned at the mention of his former Hawk teammate.

"That wouldn't surprise me. He has his own idea of loyalty — it only counts when it's directed toward himself. What's the value of a few friendships if they get in the way of what he wants?"

"But what could he want? Is there some big prize he's after, or is he just doing this for fun?"

Adam shrugged.

"I don't know. What I *do* know is that Larson is weirdly observant about everything. Always has been. I'm sure he's noticed that you don't like him. And if he has the chance, he *will* try to turn the Ducks against you."

Julie didn't know whether to laugh at the absurdity or cry at the possibility of that happening. Her instinct told her that it was ridiculous; but Adam knew Larson well, and he sounded quite sure of himself.
"I'll understand if you keep your distance from me," he quietly announced, looking down at his lap. "It's better not to give Larson anything to work with."

His soft voice ringed with concern, and Julie felt the weight of all of Adam's worries as she gripped his hand.

"You're not getting rid of me that easily, Banksie."

Adam looked up and saw the sparkle in the emerald eyes that he adored. Unlike most girls at Eden Hall, Julie was beautiful in a totally unaffected way, with her naturally blonde hair, flawless skin, generous smile, and athletic figure that her modest clothing choices mostly kept to herself. But more than her looks, her kindness, dedication, loyalty and gutsiness made her the most amazing girl he had ever known.

But she's taken.

Remembering her apparent connection with Tim, Adam withdrew his hand. Though he insisted on walking Julie to the front door of her building, the goalie had detected an aloofness from the forward that had been absent the entire afternoon. As she watched his long figure disappear across the courtyard to the boys' dormitory, Julie sighed.

Why does he always pull away from me?
The Varsity team brooded in their locker room as they prepared to take on the visiting Blake Bears. Having lost their road opener to Ridgewood Academy – a school that Varsity trounced 9-1 the previous year – the team was in a foul mood. Adam was alone in scoring that game, though his hat trick came at a price: McGill's accusations of puck-hogging on created a great deal of ill-will for the star center; this combined with 'losing' Julie had left Adam feeling isolated like never before.

The bus ride back to Eden Hall had been an ugly one, as the recriminations flew back and forth. Coach Wilson prized aggression in his players, which led to tension during good times and civil war during the bad.

Having returned to their home ice, Adam hoped that Varsity could rally and direct their anger toward the Bears. Failing that, Varsity would only have themselves to beat-up on. And Adam was beginning to get used to that – to the point where part of him actually looked forward to hitting back.

*If it's a knuckle sandwich they're craving, I won't let them starve.*

Maybe it was his Hawk roots, maybe it was his isolation. Or maybe it was a bit of both. But Adam had re-discovered the 'joy' of a beat-down when it was directed at a deserving target, his Duck-induced pacifism having dissolved in the warlike milieu of Varsity.

"Alright, Ladies," Wilson called out, moving to the center of the locker room. "Bring it in and take a knee – if you're not afraid of making your skirts ride up, that is."

After that meltdown against lowly Ridgewood, the Varsity coach was feeling the heat from the Trustees. Though his rhetoric was seldom lofty, it grew even coarser after that loss.

The team gathered and took a knee around their coach.

"Blake's got a center who's a scoring machine," Wilson announced. "So Banks, we're gonna need a little less flash from you today, and a lot more grit. Think defense!"

After being the lone scorer the previous game, Adam resented his contribution being derided as 'flash,' but he nodded in acceptance. He had learned not to challenge his coach. After privately seeking Wilson out after practice one day to discuss a disagreement over strategy, a furious Adam stomped out of the coaches' office when the old man accused him of having 'too much sand in [his] vagina.'

Wilson continued singling out various players for his mixture of instruction and reproach.

"And Henderson, let me do the coaching. You just stick to your own assignments."

The Varsity captain had drifted beyond the blue line several times to bark instructions at the forwards during the Ridgewood loss – and had found himself offside quite a bit.

"Yes, Coach," Henderson respectfully agreed. "I shall leave the instructing to you."

*Dey wouldn't-uh needed da talk if dey weren't such dumb mooks,* he added internally.

"And Vanderbilt," Wilson continued. "You're finally slowing down, which is a good thing, but you're still too jumpy. When the other team is about to take a shot, just pause for one second before..."
you make your move. Got it?"

"Got it, Coach."

After imparting a few more words of personalized wisdom, Wilson exhorted his players to 'kick some ass,' to which they roared back a loud 'YEAH!'

Though their uniforms bore the name and colors of the Mighty Ducks, quacking was prohibited in the Wilson regime.

As the team lined-up and began to move out, McGill lingered just long enough to wedge a textbook into the doorframe of the locker room before departing. Once Varsity was out of sight, Larson emerged from the shadows and crept into the deserted locker room with a can of shaving cream in hand.

The white-and-eggplant Varsity first line hit the ice against the all-blue Blake Bears. Varsity's new starting line consisted of Adam at center, McGill and Guy on the wings, and Henderson and Cole on defense.

Adam met his infamous Blake opposite at center ice, anticipating the faceoff. The Blake center won possession of the puck and eluded Adam with a spin move. He took off and sailed a pass ahead to one of his wings, who fired a pass back to the center – who maintained separation from Adam. The center was about to take a shot when Cole extended his stick and tripped him. The super senior defenseman was powerful and intimidating, but lacked quickness, and often resorted to hooking.

"Two minutes, hooking. White number 78," a ref announced before ushering the big blond ox into the penalty box.

The Bears began their power play inside the Varsity zone with a faceoff. This time, McGill took the faceoff against an opposing wing. The Bear won it and passed to his center, who blew right by Adam and took a shot.

The crowd at Eden Hall Arena collectively groaned as the puck sailed in past Scooter.

"Defense, Banks, defense!" Wilson roared from the Varsity bench.

Embarrassed, Adam looked over to Scooter.

"Sorry, man."

"Don't worry about it, Adam. Get 'em next time."

Scooter saw his own tendency toward self-flagellation in Adam, and was quick to offer a bit of an encouragement.

The game resumed with Varsity back to full strength. Adam won the faceoff and broke away from the Blake center with some shifty footwork. He bore down on the Blake goal and faked a shot, passing the puck back to Guy who sent it flying into the net.

The home crowd roared as Varsity tied it up 1-1.

Satisfied with the play of his first line, Wilson rewarded them with a breather. The second line made their way onto the ice, where the temperamental squad took out their frustration on the Blake Bears. Varsity pounded the Bears with hard checks into the boards, and mauled anyone unfortunate
enough to possess the puck.

Fulton intercepted a pass and bore down on the Blake goal like a freight train. He then put on the brakes and fired one of his famous slap-shots. It sounded like a cannon report, and the menacing speed of the puck caused the Blake goalie to flinch; throwing up his glove, he hoped for the best.

The puck whizzed past his head, and Varsity took the 2-1 lead.

Unfortunately for Varsity, an overzealous forward on the second line got penalized for elbowing – granting Blake another power play. Again, the Bears capitalized on their man-advantage and tied the game at 2 apiece.

Varsity and Blake fought like cats and dogs for the remainder of regulation, with neither side giving up a goal and both sides sending players to the penalty box.

Sudden-death overtime came, with Blake winning the faceoff and firing the puck all over the Varsity zone, hoping to optimize their position for a score.

They were a bit too loose with the puck, however, and Adam took off on a fast break after stealing it. One-on-one with the Blake goalie, and he had gotten goals in this situation a thousand times before. But as he was about to take the game-winning shot, he hesitated. *Less flash, more grit,* he remembered Wilson telling him in the locker room.

McGill had caught up and Adam passed to the former Hawk after faking a shot. McGill fired, but the puck went wide of the net.

*Damn it,* Adam cursed.

The Bears recovered the puck and brought it back to the Varsity zone. The Varsity defense could not keep up with the Blake attack, and Scooter's nerves seized-up when he realized that he was the only thing standing between his team's first win and a possible OT loss.

A Blake forward fired a shot on goal, and Scooter dove too soon, allowing the game-losing puck to sail in.

Another collective groan from the bleachers.

As the teams lined-up to shake hands, the home crowd at Eden Hall Arena deserted the stands with a swiftness that stunned Fulton.

*No one likes a loser.*

Though the veteran Duck was unhappy about leaving his team, part of him felt that he would win greater acceptance at the school as result of being on its prestigious Varsity hockey team. But the squad was winless, and the fans were already looking for better things to do with their time.

Adam braced himself for yet another round of finger-pointing and possible fist fights. He had reached the point where he feared Varsity fists less than his own increasing pleasure at inflicting pain on his teammates. There was something deeply satisfying about punching an obnoxious, aggressive loudmouth in the jaw.

But part of him knew that it was wrong for him to enjoy it.

Wilson unlocked the locker room door before turning and going into his own office. He planned on letting it rip on his winless team, but figured that he could maximize the effect of his words by
making his players wait in trepidation first.

As the players entered, they could hear the sound of running water.

Guy looked over to the showers and saw a large pile of Varsity street clothes getting soaked under the shower heads. On the opposite wall, the words 'Varsity Sucks' were written in shaving cream.

Cole recognized the prank they inflicted on JV the previous year being turned on them.

"Ducks," he snarled.

Henderson recalled the JV/Varsity prank war from the year before. At the time, he thought it was a moronic waste of time. But he went along with it out of loyalty to Riley. Now Varsity captain himself, he had no interest in taking his team to war with JV – he figured that there were more efficient ways of lording it over their rivals.

And pranking demanded a creativity and a subtlety that the blustering defenseman lacked.

But now things had changed.

JV had appeared to fire the first shot, and Henderson saw an opportunity to unite his deeply-divided team against a common enemy.

"A'ite," he spoke up. "Doze fuckin' mooks want a war, so we'll give 'em one."

The majority of his teammates roared their enthusiastic agreement while Adam, Fulton, and Guy exchanged nervous glances.

An amused Averman looked on as Ryan went about his pre-meal ritual of sucking on Warhead candies while swishing around a mouthful of Surge. The D5er enjoyed the fact that he was no longer the weirdest person on the Ducks, as it made him the butt of far fewer jokes at lunch. Charlie, Linda, Julie, Connie, Goldberg, Russ, Kenny and Dwayne also watched the little show the first line forward put on.

Noticing that he was being watched, Ryan looked up after he swallowed the candy-and-pop cocktail.

"What? It's the only way to make the food here not suck."

The copper-haired forward didn't give anyone a chance to respond before he furiously tore into his baked chicken and mashed potatoes, not wanting to lose the sweet flavor lining that he had plied his taste buds with.

"Hey guys."

A small chorus of 'hey, Tim' greeted the JV center as he took his seat next to Julie in the campus dining hall. His mint blue eyes widened at the sight of Ryan's clean plate; the team had only just sat down and were nowhere near done with their meals. All that had remained of his linemate's were the bones from the chicken.

"Geez, Ryan," Tim began. "Did you even taste any of it?"

"As a matter of fact I did," the ginger forward replied with an air of faux dignity. "The chicken had a sour beginning, followed by a lemony development, and a vanilla finish. As did the potatoes, only with a creamier texture."
"Fair enough," Tim chortled. "You're quiet the gourmet."

Looking around at his teammates, Tim cast a worried and apologetic glance. The confident forward looked a lot like the nervous brother of Rick Riley who had introduced himself to a plainly hostile Duck team. Having only just secured his social status on JV, he worried that he had thrown it all away that weekend at the diner.

"Hey guys," he spoke up. "About me walking out of Mickey's last Saturday…sorry about that."

"Water under a bridge, Tim," Charlie offered.

The JV captain was keen to prevent the weekend's tension from festering into permanent alienation.

"Yeah," Ryan spoke up. "I'm sorry about that little joke I made about you and Julie."

"Don't worry about it, man," Tim replied. "It's all good."

He had been a lot less offended by Ryan's honor-related joke, and more disturbed by the fact that Julie had been hanging out with Adam. Before the Husky game, she had mentioned her plan to hang out with Fulton; but Larson's revelation that she had been with Adam as well came as news to him.

Tim had noticed the frequent glances that Adam had given Julie from the Varsity table over the past few weeks, was he competition?

"Hey, Larson."

Goldberg greeted the taciturn defenseman who replied with a short nod, taking his seat at the end of the table – away from the others.

"Just as chatty as ever," Goldberg mused, to no one in particular.

Seeing Larson reminded Charlie that while the Ryan/Tim fire had just been put out, a more serious one was burning between Portman and Julie. The goalie had committed an unpardonable sin in Portman's eyes by fraternizing with Fulton, and Charlie worried that Portman could become even more isolated and dependent on Larson as result.

This growing dependency was demonstrated as Charlie observed Portman take his seat with Larson, away from the rest of the Ducks.

"Hey, bro," the ex-Bash Brother greeted the ex-Hawk with a genial smile.

Larson looked across the table, his dead eyes sending a chill down Portman's spine.

"You nearly gave up a goal last weekend to the Huskies, Dean. You bit on an obvious draw and left a wide-open lane to the goal. Luckily the Bitch saved your skin," Larson declared, gifting Julie with a harsher nickname than 'Cat.'

"Um…good afternoon to you too, I guess."

The dead eyes continued to drive icy daggers into Portman's soul, and the Chicago-born defenseman couldn't take it for long.

"Sorry, bro," he offered. "I'll play with greater situational awareness next time."
"Good."

The dead eyes had not softened, but at least they were directed at the meat on a plate – not the meat seated across the table. That was how he saw Portman anyway. Meat.

*But the protein makes me stronger.*

By consuming Dean Portman and Fulton Reed, Larson knew that he had strengthened his own position. He just needed a few more little things to fall into place. And falling into place, they were. Looking down at his overcooked hamburger – and the resulting lack of blood – Larson wished the Eden Hall fare was as flavorful as his human prey.

The two defensemen ate in silence for the next several minutes. As much as Portman enjoyed having a receptive audience for his anti-Fulton rants, he was beginning to wish that Larson spoke more often. He was getting bored just talking about hockey and Fulton with the ex-Hawk; and the long silences for which Larson was infamously were even less tolerable.

Deciding that he could stand the silence no longer, Portman spoke up.

"So, you got a date to Semi's?"

The Semi-Formal was still over a month away, but Portman figured that hot teenage girls were something that any teenage guy would like to talk about.

Larson looked up.

"I've got my eye on someone," he declared, glancing briefly at Connie. "But the timing is not right…just yet."

Over at the Varsity table, McGill had arrived with a large pair of bolt cutters in hand and his usual look of self-satisfaction on his face. Zach Henderson was not amused.

"Real subtle, ya mook," he scoffed. "Walkin' around wid a pair of bolt cutters don't look duh least bit suspicious.

The Varsity captain took pleasure in wiping the smirk off McGill's face. He regarded the new forward as both a dweeb and a liability on offense, so he felt no qualms about making the ex-Hawk procure the bolt cutters needed for Varsity's 'retaliation' against JV.

"I guess I'll just put them in my backpack," McGill offered with uncharacteristic self-consciousness.

"Good plan," Henderson huffed. "And you sure your guy's reliable?"

McGill nodded.

"He's the only one who can get us in."

Henderson returned the nod – unable to assuage his own doubts about the plan, but unable to come up with anything better. Before he was about to share the plan with his team, he looked over at the three Varsity Ducks. They were JV-blooded and the Varsity captain did not trust them. To avoid any leaks, he spoke up.

"As for you, Curly, an' Moe," he began, looking at Adam, Fulton, and Guy, "dis is gonna be a team effort. We don't need your guys goin' to your Little Ducky friends an' revealin' duh plan. So get
The three friends wanted to stay put and find out what Henderson had up his sleeve, but it was clear that the Varsity captain would not allow that.

He continued to stare the trio down.

After several long seconds, Adam got to his feet, followed by Fulton and Guy.

"And one more ting," Henderson called out as the trio turned to leave. "If duh tree uh-yous tip duh Little Duckies awff, me an' Cole will beat yous guys til yous piss blood. Cah-peesh?"

Against his considerable self-discipline and less-considerable instinct for self-preservation, Adam laughed out loud.

"What duh fuck's so funny?"

"Nothing, man," Adam replied. "I capiche, paisan."

"Huh?"

*The mind is such a terrible thing to waste.*

"Er, nothing. Stacy's got a nice rack, don't she?"

"Ah," Henderson replied with a grin. "Now you're speakin' my language. I knew you wasn't gay. But you're still a Duck, so bounce."

With their belligerent captain having given them a billigerent farewell, the trio surveyed the dining hall, looking for a place to sit. The seating arrangements reflected Eden Hall's rigid social structure, with the various sport teams making up the Jock clique each occupying their own tables. The Preps, Goths, Nerds, and Beautiful People each had their own piece of turf as well. Even unaffiliated lone wolves stuck together, as they had no other choice; but their table was full.

There was plenty of room at the Nerd table, however. Based out of the AV Room, the Nerds were Eden Hall's smallest, weakest, and most despised clique. Naturally, they had room to spare at their table, so the trio made their way over. The terrified nerds saw three Varsity hockey players approach and quickly emptied out their wallets, making a pile and pushing it toward the end of the table.

Adam, Fulton, and Guy simultaneously gave the nerds confused looks.

"Please, just take the money and go," Milton Meyers, the clique's leader squeaked out.

The boy was a year older than his three visitors – but much shorter, fatter, and weaker. He had a mess of greasy dark hair, and thick black glasses, but a clearer complexion than most of his acne-ridden friends.

"What are you talking about?" Asked Guy.

"Why else would you be here?" Milton replied. "Jocks demand money, and we give it to them to avoid a beating. That's how it works."

He wasn't sure if the hockey players were genuine in their confusion or just toying with him. But there was nothing he could do either way. Milton's few friends looked on with worry.
"Sounds like you've been hanging out with the wrong jocks," Adam offered. "I know this is awkward, but can we sit? If not, we'll just find someplace else. No sweat."

Milton raised a suspicious eyebrow.

*These guys are way too nice, there must be a catch.*

But he gave a reluctant nod, and the three sat down.

"Let's just get this out of the way," Adam pushed the pile of cash back toward the nerds and set his tray down.

He noticed the suspicious looks.

"Come on guys. We don't want your money, relax."

Milton grabbed the pile and began redistributing the cash to his friends.

The combination of nerds and a mountain of cash proved irresistible to Kevin Schultz, a linebacker with the school's football team; so he approached the table with the expectation of easy money.

"Hey, what's the rush, Moneybags? Send that green my way."

Fulton rose from his seat and approached the linebacker. The hockey player looked massive compared to most of JV, but about average compared to most of the football players.

But he could still fuck Schultz up, and the football player knew it.

"Leave them alone," Fulton ordered the bully.

Schultz scoffed.

"Whatever, nerd lover."

The football player turned and left.

Fulton sat back down, waving away the money Milton tried to give him as payment for service rendered.

"If you really want to pay me, help me with my math homework."

The nerd flashed a smile full of metal.

"My specialty, kind sir. Let's have a look."

As Milton helped Fulton, Guy turned to Adam.

"I think we should warn the Ducks about Varsity."

Adam nodded.

"No need for both of us to go. You stay put."

Guy was the smallest of the three friends, and Adam could not forget the savage hit that the blond forward took at last year's JV/Varsity scrimmage. He wasn't sure if Henderson would follow up on his threats, but just in case, he didn't want to risk Guy getting clobbered.
But Guy was having none of it.

"I'll go with you."

Adam shook his head.

"No, Guy. Henderson is less likely to notice one of us. He'll probably see both of us if we go together."

Guy was about to protest, but reluctantly nodded.

"Okay, just be quick."

Without wasting a second, Adam got up and approached the JV table. He noticed that Julie was laughing at something that Tim had said, and she playfully slapped his arm.

Adam cringed. As if he deserves her.

"Banks, what's up man?" Charlie asked.

Adam quickly looked back to the Varsity table and saw that he hadn't been observed.

"I don't have much time guys, so I'm just going to get straight to it. Varsity is planning a revenge prank. I don't know what – something to do with bolt cutters – but it's probably coming today after practice."

Charlie gave his old friend a puzzled look.

"Revenge prank? I don't remember pranking them in the first place."

Adam wasn't sure if Charlie was being honest, but he had no love for Varsity, so it didn't matter to him if the Ducks pranked them. But he didn't want them to get hurt either.

Especially one Duck in particular.

"Whatever, Charlie. The important thing is that Henderson thinks you pranked them. He's out for blood, watch out."

Before any of the Ducks could question their former teammate, Adam turned and left, hoping that he was quick enough to avoid the notice of his new captain. He did not see the angry eyes of Zach Henderson staring him down from across the dining hall.

"Cole, it's on," The Varsity captain informed his enforcer. "Banks is gonna get it."

Larson walked ahead of his team after practice and discovered with some annoyance that Varsity had forgotten to remove the textbook that he had used to leave the door wedged open.

Amateurs.

JV made their way into their locker room and were greeted by the sound of running water. The Ducks looked over to see their clothes, books, backpacks, everything soaking under the shower heads. They noticed that the culprits had even broken the padlocks on the lockers so they could get everything in the shower.

On the wall opposite the shower heads, the words 'Varsity Eats Duck Meat' taunted JV in shaving

The fiery ginger was even angrier when he saw that someone had made off with his bottles of Surge.

"We have to hit them back," Larson declared, being greeted with a roar of approval by most of the Ducks.

Charlie ran a hand through his thick dark hair.

"I don't know, Larson. I know Banks warned us that something was coming, but this doesn't make sense."

The JV captain believed his Varsity counterpart to be a loud and aggressive jerk, but a loud and aggressive jerk who preferred threatening fights to actually being in them. Despite Varsity's reputation for brawling amongst themselves, Henderson's face was remarkably clear of bruises – unlike most of his teammates.

Besides, Charlie did not want to rush into a war that he knew would leave Adam, Fulton, and Guy in the crossfire.

But Larson scoffed.

"That's right. Just go to Henderson and politely ask him if Varsity ruined our stuff. That'll get you real far."

Charlie glared up at the gigantic defenseman.

"Look, I'm the captain; and I say calm down and wait while I find out what's up."

"Yes, Charlie, you are the captain," Larson affirmed. "And I will happily follow your lead once you decide to take the lead. In the meantime, I'm gonna hit those pricks back." He added before turning to his teammates. "Who's with me?"

Every Duck with the exception of Charlie, Connie and Julie roared their approval.

Larson looked back to Charlie.

"The ship is waiting for its captain."

"And I stand by what I said about calming down and waiting," Charlie stood firm.

Julie, who also worried about her Varsity friends, had gone over to Charlie and patted him on the back in support. Connie, shaken by the fact that Guy hadn't given her a warning about the shower prank, found herself standing alone between Charlie and Julie on the one hand, and everyone else on the other.

"Suit yourself, Charlie." Larson pointedly refused to address the captain by his title. "We'll be ready whenever you are ready to support your team."

Charlie didn't bother to retrieve most of his soggy possessions. He put on a pair of squeaky sneakers and stormed out of the locker room.

As the Ducks proceeded to wring the water out of their stuff, Larson noticed that Connie had been
standing alone.

*Good.*

"It was nice of Banks to give us that heads-up," he began as he approached the brunette forward. "I'm sure Guy would have done the same thing. He probably just had more important things to do."

Julie immediately swooped in.

"Come on, Connie. We're going. I'll explain later."

Before Connie could reply, she found herself practically being dragged away from Larson by Julie. If the goalie's back had not been turned to the ex-Hawk, the murderous look that he shot 'the Bitch' would have chilled her to the bone.

Aware that he was betraying emotion, Larson permitted himself a sly grin before sliding on his mask of stoicism.

*Besides, she'll get hers.*
After practice and the mandatory team study hall that followed it, Adam gathered his things and prepared to head back to his dorm room. Wilson had officially benched Scooter, but if the senior goalie had been too jumpy, his replacement, Cam Parker, was too slow. Parker believed himself too clever to fall for fake shots; the problem was that he hardly moved at all, and getting the puck past him was an incredibly easy thing to do.

No one expected Parker to hold the starting position for long, so Wilson ordered Adam and Guy to continue drilling Scooter – with the expectation that some time on the bench could calm the former starter's nerves.

With the JV practice having just concluded, Scooter and Guy suited back-up and headed out to the ice for another drill session. Adam had gotten almost all of his homework done during the study hall, and wondered what do with all the free time he was about to have on his hands. Part of him wanted to check on his JV friends, having heard Henderson boast 'mission accomplished' while the Ducks had been out on the ice.

Adam had been kept in the dark about the specifics of the plan, so he worried about what would happen to his friends. On the other hand, he was still Varsity. Would the Ducks hate him for what his so-called 'teammates' did? He had tried to warn them earlier at lunch, but who knows what good that had done.

In any event, he would definitely have to see Charlie soon, as the two of them shared a dorm room. He left the arena and stepped out into the surprisingly mild October afternoon, resolved to talk to Charlie, come what may. The last thing he expected was for a pair of beefy hands to grab him.

He looked behind him to see Cole with a sadistic grin on his face.

"Start walking, Banks. Unless you really wanna get hurt," the 245-pound wall of Varsity muscle ordered the sophomore.

But Adam was having none of it. He broke free from Cole and threw a right hook into the defenseman's jaw. His hand seared in pain while Cole looked as if someone had only tickled him.

"This is gonna be even more fun than I thought," Cole declared before lowering his shoulder and wrapping an arm around Adam's back.

The force was enough to get the 180-pound forward over the defenseman's shoulder – who slowly, but surely carried his prey off to an obscure corner of the athletic complex. Adam furiously pounded his fists against Cole's back, but the only effect this seemed to have was to tax his own energy – energy that he would need in order to hold his own in yet another brawl.

Suddenly, Cole released his hold and leaned forward – allowing gravity to pull Adam down to the ground with a thud.

Adam looked up to see Henderson leaning against an oak tree, his cigarette held in a patricianly 90-degree angle.

"Ah, Mr. Banks. Good of you to join us on this salubrious autumnal afternoon."

Gone were Henderson's *Mean Streets* pretensions; now he affected Bond-villain suavity.
The Varsity captain took a drag on his cigarette that prompted a furious coughing fit.

"You mind telling me what's going on?" A suddenly impatient Adam demanded.

Henderson held up an index finger as he continued to cough.

_I told Lupe to get the ultra, ultra-lights – not these smog sticks. Damn the help!

"Look, if you need me – call me," Adam spoke up as he rose to his feet. "As much as I enjoy watching you struggle to breathe, I have more important things to do."

But Cole stopped him.

"Not so fast, Banks. We've got a score to settle. You warned your Little Ducky friends about the prank."

"That's right," a hoarse Henderson croaked in agreement. "If you snitched to the Duckies, I promised you a beating until there was blood in your stool. Cole and I are men of honor, so here we are."

"Hmm," Adam replied with a chin-stroke. "I seem to remember that you threatened to make my _urine_ bloody. Not the other stuff."

"Let me at him, Zach!"

There had already been far too much talking for Cole's taste. The longtime Varsity enforcer was practically foaming at the mouth, desperate to inflict some pain.

But Henderson held his bloodhound back.

"Give the traitor a chance to apologize first," he replied before turning toward Adam. "Well?"

"An apology, huh? How's this: I'm sorry that you're a miserable, friendless oaf who sounds like an overgrown Joe Pesci on his good days?"

Having allowed his mouth to get him into trouble in the first place, Adam doubled-down. He was quite the trash-talker when angry, and Varsity's natural aggression had definitely rubbed off on him. He _wanted_ a fight.

But Henderson's eyes widened at the soft-spoken center's suprising brashness. He had been expecting the 'Little Ducky' to beg for forgiveness and promise never to collude with JV again – he just needed to be scared straight. The Varsity captain neither wanted nor expected a fight.

Cole, on the other hand, was never one to bluff. When he threatened to break a nose, he did his very best to deliver the shattered goods.

He lowered his shoulder and charged at Adam like a raging bull.

Adam sidestepped the enforcer and stuck a leg out, causing Cole to tumble forward onto the ground. Henderson was about to protest the 'dirty move' when he felt Adam's fist land squarely on his nose.

_Crunch._

"Ow! Son-of-a…" Henderson moved to plug his bleeding nose while Cole came barreling back in.
Adam, caught off guard tumbled to the ground where Cole pinned him. After warming up with a few hard blows to his victim's chest, the enforcer drew back his fist with another one of his sadistic grins.

"Time to touch-up that pretty face."

Before he could bring it down, a girl's scream pierced the air.

"Come on, Cole," Henderson sounded less-than-menacing with his pinched nose. "I think the traitor's learned his lesson. Let's go."

The pair of Varsity defensemen fled the scene before the girl's scream could attract the attention of school prefects.

"Come on, Adam. Let's get out of here."

He looked up at his unlikely savior and immediately recognized his cousin, Sarah Davis. Dressed in a teal-and-white Eden Hall Cheerleading jacket and black sweatpants, the comely sophomore approached her cousin and extended a hand to help him to his feet.

Looking over the hazel-eyed brunette in her new cheerleading colors, Adam couldn't help but smile at the reminder of an achievement that was partly his.

*If Varsity beat us last year, Sarah would be wearing red right now.*

"Boy, you sure seem happy for a guy who just got his butt whooped," the cheerleader teased.

"Very funny," Adam replied with a mock-laugh. "But Henderson looked a lot worse, if you ask me."

He wondered if the Varsity captain had ever been in a real fight at any point in his life. The senior seemed to have gotten through hockey and school by relying entirely on his powers of bluster. What little bit of Zach Henderson that Adam had ever found intimidating was now gone for good.

"Heh, yeah. You got him pretty good," Sarah agreed. "No wonder you guys suck so much this year…no offense."

"None taken, it's the truth."

"Yeah. There can't be much chemistry on a team where the captain wants to kill the only guy who can score. Anyway, you probably should go to the infirmary."

Adam shook his head.

"Nothing more than a few bruises – I don't need to go to the infirmary. But it is going to be dark soon. And you don't need to be walking alone."

"Aw, I forgot – Cousin Adam, the perfect gentleman."

"Good manners cost nothing."

It felt good to be around someone who had some idea of what it meant to be civil. Adam could feel the aggression that had been building up melt away.

"I don't really feel like going back to the dorms," Sarah announced with a twisty face. "You know, it's been a while since we really had a chat. Wanna grab a cup of coffee?"
"Sure, let me just grab my things."

Over at the girls' dormitory, Connie and Julie enjoyed the feeling of clean, dry clothes on their skin. With their practice gear sweaty and gross, and their street clothes from the locker room soaked, something as simple as dry clothes felt like a luxury. The pair of female Ducks had left the locker room in such a hurry that they didn't even have time to change out of their practice gear.

Naturally, they drew a lot of curious stares around campus as they squeaked back to their dorm room in soggy sneakers and hockey pads.

Now comfortably seated on her bed, Connie wanted to know what the rush was all about.

"Well?" She asked.

"Well, what?"

"You said that you'd 'explain later' when you yanked me out of the locker room. Now is later. So explain."

Julie let out a sigh.

"I saw what that creep Larson was doing," she explained. "He's trying to set you against Guy – probably so he can ask you out later."

The goalie shuddered at the thought of her best friend being with such an unscrupulous manipulator.

Connie was silent for a moment, then burst out laughing.

"What's so funny?"

"Jules, there's a long way to go from wondering why Guy didn't warn me about Varsity's shower prank and wanting to date Paul Larson."

Julie was unamused – and unconvinced. But her serious face had the effect of making Connie laugh even harder.

"Honestly, Cat…how stupid, and how loose do you think I am?"

Julie did not like this one bit. She was a smart, reasonable girl. She had observed Larson tear Fulton and Portman apart. More recently, she had observed Larson steal the majority of the Ducks over to his own side from Charlie. Still more recently, she had observed Larson try to make Connie doubt Guy's loyalty.

But Connie's reaction made Julie wonder if she was being unreasonable.

*Connie's smart, I should trust her to see through Larson…but I can't take that chance.*

"Julie, what's wrong? Why won't you answer me?"

Before the goalie could respond, the phone rang.

"I guess I'll just get that," Connie offered, making her way over to Julie's desk and picking up the receiver. "Hello? Ah, Tim. Good of you to call, Julie could really stand to get out and get some fresh air." She motioned for her roommate to take the call. "Just give her a minute."
"She sounds like a really amazing girl," Sarah declared, stirring her coffee at a bistro table. "And I kinda get the feeling that she likes you too."

"Ha! If only!"

Adam had forgotten how easy it was to talk to his cousin. They had spent the last hour chatting in a coffee shop in the mall, and the forward had not felt the need to go to the usual trouble of filtering his words about Julie.

"Aw, Adam – girls love the whole he's-cute-and-he-doesn't-know-it thing, they really do. But it goes a little far when it gets in the way of what you want, doesn't it? Hey, I've got an idea. Why don't you sit with us at lunch?"

Adam's eyes widened.

"With the Beautiful People?"

"You're definitely not doing your social standing any favors by sitting with the Nerds," Sarah replied with a slight giggle. "Besides, the girls at our table don't bite. Not unless you're into that sort of thing."

Adam choked on his coffee.

"You just need a little practice talking to girls, that's all," Sarah continued. "I mean, it's not like you were born an amazing hockey player. That came with lots and lots of practice. Same thing with girls, the more you chat them up, the more confident you'll feel doing it. And when you're more confident, you'll do it better."

Adam choked on his coffee again, this time as result of laughter.

Sarah gave her cousin a puzzled look.

"You know, you kinda have a dirty mind," he explained.

"I don't follow," she replied honestly.

For all of the cheerleader's social smarts, she still possessed a naivety that Adam found endearing.

"Never mind," he declared. "Anyway, you're probably right. Sure, I'll…"

Looking over his cousin's shoulder, Adam gasped as he took in the sight of Julie and Tim walking hand-in-hand on the other side of the coffee shop glass. Flustered, he looked down.

"What's wrong?"

Standing outside the coffee shop, Julie caught a glimpse of Adam chatting-up a cheerleader. The girl's back was facing the shop windows, so Julie was unable to see the face, but she knew that there was no such thing as an ugly or plain Eden Hall cheerleader.

Adam's sudden, mysterious aloofness that he sprung on Julie when she least expected it suddenly made sense to her.

He's got someone.

Her heart – having begun its journey in her throat upon seeing Adam – sank into her stomach.
"Tim, let's go," she spoke up in a voice just above a whisper. "I don't care where. Let's just go."

The younger Riley nodded.

"Yeah, it's best not to breathe Varsity air when possible."

After the shower prank, Tim had tried to vilify Adam as just another nasty Varsity guy around Julie at every opportunity. But as he took in the sight of his rival seated with the girl he could recognize as Sarah Davis, he felt a mixture of relief and envy – relief that Adam no longer appeared to be competition for Julie, and envy that he found someone 'hotter'.

"The Banks Family was always so *nouveau-riche* anyway," Tim couldn't resist giving his rival a WASPy parting shot before guiding Julie away from the coffee shop.

"They've got that nice big pool though," she pointed out.

"Mine's even bigger."

The goalie laughed out loud at Tim's clumsy attempt to go tit-for-tat.

"Oh…" he replied with an understanding smile. "You thought I was referring to my…never mind."

"Well that – and the fact that Old Money usually doesn't brag about their possessions."

"Ah yes," Tim agreed. "The unattractive habits of the *Nouveau-Riche* rub-off on their betters when they are nearby. Lamentable, but true."

"Uh-huh. Well since money isn't a big deal to you, what say we fire up Papa Riley's credit card?"

"It would be my pleasure. As you suggested, it's *only* money."

Julie gave a soft smile as Tim led her toward some of the high-end shops.

Back in the coffee shop, Sarah turned back to face Adam – having looked out the glass to see what the source of his anxiety was.

"Was that her?" She asked.

He nodded.

"With Rick Riley, huh? I thought he went off to Michigan. He's a tool."

"No, it's his lookalike brother," Adam corrected her. "But you've definitely got the last bit right."

Sarah gave her cousin a sympathetic look.

"Well, you should sit with us anyway. Even if you're not practicing for Julie, it can only help. And who knows? You may just find a date to Semi's."

"Sure, might as well," he agreed with an unhappy shrug.

After the bus ride from the mall, Tim walked Julie back to her dormitory. The pair of JV players had been carrying several shopping bags laden with pricey cosmetics and clothes. Though the younger Riley worried about facing his father's wrath over the afternoon's reckless spending, he managed to appear cool about it the entire time. And Julie took full advantage of the largess.
Even if she had little-to-no use for most of these luxury trinkets, they had fulfilled their short-term purpose: to push Adam and the cheerleader out of her mind.

"Well, here we are," she announced as they stopped at the front of the building. "I had a really nice time today, Tim."

"Glad to hear it," he replied with a pearly grin. "May I come upstairs?"

Lord knows I've paid the price of admission – many times over.

Julie had been hoping that Connie was still in their room. The goalie was keen to prevent her best friend from wandering off into Larson's clutches. If she invited her new boyfriend upstairs, Connie would be forced to leave. That created a risk that Julie was unwilling to take.

"Sorry Tim, I'm just not ready."

Which is true enough, anyway.

"Hey, no worries," he replied, the grin remaining in place with considerable effort. "We'll never do anything you're not comfortable doing. But we're good, right?"

Julie nodded with a small but affected grin.

She dropped her shopping bags as Tim grasped her waist and pulled her in. Unable to feel even a single ounce of fat on his taut, muscular body, Julie returned the embrace with an unexpected feeling of pleasure. Pulling back, she ran both hands from his shoulders down to his chest and abs. He was hard everywhere.

Enjoyable as he found her hands, he interrupted her upper-body inspection by grasping her jaw and pulling her in for a kiss.

She closed her eyes, returned the smooch…and waited for the fireworks she had always been told would accompany her first real kiss from a boy.

Nothing.

Underwhelmed, Julie grabbed her shopping bags – including the ones that Tim had been carrying.

"I can carry these, thanks again."

His pale blue Riley eyes were swallowed up by pupils that had dilated with desire. Any Sarah-envy he had felt earlier vanished as he watched Julie's athletic figure go through the doors and disappear. Determined to get between those long, shapely legs, Tim likened the courtship they required to his father's patience in waiting to open a well-aged bottle of port.

Like father, like son – Tim had every intention of savoring the object of his lust.

As Charlie and Linda emerged from the lunch line at the dining hall, he looked over at the JV table only to discover that Larson had stolen his seat at the center of the table. Portman had turfed Linda out and was sitting at Larson's right hand. The JV captain had been in a dark mood since Larson's locker room putsch the other day, and Linda feared a temper tantrum was in the works now that the ex-Hawk had taken it upon himself to symbolically replace Charlie as captain.

"Come on, Charlie," she began. "There's room at the end of the table."
He nodded and followed his girlfriend to the isolated seats previously occupied by Larson and Portman. They were soon joined by Connie and Julie, much to Linda's relief, who was grateful that some on the team were remaining loyal to Charlie.

Julie looked up to see Adam take a seat with the Beautiful People.

_He always was gorgeous, I guess now he finally realizes it._

Still, it hurt to see her modest friend surround himself with popular, attractive girls. What little bit of her thought that Adam might like her as more than a friend disappeared as she watched him go into that inaccessible world of Eden Hall's Beautiful People.

"Hey guys."

But she perked-up upon seeing her new boyfriend approach.

"Hey, Tim," she greeted him with a wide smile, patting the space next to her. "Come, sit down."

"Why don't you guys sit closer to the rest of the team?" He asked. "Charlie, if this is about your seat, I'm sure Paul will give it to you if you join in on the pranks."

"Thanks, Riley. But I don't need Larson's permission to be captain. I'm not perfect, but at least I'm no one's tool."

The younger Riley looked hurt.

"I'm not a tool either. I just want everyone on our team to get along."

"Whatever," Charlie shot back. "There are some people who don't deserve my friendship. I'm not going to go along just to get along."

"Don't be so high-and-mighty, Charlie," Julie interjected. "Tim's nice, and the fact that he wants to be friends with his teammates shouldn't be held against him," she added before turning back to the younger Riley. "Come on, sit down."

Tim frowned slightly.

"I think I'll sit with the rest of the team. You know, keep the lines of communication open."

"Oh," Julie replied softly. "That's a good idea."

She hoped the disappointment she felt hadn't come across in her voice.

"Thanks, doll," Tim smiled, leaning in to kiss Julie on the cheek before turning and taking his seat with the rest of the team.

Linda's eyes narrowed at the JV center.

"What a spineless little worm that guy is."

Julie looked at Linda with a hurt expression.

"Sorry, Julie. It just sort of slipped."

"Don't worry about it."
It'll be good having someone close to Larson, the goalie tried to tell herself.

At the center of the table, Larson began his war council once Tim took his seat.

"I've found the perfect way to get back at Varsity," the ex-Hawk announced.

His surrounding teammates immediately ended their conversations.

"Henderson's parents will be out of town soon – a cruise in the Caribbean, I think. But that's not important. The important thing is that Henderson will be hosting a Halloween party at his house. All of Varsity will be there, along with most of the Eden Hall elites."

Larson's teammates waited with bated breath for the master plan to be revealed.

"It's a perfect opportunity to humiliate those pricks," he continued. "Naturally, we're not invited. But we should be able to get in if we get ahold of some good costumes. We're also going to need people to make trips to the party store and the drug store…"

Over at the Beautiful Peoples' table, Adam ate in nervous silence. He was surrounded by cheerleaders who wore their teal-and-white uniforms that revealed just a little too much leg in anticipation of the football game later that night. Once game-time came, the girls would probably change into their cold weather uniforms consisting of black sweatpants and green team jackets.

Most of the guys at the table were brainless meatheads who couldn't maintain the required C-average to stay on the football team, and Adam found attempts at conversation with them just as difficult as with cheerleaders.

He looked over at Fulton and Guy sitting at the Nerd table. It had gone without saying that Henderson did not want the 'Three Stooges' back at the Varsity table where they could listen in on anti-JV plots, so Adam felt free to accept Sarah's invitation to the Beautiful Peoples' table. But as he overheard the meatheads drone on about how much they bench-pressed while the girls talked fashion, he envied Fulton and Guy's nerdier company.

Part of him even wished to be back at the morose Varsity table. Quiet hostility was better than the ocean of vapid talk that he was currently drowning in.

"Banks? Didn't expect to see you here."

Adam looked up to see his former teammate and freshman-year roommate, Luis Mendoza, take a seat across from him between two blonde cheerleaders. The Miami-born heartthrob combined good looks and confidence with the exotic Latino factor in snow white Minnesota to make himself irresistible to Eden Hall's female students. He managed to slick his thick dark hair back without looking greasy – an impressive feat for a teenager – and his mocha-colored skin and almond brown eyes always managed to turn heads.

Luis was a good teammate, and Charlie had always looked the other way when he chose to sit with the Beautiful People.

"Um…yeah," Adam replied. "Sarah is my cousin. She invited me here."

Luis nodded.

"I know Sarah. She's a lot of fun."

He looked over at Adam's well-proportioned brunette cousin while the adoring blondes frowned.
"Let's file that under 'more than I needed to know,' Luis," Adam replied, drawing giggles from a few of the girls.

He decided to cut right to the chase.

"So does JV hate me now?"

Adam knew that at least Charlie was still cool with him, as the roommates had a chance to talk the other day. But he didn't know about the other Ducks.

"To be honest, it's hard to say," Luis began. "The new guys don't really know you, so they see you as another Varsity goon. But you warned us about the prank, so the old Ducks still like you. But…"

"But?"

"Things are kinda messed up at the moment. Charlie's turned into a wimp and doesn't want to fight Varsity, so Larson has stepped in and taken the leadership."

"WHAT?!"

Adam knew that Charlie was upset, but as he was known to do when upset, he got cagey. Adam had no idea there had been a coup.

"It's cool, man," Luis tried to reassure his former teammate. "This isn't a permanent thing. Larson's just filling in until Charlie's ready. You know how Charlie is, man…he gets into these moods, and he just withdraws. But he'll get better. He always does. Then things will go back to normal."

Adam sighed.

"If you say so."

He knew that Larson was capable of nasty things on his own, and didn't want to imagine what he could do with an army of Ducks behind him.

"But you said the old Ducks still like me, so Julie doesn't hate me?"

"I don't think she does," Luis replied. "But she and Tim have gotten real tight; and like I said, the new Ducks don't really trust you. If your name comes up when those two talk, I doubt Tim has anything nice to say about you."

Adam's fist clenched beneath the table. First Larson stole the team, now Tim had stolen the girl of his dreams. He had half a mind to rejoin the Varsity table and volunteer his services for whatever ghastly thing they wished to inflict on JV.

But before he could feel too much righteous indignation, he felt a tap on his shoulder. He looked up to see Sarah standing next to a cheerleader he recognized as Tiffany Collins. Tiffany was a characteristically beautiful cheerleader – with long, naturally red hair that had darkened to auburn, fair skin, green eyes, and a perfect figure.

"Hey, Adam," Sarah greeted her cousin. "You remember Tiffany, don't you? She's in our history class. We should like totally walk together."

Adam glanced at his watch to see that the lunch period was nearly over.

"We might as well get started. Dr. Barber's room is a long ways away."
"See, Tiffany? I told you he's a smart one."

"Smart enough to know that Panama isn't the capital of Mexico," Adam deadpanned, causing Tiffany to giggle.

"Shut up," Sarah replied in a tone of mock-offense. "I was kidding about that."

Adam chuckled at the memory as the trio left the dining hall.

"I thought Dr. Barber was going to have a heart attack. I was worried that you might get charged with manslaughter."

"Smart, but kinda mean," Sarah said to her fellow cheerleader.

"I think he's funny," Tiffany replied with an inviting grin.

"Sarah's smart, Tiffany," Adam began, feeling a surge of confidence. "Like that time she got out of reading *The Scarlet Letter* by watching the movie that came out a couple years ago. She would have gotten away with it had she not written about Demi's rescue from the gallows in her book report."

"A much more believable name for a woman than 'Hester', if you ask me," Sarah defended herself as Tiffany laughed. "You know what else is funny? Adam doesn't have a date to Semi's."

"Hey!" He snapped.

"Aw, don't be bitter just 'cause you're a ditz, Sarah," Tiffany replied. "If Adam needs a date I'd be happy to go with him."

Adam was shocked by the offer, but quickly recovered his composure.

"Sounds like a date, Tiffany," he replied.

"Cool," Tiffany grinned as the trio continued walking.

Adam continued to make easy conversation and joke with his new date to Semi's while they made the long journey on foot. His cousin had won over enough cute, shy guys to know that laughing at their jokes was the easiest way to make them open up. So she set herself up as Adam's wingman and gracefully took his little jabs, and his confidence soared as result.

Eventually, they strolled into Dr. Barber –aka Dwarf Man's – classroom, but before Sarah went to join her friend in the back, she turned to her cousin.

"You're welcome, by the way."

Adam chuckled.

"You're good, very good."

"And don't you forget it."
Adam looked up from his trig homework as he heard a knock at the door. Figuring that it was Linda coming over for one of her study sessions with Charlie, he looked over at the deposed JV captain who lay motionless on his bed.

"I guess I'll get it," the Varsity forward offered as he got up from his desk and made the short walk to the door.

"Hey, Adam," Linda greeted him with a polite smile.

Though the smile was a friendly one, it masked a growing sense of frustration with her boyfriend's negativity. Charlie had been so busy feeling sorry for himself that he had not even gone downstairs to let Linda in to the boys' dormitory. Instead, she had to race in through the side as another guy exited the building.

*Just like some common weirdo.*

"Hey, Linda," Adam replied, opening the door wider to allow her in. "I was just about to head to the library anyway. Alt rock doesn't exactly produce a Mozart effect."

"Heh, no. It definitely doesn't," she agreed as she entered the cramped dorm room.

The Foo Fighters – and their eponymous debut album – had been playing in the background, but Linda was unable to identify the group.

*They all sound the same anyway.*

"Later guys," Adam called out as he slung his backpack over his shoulder and departed.

"Bye, Adam," Linda called back.

Charlie still had not made a sound. But he was roused into action as Linda turned off the CD player and began unpacking her study materials.

"You mind?" He asked irritably. "I was listening to that."

"You were sulking mindlessly," she corrected him. "You know a good cure for that? Work."

Charlie rolled his eyes, but Linda persisted.

"Hey, if you think you have it bad, get a load of this guy," she thrust a copy of *Oliver Twist* into his gut. "I assume you've done your reading."

"Well you assume wrong."

He handed back the book before turning on the CD player and returning to his bed.

"Charlie, you can't just shut down and not do any school work. If you start flunking class, you'll lose a lot more than some dumb title to Paul Larson. Orion will bench you. And if you can't turn it around, he'll throw you off the team. And if you're off the team, you'll lose your scholarship. Does *any* of that mean *anything* to you?"

The veteran Duck got back to his feet with a grunt, prompting a relieved Linda to grin.
But her relief gave way to exasperation as Charlie walked past her and turned up the volume on the CD player.

"I wish I had a remote control for this thing," he mumbled on the way back to his bed.

"Well, this is pointless," Linda declared as she gathered her things.

Meanwhile, as Adam made his way to the school library, he heard a cheery female voice call out "hey, Banksie."

*Only one person can call me that without annoying me.*

But as he turned to discover that Tiffany Collins was the source, he corrected himself.

*Only one person can call me that, and her name is Tiffany. Not Julie.*

"Hey, Tiffany," he called back, approaching her in the courtyard.

Conveniently located between the boys' and girls' dormitories, the courtyard was ideal for guys and girls to meet and make plans for later. The distinct lack of privacy that it offered precluded rendezvous of the intimate kind, but its limited uses were appreciated at the stifling prep school.

As he approached the tall cheerleader, he realized that planting a kiss on her cheek would not present too much of a...*logistical* challenge. And it wouldn't hurt to lay claim to his potential girlfriend by kissing her in front of the other students who were milling about in the courtyard.

So he went ahead and gave her a peck, drawing a surprised giggle.

"I was just about to go grab some dinner," Tiffany announced, eyeing Adam's backpack. "Were you going to the library?"

"Uh, no. Dining hall," he replied before indicating his backpack. "I just haul this around to keep my strength up away from practice."

"Oh?" She asked with a grin. "I can grab some books from my dorm if you like. I even have a few dumbbells up there."

"Well, that's kind of you to offer. But I don't want to bulk up too much, y'know?"

Tiffany laughed as she extended her hand for Adam to grasp, which he did.

"So I'm not interrupting an important study session?"

"Absolutely not," he lied.

"Good."

Despite their plans to attend the Semi-Formal together, Adam and Tiffany were just short of being an official item – although they had been on a few successful dates since Sarah had introduced them. If his experience with Julie had taught him nothing else, it hammered home the importance of being bold and assertive; so he found himself taking chances with Tiffany that he never dreamed of taking with Julie.

Some hand-holding here, a cheek-peck there, and an increased willingness to trust his sense of humor had all given him an appearance of cool confidence that masked his nervousness quite effectively.
The internal nervousness made a brief appearance as the dining attendant flashed a suspicious look at Adam as he stood in line for a second time that evening.

But it was something that a bit of Banksian sarcasm could easily fix.

"Don't worry," he addressed the attendant. "Your eyes aren't playing tricks on you. I really am Elvis Presley."

Embarrassed that she had been caught staring, the attendant rung Adam and Tiffany up at the cash register without saying anything.

"Heh, speaking of Elvis – get a load of that guy," Tiffany indicated Dean Portman with her head as she emerged from the line with Adam.

"Portman?" Adam strained his eyes to observe the defenseman with the pompadour. "He looks so weird without his bandana."

"He looked pretty weird with the bandana, to be fair."

Adam laughed, but he felt guilty laughing at Portman – and always had. As he approached the Beautiful Peoples' table with Tiffany, Portman graced the pair with his puppy-like smile.

"Hey guys."

"Hey, Portman," Adam replied.

Dinner at Eden Hall had always been a more relaxed affair than lunch. The various cliques seemed less rigid during the evening, and there was more mingling. So it came as no surprise to Adam when he observed Portman sitting with the Beautiful People rather than the handful of Ducks over at the JV table.

But as Paul Larson emerged from the line and moved to take his seat in Charlie's old spot, the grin on Portman's face vanished.

"I better get going," he announced. "Later, Banksie – babe," he added with a nod in Tiffany's direction.

Adam rolled his eyes but did not bother to correct the former Bash Brother, who was already halfway across the dining hall.

"Aren't you going to defend my honor?" Tiffany teased.

"I think he's got enough problems already," Adam replied, observing Larson give the back of Portman's head a hard thwack.

Given his position on Varsity – and Charlie's increased caginess – Adam knew little about JV dynamics. But from this vantage point, it was clear that Larson had cut Portman down to size. Though JV had yet to lose a game, Adam could not shake the feeling that things would go very badly for his former team very soon – and Larson's machinations would be the cause.

But he was hardly in any position to save the Ducks; and rather than dwell on the gloomy fate that awaited them, Adam turned to a happier subject: his budding romance with Tiffany.

The two enjoyed a pleasant chat – Tiffany having been genuinely interested in learning about hockey, and Adam delighted to teach her. Given that the cheerleading squad only performed at
football and basketball games, hockey had always been something of a mystery to her; luckily, she had stumbled onto a cute guy for whom talking hockey was a pleasure second only to playing it.

As Adam began talking about Bobby Orr and the evolution of the modern NHL defenseman, he felt a tap on his shoulder.

"Oh, hey Scooter. What's up?"

"Henderson wants to invite you to the Halloween party at his place," the Varsity goalie explained before flashing a quick glance at Tiffany. "You're welcome to bring a date."

Adam raised a suspicious eyebrow.

"A peace offering, is it?"

Scooter shrugged, unaware of the Varsity captain's ill-fated attempt to discipline the team's star forward.

"More like a mandatory you-better-show up-or-else kinda thing," he replied.

But having seen what a poor fighter Henderson was, his threats did not scare Adam in the least.

"Tell Henderson that I've got plans."

"Aw, Adam – you can't turn down a party at Zach's," Tiffany protested. "His place is huge, it's practically custom-designed for amazing parties!"

Although Adam was less-than-thrilled about Tiffany's pre-existing friendship with the abrasive Varsity captain, he figured that making a fuss about it would create more trouble than it was worth. Rather than allow guilt by association to preclude a future relationship with a highly desirable cheerleader, Adam decided to acquiesce.

"Alright, Tiffany, we'll go – for you."

"Great!" Scooter enthused. "The party is actually on Halloween – it's nice having it on a Friday night for a change. I can drive you guys there, just be sure to wear a costume!"

As the Varsity goalie departed, Tiffany leaned in and whispered into Adam's ear.

"Make sure you bring the stuff for a party."

The forward nodded, not having the faintest idea what 'stuff for a party' meant, but not wanting to look like an idiot by asking.

After finishing his second dinner for the evening and walking Tiffany back to the girls' dormitory – complete with a soft kiss goodbye on the lips – Adam made a mental note to give Sarah a call so he could understand Tiffany's cryptic instructions.

Several yards away at the side entrance to the building, Julie allowed Tim in for a late night study session. Ms. Stewart, the ancient dorm supervisor who chilled easily had cranked up the building's furnace; so the girls in her charge dressed accordingly. The challenge that scantily-dressed girls created for her mission to prevent 'conjugal visits' never occurred to the matron, but at least she was warm.

Not that it bothered Tim Riley, who drank-in the sight of Julie in a white tank top that ended just above her navel and a pair of high-rise black shorts that clung snugly around her upper thighs.
"Hey, doll face," he greeted her before pecking her cheek. "Nice getup," he added.

*Stupid, stupid.*

"In case you didn't notice, it's like a sauna in here," Julie explained. "You might wanna lose that wool sweater before it starts sticking to your skin."

"Duly noted."

The JV forward did not even wait until they were upstairs before he slid his sweater off. Here he was with Julie Gaffney advising him to remove his clothes. He felt like he was well on his way to the best night of his life when the goalie opened the door to her room to reveal a bored-looking Connie watching TV from her bed.

"Oh, hey Cons," he greeted her.

"Hey, Tims," she replied before looking to Julie. "I can go and give you guys some privacy."

"Oh, no," Julie insisted. "That won't be necessary. You just stay put and watch *Beverly Hills.* Tim and I can work with it in the background."

"Honestly, Julie – I don't mind."

Connie began rising to her feet only for Julie to shove her back down to the bed.

"Heh, sorry," the goalie apologized for her brusque hands. "But there's no sense in you going out so late at night. Tim's only here at this hour because we both find history so difficult to write about on our own."

Tim frowned at the prospect of an all-night essay session; he had made the trip to Julie's dorm in the expectation that homework was a pretext for making-out – maybe even more. But taking in the sight of those long, bare legs, he decided that like a bottle of his father's port, they had aged to perfection and were ready for opening; he was not prepared to consign the object of his desire to the basement just yet.

"If Connie wants to get some fresh air, I think we should let her," he proposed, fanning his face with his hand. "It is awfully stuffy in here."

"Well, there you go," Connie replied, rising to her feet.

"It's fine!" Julie insisted, shoving Connie back down.

The brunette forward let out a resigned sigh as she returned to TV-watching position. Ever since Julie had yanked her out of the locker room after Varsity's shower prank, the goalie had been hell-bent on preventing Connie from ever being alone – where Larson could strike. And her smothering was getting old.

Connie was tempted to seek-out Larson if for no other reason than to prove to Julie that he was harmless. But she had not acted on that impulse…yet.

---

Having asked Sarah to translate the enigmatic phrase 'stuff for a party,' a nervous Adam made his way down an unfamiliar aisle in the drug store. He was horrified by the vast, confusing selection, and had no idea what device was right for him. Seeing a payphone out of the corner of his eye, he was tempted to call his father and ask for help.
Then he realized that was the dumbest idea of all time.

But without guidance, Adam did not know what to do – short of grabbing one of each kind of prophylactic on the shelf.

And there's your answer.

He went to grab a shopping basket before returning to the aisle under the watchful – and seemingly judgmental – gaze of the clerk. Though he was reluctant, Adam was with one of the most popular girls in school; and she had certain expectations. He would have to meet those expectations, or face a humiliating breakup.

Taking a deep breath, he let out a determined sigh before grabbing every men's contraceptive he could find. He liked to believe that he was 'large,' or even 'extra-large,' but who knew what qualified? So with a profound feeling of self-loathing, he grabbed the medium and small just to be safe.

He sighed again when he realized that the easy part of his mission had been completed.

Now he had to check out.

Game face, Banks, game face!

He put his head down and moved toward the front of the store in long, determined strides. Because his eyes were fixed to the floor, he did not realize that he was heading directly into Portman, Russ, and Tim – who were snickering about something in the pet care aisle.

"Heads up, Banksie!" Portman called out before Adam could crash into the trio.

"Oh, hey guys," the Varsity forward put on the brakes just in time.

But he was unable to hide his shopping basket before the three JV players caught a glimpse of the contents.

"Wow, not even a month sittin' with the Beautiful People and already Cake Eater is turnin' into a man," Russ teased. "Almost brings a tear to the eye."

"And Julie always says that you're such a nice guy," Tim scoffed.

Unlike Russ, Tim's tone did not convey even a hint of good-natured ribbing.

Although Portman and Adam were never close even during the best of times, the JV defensemen took it upon himself to offer the quiet Varsity forward what he regarded as words of encouragement.

"Don't listen to ’em Banks. Just cos these losers can't pull, it don't mean the rest of us can't have some fun," the ex-Bash Brother declared with his trademark mischievous grin.

Adam's cheeks turned beet red.

"Uh…thanks."

He wanted to drop his basket and flee to the bus stop, but managed to hold his ground before moving to change the subject.

"So what are you guys doing here?"
"None of your damn business," Tim snapped.

"Sorry, Cake Eater," Russ offered. "But I'm afraid this is on a need-to-know basis."

Adam nodded, suspecting that the JV trio's shopping had something to do with attacking Varsity. Knowing that he would not get anything out of his former teammates – and knowing that he probably would not share the knowledge with Varsity even if he did – Adam moved to leave.

"Sure thing, guys. I guess I'll see you later."

Tim turned around without saying a word.

"Later, Banksie," Russ nodded.

Portman grinned his famous grin.

"Pace yourself, you dog."

_The cashier can't possibly be any worse_, Adam tried to tell himself.

Halloween came, and with it, Henderson's off-campus party.

Seated in the back seat of Scooter's GMC Yukon – along with Tiffany, Connie, and Guy – Adam met the evening with less dread than he expected. Dressed as Indiana Jones, he felt as party-ready as he was ever going to feel; and thanks to a bit of coaching from his experienced and discrete freshman roommate, Luis, Adam was confident that he was properly-kitted for any contingency.

Looking over at Connie, who was dressed as Lois Lane, a Lex Luthor-clad Guy sulked. His girlfriend looked perfectly coordinated with Scooter, who was donning a Superman costume.

Connie understood Guy's sentiments at once.

"Well, that's what you get for skipping rehearsal," she teased.

"Uh-huh."

"Hey, don't sweat it," Connie assured him. "I dig the bald cap."

"And now my evening is complete."

Adam failed to stifle a laugh. Given his own designs on a female Duck, he always felt sorry for Guy – as his relationship with Connie was a constant source of entertainment for the rest of the team. But Adam had to concede that it _was_ entertaining.

_Besides, there isn't really a team anymore._

"You guys are gonna love Zach's place," Tiffany announced in her skin-tight devil costume.

With her sheer red corset, matching horns and thigh-high boots, she was sure to get a lot of double takes. Adam had gotten a good look at the sexy costume before she had thrown on a black overcoat for the ride over. But her _poitrine ample_ had remained quite visible, and it took every ounce of willpower that he possessed not to stare, drooling jaw agape at her mountainous chest. The sight was almost enough to make him forget that she was friends with Zach Henderson.

Almost.
"Well, if his house is less lame than he is, that's really not saying much."

"Adam, be nice," Tiffany gently chided him.

"Sorry."

"Although he is pretty lame," she acknowledged with a grin, prompting Adam to chuckle. "But sometimes the price of an awesome party is an annoying host."

"Words to live by," Adam agreed.

As the four sophomores continued to chat in the back of his SUV, a lonely Scooter moved to park his vehicle in the street in front of a large Victorian mansion not far from Adam's own house. The goalie had been unlucky in love, girls lost interest in him as he seemed increasingly distracted. He had been interested in Julie, but was unwilling to act on it and risk alienating his Duck-hating Varsity teammates.

The fact that she was going out with the younger brother of Rick Riley was a bitter irony to Scooter, but he pressed on in the face of disappointment – determined to get his mojo back in-between the pipes and help Varsity return to glory.

The party of five made their way to Henderson's front porch and waited a minute or so to be let in when the door opened to reveal Jason Voorhees of Friday the 13th fame.

The sinister figure raised his mask to expose his true identity.

"Ah, come in," Henderson opened the door wider to allow the group in. "Gentlemen, ladies…"

As Tiffany shed her overcoat, Henderson immediately began pitching a tent in his pants. Instinctively, he slid his mask back down…as if that would cover it.

"Come, this way to the living room."

He guided his new arrivals to the family's spacious living room. Apart from a few teenagers in costumes, there wasn't anything to indicate that the party was specifically a Halloween one. The Varsity captain indicated a long table that practically groaned under the weight of hors d'oeuvres and a glass punch bowl.

"The punch is a proprietary blend that I'm very proud of," Henderson announced. "It's five parts Grey Goose, two parts Hendrick's, and one part Cyrus pomegranate liqueur."

"Classy," Adam deadpanned.

"Quite," Henderson agreed. "In this house, we do not abide generic spirits," he added prissily.

Guy snickered at the ridiculousness of his new captain. Charlie Conway, even in his most petulant and mopey state possessed more dignity, grace, and humor than this mook. Startled, the blond forward covered his mouth upon realizing that he had internalized some of Henderson's vocabulary.

"Anyway, help yourselves," the Varsity captain declared. "If you'll excuse me, I must return to my duties as host."

And with that, Henderson made haste to a bathroom to disassemble his pitched tent.

Sneaking another look at the goddess who had taken the form of a devil, Adam decided that he
needed all the help he could get in living up to Tiffany's party expectations. So he went ahead and filled a plastic red cup to the brim with punch.

Given his inexperience with alcohol, he had no sense of proportion, so he knocked back a swig as if it was Hawaiian Punch. He coughed at the harsh concoction that lit his throat on fire.

*How can people actually enjoy this?*

"It might not be a bad idea to cut that stuff with some water," Guy proposed, adding a splash of Evian to Adam's cup.

Adam took another sip, this time to soothe his throat and found that the chilled spring water had taken most of the bite off the paint thinner that he had been drinking.

"Thanks man, want some?"

Guy shook his head before leading Connie over to the leather sectional in the corner of the living room.

Adam poured half a cup for Tiffany, making up the difference with spring water before rejoining Connie and Guy. The cheerleader did not leave any space between Adam and herself, and her costume became even more revealing as she sat down.

*Yep, she's dressed for bed alright...at the Playboy Mansion,* Adam thought before knocking back some more punch and strategically placing an arm over his lap.

"God, it feels so good to get out of that fucking dorm room!" Connie exclaimed, drawing a startled look from Adam.

*Connie swears?*

He took yet another swig, and noticed that the punch was going down more easily than it had before.

"Yeah, it's nice to get out, y'know?" Tiffany agreed with Connie.

"Especially when you've got a roommate who won't let you breathe without getting permission first," the brunette forward added. "It's unbelievable how controlling and smothering Julie has become."

*This girl is just full of surprises!*

Adam had no idea that Connie and Julie's relationship had deteriorated so badly. He was particularly shocked to hear Connie describe the goalie as 'smothering.' That was one quality that he had never, *ever* associated with the smart, independent girl who still haunted too many of his dreams. In fact, he would have preferred it if Julie had been a just a bit more smothering – toward himself anyway.

But as Connie continued to vent her roommate frustrations, Adam grew concerned. He made a mental note to give Julie a call to see how she was doing.

Tiffany had some roommate horror stories of her own to share, and she quickly struck a chord with Connie. As the pair of girls became absorbed in their conversation, it left Adam with little to do but drink his punch – which had gotten smoother and smoother.
In the kitchen, Henderson filled a second punch bowl with his 'classy' proprietary blend. The original bowl was not quite ready for replacing, but the hors d'oeuvres needed to be replenished, so the Varsity captain went ahead and refilled the sushi, meat, and cheese platters. He did not believe the veggie platter needed any attention – which was convenient, because he had no intention of giving it any.

Placing the replenished plates on a large tray, Henderson opened the swinging door to the kitchen with his shoulder and returned to the party.

Once the host had departed, Emperor Palpatine emerged from the shadows.

Larson had gone all-out in his homage to the *Star Wars* villain who derived power from turning people against each other; he looked like an elderly corpse in a black hooded cloak. Reaching into his pocket, he retrieved a bottle of cat ear medicine. After taking a quick look around the kitchen to ensure that he was alone, he dumped the contents into the punch and stirred it in with a ladle.

With the punch spiked, the figure in black vanished.

Two hours had passed when Henderson re-emerged from the kitchen with a full bowl of punch.

"About time!" Adam exclaimed from the sectional.

He had noticed that with each sip he took, the punch that initially made him recoil had gone down more easily; and he was enjoying the warm, confident feeling that the 'liquid courage' seemed to provide. Fortified by the hooch, Adam engaged his friends in effortless, humorous conversation. The fact that he was louder and less funny than he believed himself to be had no effect on his confidence – quite the opposite in fact.

As he got up to refill his cup, a worried Guy spoke up.

"Maybe you should slow down, man."

But Adam waved a dismissive hand.

"This stuff's great. Don't worry, I'll get you one too," he then turned to Tiffany. "And when I come back, we can check out the upstairs."

Connie's jaw dropped at Adam's alcohol-induced swagger, but Tiffany giggled.

"Sure thing, Banksie."

"Oooh…" Adam growled. "I hate being called 'Banksie.' You're gonna get it."

"Promise?" She asked with a seductive grin.

"I promise!"

"Lucky me."

The Varsity forward had no idea what he was saying – or what Tiffany was saying, for that matter. But she seemed to be enjoying it. He refilled his cup, knocked it down in a few big gulps, and slammed it on the table before returning to his date.

"Come on, gorgeous. Let's go someplace private."

He extended a hand and helped her off the sofa. A stunned Connie watched as Adam led the
giggling cheerleader through the crowd and up the stairs to the bedrooms. Given that this was her first senior party, the brunette forward had not gone into it thinking about sex. Though rarely judgmental, she was appalled in this case.

But Guy Germaine – for all of his talents – was no mind reader.

"Y'know, Henderson's got eight bedrooms."

The slap across his face was so sudden that the blond forward never saw it coming.

"Damn," he rubbed his crimson cheek. "I was thinking that we could talk about our feelings or something. What were you thinking about?"

Connie rolled her eyes, but could not help laughing.

On the other side of the room, Larson had tracked Henderson down and thrust a cup of spiked punch into the Varsity captain's hand.

"For our gracious host," the ex-Hawk offered.

"Uh, thanks – whoever you are," Henderson replied, taking a sip. "Mmm…this one's got a bit of sting in its tail!"

As the Varsity captain happily and obliviously drank the toxic brew, Goldberg, Russ, and Averman began distributing punch to other Varsity players and guests. Goldberg was completely disguised in his Pikachu costume, Russ in a skeleton costume, and Averman was unrecognizable as a Frankenstein monster. The JV players were efficient and effective in their distribution, though Fulton declined a new drink – having already cut himself off – and McGill had been tipped off by Larson and knew not to accept the punch.

Larson let out an evil titter as he watched most of the party guests sip his concoction.

Upstairs in a locked bedroom, Adam and Tiffany exchanged furious kisses as she stripped him above the waist. She bit on her lower lip as she took in the sight of his taut, toned upper body. But he didn't give her time to enjoy the view. Grabbing her by the hips, he threw her onto the bed with a ferocity that surprised and delighted her.

She kicked off her boots and graced Adam with a 'come hither' smile.

Pinning her down and straddling the her, he began feathering kisses from her jawline down to her neck. Her breathing quickened as he made his way down to her chest – driving her mad as he nibbled the silky, sensitive flesh while running a hand up her toned thigh before cupping a bare cheek.

She whimpered as he paused to undo his belt when he felt his stomach churn violently. Then came a loud rumble.

"Adam, are you okay?"

"It's probably nothing."

He had hardly gotten those few words out when he gagged. Before he knew what was happening, he vomited all over Tiffany.

"Agh! Gross! What a loser!"
She shoved him aside and sat up, sliding on her boots before stomping out the door – the brown, chunky shawl having the effect of making the scantily-clad cheerleader leave the bedroom more fully-covered than she had been when she entered it.

As Adam moved to lay down and calm his stomach, he heard pandemonium from downstairs.

Some Varsity players were lucky enough to make it to the bathrooms, only to discover that the toilets had been rigged with cherry bombs; they were greeted with a wave of toilet water as they vomited. Others, including Henderson, had not made it to a bathroom and managed to empty their stomachs in front of the other party guests.

After leaving a trail of marbles behind them, the JV conspirators grouped together at the front of the house. Russ, Goldberg, Averman, and Larson took off their masks – the former Hawk brandishing the empty bottle of cat ear medicine.

"Eat it, Varsity losers!" Russ exclaimed before he threw open the door and made his escape with his friends.

"Why those little…" a woozy Henderson was about to give chase when he slipped on some marbles and crashed belly-up onto the floor.
Larson's Regime

Adam looked over at his roommate with a mixture of sympathy and aggravation. It was November, and the Semi Formal was approaching; and there was a distinct possibility that Charlie would end up dateless. Linda had stopped coming over to the dorm for their little study sessions that included a bit of actual studying, and Charlie spent his free-time cooped up in his room, endlessly playing his new Radiohead CD.

As the particularly depressing *No Surprises* filled the small room with hopelessness, Adam got to his feet. He had indulged Charlie's moodiness long enough. Tough love was what his friend needed now.

"Do you not see me right here?" Charlie demanded from the bed upon hearing the music go quiet.

"Charlie, you have *got* to get out of this room," Adam replied. "I don't care where. Just go someplace, get some fresh air…and fucking grow a pair already."

The deposed JV captain responded by putting a pillow over his face and pressing his hands against it. His team had continued to dominate through the entire month of October and into November; and he had not had anything to do with it. Larson was calling the shots off the ice and had emerged as the captain in all but name. And Charlie's depression sapped away his vigor, leading to mediocre play and a demotion to the second line.

Adam let out a sigh as he approached his roommate's messy bed.

"Look, I'm sorry, Charlie," he began, hunching over with his hands resting just above his knees. "But you need to get your fire back. You're not going to solve any of your problems by just laying down and surrendering. It's time to fight back. You don't have to do it all in one swipe, but start with a few little victories – like getting out for a long walk to clear your head and face the world."

Charlie lifted the pillow from his face. His wry smile gave Adam a ray of hope.

"You really just want the room to yourself, don't you?"

"A man can only take so much alt rock, Charlie."

The JV forward let out a long sigh – turning pensive, then truculent.

"And what makes you so qualified to understand my problems?" He demanded. "Life is easy for you. It's not like you had your team taken away from you and made to be a loser. It's not like you're playing the worst hockey of your life while everyone around you is playing their best. It's not like you have a girlfriend who doesn't give a shit about you. You just don't get what it's like to be me right now."

Stunned, Adam's jaw nearly reached the wooden planks of the dormitory floor.

"You can't be serious, Charlie. I don't get it? My life is easy? Well, let me fill you in, buddy: I'm on a winless team that's only good at beating each other up; I've got a coach who thinks my gameplay is dragging the team down; the Ducks think I'm a traitor for being on Varsity, and Varsity thinks I'm a traitor for being associated with the Ducks; I lost my date to Semi's; Tim's got Julie…"

Having begun to vent, Adam had thrown caution to the wind and blurted out his Julie-related jealousy. Horrified, he covered his mouth to stifle a gasp. He hoped that Charlie would fail to
notice his slip – a hope that proved futile.

"And Tim dating the Cat is a problem?" Charlie asked, sitting up straight.

Adam refused to respond.

Seeing his perfect roommate so vulnerable had an energizing effect on the dejected captain. He had heard that misery loves company. Now he had confirmation.

"I mean, I know that Tim's a Riley. And a tool. And a phony. And a Larson stooge," Charlie continued. "But if the Cat wants to play with him, where's the harm? Phonies need lovin' too."

Rather than verbalize a response, Adam's sapphire eyes shot daggers.

But Charlie was not the least bit put off by the intensity of Adam's hostile gaze. For the first time in over a month, he actually seemed to have a spring in his step. Leaning in close to Adam, Charlie flashed his Cheshire Cat grin.

"Banksie and Cat Lady, sittin' in a tree; k-i-s-s-i-n-g; first comes love, second comes…"

"Alright, alright," Adam interrupted a thoroughly-amused Charlie. "So the cat is out of the bag. And no, there wasn't any pun intended. But Tim's got her, and I have to rely on my cousin for dates."

Charlie's cocked eyebrow nearly hit the ceiling.

"I have to rely on my cousin to set me up for dates," Adam clarified. "My family isn't blue-blooded enough for inbreeding," he added with an eye roll.

But he could not begrudge Charlie a bit of fun at his expense. At least the JV captain was finally starting to recover some of his old groove.

"Whatever, Adam. You're nice, you're genuine – and you're a lot tougher than I think even you realize. You're everything that Tim's not, in other words," Charlie declared. "As soon as Julie realizes that he doesn't have her back, she'll trade up…maybe for you," he added with a mischievous grin.

"Alright, Cupid. Whatever you say."

A dubious Adam returned to his desk and tried to get his mind back on his trig homework. But he could not get Julie and Tim out of his head. Part of him wanted nothing more than to see them breakup. But having Tiffany tell him to get lost had hurt plenty, and she had not even been his official girlfriend.

He chastised himself for wishing Julie to experience any kind of heartache, and tried to persuade himself that Tim was good for the girl he was crazy about.

"Julie's smart, Charlie," Adam spoke up. "She wouldn't see anything in him if there was nothing there. I'm sure he's good for her."

Charlie – who was on his feet and stretching – looked over at his roommate. He could tell from his friend's body language and voice that the goalie meant a lot to him. The JV captain began to feel guilty about his teasing; so he put on a straight face, went over to Adam, and planted a comforting hand on the Varsity forward's shoulder.
"You're not around, Adam. So you don't know what I know," he declared solemnly. "They won't last – Julie and Tim. And when she dumps his pathetic ass, she'll be much better off."

He did not wait for Adam to respond, but went over to his own desk and reached for the telephone.

"I think I'll go give Linda a visit – I just need to call ahead first."

As Charlie began dialing the number, Adam smiled. He had achieved the seemingly impossible and gotten the JV captain to lighten-up. The first little victory had been achieved.

Across the courtyard, Connie and Julie worked on their homework in silence – each girl seated at their adjacent desks. Connie had been putting off the necessary trip to the school library for her history paper because she found research so tedious. But it was already November, and unless she was willing to BS the entire thing and hope for the best, she knew that she had better get going soon.

After tucking a binder full of loose-leaf paper into her backpack, she got up to go.

"Where are you going?"

Julie, still in her overprotective mood, was quick to pounce.

And Connie had had enough.

"Out," the brunette forward replied tersely.

"I'll repeat, where are you going?" Julie asked, her arms defiantly crossed.

"Someplace where Larson can show me a good time."

Julie's eyes narrowed.

"A little free advice: don't pursue stand-up comedy as a career."

"Why thank you Julie," Connie replied in a voice that oozed false gratitude. "Since you were so kind to give me unsolicited advice, allow me to return the favor: mind your own business and quit pretending that you're my mother."

The goalie rose to her feet and blocked the forward's path to the door.

"Julie, get out of my way before I hurt you."

"Where. Are. You. Going?"

"To the library!" Connie shrieked. "I've got this huge paper due in a few days and I haven't even started my research. What, am I not allowed to pass history?"

Julie stood aside.

"There. That wasn't so difficult, was it? Just be sure to come right back to the dorm."

"Wow."

Connie could not believe how clueless her best friend had become. Julie had always been a beacon of common sense and levelheaded decency. That she had become so domineering and so unaware of it seemed incredible to Connie.
Seizing an opportunity to make her escape from the suffocating dorm room, she threw open the door and practically galloped to the library.

But Julie was not quite as clueless as Connie thought. The goalie was well aware that she was on increasingly thin ice with her best friend, but she did not know what else she could do to keep her safe. Larson seemed too clever and too omnipresent to be outmaneuvered. It seemed that the only solution was to prevent Connie from ever being alone for too long a period of time.

As she returned to her desk and attempted to get her mind back on her pre-calculus homework, the phone rang.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Julie – it's Adam. I know it's been a while, and I'm sorry I haven't done a better job keeping in touch; but I wanted to call to see how you were doing."

Under most circumstances, few things would have made Julie happier than a call from Adam Banks. But the tension with Connie had left her feeling irritable. Adam or not, whoever called Julie at that moment was going to get their head ripped off.

"Oh? The super-cool Varsity player is taking a break from his perfect cheerleaders to chat-up the commoners; and you thought 'Plain Julie must be free to chat, so why the hell not?' Is that it?!"

There was silence on the other end. Adam had received some unhappy emails from Julie over the summer; but they had never spoken when she was truly upset, and he did not know how to handle it. But he knew that he had not been a good friend lately, and he owed it to her to at least try to help.

"What's wrong, Julie? You can tell me."

The goalie sighed.

"I'm sorry Adam. I shouldn't have went off on you like that. It's just a little girl drama between Connie and me. Nothing that I can't handle."

"If you don't want to talk about it, that's cool," Adam replied. "And just so you know, I actually am taking a break from the cheerleaders."

Julie giggled.

"I was wondering why you weren't sitting with the Beautiful People at lunch anymore. "

"Yeah…it turns out that girls don't like it when you throw-up on them. Live and learn."

Julie let out a surprised laugh.

"Oh? Now this I've got to hear."

After Adam recounted the entire humiliating story, he added, "I'll never drink again, even if they hold the cat ear medicine next time."

Julie had been laughing so hard that she had to wipe tears from the corners of her eyes, but she managed to recover her voice after a minute or so.

"I'm really sorry," she apologized, her voice still ringing with mirth. "I shouldn't be laughing – it really was a horrible thing you went through."
"Meh. I've been through worse. And I'm glad you're laughing again."

Julie had forgotten that she was even upset. Even the looming threat of Larson stealing Connie away seemed like less big a deal when she could hear the voice of sweet, calm, self-deprecating Adam.

"But there's something I wanted to ask you about," he continued. "Earlier in our chat you referred to yourself as 'Plain Julie.' You don't really see yourself that way, do you?"

"Well, I'm no cheerleader."

"And that's a bad thing?" Adam chortled. "I can't think of any group that's more difficult to relate to than that bunch. I mean Sarah's nice – she's my cousin, and I get her. But the rest of them? Yikes."

"That's the thing. I want guys to see me as beautiful...I know; that's totally shallow and vain, but I can't help it. I'm the tomboy, the honors student. No one's dream girl. Except maybe Tim's. He's the first guy who has really made me feel beautiful."

Adam's stomach turned at the mention of Tim Riley. But it was obvious that the younger Riley had been given Julie some badly-needed self-esteem, so he decided not to get in between that.

"Tim's definitely a lucky guy. I'm sure he realizes that."

Julie was quiet for a while. Did Adam just imply that I'm beautiful?

She shook her head, deciding that her kind friend was being just that.

"Thanks, Adam. If you still don't have a date for Semi's, I'll save you a few dances."

"Sarah set me up with some girl from the Drama Club. We'll probably have one dance and then go our separate ways. So I'm going to hold you to that promise, Julie."

The goalie smiled at the thought of dancing with the star forward.

"Sure thing, Adam," she replied, looking over at the clock radio on the windowsill above her bed. "I still have a lot of homework, so I probably should go. But thank you so much for calling – really, you have no idea how much I needed it," she added truthfully.

"You bet," Adam replied. "And don't be shy about calling me, okay?"

"I won't. Bye, Adam!"

Averman's breath froze in the November air as he waited in the courtyard. The three oak trees were now completely naked – as were most of the trees on the campus. Though the calendar would disagree, winter for all intents and purposes was soon to arrive.

But the prospect of an afternoon with Tom Hessinger warmed the JV defenseman.

Tom was a sophomore without a formal clique – making him a lone wolf. He was also Averman's lab partner in chemistry, and had emerged as the non-Duck on campus that he was closest to. So intense were Averman's feelings for Tom that they aroused a sense of fear in addition to the excitement. He had not even confided in his best friend, Greg Goldberg.

Larson, the new leader of JV, had proven to be an effective and supportive captain and had won Averman's confidence. So the former D5er had gone ahead and confessed to the former Hawk –
who in turn surprised Averman with an accepting attitude that he had not expected to find anywhere.

"There you are!" Tom called out, approaching the defenseman.

"Here I am!" Averman called back playfully.

With his sandy hair and warm brown eyes, Tom had a look that made Averman's breath catch in his throat. Though bundled up for the weather, enough of his face was visible for Averman's viewing pleasure.

Tom looked down to see his friend carrying a picnic basket.

"Oh, you were serious about the picnic – cool. I mean, it's not too cold for you?"

"Of course I was serious," Averman replied. "Have you ever known me to speak in jest?"

"Is that a trick question?"

The pair shared a laugh as they began making the walk to Lake Eden. Somewhat off the beaten path, Averman figured that the campus lake was the perfect place for their date. It was too cold for swimmers and the usual lake crowd, but it was too early for the water to have frozen for the skaters.

Standing up in the top floor of the library, Larson observed with a satisfied grin as a half-dozen Varsity thugs got into position.

"I still don't understand why I can't be there too," McGill protested. "I'm Varsity, I should be there with the team – it'll look weird if I'm not there."

Larson turned and looked down at his longtime friend-turned-minion.

"Are you questioning my judgment?"

"No, no, no," McGill insisted. "You know best, I know that. I just wish sometimes that you'd explain your thinking a little bit more."

"Jake, you're my best friend," Larson replied. "We're joined at the hip. When people think 'Paul Larson,' they immediately think 'Jake McGill.' If you're down at the lake, Averman's going to put two-and-two together. You're too valuable as a quiet go-between with Varsity – I can't have you go and blow your cover."

"I guess. But still – I'd love to beat the fucking shit out of some fags."

"Don't worry, there will be other opportunities for you," Larson offered. "But right now I need you to lay low."

McGill nodded in acceptance – if not necessarily agreement. But he supposed that even if he did not get to participate in the coming blood sport, at least he would get a good view of it.

Several minutes later, as Averman spread the picnic blanket and began setting-up, the squad of Varsity enforcers moved in for the kill.

"Les!" Tom cried out as half a dozen Varsity players surrounded them.

"Deez fuckin' pussy degenerates," Henderson scoffed in his gangster voice. "Normally, we don't
help Ducks – but today, we're gonna beat yous til yous turn straight.”

Averman and Tom were completely disoriented by the swiftness and ferocity of the assault. Varsity fists and kneecaps came raining down on the pair of sophomores as they cried in vain for help. The junior and senior hockey players had always had a sadistic streak, but their viciousness was augmented by their failures on the ice.

They took out all of their many frustrations on the helpless underclassmen, and bloodied them for what felt like a lifetime to their victims.

Standing from his observation post in the library, Larson again turned to McGill.

"I think you better get the prefects down there," he advised his minion. "We don't want to kill them, after all."

McGill wanted to protest, but he feared Larson too much to defy him.

"I'll get right on that," the Varsity forward said instead.

Several minutes later, Varsity dispersed when they saw school prefects in their navy blue coats approach. The prefects had always practiced selective justice and allowed the best-connected students to get away with anything just short of actual murder. But in this case, the evidence was too obvious for Varsity to expect to walk.

So they fled.

A prone and bloody Averman rolled onto his side with enormous difficulty, and he managed to spot Tom lying face down several yards away. Returning to the prone position, Averman planted his hands on the cold, hard ground and tried to push himself up to his feet. But his legs had been reduced to jelly and gave out immediately.

"Tom, I'm coming," he called out in what felt like a shout but was only as audible as a whisper.

The Duck began crawling toward his friend. His hands felt like they were being pressed against broken glass as he made the long journey. He was halfway there when he began hearing the voices of prefects, which prompted Tom to stir. Averman was overcome with a sense of relief when he saw his friend take his face out of the dirt.

"Les…" he croaked through his broken ribs. "It hurts to breathe."

Back at the library, Larson turned to McGill.

"That's a job well-done. Let's grab something to eat."

McGill nodded, following his master to the elevator.

"That was some game against the Pats last Sunday, wasn't it?" He asked.

"Indeed," Larson agreed. "It looked like New England really had the Vikings on the ropes, but the Vikes pulled through. Hopefully they can do it again against Chicago."

A few seconds later, the elevator landed at the ground floor. As Larson alighted, he observed Portman dutifully at work in a study carrel – exactly where he had ordered the ex-Bash Brother.

*Good boy.*
As he turned to face the main research area, the former Hawk observed Connie at a large table covered with a prodigious amount of books and notes. It looked like the brunette forward was packing up to return to her dorm.

"Change of plans, Jake," Larson spoke up. "You go on without me. Other matters require my attention. I must confess, it is lonely at the top," he added with a wafer-thin smile.

"Heh, okay. Don't work too hard, Paul."

"I don't intend to."

Larson made his way over to Connie's table as McGill took his leave.

Poor thing, she's been working too hard.

Though Connie had waited until the eleventh hour to do her research, she was a fast worker and had gleaned enough material to do her writing. But she was kidding herself if she thought that she could carry all of those books unassisted.

She let out a faint curse as the tall, unwieldy stack got away from her and crashed to the floor.

"Here, let me help."

Hearing the deep voice of Paul Larson, Connie looked up with a start.

"Oh, hey there," she greeted him. "I didn't realize that my non-Julie teammates did libraries."

Larson pointed to Portman, still hard at work in the carrel.

"I do what I can to keep our star defenseman's grade-point average up," he declared. "Anything I can do to help the team, y'know. That's what I'm all about."

Back at the campus lake, Averman sputtered as prefects strapped him to a gurney bound for the infirmary.

Back at the library, Connie nodded in agreement.

"You've sure done a lot," she said. "Especially with Portman. It's amazing that you can keep him so disciplined."

"Discipline is not an issue for Portman," Larson assured her as they rose to their feet. "I know he comes across as a doofus, but he's got a hidden streak of ambition. He really wants to do well, believe it or not. He just needs someone who can keep him focused."

"Well, I think what you've done for him is wonderful. It's just too bad about Fulton though."

"Ah, yes – quite."

"But really, Larson…"

"…Call me 'Paul'."

"Paul," Connie corrected herself. "I appreciate you giving me a hand, but I've got these."

"It would seem that gravity disagrees."
Connie chuckled, and nearly dropped her small stack of books as they began walking toward the check-out desk.

"Touché," she replied.

"But getting back to Portman – and how I help him," Larson began, not wanting to miss the opportunity to build his good-guy credentials with Connie. "What Portman needs more than anything else is a good listener. Someone who can give him real perspective. I'm an excellent listener, Connie. And I can give you a perspective that you can't get anywhere else."

"Well, anyone who can make Dean Portman crack the books obviously has something going on," she acknowledged, setting her books down on the counter to be scanned.

"Is there anything that you want to get off your chest?"

"Heh, one or two things – now that you mention it. There's my increasingly stalkerish roommate, for starters."

"Really?" Larson asked, suppressing an opportunistic grin. "Why don't we walk-and-talk about it on our way back to your dorm?"

Connie shrugged.

"Why not?"
Two Ducks, Two Hawks

Connie emerged from the library with a small stack of books in hand as Larson held the door open for her. Most of her books were either tucked away in her backpack – which Larson had slung over his shoulder – or balancing on one of the tall defenseman's long arms while he held the door with the other. Not only was the former Hawk tall and strong, but he had an impressive sense of balance and coordination.

He was not at all like the loveable, clumsy blond forward who Connie had dated on-and-off for years.

"Thank you Paul, but really – you don't have to hold my backpack."

Given that it was pink, a guy was flirting with disaster by carrying it in public. Beneath the sleek, patrician veneer, Eden Hall was a surprisingly brutal place. Between corrupt prefects, testosterone-drenched bullies, and vicious gossips, the idyllic campus in the woody suburbs of the Twin Cities practically hummed with cruelty.

"I don't mind," Larson replied. "We shouldn't let these macho jerks get to us. So what if I'm carrying a pink backpack?"

"You are so right," Connie agreed before frowning slightly. "But still, I'm a little nervous."

"Don't be. There are enough books in here to make the business end of this backpack rather unpleasant for any bully's face."

Connie chuckled at the thought of the tall, quiet defenseman swinging a book-laden pink backpack and knocking out bullies with it. The character almost sounded like some hero out of one of Guy's graphic novels. Speaking of whom, the brunette forward wondered where her boyfriend was. She had caught up with him on the way over to the library and he had agreed to walk her back to the dormitory, but he was nowhere to be seen.

Well, Varsity is still winless. I guess Scooter needed extra attention.

"So anyway," Larson spoke up, "how are things? The two of us never seem to get an opportunity to talk."

Connie observed a puff of frozen breath issue from Larson as the defenseman spoke. Though she took care to wear her black overcoat, leather gloves, and gray crocheted hat, the temperature had dropped precipitously; and the dull November gray had lightened a shade – indicating the imminent arrival of snow.

"No, we haven't talked much, have we?" She agreed. "That's because, well…it's complicated."

The kindly brunette was reluctant to hurt her companion by admitting to him that her roommate detested him and had bent over backwards to keep her away from him.

'I doubt it," Larson deadpanned.

"Huh?" Connie froze, prompting Larson to stop in his tracks. "I mean—what do you mean?"

"I doubt it's complicated," he clarified. "Most things in life are very simple. But people avoid facing their problems directly. So they grow into big, complicated things."
"I guess."

"So what is it, then? What has become so big and complicated?"

"Ha! Well you asked, so don't cry – or laugh – when I tell you. You promise?"

Larson nodded.

"It's like this, Paul: Julie is convinced that you're trying to make me breakup with Guy so I'll go out with you."

The former Hawk remained frozen in his tracks, his obsidian eyes as inscrutable as ever.

"I promised that I wouldn't laugh, so I won't."

"I know, I know – it's totally ridiculous," Connie extended an apologetic hand that grasped Larson's forearm.

Through his leather jacket, she could feel his strength. His arm was as hard as a barbell and as thick as a bough.

**Heh, no wonder he's not afraid of the bullies.**

At that realization, part of Connie actually wished for some bullies to emerge and try their luck against the powerfully-built Hawk. The D5er bit on her lower lip at the thought of Larson unleashing his raw power on Eden Hall's worst. Her touch persisted, and her pulse quickened as she continued to grasp his ferric arm.

Larson could feel Connie's attraction through her touch, and suppressed a triumphant grin. And he could feel the flesh beneath the photograph in his pocket burn with desire. Although Connie was not *technically* the smiling brunette in his pocket, the resemblance was uncanny. Larson had longed for that girl – that woman – ever since she had been torn from his life on his 9th birthday some six Januaries earlier. Now, she was as close as she would ever be to him again.

Connie withdrew her hand with a start.

"Sorry about that, Paul. I've always been a bit of a toucher, y'know? I like to touch an arm sometimes. Dad says I talk too much with my hands. Anyway, I'm sorry."

"No need to apologize. My mom liked to talk with her hands too."

*And dads never know best,* he added internally.

The defenseman looked down at the paved walkway, ruminating on his loss.

"I miss her every day."

Connie's tender hand returned to its position on Larson's forearm – this time in a stronger and more sympathetic grip.

"Oh, you poor thing."

"Y'know, I used to think that hand-talking was just an Italian thing, like on Mom's side of the family," Larson began with a slight smile. "But now I know that it's more of a 'nice thing' than an ethnic thing."
"Oh, that's it. You've asked for it!"

A worried look flashed across Larson's face, but it gave way to a smile as Connie embraced him in a comforting hug. He returned the embrace, but took care not to linger.

A howling gust of winter wind crashed into the pair and stung their faces with sharp snowflakes. The coldness and the swiftness of the wind had the effect of making the flakes feel every bit like the shards of glass they resembled.

"We better get moving," he suggested, ushering Connie forward with a light shove.

"Yeah, it's really getting nasty."

"So, getting back to your stalkerish roommate," Larson spoke up as they began walking. "She's the reason why I haven't been able to talk to you? Well, that's good to know."

He had known that all along, but if he had any hope of turning Connie against Julie, he needed the forward to condemn the goalie with her own words.

"Yeah, she's been very unreasonable lately. I've had to get her expressed permission to go anywhere on my own because she was so afraid of me bumping into you…and you working some kind of weird voodoo on me. What do you think that could be, anyway?"

"I have no idea."

"Well, whatever it is – Julie is convinced that you're dangerous."

"She's not wrong about that," he declared coldly.

Curious, Connie looked up at her tall companion. His gaze was hard. But she laughed out loud anyway, prompting Larson to crack a paper-thin smile.

"Yes, you are dangerous," she offered. "To any hockey player unlucky enough to play the Ducks, that is. You've been such a force on the ice for us. But I don't think you're dangerous off the ice…not even a little bit."

"Oh?"

Connie blushed.

"Okay, maybe a little bit."

"Only a little bit? Well, it's obvious that you'll have to get to know me better. Then you'll discover what Julie already seems to know: that I'm a monster."

Connie laughed out loud.

"You really are making Julie out to sound unhinged. But I guess that's what she's been lately," she then flashed a teasing smile at Larson. "Heh. Monster, indeed."

Larson smiled a bit wider this time. It never ceased to amaze him how false an impression some well-timed candor could create. Strategically-timed candor was an especially powerful instrument when combined with sentiment that appeared to be noble.

"But we'll have to wait until after Semi's for that," he declared. "After all, you have to take Guy. I don't want Julie or anyone else to accuse me of being a home wrecker."
Connie laughed again. As unreasonable as Julie had seemed to her lately, the goalie seemed positively crazy when she talked it over with another person.

"Don't worry," she began as they approached the girls' dormitory. "Guy and I are going strong. And as cool as you are, I'm not leaving him for you."

*Give it time, my pretty.*

"But I definitely want to be friends – *good* friends – with you," Connie declared. "And I'd like it even more if you, Julie, and me could all get on the same page."

Larson's eyes widened as they stopped in front of the main entrance. He did not like where this was going. But Connie continued.

"Julie's probably upstairs right now. I think a little powwow could go a long way toward clearing the air. And we might as well toast our new friendship with some hot cocoa."

"Are you sure that's such a good idea, Connie? Julie seems to be under such a powerful delusion that I'm not at all sure that she's rational. Maybe she should see the school psychologist first."

Connie raised an eyebrow.

"Well…I know I called her 'stalkerish,' and I know she believes some crazy things about you. But I think she's still a long way from being legit crazy. And besides, you still have my books," she added with a teasing smile. "Your couriering service includes delivery to my desk. Which means you have to come inside. Which means you have to go around so I can let you in."

"Heh, fair enough."

The former Hawk went around to the side entrance as instructed and within a minute was following Connie up the stairs to the room that she shared with Julie.

"Holy hell," Larson gasped. "Sauna much?"

He had never been inside the girls' dormitory before, and was unaware of Ms. Stewart's penchant for setting the thermostat to the max.

"Yeah, it's pretty ridiculous," Connie agreed. "You're definitely gonna have to take off that leather jacket."

Larson grinned as he imagined what articles of clothing Connie would have to remove in order to get comfortable. He was even looking forward to seeing 'the Bitch.' Although Julie was next in line for the chop, Larson could not deny that she had a pleasing figure. He simply preferred 'eye candy' of the more submissive variety.

As Connie and Larson made their way down the hall, they were greeted by a spicy and exotic aroma, prompting the forward to flash an excited grin.

"Oooh, if that's what I think it is, then I take back every bad thing that I've ever said about Julie."

Inside their dorm room, Julie had begun unpacking some Thai food that she had ordered. It had arrived just minutes earlier, and the aroma of ginger and lemongrass was almost strong enough to make the goalie feel lightheaded. But Connie loved the stuff, and Julie figured that a Thai dinner could win back her roommate's good graces.
She heard the door open as she placed a polystyrene box on Connie's desk.

"Hey, Connie. I know that I've been a pain in the butt lately, so I've ordered some Thai. There's..."

Julie stopped talking as she looked up and discovered Larson standing behind Connie. The former Hawk flashed a grin that was smug, but not lustful – Julie had covered up to fetch the food, so he did not get to see anything exciting. But he relished the opportunity to needle his nemesis, so he persisted with his triumphant smirk, as if to say 'I win.'

"Julie, I think we need to have a talk," Connie declared.

"We sure do," Julie agreed. "Right after this...creature...leaves our room."

"Julie!" Connie snapped.

Rather than respond to her roommate, the goalie took a seat at her desk and dialed the phone number to Tim's room. After a couple of rings, it picked up.

"Hey, Tim – it's Julie. I'm coming over to your dorm right now. Be at the side entrance to let me in. 'K? Bye."

She threw a few study materials into her backpack before grabbing her Bruins parka and heading to the door.

"Julie..." Connie began to protest, blocking the goalie's path.

"Let her go," Larson spoke up, gently pulling Connie to the side.

Julie wasted no time in taking her leave. She would no sooner submit herself to the joint presence of Connie and Larson than she would submit to an hour of medieval torture. Everything that she had worked for in the past several weeks, everything she had done to keep her best friend safe – even when it involved risking the friendship itself – was all for naught. Larson had won. She felt it was only a matter of time before the former Hawk cast the same dark spell on Connie that he had cast on Portman.

As she stomped down the stairs, she decided that she had to warn Guy. But JV and Varsity players seldom crossed path even during the best of times – now the teams were again at war. Julie felt her stomach turn at that realization; it would be even easier for Larson to get Connie to turn on Guy in these circumstances. Guy was Varsity after all.

She recalled the words of a crestfallen Russ some two months earlier.

"The flock's broken up, Cowboy. No more Ducks."

That sentiment had struck Julie as an exaggeration at the time, but it was beginning to feel painfully true. Their former coach, Gordon Bombay, had touted his alma mater as a wonderful place for his Ducks – a golden opportunity for the team to stay together and really develop as hockey players.

But it did not appear that the Ducks could survive the strain of being 'together' at Eden Hall.

The dejected goalie was in an utterly miserable mood as she waited at the side entrance to the boys' dormitory to be let in. She did not have to wait for long, as an eager Tim was ready for her.

"Hey, doll face," he greeted her with a peck on the cheek. "Brrr! Good day to be indoors, isn't it?"
"Yes it is," she said flatly.

"Well, right this way."

The younger Riley led Julie up the stairs to the room that he had all to himself. Given that his father was a powerful Trustee, he had his own room – a fact that he had repeatedly pointed out to his girlfriend. But she had shown no interest in checking the place out, and the few times that Julie had ever invited Tim over to her dorm, Connie had always been there.

He was beginning to despair that the two female Ducks were conjoint twins, but he observed with relief that Julie was alone this time. Now he might finally have an opportunity to prove himself as a man and really make Julie his.

Tim had already taken all the precautions, even undertaking that dreadful rite of passage for teenage boys: the first 'adult' trip to the drugstore. And his shopping approach had proven to be remarkably similar to Adam's – the trip that Tim had openly scoffed at. Having run some private experiments, Tim had determined his true size.

But he made sure to transfer the modest-sized condoms to the box labeled 'extra-large.'

_It's that kind of attention to detail that makes me a-natural._

"Welcome to my castle," Tim declared as he unlocked the door and guided Julie in.

It was smaller than the room she shared with Connie, but Julie figured that it was large enough for one person to be comfortable. It had all the same amenities anyway – twin bed, desk and chair, fridge/microwave unit, closet with bureau, and a small TV.

"Let me just take that," he offered, sliding off Julie's parka.

"Thanks."

He suppressed a disappointed sigh at her conservative outfit – a charcoal wool sweater, blue jeans, and wool socks. When she was in her own dorm room, she hardly seemed to be wearing anything at all. But Connie was always there. Tim shook his head, trying to push these negative thoughts out of his mind. If he was going to open and savor that fine vintage situated next to him, he had to get her in the mood.

"Have a seat," he advised, hanging the parka on a door peg.

"Thanks."

He suppressed yet another disappointed sigh as Julie sat down on his desk chair rather than his bed. But he was undeterred. Opening a desk drawer, he 'subtly' placed his box of 'extra-larges' on the desk. If the prospect of some Riley lovin' would not get Julie out of the dumps, it seemed to Tim like nothing would.

"So what's up, anyway?" He asked, taking a seat on the bed. "You seem upset about something."

Julie took a deep breath, then when in to a long, unfiltered rant about Connie and Larson – or something or other. Those two names were the only thing that Tim could make out as his girlfriend continued to race. He really did not give a damn. He just hoped that Julie would vent whatever she needed to vent, then be in the mood for some lovin'.

"So, that's really…something." Tim declared once Julie finally stopped talking.
Leaning forward, he deliberately brushed a hand against her surprisingly full chest and grasped her jaw before pulling her in for a kiss.

But Julie was having none of it.

"Don't you ever think of anything else?" She demanded as she pushed Tim away. "You know… besides it?"

"Heh, I can only think of it cos you're such a damn prude," he mused bitterly. "C'mon, baby. Dr. Love's got the cure for your blues."

He moved to kiss her again, but Julie gave him a hard shove that sprawled him across the bed as she got to her feet.

"Whatever you've got…it's no cure for me."

As Julie turned to fetch her parka, she noticed the box of condoms. And for the first time in what felt like ages, she laughed out loud.

"It looks like Charlie has underestimated you, Tim. You're even more pathetic than he thinks you are. Good luck finding a new patient, Dr. Love."

Enraged, Tim shot up from the bed and quickly closed the distance. His affected charm had deserted him, and his pale blue eyes looked almost demonic as the veins in his neck became more prominent and his face reddened.

"Just who the hell do you think you are?!" He demanded, leaning forward and planting a palm on the door. "Do you have any idea what guys say to me about you? They say that I'm performing a community service just by being with you. And you are turning me away? No way. No fucking way."

Julie sent her kneecap into Tim's groin, causing the forward to fall backwards. She threw open the door and stomped out. But Tim recovered rather more quickly than Julie expected, so she started to run as he began his angry pursuit.

"Come back here, you bitch – you're mine!"

She leaned her head forward and galloped like a racehorse in the last leg. Tim had a long stride that made him a formidable pursuer. But Julie ran and ran – she had no choice. She felt the adrenalin rise to her throat as she heard his footsteps gain on her. She was so absorbed in her escape, and in her pursuer, that she was oblivious to the six-foot-two inch, 180-pound frame that was standing directly in her path.

She crashed directly into Adam as he emerged from his room, causing both of them to tumble to the floor.

"Oh, Julie! I'm sorry – I didn't see you coming, are you alright?"

It was a testament to his physical and moral strength that he was able to respond to such a violent collision in a calm and gentlemanly way. He was already back on his feet and worrying about the person who had run into him.

Looking down at Julie, Adam could tell that she was a long way from 'alright.' The goalie was breathing heavily and was obviously flustered about something. As he heard Tim's mocking laugh, he discovered the source.
"That's right, Julie – go to the King of Birth Control," the younger Riley sneered. "Y'know, this is just perfect: the sex addict and the nun. I'm sure you two will get on like a house on fire."

Julie – seated on the floor of the hallway – began to softly cry. Squaring up against Tim, Adam shot a murderous look at Julie's tormentor. Before the younger Riley could make his escape, he felt Adam's hand clamp onto his throat like a vise before getting pressed against a wall.

"Well now," Adam hissed. "I'm not the smartest guy in the world, but I'm not the dumbest either. It seems that you've been a bad boy, Tim."

Tightening his chokehold, Adam showed-off his strength by lifting his rival off the ground with one hand.

"It looks like you owe Julie an apology. If you value oxygen more than you value her feelings, you'll make it a good one."

The younger Riley tried to protest, but it sounded like incoherent sputters.

"I don't know…that didn't really sound like 'sorry' to me. You'll have to try again."

"Sss-ooo-rrr-ee."

"Louder!"

"Ssorr-ee!" Tim 'offered' as his horrified eyes began to bulge.

"Not to me, you little rodent!" Adam snapped. "Apologize to Julie!"

"Ssorr-ee, Jul-ie," Tim croaked.

"Adam, please," Julie pleaded on Tim's behalf. "Let him go."

"I guess that'll have to do then," Adam said to Tim as he loosened his grip. "Lucky for you, Julie is a better person than I am."

The ex-Hawk released his grip completely and set his prey back down. Now free, the younger Riley took several loud, deep breaths.

"Go on, get the hell outta here."

Tim coughed to recover his voice.

"I'm getting a prefect!" He threatened.

"And admit that you got handled by a Banks?" Adam asked with a wry grin. "I know your family a little too well to believe that, Tim. Buh-bye."

Unable to find a snappy comeback in his oxygen-deprived state, Tim stormed off. Adam turned to Julie, who was still sitting on the floor.

"Come on, let's get you up," he offered as he helped her back to her feet. "You alright? He didn't hurt you did he?"

"No, and please don't kill him after this."

Adam's sense of Duck righteousness had combined with his old Hawk sadism, which led him to
believe that the younger Riley deserved further punishment. Julie could sense from his blazing eyes that Adam's anger had not been satiated.

"Really, Adam – he's not worth it," she continued. "But I appreciate you sticking up for me like that. I've almost forgotten what it's like to have your back covered by a friend."

Julie's been feeling abandoned by her friends?

The goalie watched as the anger in Adam's eyes subsided. In its place, the soulful orbs began to glisten with sympathy. She had no way of knowing it, but those newly-sympathetic eyes also were awash in guilt. Adam always felt terrible whenever his dark instincts of years past surfaced; his fits of temper were invariably followed by feelings of guilt and remose. In addition to all that, Julie was feeling abandoned. He had hardly been around her this semester, so he blamed himself for that too.

"I'm sorry, Julie," he offered in a soft voice. "About everything."

Her eyes widened as she looked up into Adam's. The sapphire diamonds were shimmering. Is he going to cry? She had no idea what exactly he was apologizing for, but she knew that he was being sincere; and that he needed to hear that all was forgiven.

"It's fine, Adam – really," Julie offered, reaching for his hand.

His large mitt gently grasped the silky, feminine hand it had been offered.

"I suppose we better get you back to your dorm."

Julie shuddered at the thought.

"I can't go back there – Larson's there with Connie right now."

Adam's eyes widened in horror.

"Please? Can I just stay here for a little while with you and Charlie?"

That soft, pleading voice had the effect of chasing away the Larson-induced horror.

"Sure," Adam replied. "Charlie's actually out with Linda right now. So you'll only have me for company."

"I think I'll cope," Julie teased with a slight smile.

He released her hand as they began making the short walk back to his room, but she leaned into his side in response. He was sore there, but he was not about to complain. So he wrapped an arm around her waist.

As he fumbled with his keys, she noticed that something was amiss.

"Adam?"

"Yes?"

"Why aren't you wearing your Michael Jordan cologne?"

The preppy forward chuckled.

"I wasn't expecting to see you tonight," he explained. "But I guess I can put some on when we get
inside."
"Yeah, that's a good idea – you totally stink."
"Heh, sure thing, Julie."

He opened the door and flicked on the overhead fluorescent lights before ushering her in.
"Nice place you've got here," the goalie offered as she scanned the room.
"You should check out the hot tub on the patio."

Julie threw a light elbow into Adam's gut as the latter chortled.
"I bet, smartass."

"Sorry. Well, make yourself comfortable," Adam offered as he reached into his closet and fetched his bottle of cologne.

Julie looked over at the pair of twin beds separated by a beat-up Dallas Stars footpad. The pad belonged to Charlie, and like many native Minnesotans, Captain Duck had been deeply hurt by the North Stars' move to Dallas – so he liked to step on them every day. The tattered, mangy mat stood in stark contrast to the lovingly-washed Minnesota North Stars comforter that formed tight hospital corners around one of the twins.

The goalie knew that it must have belonged to Adam. She knew that he was one of the few locals to remain loyal to the Stars even after they had moved to Texas, and comparing the neatly-made bed to the chaos across from it – she knew that Adam could not possibly sleep in such a mess.

After hanging her parka on the door peg, she took a seat on the green North Stars comforter – disturbing its taut perfection with the imprint of her body.

"Oh, that's nice," Adam began sarcastically. "First you say I stink, then you steal my spot."

Julie smiled sweetly.

"Well, this side is closer to the TV. And who says we can't share?"

Adam turned and grabbed his desk chair, rolling it over toward the bed gap with one hand while carrying a VHS in the other.

"If you like A Fish Called Wanda, you'll love The Burbs. It's the same sort of dark, offbeat humor," he declared while wheeling the chair over.

Before he could sit down, Julie slid over, extended her leg and kicked the chair away.
"What part of 'sharing' don't you understand?" She demanded, patting the bed for emphasis.

She had missed him far too much to settle for anything less than some movie cuddles.

He's going to hold me whether he wants to or not dammit, she thought – only half-kidding.

He let out a nervous laugh before placing the tape into the VCR and making his way over to the bed. Sitting down on it like a chair, his posture was immediately 'corrected' by Julie.

"There," she declared in triumph as she rested the side of her face on his chest.
Feeling the well-developed pectoral on the other side of Adam's long cotton T, Julie felt that he had gotten even stronger since their last movie night.

*Man, no wonder he could lift Tim off the ground…with one hand no less.*

She pulled him in closer, and wrapped an arm around his tight, powerful chest.

It was obvious that these were not simple maneuvers in an attempt to get comfortable. She wanted him. And he finally realized it.

Gently grasping her jaw, he closed his eyes and began pulling her in – closer and closer to his long-held dream, the dream that had seemed so close yet so far away for so long.

Their lips connected like two elusive pieces of a jigsaw puzzle and locked onto each other in blissful, tender exploration. Time disappeared as Julie and Adam began getting to know each other in a way that they never had before. Both of them had harbored doubts about the other's affection. But the intensity that coursed through their lips confirmed that their infatuation had been mutual after all.

Whatever the future held for them, they could never go back to the way they were before this moment.

Eventually, they parted for air. But they held each other close in their arms. As Julie gathered her emotional bearings, a worried frown appeared on her face.

"Adam?"

"Yes, Julie?"

"About what Tim said…about the birth control."

"I'm sorry, Julie. But I'm not even close to ready for that right now."

"Good," she replied with a smile before pulling him down into movie-watching position. "Heh, we should always do this during the previews," she proposed as the feature film began.

"That can be arranged."

Julie giggled before reaching up and giving Adam's cheek one final kiss before settling in for the movie.
"Yo, Rumsfield!" Came the voice of Corey Feldman's character in *The Burbs.*

Julie and Adam laughed out loud as the M16-wielding Army veteran lost his balance and fell off the roof of a house – shooting-out the window of a parked car on his way down and drawing a round of applause from the teenage onlookers next door.

"This movie is so kooky," Julie declared. "I love it."

"Heh, yeah," Adam agreed. "Charlie thinks I'm nuts for liking it so much. But he would, wouldn't he? It's not like he's ever laughed at a movie that didn't have Chris Farley in it."

"I like Chris Farley."

"So do I!" A wide-eyed Adam insisted. "Really, I do – I swear, I do!"

*Great. Everything was so perfect, then I had to go and trash her taste in movies.*

Julie flashed a mischievous grin as she slid up his chest. Grasping the back of his head with one hand, she lined their faces up so that the tips of their noses touched. As recently as an hour ago, neither of them would have dared to get so close to the other. Now it felt perfectly natural – at least to her.

"Careful, Banksie…you might just make me jealous if you like Chris Farley that much."

A relieved Adam chuckled.

"We can't have that, can we? Let's kiss and make-up."

Julie's giggles were cut short by Adam's lips – which had taken possession of hers with much greater confidence than they had earlier in the evening. She ran her hands through his mane while he held her by the hips and deepened the kiss. But before things could get too steamy, the door opened.

"About freaking time," Charlie declared with a genial laugh.

Julie and Adam parted at once, but Charlie had already turned and left by the time they had assumed the 'we were just studying' pose a good four feet apart. As Adam noticed the hastily-created distance, he wondered if kissing teens would look less suspicious if they were seated closer together.

As he ruminated on this thought, Julie got to her feet.

"I really should get going," she declared.

"No, you really shouldn't," Adam corrected her, pulling her back in and kissing her forehead for good measure.

She wanted to agree, but as her mind turned to a lonely, sleepy Charlie wandering the campus with no place to go, her determination to head back solidified.

"Come on, Adam," she protested. "Let poor Charlie sleep in his own bed."
Adam let out a sigh as he released her.

"I suppose fair is fair," he agreed. "Can I at least walk you back to your dorm?"

"Of course."

After turning off the TV and helping Julie into her Bruins parka, Adam slid on his Varsity jacket and led her out of his dorm room. He was about to turn and lock the door behind him, but noticed that Charlie was sitting on the floor of the hallway, his back against the wall.

"Is it safe to go in?" Charlie asked with a teasing grin.

Adam nodded gravely.

"Just try not to wake the baby," he advised in a whisper.

Charlie's eyes widened in shock, but as Julie laughed at his reaction, he realized that he had fallen victim to Adam's deadpan sense of humor.

"Well-played, Catman, well-played."

"Heh, thanks," Adam replied with a roll of the eyes before turning to Julie. "Come on, let's get you back to your dorm."

"Night, Charlie!" She called out over her shoulder as they walked.

"Night, Mrs. Cake Eater-Gaffney."

Now it was Julie's turn to roll her eyes, but the unwieldy nickname did not sound half-bad in her current state. As she took Adam's hand and followed him down the stairs to the side entrance of the boys' dormitory, she wished that he could follow her into the girls' building and hold her while she slept.

Had it been Tim instead, Julie could expect a night of uncomfortable groping followed by pressure for sex. She had genuinely liked him, but the pressure he had put on her had become too much. While in one of his nastier moods, he mentioned Adam's drugstore shopping – hoping to simultaneously vilify Adam and 'loosen-up' Julie. He failed on both counts.

Adam pushed open the door to the side entrance and the couple was greeted by a bitter, snowy wind. The shock of the cold caused them to release their grip and lean into each other instead, each wrapping an arm around the other's waist. The howling wind precluded any conversation, and it cut through their faces and hands like daggers.

But the distance between the dormitories was mercifully short.

Stopping in front of the main entrance to the girls' building, Adam lifted Julie by the waist to bring her eyelevel for a kiss goodnight. She gripped him tightly, anticipating a passionate kiss. But it turned out light and sweet, which was just as well.

"See you at Semi's?" She asked as he set her back down.

"I hope I'll see you sooner than that."

"Aw, you will," she assured him with another embrace.

"I still think I should save a couple dances for Kelly though. Sarah went to a lot of trouble to set me
up with her, so I kinda owe it to my cousin."

"Sure thing."

A bracing flurry singed their cheeks as a snowy gale crashed into them.

"Whew!" Julie exclaimed as the wind died-down. "If that's not a message saying 'get inside,' I don't know what is! Anyway, goodnight Adam."

She got up on her tiptoes and gave his icy cheek a goodnight kiss before throwing open the front door.

"And get back inside, before you freeze!" She advised before closing the door and disappearing inside the building.

In the frigid air, Adam felt a warm tingle on his cheek where Julie's lips had been. Being the sensible girl that she was, she had already gone indoors while Adam stood dumbstruck in the cold and the significance of that evening occurred to him.

"Goodnight, Princess," he whispered back to the girl who had already left.

As Julie climbed the stairs and made her way to her dorm room, she could not believe that Adam Banks was really hers. Part of her wondered if she was dreaming, but the lingering smell of his deodorant from where he had embraced her confirmed that she was living the dream rather than sleeping through it. With his diligence, quiet strength and respectful demeanor, Adam seemed like an older soul to Julie; even his choice of deodorant seemed pretty adult. He eschewed the pungent, ultra-sporty fragrance so popular with teenage boys and went for a combination of sandalwood, leather, and talc that made him smell like an old-timey barber's shop.

She had not noticed the grin that she had been wearing the entire walk up the stairs and down the hall, but it vanished as soon as she entered her room.

Julie's stomach turned as she observed a scantily-dressed Connie laughing at something that a bare-chested Larson had said.

"Oh, Julie – hey," Connie greeted her roommate.

Julie had not detected any embarrassment in Connie's voice. It was almost as if Connie laughing it up with a half-naked Paul Larson was the most natural thing in the world to the brunette forward. The goalie could not hide her disgust, a feeling that was augmented by the smug grin gifted to her by Larson.

"It's getting late," he declared, sliding on his white undershirt. "I better get back to my dorm. But thank you for the soup…"

"…Tom kha kai."

"Er, right," Larson acknowledged. "Anyway, thanks for that – and don't forget what we talked about."

"I won't, Paul."

The defenseman slid on a gray Minnesota Vikings sweatshirt before reaching for his leather jacket and looking down at the goalie.
"Ah, Julie. You were the one who placed the order, so I guess I should be thanking you. So thanks for the Tommy ka-ka or whatever."

Julie rolled her eyes.

"I was surprised how much I liked it," Larson continued. "But there's plenty of it leftover in the minifrige. Anyway, I better get going."

"Don't let me stop you."

The former Hawk brushed past Julie as he made his way to the door, and nearly knocked the goalie over in the process.

"Heh, sorry," he offered. "Tight space."

Julie recovered her balance and shot Larson the dirtiest of her dirty looks.

"Why don't you go back to hell where you came from?"

"Julie!" Connie snapped.

"It's alright," Larson replied, straightening out his jacket. "Goodnight, ladies."

He departed without another word, leaving Connie as the sole remaining target of Julie's dirty look.

"What's that look for?" Connie demanded. "And why were you such a bitch to Paul just now?"

"Do you really have to ask?" Julie shot back. "Look at the way you're dressed. And Larson was topless just now."

Connie was dressed for a sweltering night in Ms. Stewart's dorm building, and her high-rise black shorts and white tank top left little room for imagination. Julie was especially troubled by the red bra that could be seen through the forward's top.

"Oh for godsake, Julie – we didn't do anything. We just sat around and talked. And ate. And you know as well as anybody how Ms. Stewart likes to re-create the Everglades during the winter. Paul was afraid of taking his shirt off, but I told him it was cool. Nothing happened."

Julie's lips twisted as she made a sour face. Now she could add Larson making me look paranoid to the growing list of grievances that she held against the former Hawk.

"Speaking of the swamp dorm," Connie continued, "you should really take that parka off."

The goalie followed the forward's suggestion readily enough. So oppressive was the hot, thick air that it made its effects felt in an instant. As Julie began her 'dorm strip' routine, Connie felt that the tension had been defused and fished the leftover Thai food out of the minifrige before popping it into the attached microwave.

"Seriously, how can someone possibly be cold enough to crank the furnace to 100 degrees or whatever?" Julie asked as she slid out of her jeans and moved to put on a pair of shorts.

"I don't know," Connie shrugged. "Old people just get cold more easily than the rest of us. Maybe that's why so many of them move to Florida when they retire. So did you have a nice time at Tim's?"

Julie looked startled, then confused.
"What?" Connie asked.

"Oh, nothing." Julie replied. "Actually I had a real shitty time at Tim's. He got grabby and pushy so I left. But he couldn't take 'no' for an answer so he chased me down the hall…"

"…Oh my God!"

"…where I bumped into Adam – literally," Julie's voice brightened as her story came to Adam. "Then Adam straightened Tim out…"

Connie raised an eyebrow.

"Straightened him out?"

Julie shrugged.

"There may have been some…mild choking involved. Anyway, after Tim fled, Adam took me to his dorm where we watched a movie; and there was some…mild kissing involved."

"In the movie?" Connie asked. "I thought you hated romantic movies."

"In the bed, Adam's bed."

Now both of Connie's eyebrows flew to the ceiling as the microwave chirped.

"I'll just get that," Julie declared, moving to retrieve her supper.

The pungent smell of lemongrass and ginger returned to the small dorm room once the soup was re-heated. After retrieving a chilled can of Moxie from the fridge, Julie made a mental note to stock-up on the New England soda when she returned home for Thanksgiving, then settled in at her desk to eat.

Meanwhile, Connie's head was spinning – and not from the aromatic soup.

Julie and Tim are no more? She kissed Adam – are they an item now? How can she just sit there and eat soup?!

"So what were you and Larson talking about?" Julie asked between spoonfuls.

Julie's dramatic news had forced Larson out of Connie's immediate memory. Now that he had returned, Connie could not help but recall Julie's rudeness toward him – and her smothering efforts to keep him away in the first place. Slowly but surely, Connie's sense of indignation snowballed.

"And what business is that of yours?" She demanded, the sharpness of her tone prompting Julie to drop her spoon.

"I was just curious."

"Yeah, well you can stop pretending to be my mother, Julie. Paul is a friend of mine, and we're going to be visiting from time-to-time. So you better get used to it."

"Do you really think it's appropriate to be alone in a room with him?"

"Julie, if you think I'm going to let you control where I go and who I hang with, you can forget it."

"Oh, and what about Guy? You think he's cool with a half-naked guy being alone with his
Connie's eyes narrowed. Her honey browns had always looked so friendly and warm to Julie. Now they oozed hostility.

"Not that it's any of your business, but Guy and I can handle our own relationship, thank you very much. Besides, he's not the jealous type. I'm sure Guy would love to hang with him, but he's always so busy training Scooter and whatnot. And who are you to lecture me on appropriateness? You dumped Tim and then immediately turned around and took up with Adam. But I'm the one who needs relationship advice?"

"And who are you to suggest that I'm loose?" Julie shot back.

"You're imagining things again," Connie replied. "Just like how you imagined Paul's evil intent. I'm not trying to judge you, but you're judging me – and I resent that."

Julie had not registered the second half of Connie's reply. The accusation of 'imagining things' had set her off.

"I'm not imagining things!" She snapped. "Larson turned the Bash Brothers against each other, then he tried to setup Guy over the shower prank, then he muscled Charlie out of the captain's spot, and now he's trying to turn you against me. And I wouldn't be surprised if Larson schemed to get JV and Varsity into another war."

Connie rolled her eyes, elevating Julie's blood pressure further.

"I think you should finish your soup and get a good night's sleep," the brunette forward advised the goalie. "An empty stomach and a sleepy head seem to bring out the crazy in you."

But the knots in Julie's stomach seemed to preclude any more eating. She looked up at the corkboard over her desk – it was covered by Duck photos. Fulton and Portman had become enemies. Along with Fulton, Adam and Guy were on Varsity. Larson had sidelined Charlie as captain; if Charlie had any intention of fighting for his job, it could lead to a civil war within JV. Now Julie and Connie's friendship – already strained by the goalie's protectiveness – was on the rocks.

All of these smiling faces from happier times seemed to mock her isolation, causing the knots to tighten further.

But as her eyes were drawn to her Bunny Ears shot with Adam, the knots came undone.

At least one thing's going right – finally.

Having regained her appetite, Julie finished her meal before climbing into bed – her Adam-related thoughts pushing her worries aside and lulling her to sleep.

Connie and Julie went about their morning routine with no drama, which was a promising start to the day. But as Julie searched in vain for her backpack, the tummy knots returned – and they tightened when she realized that she had left Tim's room the day before in such a hurry that she had left it behind.

Shit.
The goalie briefly considered going without it and buying a new one, but she had too many important school projects in there. She had no choice but to retrieve it from Tim the day after a breakup that had included the threat of sexual assault – which had only been averted through a violent confrontation that involved Adam.

Taking a deep breath, Julie dialed Tim's number from her desk phone. After several rings, a groggy Tim Riley finally answered.

"What?"

Charming.

"Uh…hey, Tim. It's Julie. I'm sorry to wake you, but I think I left my backpack in your room yesterday. Could you let me in so I can come over and get it?"

"I don't have it."

"Tim, I'm pretty sure…"

"I. Don't. Have. It."

Julie let out a worried sigh. The only other place it could be was Adam's room, but she had no memory of carrying her backpack there. She was about to apologize to Tim when she stopped herself.

You have nothing to be sorry for. So be cool.

"Alright, well thanks anyway, I guess."

Click.

She dialed Adam, who answered after two rings.

"Hello?"

"Adam, hey – it's me."

"Hey, Julie. What's up?"

"I'm sorry to bug you in the morning, but I think I may have left my backpack in your room. Can you check for me?"

"Sure," Adam replied. "Just a minute."

Given that he was only searching a cramped dorm room, it did not take long for him to pick the phone back up.

"Sorry, Julie – but I'm not seeing it anywhere. Maybe you left it at Tim's?"

"He said that he didn't have it."

"Maybe he's being a petty little man-bitch?"

Julie giggled at the apt description.

"That sounds about right," she agreed. "But he's not letting me into the building."
"No worries, I'll let you in," Adam offered. "Then we'll go over to Tim's room and have a nice little chat."

As much as Julie appreciated the offer, she could not forget Adam's chokehold from the day before. Although the younger Riley had it coming, Julie worried about Adam losing his temper and doing something that would get him into trouble.

"Thank you, Adam," she spoke up. "But I'd rather not get you involved. I'd appreciate it if you'd open the side door for me, but I'll handle Tim on my own."

There was a brief pause on the other end before Adam reluctantly agreed. He would never forget Tim chasing Julie down the hall, or her tears. Privately resolving not to let her go it alone, he met her at the side entrance, led her up the stairs, and walked her down the hall to Tim's room.

"This is the part where you leave," Julie declared as they stopped in front of the door.

"If you insist."

"I do."

"Fine."

Adam made his way further down the hall, turned a corner, and planted himself out of sight but within hearing range. If Tim tried any funny business, Adam would be on him like white on rice. Julie knocked on the door, and after a few seconds, was greeted by an annoyed Tim.

"I told you I don't have your fucking backpack," he snapped. "Now if you don't mind…"

Julie planted her foot in the doorframe before Tim could shut it.

"Maybe another pair of eyes could help," she suggested. "Can I take a quick look inside?"

He exhaled a loud sigh.

"If you must."

"Thank you. Leave the door open."

Tim leaned against the doorframe while Julie did a 5-second search of the room.

*Hidden in plain sight.*

She was about to make a snarky comment about the backpack being hidden on top of the desk that was directly in front of the bed, but decided against provoking Tim.

"Thank you," she offered as she slid a strap of the backpack over her shoulder. "I guess I'll see you at practice."

"Lucky me."

As she stepped out of the dorm room, Julie caught Adam turning a corner and hiding. The goalie rolled her eyes but grinned slightly as she approached her new boyfriend.

"Come on, you," she called out to him. "Let's get some breakfast."

"Sounds like a plan," he replied, grasping her hand. "Everything cool? He didn't try anything
funny, did he?"

"If he did, would he be breathing right now?"

"Probably not."

"I thought I told you that I'd handle Tim on my own."

"Yes – and you did. That was really gutsy of you to approach him by yourself. You're kinda awesome, y'know?"

"You're not so bad yourself," Julie replied as she stopped and drew Adam in for a quick peck on the cheek.

"Alright, bring it in guys," Orion called out as JV gathered in their locker room for their pre-practice study hall.

The JV coach looked haggard and upset as his players gathered around him. He had a reputation for fairness, but that did not make him any less demanding. His undefeated team had no idea what they had done wrong, but there existed a collective feeling of unease at the prospect of an Orion smackdown.

"I got some bad news last night," he announced. "Averman and a buddy of his got beat-up yesterday. Real bad. They're in the infirmary right now."

Gasps and questions filled the air, but one question that had been on the mind all day for most of the Ducks had now been answered. Averman had not been to class all day, now they knew why. Ken looked over at Goldberg, who had been uncharacteristically quiet the entire day. The ex-figure skater did not verbalize his question is that why, but from the nod that Goldberg gave him, it was understood and answered. As Averman's roommate and oldest friend, Goldberg knew all about the assault. The pair of D5ers had drifted apart in recent months, but Goldberg felt terrible about this latest development – even though it was about to result in more playing time for him.

"Goldberg," Orion spoke up over the din, prompting silence. "We're gonna need you back on defense for the time being."

"Sure thing, Coach."

"Coach – who did this?" Dwayne asked.

Orion let out a sigh.

"They don't know. Anyway, I want each and every one of you to visit Les after practice," he declared, drawing murmurs of agreement. "But in the meantime, we have to press on. So hit the books, we'll be on the ice in 50 minutes. Got it?"

"YES, COACH."

He gave a short nod before turning and escaping to his office.

Once the players were alone, Larson spoke up.

"It looks like we're gonna have to do more as a team to protect each other," the former Hawk proposed. "Obviously Varsity was behind this."
"How do you know that?" Charlie demanded.

"Who else could have done it?" Portman shot back. "Now are you gonna help, or not?"

"Dean, relax," Larson spoke up. "I'm sure Charlie meant nothing by it, and I know he can be relied on to help protect his team. Isn't that right, Charlie?"

"Of course," Charlie agreed. "I just want to make sure we hit the right target."

"We will. Leave it with me," Larson declared before turning toward the rest of the team. "Right guys?"

Having impressed the Ducks with his innovative Halloween prank and his leadership on the ice, Larson was greeted with a roar of approval. His position has de facto captain had been secured.

Julie understood the significance at once, and the tummy knots returned yet again.
Time After Time

Few things in life are more conspicuous than the absence of a familiar figure. And so it was with Les Averman. The geeky, wisecracking Duck had always been a reliable, if low-key teammate. His gameplay never drew the sort of attention that was lavished on his more athletic and flashy teammates. But he had always been there – since their District 5 days.

As the Ducks practiced without him, they noticed him like they never had before.

With Goldberg filling in for him on defense, the team lacked a second goalie for scrimmaging; so the entire practice consisted of drills. It was a hard, miserable slog with the team divided into sections. The exercises had given the Ducks a chance to improve their technique – which had gotten sloppy and complacent on the undefeated team – but the lack of unified play made it impossible not to notice that their flock was not at full strength.

Julie in particular had felt her candle burn at both ends. Being alone between the pipes for an entire practice, she was even more exhausted than she would be at the end of a game. But she had held up long enough to deprive all but one of her teammates a goal during their final round of scoring drills.

Now it was Tim's turn.

She took a deep breath and fixed her eyes to the end of Tim's stick, drawing from her near-empty reserves of energy to counter the incoming attack from her ex.

He managed a triple deke in the short space between them, but two-and-a-half years of dueling with Charlie Conway had made Julie a master at countering it.

The quick fake, on the other hand, caught her by complete surprise.

"Dammit!" Julie cursed as she slammed her stick on the ice in a rare loss of composure.

"Better luck next time, Pussycat," Tim sneered.

"Go hit on a fifth-grader, Perv Boy."

"Why you…"

Before he could close the distance with Julie, Orion's whistle pierced the air.

"That's enough!" The coach called out. "Bring it in!"

His players gathered in a semi-circle around him and listened to his critiques. It was a purely technical exercise on Orion's part, and he lacked his usual fire. But as his monologue reached the end of hockey and approached the coming weekend, the Ducks began to recognize their tough-loving coach.

"As you may have heard, there's no game this weekend. The powers-that-be decided that Thanksgiving Break wasn't enough time off for you guys…"

"…so practice at six on Saturday morning," Goldberg ventured.

"Make that five," Orion seethed, drawing groans of protest. "Which will leave you plenty of time this weekend to visit Les. Being off the ice doesn't make him any less of a teammate, and I expect each and every one of you to act accordingly. Got it?"
The teenagers replied with murmurs of agreement, disliking the prospect of a 5am practice, but knowing better than to object.

"What was that?" Orion demanded.

"YES, COACH!"

"Better. Now get dressed and get outta here."

JV lined-up and filed-in to their locker room. As the rest of the team began undressing, Portman and Larson stood at the center of the room. The former Bash Brother grabbed the Ducks' attention with a loud finger whistle.

"The Captain's got something to say," Portman announced.

Before Charlie could protest, Larson spoke up.

"Thank you, Dean. Getting back to what we discussed before practice, I think we need to talk about security. Varsity is literally out for blood – what they did to Averman proves that. He was vulnerable because he didn't have any Ducks with him at the time. So from now on, we're gonna move in pairs.

"This can change day-to-day, but right now, I want us to leave the locker room in the following order: Portman and Ken, Tim and Goldberg, Ryan and Dwayne, Charlie and Russ, Julie and Luis.

"And I'll escort Connie."

"No, I'll escort Connie," Julie protested. "We're going to our dorm anyway, and it's not like you're allowed in."

"You each need one of the guys to walk with you," Larson insisted. "It's for your own safety."

"I don't see why Luis can't walk with both of us then."

"Julie, don't be difficult," Connie snapped. "Paul, thank you for your offer."

"No need to thank me for doing what's necessary," Larson replied. "Anyway, finish getting dressed and stick with your buddy."

"Your buddy?" Charlie repeated. "Let's talk about your buddy, Larson. What will you do if McGill comes after any of us?"

"I'll make him live to regret it."

Charlie gave an incredulous laugh.

"No way in hell are you gonna beat-up Jake McGill. You can take that to the bank."

"Mixed metaphors aside, Charlie, Jake and I haven't been seeing eye-to-eye for quite some time. If Jake McGill comes between me and a Duck, I can promise you that Averman will have a roommate in the infirmary."

Charlie did not trust the former Hawk who had stolen the captaincy from him, but the loud cheers from their teammates proved the futility of arguing with Larson.

*For now,* the deposed captain resolved.
"Thank you," Larson acknowledged his teammates' support. "And don't ever forget, *Ducks fly together.*"

"DUCKS FLY TOGETHER!"

A few minutes later, the team had changed into their street clothes which for the first time that year included winter coats. As Julie walked with Luis into the frigid November sun, the goalie spoke up.

"You can go ahead without me, Luis. Adam should be around here somewhere."

"Huh?"

"Over here!" Adam called out, a short distance away.

The Varsity forward had been sitting on a bench near the main entrance to the arena. Being his freshman year roommate, Luis knew Adam's affinity for cold air very well. The Floridian thought Adam Banks was a perfect madman for sitting outside in the cold for such long stretches during the winter – it was one of the many things that made the two of them such opposites. But Adam had always found the cold, dry air of Minnesota's winters to be therapeutic; and his 'arctic therapy' sessions were convenient whenever Luis needed their room to himself.

"Oh, hey Banks," Luis called back, alternating between Julie and Adam. "So you two…"

"…you could say that," Adam acknowledged with a grin.

Having tried in vain for so long to get Adam to ask Julie out, Luis flashed a wide, proud grin – the sort of grin that a master gives a dutiful, if rather dim apprentice who finally rose to the occasion.

"Anyway, Adam can walk me from here," Julie declared. "Unless you want to join us. I mean, I'd hate to cramp your style."

As Julie and Adam's gloved hands took possession of each other, Luis came to an unfortunate realization.

"But…you're Varsity, Adam."

"Heh, you just figured that out?"

Julie threw an elbow into Adam's gut.

"Er…sorry, Luis," he offered.

"You're Varsity," a wide-eyed Luis repeated. "You're the enemy."

"Oh come on, Luis – don't give me that. I was on Varsity last year too, but you didn't get weird about it."

"Back then, the worst thing that Varsity did was leave us with a huge restaurant bill," Luis replied. "This year, the worst thing they did was put Averman in the hospital."

Adam's eyes widened in shock. Luis continued.

"You weren't involved in that, were you?"

"What? No!" Adam insisted. "I'm learning this just now. Which hospital? Is he there now?"
"The campus infirmary."

"Let's go and visit him then."

"Adam…I don't think that's a good idea," Luis explained. "Even if you're not in Henderson's inner circle, you're still Varsity. And in all honesty, this feels a lot different from last year's prank war. Like this is a real war, with real casualties."

"And I had nothing to do with either war!" Adam insisted. "You believe me, don't you?"

"I don't know."

"Luis…" Adam pleaded.

"What's this?" Portman demanded.

The former Bash Brother had been escorting Ken when he stumbled onto two of his teammates chatting with Varsity. He continued before any of them could answer.

"Whatever it is, it's over. Get lost, Preppy."

"Excuse me?"

Adam squared up against Portman, but Julie threw herself between them – much like she had during a workout session at the Goodwill Games. For all of Adam and Portman's differences, one thing that they had in common was an unwillingness to back down.

"Come on, Adam," Julie spoke up, grabbing his arm. "We're going."

Portman did not attempt to pursue and separate the couple, but he mentally saved his report for Larson: JV's lone goalie had fallen under the sway of Varsity.

From the JV captain's chair in the campus dining hall, Larson's obsidian eyes betrayed a smile as he observed Julie and Adam emerge from the lunch line. Seated across from Larson, Goldberg felt the ex-Hawk's boot connect sharply with his shin.

"Hey!" The goalie-turned-defenseman snapped. "What was that for?!"

"You watch your fucking tone," Larson seethed before indicating Julie and Adam with his head. Goldberg followed the motion and observed the new couple.

"Hey, look over there!" He exclaimed.

The rest of JV turned and saw Julie laugh at something that Adam had said. After saying goodbye to him, she made her way over to the JV table. As Julie approached, she drew probing stares.

"Uh…hi, guys."

Portman scoffed as Julie took her seat.

"You got some nerve showin' up here."

"What?" Julie asked.

"What?" Tim repeated bitterly. "You think we have room for Varsity whores at this table?"
The hateful epithet cut right through her. The din of the dining hall, the suspicious stares of her teammates, and Charlie's animated protests on her behalf had all gone unnoticed by Julie. *Varsity whore.* Nothing had ever sounded uglier to her. She did not cry, but a full minute later, her numbness prompted a worried hand to rest on her shoulder.

"Julie?" Connie tried to draw her roommate back to the present. "Julie, you there?"

The goalie pulled herself out of her stupor and gave Tim a hard look.

"Did I miss your apology?" She asked.

"Hell no!" Tim snapped. "I was saying that you should eat somewhere else."

"And I was saying that Tim was being a fucking retard," Charlie offered.

"And I was saying that you should stay put, Julie," Larson replayed his contribution. "But I also said that you should avoid Adam Banks – both for team chemistry and your own safety."

Having recovered from her shock, the goalie laughed.

"You can't be serious, Larson."

"I never joke about team chemistry, or my teammates' safety."

"And the rest of you agree with him?" Julie asked her teammates – all but Charlie and Linda nodded.

"Wow," she declared, rising to her feet. "Maybe I should eat someplace else while I wait for my teammates to return to me. I don't recognize any of these people."

The goalie took her tray and marched over to the Nerds' table. Adam had been sitting there ever since his expulsion from the Beautiful People. Fulton and Guy had been sitting there since Henderson expelled them – along with Adam – from the Varsity table. Henderson did not trust the 'Three Stooges' enough to invite them back, which suited Adam, Fulton, and Guy fine. The Nerds did not have any hidden agendas or bloodlust, which made them a welcome change of pace.

And having three burly Varsity hockey players around kept the bullies at bay. Though the arrangement was awkward at first, it did not take long for the nerds and exiled hockey players to feel comfortable with each other.

"Hey, guys!" Julie called out.

Upon seeing the pretty goalie, several flustered nerds reached for their inhalers.

"Hey, back," Adam replied with a smile. "Joining us?"

"Yeah," Julie replied, taking a seat next to him. "The Ducks have officially lost their collective mind."

"Hopefully they won't find it too quickly, now that you're here."

Julie giggled.

"Smooth, Banksie – have you been taking lessons from Guy in pick-up lines?"

"Nothing formal," Guy spoke up. "It's a bit like osmosis. Adam and the others absorb my charisma
simply by being near me."

The rest of the table laughed, but Julie worried as she looked back at Guy's smiling face. Larson had already won Connie's trust, and Guy was hardly ever around her. If Larson could push Charlie out of the captain's spot, how hard would it be for him to break-up an on-again/off-again couple like Connie and Guy? Their relationship was checkered enough without the recent Varsity/JV tensions.

And if Larson succeeded, Guy's broken heart would only be half the problem. Connie would be with Larson – and the thought of that prompted a terrified rush of adrenalin in Julie. "Hey," Adam eased the goalie out of her brooding. "Things will work out for the Ducks – they always do. But in the meantime, I should introduce you to your new friends."

He went around the table and introduced Julie to the different members of Eden Hall's most-despised clique – surprising the outcasts with his ability to remember their names and little facts about each of them. "And this is the Milton Meyers," Adam declared in an exulted tone, indicating a heavyset junior with greasy black hair and thick glasses. "President of the AV Club, Captain of the state-champion Math League team, and secret Godfather of the Student Body."

The nerd laughed at the grandiose introduction. "It's true," Adam insisted. "When people need a problem solved, they go to this guy."

"Usually that problem involves derivatives," Milton pointed out. "With which I'm happy to assist, Julie."

"I'll keep that in mind," she replied with a smile.

"Now that we've gotten the fun stuff out of the way," Adam began, "we need to take care of some serious business."

Julie's smile faded as she took in her boyfriend's grim countenance. "What's wrong?"

His expression lightened. "We never finished watching The Burbs," he declared. "And that simply cannot stand."

A wave of relief washed over her. "No, it cannot," she agreed with a giggle.

Most of the early snow had melted in time for the Semi-Formal, but the slush on the campus walkways meant that students were expected to bring a separate pair of dancing shoes in order to prevent all the water from their boots from damaging the gym floor. Given that he was unlikely to dance, Milton had gotten roped into boot duty by the Student Council. So the task of tagging and organizing everyone's boots and coats had fallen to him.

But at least he secured a bit of funding for the AV Club in exchange. Plus, all the downtime provided a good opportunity for him to write student essays for his 'boss.'
Julie and Adam arrived hand-in-hand. The dress code for Semi's was very broad, and students were given a great deal of latitude in picking out their outfits. Unsurprisingly, Adam leaned on the side of overdressing – with a steel blue tie neatly knotted into a windsor and his pair of black wingtips meticulously polished to a shine. His charcoal gray slacks and white dress shirt completed the ensemble. Julie wore a long-sleeved lavender blouse, a black skirt and stockings.

"Don't forget, Milton," Julie began as she handed him her overcoat. "You owe me a dance."

Milton chuckled.

"Yeah, right."

He remembered the 'promise' that he had made to the comely hockey player at lunch. He could not imagine that she was serious.

"It's going to happen," Julie insisted. "You and me, one dance. Adam will cover for your coat duty if you need him to," she looked over at her new boyfriend who duly nodded in agreement.

"Uh…sure," Milton was not used to girls being nice to him – especially attractive ones. He doubted Julie's intentions, but her business-like demeanor made it sound like a command.

"Just be ready, okay? Come on, Adam."

The pair walked onto the dance floor that already had several couples dancing to All-4-One's *I Swear*. Apart from the one dance that Julie had promised Milton, Adam would have her all to himself that night, as his date Kelly had gotten set up with someone else, thanks to a last minute intervention from Sarah.

Connie and Guy were the next to arrive, with Connie wearing a flattering pair of blue jeans and a long black T-shirt that rose just below the navel. Guy wore a long-sleeved burgundy polo shirt with khaki slacks. After leaving their coats and boots with Milton, Connie took her boyfriend's hand that felt uncomfortably cold and followed him to the dance floor.

"We're alright, aren't we Guy?"

The blond forward looked startled by the dramatic question.

"Of course," he nodded. "I mean, I've always just assumed that no news is good news."

Connie nodded, trying to convince herself that Guy was right. Seeing each other had been difficult all year. Not only were they on separate teams, but he had drill duty with Scooter every other week. Guy was just busy, there was no drama, and she did not need to worry, she tried to tell herself. But she could not forget Larson's warning that she should not let Guy take her for granted.

If he really cared, he wouldn't just find time. He'd make time, the quiet JV defenseman had advised her the other day in her dorm.

She looked over to see Larson dancing rather awkwardly with a much shorter Goth girl who Connie did not know by name. Having already been impressed by Larson's leadership, his hockey talent, and his attentive personality, Connie was beginning to appreciate the defenseman's physical qualities as well. Dressed in a snug, long-sleeved navy blue button shirt with a collar, and a nice pair of blue jeans, Larson was a magnet for Connie's stares.

Although he was tall and strong, he lacked the classic good looks of an Adam Banks, the boyish cuteness of a Guy Germaine, or the roguish charm of a Charlie Conway. But there was some kind
of magnetism to Paul Larson. Even if Connie had difficulty describing it.

*He's…how would you say? Ruggedly handsome?*

She chuckled as she remembered Guy's 'amazingly stupid' attempt to flirt with her last year during the fire ant prank. Returning her focus to her boyfriend, Connie resolved to stop looking in Larson's direction. She was with Guy. Guy was nice, he made her happy…she kept repeating to herself as she danced.

Several dances later, Julie abruptly stopped when she heard Dionne Warwick and Elton John's *That's What Friends Are For.*

"This is the one, Adam," she announced as she pulled him toward Milton's table.

"Dance with me, Mr. President," Julie ordered Milton, referring to his title as President of the AV Club.

He stammered in response.

"Up you go – you're in my way," Adam guided Milton out of his seat before taking it. "I've got this covered, don't worry."

Julie and Milton remained on the dance floor beyond that one song, but Adam did not mind. He was proud to have such a kind girlfriend.

*And it's not like Milton's the only dork Julie has danced with tonight.*

It still amazed Adam that Julie could find him so appealing. He cringed at the memory of all the shy, awkward moments that she had taken in stride. Most incredible of all, Julie still thought he was worth her time after his Halloween humiliation and weeks of Tim trying to poison her mind. The Varsity forward smiled and shook his head in wonder at his luck.

As other dancers began to obscure Adam's view of his angel, his eyes drifted down the table, past Milton's inventory sheet and toward a stack of papers written in cursive. He recognized several different essays, including one that was required in his English class – a class that he did not share with Milton.

*He can't be doing all this for fun, he reasoned.*

"Tag, you're in," the stout nerd declared as he reached for his inhaler.

Adam looked up to see a winded Milton standing next to a grinning Julie who spoke up.

"He kept up with me the entire time, just so you know."

"I'd never doubt you," Adam replied as he got up from his seat and followed Julie back to the dance floor. "That was really nice of you, by the way."

Julie batted away the compliment.

"You've got a tough act to follow, Banksie."

The couples on the floor slowed as Cyndi Lauper's *Time After Time* came on. This particular song never was a favorite of Julie's, but it gave her an excuse to slow-dance with Adam, so she was not about to complain. As the chorus played, she felt her eyes moisten.
If you're lost you can look – and you will find me

Time after time

If you fall I will catch you – I will be waiting

Time after time

Adam had caught her, time after time.

Not just during the unhappy lunch period where she left the JV table. Not just when he defended her from Tim and let her stay and watch a cool movie. Not just when he had called after she fought with Connie and cheered her up with a self-deprecating story. Not just when he agreed to go on a double date that clearly made him uncomfortable just so she could be happy. And not just when she sank into despair when she saw Larson set Portman against Fulton – Adam had appeared at that moment and Julie remembered how a terrible situation became much more bearable.

Adam had caught Julie, time after time.

She rested her head against his chest. He could feel her warm tears through his shirt.

"Everything alright, Julie?"

"Never better," she replied softly without looking up.
Charlie jolted awake to the sound of his clock radio. He needed to be at the arena by 5am, but remained perfectly still in his bed – partly in a small act of protest, but mainly as result of his slow-to-start teenage body. His stepfather often compared him to a diesel engine: slow to start, but relentless and durable once warm.

In the small hours of a November morning in Minnesota, however, the diesel engine was far from warm.

"Charlie, get up," Adam groaned from his separate twin bed before covering the back of his head with a pillow to tune-out the music.

Charlie groaned back in response.

*Why is JV's coach more of a hardass than Varsity's?*

But he managed to throw the sheets off his body and sit-up as Black Sabbath's *Heaven and Hell* picked up pace.

*They say that life's a carousel*

*Spinning fast, you've gotta ride it well*

*The world is full of Kings and Queens who blind your eyes and steal your dreams*

*It's Heaven and Hell, oh well.*

Now out of bed, Charlie felt the blood-curdling embrace of a frigid morning. Casting a wistful glance at the warm bed that he had to abandon, he reached for his clock radio as the heavy metal classic continued.

*And they tell you black is really white*

*The moon is just the sun at night*

*And when you walk in golden halls*

*You get to keep the gold that falls*

*It's Heaven and Hell, oh no!*

*Click*

After chugging a bottle of water from the microfridge, Charlie got dressed, threw on a winter coat, and began the long trek to the athletic complex in pitch blackness. Whenever he was down in the dumps as a small boy, his mother liked to remind him that "it was always darkest just before dawn."

Taking in his bleak surroundings, Charlie wondered if that was a literal truth as well as a metaphorical one.

"Hey, Charlie – wait up!"
The JV forward turned to see Goldberg move to catch-up to him.

"Hey, Goldie. How much you wanna bet we're not the last ones to show-up?"

"Ha! Not taking."

"Probably a wise decision."

"There's a first time for everything, I guess," Goldberg replied.

"I guess," Charlie shrugged. "So how's Averman?"

"He's been wondering why you haven't seen him yet, as a matter of fact."

"Yeah…stuff's just been coming up."

"You don't have to tell me," Goldberg agreed. "Everyone's been busy – only Larson has been by to see him. I live with Les, and even I barely talk to him."

"Yeah…why is that?"

Goldberg's face twisted into an uncomfortable scowl. He and Averman had been growing further apart since Les' surreptitious revelation. The goalie-turned-defenseman felt horrible about his friend's assault, but Averman's secret made him uncomfortable. And Goldberg hated himself for being uncomfortable with his best friend. He had buried all of this and was in no mood to dig-up and analyze it all with Charlie; but at that moment, relief came from an unusual source.

"Alright, hold it!" Commanded a reedy, staccato voice.

The pair of Ducks turned to see a diminutive prefect stomp up to them. Wrapped in his thick winter uniform complete with a knit cap, the prefect would have resembled an angry little fire hydrant were it not for the blue of his uniform.

"Let's see some IDs," he ordered, shining his flashlight up into Charlie and Goldberg's faces.

"Geez – what is that thing, like a thousand watts?" Goldberg asked, shielding his eyes from the unforgiving beam.

"What was that?!"

"Nothing, sir."

"What are you doing walking around at this hour, anyway?"

You just answered your own question, Goldberg thought but dared not say.

After fumbling with a few cards in his wallet, he managed to produce his student ID.

"We're on our way to hockey practice, sir. Coach Orion's team."

"What about you, where's your ID?" The prefect demanded of Charlie.

"I must have left my wallet in my room," Charlie replied. "Normally I'm not up this early, so it must have slipped my mind. My name's Charlie Conway, I'm a sophomore."

"Then you should already know that it's school policy for students to carry their ID on their person
at all times."

"What do you need it for anyway?" Charlie shot back.

"I don't care for your tone, young man."

"And I don't care for your…"

"…hold it, Charlie," Goldberg interrupted with an arm block before reaching back into his wallet and facing the prefect.

"Y'know, it's cold outside. Why don't you go someplace warm and get yourself a nice cup of coffee and a slice of pie?" He suggested, stuffing a few bucks into the prefect's coat pocket.

The prefect looked back to Charlie as he patted the cash.

"Just be sure to keep your ID on you in the future, sonny."

And with that, the prefect took his leave – whistling a tune while he departed.

Charlie shook his head as he resumed his journey with Goldberg.

"Just when I feel that I can't think even less of this school, it always finds a way to make me."

Goldberg shrugged.

"The prefects aren't so bad if you can pay-up. They're better than Varsity – those guys have a stick up their ass no matter what."

Charlie offered no reply.

"How are you holding up with that, anyway?" Goldberg asked. "It can't be easy, sleeping with the enemy."

"I doubt it's as bad as sleeping with an invalid," Charlie replied with a teasing grin, imagining Goldberg waiting on Averman hand-and-foot.

"It's not like that!" Goldberg shot back. "I'm not like that!"

"Hey man, take it easy."

"What exactly did you hear, anyway?"

"Only that Averman was released from the infirmary a few days ago…and that he's probably relying on the help of his roommate and best friend."

"Uh-huh. What else?"

"Nothing, man," Charlie insisted. "You're freaking out over nothing. Do I need to give you a cup of coffee and a slice of pie for you to chill out?"

"Ha-ha, laugh it up," Goldberg scoffed as they approached the arena. "Might as well get them laughs out now, we're almost there. And if Orion catches you laughing on his time…"

Charlie's eyes widened in horror as he looked down at his Casio.

"Shit, we're running late. That little puke held us up. C'mon, Goldie – double-time!"
Julie did not protest Larson's pairing arrangement this time – not with Charlie escorting her back to the dormitories. Given that she planned on meeting-up with Adam, it was convenient for her to walk with her boyfriend's roommate. She refused, however, to cut the ex-Hawk any slack, and remained convinced that anything he did that happened to benefit her was purely by chance and not by design.

"Oh, that cold air feels good!" Charlie exclaimed as they exited the arena.

Practice had ended just in time for dawn.

"We worked up a sweat, that's for sure," Julie agreed.

"Now don't let your boyfriend hear that. He'd be devastated."

Julie gave Charlie a playful slap on the arm but could not help giggling. She was still basking in new couples' bliss with the boy who personified perfection to her. And getting to walk with a good-humored Charlie did not hurt either. They continued to make pleasant small talk before separating at the side entrance to the boys' dormitory, where he went around to let her in before walking her to the room he shared with Adam.

As they entered the well-lit room, Charlie rolled his eyes.

A freshly-showered and cleanly-shaven Adam was sitting at his desk, dressed in a gray mohair sweater and charcoal slacks while doing schoolwork on a Saturday morning. Looking over at the beds, Charlie observed his messy sheets juxtaposed with the crisp hospital corners on Adam's.

"Why can't the morning person play for JV while I sleep-in for Varsity?" Charlie teased.

"Because the morning person earned it," Julie shot back.

"Oh, sure – take his side."

Adam stuck out a quick, mischievous tongue at Charlie.

"Hey, did you see that?!!" Charlie asked Julie with a light elbow.

"See what?"

"Charlie's seeing gremlins again," Adam explained, rising to his feet. "But we love him anyway, don't we?"

"We sure do," Julie agreed, turning to Charlie. "So will you and Linda be joining us at the AV table?"

"The Nerds?" Charlie asked.

"They prefer being called the AV Club," Adam corrected him. "But yes."

"And they're really cool once you get to know them," Julie added.

"I think we'll pass," Charlie replied. "Linda likes to sit with the other members of Student Council. And I need to sit with my team."

"Suit yourself," Adam shrugged before putting on his coat. "There'll always be room for you if you change your mind."
It only took five minutes into breakfast for Charlie to regret declining Julie and Adam's invitation to sit with the Nerds. Seated at the end of the JV table, the deposed captain endured an internal exile while Larson held court from the center of the table. Meanwhile, Julie and Adam were clearly enjoying each other's company – and from Charlie's vantage point, the pair looked like a royal couple surrounded by adoring subjects.

He was reminded of a quote from Julius Caesar that he had learned in Latin – "I would rather be first in a village than second in Rome."

Charlie certainly had enough of being second in Larson's Rome, but he could not be first in Julie and Adam's village. As he got up to put away his tray, he decided that now was as good a time as any to finally pay Averman a visit.

A groggy Averman sat up on his bed with considerable effort – there had been a knock at the door.

"Who is it?" He called out.

"It's me, Charlie!"

"Hang on, Charlie."

Averman braced himself as he stood up and felt his broken ribs sting. Movement of pretty much any kind was painful, and breathing was uncomfortable – but at least the breathing had become less painful. Taking several quick, shallow breaths, he shuffled across the immaculate floor of his dorm and opened the door.

"Hey, buddy!" Charlie greeted his fellow D5er with a jovial grin. "I just thought I'd stop by, y'know – see how you were doing. I brought over Tommy Boy if you wanted to watch something."

"Come in."

Averman opened the door wider to allow-in his visitor. Charlie stepped across the threshold and marveled at how tidy the room was. The hardwood planks gleamed with a waxy finish, the shoes and boots were neatly placed on two trays, and neither of the desks contained so much as a speck of eraser dust.

"Leave your shoes there," Averman instructed Charlie, pointing to a tray.

The forward complied with a nod.

"I had no idea you and Goldie were such neat freaks."

Averman shrugged.

"Greg's not a pig, but I wouldn't exactly call him a neat freak," he declared. "And I simply don't like living in squalor."

Charlie let out a nervous laugh. Despite his long history with Averman and Goldberg, he knew little about either of them. Looking over his host, it was obvious that Averman had just gotten out of bed; wearing plaid pajama pants and a black T, the injured defenseman's hair was disheveled and his eyes looked beady without his glasses.

"Sorry if I woke you," Charlie offered. "I can go…"

"…no, stay – please," Averman implored. "I could use the company. Besides, I haven't been
"I bet," Charlie nodded in sympathy. "I'll understand if you don't want to talk about this…but it was Varsity that did this to you, right?"

Averman nodded.

"So Larson was right," Charlie declared bitterly. "I guess I owe it to him to help get back at Varsity then. It's not like the school is going to do anything about it."

"If you really think that will make a difference."

Charlie looked puzzled as Averman turned to put on his glasses.

"You mean you don't want us to hit them back?"

"Why don't you have a seat, Charlie?"

The deposed captain took a seat on one of the desk chairs while Averman rolled out the other one and gingerly took a seat.

"Varsity's not my problem, Charlie. They're only part of my problem."

"I don't follow."

"I didn't expect you to."

"Care to guide me then?"

Averman briefly forgot himself and let out a sigh. But his burning ribs were quick to remind him of his condition. This prompted a cough, which in turn led to a coughing fit – leaving him to feel that his lungs were being assaulted by a barrage of flaming steel pellets. Charlie leapt to his feet and retrieved a bottle of water from the microfridge, handing it to his friend between agonizing coughs. Averman managed to get a few labored sips down his throat and slowly began coming to.

"I need to be careful how I react to things," he declared. "I forgot that I'm not allowed to sigh anymore," he added with a wry grin.

But Charlie was unable to see any humor in the situation. Sitting before him was arguably the most harmless Duck, whose only sin was to be JV on a campus that Varsity felt they owned. And for that transgression, Varsity saw fit to make Averman's breaths, laughs, and sighs, an exercise in self-inflicted torture.

Charlie's teeth gnashed as he felt his blood boil.

"If you don't want to hit Varsity, I sure as hell do."

Averman shrugged again.

The futility of revenge allowed him to do little else. He had been attacked because he was gay, and if Varsity knew that he was gay, then what was to prevent word from getting out to the entire student body? If Averman did not have a target on his back already, he would soon enough. And nothing that JV could do to Varsity would change that.

"I don't get you, man," Charlie continued. "Some Varsity goons beat you up and left you for dead…and you don't want us to hit back? Did you find Buddha or something?"
And there was the reaction of his friends that Averman had to take into account. He and Goldberg had already become somewhat estranged as result of Averman's secret. He did not want to lose Charlie and the rest as well. Although he could not control what other people said about him, Averman could choose to hide the difficult truth from his friends.

And he did.

"Do what you gotta do, man," Averman spoke up at last. "Let's watch that movie you brought."

Charlie smiled, pleased that his friend had apparently recovered his mettle.

"Nothing would make me happier," he declared.

Snow had returned during Larson's bus ride and gained in intensity when he alighted at the stop on the outskirts of Edina. Although he was bound for McGill's house, Adam's was closer. The last time Larson and McGill had been at Adam's house was the day that Philip Banks had confirmed that Adam was to leave the Hawks and join the Ducks. It was striking how divergent their paths had been ever since, but their paths were converging again. As Larson made the trek to McGill's house, he meditated on the usefulness of having Adam as an enemy.

It had never been Larson's idea to cast Adam out into the cold, but what was done had been done. They could never be friends again, and that was just as well. Being enemies with Adam the Varsity player was a useful means of posing as a JV loyalist and defender – and a good way of keeping 'the Cat' spayed.

Useful an enemy that Adam had become, Larson knew he would be remiss to rule out the possibility that he would have to destroy his old friend someday. Utterly and completely.

If Paul Larson had learned nothing else from his fearsome father, he learned that survival could never be left to chance.

And you have to do unto others before they do unto you.

But as the McGill Family's sprawling Georgian Colonial mansion came into view, Larson felt reasonably secure. Charlie Conway – a major loose-end – had come round to pledging his support, and Larson knew from his conversations with Connie that her relationship with Guy had become frayed. Larson was winning his devious game of chess, but he knew that he had to be vigilant and guard against unexpected countermoves.

As he rang the doorbell and waited on McGill's front step, he reminded himself that countermoves – both deliberate and unwitting – could come from the most trusted of allies.

After several minutes of waiting in the cold, the door finally opened.

"Sorry, man," McGill offered, opening the door wider to allow Larson in. "The washing machine was spazzing out again, and if I didn't take care of it, the basement would have flooded."

"Don't worry about it," Larson replied, stomping the snow off his boots before setting them on a tray. "A beer will warm me up in no time," he added while hanging his leather jacket on the coat stand.

On campus, Larson had duly declared McGill an enemy – thus maintaining his pose as a loyal Duck. But McGill was a reliable servant, so they maintained their relationship away from the prying eyes of Eden Hall. And both former Hawks enjoyed having the other around. McGill's
house had always felt painfully empty to him, Larson brought it companionship. And Larson appreciated McGill's house as the only place that felt anything like a home to him.

"Two Schlitzes, comin' right up," McGill declared, leading his friend into the kitchen.

As Larson took a seat at the kitchen island, he wondered what it would be like to feel safe in the place called 'home.' McGill's parents and sister were never around, and the quiet, empty mansion that tortured him seemed like heaven to the defenseman. And the endless supply of free beer did nothing to dent Larson's esteem for McGill's home.

"Bottom's up," McGill declared, placing a chilled can in front of his friend.

"And I believe you have something else for me," Larson replied, cracking open the can.

He took several large gulps as McGill left to retrieve his backpack. Looking through the sliding glass door that led out to the patio, Larson felt a tinge of envy. The in-ground pool was closed for the winter, but the hot tub was kept operational year round. His mood turned foul as he brooded on the unfairness of being the son of a corrections officer while most everyone else in his life was the child of a well-to-do lawyer or doctor.

The brooding defenseman downed his beer can and slammed it onto the granite island top. He was beginning to feel ill-disposed toward his host when McGill returned with his backpack.

The host reached into his backpack and placed five thick stacks of cash bounded by rubber bands in front of his guest. He then lifted and shook Larson's beer can to discover that it was empty already.

"Refill?" He asked.

Larson shook his head.

"Business first," he declared with a belch.

Without another word, he proceeded to unband the cash and count the notes with the speed of a seasoned bank teller.

McGill looked on with apprehension. He knew that he was short, and he feared what his erratic master would do once the count was finished. McGill had always maintained an outwardly firm conviction of his own superiority, and humiliating others had always given him a nice little thrill. Unfortunately, he did not always have the strength to defend himself when other kids finally had enough of his crap.

Larson, the tall, powerful brooder had saved McGill's skin on several occasions. But the defenseman never failed to turn his fists on his supposed friend whenever he felt underappreciated. McGill knew that it took a lot to push his stoic master over the edge, but he also knew that Paul Larson was absolutely merciless once he had gone over.

At the same time, Larson often surprised McGill with gentleness, forgiveness, and understanding. He was certainly one of the select few who could stand to be with McGill on a regular business – and for someone as lonely as Jake McGill, that was a powerful virtue. And when their old Hawk coach Jack Reilly suffered a nervous breakdown following their defeat at the hands of the 'Little Duckies,' Larson had provided a stabilizing presence in McGill's life after the latter had lost what was practically a father to him.

"You're short, McGill."
McGill's eyes widened in horror. Larson had called him by his surname, not 'Jake.' He must have been pissed.

"I…I…I know, Paul."

"Don't Paul me, you dolt," Larson snapped. "I gave you a simple job and you fell short. What's the matter? Did the Nerds start wearing brass knuckles?"

McGill fortified himself with a sip of beer before replying.

"As a matter of fact, Milton wants to re-negotiate the terms."

"And the reason you didn't hand that prick his lungs on a platter is…?"

"He's kinda…got muscle. You know, Banks, Reed, and Germaine have been sitting with him the past few weeks. Milton thinks he can get a bigger cut of the essay profits because those three will protect him."

Larson seemed to bring the cold weather indoors with his dead-eyed stare.

"I mean…they're not Little Duckies anymore," McGill continued. "The three of them together could kick my ass."

"Or I could do it by myself."

McGill swallowed hard.

Larson stood up and began to slowly close in on McGill, causing the hair on the back of the latter's neck to rise in terror as he backpedaled and found himself pinned against a wall.

Larson reached around his prey's neck and pressed an icy finger against a pressure point just below McGill's skull – causing his victim to fall against the wall and slide down to the floor. McGill instantly recognized his tormentor's favorite torture tactic: attacking the pressure points at the top of the body and slowly working his way down.

McGill winced as Larson simultaneously attacked both shoulder clefts.

"Gah! Okay, okay! Stop, please!"

"I think I just heard a request, not an offer," Larson replied as he attacked the collarbone clefts.

"AGH! You can have my cut for the week – all of it!"

Larson let up, causing McGill to let out a sigh of relief.

"And?"

"And I'll get Milton to hand over all of what he owes after Thanksgiving Break," McGill offered.

"Good boy," Larson replied, helping his minion to his feet. "I think I'll have that refill now. Bring it into the living room – in a glass. I'm not a goddamn savage."

The burly defenseman made his way to the living room, plopping down on a settee and resting his large feet on the coffee table.

"And bring me some pretzels!" He bellowed as he turned on the TV and flipped to the Blackhawks
The fact that the Minnesota North Stars and the Winnipeg Jets had both moved south in recent years meant that the Chicago Blackhawks dominated the hockey airwaves in Minnesota – a fact that did nothing to improve Larson's dark mood.

As if those wimps were real Hawks.

A few minutes into the game, McGill set a bowl of pretzels and a tall mug of beer down onto the end table to Larson's right.

"Want me to massage your feet while I'm up?" He teased.

McGill had evidently recovered some of his spunk, and Larson was quick to squash it.

"Get your mom's foot file."

McGill chuckled.

"Very funny, Paul."

Larson trained his dead eyes onto McGill's silvery blues, sending a shiver down the latter's spine.

"Okay, okay. I'll be right back."

As McGill left to retrieve the file, Larson watched with disgust as a Blackhawk forward flopped backwards onto the ice before shooting up and demanding a penalty. It seemed that hockey was beginning to pick up the worst features of basketball, which made watching the game far less enjoyable. But mirth was restored as Larson watched a Detroit Red Wing blow past the whiny Blackhawk and score a goal.

'Be a winner, not a whiner.' That's what the Old Man always says.

The thought of his father's catchphrase prompted Larson to grab his beer and take several big gulps. Of course, it was impossible to be both a winner and a whiner. In Bill Larson's eyes, his son was never a winner, and that made his torments justifiable. Paul Larson had long since abandoned his futile efforts to win his father's love, but as he grew up, he became more and more like his hated Old Man – both on the outside and the inside.

A minute later, McGill returned, and Larson was munching on pretzels while his servant got to work massaging his feet. The defenseman was not about to deprive himself of a rare comfort, especially when it had the added effect of putting McGill in his place. It had always been a delicate balancing act – building McGill up to increase his loyalty while taking care to break him back down whenever he got too big for his own skates.

Having a mostly absentee father definitely made McGill easy to handle. Portman's own daddy difficulties also had a way of making Larson an irreplaceable life coach. It was easy enough for Larson not to be affected by Portman's sob stories, given that he was pretty much dead on the inside. Even the daddy difficulties of Adam Banks had made the soft-spoken center a fairly pliable stooge when he was a Hawk. Unfortunately for Larson, Adam left for the Ducks and found strength in genuine friendship.

But there's gotta be more to it than Duckie love, Larson thought.

It certainly had a limited effect on Portman. But there was something about Adam that Larson just
could not put his finger on. Having learned about the Varsity/JV prank war and Adam's exile from the previous year, Larson was amazed that Adam had not sought him out during what must have been the center's lowest point. Adam Banks was strong and independent. He was, in a word: dangerous.

And of course, there was 'the Bitch.' The smart, spunky JV goalie had seen through Larson from day one; although she had been put out to pasture, Larson could not shake the feeling that Julie Gaffney was a potential threat.

"McGill. Refill," Larson demanded as the Bitch entered his thoughts.

She seemed containable when she was going out with Tim Riley – a dependable stooge who had both daddy and big brother issues. But she could well find strength in her relationship with Adam. Larson found that possibility vexing.

On the plus side, at least Charlie appeared to be in Larson's corner…if not quite under his thumb where the defenseman would prefer. Though initially skeptical, Charlie had come round to believing that Larson could help protect the Ducks in the wake of Varsity's attack on Averman – a stunt that Larson himself had planned.

He rewarded himself for that last bit of deviousness with a handful of salty pretzels, washing them down with a freshly-poured beer. A nice little prize for his cleverness…but the big prize still eluded him.

"McGill. File!" Larson barked, having noticed that McGill had taken a seat and was watching the game.

The Varsity forward returned to filing his master's feet without complaint. He knew better than to do that.

As McGill went to work, Larson's thoughts returned to the big prize…Connie Moreau. The beautiful Porcelain Goddess had haunted Larson's mind as soon as he first set foot on Eden Hall's campus as a freshman. He had been aware of the brunette lady Duck since their Pee Wee days, when he was the feared enforcer on the seemingly indestructible Hawks.

But in those days, girls seemed to have cooties; and Larson felt himself to be above a girl who liked a weird blond kid who wore goofy hats.

That weird blond kid, however, owned the Porcelain Goddess, an object that Larson was determined to possess for himself. Although Connie and Guy's relationship had become strained, Larson was unwilling to let it take its natural course. Without his intervention, that particular prize would elude him and remain secure in Guy's trophy case. The former Hawk was not about to risk that.

"Alright, Jake. That's enough."

At once, McGill ceased filing his master's feet. As he awaited further instruction, he looked over at Larson's empty beer mug.

"Refill?"

"No thanks. Your mother will be home soon, and she still thinks I'm a good boy, bless her. Would you be kind enough to clean the glass? Then come, have a seat. We'll watch the Little Hawkies get pounded by the Red Wings as we come up with a way to put Guy Germaine in the fix. You're still the best spare set of brains I've got."
Larson gave his servant a reptilian smile.

McGill went to pick up the glass.

"I'll try my best. You're the *real* brains, after all."

Satisfied that his minion was pliant, but sharp enough to plot, Larson nodded in affirmation.
An Icy Breakup

A fine day for Duck huntin', Larson thought as he took a drag on his morning cigarette.

The air had a wintry bite, but there was not a cloud in the sky as the sun rose over the sleepy, snow-coated campus and Paul Larson made love to his unfiltered Pall Malls. Standing by the side entrance to the boys' dormitory, he took in his placid surroundings between puffs of tobacco and chilled air. Sunday mornings at Eden Hall had always had an unnaturally calm feel to them, but if all went according to plan on this particular day, the morning silence would feel even more poignant when juxtaposed with the bloody events to come.

Larson's unease over the execution of his plans had driven him out of bed early that morning; but the generous infusion of nicotine had fortified him, and he felt at one with the day, the season, and his destiny. Whether for good or for ill, the most fateful days for this January-born defenseman had always been cold ones.

"Sup, bro?"

The former Hawk turned to see that Dean Portman had joined him.

Looking over his new sidekick, Larson could not help betraying a grin. Not only had Portman ditched his Bash Brother bandanas in favor of a Larsonesque pompadour, but the Chicagoan had also taken a liking to Aqua Velva – Larson's favorite means of masking his eau de nicotine. While Portman remained recognizable to his fellow Ducks, the changes were significant – and were not lost on his new mentor.

"Lookin' good, Dean," Larson greeted him with a chin nod. "You ready for today?"

"You know it."

"Good. Go and round up the guys. We'll all go to breakfast together. We can't have anyone unescorted on a Sunday – Varsity likes to keep the Sabbath bloody."

"What about Connie and Julie?"

"I believe they already have male escorts."

"Uh, yeah…but they're Varsity," Portman pointed out.

Larson nodded.

"I have a feeling that we're going to learn a lot about the girls' loyalty today," he announced. "We need to know where we all stand. And as long as Connie and Julie are going out with Varsity guys, their loyalty is a question mark at best."

"Whatever you say, man."

Larson gave another quick nod before taking a long drag on his cigarette. As his plans for the day continued to race through his head, he lamented the fact that people and cigarettes were so dissimilar. One could be owned, enjoyed, neglected, loved, and easily discarded without any complaint.

The other was a human being.
Dropping his cigarette onto the pavement, he ground it into the heel of his boot.

"Anyway, you know what needs to be done," he spoke up. "So go do it."

"Got it," Portman replied. "See you in a bit."

Alone again, the former Hawk reached for his pack of cigarettes and pounded its side with his index finger only to discover that it was empty. His lips twisted into a bitter scowl as he realized that his pliant, usable companions had more in common with human beings than he had previously thought.

*In the end, they all leave you.*

"Mornin', Charlie," Larson greeted the deposed JV captain at the Student Council's table before turning to acknowledge Linda. "Linda. How are you?"

"Fine, Paul," she replied.

"Everything alright?" Charlie asked.

"Peachy," Larson deadpanned.

Charlie suppressed a laugh at the dour defenseman's expense. In all of his fifteen years, Charlie Conway had never met anyone even less perky and slower to laugh than Paul Larson – and that included all of his old D5 coaches who had an unfortunate habit of developing heart disease. But he was beginning to trust him.

"I'm sure you didn't stop by just to say 'hi'," Charlie speculated. "So what's up?"

"I'm gonna be your escort today."

Linda stifled a deep, husky laugh – Larson's dead eyes having the effect of making his declaration sound even more ridiculous.

Ignoring Linda, Larson spoke up.

"Varsity hit Averman on a weekend, so we need to be extra vigilant. I'm sure you can handle yourself if the shit hits the fan. But I owe it to our team to do my part to ensure that no other Ducks ride the pine pony over non-hockey injuries."

"Alright," Charlie agreed, rising to his feet. "Having a big, mean bodyguard at your side in this dump isn't the worst idea in the world."

Larson nodded in agreement as Charlie grabbed his empty breakfast tray.

"And maybe we could finally start getting to know each other," the loquacious forward suggested with an amiable grin.

Larson's coarse features remained set in a stony expression, and he remained silent as he walked Charlie and Linda to the tray conveyor. Now it was Charlie's turn to suppress a laugh. The old Hawk was just so serious and closed that getting him to open-up should provide a lark – even if those attempts proved unsuccessful.

"So…Larson," Charlie began as the trio left the dining hall and entered the foyer of the main academic building. "I've always wanted to know…what was Banksie like as a Hawk?"
The inscrutable defenseman gave a barely-perceptible shrug.

"I doubt he was much different as a Hawk than he was as a Duck," he declared. "Or as Varsity. Banks was always good at following orders."

"Yeah, Reilly seemed like he really ran a tight ship," Charlie replied. "I bet you all were used to taking a lot of orders."

"Most were."

"But not all?"

"The vast majority of a team's roster consists of loyal followers," Larson declared. "Only a small core of players has what it takes to lead. Adam never had the heart, the balls, or the brains to lead. But he follows as well as – if not better than – anyone else. If Henderson needs something done, I have no doubt that Adam will do his all to get it done for his leader."

"But he doesn't even sit with Varsity anymore," Linda protested.

Fire briefly flashed across Larson's obsidian eyes upon hearing Linda's objection.

Annoying cunt.

Rather than follow his father's example and invite her to butt-out by declaring his conversation with Charlie to be 'man-talk,' Larson gave a quick nod in agreement as he held the door open for the couple and led them outdoors.

"Adam hasn't been sitting with his team," he confirmed. "But if loyalty won't make him do Henderson's bidding, cowardice will."

"And you're not moved by cowardice at all?" Charlie asked.

Larson stopped and stared coldly at the longtime Duck captain, prompting Charlie to stop and meet the former Hawk's gaze. It was blank, but it had an unyielding, and almost predatory quality to it.

Heh, the guy even looks like a Hawk up close.

As Linda came to a stop, Larson noticed how closely he was being scrutinized, and softened his coarse features at once.

"I'd be lying if I told you that my fears didn't move me," he offered. "But fear isn't the same thing as cowardice. The former applies to me, the latter doesn't."

Although the corners of Larson's wide mouth formed a smile, the corners of his eyes remained perfectly smooth. Combined with his aquiline nose, square jaw, and obsidian eyes, the former Hawk had a way of appearing harsh even when he affected to look pleasant. Charlie decided to press him further.

"Is it cowardice to knock a player down from behind and send him headfirst into a goalpost?"

Larson's faint smile remained in place as he motioned for the trio to continue their walk.

"Let's look alive here," he commanded. "It's a cold Sunday and Varsity thugs are roaming the campus. The best place to be is in our dorms."

The trio resumed their walk as Larson continued to speak.
"And to answer your question, Charlie – yes, that's cowardice. What Jake McGill did to Adam Banks was cowardice. And I'm sure I don't need to remind you that I was the first one to help Adam after he went down."

Charlie looked down, ashamed of the fact that Larson actually had one up on him and the rest of the Ducks. The former Hawk continued.

"And I'm sure I don't need to remind you of Adam's behavior toward that colored boy when he first became a Duck. That was pretty cowardly too."

"Colored boy?!" An appalled Linda repeated.

"Or 'negro' if you prefer," Larson deadpanned. "His name escapes me."

"He's talking about Jesse, Linda," Charlie explained. "Jesse Hall. He had a hard time accepting Adam as a Duck…and Adam had a hard time accepting Jesse's attitude."

"I'm pretty sure Adam beat him up at one of your practices, if memory serves," Larson volunteered.

"He did," Charlie acknowledged glumly.

"Adam still felt he was a Hawk at that point," Larson added. "Being a Hawk comes with a lot of baggage, I can't deny that. But the person driven by fear can overcome their past. The person driven by cowardice cannot."

Larson allowed Charlie to meditate on that oblique distinction between Adam and himself as they walked in silence toward the dormitories. A few minutes later, he proposed a detour.

"Varsity won't be expecting us on this route," he explained, leading them to a walking trail that snaked through part of the woods behind the dorms.

As the trio walked, Charlie wondered about Adam. Although he did not sit with Varsity at lunch, he was a member of the team, and Charlie had buried the unpleasant memory of Adam and Jesse's fights before Larson dug them back up – reminding Charlie of the vicious streak that seemed to be in every Hawk's DNA. And with Adam dating Julie, he had managed – whether intentionally or not – to create a wedge between Julie and the rest of JV.

The deposed JV captain felt his stomach turn as he pondered his team's unhappy predicament – where it had to rely on an old Hawk to protect them from a bloodthirsty Varsity squad.

"Well, well, well," came a sharp, grating voice from behind a tree.

Charlie looked over to see Jake McGill move to stand in front of their path. Of all the former Hawks, McGill appeared to have grown the least. As was often the case with tall boys in elementary school, they turned out to be rather short in high school. But the sandy hair, the sardonic eyes, and the perma-smirk had remained unchanged over the previous four-and-a-half years.


"Jake – if you know what's good for you, you'll keep walking."

McGill gave his fellow Hawk a look of disgust that appeared quite genuine to Charlie.
"Paul Larson…sticking up for Little Duckies," he grimaced as he mouthed the epithet. "What happened to you, man?"

"This is your last warning, Jake. Keep. Walking."

"I got a better idea!"

McGill whisked Linda away from her escort, squeezing her wrists together behind her back with one hand while reaching an arm around her neck.

"Hey, honey," he whispered to his prey before licking her neck. "You taste good."

"You son-of-a…" Charlie barreled at McGill, only to have the bully throw his girlfriend into his path.

As Charlie and Linda collided, Larson dove headfirst toward McGill's hip, executing a perfect open-field tackle before pinning his fellow Hawk to the ground.

Straddling his victim, Larson's unforgiving eyes locked onto McGill's – which betrayed fear.

"I warned you," Larson growled, yanking McGill by the nape to draw his face close.

Charlie watched first in surprise, then in gratitude, and finally in horror as he witnessed Larson's merciless assault. The defenseman's enormous fists landed on McGill's face with the swiftness and repetition of rain in a hurricane. Time seemed to stand still as a dumbstruck Charlie stood and watched Larson give McGill a ferocious beating. The danger that McGill had presented had long since subsided. Now he had been reduced to a bloodied ragdoll clinging to life as Larson's relentless onslaught continued.

"Larson, stop!" Linda cried. "You're gonna kill him!"

Larson let up at once. Quietly and calmly, he released his grasp, stood up, and helped McGill to his feet without breathing a word. His expression was blank, and despite the ferocity of his attack, he never seemed to be out of control of his emotions. He turned to Charlie and Linda as he pulled his wallet out of his back pocket.

"Go on, guys. I'll catch up."

But Charlie and Linda were too shell-shocked to move. Larson smirked as he reached into his wallet and retrieved a bit of cash that he proceeded to throw at McGill's feet.

"Get your face fixed."

He moved to rejoin Charlie and Linda, getting between them and wrapping a protective arm around their shoulders.

"I'm sorry you had to see that," he offered once they got walking. "But it was necessary. Varsity is out for our blood, so we have to give them theirs right back."

Linda was appalled by the whole situation. Although Larson's intervention was ostensibly for her own safety, she felt that his counterattack was excessively violent. She did not breathe another word for the rest of their journey, and Charlie and Larson were equally silent.

Despite Larson's locker room coup, Charlie could not deny to himself that the former Hawk was all-Duck now.
How could he beat the shit out of McGill if he wasn't?

Although he continued to dislike Larson for his power grab, Charlie had finally come to trust him. And as news of other Varsity attacks on Ducks reached him throughout the day, he began to accept that Larson's leadership – bitter pill though it was – might be necessary after all.

The appalling weekend gave way to a dismal Monday and Tuesday for JV. Given his position as de facto captain, Larson had known all about his teammates' plans and movements for that weekend; and he relayed the information to McGill, who in turn passed it along to Henderson and the rest of Varsity. Although none of the Ducks ended up hospitalized, they were shaken-up. All but Connie and Julie had come under attack.

And given their Varsity boyfriends, the pair of lady Ducks came under the suspicion of their teammates. The holiday-shortened school week had felt like a month to Connie. But Julie, seated with Adam and the Nerds, had been spared the accusing looks that had befallen her roommate.

Connie's relationship with Guy had already been strained by his long absences. And now that his status as a Varsity player risked Connie's friendship with the rest of JV, she was beginning to feel that the weight of their relationship was no longer worth carrying.

It was in this gloomy spirit that Connie took a seat in the stands while Guy ran post-practice scoring drills with Scooter. After all that they had been through together, she had resolved to give him a proper face-to-face breakup. But her resolve was sorely tested as she watched Guy glide effortlessly across the ice, performing exotic scoring moves and offering Scooter advice between shots.

Although Guy Germaine was not the scoring machine that Adam Banks was, or the sheer force of nature that Fulton Reed was, his game was commanding and elegant – and there were no deficiencies.

Connie bit on her lower lip as she watched Guy get another one by Scooter. She had learned from experience how difficult it could be to date a teammate, but as Connie watched Guy, she felt that she could never be with a man who was not a hockey player. The combination of power, speed, elusiveness, cleverness, and gutsiness required of a hockey player was just too much to be discarded. Any other type of guy would feel like a massive downgrade.

The fact that almost all of them have perfect bods doesn't hurt either.

As Guy finished imparting his latest course of wisdom, he looked into the stands and discovered Connie.

"Hey, sweetie!"

An uncomfortable Connie waved back. Now that she had been seen, there could be no turning back. She could not get up and leave the breakup to another day. It had to be done now.

The remaining thirty minutes of the private practice session felt like eternity to her, with each passing minute adding to the dread of the preceding one. But the drills eventually finished, and the pair of Varsity players disappeared into their locker room to change into their street clothes before emerging in the tunnel a few minutes later.

"You've really come a long way," Guy offered. "I know it sounds corny man, but I'm proud of you."
"Heh, thanks Guy," Scooter replied. "Even though that sounds kinda weird coming from a sophomore. But thank you for all of your help, I really appreciate it."

"Not at all."

"Anyway, have a nice Thanksgiving," Scooter then looked into the stands. "You too!" He called out to Connie. "Happy Thanksgiving!"

Connie gave a half-hearted wave in reply.

"Yikes, she seems miserable," Scooter said in a low voice. "Good luck with that. Anyway, take care."

"You too."

As Scooter departed, Guy made his way up into the stands. True to Scooter's assessment, Connie was giving off a miserable vibe.

_Nothing I haven't fixed before though_, Guy thought breezily.

As Guy approached, Connie observed the boyish excitement in his hazel eyes. He had a way of looking like a kid on Christmas morning whenever he saw Connie – a tendency that she had only just noticed. Without realizing it, he was determined to make her task as difficult as possible.

"Hey, baby," he greeted her with a peck on the cheek, causing her to recoil.

"Guy," she replied with a short nod. "Have a seat."

"Um, okay…"

Struggling to find her voice, Connie let out an unhappy sigh as Guy took a seat next to her.

"Guy…oh Guy…there's no nice or easy way to say this, so I'm just gonna come right out and say it: we can't be together anymore."

A look of surprise that gave way to hurt and confusion flashed across his face.

"But why? I thought everything was cool between us. It's not about those weekend attacks, is it? I swear, I knew nothing about them! You know how I don't even sit with Varsity anymore."

Connie ran a hand over her forehead and through her hair before replying.

"Well, that and the shower prank you didn't warn me about either. Keeping me in the dark about the shower prank was one thing, but this is beginning to look like a pattern here."

Guy inhaled, about to speak but Connie continued.

"And more importantly, you're just not around anymore. Do you know how embarrassing it is for me to explain to my girlfriends why I can't join them on double dates anymore? I keep making up these excuses for you and I look like an idiot while they think you're off with another girl."

"Connie, you know that's ridiculous."

"Oh, is it? I know you have these drills to run with Scooter, but would it kill you to call from time to time? If only to see how I'm doing, and to let me know you're alright?"
"You know how it is, Connie. I get tired. Plus I have homework. I have to run drills with Scooter after a day of classes and a practice that usually involves a few fist fights. I'm spent by 5."

She knew that was true from the calls she had made to him, but a quick chat over the phone did not seem like an undue hardship. And she could not block out Larson's insinuation that Guy had used fatigue as an excuse to go on doing things without her. And of course, there were the weeks that Adam drilled Scooter and Guy was free but could not be bothered half the time.

If the relationship had not gotten so lousy, she might have been willing to endure the suspicion of her teammates. But it was joyless in its own right, and Guy's Varsity status made it extra burdensome.

"Well," Connie spoke up, "if you're really that tired and busy, you won't have much time to miss me. So that should make things easier for you."

Guy sighed.

"Why do you have to be so dramatic?"

Connie scoffed at the characterization.

"You call that 'dramatic'? It sounds like you're gonna be in for some insanely crazy breakups if this is your standard for 'dramatic'."

"Well, it sounds like your mind is made up."

Connie nodded, knowing that Guy was not going to offer any protest.

"In that case, all the best," he offered as he stood up. "Hopefully we can stay in touch as friends." He turned and began to walk toward one of the exits. "And happy Thanksgiving…I guess."

Connie could tell that his attempt at stoicism was hiding real pain, and part of her wanted to jump out of her seat, go after him, and assure him that everything would be alright. But that would have undone the breakup that she felt was necessary, and that she had worked so hard to see through. She sat in the bleachers for an additional few minutes to give him space to get ahead during the walk back to the dorms before she moved to leave.

Whenever Connie had done something difficult in the past, she felt a wonderful surge of energy as she moved on to the next big thing. But as difficult as this breakup was, achieving it gave her no joy. All that she felt was an awareness of having completed a grim task as she walked alone into the cold.

"Hey, Guy – watch out!" Fulton called-out as the blond forward walked mechanically toward the boys' dormitory.

But the warning came too late, and Guy walked straight into the Varsity defenseman.

"Huh? Oh, hey. Sorry Fulton."

"Is something wrong, man?"

Guy shook his head.

"No, I'm okay. Connie broke up with me, but I'm fine."
"Ah man, that sucks."

"Don't worry about it."

The two Varsity Ducks stood outside the boys' dormitory in silence for some time. Fulton wanted to ask his friend to explain what had happened, but a dazed Guy seemed too lost in his own thoughts to be coherent.

After a few awkward moments, Fulton decided to see if he could bring his teammate back to earth by reminding him of the task at hand.

"So why don't we go inside?" He suggested. "Your mom will be here soon, and you wanted to grab a few things before the dorms close for break."

Guy nodded and led his friend through the main entrance and up the stairs to his deserted room. As they passed rooms full of students making last-minute preparations before leaving for Thanksgiving, Fulton thought he could hear the familiar sound of Bone Club, Portman's favorite band, getting closer.

He turned and observed Portman bopping his head to his portable CD player whose volume had been cranked to the max, allowing Fulton to identify the song as *Everything's On Fire*.

Portman looked up with a start when he noticed his old friend standing in the hallway before stopping in his tracks. The former Bash Brothers had not been around each other for two months, and they were beginning to forget what had driven them apart in the first place. But their time away from each other led to a bit of awkwardness, and neither of them quite knew what to say, though both wanted to say something.

"Uh…hey…man," Portman greeted Fulton.

"What's up? I thought you'd be heading for Chicago by now."

Portman nodded.

"I'm doin' that right now. Gettin' ready for an evening flight. Only an hour-and-a-half long. Definitely beats the car ride."

"You should get going then."

Portman shrugged.

"Nah, it's cool. I've got time. So how are things?"

Before Fulton could respond, Larson emerged from his dorm room.

"You had better get moving, Dean," Larson suggested. "Your flight's a short one, but airport security takes time getting through. You'll have plenty of time to talk to Varsity after break."

As if shaking out of a stupor, Portman's back straightened and his brown eyes hardened.

"You're right, Paul. I was just gonna tell these Varsity losers to get bent. But I can always do that later."

Larson gave Portman a nod of approval as he observed the JV defenseman leave Fulton and move to retrieve his belongings for the flight home. Satisfied that Portman was not about to have a Fulton relapse, Larson gave the disappointed-looking Varsity defenseman a smug grin before
returning to his room and closing the door behind him.

The brief encounter with Portman had the effect of making Guy more aware of his surroundings, and as he observed his burly old friend's slumped shoulders sad countenance, he spoke up.

"Too bad Portman had to go. It's been so long since we've gotten to talk to him."

Fulton nodded. He had not missed Portman's irritability, or his willingness to fight him at the drop of a hat since the two Bash Brothers had wound up on separate teams. But Fulton missed his friend, and though he had no idea what Portman's real problem was, he was quite willing to meet his old friend halfway in any attempt to solve it. He imagined that Portman felt a similar willingness, having shown a desire to stay and catch up for a little while before Larson reminded him of the plane he needed to catch.

Larson.

That name had a strong association with trouble and unhappiness.

Fulton remembered the old Hawk bully from his D5 days. Larson was far quieter than his trash-talking friend McGill, but something about the taller, darker Hawk seemed much more cruel to Fulton. A few weeks earlier, Julie had moved to the AV table at lunch, citing Larson's rising influence over the Ducks as her main reason. Fulton had observed from afar how close Portman seemed to have gotten to Larson, and the sick feeling these observations had induced could not be attributed exclusively to jealousy.

"Uh, Fulton…yoohoo."

Guy waved a hand in front of Fulton, who appeared lost in thought.

"Oh, sorry man."

Fulton took Guy's hockey bag while Guy picked up a travel bag before the pair began heading for the exit.

"So what do you make of Larson, Guy?"

Guy shrugged.

"Quiet old Hawk who looks like a '50s greaser. Why?"

"I don't know, man. Something about him just seems off."

"I do remember Larson being slightly less mean than McGill," Guy declared. "I mean, it was McGill who drove Adam into the goalpost, and Larson who skated over to see if he was okay."

"That's true I guess…but that was a really long time ago. Larson doesn't seem so nice now; and McGill's bark is worse than his bite these days. Plus Julie hates him, she's gotta have a reason."

Guy chuckled.

"I think she just likes having an excuse to sit with Adam."

"It might not be a bad idea to send her back to the JV table," Fulton suggested. "You know, as a sort of spy. She could observe Larson…and see what the rest of JV has planned."

Guy shook his head in dissent.
"You're taking this so-called 'war' too seriously. It'll pass eventually. And if you wanna try talking Julie into going back to the JV table, be my guest. Just don't come crying to me after she rips your arms off."

Fulton sighed. He knew that Guy was a loyal and generous friend, but he was far too passive for the former Bash Brother. The blond forward always seemed to assume that things would just work themselves out. The Varsity defenseman knew that if he was to defeat his JV replacement, he would have to rely more on Adam and Julie, and less on Guy.
Charlie buzzed with anticipation as he awaited Linda's arrival in a bus shelter a couple blocks from his house. His mother had re-married a few years ago to a reasonably successful insurance agent named Bruce Portallino, allowing the Conways to move out of their cramped Minneapolis apartment and into a comfy Cape Cod-style house in the suburbs. Despite their home's proximity to a bus stop, Charlie was determined to get the best grades possible in order to get his stepfather to make good on a promised car for Charlie's 16th birthday the following August.

He was enjoying a temporary reprieve from class on the Wednesday before Thanksgiving, but he would have preferred to remain on campus while class was out; Eden Hall's dormitories had closed for the short break, forcing him to spend the next five days under Bruce's roof.

Charlie's relationship with his stepfather had improved somewhat since the early days when the boy happily worked for nothing in Jan and Hans' skate shop just to get away from his mom's new husband. Bruce was not a bad man, but Charlie felt that his stepfather was a bit too eager to be his dad. The insurance agent affably smothered Charlie whenever the boy was around, but wallowed in self-pity whenever Charlie called him 'Bruce' instead of 'Dad.'

This caused Casey to get frustrated with her stubborn son, and it led to a lot of uncomfortably quiet dinners.

Linda Tompkins offered an escape from all of that.

Whether it was circulating petitions around Eden Hall, writing letters to corrupt governments for the school's Amnesty International chapter, or listening to the head-banging group Pantera, Linda shared Charlie's contempt for arbitrary authority. With her chestnut hair, baby blue eyes, clear skin, and pleasant build, she was not bad on the eyes either.

Despite their shared rebelliousness, Charlie and Linda were a wholesome and complementary young couple. He had shattered her old prejudice against jocks and helped make the somewhat sanctimonious young woman more tolerant and easy going. In return, Linda provided a source of loyal stability for the occasionally moody and unpredictable Charlie, whose whacked-out teenage hormones got the better of his judgment at times.

The bitter, snowy weather of the previous weekend had given way to sunshine and mild temperatures the past few days, and Charlie was sure that Bruce would use the fair weather as an excuse to toss the pigskin with his 'son.' Bruce's disinterest in hockey and obsession with football also stuck in Charlie's craw.

But before he could brood on these thoughts too much, Charlie heard the rumble of the approaching bus. Like an excitable dog eagerly anticipating the arrival of its beloved master, he jumped off the bench in the shelter as the bus came to a halt. The arrival of each passing stranger made Charlie's heart beat a little faster, as Linda's arrival got closer.

As soon as she alighted, she heard an excited voice call out her name before a wild-haired teenager squeezed her, causing her to drop her canvas library bags.

"Thank God it's Charlie," she thought as she returned the embrace.

"Come on, let's get out of these peoples' way," she advised, grabbing her bags and moving away from the bus. Charlie's greeting had created a bit of a backlog as people struggled to get around the
inconveniently-positioned couple.

"I got those," he took her bags and peered inside to discover cooking ingredients, prompting him to chuckle. "I didn't know real feminists cooked."

Linda scoffed at the teasing.

"Real feminists aren't stupid enough to leave the cooking to men."

"Now that's an agenda I can whole-heartedly support."

Linda playfully rolled her eyes as she began the short walk to Charlie's house. The mild, sunny day was a welcome change from the early snow storm the previous week, and the pair walked comfortably without the need for any bulky winter clothing. She had been feeling sorry for Casey, who had to wait on strangers all day only to come home and cook a huge meal for Charlie and Bruce; so Linda volunteered to cook the stuffing, vegetables, mashed potatoes, cranberry sauce, and pumpkin pie. She hoped that with the early start, it would all be done in time for Casey to come home. It was either that or leave the cooking to Charlie.

"So how's your Latin project coming?" She asked as Charlie's house came into view.

He sighed.

"I probably should start that."

"I don't know why you picked such a difficult one. I mean, don't get me wrong, I'm impressed; but five mini biographies written in Latin is a lot."

"I realize that now," Charlie groaned.

He had decided to write a mini biography for each of the Five Good Emperors instead of writing an original work of fiction or poetry. His project idea seemed like a natural fit, given that he had always been impressed by leaders. But he had come to realize that he was in over his head.

"Don't worry, Charlie. Where there's a will, there's a way."

His eyes lit up in hopeful expectation.

"And no," Linda replied. "That does not mean that I will do your project for you."

Charlie deflated somewhat as they approached his house, but Linda continued.

"Why didn't you sign up for an original fiction?"

Charlie shrugged.

"Writing fiction is too hard. Every time I sit down to do a creative writing assignment, my mind just goes blank. At least with biographies the facts are already there, it's not like I have to create another world."

He unlocked the front door and ushered Linda in.

"It's not as difficult as you think – creating another world," she declared, taking off her shoes and placing them in the tray by the door. "Every time you verbally tell a story, you're basically recreating a world – a world that has passed and changed since. I've heard you tell plenty of Duck stories, and they're interesting even to a hockey-hater like me. So I know you can tell a story, it's
"Heh. We've already had the modern story assignment," Charlie replied as he began to make his way to the kitchen. "So Duck stories are out."

"Mmm. Yes and no. You can certainly take Duck-like characters and place them in the Ancient World. They had sports back then, even if ice hockey wasn't around."

Charlie considered this as he began unloading Linda's ingredients and setting them onto the kitchen island. It never occurred to him that even original works of fiction were often real life experiences, just slightly tweaked. Suddenly, the creation of an original work did not seem so daunting.

"But if you don't feel up to it, you can always stick to the Five Good Emperors," Linda continued. "Hell, you could even write a work of historical fiction on one of them if you like. But whatever you choose, you should definitely get some writing done over break. It's late, but I'm sure Dr. Wolff will let you change subjects if you give him a sample of your work."

Charlie smiled, as the dark clouds of a tedious project gave way to sunshine. It amazed him how Linda could take what seemed like an impossible problem, calmly break it down, and then offer practical solutions. This ability stood in stark contrast to the temperamental Duck whose powerful emotions often made mountains out of molehills, but provided an enormous source of energy and determination once his mind settled on a possibility.

"I'll definitely do that," he nodded, then sighed. "It'll be great next year, when all this language stuff becomes optional instead of required."

Linda had begun setting up her cooking implements on the counter as Charlie mulled over his project.

"You should stick with Latin for at least another year," she suggested. "It's a big help with the verbal section on the SATs. Even if you get into college on a hockey scholarship, schools will want some proof that you can be a decent student."

"Not to mention…it'll probably be the only class that we'd have together," Charlie grinned before planting a kiss on Linda's cheek.

Given her all-honors core schedule, Latin was the only class that she shared with him.

"That's true too," she agreed, giving Charlie a peck of her own before returning to her mixing bowl. "But unless you want to learn how to cook, you better get moving on your Latin, young man."

He pouted, but moved toward the living room without protest.

"In here!" Linda called out. "You'll work better without the TV distracting you."

"But you'll distract me with your beauty."

Linda giggled. She loved her boyfriend's silly charm, but was determined not to be ruled by it.

"I'll take that chance," she replied, pointing to the kitchen table and commanding him to sit.

"Let me just get my things," Charlie replied as he turned and left the kitchen to retrieve his Latin-English dictionary and some paper.

It did not take long for Charlie to return to the kitchen. Although the house was a step up from the
apartment he had lived in, it was still pretty small. Linda had taken an immediate liking to the place, whose small, intimate quarters stood in stark contrast to the spacious mcmansion she lived in with her parents. She felt that her large house was a ridiculous extravagance for three people, and all the physical space it created between her parents and herself had created some emotional distance as well. The more intimate setting her boyfriend's house provided gave her a warm feeling inside.

Charlie looked on with curiosity as Linda stirred ice into a pitcher of water.

"It's for the pie crust," she explained. "You'll get the perfect texture every time if you use chilled water. It's not enough just to run the cold tap."

"Or you could just get store-bought crust."

She glared at her culinary slacker of a boyfriend.

"I'll shut up now," Charlie offered, returning to his blank pages where he began to brainstorm.

After about twenty minutes of Linda cooking and Charlie writing in silence, she wondered what he had come up with.

"So are you bringing the Ducks into the Ancient World?"

"You know it."

"I hope you'll be nicer to Adam and Julie in fiction than you are in real life."

Charlie set his pen down and turned his body toward Linda while remaining seated.

"And what the hell's that supposed to mean?"

"Only that the actions of a few Varsity goons aren't enough to justify treating Adam like a traitor. Or that Julie's loyalty to her boyfriend makes her less of a Duck as well."

Linda's mention of Adam stirred Charlie's conflicting feelings about the Varsity center. Adam had always been somewhat of an outsider among the Ducks. First he was a rich ex-Hawk among ragtag Ducks with more blue collar backgrounds. Then he was on Varsity for almost all of last year. Then came the reconciliation between Adam and Charlie once the quiet center returned to the Ducks, followed by a summer of bonding over hockey talk and Duck outings. Charlie even took the bold step of volunteering to room with Adam that year to prove that the hatchet had truly been buried.

But Adam was back on Varsity, and as the thuggish team's season continued to slip away, they had gotten increasingly violent. Meanwhile, JV had remained undefeated, and Charlie had no doubt that this made Varsity even more hostile to JV than they were already inclined to be. Charlie understood that Adam had to play for a different team, but that was no excuse for sitting back and allowing his friends get beaten-up.

Probably all that time with Julie, Charlie reasoned as he tried to figure out why Adam was not reining-in his Varsity teammates.

Then came another problem: Julie. The determined, independent goalie had epitomized everything Duck for the past year-and-a-half. But her team spirit seemed to fade as Larson took on a greater role. Charlie had had his own difficulties with Paul Larson, but the longtime Duck captain could not deny that the former Hawk was an excellent hockey player, a smart leader on the ice, and a protective teammate off of it. Despite his past life as a Hawk, and his locker room coup, Larson
seemed like a model teammate; and Julie's unremitting hostility toward him was puzzling to Charlie.

All of this while Ducks were being hunted like wild game by Varsity. Now was not the time for division, but Julie seemed hell-bent on it.

*And where the hell is Adam?*

"Charlie?"

He snapped out of his brooding to notice his worried girlfriend.

"Yes?"

"I'm sorry if I offended you there," she offered. "But Julie and Adam are good people, and I hope you can clear-up whatever it is between you."

Charlie nodded. He did not know how unity could be achieved, but given JV's tenuous position on campus, he knew that unity was needed now more than ever.

"I'm sure we will," he replied. "Thanksgiving Break was perfectly timed. I think we all needed time to get away from each other and clear our heads."

"That sounds about right," Linda agreed as she returned to her cooking.

Charlie put a big X over the paper on which he had been writing, and began piecing together a new story idea on a fresh page.

Instead of an injury-prone hero named Limbus—Latin for 'Banks'—missing the games, he fights on, encouraged by his tough but loving wife Julia, and goes on to triumphant victory before returning to his village and coaching others to greatness. Satisfied that Adam the French student and Julie the Spanish student would not recognize themselves in his story, Charlie began to write.

Sandwiched between her father and her brother in the Gaffneys' Bangor living room, Julie was on the edge of her seat as the overtime period drew to a close in a bareknuckle brawl of a game between the Montreal Canadiens and the Boston Bruins.

"Holy shit, they're going to shootouts!" Steven Gaffney Junior – aka 'Junior'– exclaimed.

His father, Steven Senior, gave the college sophomore a look of mild reproach, but it lacked any real intensity or authority. Junior had become a man, and if he wanted to indulge in a bit of salty language from time to time, it was his right to do so. Besides, shootouts *were* an awfully rare occurrence.

"Bring back any memories, sweetie?" Steven asked his daughter.

"It sure does," Julie replied. "But if Coach Bombay had put me in at the start of the game, we never would have been in that position against Iceland in the first place."

"Haha, that's my girl!"

Steven gave Julie an affectionate slap on the shoulder. A former high school goalie himself, he knew all about the importance of a goaltender's confidence. As long as they believed that they were impenetrable, there was a chance – though not a guarantee – that they were. But once doubt creeps into a goalie's psyche, anticipation of blown saves becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.
Fortunately, Julie Gaffney had never been wanting for confidence when between the pipes. Or in the classroom. But Steven could tell that there were areas in life where Julie's footing was less-than firm. Given his constant traveling for work, he did not have the sort of life-affirming opportunities with his daughter that he would have liked to have had; and her presence in Minnesota for most of the year made these moments even more difficult to come by.

He resolved to have a private heart-to-heart with her sometime during these rare days together at home when his wife Karen stuck her head into the living room.

"Julie, you have a phone call," she announced. "Some boy named Adam."

The goalie's eyes widened at the mention of her boyfriend's name. She still had not told her parents about him – she had not even told them about Tim. Rising to her feet, a feeling of dread washed over her as she realized that she would have to tell her parents. But as she approached her mother, Julie noticed a strange look in Karen's eyes.

Like a twinkle, almost.

She followed her mother into the kitchen, where Karen and Steven's middle child, Mark, was sketching at the table. Karen returned to her Thanksgiving preparations while Julie picked up the receiver.

"Hey, Adam."

"Julie! Hey, I…"

"Adam, I'm sorry to cut you off, but Boston is about to go into shootouts with Montreal. I'm sure you understand."

"One hundred percent," he assured her. "Let me know how it goes!"

"Thanks, I'll call you back in a few. Bye!"

As Julie replaced the receiver, her mother called out to her.

"Putting hockey before your man, are you?"

Julie looked back with a shy smile and rosy cheeks.

"He's the sort of guy who understands that."

"I'm delighted to hear it," Karen replied with a knowing smile.

Julie felt like her face was on fire as she returned to the living room, but she no longer felt any dread about the prospects of 'the Talk' with her parents. If someone as humorless as her mother could smile about it, talking to her father about it would be a walk in the park.

After zipping-up his black duffel bag, Larson looked around his spotless bedroom for something to help him kill time before his trip up north for the holiday. This took some doing, as he kept his room neat and sparse to avoid the wrath of his father. Apart from a single bed that was too short for his frame, a desk, a chair, a two-drawer filing cabinet, and a modest collection of old nature books, there was not much that could provide him with comfort or distraction. The only 'frills' in the room were the collection of hockey trophies on the top of his dresser, and the 40-inch lake trout mounted over his desk that stood as a testament to his fishing prowess.
Deciding that he did not have anything better to do, he approached his bookshelf and reached for his musty old copy of *The White-Tailed Deer of Minnesota* when the phone on his desk rang. His father had been running uncharacteristically late, so he figured that the old man was calling to explain his tardiness.

"Hey, Dad. Almost home, sir?"

"Um...hey, Paul. It's Connie."

Larson's heart jumped against his chest as he heard the voice of the Porcelain Goddess.

"But if you're expecting an important call I can hang up though," she offered.

"No, no. It's nothing important," he replied as he got up and took a seat on his hard bed so he could lay down. "So how are you doing?"

Connie sighed.

"I still feel like I made a mistake dumping Guy."

The pretty brunette had called Larson almost immediately after breaking up with Guy the day before and tearfully vented her guilt over the phone; and from the hoarse sound of her voice, he could tell that she was still upset. The young hunter knew that his doe was wounded, and he needed to tread carefully. An aggressive approach risked spooking her and causing her to flee to someplace inaccessible. A conservative approach risked allowing another hunter to come in and bag her. Having only been one day since the initial phone call, Larson decided to play it conservative.

"It's only been a day, Connie. Of course you're still feeling raw, that's natural. But you'll feel better with time."

He knew that last bit was only partly true. He was reminded that some wounds will always remain raw on the flesh as he felt his thigh burn beneath the photograph of his mother in his pocket.

"You're right. It just sucks hurting Guy like that. I mean, I didn't see him get really upset, but I could sort of tell, y'know? Or maybe I'm just imagining things. The breakup last year was so much easier because he already had someone else."

Connie had told Larson about last year's drama, and he realized that Connie was one of those rare girls who would rather get dumped than do the dumping. She had an unusually high degree of empathy and compassion beneath that tough hockey facade. He knew that such a girl would always think more with her heart than her head, so reasoning could only go so far. She was a giver, and was happiest when she was building up the people closest to her.

It was time for Larson to appeal to the giver in Connie, even if it meant damaging his own interests in the short term.

"The fact that you still care so much about Guy tells me that you've got a lot to give. The way you described Julie the other day...it's obvious she's feeling down now that the team is suspicious of her. Maybe you could give her a call, welcome her back into the flock. Not only will you feel better about yourself, but making our goalie happy will be good for the team."

Connie giggled at her earnest teammate who always managed to tie everything back to hockey. But his advice felt sound. She did not like where things were going between Julie and herself, so a long distance call to comfort Julie seemed like just what the doctor ordered.
"That's a good idea," she replied. "Julie still hates you, y'know. I'm surprised you are so worried about her when she's been so awful toward you."

"Like I told you before, my first interest is always what's best for the team. Once egos emerge, team chemistry evaporates. Reconciliation will be good for both of you, and our team by extension. Plus, it will allow you to give again in a positive way."

Larson could hear the door open and shut downstairs, along with the sound of his father's heavy gait.

_Shit._

"Ready to go, Paul?" Bill Larson called out from downstairs.

"I'll be right down, sir!" The younger Larson replied as he put a hand over the mouthpiece of the phone. "I'm sorry, Connie. But my dad's here and I have to go now. We're heading up to Duluth for Thanksgiving with the extended family. I've got your number so I can call you back. Talk to you soon."

"Thanks, Paul. Enjoy your family!"

Larson got to his feet and replaced the phone on his desktop charger, then grabbed his duffel bag and his backpack before quickly making his way to the staircase. He did not want to keep Bill waiting. He knew full well that his father was at his most irritable when he returned home from work at the prison, and he knew that his father wanted to hit the road as soon as possible, so the younger Larson had taken care to pack ahead of time.

"Let's go already!" Bill barked when he saw his son at the top of the staircase.

True to Larson form, Bill was tall and strong. The 39-year old corrections officer kept fit with 220 pounds of muscle on his six-foot-five-inch frame. He wore the stress of his job on his pale, craggy face and weary, but keenly observant blue eyes. The remaining hair on his balding head was more gray than brown, and he had not bothered changing out of the white shirt and black slacks that made up his uniform, although he had taken off his black necktie and left it in his Jeep Cherokee.

Paul obeyed his father without a word as he quickly made his way down the stairs. Silent obedience was the response that Bill demanded from prisoners, and he had difficulty letting go of his rigorous jailhouse habits around his son. The prison guard had been on edge for the past week, as his superiors had told him to ease-up and the prisoners under his supervision had detected weakness. Earlier that morning, he decided to re-assert himself by taking a mouthy prisoner to a blind spot away from the cameras and beating respect into him. There was always a fine line between being the hunter and the hunted in that kind of environment, and occasionally a guard needed to send prisoners a brutal message to remind them who was who.

"Get Shadow," Bill commanded his son as he approached his shiny black Cherokee.

Paul nodded and went around to the back of the house to retrieve the family's loyal dog. Shadow was an active but disciplined chocolate lab with a keen nose and strong swimming ability that made him ideal for hunting – particularly duck-hunting. The Larson farm had plenty of land for the dog to run around on, and Bill had no intention of putting Shadow in a kennel while they were up north. He fired-up the engine as he saw his son approach with the dog.

As Shadow got settled in the back, Paul went around to the front passenger seat. He did not even have time to close the door and fasten his seatbelt when his father started backing out of the
driveway. The interior of Bill's Jeep was just as spotless as the meticulously-waxed exterior, and he made a mental note to vacuum the interior once they returned home to get out any dog hair. This was Bill's regular driving vehicle, he drove a black Dodge Ram that toed a camper for long hunting trips. The Larson men rode in perfect silence as they made their way out of the Twin Cities and onto I-35 toward Duluth.

After an hour of hearing nothing but the wail of Bill's snow tires against the clear highway road, Paul decided that he had had enough of the silence. He knew better than to ask his father how his day went, having gotten the same response every time: "how do you think it went?"

He also knew that his father was perfectly capable of making the two hour drive without breathing a word, so Paul decided that music was his best bet.

"Can I turn on the radio, sir?"

"Turn on the tape player, I've got Roy Orbison in the deck."

The younger Larson nodded and did as he was told. He knew that his father despised most contemporary musicians, seeing them as a bunch of "dumb, drugged-out Commies," so he was not surprised by Bill's old-school selection. As the sounds of Blue Angel filled the Jeep, Paul observed the monotonous, desolate landscape as they headed further north. Bill's older brother, Joe, now ran the family dairy farm; but their parents still lived there, along with a few other Larsons.

Bill was the only man in the family not involved in farming or Great Lakes shipping. He did not care what his son decided to do with his life as long as it was a step up from farming, shipping, or corrections duty. In one of his brighter moods, he even imagined Paul going pro as a hockey player. The younger Larson certainly had the strength, speed, agility, and game IQ to go far, and his acceptance into Eden Hall's hockey program had earned the defenseman a rare pat on the back from his father.

Paul tried to get his mind off the dreary landscape and impending family reunion by thinking of his Porcelain Goddess. He was determined to own her. He figured that with Connie having broken up with Guy, the hard part was out of the way, and he had noticed the looks that she had been giving him lately. Those honey brown eyes craved warmth, contact, and strength; and the looks she gave Larson indicated to the defenseman that he could offer all of those things.

The 15-year old stifled a shiver as the Jeep continued to speed north. He knew better than to attempt to turn on the heat, or ask his Old Man to do so. He remembered a hunting trip they had gone on four years earlier when he complained about the coldness of the trailer to his father. Bill responded to his son's complaints by taking the boy's blankets for himself.

"You're right," the elder Larson deadpanned on that occasion. "Be a winner, not a whiner."

From that moment on, Paul Larson knew that externalizing his discomfort, worries or fears, had the strong potential to make things even worse for him. So he developed a stoic approach to life, mirroring his father.

Paul's quiet, hardworking nature gave him an appearance of being wise beyond his years. To some extent, he was. But this stoicism was as much a shield as it was an outlook for the boy. He was also aware of its use as a sword – its ability to conquer his enemies through the use of other people. His aura of quiet wisdom drew broken boys to him, and he felt no qualms about fostering that dependency for his own ends. As he had learned from his father, a person's status as the hunter or the hunted was a free and unavoidable choice in life.
And there were only those two choices.

Paul Larson had no intention of being hunted, and if weaker boys sought his protection, why should he not demand total obedience in exchange?

He would certainly demand total obedience from the Porcelain Goddess once she was finally his. He felt that would only be a fair exchange for all the gifts he intended to lavish on her. Larson had worked hard to setup that essay selling scheme, and he had saved-up a considerable amount. That kind of money, he believed, would enable him to secure his next conquest and afford a trophy girlfriend.
Fulton hopped out of his mother's car and began the walk to Eden Hall's main academic building. With the first day of classes after Thanksgiving Break, December had arrived and Fulton could almost taste an impending blizzard in the air. The Varsity defenseman walked alone, still living off campus and away from his roommate Dean Portman. Not only had Fulton lost his best friend, but living off campus and being on Varsity had made him a solitary figure. Adam and Julie visited him from time to time, but he always felt like a third wheel around the happy couple, even though both of his friends did their best to make him feel wanted.

Guy was around, but his recent break-up with Connie reminded Fulton just how much of a loner the blond forward was beneath the glib exterior. In recent days, Guy had become increasingly spacey, and his time away from school had not cleared his head. Fulton did not know what he could do, as Guy refused to open-up, choosing instead to speak in vague philosophical terms when asked how he was doing.

The distance between Fulton and his friends had taken a toll on him, and he had even talked to his mother about re-enrolling in public school, a suggestion that Ms. Reed dismissed out of hand, not wanting to deprive her son of a valuable educational opportunity.

As Fulton walked through the bustling entrance hall and to his first period class, he noticed how none of the other students had either greeted him or looked at him. Being a Duck as a freshman had brought with it pariah status, and being Varsity as a sophomore meant loser status. Varsity's embarrassing performance, combined with his seat at the AV table, pushed the defenseman to the outer edges of the social margins at Eden Hall.

Christmas at the Reed household yielded few gifts, but Fulton could hardly wait for the Season of Giving, as it provided him an excuse to get away from the school that made him feel alone in a crowd.

Fighting off melancholy, he approached Dr. Carcerano's classroom for his first period math class; but before he could open the door, he heard a startling sound in the distance. It sounded heavier than the familiar slamming of a locker door, and the faint groan made it obvious that someone was getting beaten-up.

Cursing the useless and venal prefects who sat around sipping coffee and scarfing donuts in the faculty lounge, Fulton turned and followed the sounds of suffering, ready to break-up the fight.

"Where are your boys now?" McGill sneered at Milton before throwing his prey back into the wall of lockers. "No matter, I can take 'em. All of 'em," he added with a punch to Milton's gut.

"Now pay up and don't skimp again, you four-eyed virgin!"

Milton reached for his wallet, hoping to get the Varsity goon off his case. He knew that he did not have enough for the amount that McGill expected, but he hoped that a few bucks could get the nasty collector to ease up. As he was about to hand over the money, he looked up and discovered that Fulton had silently crept behind his tormentor.

The burly defenseman was surprisingly light on his feet, and neither McGill nor Milton had noticed his approach. Milton let out a relieved smile.

"What are you so fucking happy about?" McGill demanded as he snatched the cash out of Milton's
Before Milton could respond, Fulton tapped McGill on his shoulder.

The former Hawk spun around, his natural irritability enhanced by the interruption.

"What the fuck you want, you…F-F-Fulton?!!"

His eyes widened in horror as he looked up and observed the powerful Duck.

Fulton's manly mits grabbed McGill by the sides and lifted the bullying forward off the ground, bringing him eye level with the defenseman. Pinning him against a wall of lockers, Fulton drew back a clenched fist. McGill looked away, anticipating a devastating blow to the face.

Instead, he felt a surge of pain below the belt as Fulton's knee connected with his groin.

With his rival temporarily incapacitated, Fulton released McGill, allowing the latter to tumble to the floor in pain. Fulton snatched the money that had fallen out of McGill's hand and returned it to Milton.

"I'm getting a prefect!" McGill threatened as he staggered to his feet.

"Heh. Good luck findin' one. Now get lost."

McGill was about to flee, but checked himself as he remembered the essays. It was bad enough that he had failed to collect the full amount for Larson, and he did not want to incur his master's wrath by failing to show-up with the latest batch of completed essays. He moved to pick-up the manila folder that had fallen to the ground during his ill-fated extortion attempt.

"What's that?" Fulton demanded.

Milton quickly checked to ensure that the coast was clear of faculty before replying.

"The essays," he answered. "My friends and I write them, McGill's people distribute them to paying students, and then we get a cut of the profits."

"How much?"

"Ten percent."

Fulton threw the loose papers into the folder and snatched it away from McGill.

"Until you come back with a better offer, you get nothing," the defenseman declared.

McGill felt a panicky rush of adrenalin as he thought about Larson's inevitable retribution. But he put on a brave face.

"Fine. You have no idea who you're up against, though," he sneered.

Fulton moved toward McGill in a sudden, menacing gesture, causing the forward's bravado to evaporate. He turned and fled.

Fulton then turned to Milton to see if his friend was alright, only to be greeted with a fistful of cash.

"What is it with you?" Fulton demanded as he waved away the money. "We're friends, I'm not hired muscle."
The nerd had still been getting used to the fact that he had friends outside his circle who were willing to stick-up for him. With a happy chuckle, he put away the money. Having Fulton, Guy, Adam and Julie around made life at Eden Hall a dramatically safer experience than it had been during his first two years at the school.

He was no longer threatened by bullies and meatheads on a daily basis, even though he still had to put up with McGill from time to time. He only hoped that he could do something for his new friends in return, but they were uninterested in money and he felt that the tutoring services he provided were not nearly as valuable as the protection that his new friends gave him.

"Why do you do that prick's bidding anyway?" Fulton asked as he began walking Milton to his first period class.

Milton shrugged.

"I guess the pocket change he pays me is better than nothing. It's definitely better than getting beat-up."

"You could get him expelled," Fulton proposed. "Then you won't have to work for scraps, and you'll have one less bully on your case. I mean this essay thing has gotta violate at least a dozen school rules."

Milton nodded as they approached his classroom.

"It does. And if I take down McGill and whoever is running him, they'll take me down with them." The nerd then lowered his voice to a whisper. "I mean, I wrote the essays, so of course I'll be expelled if Dean Buckley finds out about this."

"Why throw away a perfectly good opportunity to leave this dump?"

"Heh. This place may be a dump, but colleges still respect it for some reason. I've only got a year-and-a half to go. At least I'm past the halfway mark."

"Your call, man. But don't write those essays if you don't want to. And double don't write those essays if McGill gives you a shitty price."


The bell rang, indicating an end to Julie's morning classes and the beginning of the lunch period. She grabbed her things, left the classroom and made her way toward Adam's biology class so she could meet him halfway before they walked to the dining hall together. Thanksgiving Break seemed to have provided a welcome cooling-off period for Charlie, Connie and Julie. The JV goalie had received apologetic phone calls from both her teammates; and whatever Larson had been trying to pull, it did not appear to involve driving a wedge between Julie and the Ducks.

She still did not trust the old Hawk, but she knew enough to avoid mentioning him during her conversations with Charlie and Connie.

Another old Hawk, however, laid total claim to Julie's trust, and to her heart. And his long, attractive frame towered over shorter classmates in the hall. Before he could spot her, she retreated and went around the cluster of classrooms to approach him from the other side. She hoped to take him by surprise.

"Hey, handsome," she greeted him with a tap on the shoulder.
As reward for her catlike elusiveness, she was gifted with a wide-eyed, astonished grin from Adam Banks that mixed surprise with delight. When he was not wearing his natural frown, his face could be exquisitely expressive, and Julie was more than willing to resort to a bit of subterfuge if that was what it took to induce such a lovely sight.

"Hey, Sneaky," he replied, still grinning. "If I hold your hand, you won't try to wriggle out of it, will you?"

"Aw, of course not."

"Good."

Gently grasping her hand, he brought it to his lips for a quick peck before bringing it back down and interlocking his fingers with hers.

"So how was class?" He asked as they began walking.

"Not bad, I guess," she replied with a shrug. "It was the first day back from break, so all we really did was go over the exams we had taken the week before."

"Same here. All A's in your case, I presume?"

She shrugged again, this time with a blush creeping into her cheeks.

"It's not boasting if it's true," he offered.

"Then yes."

"Nice, way to go!"

"Thanks. And you, how did you do?"

"I'm still Range Rover-eligible, let's put it that way."

"Good job!" She offered, walking on her tiptoes to give his cheek a congratulatory peck.

"So how are things on the roommate front, anyway?" He asked.

"I could ask you the same thing."

He shrugged.

"Okay, I guess. Charlie wanted to make sure that we're cool, but we still haven't talked much – apart from one instant messaging conversation. I kinda get the feeling that he reached out under orders."

"Linda," Julie and Adam said simultaneously, causing both of them to chuckle.

"How did the Ducks ever get along without her?" He asked.

"I don't know. I just wish she could unlock that spell that Larson's got over Portman and Connie."

"Have you asked Connie about what's going on with Larson?"

Julie shook her head.

"I kinda don't want to know, anyway. Anything I say about Larson will only upset Connie and push
her away, so I don't feel it's worth it."

As the couple entered the dining hall and began making their way to the lunch line, Adam was brought back to his Hawk days. To the outside world, McGill had looked like their leader at the time, but even back then Adam could tell that Larson had always pulled the strings. He figured that McGill's greatest act of rebellion was his deliberate attack during the championship game, something that Larson had told Adam afterward that he had not wanted to happen.

Larson had still held out hope that Adam could be persuaded to rejoin the Hawks after the boundary complications were settled, and he was furious with McGill for acting out, knowing full well that it would make Adam a Duck forever.

But Adam doubted that Larson was interested in friendship for its own sake. Friendship demands a feeling of equality that had always been quite alien to Paul Larson. Adam worried about Larson's intentions toward his JV friends, but saw that this was an uncomfortable issue for Julie, so he changed the subject.

"So are you gonna be at the game this afternoon?"

Julie repaid Adam's magnetic smile from earlier with one of her own.

"You know I wouldn't miss it for the world."

JV had stopped sending players to scout Varsity games, having determined that the squad posed no real threat at the yearend scrimmage. But Julie had every intention of going and cheering on Adam. She had noticed that he was much bolder in their last game, and Varsity was finally able to secure a win. She hoped that Adam would remain confident and play the way he knew, rather than forcing himself into Wilson's awkward and outdated scheme.

"I guess this is where I leave you," Adam stated with a hint of sadness as the couple carried their lunch trays into the dining hall.

Were it not for the upcoming hockey game, he would gladly sit with Julie at the AV table, but he knew where his team needed him.

She gave him another peck on the cheek.

"There's always tomorrow. See you at the game!"

To Adam's surprise, she sat next to Fulton at the AV table rather than return to her team. He observed her greeting Fulton with a seated one-armed hug. Adam would feel a bit jealous if any guy other than Fulton was receiving this treatment, but he trusted Julie and he knew that Fulton needed the TLC.

He made his way over to the Varsity table for some pre-game coaching and planning.

The Varsity first line stormed onto the ice at Eden Hall Arena, ready to take on the visiting Richfield Knights. The Knights were dressed in their all-black road uniforms while Varsity wore their white and eggplant home colors. Fans and players alike knew going into this game that it was going to be a showdown between the opposing centers, Adam Banks and Danny Vaughn; and whichever offensive phenom managed to outshoot his opposite would likely carry their team to victory.

As Adam left the bench and made his way to center ice for the opening faceoff, Julie tried
unsuccessfully to draw his attention. She had been wearing his classic green Duck jersey that no longer fit the tall forward and enthusiastically waved at him. But she remembered who she was dealing with. Adam had tunnel vision during game time, and the fact that he was unaware of her presence came as no surprise, so she shrugged it off.

With the entire crowd on its feet, the puck dropped.

Adam beat Vaughn at the faceoff and deked the Knight center to the left before flying through an open lane to the Richfield goal. One-on-one with the goalie, Adam faked left before firing right to the goalie's glove side. The puck sailed into the upper-right corner of the net, drawing a roar from the home crowd.

"I'll get that one back, Banksie, don't you worry," Vaughn taunted his opposite as the home crowd resumed their seats.

But Adam ignored him. He was on a mission, as he always was during a game.

After winning the next faceoff, Vaughn found Adam stuck to him like white on rice. Vaughn had also drawn Guy in a double team, leaving a Knight wide open.

But Vaughn's ego was too big to settle for a pass, so he fired a doubly-contested shot at Scooter.

Incredibly, the puck went in.

Scooter would never blame his teammates, but the truth was that Adam and Guy had unintentionally blocked the goalie's line of sight. Wilson noticed this, however, and gave his two forwards the third degree as soon as the second line hit the ice.

The Richfield and Varsity second lines fought an intense battle, frequently interrupted by penalties and referee escorts to the Box.

Neither the second nor third line scored from either team, leaving the score 1-1 as the first line returned to the ice.

Adam eluded Vaughn with a flashy spin move that he had learned from Ken Wu and scored again, giving Varsity the 2-1 lead. A few plays later, having drawn a double team, Adam fed the puck to Guy who earned a goal of his own, extending Varsity's lead by two goals.

But Vaughn came roaring back, breaking free from Adam with some shifty footwork and turning on the jets. The Knight center flew around the back of the Varsity net and hooked a goal in through the far corner before Scooter knew what had hit him. 3-2, Varsity.

The second lines came onto the ice, and a Varsity forward lost his temper, throwing an elbow into a Richfield gut and incurring a Knight powerplay. Richfield capitalized on their man-advantage and tied the game up 3-3.

The elbowing also had the effect of escalating the chipiness of both teams, and hockey seemed like an inconvenience to be suffered by both teams between brawls.

Halfway through the third period, a battered and bloody Adam tried to break the stalemate. He attempted to mimic Vaughn's scoring move from behind the net, but the Varsity center put himself in a vulnerable position, and Vaughn rammed into him at full speed, causing a violent collision into the boards that left Adam doubled over on the ice with searing pain in his clavicle.

But worse than the physical pain was the sound – that awful, crunching sound that wiped away any
doubt that his collar bone was broken.

The refs quickly moved-in to prevent yet another brawl, and Wilson penguin-walked onto the ice and over to his fallen center. A trainer confirmed that Adam needed to go to the hospital, over the Varsity center's objections, but eventually he skated off, holding back his sinking shoulder with his good arm.

The home crowd applauded, somewhat relieved to see the boy skate off, rather than get carted off, but Julie had an awful feeling as she observed medics scramble with a gurney. Shooting up from her seat, Julie went to follow Adam.

Through the scrum of worried spectators that had lined the tunnel between the ice and the arena's emergency exit, Julie met-up with the Banks Family. Philip appeared to be in his element, barking orders at the paramedics while they strapped his son to a gurney. His wife Charlotte literally clutched her pearl necklace as she looked on, and their youngest son, Eric, stood stoically amid the chaos.

With an elegant wife and handsome sons, the tense, balding, and glowering Philip Banks looked like an adopted father rather than a biological one. As Julie wondered about the connection between Philip and the rest of his family, Charlotte Banks gently took her by the upper arm.

"This way, Julie," she instructed, walking the goalie to the exit. "You'll ride with us."

If Julie had been tight-lipped with her own family in regards to her dating situation, Adam had been quite candid. All of the immediate members of his family knew who Julie was and what the nature of her relationship with their son and brother was.

The awaiting ambulance – one was always on standby at sporting events – took off, lights flashing and sirens wailing while Julie and the Banks Family made haste to Philip's hunter green Range Rover. Adam had been hoping to earn that vehicle for himself with his academic and hockey performance that semester.

Julie hoped that Philip would not hold her boyfriend's injury against him.

Inside the British-made SUV, the tension was palpable. No words were exchanged during the uneasy ride to the hospital. Although Eden Hall had an on-campus infirmary, the school's trustees took care to ensure that their athletes would have the best-available emergency treatment in the area.

The atmosphere in the waiting room was not perky by any means, but with the space it provided, it offered some relief from the close-quartered tension of the car ride.

Philip paced back and forth on his cellphone, re-scheduling his appointments that he was about to miss. Charlotte checked her immaculate face in a compact mirror, prompting an uncharitable Julie to muse that the Banks matriarch was on the prowl for a handsome doctor. Meanwhile, Eric played Pokémon on his GameBoy Color.

To Julie, they all seemed used to this. Adam getting carted off to the hospital was just another day in the life of the Banks Family.

She felt sick with worry as she searched in vain for something to take her mind off of Adam's predicament. Seeing a happy golden retriever frolic around on a dog food commercial only served to remind her that her boyfriend would not be frolicking for a long time.
After several minutes, Philip's voice suddenly stopped.

Snapping his brick-sized cellphone shut, he placed it in his ever-present briefcase and rejoined the group.

Julie noticed a faint look of disgust on Charlotte's face as she was joined by her husband.

*Yep, the cougar's hunting for a doctor alright.*

The goalie chuckled at the thought when she felt a gentle tap on her shoulder.

Eric extended his GameBoy toward her.

"You look like you could use a distraction."

Julie smiled at the thoughtful 13-year old who looked like a shorter, rounder Adam.

"No, thank you though," she replied. "I doubt I'd be able to concentrate. I'm so worried about Adam."

Being the younger brother of two hockey players, Eric was used to seeing Adam and their brother Michael take vicious hits and bounce back stronger than ever. Julie's concern seemed unnatural to him. To Eric, the only source of tension in this situation was his father.

"I'm sure he'll be fine," he offered.

"He damn well better be!" Philip growled. "God only knows what he was thinking with that fancy move of his. If he thinks he can use this as an excuse to take it easy, he's got another thing coming!"

Julie's eyes narrowed in quiet fury upon hearing Philip's outburst. Adam, through no fault of his own, had ended up in emergency surgery, and his father was there placing blame and devising punishments. Her boyfriend had never had another fighter in his corner. Whether it was the Hawks and the Ducks joining in rare solidarity to hate him, or whether it was his freshman year exile on Varsity, or the suspicion that he had endured this year both from Varsity and JV, Adam always had to fight his battles on his own.

Until now.

"I'm sure all Adam wants is to get back onto the ice," she challenged Philip, looking him directly in the eye. "You should really give him a break. If you want to blame anyone for this situation, blame Danny Vaughn for that cheap shot. Adam needs your full support, and he deserves nothing less."

Charlotte, who had been re-applying lipstick, froze.

Eric's GameBoy landed on the waiting room floor with a thud.

Philip's nose twitched, a sign that a volcanic eruption was imminent.

But before the lava could flow from Mount Philip, a doctor appeared through a set of swinging doors.

"Adam Banks?"

Charlotte snapped her compact shut, got to her feet and walked her fuming husband over to the doctor. The trio soon disappeared behind the swinging doors.
Julie moved to follow them, but was stopped by Eric.

"They only let in two at a time," he informed her.

Being the younger brother of Adam Banks, Eric knew hospital protocol like the back of his hand.

As Julie returned to her seat, Eric could no longer conceal his admiration.

"By the way, that… was… awesome."

"Huh?"

"You telling Dad like it is just now," he explained. "That was awesome! Nobody ever does that."

Julie shrugged.

"I was just telling him the truth," she replied. "It's the very least Adam deserves."

Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Charlie and Linda enter the waiting room through the sliding electric doors.

"Charlie, Linda!" She called out, waving the couple toward her. "Over here!"

The goalie was so grateful for the unexpected support that she leapt out of her chair and greeted both Charlie and Linda with a hug.

"How's he doing?" Charlie asked, taking his seat.

"Don't know," Julie answered. "Still waiting for an update, but his parents are seeing him now, so I guess whatever the doctors were doing is over."

"Varsity ended up losing," Charlie announced. "No surprise there."

"I wonder if Wilson has compromising photos of Dean Buckley," Linda speculated. "I can't think of any other reason why he hasn't been fired yet."

Julie and Charlie laughed, as Eric turned his full attention to his GameBoy, privately thanking God that it had survived the fall to the floor.

"Whatever it is, I hope the Dean gets his head out of his ass before next season. I can't imagine playing for that guy," Julie declared, with Charlie nodding in agreement.

The three 15-year olds made small talk for the next several minutes before Julie felt a tap on her shoulder. She looked up to see Adam's parents standing to her left. Philip greeted her with a scowl, Charlotte with a gentle smile.

"You and Eric can go see Adam now," Mrs. Banks announced. "Just go through those doors and take the elevator up to the fourth floor. He's in Room B."

"Don't be too long," Philip snapped.

Julie was about to give him a snarky reply, but decided against pushing her luck.

"Thank you," she said, rising to her feet.

After a quick elevator ride, Julie and Eric walked past scurrying medical personnel and orderlies
and made their way to Room B.

"Uh-oh," Eric said as he peered into the room. "Adam's got a single. Dad's not gonna be happy about the extra cost."

Julie felt a mixture of indignation and relief upon hearing of Philip's financial concerns. On the one hand, his parsimony was insensitive. On the other, Julie imagined that Adam's injury – or injuries – were not too serious if Philip was already onto worrying about the bill.

She looked over Eric's shoulder to see Adam laying in the upright position of the hospital bed with his right arm in a sling. Upon seeing the battered, helpless boy, she desperately wanted to wrap her arms around him and kiss the pain away, but sighed as she accepted that her wish was impossible.

"Julie, Eric?" Adam's voice sounded distant and tired.

"Come in, there's chairs," he beckoned, pointing to the single chairs on either side of the bed with his good arm.

"Thanks, I'm good though," Julie replied as she walked in.

After waiting for what felt like eternity to see him, she was in no mood to start sitting again. Eric, on the other hand, went ahead and sat down on the side nearer to the door.

"You look good," he told his brother. "I never would have guessed you got manhandled into the boards."

Adam gave a faint laugh in reply.

"Well, I am on some fabulous medication right now."

"I guess that answers the question about how you're feeling," Julie said, stroking Adam's good arm. "Did they tell you what's wrong?"

She was unsure how much, if any, of the diagnosis registered with him in his current state.

He sighed.

"Fractured clavicle…a couple of broken ribs…something about my shoulder. Whatever it is, I'm not getting out of here today. Dad was pissed about that."

The Varsity forward could see that his girlfriend was upset, so he took his free hand and cupped her cheek in a reassuring gesture. She gently leaned her head into his palm and placed her smooth, warm hand over his. She noticed that the contact had put a bit of light into his cloudy, medicated eyes.

"So…did we win?" He asked.

Julie chuckled, but quickly regretted it. She knew how seriously Adam took the game, and she did not want to add to his pain by making it seem trivial.

"Sorry about that," she offered.

He pulled her hand down and drew it close to his lips, kissing her knuckles and sending a warm vibration up her arm.

"It's okay, I know I have a problem," he smiled softly, referring to his hockey obsession. "I've
heard laughter is the best medicine anyway."

As he held one of her hands, she gently ran the other through his sandy hair and returned the face cupping gesture that he had given her earlier. Adam smiled at the contact, and wished he was in his movie watching position with Julie in his arms. Being a hockey player, he was still getting used to the cuddling sensation, as most of the physical contact in his life was considerably more violent.

Though unfamiliar, the newer sensation was of enormous comfort to him.

When Julie pulled away to stretch, he felt like a blanket had gone and left him in the cold. Seeing the hurt look on his face, she quickly grasped his hand as she pulled up a chair with her free hand to get more comfortable.

"Sorry about that," she offered again.

"Don't worry about it. So, did we win or not?"

"Oh, right," she had forgotten about his question. "I followed the ambulance in your dad's car, so I didn't see the final score. But Charlie says you guys lost."

Adam sighed.

"I have to get back."

"You have to get better," Julie corrected him. "You're not any use to your team in your current state, and you won't do them any favors by returning before you're fully healed. So just relax."

Before Adam could reply, Eric spoke up.

"Hey, do you want me to get Charlie? He probably wants to see you."

Adam nodded.

"That'd be great, thanks Eric."

As soon as the younger Banks left the room, Julie got back to her feet, but she kept her hand in Adam's grasp. Looking down at her injured boyfriend, desperate to get back onto the ice and hating himself for his inability to do so, the urge to kiss away the pain returned.

Now that they had a little privacy, she intended to do exactly that.

Taking care to avoid the damaged side of his body, she let go of Adam's grip, rested one hand on his pillow and the other on his thigh. He nearly gasped at the unexpected and intimate contact, but Julie got to work, kissing and gently sucking the pulse point on his neck while he enjoyed the smell of her lotus-scented locks. Gradually, she worked her way up, feathering kisses past his jawline and to the corner of his mouth.

He turned her head and hungrily seized a kiss from her lips. If it had not been for the sling, he would have grabbed her with both hands.

Who needs drugs?

As his tongue explored the warm, strawberry-flavored depths of Julie's mouth, the pain of his injuries and the sleepiness of his medication vanished. She was a powerful and natural painkiller with none of the drowsy side-effects. Quite the opposite, in fact. But she was twice as addictive, and the more he tasted her, the more he craved.
Julie felt her face flush as she backed out for air.

She never expected her comfort to become so passionate.

Adam noticed that her bright green eyes had turned into onyx orbs, as her pupils dilated with desire.

"Well, that was…" Before he could finish, she leaned back in, seized his face with both hands and started all over again.

The couple was unaware of Charlie, who stood in the doorway, but realizing that his presence was redundant, he quietly and tactfully departed.
Hawk Prey

Philip checked his Rolex yet again as he paced around the hospital waiting room, his irritation mounting as Julie continued to keep him waiting. As the night sky appeared through the windows and sliding doors, he decided that he had been far too generous with his time.

"She can take the bus," he declared. "Just like Charlie and Linda."

"Honestly, Philip," his wife shot back. "You would just leave a teenage girl to fend for herself after she rode with us?"

Charlotte Banks' delicate nose scrunched in a manner of profound disdain.

"Julie's smart, dear," Philip retorted. "She's got a smart mouth, that's for sure. I'm sure she's got a smart enough mind to find her way to the bus stop. Like I said, Charlie and Linda could handle it. Surely the brilliant honors student can handle it."

"Philip, you're being petulant."

The glowering attorney cast a wicked eye at his wife, but she did not appear disturbed by it. Little did he know, but Julie's bold defense of Adam that afternoon had the effect of shaming Charlotte. If a 15-year old girl with no resources of her own could stand up to Philip Banks, then what was Charlotte's excuse for remaining silent?

"That's what my father always said about you," she reminded him. "He'd say to me 'That boy of yours is such a petulant and ill-educated oaf,' his exact words."

"I know," Philip seethed. "He insulted me to my face more times than I can count."

Rushton Higginbotham, Charlotte's aristocratic father, had never had a shortage of choice words to describe Philip. And the Higginbotham patriarch seldom deigned to hide the contempt he felt for his social-climbing son-in-law. Philip had worked himself up from very little, working two jobs to pay his way through college and law school and making partner at one of Minnesota's leading law firms by the age of 30.

His work ethic, though admirable, had given his personality a certain abrasiveness. Those who have to fight for everything are driven by an intensity that is difficult to switch off.

Charlotte was about to mention her father's epithet of choice: 'a gold-digging gutter rat'. But as she observed her husband's slumped shoulders and softening face, it was apparent that the tempest had run its course. Her husband now adrift, she decided to toss him a lifeline.

"It's never too late to show him how wrong he was. He's watching down on us."

"Are you sure he's not watching up at us?"

"Philip!"

But her voice conveyed neither anger nor disgust, and the couple enjoyed a wicked laugh at the expense of the late Rushton Higginbotham.

"Alright, doll," Philip spoke-up. "We'll wait for Julie," he looked again at his watch. "It shouldn't be long now anyway."
Sure enough, Julie emerged from the double doors as visiting hours came to a close. Philip noticed the goalie's swollen lips, but suppressed a snarky comment. Just because Rushton had tried all those years earlier to make Philip and Charlotte's relationship difficult, it was no reason to inflict the same treatment on Julie and Adam. Although he had been cursing Julie's long visit, it proved to him that she cared a great deal about his son.

"Come, Julie," he beckoned her. "We'll drop you off at campus."

The goalie piled into the Range Rover with the Banks Family and as the luxury SUV made its way to Eden Hall, Philip decided to make his peace with Julie.

"I just wanna say, Julie, you were right back there," he offered, peering into the rearview mirror. "I was wrong to blame Adam for his own injury…even though that really was a boneheaded move on his part. I mean, how could he leave himself exposed like that? If he played it smarter…"

"Philip," Charlotte admonished.

"Regardless, it was wrong for me to blame Adam like that," he corrected himself. "And it took a lot of guts for you to speak-up for him, and I respect that."

Seated in the back next to Eric, Julie was grateful for the darkness of the SUV's interior, as it concealed her scarlet face. Although she possessed the boldness to defend Adam, she felt embarrassed by the situation, and Philip's apology – though well-meaning – only compounded her embarrassment.

"It's cool," she offered softly.

"No, it's not cool," Philip shot back. "I was wrong, and I apologize. Do you accept?"

_God, even his apologies are intense._

"Yes, I accept," she replied, hoping for silence.

The silence, however, proved transitory; and having gotten the apology out of the way, Philip took it upon himself to get to know Julie better. He peppered her with questions about her family, her life in Maine, what she wanted to do when she grew up, what she wanted to study in college, etcetera. They were the sort of questions that any parent might ask a boyfriend or girlfriend of their child, but Philip's naturally brisk tone had the effect of making Julie feel like she was being interrogated, and it showed in her one and two-word answers.

"Your father worked for McKinsey didn't he?"

"Yes."

"Top consulting firm in the country, that. Now he works independently?"

"Yes."

"Very well-regarded in the industry."

"Yes?"

"And you plan to follow in his footsteps?"

"No."
"What do you want to be then?"

"A doctor."

"What kind?"

"Pediatric."

"A fine aspiration," he offered mildly. "So you intend to major in biology when you get to college?"

"Probably."

When the Range Rover finally stopped outside the main gate to Eden Hall, Julie felt like she could kiss the ground when she got out.

But she managed to thank Philip and Charlotte politely and keep her lips off the pavement before the SUV took off for Edina. The early December air had a distinct chill, and as the Range Rover disappeared, snow began to lightly fall. With a denim jacket and no gloves, Julie was underdressed for the weather so she hustled to her dorm.

Upon entering her building, she was greeted by a wall of damp heat.

"Close the door!" An elderly voice snapped. "You're bringing in the cold!"

Julie looked over to see Ms. Stewart seated at her desk in the lobby, a mug of hot chocolate in one hand and an Agatha Christie novel in the other.

*How could she possibly be cold in this environment?*

Despite the artificial heat and humidity of the building, Julie could not see any sweat on the wool-clad dorm matron – a fact that amazed the goalie.

After closing the door behind her, Julie was already unbuttoning her denim jacket as she climbed the stairs to her room. It came as no surprise that Connie had gone some place more comfortable to do her homework, and Julie decided to escape the heat by heading to the library – the one campus facility that the school kept open late.

As she threw a couple textbooks into her backpack, she realized that she was about to be walking alone. At night. With Varsity on the prowl.

*Well, I guess we'll see how serious Larson is about security,* she thought, reaching for the phone on her desk.

After three rings, a deep voice answered on the other end.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Larson," the goalie was not on first-name terms with her defenseman. "It's Julie Gaffney."

"What can I do for you, Julie?"

"I need to go to the library, but I don't want to walk alone…"

"Say no more, I'll meet you outside your building's main entrance."
She had been hoping that he would send Portman, rather than go himself. But she figured that Larson was mean, strong, and scary enough to deter any Varsity goons, so she accepted his protection. After throwing on her Bruins parka, she grabbed her backpack and made her way back down to the dormitory's main entrance.

She smelled him before she saw him.

That unique blend of Aqua Velva and tobacco gave Paul Larson a musk that was at once smokey and tangy. It was masculine and disconcerting, much like Larson himself.

"Good evening," he greeted her with a wafer-thin smile.

"Larson," she nodded in reply.

"I have a first name, you know."

"So I heard."

To Julie's astonishment, Larson laughed.

"Then you may have heard that it was 'Paul'. But if you're uncomfortable saying it, I guess 'Larson' will have to suffice."

Though Julie found his words cordial, she found his eyes unsettling. They appeared to be examining her in a way that bordered on inappropriate.

He could not deny to himself that she was fit, and her parka left plenty of leg exposed. Pressed snugly against her blue jeans, they were evidently strong and well-defined. He figured that each leg was capable of supporting her weight on its own.

*Good goalie legs. No wonder she's so well-balanced in the net.*

Before Julie could protest the unwelcome body-scan, Larson spoke up.

"Let's get going."

She nodded before raising her hood and getting into step with him. Given that he was even taller than Adam, Julie was expecting a long stride, but it proved to be much shorter than she had anticipated. The snow was picking up, but Larson was in no apparent rush. Had Julie been walking with anyone other than Paul Larson or Tim Riley, she would have welcomed the leisurely pace.

The cold, fresh air was a welcome contrast to the stale, oppressive air inside her dormitory, and enough snow had fallen to coat the walkways – causing Julie and Larson to leave footprints in their wake. For reasons Julie never understood, she had always loved leaving her mark on virgin snow.

As they approached the main academic building, the snow and the walkway lights created a haunting glow; apart from Larson, Julie could not see another living soul anywhere.

"I heard about Adam," he announced.

A startled Julie looked up at her companion. Without any headgear, his dark pompadour had become peppered with snowflakes.

"And I'm very sorry," he continued. "It's amazing how someone born with all the advantages can be so unlucky, isn't it?"
"It really is," she agreed bitterly.

"But it's made him tough. And in the end, that's what you need most in life. Toughness. A bit of smarts is also nice, but not essential by any means."

"What about love?" She countered. "Don't we need love?"

Larson laughed again, but the note of his laughter was darker than it had been earlier.

"If you believe Hollywood, sure."

"Heh, if Hollywood's idea of love is accurate, then we're all screwed."

"Indeed."

"But that's not what I meant," Julie insisted. "I meant companionship. Genuinely caring for another person. Doing everything that you can to make someone happy because doing so makes you happy. Y'know, that sort of thing."

"You mean obedience?"

"What? Where did that come from?"

"Never mind. The point I'm trying to make, Julie, is that all the tough breaks that Adam has had to endure has given him the quality that is most needed for survival: toughness. Anyone who challenges him is going to have their work cut out for them."

She paused to consider Larson's words as they walked past the main academic building – the library was off in the distance. It seemed that Paul Larson had a high opinion of Adam Banks, and justifiably so, Julie thought. Adam was probably the toughest person that she knew, and his brave endurance of every ordeal that fate had thrown his way was proof of that.

But there was so much more to Adam Banks than his resilience – or 'toughness,' to use Larson's cardinal virtue.

"Yeah," she agreed after a moment's silence. "Adam's tough. But he's so much more than that."

Larson shrugged.

"And that's nice. But it's not necessary," he deadpanned.

"I wouldn't be with him if I didn't feel that those things were necessary," she protested.

The former Hawk shrugged again. He had no interest in arguing over a man's essential qualities with a girl whose tastes were beneath his contempt. But Julie wanted to keep Larson talking.

"Okay, so what exactly is it that you're looking for in a girl?" She challenged.

"Why do you care?"

"Because I'm curious."

"Some questions aren't meant to be asked."

Julie detected a clear edge to Larson's voice, something that was impossible not to notice given his normal monotone. Having deked him, the goalie decided to make her move against the defenseman
in this act of role reversal.

"So did you frame JV and provoke Varsity's war against us? Or is that another question that's not meant to be asked?"

Larson stopped dead in his tracks.

"Where did this come from?" He asked, just managing to suppress a quiver in his voice.

She stopped and stared directly into his obsidian eyes.

"It just seems like a lot for it all to be coincidental," she explained. "Varsity being convinced that we pulled a shower prank on them a full year after they did it to us; your arrival on JV; Fulton and Portman's falling out; you pouncing where Charlie hesitated, resulting in you taking over as captain; and Varsity's aggressiveness that allows you to be the brave defender of the Ducks.

"Doesn't that seem like a lot of coincidences?"

Julie felt a shiver run down her spine as Larson grabbed her by both arms, hurting her with his strength. She whimpered as he squeezed, knowing that she was going to have bruises the next day. His normally stolid eyes were ablaze. She wanted to cry for help, but they both knew that they were alone.

"Julie, this is very serious."

She felt her eyes moisten as he pressed even harder.

"What you have in mind, it's absolutely sensational."

He paused, heightening her anguish as he continued to squeeze and stare.

She breathed a sigh of relief when at last he loosened his grip and his countenance softened.

"Which is why I really feel that you should take your idea to Oliver Stone. I'm sure he'd make a brilliant movie with it."

He then released her, laughing at his own wit. His linking of Julie's accusations to the conspiracy-minded screenwriter were not lost on her. And having seen his prey suffer, the former Hawk had a bounce in his step that had been quite absent during the walk.

"Anyway, we're almost there," he indicated the library with a long, bony finger. "I'm sorry if I hurt you just now. Sometimes I forget my own strength."

The defenseman smiled, and the goalie shivered yet again, but she did not attribute her shivers to the hastening wind or the intensifying snowfall. Larson had placed his hand just above the small of her back – again pushing the bounds of propriety – and gently pushed her forward.

He removed his hand as they resumed their walk, but Julie would never forget the cruelty that she had felt in his hands, the hatred she had seen in his smile, or the slow-burning rage she had seen in his eyes. She was onto him, and he knew it. He had not denied her charge outright, and she was convinced now more than ever of Paul Larson's malevolence.

All she needed was proof, and she resolved to get it.

The two did not exchange any words until they entered the library.
"I've got some work of my own," he announced. "So I'll stick around. When you're ready to head back, just let me know."

And with that, he ushered her into a wooden chair and took his seat on the opposite side of the table. If Julie was resolved to bring Larson down, he was resolved to let her know that he was not going anywhere.

Saturday had arrived, and to reward Connie for her stellar game performance the day before, Larson offered to take her to the movies. She had not been on a date since her break-up with Guy, and she was not sure if this outing qualified as one. The former Hawk had been an invaluable friend and counselor as of late – to say nothing of his vital contributions on the ice.

And she could no longer deny the attraction she felt toward the tall, dark defenseman.

But Paul Larson was a tough read, and Connie could not be entirely sure that he reciprocated.

She could not turn down his offer, however. The pull she felt was too strong.

"Where are you going looking so fancy?"

Connie looked over at her recumbent, scantily-clad roommate and let out a chuckle.

*If Adam saw her right now, he'd faint.*

Dressed for Ms. Stewart's sweltering dorm, Julie's black spaghetti tank top ended just above the navel, exposing her taut, cream-colored tummy; and her black shorts left little to the imagination. But significant portions of her upper-arms were a pale shade of purple, Connie had attributed the bruises to a nasty goal collision that Julie had endured earlier in the week.

"This really isn't fancy," Connie replied, indicating her wool sweater and dark blue jeans. "But going in public requires more than just underwear."

"Ha-ha," Julie mock-laughed. "I was referring to your make-up. You're going to more trouble than usual."

"Maybe I am," the forward shrugged.

"So who's the lucky fella?"

"Paul Larson."

As Julie's eyes widened in horror, Connie hastened to finish her primping. Throwing on her black overcoat, she fetched her crochet hat and opened the door that led out to the hallway.

"Don't wait up," she said over her shoulder, departing before the goalie could find her bearings.

Julie's head spun with all sorts of dreadful possibilities. She had not confided in anyone regarding Larson, figuring that the rest of JV was unwilling or unprepared to hear it, and she did not want to burden Adam with needless worries during his recovery.

But she could contain herself no longer.

She needed someone to help make sense of her thoughts, and to help free her teammates – and her roommate in particular – from Larson's talons.
Rising from the bed, she took a seat at her desk and dialed Adam's number.

Connie was greeted with a rush of wintry air as she exited her dormitory.

Larson, whose strained nerves had led him to polish off an extra pack of Pall Malls, had practically bathed in Aqua Velva to mask the odor. Such liberal use of the pungent aftershave had the effect of making Connie feel light-headed.

"Hello, there," he greeted her with a hug.

"Oh, hey there," she returned the unexpected embrace.

"You looked like you were about to faint just now."

"I think I might."

"Then allow me to help keep your balance."

He released her from the hug, only to run a gloved leather hand down her back, pausing just below the small of it for half a second before wrapping a long arm around the waist. Her figure was less muscular and more boney than Julie's.

Such a fragile vessel.

"This way to the bus stop," he announced as they began walking. "I told you that we were gonna be pranking Zach Henderson today, right?"

A bewildered Connie shook her head.

"I thought we were just catching a movie."

"We'll multi-task. Our favorite Varsity dickhead is taking his girlfriend out to the movies – at the cinema where Averman works. Let's just say 'the mook' is gonna be in for a surprise."

"How do you know about Henderson's plans?"

Larson abruptly stopped and removed his arm. Despite his gift for planning and attention to detail, he had neglected to come up with a good answer to Connie's question ahead of time. He cursed himself for his carelessness, unwilling to reveal his source – McGill – for fear of looking like a Varsity collaborator, but he struggled to come up with a convincing lie on the fly.

"I know a guy," he deadpanned after a pause.

"Um…okay. Why did we stop walking?"

Larson kicked the toe of his boot against the freshly-shoveled walkway a couple times.

"Oh, I've got a stone in my boot, that's all. I guess I should shake it out when we get on the bus. Shall we?"

He extended a hand, which Connie grasped – her gloved fingers interlocking with his. It took every ounce of the defenseman's willpower not to betray a satisfied grin, but he succeeded.

The pair made pleasant small talk until their bus arrived, and their hands separated as they boarded. But once seated, she re-took his. This time he grinned, and Connie responded in kind. She was
beginning to feel a connection, and having debated with herself on the matter quite a bit, she was satisfied that she made the right choice by letting Larson take her out.

"You seem happy," he observed.

She blushed, realizing that she had been found out.

"Well…I just can't wait to see Flubber."

"Yeah, about that…we're not seeing Flubber."

Connie frowned, prompting Larson to offer his explanation.

"We're gonna see something even funnier: Henderson humiliating himself on his date. So Mortal Kombat: Annihilation it is."

"You didn't tell me how you knew about Henderson's plans," she reminded him. "Just that you've got a guy. Who?"

His obsidian eyes betrayed a flick of anger, then settled into the impassive veneer of their natural expression.

"That…is none of your business."

He released Connie's hand from his grip, causing her to feel a rush of adrenalin as she moved to placate her date.

"I'm sorry, Paul," she offered, sandwiching his large mitt with her dainty hands. "It's just that I've been so open with you about Guy and everything. I want to know more about your world—to see if I can help you the way you've helped me."

"It's nothing, don't worry. But there are some things that you don't need to know. I need you to understand that."

"Of course," she agreed, choosing peace over curiosity.

Satisfied that he had established a boundary, and detecting an eagerness in Connie to please him, Larson decided to ease-up. Remembering how keen she was on Flubber and Robin Williams, he quoted some of the funniest bits from the comedian's stand-up routine, drawing tearful laughter from the Porcelain Goddess. By the time they had arrived at the Mall of America, her spirits were high, and her hand stuck doggedly to his.

That suited him just fine.

Averman looked up with surprise as he observed Connie and Larson approach his snack counter hand-in-hand. Seeing Connie hold hands with anyone other than Guy just seemed odd to the old D5er. Even during their freshman year, when Connie and Guy had taken a break, she remained single while he played the field.

But what's done is done, I guess.

"Hey, guys." Averman greeted them. "What can I get you?"

"Two medium Diet Cokes and a large popcorn, please," Larson answered.
"Comin' right up."

As Averman got to work filling the order, Connie looked up at her companion.

"Y'know, when things were going well between me and Guy, I liked to go on double-dates."

"Is that right?"

"Maybe we could go with Julie and Adam some time... y'know, when he gets out of that sling, of course."

Larson looked back at Connie, unable to conceal the exquisite mirth that her idea had given him.

_A chance to make Julie look like an hysterical bitch in front of Connie, what's not to love about that? And Adam can be so fun to play with..._

"That may just be the best idea I've heard all month," he stated with a grin.

"The month is only a week old," she shrugged modestly.

"Then it's the best idea I've heard all year."

"Well... good."

Connie was feeling better and better about Larson. The fact that he was so enthusiastic about a double-date with Julie and Adam was taken by her as a wonderful sign. She was already imagining fun, laugh-filled outings when Averman set the popcorn and sodas onto the counter.

"Thanks, Les," Larson offered, extending the money. "So did you remember to bring our little friend?"

Averman nodded with a mischievous grin.

"He'll never know what hit him."


"The mook," Averman agreed.

"I'm looking forward to the show," Larson then turned to Connie. "Let's go."

A few minutes after Connie and Larson departed, Henderson approached Averman's counter with an auburn-haired cheerleader who Averman knew only as 'Tiffany.' He remembered seeing her hang out with Adam back when the Varsity center sat with the Beautiful People. Seeing the vicious Varsity captain who led the attack on him a month earlier, Averman instinctively shrunk from the counter.

Henderson could feel his terror and smiled malevolently.

"Well look who it is," the Varsity captain sneered. "You pick-up a lotta dudes in that cute little vest of yours, princess?"

Averman stood frozen while Henderson rattled off his order. The burly defenseman had an appetite that matched his stature, and he went on for some time, but Averman could not hear him. He kept picturing those brutal moments in the woods.
"Hey…faggot!" Henderson snapped. "Yoo-hoo."

He repeated the order.

"And try not to get AIDS all over it," he added for good measure.

"I'll do my best, sir," Averman replied.

He turned and got to work, filling soda cups and placing a few boxes of candy on the counter. Then, he grabbed a popcorn tub and discretely crouched behind the counter as Henderson and Tiffany began to suck face. The Duck reached around a cardboard box full of paper napkins and retrieved a fake, but very real-looking tarantula and placed it at the bottom of the tub. He got up, went to the popcorn and quickly filled the tub to the brim.

Having completed his work, he cleared his throat to draw attention to the couple that was still hard at work in each other's mouths.

"Enjoy," he said, bringing genuine contempt to his fake customer service smile.

"Much obliged, ma'am," Henderson fired the contempt right back.

As Larson had anticipated, Henderson wanted to sit in that venerable teen magnet common to all cinemas: the make-out corner. Naturally, the former Hawk had planted himself there with his date, drawing a startled look from Connie.

But Larson assured her that his seating choice was driven by his bad right ear, and he needed to be close to a speaker in order to hear properly. Upon seeing the JV couple occupy his seats, Henderson scowled.

"Hey, buddy," he called out to Larson. "Youse wanna move? Youse in my seat."

The former Hawk detected a New York gangster voice that he immediately recognized as fake.

_and that guy's considered the toughest in the school? This is gonna be even easier than I thought._

"Stay put," he whispered to Connie before rising to his feet.

The tall JV defenseman stood and approached Henderson. Suddenly, the big, bad Varsity captain looked about average.

"I'm sorry," Larson offered. "I don't hear too well. Could you come a little bit closer, please?"

His statement, benign on paper, was undeniably predatory in its verbal delivery. Between the wolfish smile and his affected air of politeness, even Zach Henderson could sense that Paul Larson was not to be trifled with.

"Never mind," Henderson reverted to his Midwest twang. "We'll sit someplace else."

He took his seat with Tiffany several rows ahead of Connie and Larson – well beyond the traditional make-out zone. But such was Larson's vibe that Henderson wanted to be nowhere near it.

Connie greeted Larson with an excited grin as he resumed his seat.

"So what were you gonna do?"
"Let's just say that's another thing you don't need to know."

"Oh…okay."

She was more excited by his caginess than disappointed by it. Not only did Larson seem a wise counselor, loyal friend, and talented defenseman, but he was obviously a bad boy. That was when she was finally able to articulate in her head what she had found so magnetic about him. There was a hint of danger to him that was genuine and thrilling. In a school that was full of phony tough guys, Connie found the genuine article to be irresistible.

As the lights dimmed and the previews began, she felt her cheeks flush.

Larson had rested his hand on her thigh.

_That's as good a place as any, I suppose._

She placed her hand over his mitt, he grinned softly.

The feature film began, and having been exiled from the make-out corner, Henderson felt inhibited. Instead of snogging with the comely cheerleader to his right, he scarfed down popcorn and cursed his absentee henchman Cole.

_He could have taken care of that creepy greaser, no problem._

As he reached for more popcorn, something felt odd…and hairy. He grasped the mysterious object and pulled it out of the tub for examination.

There, in his hand, lay a tarantula – it sat perfectly still, as if it was waiting for just the perfect moment to bite.

The big, bad Varsity Captain let out a shriek that could have shattered glass as he leapt to his feet and bolted for the exit. In his flight, he absent-mindedly flung the giant spider, and it ended up on Tiffany's lap, causing the cheerleader to match her date's terrified pitch.

She threw the tarantula into the seats closer to the screen, causing further pandemonium. Terrified patrons ran to the exits while confused patrons joined them, not knowing what was up, but not wanting to remain in a theater full of screaming people.

Connie and Larson observed the entire spectacle and laughed until their sides hurt as the fake spider was thrown about like a dog toy. It did not take long for the two of them to have the theater all to themselves.

Alone with her at last, he slid his hand up the inside of her thigh.

She turned her head.

Grasping her jaw with his free hand, Larson pulled her in and stole a ferocious kiss. He even drew a little blood, having bitten down on her lip. She returned the favor with a love bite of her own, driving her nails into the back of his neck while he moaned in pleasure.
Tim Riley entered the school library and strode with an easy confidence to the computer lab. Having grown frustrated with McGill's inability to collect the full amount from Milton, Larson had put the younger Riley in charge of collection for the essay ring. Tim was already the son of a wealthy and powerful father who sat on the Eden Hall Board of Trustees; enjoying the confidence of Paul Larson, captain of the undefeated JV hockey team, and increasingly a force within the student body, would be yet another feather in Tim's rather ornate cap.

Given that he had served as Larson's distributor for the popular student customers, one might think that being collector for the nerds would be a demotion. But Larson had put his best friend – Tim knew of their private friendship beneath the public hostility – in charge of the nerds, and McGill had failed. This was Tim's chance to be the Top Dog's new deputy.

And he was determined to make the most of it.

Where Jake McGill failed through bullying and ham-fisted extortion, Tim Riley would succeed through charm and smooth persuasion.

As he entered the computer lab, he was greeted by the soft, rhythmic sounds of typing. Thanksgiving had seemed like only yesterday, but the calendar was already closing in on Christmas, so students had to scramble to finish assignments before yet another break. Thanks to the essay ring, however, fewer students had to write essays when they could simply buy them.

As result, the computer lab was well below capacity, and Tim had no difficulty in securing a station next to his quarry.

"Excuse me, is this seat taken?"

Milton paused from his typing and looked to his side.

"Heh, it is now," he answered, noting that Tim had already sat down.

But the younger Riley, unaware of how presumptuous he looked, flashed a pearly smile.

"I'm Tim Riley."

"I know who you are."

_Milton wondered._

"Am I supposed to be impressed?" Milton wondered.

"And you're Milton Meyers?"

"Also something I already knew," the nerd quipped.

Tim suppressed a flash of indignation. Not only was this pathetic nobody failing to show him proper deference, but the nerd was bordering on rude. He was beginning to understand how McGill lost his temper so easily when dealing with Milton. But the younger Riley was different, and he knew that fistscuffs were beneath his considerable dignity.

A brutish Neanderthal like Jake McGill might snap at the slightest provocation, but a classy gentleman like Tim Riley would let these slights roll gently off his toned and supple back.

"I'm glad I bumped into you, actually," he declared. "I'm a friend of Jake McGill's."
As recently as two months earlier, the mere mention of McGill and his putative 'friends' would inspire terror in Milton's heart. But having Fulton and Guy around to protect him had given him confidence where none had existed before. He had lost the protection of Adam due to the latter's injury, but that hardly made a difference.

"If you're here to muscle me, Tim," Milton spat out the name, "then I can setup an appointment with Dr. Fulton for you. He specializes in testicular pain, just ask McGill."

Tim smiled again, but the pearly whites conveyed neither ease nor affinity this time.

"Now look here, you fat tub of goo…"

The younger Riley checked himself.

"Please forgive me," he began delicately. "I want to help, but sometimes my enthusiasm gets the better of me."

"And what is it that you want to help me with?" Milton demanded. "Do you want to 'help' me into a smaller cut of the essay profits?"

Tim stared blankly at the nerd, but Milton continued.

"Luckily for you, Dr. Fulton makes house calls."

"There's no need for doctors or house calls," Tim assured him. "I'm coming to you in friendship. You scratch my back, I scratch yours. You know, I'm blessed to have many friends…"

*I wonder which they find more appealing? Your ridiculous personality or your daddy's money.*

"…and Becky Hansen is one of them," Tim continued. "You know her, don't you?"

"I know of her."

"How would you like me to set you up with her?"

Milton paused to consider the offer. Becky Hansen was a pretty blonde sophomore who played the clarinet. She was not quite up to the exacting standards of the Beautiful People, but Milton thought she was gorgeous. He had no way of knowing, but Tim had overheard Becky complaining in class about his staring.

As Tim observed Milton's pause, he realized that he had discovered the brash nerd's Achilles heel. By extending that simple offer, Tim had shifted the conversation away from threats – where he knew that he was on shaky ground – and toward the commanding heights of his influence among the student body.

"Could you really do that?"

Milton's voice was dubious, but his mocking tone had vanished.

"It won't be the easiest thing in the world, but it can be done," Tim assured him. "Naturally, if I'm going to sticky my neck out for you, I'm going to need proof your goodwill."

"So we go back to the old rate for my cut of the essays?"

"You read me like a book. Do we have a deal?"
Milton paused again to consider. As confident as he had grown in recent weeks, he knew that he lacked the guts to ask anyone out. Tim Riley may have been a self-regarding dolt with the depth of a teaspoon, but he was as well-connected as he was shallow. On the other hand, why should McGill and Tim's mysterious handler enjoy most of the profits that Milton had worked for?

But the prospect of a date with his crush proved too tempting to be discarded.

"Deal," Milton nodded.

Larson took his seat at the JV table in the captain's chair, an act that Charlie had ceased to protest or even sulk over. From his vantage point at the AV table, Adam could not believe his eyes. His old Hawk buddy had gone and seized a team that included several District 5 alumni, and he had seized it from Captain Duck no less.

Adam Banks had known alienation from a team in his day, but he had never felt anything like this before. The fact that the Ducks were being led by Paul Larson – a person whose Hawk past was arguably the least-horrible aspect of his personality – was a reality that Adam found so shocking, he could not find the words describe it in his own head, much less verbalize his sentiments.

*I can't even recognize the Ducks anymore.*

When Julie had crossed the dining hall to the AV table all those weeks earlier, she had declared that the Ducks had "lost their collective mind."

It seemed to Adam that they had lost their heart and soul as well.

Even the smug grin that Larson flashed to him across the dining hall could not provoke anger in Adam.

He found the entire spectacle too depressing for anger.

Seeing Adam hang his head in despair, Larson let slip a titter of glee.

But as much satisfaction as the defenseman gleaned from his conquest of the Ducks, and the obvious wound it had inflicted on Adam Banks, it paled in comparison to the fruits of his amorous labors.

On the previous night, he had Connie. In every sense of the word.

Alone in the dorm room that Portman had to himself – courtesy of Fulton's exile – Connie had been reluctant. But Larson was gently persuasive.

"I don't know, Paul," she said as he began working her bra. "This doesn't really feel right."

He ceased his embarrassingly clumsy attempts to free her breasts, then gently grasped her jaw.

"That's exactly why you need to do this, Connie. Guy is still affecting you, the guilt you're feeling over him is preventing you from being happy. You want to do this. Your guilty conscience does not. You have to break this spell he has over you, or you'll never be able to be with anyone else. And you'll never be happy."

"But this feels too soon," she protested.

"Trust me," he said softly, stroking her cheek. "I've never led you wrong before. And I won't now. Let me in, Connie. Help me help you. We can break Guy's spell together."
Before she could offer any further protest, he kissed her lips before working his way down her chin and neck, peppering her bosom with his tick lips, and willing her hormones to drown out her reservations.

And he succeeded.

"Hey, Paul," Connie greeted him with an inviting smile.

"Connie," he nodded.

As she took her seat next to him, his eyes were drawn to her lunch tray. He had been pushing her in the direction of more protein the past couple weeks, and he was mostly satisfied by the contents of her tray. But as his eyes settled onto a double-fudge brownie, they narrowed in reproach. He seized the offending treat, drawing a startled look from Connie.

"You don't need the empty calories," he explained.

Seated directly across from the new JV couple, Linda was appalled.

"I think Connie can decide for herself what she can eat."

"Mind your own business," Larson snapped.

"I could say the same to you," Linda retorted. "Who are you to decide what Connie can eat?"

"I'm her captain. And like the rest of our forwards, she's a bit undersized. That's why I want her to boost her protein intake."

"Then are you going to correct the rest of the team's eating habits?"

As she challenged Larson, she could not help but glance in Goldberg's direction. It was a subtle gesture, but one that the former Hawk noticed.

"I said our forwards are a bit undersized," he repeated. "Not our goalies or defensemen. You should talk less and listen more."

"Hey, hey," Charlie admonished him while Linda's jaw dropped.

The tense seconds that followed lazily traipsed forward in silence. All of the other Ducks had ceased their conversations, and Linda could feel their undivided attention bear down on her. In the pressure of the moment, she did not know what to do. She had done nothing wrong, so she did intend to offer an apology. Larson, on the other hand, had done wrong – twice.

But Linda could sense enough of Larson's nature to know better than to expect him to apologize – not with any real sincerity or remorse.

She managed to break the silence by seizing the brownie plate from Larson's tray.

"Here you go, Connie," she offered, setting the plate onto Connie's tray. "It's not like you won't burn that thing off before practice even starts anyway."

That bossy, uppity little shit, Larson seethed. Well, maybe not so little.

"Connie needs more muscle," he declared, seizing the plate once more, then turning to Linda.

"What she doesn't need is a slow, oversized, and jiggly ass like yours. Hockey players don't need
floatation devices on their person."

Linda knew from her observations that Larson was ruthless, but he had always affected to be civil. Now he had let the mask slip, and expressed his true nature in a way that shocked her more than it offended her. But Charlie had taken plenty of offense for both of them.

"Apologize. Now."

Larson looked over to see an anger and intensity in Charlie's eyes that the old Hawk had never seen before. But Larson meant every venomous word that he had said, and he knew that they were being watched by the rest of the team. Even if he had wanted to back down, he could not afford to.

Linda had interfered in his relationship with Connie, with all the Ducks as witnesses. And she was defying him openly by returning the brownie. An example needed to be set. She needed to be put down hard and fast, and Larson thought his insults had served the purpose nicely.

"No," he deadpanned. "I'm willing to accept an apology from Linda, but I won't offer her one."

Larson was still uttering that last sentence when Charlie shot out of his chair and began going around to Larson's side of the table.

The rest of JV jumped to their feet, drawing attention from throughout the dining hall. Sensing that a fight was imminent, Fulton and Guy bolted from the AV table and made for JV. Adam would have joined them, but Julie prevented him, fearing that he would aggravate his injuries. At the opposite end of the dining hall, a portly prefect grunted, and began a slow waddle toward the commotion.

Squaring up against Larson, Charlie could scarcely contain his fury as Portman locked his arms from behind. The former Hawk permitted himself a tiny smile as he watched Charlie struggle to break free from Portman's powerful grasp.

"Is this really what you want, Charlie?" Larson asked. "Some macho pissing contest at the expense of our team?"

"Yeah man," his loyal courtier, Tim, chimed in. "Calm down, Charlie."

Other Ducks murmured their agreement. They knew that Larson had been rude, but they also felt that Charlie – as he was wont to do – had overreacted.

Again, Charlie tried to lunge at Larson, and again he was restrained by Portman.

"For God's sake Charlie, quit making a scene," Connie hissed.

He looked over to Connie with a start.

Although he had been defending Linda, Linda had been defending Connie. The accusation made by Charlie's longtime teammate stung him in a way that took him by surprise. The deposed captain would wrestle a grizzly bear if he felt that it had wronged one of his friends, and Connie went all the way back to District 5 with him. That Connie felt his defense of her was merely a spectacle hurt him more than anything else that had in recent years.

It deflated his resolve and doused his fury.

He stood limp in Portman's arms, the fire gone.

There were more murmurs of Duck agreement.

Beneath the calm façade, Larson nearly trembled with rage. He was furious with Connie's very public emasculation of him, and he felt an overwhelming desire to make her suffer for it. But as quickly as the fury had arrived, it was displaced by the cold and efficient calculating machine that occupied the space normally held by a conscience.

Larson realized that he had crossed the line – not in terms of decency, but in terms of how much the Ducks would tolerate from him. The calculating machine had determined that an apology was the only viable option. To deny it would be to risk having things spiral out of his control.

"You're right, Connie," he offered mildly before turning to Linda. "Linda, I am sorry about my earlier comment. It was rude and hurtful, and I take it back."

"Fine," she replied with folded arms.

"Alright, what's all this about?"

The team turned to see that the heavyset prefect had finally completed the journey across the dining hall, arriving as they all stood around their table. His tomato-colored face gleamed with perspiration, and it was obvious that this particular 'campus cop' – as the prefects were known informally – resented the exertion that the near-fight had demanded of himself.

"Nothing, sir," Portman declared, releasing Charlie. "We were just stretching. We're a hockey team, y'know. But we were just about to sit back down, weren't we, guys?"

The rest of JV murmured their agreement and began resuming their seats while the prefect sighed and began the long return voyage to his post.

"Young punks," he grumbled well within JV's collective earshot.

"It's nice to know how much the school cares," Averman quipped, drawing a few chuckles.

Fulton had returned to the AV table, but Guy lingered in the no-man's land between tables, observing Connie take her seat next to Larson. It had not surprised him that Connie was the one who had prevented an all-out brawl amongst JV. As much as he hated to think in this way, he was grateful for Adam's injuries, as they prevented Julie from getting involved.

Had 'the Cat' pounced, out would come the fangs and the claws, he figured. The goalie's August birthday was not the only thing that was leonine about her. And Guy knew that Julie nursed a special kind of hatred toward Paul Larson.

Best to not even get her started with him, he thought.

In the weeks that had followed Connie's movie date with Larson, Guy was slowly but surely accepting that the former Hawk could make his former girlfriend happy. She deserved happiness, and he had no intention of getting between her and Larson.

But for reasons Guy could not articulate in his mind, he felt a pang of sadness as he watched Connie hand her controversial brownie over to Goldberg.

"Uh…Guy?"
The blond forward turned with a start. Fulton had joined him.

"Wouldn't you be more comfortable sitting down?" The burly defenseman asked.

"Oh, sure."

The pair of exiled Varsity players returned to the AV table while Connie went without dessert.

The snow steadily piled-up as the fall semester drew to a close. Standing by the Eden Hall bus loop, Julie observed the mountainous snow banks that lined the edges of the campus parking lots. So much had accumulated – and if the weather forecasts were to believed, even more was on its way. She had no doubt that the campus would continue to look like the North Pole when it re-opened for the spring semester.

_Heh, the sights of spring alright._

Not that it bothered the girl from Bangor. She was used to long, snowy winters and held firm the belief that winter weather created – rather than limited – opportunities for fun. As she contemplated weeks of skiing, snowshoeing, and watching her beloved Boston Bruins with an endless supply of hot cocoa, Julie wondered if being a winter girl, she was born in the wrong month or the wrong hemisphere. But a loud thud brought her back to the present.

Turning to follow the sound, she glared at its source.

"Be careful with that!" She snapped.

Fulton had set a heavy suitcase down onto the pavement with rather less delicacy than she appreciated.

"Sorry," he replied. "I just couldn't resist hurting this stupid school in some way."

"A feeling that I completely understand," she assured him. "Just try not to do that at the expense of my stuff."

"Duly noted."

They were soon joined by Guy, who brought the last of Julie's luggage. As the three of them stood together at the freezing bus loop, Julie paid her friends with a smile.

"You guys are lifesavers, thank you so much for all your help."

Guy shrugged.

"To be honest, most of the stuff I carried was mine."

"My back could have told you that," Fulton declared, punching the blond forward's arm.

"What?" Guy asked innocently. "Are you telling me that none of the stuff you carried was yours?"

"You seem to be forgetting that I don't live on campus."

"Oh my God, I'm so sorry!"

Guy was mortified. Fulton's exile from campus had completely slipped his mind.
"Don't worry about it, man."

"Really, Fulton – I totally forgot. You believe me, don't you?"

"He said, 'don't worry about it,' "Julie chimed in. "It's easy to forget about Fulton's problems because he's one of the few people in our circle who doesn't constantly whine about them. So don't worry about it!"

Guy, wide-eyed and apologetic, looked to Fulton, seeking forgiveness.

"You heard the lady," the defenseman smirked.

More than anything he could have said, Fulton's gentle smile confirmed that he did not hold Guy's casual slip against him.

"Anyway," Julie spoke-up, "thank you both, so much for helping with the luggage. I really appreciate it. But you don't have to stand out here and freeze with me."

Guy shrugged.

"It's not like I have anything better to do. And my mom will be picking me up here anyway." "Same here," Fulton declared.

And although neither boy would say so out loud, their sense of chivalry would not permit them to leave Julie alone in the cold to struggle with her bags – and possibly the most obnoxious of their Varsity teammates.

"Besides," Guy continued with a wry grin, "I wanna see how Phil reacts when he sees you next to all these bags."

"Ah, hell yeah!" Fulton agreed, slapping Guy's hand.

Julie laughed at the thought of Philip Banks flipping out; and given that Charlotte had whisked Adam away from the campus earlier that day, Julie appreciated having friends by her side when she faced Philip.

As messed-up as things had gotten with the JV Ducks, at least the Ducks of Varsity had kept their heads together. If it had not been for Adam, Fulton, and Guy, Julie figured that she would have gone crazy as Larson took over JV without any real opposition.

As her sinister new captain entered her mind, Julie steered the conversation in his direction.

"I still think Larson planned all this," she declared.

"What, the war between JV and Varsity?" Guy asked. "The teams still hated each other, even without Riley. Another fight was inevitable."

"I'm not saying that JV and Varsity were best friends before the Evil Paul Larson came and made them mortal enemies. I'm saying he gamed the hatred that already existed to suit his own purposes," she then looked toward Fulton with an apologetic glance.

"And I think we all know who benefits from the Bash Brothers' falling out."

"Larson," Fulton seethed.
"That may be true," Guy conceded. "But you saw him that day in the dining hall. Larson insulted Linda, the former Captain's girlfriend, to both their faces. And he got away with it."

"So?" Julie demanded.

"So, the Ducks aren't ready to disown him," Guy answered. "We'll have to wait for better weather."

Observing their frozen breath, it seemed to Julie that the weather would not improve either in the literal or metaphorical sense any time soon. She had to find a way to dislodge Larson, but how? The longer he sat in the captain's chair, the more natural his possession of it would seem to the Ducks.

*If we 'wait for better weather,' the brainwashing could be complete.*

"Here he comes," Fulton announced.

Julie was interrupted in her thoughts by the approach of a green Range Rover.

Whether he was at work, playing racquetball, or just sleeping in his bed, Philip Banks lived life in a hurry, and as his SUV raced through the icy bus loop, Julie was amazed that it stayed upright. The rubber of the snow tires screeched to a halt as Philip slammed the brakes.

Even before he stepped out of the vehicle, Julie could see that his eyes were bulging at the sight of her prodigious luggage.

He hopped out of the driver's seat and went around the front to be greeted by a massive Julie Gaffney grin.

"Hi, Mr. Banks!"

Upon seeing her smiling, pretty face, Philip felt the corners of his own lips raise to form a smile – almost against his own will.

"Uh hi, Julie," he replied. "I rather thought you would be the only one joining us this weekend," he stated, noting the presence of Fulton and Guy.

"Yep, just me," she nodded. "Fulton and Guy were just helping me carry my bags. They were a bit much for one person."

"Indeed."

Julie giggled, slightly embarrassed.

"I know…it's kinda ridiculous. But you've seen the weather forecasts. 'The Big One' is supposed to be coming. I have no idea if I'll be able to return to campus, or even get to the airport and go home; so I figured it was better to be safe than sorry."

"Ah," Philip offered a wafer-thin, but sincere smile.

He did not relish the prospect of having Julie as a multi-week guest at his home, but he appreciated a young woman who thought ahead.

Without any prompting, Fulton and Guy got to work loading-up the Range Rover with Julie's possessions. Philip, always keen to see everything done swiftly, joined-in, loading bags with vigor and challenging the younger men by his example to keep pace.
Fulton was about to grab the large suitcase he had dropped earlier when Julie preempted him.

"I've got this, Fult."

"No, Cat, it's heavy," Fulton protested. "I've got it."

"It's also fragile," Julie countered. "I've got it."

Among other things, the suitcase contained Adam's birthday and Christmas gifts, and Julie did not want to take any chances.

"Oh for Pete's sake!" Philip snapped, grabbing the suitcase and cramming it into the back of his SUV, prompting Julie to wince.

"Right, that's everything," he announced. "Gentlemen, thank you for your assistance. Merry Christmas, happy New Year."

Guy thought Philip, in his businesslike tone, was about to add 'etcetera,' but Mr. Banks had ended the sentence on 'New Year.'

"Thank you so much, guys," Julie offered, giving Fulton and Guy each a parting hug. "See you next year!"

*Hopefully 1998 will suck a lot less than 1997 has,* Fulton thought.

Philip wasted no time, flooring the accelerator the second Julie closed her door. The plan had been for Julie to spend that weekend before the final 'week' of school to celebrate Adam's birthday on the 20th, return to campus for finals on Monday and Tuesday, then fly home for Christmas break.

But if the forecasts proved accurate, the shortened school week could be cancelled altogether, and Julie would find her stay at the Banks Residence lengthened.

"There she goes," Fulton declared, observing the fading Range Rover in the distance. "A weekend, maybe more. Just Julie and Adam. They'll be bored out of their minds."

"I'm sure they'll find a way to cope," Guy chortled.

A reluctant Charlie had returned home at the insistence of his stepfather, who had spent the previous week watching weather forecasts that were laden with snowy doom. Local meteorologists were referring to the coming snowstorm as 'The Big One,' and as the weekend approached, their forecasts had become overwrought.

Bruce did not want to take any chances, so he practically dragged his stepson back home.

The seriousness of the weather finally hit Charlie as he channel-surfed in his living room. Every local station warned its viewers of The Big One, advising them to stock-up on emergency goods, avoid unnecessary travel, and to check on their neighbors.

"The snow could pile so high up in some cases that it may block your home's ventilator, trapping carbon monoxide in your house. So watch those ventilators, and dig them out if necessary!"

Charlie's eyes widened at the ominous warning.

*And here I was thinking the world was gonna end in the year 2000.*
Then his thoughts turned to his teammates. Before leaving campus, he had seen enough worried Duck parents whisk their children away to know that the in-staters were safe at home, but the out-of-staters – with the exception of Julie – risked being stranded in the blizzard. He thought of them, cut-off from their families, trapped on a snow-sodden campus that was about to close for Christmas break and probably lacked provisions.

He looked into the kitchen from the living room sofa and spotted his stepfather who was busy with paperwork. The insurance agent looked stressed as he palmed his forehead and tapped his pen against the kitchen table. It would be difficult for Charlie to ask him a favor in those circumstances, but his teammates were in peril, so desperate times called for desperate measures.

"Hey, Dad," he called out.

Bruce dropped his pen and looked up with a start.

Did he really just call me 'Dad?'

As the insurance agent gathered his wits, his stepson entered the kitchen and took a seat across from him at the table.

"Sorry to disturb you," the boy offered, "but I was wondering if you could do me a huge favor."

For years, Bruce had loved Casey and her son Charlie. But Charlie had erected a tall, thick emotional wall – complete with barbed wire, guard dogs, and sharpshooters. His biological father had left years earlier, and whenever Charlie had gotten close to one of his mother's boyfriends – including Gordon Bombay – they also vanished.

He was understandably reluctant to put his heart out there to get broken again. So he kept his distance from his stepfather. It had always been 'Bruce,' and never 'Dad.'

"Of course, Charlie," Bruce replied, setting aside his work. "What do you need?"

Charlie drew a deep breath, then exhaled slowly.

"I really didn't want to ask you for anything, because I know I've been such a crappy son…"

He said 'son,' not 'stepson,' the insurance agent realized.

"…but I'm worried about the blizzard. If it really is 'The Big One,' the Ducks who live out of state could get stranded."

Bruce knew that he had to tread carefully. If Charlie wanted to get his friends off campus, it could only mean that they would wait out the storm at his house. Their one-story Cape Cod was far too small to house another four-to-five teenagers, but Bruce could sense that Charlie's walls had finally come down. He did not want to give the boy a reason to put them back up.

"What are you suggesting, Charlie?"

"I was thinking we could go to campus in your Suburban – y'know, that thing's huge, and it's great in the snow – and we could pick-up Ducks. Then, we take each of them to the houses of in-state Ducks. Julie is already at Adam's, so that's one down. That just leaves Russ, Kenny, Portman, Dwayne, and Luis."

Finding homes for five teenagers ahead of a blizzard struck Bruce as a rather more difficult undertaking than it seemed to Charlie. And for the boy's plan to work, at least one of them would
have to come home with them. Casey would come home from work only to discover that her Christmas preparations had fallen short by a teen or two.

"Please, Dad," Charlie pleaded. "I know it's a lot to ask, and I don't deserve it, but could you help me out? What if we count this as my birthday present?"

_The boy is just full of surprises today_, Bruce thought.

First Charlie had called him 'Dad,' and now he was willing to give up a promised car in exchange for helping him find places for his out-of-state friends to go.

Charlie continued to beseech Bruce with his eyes, conveying a sense of urgency and desperation that his stepfather could not resist.

"Alright, Charlie. But make some calls first. I won't drop these kids off anywhere they're not welcome, and if we end up having to take all five of them...I'm gonna tell your mother that it was your idea," he added with a teasing grin.

"Heh, I'll take that chance," Charlie replied. "Thanks, Dad."

The boy got to his feet and gave his stepfather – who remained seated – a hug before proceeding to the kitchen phone.

As Charlie got to work, Bruce put away his documents and began getting dressed for the winter weather they were about to confront. It took Charlie just over five minutes to find three homes willing to temporarily adopt a Duck, prompting Bruce to marvel at his stepson's powers of persuasion.

After throwing on his own winter gear, Charlie looked back to his stepfather who had so willingly agreed to venture out and help his friends. Suddenly, the D-word no longer felt forced to the boy.

"Alright, Dad – let's do this."
"Here we are," Charlie announced from the front passenger seat of Bruce's Suburban.

The large SUV had confidently rolled through the snowy suburbs of the Twin Cities like a tank, safely delivering out-of-state Ducks to various Minnesota-based Duck homes. The snowfall had steadily picked up during the journey, and it seemed possible that 'The Big One' would surpass even the most alarming predictions.

Charlie and Bruce had already dropped Luis off at Goldberg's; the Miami speedster had expressed curiosity about Hanukkah, so Goldberg's was a natural fit. Averman came through big for Captain Duck, agreeing to play host to both of the California-based Ducks, Russ and Ken. Julie was safe and sound at Adam's, leaving only Portman and Dwayne.

Bruce had taken an immediate liking to the impeccably-mannered Southern boy, indicating that Dwayne would be going home with Charlie.

Portman looked out his window in the back and noticed that they had pulled up to the front of Fulton's apartment building in Stillwater.


"Come on Portman, there's nowhere else for you to go," Charlie insisted, looking back at his teammate through the rearview mirror.

He had been expecting to meet some resistance in his attempt to re-unite the Bash Brothers, but Charlie decided to put his foot down. Meeting Charlie's gaze in the mirror, Portman glared at his former captain.

"You planned this, didn't you?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Charlie deadpanned.

But the corners of his green eyes betrayed a smile.

"You're a lousy liar, Conway."

"I'll take that as a compliment, Portman."

Charlie's eye creases deepened, indicating a widened smile. But Portman was not in a smiling mood.

Letting out a deep breath, he cast a worried glance at the apartment building. Apart from the brief encounter with Fulton in the dorm hallway just before Thanksgiving, the JV defenseman had not had any contact with his former partner in crime.

He thought back to the smelly dorm room they used to share, and his inability to grasp subject matter in school despite his best efforts. All of that had changed when Paul Larson entered his life. At once, Portman shaped up. His dorm room was spotless, and he could now reasonably expect at least one 'A' on his report card. His lowest grade was likely to be a B-minus in math, a significant
improvement over his usual D.

Larson had convinced Portman that Fulton was deadweight, preventing the Chicago-born enforcer from realizing his full potential. When Portman had excitedly called home to enthuse about his improved academic performance, his father was drunk and could not have cared less. Larson, on the other hand, looked visibly proud.

The small, but warm, approving grin from the tough, quiet Hawk made Portman feel like he was on top of the world.

Now he risked throwing all of that away by going back to Fulton.

"You better get moving, Dean," Bruce advised. "The snow's only gonna get worse from here. We can't keep waiting."

Portman let out a frustrated sigh as he unfastened his seatbelt, realizing that with Bruce's intervention, he would not be able to stay in the vehicle and eventually go to Charlie's. He got out and went round the back to retrieve his duffel bag.

What would Paul say about this?

Portman not only risked losing the approval of Paul Larson, but he feared that he was about to reverse all of the gains he had made in school, on the ice, and in his personal life. There could be no denying that he had been adrift before Larson had come along, and Larson had convinced Portman that his lack of moorings were entirely attributable to Fulton's influence.

Letting out another sigh, Portman grabbed his bag and closed the Suburban's tailgate before taking a few grudging, snow-sodden steps toward the building's front door. The building was a long, 5-story rectangle that had a dreary block of Stillwater all to itself, the building's shape, combined with its sandstone exterior, created the appearance of a school building in a crummy neighborhood.

As he got closer, he could hear the Suburban roll onto the road. There was no possibility of turning back now. Like it or not, Fulton Reed would soon re-enter Portman's life.

He took a deep breath as he pushed the buzzer outside of the main entrance.

"Yeah?"

"Uh, hey, Fulton. It's me."

"Come on up."

Portman heard the front door unlock and he quickly went in from the cold, making a mental note of the apartment number by the name 'Reed' before going inside and stepping onto the elevator. It did not take long for him to regret his choice of conveyance.

The 'doors' of the ancient contraption were in fact an iron grille that had to be opened and closed manually, and it let out a series of hair-stiffening creaks and groans that left Portman with the impression that it would struggle to carry his weight up the five floors.

Taking a quick look around his cloistered surroundings, he did not see an emergency phone anywhere.

Heh, the phone probably wasn't invented when this thing was built.
As the elevator continued its slow, tortured journey up to the fifth floor, Portman resolved to take the stairs on his way back down. The languid pace gave him time to realize that he had never before been inside of Fulton's home. He supposed that was not much of a surprise. After all, he lived in Chicago and had been home for a good chunk of freshman year – and of course, there were this year's tensions. Portman had only recognized Fulton's building because he had waited outside of it when they went on a few outings at the end of the previous school year.

At long last, the elevator ceased its groans and came to a halt with a metallic clank. As he slid open the grille, Portman noticed that there was a two-and-a-half foot gap between the floor of the elevator and the floor of the hallway. As he climbed out of it, the thought of Fulton having to use that death trap every day gave Portman a pang of guilt. He had been the one who had driven Fulton off campus, and the JV defenseman began to hate himself for that.

Maybe he could move back in and we can keep separate?

Portman remained reluctant to bring Fulton back into his life, but the thought of his former Bash Brother in that Victorian Era lift had rattled his conscience. And it planted the seed for a possible reconciliation with his old friend.

"Okay, here it goes."

He knocked on the apartment door and was greeted by Fulton just seconds later.

Face-to-face for the first time in a month – or three, if the hallway encounter is omitted – the former Bash Brothers were speechless. Their mutual reticence was easy to understand, however. After all, what do you say to a guy you are convinced had led you astray? Or to your best friend who summarily banished you without any explanation?

The seconds on Fulton's doorstep dragged on in a way that made Portman's ride in the elevator feel fast and carefree by comparison. Portman racked his mind for an ice-breaker, something that could relieve the tension and establish something that approached a connection.

The best that he could come up with was a weak "Hey," that dripped with self-consciousness.

"Hey," Fulton replied with a bit more strength. "Why don't you come in?"

Portman crossed the threshold with a nod as Fulton opened the door wider. The apartment opened into a living room, an arch leading into a walled-off kitchen and dining area to the right, along with two bedrooms separated by a bathroom to the left.

"I guess I should show you where you're staying," Fulton offered as he beckoned his guest forward.

Portman nodded, continuing with the silent inspection of his home away from home. The place was tidy, but spartan. The living room suite had matching floral patterns that were big in the 1970s, but looked out of place at the end of 1997. The old television set that dominated the room seemed to double as a space heater, and Portman noticed that no video game system or cable box were attached. There seemed to be little to offer in terms of comfort and entertainment.

Fulton led Portman into the bedroom that he used to share with his older brother, Nick, who had moved out that spring, having earned his auto mechanic's certification. Nonetheless, the old bunk bed remained, and the messy tangle of sheets and blankets on the bottom bed indicated to Portman which one was used by his former Bash Brother.

"You're on top," Fulton declared redundantly.
Portman nodded and set his duffel bag down. This small bedroom seemed much more Fultonesque than the living room did. With CDs and clothes carelessly strewn about the floor and the small wooden desk that functioned more as a shelf, Portman had images of the previously messy dwelling he had shared with Fulton. The JV defenseman had even noticed Fulton's old stereo, which had evidently been fixed as it filled the room with sounds from the Red Hot Chili Peppers.

He looked back to Fulton, still unsure of what to say. As awkward as this situation was, he took some solace in the fact that Fulton appeared equally uncomfortable.

*Charlie sure has a lot to answer for,* Portman thought wryly.

He did not understand why Charlie believed that whole journey through the snow was even necessary. It was not like the out-of-staters would starve at Eden Hall. And it was not like Portman would be stranded with Fulton in a blizzard if he had remained on campus. But however inexplicable Charlie's decision was, what was done was done and Portman had to make the best of it.

Desperate to break the tension, he said the first thing that leapt to mind.

"So that's some elevator, huh? I'm amazed the damn thing hasn't killed you yet."

"That's no accident," Fulton replied with a slight laugh. "I take the stairs every day, up and down."

"Yeah, thanks for warning me about that," Portman punched Fulton's arm playfully.

Fulton shrugged with an innocent look on his face.

"After all that crap we've been going through, I wasn't ready to tell you to walk up five flights of stairs."

"Yeah…I've been a real pain in the ass," the contrite words flowed freely as images of a tired Fulton climbing up the stairs day after lonely day went through Portman's head. "I'm sorry, man…about everything."

Fulton twisted his lips in confusion. He had no idea what had really gone wrong between them, but figured he must have been partly responsible. Hoping that Portman would give him some sort of clue, he added, "It takes two to tango."

Portman raised an eyebrow. To be sure, Fulton's sloppy habits had irritated him, as did the Varsity affiliation. But whenever Portman tried in the past few months to remember real grievances that he harbored against his former Bash Brother, all he could recall were Larson's words of warning: Fulton was deadweight, a drag. Portman could never move onward and upward as long as he had the Fulton millstone around his neck. In his own mind, Portman could not understand how he could have blamed all of his difficulties on Fulton, but whenever Larson explained it, it all made sense.

He wished he had the former Hawk by his side at that moment.

*Paul could always make sense of things.*

But as he observed the wall of snow falling on the other side of the bedroom window, Portman realized that he would be on his own to figure out the nature of his relationship with Fulton. That particular course was fraught with peril, and Portman did not trust his own instincts to navigate it safely.
As his thoughts moved away from the weather and toward Fulton's lugubrious living room, Portman's fears were overcome by sympathy. Fulton had been forced to live away from the Ducks in this cramped and joyless apartment, climbing up and down five flights of stairs every day for the privilege. And Portman knew that he was responsible for it. With guilt sinking in, he resolved to bring Fulton back to campus.

Of course, that did not mean that everything had to go back to the way they used to be. As Portman took in his messy surroundings, he was determined not to lose the immaculate dorm that he enjoyed having.

"Y'know," he spoke-up, "You can get a lot more space out of this room if we tidied up."

Fulton chuckled. He knew that despite the rebel-without-a-cause façade, Portman was a neat freak. The Varsity defenseman figured that this clash of domestic habits played at least a part in their falling out. He also figured that being less of a slob was a small price to pay if it meant getting his best friend back.

"Sure, man," Fulton agreed. "Show me the ways of the Tidy People."

Portman laughed. Fulton's quip had not been particularly brilliant, but Portman's feeling that the Bash Brothers were on the road back to friendship filled him with joy. He could not completely shake the Larson-inspired feeling that a return of the Bash Brothers would cause him to fall back into bad habits, but as he saw the eagerness in Fulton's eyes to reconnect, Portman doubled down on his decision to reconcile.

The JV defenseman had observed a CD book still wrapped in cellophane. It turned out that Fulton had the means to neatly store his CDs, but lacked the will to do so.


He ripped open the cellophane and unzipped the book, prompting a wide-eyed Fulton to stare in horror.

"Um, that was your Christmas present, man."

Portman returned the wide eyes. The possibility that Fulton might have gotten him a Christmas present had never occurred to him, given all that they had been through in recent months. He felt guilty about not getting Fulton one.

"And now it's my gift to you," Portman replied. "Merry Christmas!"

"I was hoping for a pool table, but I guess this is cool too."

_Ah, the sarcastic banter has returned_, Portman thought happily.

"If this weather ever clears up, I'll take you to the pool hall," he offered.

"Deal."

For the next couple hours, as the Bash Brothers cleaned the room, they traded jokes and happily argued over who was the hottest chick at Eden Hall. Fulton enjoyed the horrified look on Portman's face when he pointed out that Portman's crush, Sarah Davis, was related to Adam Banks. Not that Portman really hated the Cake Eater, but he figured that blue-blooded dorkiness ran in families, so he changed his mind and went over to Fulton's side. Tiffany Collins, the auburn-haired cheerleader was the hottest after all. Unfortunately for them, Tiffany had sworn off hockey players.
after her disastrous dating experiences with Adam Banks and Zach Henderson.

Julie awoke from a perfect night's sleep on a queen-sized, pillow top mattress in the guest room at Adam's house.

*I could definitely get used to this*, she thought, sitting up on the bed and stretching her arms over her head.

The Gaffneys were a long way from deprived, but as comfortable as Julie's Bangor home was, it simply could not compare to the majesty and sumptuousness of the Banks Residence. In addition to boasting the most comfortable bed that Julie had ever slept on, her room contained an antique armoire whose sale looked like it could finance four years of college, a sitting area complete with a brown chesterfield sofa and matching leather armchairs, and a 48-inch TV, housed in an ornate wooden stand. All this while being gently heated by a gas fireplace and connected to a full bathroom of its own.

*And this is just a guest room!*

Julie figured that the stately clock at the center of the mantelpiece was worth about as much as the armoire, but she was more interested in the family photos that flanked it. Charlotte Banks looked every bit like the queenly matriarch that she was, Philip would have looked tense to anyone else in these photos, but Julie was beginning to recognize his 'relaxed' face; and she decided that the three Banks Boys, Michael, Adam, and Eric were handsome, gorgeous, and adorable respectively.

As striking as the 18-year old Michael Banks looked in his college hockey uniform, being a Michigan Wolverine meant that he played for the same school that Rick Riley did. That realization had the effect of knocking Michael's appearance down several pegs in Julie's book.

Next to the fireplace stood a small, round table with two matching wooden chairs.

*Strange choice of furniture for a bedroom.*

As her stomach growled, her mind turned to breakfast, but she decided against going downstairs in her pajamas – warm, wintery, and unrevealing though they were – and took a quick shower in her private bathroom before getting dressed. The speed with which the water turned hot amazed her, and the toilet had such a powerful flush, she almost feared that she would be sucked into it. The Banks Residence had that lovely combination of being pre-modern where it was appreciated, and ultra-modern where it was practical.

Julie recalled the massive and well-furnished kitchen, and half expected to go into orbit around the moon, given the space ship feel of the appliances.

Emerging from the bathroom in a towel, she squinted as she looked out the bedroom window and into the endless sea of snow that shined rather painfully in the bright sunlight. The meteorologists had been validated, The Big One had indeed struck, and if their forecasts continued to be accurate, The Even Bigger One was on its way.

Julie smiled at the thought of cancelled exams on the following Monday and Tuesday before Christmas Break, but worried about the possibility of not being able to return home.

Then she looked around her luxurious quarters just across the hall from the boy she was crazy about.

*I think I'll manage.*
After getting dressed in a pair of dark blue jeans and a cream-colored Irish wool sweater, she looked at the mantle clock and decided that it was still a bit early to go down and wait for breakfast. She certainly did not want to pester the housekeeper, so she made her bed and sat down on the chesterfield to watch some TV. Despite the snowstorm, the electricity and the cable had remained on.

Local channels were dominated by coverage of the blizzard, while Carlos the Jackal and his trial in France dominated CNN. Julie was about to resume her channel-surfing when she heard a soft knock at her door.

Rising to her feet, she made for the door and discovered Adam on the other side of the threshold. The sight of him fully-dressed and in a sling caused the desperate feeling of love she had experienced for him at the hospital to return to her. Something as simple as getting dressed must have been incredibly difficult and painful for Adam – on his birthday, no less.

Julie suppressed her urge to hold him in both arms and give an affectionate squeeze, taking care to gently wrap a single arm around his good side as she gave him a kiss on the cheek.

"Happy birthday!"

Adam had turned the big One-Six, making him technically older than most of his friends. Being born at the end of 1981, he had been placed into 1982's cohort of students in kindergarten. Julie had only turned fifteen four months earlier.

"Thanks," he replied. "May I come in?"

"I don't know can you?" She teased, drawing a confused look from Adam.

"I said 'may,' not 'can.' At least I thought I did."

"Oh, right."

With a small, embarrassed smile, she opened the door wider to allow him in.

*People always say 'can,' not 'may.' That 'can you' comeback is always bulletproof! Curse his perfect syntax!*

But as Julie cursed herself for being a dork, Adam felt a wave of shyness wash over him. Part of him still could not believe that Julie was really his, and as he noticed the self-conscious look on her face, he feared that he was being intrusive. They were alone in her bedroom, after all.

As his eyes settled onto her neatly-made bed, however, he managed a chuckle.

"I think you're the first guest we ever had who made their own bed."

"I didn't want to be a burden," she replied with a shrug.

"It's not a big deal," he countered. "No one will think less of you if you let Penny do her job."

Intensely loyal and efficient, Penny was the family's rock. Her Yorkshire accent was undiminished by two decades of living stateside, and it gave the appearance to Julie of a woman who was not to be trifled with. The intimidation factor notwithstanding, Julie was not used to being fussed over, and found it awkward to be waited on. Noticing her discomfort, Adam did not press the point.

She raised a curious eyebrow as she observed him walk across the room and toward a white panel
in the wall by the table and chairs. As Adam raised the panel, Julie could see a pewter tray of food that had been sitting in the dumbwaiter.

Before he could lift the tray, she flew across the room and grabbed it herself. Not only were her reflexes quick, but her legs were speedy. Unsurprisingly, this realization made Adam wonder what Julie would be like as a forward instead of as a goalie. Everything always came back to hockey with him. The thought of having Julie as a linemate gave him a wonderful feeling of invincibility, but he knew that broaching the idea of 'the Cat' leaving her net would bring out the lioness in her, so he kept it to himself.

"Just how hungry does Penny think I am?" Julie asked, setting the tray down on the table.

In addition to a large pitcher of freshly-squeezed orange juice, two cups of black coffee, a tin cup of cream and several cubes of sugar, the tray had enough eggs, sausage, French toast, and sliced cantaloupe to feed two. Then she realized.

"This is my parents' birthday present," Adam announced. "I don't have to follow Mother's insane table rules."

Julie laughed, grateful that Charlotte and Philip were doing something nice for Adam, and equally appreciative that she would not be subjected to the rigid formality of the Banks Family's dining room. The goalie had unwittingly committed several breaches of etiquette the previous evening at dinner, drawing a series of incredulous looks from the family matriarch. Charlotte had not been overtly rude or antagonistic toward Julie, but the girl from Bangor was made to feel like an uncouth bumpkin by all the raised eyebrows.

"Usually they don't give me anything," Adam continued, taking a seat and fumbling with a sugar cube in his good hand. "My birthday is close enough to Christmas anyway."

As Julie protested that everyone deserved a birthday celebration, Adam abandoned his efforts to open his sugar cube with one hand, opting to gnaw on the package instead. Charlotte would have been horrified, but what Mother doesn't know will never hurt her. Julie continued talking while Adam continued to gnaw, and before long, she could take no more.

"How many?" She asked, placing a hand over his good one to stop the gnawing.

"Two."

She nodded, opened two sugar cubes, and stirred them into his coffee cup.

"Well, I got you separate birthday and Christmas presents," Julie announced before getting up and retrieving a flat rectangular-shaped object in blue wrapping paper from her suitcase.

She did not trust Adam's grip from the hand on his slinged arm, so she knelt down and held the package close to him. Aware of the optics, the goalie giggled at the thought that she was offering him a ridiculously oversized engagement ring.

"Go on, open it."

He ripped open the package with one swipe of his good hand and discovered a carefully framed poster of Mike Modano, the Stars center who Adam worshiped and modeled his own game on. The poster would have been nice enough on its own, but then Adam's eyes wandered to the bottom right corner where he discovered an autograph.

"The certificate of authenticity is in the envelope, if you're interested," Julie added.
Adam figured that the envelope included in the wrapping was a birthday card. Like any under-40 male opening a present, he had already forgotten about the card. Struggling to open the envelope with his thumb, he instinctively raised it to his lips, but checked himself.

"Would you be so kind?" He asked, extending the envelope toward her.

"Of course."

As Julie neatly opened the envelope with ease, Adam reflected that even with two good hands, he had always decimated envelopes in the past.

*This must be the 'feminine touch' I've heard so much about.*

Freeing the contents from the envelope, she handed them to him. Sure enough, she had included a birthday card along with the certificate of authenticity. After examining the documents, his eyes were drawn back to the framed, autographed poster of his hero. It was an amazingly thoughtful and generous gift, and he could not find the words to properly express his gratitude. His stunned, searching silence had the effect of worrying her.

After a minute or so, she spoke up.

"So…do you like it?" She could not hide the timidity in her voice.

As if snapping out of a trance, Adam looked away from the poster and into the emerald orbs that seemed uncharacteristically nervous.

"I love it," he replied, carefully setting the frame onto the table. "But I love you even more," he added before he could think any better of it.

*Oh my God, I said it. And I sounded like a total dork. Smooth, Banks…real smooth.*

Julie giggled, the sweet, familiar sound that had always delighted Adam now made his heart sink.

"I love you too."

Still on her knees, she happily rested her head on Adam's lap.

Letting out a contented sigh, he draped her hair over the front of her shoulder and ran his good hand up and down her back. He had no idea what he had done to deserve her love, but he was determined to repay it tenfold. As the sunlit room began to darken, his eyes were drawn to the window. The snow-bearing clouds had returned and looked ready to pick up where they had left off.

"I hope you didn't have your heart set on taking final exams," he declared with a laugh.

Julie raised her head and followed her boyfriend's gaze, observing The Big One's impending sequel.

"I guess we'll just have to settle for more of *this* then."

Before he could ask what, she took his face in both hands and planted a tender kiss onto his lips.

"Works for me," he replied as they separated. "But I think you'd be more comfortable on the sofa."

Julie nodded before rising to her feet and taking a seat on the chesterfield, while Adam switched the fireplace back on and retrieved *National Lampoons: Christmas Vacation* from the stack of
video tapes inside the TV stand. Taking care to leave his good side next to her, he settled in for a
day of movie cuddles.

Both Julie and Adam felt they were getting the better side of the bargain throughout.

Chapter End Notes

Apologies to any Minnesotans who were offended by my less-than-accurate portrayal
of Stillwater. I learned after writing the original version of this story that Stillwater is
quite comfortably middle class, and not the depressed, post-Industrial Rust Belt town
that I had imagined. I agonized over the first half of this chapter and re-wrote it a
couple times, but ultimately decided that to re-write the Reed Family as middle class
would have changed the story too much. Hopefully the liberties that I took didn't
annoy denizens of the North Star State too much.

Much love from New England ;)

-Matt
Donna Reed's beat-up '82 Buick LeSabre Estate carefully moved through the slick streets of Stillwater on its way to Eden Hall. As she gently applied the brakes ahead of a stop sign, she realized that her station wagon was made the same year Fulton was born. The station wagon, nicknamed 'Old Faithful,' had represented hope, optimism and excitement for the future when it was purchased. As it soldiered on through the years, it came to represent the wearying slog through life that mirrored Donna's own struggles. Money had always been tight since her husband died ten years earlier, and she had only just managed to keep her family's head above water.

Even the slippery journey to Eden Hall was emblematic of her struggles. She had managed to scrape together enough money for a few Christmas presents for Fulton, but at the cost of snow tires. Although the plows had since cleared most of the snow from the late-December blizzards, the roads were still treacherous to the worn treads of Donna's 'all season' tires. Her brown eyes looked up at the mirror and saw the reflection of Portman in the back seat next to his duffel bag. Most of Fulton's things were in the very back, and the Varsity defenseman rode shotgun with his mother.

After all the drama of the fall semester, Fulton was returning to the dorm he shared with Portman. The Bash Brothers had made up over break, and this aroused mixed feelings in Fulton's mother. She was happy to see one of Fulton's most important friendships restored, and imagined that Fulton would drop his demand to be re-enrolled in public school. But she was going to miss having him around the lonely apartment, especially now that Portman had taught her son some organizational skills that had resulted in Donna seeing the carpet in the boys'room for the first time in years.

"C'mon Ma," Fulton pleaded as Old Faithful pressed on at a sluggish pace. "Can't we go a little faster?"

The forty-four year old wiped a graying brown lock from her forehead before reproving her son with her eyes.

"You want me to fishtail this thing?"

Fulton grinned mischievously.

"That would be awesome."

"Yeah, do it Mrs. Reed!" Portman chimed-in from the back.

"Well you two daredevils are gonna have to wait 'til you get back to campus before you can fulfill your death wish. In the meantime, I'm gonna keep things safe."

Fulton sank back in the bucket seat, the tears of which had been stitched back together by Donna over the years. He knew that there was no point in arguing with his mother, but he was bored out of his mind. And at this pace, he wondered if it would still be winter by the time they finally arrived at Eden Hall.

Hoping for some stimulation, he looked through his window when a tall, familiar figure caught his attention.

Having finally left Stillwater, they were getting closer to campus, and Fulton had noticed Paul Larson walking on the sidewalk to the station wagon's right. He was confident that it was Larson. Old Faithful had been moving at the speed of a golf cart, and the Varsity defenseman had plenty of time to get a good look at the lumbering figure's coarse features and distinctive pompadour. Larson
had been dressed in his standard off-the-ice uniform: black leather jacket, pale blue jeans, and black Army combat boots.

Though the sky was clear, the temperature was well below freezing, and it surprised Fulton that Larson had not taken care to wear gloves or earmuffs. As if reading Fulton's thoughts, Larson shoved his hands into his jacket pockets for warmth as he continued to walk.

Larson heard the labored rattling of a poorly-muffled engine, and looked up to discover Fulton in the passenger seat of a Reagan-era station wagon. The JV defenseman raised a defiant eyebrow at the Duck he had replaced that fall, as if demanding to know what Fulton was looking at.

Then, Larson's gaze shifted to the backseat – where he saw Portman.

*Shit.*

He took another quick peak at the backseat to ensure that his eyes were not playing tricks on him. He had seen correctly. As his gaze returned to the front of the station wagon, he saw Fulton grinning back at him. It was that same triumphantist smirk that Larson himself loved to flash when he knew that he had gotten the better of someone.

Larson had half a mind to run up to the backdoor of the station wagon and yank Portman out of it. The Buick certainly had been moving at a slow enough pace for that to be a possibility. But the JV defenseman decided against it, pressing on to his destination instead.

Unfortunately for Larson, the station wagon just happened to be moving in the same direction. He had been planning on meeting with McGill, but the presence of Portman and Fulton had unnerved the former Hawk. For a moment, he considered taking a detour in the hope that the station wagon would go on its way so he could proceed to McGill's house undetected.

*Screw it.*

He continued on his path undeterred.

Although proof of Larson's continued friendship with McGill could have a devastating effect on his standing with JV, the wily defenseman reasoned that no one on JV knew where McGill lived, so his minion's house was safe to visit.

With a renewed sense of confidence and security, Larson marched to McGill's front door, rang the bell, and waited.

And waited.

He had forgotten about McGill's habitual slowness in answering the door, a habit that normally irritated him, but served his purpose on this particular day. At least he did not have to worry about Portman and Fulton spotting him with McGill as he shivered alone on the doorstep.

The station wagon began to fade in the distance. Shortly after it had disappeared over the horizon, McGill opened the door.

Portman strained his eyes as he looked back toward Larson, but Old Faithful had moved too far away. Part of Portman feared being seen by Larson with Fulton, but he knew there could be no avoiding that scenario now that Fulton was on his way back to the dorms.

Larson's words against Fulton had clung to Portman's mind like a barnacle to a hull, and the JV defenseman began to wonder if he had made a mistake by inviting Fulton back to campus. He
wished Larson was there to make sense of it all for him. The ex-Hawk always had a way of making things make sense to Portman.

Fulton had noticed his Bash Brother's staring out the back window and was reminded of Larson's influence over Portman. He knew that no reconciliation with Portman could be complete without addressing his friend's relationship with Larson, and decided to press him on the subject.

"That dude back there sure looked like Larson, didn't it?"

Portman turned to face forward.

"Yeah, it was him."

"Hangin' out with McGill, eh? I guess it makes sense for Hawks to fly together."

Portman's eyes widened in surprise.

"How did you know that was his place?"

"Varsity had a little get-together there a while back," Fulton explained before checking himself.

He was about to add that the party at McGill's had consisted of heavy drinking and terse conversation – a typical Varsity party. But Fulton was still in the presence of his mother and knew not to elaborate.

"Oh," Portman did not know what else to say.

He remembered hearing Larson bragging about his loyalty to McGill at the beginning of the school year; but when war broke out between JV and Varsity, Larson made a big display of enmity toward his fellow Hawk – beating the crap out of him to 'protect' Charlie and Linda one Sunday morning.

_How did Paul really be making up with McGill, getting close to Varsity?_

But Portman realized that he was cozying up to Varsity himself in the form of renewed friendship with Fulton. Not only was he about to be friends with Varsity, he was about to _live_ with Varsity.

A simple and loyal guy, Dean Portman did not like the complicated nature of the events surrounding him. In the past, the enemy had always been clearly defined. Now Varsity was an enemy, but Fulton was a friend. Larson won the confidence of JV to become their leader, and here he was making nice with a particularly nasty Varsity guy.

As Old Faithful slowly approached Eden Hall, Portman wished that Larson could be there with him to make sense of it all.

As Charlie and Linda emerged from the lunch line at the dining hall, he could not help noticing that her tray was pretty sparse – nothing but a dressing-free bowl of salad and a small carton of skim milk. He had a hard time believing that Linda had made a New Year's resolution to lose weight; for one thing, she did not follow fads, and more importantly, she did not need to lose weight.

Looking toward the JV table, he noticed a similarly light fare for Connie as she picked at her food under the watchful eye of Paul Larson. The sight angered Charlie so much that he thought he could taste blood. Then he realized, he had bitten down on his lip so hard that he was in fact tasting his own blood.
"Come on, Linda," he spoke-up. "Let's sit with Julie and Adam."

He was in no mood to deal with Larson, fearing that he might lose his temper if the former Hawk decided to comment on Linda's weight or Connie's eating choices.

Charlie's suggestion drew an appreciative grin from Linda.

"Good idea."

"Hey guys," Julie beamed at the couple as they took their seats across from Adam and her.

She tried not to read too much into the surprise seating choice, and told herself that Charlie and Linda simply wanted to hang out with their other friends. But an excited part of her felt that Charlie had turned definitively against Larson.

"What's up?" Charlie greeted in response.

"Not Linda's blood sugar apparently," Guy nodded in the direction of Linda's salad. "I think you could use some dessert," he added before getting up.

"No Guy – I'm fine, really. Thanks though."

But Guy ignored her and made his way back to the lunch line to get her something sweet. He would never flirt with Charlie's girlfriend, but Guy could not forget the lunchtime standoff before Christmas Break. It had all started because Larson had said something nasty about Linda's weight.

She had been nothing but nice to Charlie's friends, and the blond forward would not allow Larson's words to stick. He felt his heart beat a little faster as he approached the JV table – there was no avoiding it on the path back to the lunch line. Despite the breakup, Connie could still trigger an excited reaction in Guy.

He looked to his ex-girlfriend, seated next to Larson, and cringed. Although he would be jealous of anyone who Connie dated, seeing her with a Hawk inspired extra bitterness in the old D5er. The Hawks had epitomized all that was cruel during the early part of his childhood, and he still recalled McGill's racist 'Oreo line' tag. Terry Hall had quit hockey after that season, having felt out of place since that remark, and his brother Jesse soon joined him in leaving the game.

Guy could see that Connie barely had anything on her tray, so he decided to grab two desserts. As much as he loathed Larson the Hawk, Guy accepted that Connie had to make her own decisions. That did not mean, however, that he could not be nice to her.

"Hey Connie," he offered a friendly smile as he passed the JV table.

"Hey Guy," Connie smiled back, prompting Larson to flash an evil look at Guy.

Realizing that he had succeeded in needling Larson, Guy smiled wide for the former Hawk.

Larson had torn the Bash Brothers apart, muscled-out Charlie, and driven Julie into exile, so any discomfort Guy could inflict on him felt better than a hat trick.

A few minutes later, he emerged from the lunch line carrying two small plates of double fudge brownies. Spying Connie's bare tray from the distance, he made a bee-line for the JV table.

"Here you go, Connie," he gently set one of the desserts onto her tray.

He then looked directly into Larson's dark, furious eyes, as if to say "What are you gonna do about
"Thanks, Guy," Connie replied, grabbing the brownie and taking a large bite. "You have no idea how hungry I still was."

"Yes. That was very thoughtful," Larson seethed through gritted teeth.

"It was nothing." Guy replied with an oily smile for Larson. "I'd give you this last brownie, Paulie-boy, but unlike you, Linda is calorie deficient. Buh-bye."

Like Charlie before him, Larson was so angry he hurt himself.

Having squeezed his hands underneath the table, the former Hawk winced at the loud, cracking sound his fingers made before shaking his sore digits. He noticed that Fulton had given Guy a congratulatory pat on the back as the blond forward resumed his seat at the AV table.

And therein lay another source of trouble for the JV defenseman.

Milton continued to withhold essay profits, as Tim failed to secure the promised date with Becky. That, along with the Bash Brother reunion, and Connie accepting dessert from her ex added to Larson's frustrations. The former Hawk could feel his grip beginning to slip.

He knew that he would have to re-assert himself quickly, or risk losing everything.

Pounding his fist onto the table, he drew the immediate attention of his teammates as their conversations ceased.

"We're gonna hit Varsity, and to do it, we're gonna use Milton Meyers as bait," Larson announced. "Apparantly the AV Club got hold of some embarrassing Henderson pictures," he continued, looking toward Averman. "Pictures of our little collaboration."

Averman grinned at the memory of humiliating the Varsity bully. He had not been aware of anyone taking pictures of the event, but he trusted Larson enough to believe him.

Larson looked to Ken before continuing.

"Your job is to get Milton over by the band room, where Henderson will be waiting for him. Then clear out. I'll take it from there, I don't want you getting hurt."

Ken nodded without question, the task seemed simple enough.

"As for the rest of you," Larson continued. "All I need is for you guys to distract the prefects. Just skate around the main building, but keep away from the band room. That should do the trick."

"What are you going to do?" Goldberg asked.

"You'll find out soon enough."

Larson figured that he could make up some lie about humiliating Henderson that the Ducks would readily believe. He looked up at one of the wall clocks. Twenty minutes remaining in the lunch period.

"Grab your blades as quick as you can, then start skating around."

Looking around at his would-be minions, the Ducks did not seem terribly enthusiastic about the idea, as the tarantula prank had the apparent effect of humbling Henderson. And after Adam had
gone down, Varsity had pieced together a little winning streak. With success on the ice, Varsity had less frustration to vent on JV, and the days leading up to Christmas Break had been mostly peaceful.

Larson's insistence on being alone with Milton in order to trap Henderson also sounded sketchy.

A feeling of panic ran through him as he continued to feel that JV was pulling away from him. They were not responding to his plan of attack, the sort of thing they would have done without question before Christmas. His desperation was mounting. He had to assert his authority immediately, or Charlie would be invited back to the captain's chair before long.

But if the Ducks did not want to jump on command, how could Larson make them?

A wolfish grin flashed across his face as he found the answer. As dirty as it made him feel, the old Hawk had a trick up his sleeve for whipping-up Duck enthusiasm.

"Alright, bring it in," he extended his hand to the center of the table. "Quack, quack, quack."

The others extended their hands in response and joined in.

"QUACK, QUACK, QUACK, QUACK, QUACK!"

Several seconds later, Larson withdrew his hand and pointed to the exit as the rest of the students in the dining hall observed the commotion.

"Alright, let's go, Ducks! Quack, quack quack!"

The JV team got to their feet and left the dining hall, drawing worried stares from Charlie, Julie, Adam, Fulton, and Guy.

"What do you think that was all about?" Julie asked.

"I'm not sure that I want to know," answered Adam.

Ken separated from the crowd and approached the AV table, taking a seat next to Milton.

"Kenny, what's going on?" Charlie asked.

The diminutive forward shrugged.

"Something about hitting Varsity. Larson thinks I'm too small to handle myself, so whatever it is, I'm out." He looked to Milton before continuing. "Hey, wanna walk and talk?"

"Um…okay," he got up to follow Ken out, but was soon joined by Fulton.

Fulton had no idea what was up, but the Bash Brother's fighting instincts told him that something was about to go down, and he wanted to stick close to Milton just in case. But this did not bother Ken. He figured if anything, Henderson would feel more comfortable falling for the trap if he observed a Varsity teammate with Milton.

The trio began to make their way to the band room.

Larson waited in the music department's hallway. Off the beaten path, and muffled by the sounds of music, the isolated hallway was an ideal ambush spot. As soon as Ken delivered Milton, Larson would beat the money out of the stubborn nerd, and in so doing, re-establish control over the essay
ring. And having deployed the Ducks as decoys, he was able to demonstrate that he was in charge of the team, a fact that could be used as a cudgel against Charlie and Julie should they decide to give him any trouble.

*Which they absolutely will.*

And of course, there was Connie. Would the kindly brunette risk team chemistry by displeasing the team's leader? The former Hawk reasoned that she would not. Were she to pull any dessert-related stunts in the future, Larson could use his influence with the team to isolate her. A useful way to get her to submit, he figured.

As Larson observed Milton approach with Fulton and Ken, he glared at the former figure skater – the inability of his minions to perform simple tasks according to his specifications irritating him further. But Paul Larson was nothing, if not adaptive. And if Fulton insisted on tagging along, Larson figured that he had enough frustration to vent for two.

"Thanks, Wu. Now get moving."

Kenny nodded, then turned and left.

Larson turned to Fulton.

"Is there something you wanted, Reed?"

"What's going on here, Larson?"

"That's between me and Milton."

Fulton closed the distance with Larson. The Bash Brother was not about to back down.

"You see, Paul...you don't mind if I call you 'Paul,' do you?" Fulton began, affecting friendliness. Before Larson could respond, Fulton continued. "It's just that Milton's been having trouble with cheap jerks who don't wanna to give a fair day's pay for a fair day's work. You wouldn't be one of those jerks, would you?"

Larson's eyes narrowed.

"You ask too many questions, Ape. Not like you'd ever understand the answers."

Fulton inched even closer, Larson's shaving nicks from that morning were now visible to the Bash Brother.

"So you're the one running this essay thing, aren't you?"

Larson let out a mirthless laugh.

"I wish I had a banana to reward you for your cleverness," he answered, his breath reeking of stale tobacco. "And if you stick up for that fat little nerd without taking a cut, then you're an even bigger moron than I thought."

The loud, steady stream of Sousa emanating from the band room crescendoed as Fulton grabbed Larson by the collar and took a swing. The force of the blow to the jaw caused Larson to turn his head. The former Hawk spat blood as he turned to face Fulton, flashing a grin that made the longtime Duck boil. Before Fulton could take another swing, Larson kneeled him the groin and broke free.
Milton ran to get a prefect while Larson and Fulton circled each other like a pair of prize fighters.

"Go ahead, Koko," Larson taunted his rival. "Give me another."

Enraged, Fulton took a swing, but Larson dodged it and countered with a punch to Fulton's stomach. Larson added a quick jab to the face for good measure.

Fulton lunged at Larson, tackling his JV opposite and whaling away at Larson's face. Larson shook an arm free and threw an elbow into the side of Fulton's face, causing Fulton to roll off. Fulton got back on his feet and the pair of defensemen began circling each other again when Portman skated by the end of the hallway and observed the confrontation. He turned and skated to the fight as quickly as he could.

Fulton and Larson both heard the approach of roller blades. They turned to see Portman bearing down on them.

Larson had figured that he could take Fulton by himself, but the old Duck was proving to be a much tougher match than he had thought.

Sensing that he had seized the advantage, Larson grinned as he tackled Fulton. As the pair of defensemen traded blows, Larson realized that Portman had not joined him. Clamping a large mit around Fulton's throat, Larson turned to face Portman.

"Well? What are you waiting for?"

Portman shot quick glances at Larson and Fulton, both of whom expected him to join the fight on their own behalf. Despite Fulton's return to campus, Portman had been keen to remain friends with Larson if possible. Now he had to choose between his Bash Brother, or the mentor who he felt had been indispensable.

"Nothing, man," Portman replied. "Nothing at all."

He lunged at Larson, prying Fulton from his grasp. As the Bash Brothers got to work touching-up the former Hawk, the hapless prefect who had been chasing Portman finally caught up to the teenager on roller blades.

The brawling teens suddenly paused at the sound of the prefect's finger whistle. "ENOUGH!" He barked. "Break it up!"

The prefect moved in to separate the three fighters, then turned to Portman.

"Get those blades off now, young man."

As Portman moved to comply, the prefect managed to get Fulton off of Larson with some difficulty.

"We're going to Dean Buckley's office," the campus cop announced. "Move."

The three teens warily got moving under the watchful eye of the prefect behind them. As they got closer to Dean Buckley's office, they could see JV seated up against the wall in the hallway. The heavily-winded prefects had succeeded in rounding up all of Larson's decoys. There were so many students waiting to be grilled by the Dean that there was not enough room for all of them to wait in the outer office, so they had to sit in the hall.
Despite enduring a Bash Brother beatdown, Larson managed a sardonic smile at the sight of all those Ducks waiting to see Buckley. The old Hawk figured his downfall could be made bearable with a generous helping of grilled Duck.

Milton could not avoid walking past Buckley's office in order to reach his locker. He noticed the long line of JV Ducks sitting against the wall, with Charlie and Julie being the only ones absent. Once the brawl between Fulton and Larson had begun, Milton went to look for prefects, only to find them pursuing Ducks on rollerblades. An obvious distraction engineered by Larson, the nerd reasoned. He figured that he may as well inform Charlie, and made his way back to the dining hall with five minutes remaining in the lunch period.

He had resigned himself to the fact that he was about to face expulsion from Eden Hall. With Fulton and Larson getting nabbed for fighting, the reason for the confrontation would be unavoidable in Buckley's questioning. It was this grim realization that made Milton rejoin his friends with a miserable look on his face.

Julie had been laughing at one of Adam's jokes, but her smile gave way to a frown upon seeing the AV president's dour countenance.

"What's wrong, Milton?"

"Larson's gone and gotten JV into trouble. They're all at Dean Buckley's office waiting to be questioned."

Charlie shot up from his chair.

"Damn it, I knew that something bad was gonna come from that scene," he said, alluding to JV's quacking exit that had occurred fifteen minutes earlier.

Linda, Guy, Adam, and Julie all got up to follow Charlie. Milton decided to go and reveal everything to the Dean about the essay ring, hoping for leniency in exchange for honesty. But he knew that the odds were against him. As the nerd exited the dining hall with his hockey friends, he tried to work out a good spiel for Buckley in his mind when Adam tapped him on the shoulder.

"I think it's time that you told us what's going on."

Milton nodded. If he had to tell Buckley, he might as well tell his friends.

"Me and the AV Club have been writing essays that Jake McGill and Tim Riley sell to more popular kids," Milton explained as the six teenagers walked. "I didn't know that Larson was running the whole thing until just now when Fulton fought him off for me. There's…"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!" Charlie interrupted. "Larson didn't bring the rest of the Ducks into this, did he?"

Milton shrugged.

"I don't think he did…not until today anyway. I figure that skating stunt he just pulled with JV was to distract the prefects so he could beat me up in peace. But Fulton had other plans."

Charlie's blood boiled at the realization that the old Hawk had been using the Ducks for such squalid ends, and that the Ducks were in big trouble with the school as result. His friends quietly mulled over the significance of Milton's revelation as they continued the walk to Buckley's office. As the line of Ducks waiting outside became visible in the distance, Adam broke the silence.
"You know…this could be a golden opportunity for Dean Buckley, if we can present it to him that way."

The others looked at him intrigued.

"Go on," Charlie invited him to elaborate.

"My dad knows all of the Trustees," Adam continued, "and he knows that Tom Riley, Tim's dad, has been giving Buckley all kinds of hell since the Dean gave us our scholarships last year."

"And if Daddy's boy gets disgraced," Julie began, following her boyfriend's reasoning, "then Daddy will have a hard time keeping his seat on the Board."

Milton flashed an excited grin, relieved that he had a decent card to play in his bid to avoid expulsion. As the group approached Buckley's office, they noticed a dark-haired prefect and a blond-haired prefect standing guard over their friends. Once they took a seat together along the wall, the darker-haired prefect spoke up.

"This isn't some party, folks. The Dean is very busy, so whatever you have to tell him can wait."

"It's just…we were all in on it too," Charlie replied.

"Ah. That makes sense. Well, with any luck the Dean will see fit to throw all of you out on your ear," the prefect smiled at the prospect of Eden Hall returning to a Duck-free zone. "Anyway, you can't just sit wherever you like."

Charlie rolled his eyes at the petty tyrant who began ordering the group apart, with each of them taking seats among different JV Ducks who had arrived earlier. The dark-haired prefect briefly went into Buckley's office to inform the Dean of his new arrivals. Once they had all settled, Julie, who ended up next to Connie, tried to comfort her roommate who was visibly disturbed by all that had transpired. Connie and the Ducks were a mischievous bunch to be sure, but real disciplinary trouble was something they had managed to avoid up to this point.

"No talking!" The blond prefect snapped, ordering Julie to quiet down.

The goalie complied, but not without flashing an annoyed look at the prefect. The group continued to wait in silence for several minutes before they observed an angry-looking Coach Orion approach. He slowed down as he got close to the door, providing enough time to give each of his players the evil eye before disappearing into Buckley's office.

Great. Charlie shook his head at the team's misfortune.

It seemed that under the best case scenario, where Buckley decided to go easy on the Ducks, JV would still be at the mercy of an angry Orion. The minutes dragged on as the Ducks waited in tortured silence. Most of them figured that Orion was arguing with the Dean on their behalf, but it seemed like a no-win situation. Either Orion failed to win leniency for the Ducks and they got expelled, or he secured leniency from Buckley, only to impose his own strict discipline on the squad.

"Charlie Conway."

He looked up at Dean Buckley, who was standing in the doorway to the outer office. Gordon Bombay's former biology teacher still looked more like a quirky science teacher than the head of a prestigious boarding school, with his suspenders and his red bowtie. Charlie saw that Fulton had walked out into the hallway and was heading off in another direction, most likely to In-School
Detention. Larson was nowhere to be seen. Charlie supposed that the former Hawk had already been interviewed by the Dean and sent on his way. He wondered how that would shape his own interrogation.

Charlie got up and approached Buckley to follow the Dean into his office. Although Charlie had not gotten snagged by one of the prefects, he was still the captain – even if only in name – of the team that had gotten busted, and once Buckley had seen him, he was interested in hearing Charlie's version of the events that had just transpired. As Charlie made the walk of shame in the outer office under the hostile gaze of surly secretaries, he forced himself to remember Adam's strategy: nab Tim and Larson. It seemed to be the only card that he could play in any event.

Buckley closed the door behind them as Charlie entered the Dean's private office, observing a grim-faced Orion standing behind Buckley's desk with his arms crossed.


"Have a seat, Conway," Orion ordered.

Charlie nodded and sat down as Buckley made his way around and took his own seat behind the ornate wooden desk that was littered with papers and folders. Buckley's pale blue eyes stared over his black bifocals in a disapproving schoolmaster look that gave him an air of authority.

"So," Buckley began. "Do you mind telling me what exactly all of this is about, young man?"

"I only know what Milton Meyers told me," Charlie replied truthfully.

"And that is?"

"That he had been writing essays for Paul Larson, Jake McGill, and Tim Riley to sell throughout school. That Milton and Larson disagreed over the price, so Larson thought he could beat some money out of Milton, and use the Ducks to distract the prefects while he did it. But Fulton stopped Larson, the prefects caught up to the Ducks, and now here we are."

Buckley's eyebrows shot up in surprise. Larson had been a solid student with no disciplinary issues, and he was inclined to believe the former Hawk's version of events, where Fulton had attacked Larson out of jealousy over his friendship with Dean Portman. But Charlie's version matched Fulton's version, with one tantalizing new detail: Tom Riley's kid was involved.

"I see," Buckley replied, removing his glasses and massaging his temples.

"You see what?! Charlie wondered anxiously as Buckley deliberated in his head for a full minute and a half before finally speaking up.

"Coach, do you have anything to add?"

Orion's steely gaze turned to Charlie.

"No one besides Larson and Riley were involved in this from JV?"

"No, Coach."

Orion nodded, his expression softening just enough for Charlie to feel relieved.

"Well, Charlie," Buckley spoke up. "The prefects tell me that you weren't involved in the rollerblading, so you're free to go to your next class. Let me just write you a late pass."
The Dean retrieved a pad of hall passes from a desk drawer and scribbled some mysterious hieroglyph onto it before handing it to Charlie.

"Thanks," Charlie replied, rising to his feet. "And can I just say one more thing, sir?"

"Yes?"

"Could you go easy on Milton, please? I'm sure he was bullied into breaking school rules. If you need to make an example out of people, get the bullies."

"We'll see," Buckley replied. "I'll talk to Milton next. Off you go, Charlie."

As Buckley watched Charlie depart, he suppressed a smile. He hoped that what the JV captain had revealed – that Tim Riley had committed an expellable offense – was the truth. The chance for Buckley to get Tim Riley's overbearing father out of his hair was almost too good to be true, and the Dean figured that he could let Milton off with a slap on the wrist if the nerd enabled him to get rid of the most annoying and meddlesome Trustee on the Board.

Buckley could just picture the triumphant conversation in his head.

"Sorry, Tom. My hands are tied," as he had said so often without any pleasure.

With some effort, he managed to suppress his gidiness as Milton entered. The Dean put on his bifocals and affected the stern schoolmaster exterior while he danced on the inside.
Flying Together

Coach Orion made every ounce of his displeasure felt as he drilled his squad into the ground during the week leading up to the road showdown with the Highland Park Scots. It was bad enough that Dean Buckley had expelled Paul Larson and Tim Riley, but what irritated Orion more than anything was how easily his team had gotten taken in by a troublemaker. He supposed that was partly his own fault, having failed to keep adequate tabs on his players, but he was determined to restore discipline and cohesion to a team that had precious little of either in recent weeks.

Though technically undefeated, JV was beginning to look vulnerable for the first time.

In addition to the loss of Larson and Tim, the team's scoring ability was diminished further by Connie's developing cold streak. The dynamics of the second line on which she played were thrown off-kilter when Dwayne was promoted to the first line to replace Tim. Russ had replaced Larson on defense, and Goldberg filled in for Portman, who was serving a suspension for fighting. Contributing to her diminished performance, a feeling of bitterness had set into Connie as she noticed the visible satisfaction in which her friends had greeted Larson's expulsion.

Before leaving campus for good, he had in effect broken up with her by telling her that his father would never allow them to see each other again. But all of this seemed just wonderful to Connie's friends, especially to Julie.

The second line forward had become isolated by her friends' putsch that had resulted in her losing her boyfriend, and her inability to remain on the same page with her teammates showed in practice.

As the JV Ducks took the ice in St. Paul against Highland Park, it was apparent to Charlie that this was going to be the first real adversity that his team faced on the ice all season. Despite the off-ice drama involving Larson, the former Hawk had proven to be an invaluable player-coach, and the Ducks had hummed along without difficulty all season long. All of that was about to change as the Duck first line hit the ice in their black and teal road uniforms against the red and white Scots.

Dwayne, the new first line center, made for center ice and greeted his Highland Park opposite with an amiable smile.

"Great day for hockey, ain't it?"

"Get bent, redneck."

The puck dropped to the sound of the ref's whistle and Dwayne won possession. His baffling puck handling kept him firmly in possession as he bore down on the Scots' goal. After faking a shot, he sailed the puck ahead to Ryan O'Neill, the only new Duck who had remained on the team. But Dwayne and Ryan were not on the same page, and the puck flew past the copper-haired forward before crashing against the boards behind the net.

A Highland Park defenseman retrieved the puck and fed it to his center, who charged through center ice and passed it to a wing, who took a shot that went wide of the net. Despite the inability of the Ducks to clear the puck from their own zone, the first several minutes of the game remained scoreless as Highland Park could not get a good shot off. The defensive combination of Goldberg and Russ was a step down from Portman and Larson, but a familiar one, and the new first line defensemen succeeded in forcing several bad shot attempts.

The shifty second line for the Ducks hit the ice with Luis at center and Connie and Ken on the
wings. After winning a faceoff, Luis turned on the jets and bore down on the Scots' goal. The opposing goalie appeared dazed by the speed of the Miami-born forward, and when Luis put on the brakes just ahead of the Highland Park crease, he faced a stunned, statuesque goalie. Luis tapped the puck in for an easy goal, giving the Ducks an early lead.

Ken and Luis slapped the puck back and forth, confounding their opponents with their elusiveness, and frustrating Connie with her lack of involvement in the game. Her linemates had yet to send the puck her way, and she was beginning to grow restless. But after winning another face off, Luis sailed the puck to Connie, who fired wide of the net, and earned a taunt from a Highland Park forward.

Connie replied with an elbow to the boy's gut, forcing a Highland Park power play.

"Head in the game, Moreau!" Orion barked from the visitors bench as Connie was ushered into the penalty box.

The Scots made short work of the power play with a quick goal, tying the game at 1-apiece.

As the door to the penalty box opened and Connie got to her feet, Orion called for a line change. With a sigh, Connie made the short trip over to her team's bench. She was desperate to hit the ice and redeem herself after that boneheaded penalty, but now she had to wait.

"Hey Connie, what was that?" Luis demanded as he took his seat next to her.

"That jerk got to me, I guess," she replied with an exasperated sigh.

"Yeah, well I bet he'll appreciate the win you'll hand his team if you keep that up."

Her eyes narrowed.

"Keep it up, Mendoza, and your gut and my elbow will become fast friends."

Luis was well-versed in the art of flirting, but at that moment he was genuinely unsure if the comely brunette had just threatened him or hit on him. Deciding that it was the latter, he flashed a handsome set of pearly whites, inviting her to continue.

"OOOF," he groaned after Connie dispelled his doubts.

"Hey, hey, knock it off! Head in the game!" Orion snapped.

The home crowd groaned as Charlie scored, re-claiming the lead for the visiting Ducks.

The Ducks and the Scots fought a mostly clean game for the remainder of regulation. The Duck first line eventually started to gel, while Luis and Ken continued their second line magic. JV managed to win 4-2, a solid victory, especially given the circumstances. But Orion knew that his defense was significantly worse without Larson and Portman, and it had given Highland Park two easy goals. Equally worrying was the lack of chemistry between Connie and her linemates.

After giving a mostly instructive post-game speech in the locker room, Orion ordered his players onto the bus bound for Eden Hall. Connie had sat alone on the trip to St. Paul, and boarded the bus with the hopeful expectation that she would be alone on the return trip as well, feeling a desperate need to clear her head. Bitter thoughts over Larson's expulsion had never been far from her mind during that past week, and they likely contributed to her detached, mechanical gameplay. It seemed to her that her supposed 'friends' had conspired to throw her now ex-boyfriend off campus, and that reflection filled her with anger.
Anger fed suspicion, and in her bleak and uncharitable mood, she decided that everything had come undone because of Charlie's insecurities as captain, and Julie's inexplicable hatred of Paul Larson, as well as the goalie's lingering bitterness over Tim Riley.

_And everyone else just goes along to get along_, she reflected bitterly. _Nobody was willing to stick up for Paul after all that he had done for us._

She could not recall feeling this isolated at _any_ point in her life, much less in her time as a Duck. The plucky squad had always flown together against the world, so their apparent betrayal was deeply hurtful.

And Connie's unspoken wish to be left alone was not to be granted.

"Hey, Connie," Julie greeted her roommate with a friendly smile, taking her seat next to her on the bus.

"I have nothing to say to you."

Julie's smile vanished and gave way to confusion, followed by hurt.

"Oh...okay," she managed softly.

The two lady Ducks did not exchange another word the entire journey back to campus.

Connie shivered alone in the cold at the Eden Hall bus loop. Her teammates had already gone to Mickey's Diner for their customary post-victory celebration, and given all that had transpired between her and the Ducks, she was in no mood to join them. The cold, clear weather created ideal conditions for her to go to the one place that she thought could clear her head. Her mood continued to darken as she brooded over the injustice of her situation while waiting for the next bus. Larson had been a hardworking and effective team leader while Charlie coasted in his usual way, and the former Hawk had been an exciting, if somewhat controlling boyfriend in Connie's eyes.

But the Ducks severed their ties to Larson in ruthless fashion as soon as the going got tough and Dean Buckley insisted on doling out a brutal punishment for someone. Julie had never given Larson a chance, and had spent most of the previous semester doing her best to keep him from even talking to Connie. JV's win over Highland Park also struck Connie as an injustice. Larson had been unable to prep and play with the team, but the Ducks had prevailed, and Connie could not shake the feeling that it was an undeserved win. Her teammates' delight was understandable, but their happiness seemed to mock her.

These poisonous thoughts would be the death of her if she could not vent them, but at long last, the bus arrived and took Connie to her destination. Once the bus came to a stop, she grabbed her skate case and made her way to a bench by the old D5 pond to put on her ice skates. After lacing-up, she tucked her skate guards into her case and stepped onto the ice.

That was when she noticed a graceful figure with a long scarf and a rather goofy-looking winter cap.

_Guy?_

The blond forward's choice in headgear had always provided plenty of ammunition for his sarcastic friends, but he never allowed the teasing to force him to abandon his beloved hats. This stubborn loyalty zany articles of clothing had always embarrassed the more stylish Connie whenever she had ventured into public with Guy; but deep down, she admired her ex for his gentle, but unswerving
refusal to conform. She had been hoping for solitude when she had set out for the pond, but she did not feel the need to avoid Guy, so she went ahead and approached him.

Having checked to make sure that he had plenty of room to maneuver, Guy turned around and began skating in reverse to work on his defensive positioning. He did not have a hockey stick with him, but that did not prevent him from practicing his footwork. A familiar looking figure in a familiar looking black overcoat approached as he continued to skid backwards.

"Connie?"

"Hey, Guy."

The Varsity forward put on the brakes at once.

"Don't let me stop you," she urged. "We can skate together, if you like."

He nodded, then led her to the perimeter of the pond where they could do laps. The pair skated for several minutes in silence, Guy figuring that his ex-girlfriend was simply being polite by offering to skate with him. It did not seem like she had anything to say, so he did not press her for conversation. This suited Connie fine. She had had enough of friends telling her what was good for her, so she appreciated the quiet company. The two had not breathed a word to each other until they made a turn at a bend, the tight turn having forced a gentle collision – not strong enough to knock either of them down, but not gentle enough to go unnoticed.

"Sorry about that," she offered.

It was only then that she realized just how close she had been skating to Guy.

"You've given me much worse before," he replied with a slight laugh, recalling their playful roughhousing on the ice from their days as a couple.

Connie's rosy cheeks betrayed a hint of embarrassment, but she laughed it off.

"Yeah," she replied. "We always used that as an excuse to kiss and make up later."

Guy looked down at Connie as he laughed. She had appeared tense when she first entered his line of sight, but she was beginning to ease-up. Guy, however, resisted the temptation to ask her what had been bothering her. He knew all about Larson's expulsion, but did not want to appear overly anxious to re-start his relationship with her. Apart from his own pride, his reticence was also motivated by a desire to keep her in his life as a friend. The last thing he wanted to do was scare her off by coming on strong.

Silence briefly returned to the pair as they skated, but Connie broke it.

"I wasn't really expecting to see you here," she announced. "I kinda figured that the Ducks were done with this place."

"Nah," Guy shook his head. "I still love it here. Plus, I run into Peter and Karp from time to time. I can't say that I expected to see you here either. Aren't you supposed to be at Mickey's?"

The blond forward did not know who had won the game, but he figured that the Ducks would be at Mickey's Diner regardless. In Charlie's own words, "In victory, you deserve cheese cake. In defeat, you need it."

It had been one of Captain Duck's many paraphrases of Napoleon Bonaparte, whom he relied upon
as a source of inspirational quotes.

"They'll get along fine without me," Connie replied, lengthening her stride and separating from Guy.

Surprised by the distance she had created, he matched her pace and caught up to her.

"You're not mad at me, are you? You're skating really fast."

"Sorry," she slackened at once. "And no, I'm not mad at you. I'm mad at the Ducks – mainly Charlie and Julie – because they threw Paul out of school and seem to think that's something that I should actually thank them for."

"Oh."

"I'm sorry," she offered. "I shouldn't burden you with this."

"I don't mind," he shrugged. "Besides, any friend who is only around for the easy stuff isn't much of a friend."

"Thank you," she flashed an appreciative smile before continuing. "I mean all Paul ever did was straighten Portman out, make us play better than we ever did before, and..." she was going to mention the romantic feelings that he had aroused in her, but decided against it out of consideration for Guy.

"I get it," Guy chortled, knowing where his ex-girlfriend was about to go.

"And all he ever asked in return was for us to be the best that we could possibly be," Connie added. "It's not like he ever wanted anything for himself."

"If you say so."

"I do say so!" She insisted, before continuing on a note of uncertainty. "I mean, sure. He wanted things, but they were never unreasonable."

She thought back to her more intimate moments with Larson. Even when he had been at his most selfish, he managed to convince her that all of it was for her own good. For one thing, letting Larson have her would cure Connie of her lingering feelings for Guy. Despite that apparent intent, she knew that that had not been the case.

"Never unreasonable?" Guy asked. "Even when he decided what you could and couldn't eat?"

Connie scoffed.

"Yeah, cos brownies are really loaded with nutrients. And so what if he wanted me to look my best? His birthday was coming up, you know."

"No, I don't know. But it seems that Larson is as capable as the average person of selfishness – maybe more."

"You know nothing."

Guy nodded.

"You're right, I only know what you tell me about your relationship with him."
"Paul is a good person!"

"Who are you trying to convince, Connie? Me, or yourself?"

Once again, Connie quickened the pace as she was forced to confront something unpleasant. Always a people-pleaser with a strong inclination to see the best in others, she was an expert in making excuses on behalf of other people. Guy recognized this tendency of hers, having been a beneficiary of her excuses in the past. It took a lot to make the easy-going Varsity forward mad, but seeing someone take advantage of Connie did the trick. He picked up the pace and caught up to her, noticing that she had started to cry.

Larson had seemed like an amazing guy to Connie, and all she wanted to do was make him happy. The tension that their relationship created between Connie and Julie tore the JV forward to pieces, and Connie's inability to get along with Julie the last few weeks had crushed her gentle spirit. But as she was forced to confront the truth about Larson's harsh and controlling nature, Connie felt the most dreadful of all feelings that she had been experiencing: the guilt that came with knowing her friends had gotten Larson right, and that she had cast them away for looking after her own well-being.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Guy close the gap, and soon felt his arm around her shoulders; she subconsciously matched his slowing speed. They soon came to a halt, and he released his gentle grasp.

"They hate me…they must hate me," Connie whispered, dabbing her eyes with the sleeve of her coat.

Guy rested his hand on her shoulder.

"No, they don't. I bet if you walked into Mickey's right now, nothing would make them happier."

But she shook her head.

"Why don't we head back to campus?" He suggested. "If you change your mind on the bus, the diner is along the way. No pressure though."

"Alright," she agreed with a whisper.

Without another word, the pair got off the frozen pond, changed into their boots, and made their way to the bus stop. A few minutes later, the bus arrived, and the duo rode together in silence, but Guy was relieved to see that Connie was no longer crying. As the stop near Mickey's came into view, she tapped him on the shoulder.

"I'll get off here," she declared, drawing a nod of agreement.

Once the bus rolled into the stop, Guy nearly jumped out of his seat when he felt Connie grasp his hand.

"Go in with me?"

"Of course."

He had no idea why she felt the need to ask, as he had had every intention of going into the diner anyway.

After grabbing their skate cases and alighting from the bus, she clutched his hand again as they
approached the diner. The pair entered, hand-in-hand, to the sound of Duck laughter as the boisterous squad continued to celebrate their victory from earlier that day. Julie's eyes wandered to the front door when she heard the entry bell ring. The goalie beamed as she observed Connie and Guy together, and immediately waved them over.

"Over here guys! There's plenty of room!"

Connie let out a relieved sigh once it was clear that Julie was not holding any kind of grudge against her. Then the pretty brunette noticed that she was still holding Guy's hand, a realization that came as a shock to her. She withdrew her hand as if his was a hot stove, but he managed to hide the disappointment he felt. In those moments, Connie had been a friend in need of support, not his girlfriend.

"Hey, Connie!" Charlie greeted his old teammate with a broad smile.

Other Ducks begun to notice Connie's arrival, and chorused in their happy greetings. As she took her seat amidst the warm welcomes, she realized that her isolation had only existed in her own head; and now it had vanished.

With Connie back in the fold and Portman having served his brief suspension, the JV Ducks marched through the regular season undefeated. They were not as dominant as they had been with Larson, and they had ended up winning an awful lot of close calls, but ugly wins still counted as wins. With victory comes confidence, and with endless victory comes overconfidence, and Orion worried that his team had gotten complacent. The gritty coach had actually hoped for a loss along the way, believing that it could serve as a wake-up call for his team to play with greater urgency and focus.

The regular season ended with JV undefeated, and the Ducks had a strong belief that they would triumph in the State Championship. Before the playoffs were to begin, however, JV had to face their Varsity rivals in the annual Eden Hall JV/Varsity Scrimmage. Varsity's loss of four seniors from the previous year had proved to be devastating; and despite scraping out a few wins toward the end of the regular season, Eden Hall's once-fearsome Varsity squad was set to miss the state playoffs for the first time in twenty years.

With much of the school's illustrious alumni making its way back to campus for one of Eden Hall's greatest traditions, Coach Wilson decided to resign rather than suffer the indignity of coaching a scrimmage that could not possibly save his job. This left Varsity's assistant coach, Carl Stanek, as acting head coach.

Having ruined his junior and senior year experience, Zach Henderson was determined to avenge JV on the ice before leaving campus for good. Other seniors on Varsity felt the same way. Juniors and sophomores who were looking to return the following year wanted to play hard and win the game for Stanek, in the hopes that a strong performance could land him the top job permanently. This overwhelming urge to win the scrimmage was not shared by the more lackadaisical JV squad, who neither feared nor respected Varsity.

JV's first line took to the ice at Eden Hall Arena in a mood that mixed supreme confidence with boredom, while Varsity hungered for victory. JV wore classic Duck green while Varsity wore home white and eggplant.

After nearly five months, Adam had finally healed and was chafing at the bit to play as he met Dwayne at center ice for the faceoff. With McGill having been expelled along with Larson and Tim Riley, Bobby Williams got bumped to first line left wing. Williams, a bitter senior, stared
down his JV opposite, Charlie, before the puck dropped.

The whistle sounded, the all-standing crowd roared, and Adam won the faceoff. He passed to Guy, who sailed the puck forward to Williams. The Varsity senior rammed into Charlie with relish as he charged toward Julie. After faking glove side, Williams fired stick side, and Julie confidently slapped the puck away, a move she instantly regretted as Adam took possession on the rebound and fired one past her.

1-0, Varsity.

Julie sulked, annoyed with herself for not covering up the puck and forcing a faceoff—a rare and thoughtless mistake on her part. Seeing that his girlfriend was upset, Adam lifted his mask and was about to apologize before she pre-empted him.

"Apologize and I'll kill you."

He smiled at her fire.

"I wouldn't dream of it," he replied, sliding his mask back down and heading to the next faceoff.

As soon as Adam was at a safe distance, Julie permitted herself a smile. Everyone had always said that Adam Banks was a hockey-bot who cared about nothing else, but their brief exchange proved to her that one thing mattered to him even more than hockey: Julie Marie Gaffney. And that realization filled her with warmth.

But as much as she loved him, she was determined not to give him another goal.

Varsity won the next faceoff, and Portman pancaked Cole the instant his nemesis got possession of the puck along the boards.

A ref's whistle sounded.

"Two minutes. Boarding, 21, green. Let's go."

"Whatever, man. That was a clean hit," Portman protested as he was led into the penalty box.

As most female eyes in the audience gazed at the box in anticipation of another Portman strip show, Fulton felt a sense of relief from the Varsity bench. After all their highs and lows, the second line defenseman was grateful that he did not have to face his Bash Brother directly, and risk things getting weird between them again.

Varsity won possession on the power play, and Williams took off in Julie's direction. He fired a shot and Julie immediately smothered the puck, forcing a faceoff in the JV zone. After winning possession, Adam forced his way in past the JV defenders and took a shot that ricocheted off Julie's kneepad. Guy picked up the rebound and fired wide, glove side.

Guy had had a nice, wide opening, and nine times out of ten, that situation would have resulted in an easy goal. But Julie was not nicknamed 'the Cat' for nothing. She threw up her glove in a millisecond and caught the blazing puck as if it were a big, fat beach ball.

For the remainder of the power play, Varsity hacked away at the JV goal, but was unable to get anything past Julie. Portman's two minutes were up and the defenseman returned to the ice. JV had managed to kill the power play.

Back at full strength, JV managed to take possession, and Charlie bore down on Scooter. As he
was about to take a shot, the JV captain crashed belly-first onto the ice as Williams hooked him. A whistle sounded as the refs moved to prevent a brawl.

"Two minutes. Hooking, 34 white."

Stanek roared his disapproval at Williams as the senior took his seat in the box. Unlike Wilson, Stanek did not appreciate dirty play.

JV had a power play, and took full advantage of it with a quick goal from Charlie, tying the game at 1-apiece. After two uneventful line changes, the first period came to a close with the score 1-1. Apart from a goal from Guy, nothing noteworthy happened during the second period. After the first lines got their four minutes at the beginning of the third period, the second lines for JV and Varsity hit the ice, with Varsity leading by 1.

A Varsity forward fed the puck to Fulton who stood just inside the JV blue line. As JV went shrapnel in anticipation of Fulton's infamous slap shot, Julie swallowed nervously.

It all happened in a blur.

One loud bang, then the red strobe lights and goal siren came on. Julie let out a frustrated sigh as Varsity took the 3-1 lead. Varsity did not score another goal for the rest of the game, but they did not need to, because JV continued to get in its own way. As the game clock ticked down, JV's lethargy was replaced by hyper nervousness. They were desperate to avoid a humiliation from Varsity, and the JV offense made a lot of silly mistakes once they lost their composure.

The final game horn roared, and Charlie stared with disbelief at the scoreboard.

JV had finally suffered its first defeat.

As the stunned JV squad finished changing into their street clothes, Orion entered the locker room. Privately, he was relieved that his team had suffered what he felt was a necessary defeat. Best of all, that loss had not really counted, as it was only a scrimmage. Nevertheless, he knew that he could not instill the sense of urgency his players needed going into the playoffs if he congratulated them on a defeat. So he put on his determined scowl after he finger-whistled his players to attention.

"Well, that was some effort. Wasn't it?"

His players looked down in embarrassment.

"Some effort by Varsity in any event," Orion continued. "They wanted it more, and they were not scared by your perfect regular season record. The teams we're about to face in the playoffs are the best in the state, and they're not gonna be scared of your regular season record either. Especially now that we've lost a scrimmage to a team that finished dead last in their division."

The collective feeling of shame was palpable throughout the locker room. It created an invisible weight on all of the players, and all shoulders were slouched.

"No one's gonna lay down just cos of our regular season record. That's in the past, forget it. You guys have got to want it more than anyone else. Of course, wanting it is necessary, but not enough on its own. You gotta work for it. That's why I'm gonna see each and every one of you bright and early tomorrow morning at Six."
Despite the temptation, no Duck dared to groan.

"Finish getting dressed, then clear out."

Once she had finished getting dressed, Julie grabbed her hockey bag and made her way to the exit when Charlie gently tugged her by the shoulder and pulled her aside.

"Hey Cat, wait up."

"What's up, Charlie?"

"I just wanted to apologize," he offered. "You were exposed the entire game and I didn't do nearly enough to keep the puck away from you."

"Don't apologize, we lost this thing together," she replied, leading him out of the locker room.

The pair entered the adjacent hallway to find Adam and Linda waiting for them.

"Good game, man – again," Charlie gave Adam a high-five.

"Thanks," Adam nodded, observing the disappointed look on Charlie's face. "Don't be so glum, Charlie. You guys are going to the state playoffs! You should be pumped!"

The JV captain shrugged.

"Did we look like a playoff team out there?"

"No, but who cares?" Adam answered. "Sure, you guys made a bunch of mistakes, but nothing that's unfixable. Your defensemen screened Julie a lot, meaning she couldn't see a lot of what was coming at her – even if she won't admit that."

Julie had been about to protest on behalf of her teammates, but checked herself, knowing that Adam was right.

"You guys pass too far ahead of each other," he continued, "but I bet that's mostly nerves. And Guy had a wide open lane to the goal during that line change where you guys failed to trap. Of course he was going to score there."

"Heh, maybe you could diagram what you're saying sometime," Charlie proposed.

"I'd be happy to. I'm done playing, so I might as well coach."

Charlie smiled at his earnest, hockey-crazed roommate who resembled a fictitious hero from Antiquity.

"Okay, Limbus. You're on."

"Huh?"

Charlie and Linda exchanged knowing grins.

"It's Latin for 'Banks,' Adam," she explained.

"Beats 'Cake Eater', I guess."

"Well, you'll always be 'Banksie' to me," Julie declared, leaning her head against Adam's shoulder.
He wrapped an arm around her waist and held her close.

"I wouldn't want it any other way," he insisted, kissing her forehead.

"Well, I take it that you and Julia would rather hang out in our room than grab some cheese cake with us," Charlie suggested.

"Julia?" The bemused goalie asked.

The JV captain let out a small laugh as he allowed more of his Latin project to slip.

"Never mind."
New Royalty

The air was electric at the University of Minnesota's Mariucci Arena. The State Championship had arrived, and the Ducks had weathered a series of tempests in the earlier rounds to reach their destination. Prior to the Varsity scrimmage, JV had felt invincible. After all, they had kept on winning despite losing Tim the scoring machine, and Larson the defensive guru. But JV's defeat at the hands of Varsity snapped the squad out of its complacency, and they played with the sort of gritty, blue collar persistence that made Orion proud.

If the Ducks had only just discovered gritty gameplay, however, the John Marshall High Rockets out of Rochester knew it very well. Toward the end of the regular season, the Ducks squeezed out a 2-1 victory over the Rockets, and Rochester was determined to avenge that defeat on the big stage.

Adam, Fulton, and Guy took their seats in the Eden Hall section to support their old friends just as the lights began to dim for the introductions. Given the Ducks' higher seeding, they were considered the home team, so the Rockets hit the ice first.

"Geez, what do they put in the water in Rochester?" Adam wondered aloud as he observed JV's massive opponents take the ice in black and red.

Although he had given his friends a great deal of helpful advice during the playoffs, he found himself worrying about the obvious disparity in size.

" Seriously, how can an entire hockey team have a growth spurt in the span of one month?"

"I don't know, man," Guy answered. "But size isn't everything."

Before Adam could reply, the Ducks hit the ice in their white and eggplant uniforms, prompting the three friends to rise to their feet and join the chorus of Duck fans in a roar of support. In that moment, Adam had forgotten all about his yearning to play and his guilty feeling of jealousy toward his JV friends. So intense, so infectious was the energy of the crowd that Adam Banks forgot himself – as though he had been reduced to a mere cell of a much larger organism. He had never experienced anything like it before.

But the delirium vanished as The Beast was tranquilized for the singing of the National Anthem. The tranquilizer appeared to have a neutering effect on The Beast, for when it awoke, Adam had noticed its loss of vigor just ahead of the opening faceoff. With the first lines of Rochester and Eden Hall now in position, The Beast was reminded of its purpose and let out a roar, but the feral energy that had existed just moments earlier could not be recovered.

Down at center ice, Dwayne looked up at his Rochester opposite ahead of the puck drop.

"How's the weather up there, partner?"

The Rocket replied with a smile that looked more predatory than friendly before training his gray eyes onto the ice.

The puck dropped to the sound of the ref's whistle and the State Championship was underway.

Taking possession of the puck, the Rochester center drove his shoulder into Dwayne's chest and put the affable Texan on his back before barreling into the Duck zone.
With Dwayne beaten, there was no one to cover the Rochester center, so Ryan O'Neill charged in, but left his own man open in doing so. The Rochester center passed to his open wing who took off in Julie's direction to get a nice, close shot. The wing fired, but Julie caught the puck, and it took every ounce of her strength to hold onto it as the Rochester wing crashed into her. The JV goalie had had more than her fair share of goal collisions, but this one felt like a charging bull who had been fed amphetamines.

Seeing Julie stagger back to her feet, Adam felt an overwhelming desire to hold, comfort, and protect her.

*After I beat that oaf to death with my shoe, of course.*

Sensing his friend's disquiet, Fulton clasped Adam's shoulder.

"She's got this, dude. Julie's a champ."

A ref blew his whistle and grabbed the puck. After winning the faceoff in the Duck zone, the Rochester center skated around the back of Julie's net and fired a corner shot. Adam groaned as the Rockets drew first blood.

The Ducks won the next faceoff, but Charlie got leveled the instant he received the pass from Dwayne. Charlie's Rochester opposite turned and hit the gas, bearing down on Julie and taking a shot. Once again, Julie caught it and forced a faceoff in the Duck zone. In the close quarters of their own zone, the Ducks saw firsthand just how much of an advantage Rochester had in terms of size. The Rockets kept firing at the net, and continued to overpower the Ducks for all of the rebounds, which created a vicious circle of Rochester shots and rebounds that deprived Julie of even a second's peace.

His personal bias notwithstanding, Adam figured that his girlfriend could probably – and should definitely – win game MVP if the Ducks prevailed; she continued to deflect and catch the puck with no defensive support for several grueling minutes.

But she breathed a sigh of relief when, at last, Ryan fished the puck out from the boards, then made for the neutral zone, allowing a line change. As the elusive second line hit the ice, Adam felt that the Ducks were now on a level playing field. Although the Rochester second line was every bit as gigantic as the first, size was less of an advantage against the shifty speedsters of the Duck second line.

As Ken drew a double team, he fed the puck to Luis who took off for the Rochester net. The Rockets could not hope to catch the Miami speedster, and Luis found himself one-on-one with the goalie. After a quick deke to the left, he fired far side and got it by the goalie. 1-1.

The Ducks won possession after the faceoff, and Rochester continued to double team the confounding ex-figure skater, this time leaving Connie wide open by the net. Kenny sailed the puck ahead to her, who in turn slapped it in for an easy goal. 2-1, Ducks.

The first lines returned to the ice at the beginning of the second period, and the Rockets continued to bully their smaller opponents around the Duck net. The only first line Duck who could match Rochester's physicality was Dean Portman. It was with Portman's combination of power and sheer frustration at his line's inability to get something going that he barreled into an opposing forward – prompting a ref's whistle.

"Charging. 21, white. Five minutes."
"What?!" Orion demanded from the JV bench. "His feet didn't even leave the ice!"

The length of the penalty made no difference, as Rochester capitalized on the man advantage almost immediately, tying the game at 2-apiece. With eight minutes remaining in the second period, Portman earned himself another charging penalty, resulting in an ejection.

"Come on, Ref!" Orion was livid at the double standard in the game's officiating. Rochester had leveled Ducks on virtually every play, yet had only drawn whistles for being offsides. But the refs had no qualms about ejecting the one Duck who could push back against the Rockets' bullying and bruising style.

The remainder of the period was ugly for the Ducks.

Two Rochester goals, countless hard checks, and several dubious penalties later, JV found itself trailing 4-2 at second intermission. As his team gathered in their locker room, Orion observed the slumped shoulders of his battered and demoralized players. He knew that unless he could instill some confidence in his Ducks, they were finished.

"Alright Ducks," he began. "We've got 'em right where we want 'em."

Confused looks shot up all around.

"They're too confident for their own good," Orion explained. "Remember how you guys felt going into that Varsity game?"

A few players nodded grimly at the memory of that confidence-shattering experience.

"You underestimated Varsity, and by doing so, you gave them lots of openings. Well, Rochester is underestimating you. They think they've got this thing wrapped-up, so they're getting careless. They're starting to leave open scoring opportunities that they didn't at the beginning of the game. But they can get away with that kinda sloppiness as long as you guys don't believe in yourselves."

There were some vague murmurs of agreement, but Orion could tell that his message had not sunk in.

"These guys are tough, but no tougher than you make them out to be. Remember how we practiced: make them use their own strength against themselves. Don't try to overpower them when they've got the puck. Just go on the inside, force a few misdirections, and dig that puck out. When you've got the puck, remember: your shoulder is your shield. Use your shoulder to block their attacks and force your way in."

The players appeared to be absorbing the message, now Orion needed to put a bow on it.

"These guys are waiting to be beat," he looked around at his players, pausing for dramatic effect. "Well, don't keep them waiting!"

The Ducks roared back in enthusiasm.

"Okay, bring it in guys," Orion commanded as he extended his arm, prompting his players to do the same at the center of the room.

"Quack, quack, quack…"

"QUACK, QUACK, QUACK, QUACK, QUACK, QUACK…"
"Alright, Ducks," he exhorted amid the chanting. "let's go!"

As the Ducks began marching back to the ice, Orion pulled Russ aside.

"These guys are overconfident, Russ. They're not gonna expect any scoring from a defenseman. So expect an open shot...when you get it, give 'em a knucklepuck for me."

Russ nodded with a smile.

"You got it, Coach."

The new Duck first line hit the ice, with Russ having replaced Larson on defense and Goldberg filling in for the ejected Portman. Dwayne won the faceoff and immediately found two more Rockets converging on him, in addition to his opposite. Having drawn a triple team, Dwayne had no choice but to pass, and Russ was wide open.

The boy from South-Central Los Angeles took the puck, teed-up, and fired.

The puck flipped and wobbled in the air, and looked certain to go wide of the net. Then, it broke and sailed in past the befuddled goalie.

Orion let out a sigh of relief from the bench. Having trailed by two goals against a formidable team, it was essential for the Ducks to do something big early in the final period to regain their confidence. Russ's knucklepuck did the trick, and JV now trailed by just one goal.

Rochester came roaring back, and the bully boys rocketed into the Duck zone. Adam looked on nervously. All those bodies around the Duck net had resulted in four Rochester goals. The Ducks simply could not hold their own against their much larger opponents. But this time, something was different.

"Are those Judo moves?" Adam wondered aloud as he observed Rockets falling down, resembling felled Redwoods in the process.

The Ducks had taken Orion's advice to heart and used their shoulders to force their opponents into awkward positions, where their own strength worked against them.

Charlie seized the puck and took off in the direction of the Rochester net, as the lumbering Rockets failed to keep up. One-on-one with the Rochester goalie, Charlie performed his triple deke scoring move to devastating effect, tying the game up, 4-4.

Having given up two easy goals in the opening minutes of the third period, the dazed Rochester squad redoubled their earlier intensity. Ducks went flying into the boards as Rochester tried to physically re-impose their will on their smaller opponents, and the refs appeared to have swallowed their whistles. Orion quietly fumed as he watched flagrant penalties go uncalled, and vowed to file an officiating complaint with the league office regardless of the game's outcome.

Although the Duck offense struggled against the ferocious Rochester defense, the Duck defense had become more resilient thanks to Orion's 'Judo moves,' and had succeeded in preventing a considerable number of shots on Julie.

With one minute remaining in regulation, Orion called a timeout, then proceeded to make a stunning decision.

He pulled his first line out and ordered his second line speedsters onto the ice. His decision had the potential to go spectacularly wrong, for as elusive as the second line was on offense, their defensive
skills left a lot to be desired. Instead of playing it safe by retaining his first line, running down the clock, and forcing overtime, Orion decided to go all-in.

"Those guys haven't covered you before," he explained, looking to Ken, "So they won't know what hit 'em. Don't be afraid to get fancy. If you break free and get a clear shot, take it."

"Right, Coach."

The second line hit the ice. Luis won the face off and fed the puck to Connie, who in turn passed ahead to Ken. As Rochester's gigantic defenders bore down on the diminutive San Franciscan, Ken eluded the pursuit with a spin move and found himself in an open lane to the goal. He made a bee-line for the Rochester net as the clock ticked down, faked stick side, then fired glove side.

JV finally re-took the lead with just forty seconds left in regulation.

Rochester won possession on the next faceoff and swarmed Julie's net. The Duck second line did their best to hack and defend, but they were clearly over-matched. A Rochester forward fired a shot, which Julie immediately covered-up to prevent a rebound. Thirty seconds remaining.

After winning the faceoff, the Rochester center took off and skated around the back of the Duck net before firing a shot that went wide, missing both the net and Julie's glove. The clock continued to wind-down as the Ducks and the Rockets fought a desperate battle for possession.

Twenty seconds…nineteen…eighteen…seventeen...

A Rocket won possession and emerged from the scrum, firing a shot.

Julie smothered the puck, prompting yet another faceoff with thirteen seconds left.

The exhausted, beleaguered goalie almost yipped when she saw Connie win the faceoff and begin moving the puck away from her net.

The Ducks' entire season came down to eleven seconds. All they had to do was make those eleven seconds disappear, but to do that, they needed to maintain control of the puck. If possession came down to strength, then Rochester could seize the puck and send the game into overtime. But if the Ducks could elude the Rockets, they would be State Champions.

As a mean pair of Rochester titans honed-in on Connie, the brunette forward kept her head, making a perfectly-placed pass to the one Duck that she knew could outpace a Rocket.

Luis took possession and drew all but one of the Rochester skaters into a furious pursuit. The Miami speedster's lungs were on fire, but he forced the Rockets to chase him all around the ice for the remaining nine seconds that felt more like nine decades. With fire rising up through his throat, Luis collapsed onto the ice as the final game-horn sounded, only to be scooped-up by his ecstatic teammates as they took their victory lap.

Connie grinned from her front doorstep as Guy's ocean blue Corolla came into view. Having turned 16 that past February, Guy had earned his driver's license and his mom's old sedan. As convenient as it was having a good friend with a car, Connie had begun to want more. Guy had been so patient, easygoing, and just plain fun in the months since Paul Larson was expelled. She had almost forgotten how much she adored Guy, and she begun to worry that he had gotten over her. He had seemed a little too patient and laidback to be interested in striking a romance back up.

But as Connie settled into the passenger seat of Guy's car, she decided to make one last attempt at a
romantic relationship before throwing-in the towel and accepting permanent friend zone status. It was July, and in a little over a month, the Ducks would all be back at Eden Hall for their junior year. She wanted to start the new school year with a permanent answer to the Guy question, one way or the other.

She was about to speak when he pre-empted her.

"Hold that thought," he said. "I'm backing out – I need to concentrate."

Despite being one of the rare Ducks who could drive, Guy lacked the confidence for conversation unless the car was moving forward.

"So how have you been?" He asked once they were safely in first gear.

"Not bad, I guess. Julie and I are still e-mailing each other back and forth like crazy. Poor girl just doesn't know what to do without Adam."

"Poor Adam just doesn't know what to do without Julie."

"Speaking of Adam," Connie began, "Has he given you any news about the coaching search?"

Philip Banks had replaced Tom Riley on the Board of Trustees, and to no one's surprise, he was neck-deep in the school's search for a new hockey coach. As result, the Ducks regularly pressed Adam for information, who in turn played with fire by pressing Philip for answers.

"Well, Orion got promoted to Varsity," Guy answered. "But you already knew that, didn't you?"

Connie nodded. Orion's promotion had not come as a surprise, given that he had brought home a state title.

"No idea about the new JV coach," Guy continued. "I think Adam's starting to get nervous asking his dad – maybe we should just wait and see."

"Yeah, might as well."

The pair continued to make pleasant small talk for the remainder of the journey to the mall. Once they arrived at the movie theater, he held open the door for her like a gentleman and allowed her to go ahead. With Connie in the lead, it was up to her to choose their seating. Even in the dimness of the theater, she could see the surprise in his eyes when she led him to the makeout corner.

"Would you rather sit someplace else?" She asked with a coquettish smile.

"No!" Guy replied a bit too earnestly.

Connie giggled as she took her seat, patting the space next to her. Once seated, he felt a set of silky fingers interlock with his. He returned the grasp, the familiar pair of hands firmly in place until several minutes into the film, when their owners decided to put them to more vigorous use.

First gradually, and then suddenly – that was how their love was revived after months of drama and separation. Time stood still, and the world disappeared as Connie and Guy found each other again.

It was only when the end credits began and the lights came on that they were brought back to the present.

The couple shared a laugh as they stood up and begin to exit, with Connie reaching into her handbag to retrieve her chapstick – which she needed to apply liberally.
"Well, that was some movie!" Guy exclaimed. "So what happened, anyway?"

"I have no idea," Connie laughed. "Wanna see it again?"

"You read my mind."

Returning to the box office, the couple bought another pair of tickets.

A hunter green Range Rover eased into the cobblestone driveway of the Moreau Residence. Taking care to leave the windows cracked open before alighting, Adam switched off the ignition and popped out of the driver's seat. Being one of the few Ducks with a driver's license, and one of the even fewer Ducks who had a roomy SUV to call his own, Adam had become the group's designated chauffeur, and the eclectic selection in his CD changer reflected that.

But no one needed a ride today, and he intended to take full advantage of the reprieve.

Julie's parents had again allowed her to return to Minnesota ahead of the school year. A mere two days after celebrating her 16th birthday back home in Maine, the goalie had settled into the guest room at Connie's house and looked forward to another late August with the Ducks. Connie and Guy were enjoying themselves at his place, leaving Julie with the Moreaus' home all to herself for the day.

She had hardly been partying wild, however. The main drama of the summer of 1998 had been the developing Clinton impeachment saga – an affair that struck Julie all at once as confusing, sleazy, and strangely compelling. Given the summertime lack of hockey and new TV seasons, it was literally the only game in town. She had been watching the President's sworn deposition on television when she heard the doorbell ring.

Rising to her feet at once, she made haste to the front door to let in her boyfriend.

"Hey, you!" She beamed, leaping into Adam's arms for a warm embrace.

"I missed you so much," he declared, catching and twirling her in his arms before they kissed.

"I bet I missed you more," she teased, ever the competitor.

"Oh?" He asked, setting her back down. "Prove it."

"Gladly."

Without another word, she took his hand and led him to the living room where the President was about to answer one of the lawyers' questions.

"It depends upon what the meaning of the word 'is' is."

"Huh?" An incredulous Adam asked.

"I'm not even going to try to unpack that one," Julie declared, turning off the TV.

"Fine by me," he replied, draping his arms around her waist and pulling her in. "Now, back to our little contest."

Her happy giggles were interrupted by his passionate lips that took possession of her own like a hungry dog who had been given a steak. A steady crimson wave washed over her cheeks as he detached from her lips and began peppering her jawline with kisses, his lips working their way
down the silky flesh of her neck, toward the sun-kissed bosom exposed above her white tank top.

Grasping the back of his head with both hands, she drove him further down, smothering him while drawing a moan of pleasure and an aggressive pair of hands that began to attack the straps of her top when she pushed him off.

With a slight whimper, his apologetic sapphires pleaded with her emerald orbs as they separated. But Julie was quick to correct Adam's misapprehension.

"Not here," she declared. "Let's go upstairs."

And like a punished 9-year old whose sentence had been commuted to a trip to Disney World, Adam's face lit into a broad smile. But his joy gave way to caution, as it had in most cases. He was not about to push her into something that she would regret later and hate him as result.

"Only if you're really ready for this."

"I've never been more ready for anything in my life."

Fixing her straps, he helped her off the sofa before falling-in behind her as she led him up the stairs to the Moreaus' guestroom. As his eyes fixed onto the inviting queen-sized bed, Adam's rhetorical filter went to sleep.

"You should stay at Connie's all the time," he declared in an earnest tone that betrayed a feeling of wonder.

"Good idea," Julie giggled, looking to the bed, then back at him. "Well?"

"Ladies first."

Marching to the bed, she slipped out of her tank top while he peered into the hall, flashing a boyish grin at some invisible companion before closing the door.

JV and returning Varsity Ducks along with several aspiring walk-ons waited on the ice at Eden Hall Arena for tryouts to begin. As Adam looked over the crowd, he felt that he and the Ducks were in for their best year at Eden Hall. Larson, McGill, Riley, Henderson, and Cole were all gone. Scooter had graduated, so Julie would in all likelihood get promoted to Varsity. Connie and Guy were an item again. Charlie and Linda were still going strong. With their friendships restored and enemies gone, the Ducks were about to go from being mild outcasts to campus royalty. Best of all for Adam was the knowledge that he had managed to keep secret. Not wanting the effect to be ruined, he hoped that Julie had kept quiet.

The buzz of separate conversations ceased once the players heard a whistle pierce the air.

Eyebrows shot up, 'Oh my Gods' were exclaimed, and plain, happy laughter arose from the Ducks as they took in the sight of Gordon Bombay standing next to Orion.

"Some of you may already know me," he began with a slight smile. "But for those of you who don't, I'm Coach Bombay. I'll be coaching JV this season."

Charlie threw a light elbow into Adam's gut.

"You knew, didn't you?"

"Well," Adam answered innocently, "To be fair, my dad wasn't certain about it. Besides, I didn't
want to announce that Bombay was returning only to have him show up and announce that he had
gotten a job somewhere else."

"Heh, yeah...he's been known to do that. He can be so dramatic."

"Oh, look who's talking," Adam teased.

Before Charlie could reply, Orion's whistle sounded.

"You two got something you'd like to share with the rest of us?" The new Varsity coach asked.

"Er, only how thrilled we are to be back!" Charlie beamed, prompting Adam to chuckle.

"I'm sure," Orion agreed with a paper-thin smile.

As Bombay resumed his introductory speech, Charlie spoke to Adam in a whisper.

"I was thinking – if you don't get me into trouble, that is – would you like to be alternate captain?"

Adam considered the offer, but not for long. Although he was the superior player, he could not
deny that Charlie had proven himself as the Ducks' true leader. Between getting the Bash Brothers
back together, and rallying JV after Larson's expulsion, and bringing home a State Championship,
Charlie Conway had proven himself beyond all doubt to be the heart of the team. If Charlie had
still been the temperamental prima donna of freshman year, Adam might have been inclined to
withhold his support. But the Hawk-turned-Duck MVP knew where his team needed Charlie, and
where it needed him.

"I would be honored," Adam answered, "to be 'A' to your 'C'."

THE END

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!