

## CHAPTER ONE

“Damn,” Coach Johnson muttered. “That’s four fouls, Drew!” he shouted to our King James. “B, you’re in.” This is where all the trouble started. I sometimes wonder what would have happened if Drew had never fouled out.

I had it in my head that if I became popular, every day would feel like my birthday. I’d have no trouble talking to girls and I’d be admired by my peers at the Granger School. I did *not* think everything would turn to crap salad in a bucket.

Who could blame me? I mean, in all the movies and TV shows, the popular kid who ascends from the depths of dorkdom has their day in the sun, and then it’s smooth sailing. Marty McFly gets the awesome truck. Daniel LaRusso gets to crane-kick the crap out of Johnny. Seth Rogen gets to spend time with a girl *way* out of his league

in every Judd Apatow movie. But my name isn't Marty or Daniel or Seth. My name is Bijan, and the world won't let me be the hero in my own damn life.

I jumped up to check in at the scorers' table and the horn blared for substitutions. I was trying to look tough and hard, but inside I was freaking out the same way I did when my imaginary future ex-girlfriend, Elle, walked by me in the halls: so excited that I might hurl chunks all over the floor.

I jogged over to Drew and reached out to give him a low five. We barely clapped hands. Drew stared at the floor, fuming as he hustled to the bench. He wasn't supposed to foul out of a game that would determine whether our season ended or kept going. He also wasn't supposed to let me, a nonentity on loan from JV, fill in for him.

The Granger crowd was quiet as my sneakers squeaked onto the court, except for my mom and my best buddy, Sean. He stood up and yelled, "Go get 'em, Tiger!" with 1950s irony while my mom clapped and whooped next to him. She knew how much playing meant to me. She was maybe the only one in that gym besides Sean who did.

It was the beginning of the fourth quarter, Carter Prep 54, Granger 38. I joined the others around the key, waiting for the Carter Prep student to shoot his second free throw. He made the basket, the swish of the net prompting loud cheers from the visiting team's fans.

I grabbed the ball from under the basket and inbounded it to Marcus Silva, the cocaptain, who dribbled it down the

court. Marcus was the only reason we had as many points as we did, and Carter Prep knew it. Their defenders were double-teaming him.

“Beej!” Marcus yelled as he passed the ball to me.

I looked to Will, but he was covered. Steve was cutting behind the basket to lose his man.

Todd was struggling to stay upright against the opposing center, who kept shoving him from behind. The shot clock was winding down. I bent my knees to shoot.

The ball hit the backboard before it went in. The Granger crowd cheered, waving the blue-and-gold plastic pom-poms the school had given out before the big game.

Our team started to run back on defense, but I was so amped I stayed behind to guard the player inbounding the ball. I hopped in front of him, waving my arms in the air.

“Back off, benchwarmer,” he grunted as he tried a ball fake.

I didn’t bite. Marcus doubled back. He stuck to the point guard, who was trying to receive the pass. A short, shrill whistle blew.

“Five-second violation,” the official said, taking the ball.

“I do love that rule.” I grinned at the scowling Carter Prep player. “If I was in *your* lofty position, I would have called a time-out. But hey, what do I know?”

The ref handed me the rock and blew the whistle again. The clock started. I inbounded to Marcus before I bolted to the top of the key to set a pick for Todd. I crisscrossed

my arms flat across my chest and blocked the Carter Prep goon with my whole body, allowing Todd to cut to the hole. The Carter Prep goon guarding him crashed into me. I stumbled backward, but it was enough time for Marcus to lob a pass to Todd for an easy layup.

The crowd cheered louder, but not loud enough that I couldn't hear my mom yell.

"It's not ice hockey, Carter! Watch the checking!" Mom shouted.

*"Would you listen to that crowd, Reggie? They have really come alive in this last quarter!"*

Sometimes, when I need a minute, I like to pretend that Reggie Miller and Kevin Harlan, my favorite NBA commentators, give color commentary for my life.

*"Well, the Granger Gunners are finally giving the crowd something to cheer about, Kevin. When you start playing with a little fire in your belly, the atmosphere completely changes."*

*"There is a steal from Marcus Silva, who rockets the ball over to newcomer Bijan Majidi for a three-pointer . . . BANG! He makes it! Where did this kid come from?"*

*"This is why I love basketball, Kevin. Anything can happen!"*

I panted as I looked up at how much time we had on the clock. We were down by two with fifteen seconds left. Todd had finally been able to post up effectively and get some layups in. Will had driven to the hoop when Marcus or I were double-teamed. There was sweat running down Coach Johnson's cheeks during our time-out huddle; his

sports coat was off and his armpits were soaked. He'd been sweating a lot this season. His team wasn't up to the usual Granger standards of excellence.

Coach drew up a play on his clipboard. "Okay, we've got no time-outs left. Worse comes to worst, they get the last possession, you foul," he said. "Get the ball to Marcus for the play to work. Got it?"

The buzzer sounded. I hustled to the baseline. The ref handed me the ball and then blew his whistle.

The other team didn't let Marcus breathe. A player stuck to either side of him, anticipating his every move. Marcus tried to break free, but I didn't have time to wait. I hurled the ball over my head to Will. Will drove to the hoop. As the big goon in the key moved up to guard him, Will bounce-passed to Todd, who was free under the basket.

For a split second, Todd looked terrified. The clock was winding down. Ten seconds left.

"Shoot it!" Marcus yelled. Todd tossed it up. The ball bounced twice on the rim before falling in.

*"Unnnn-believable, Kevin!"*

*"The Granger Gunners have stunned everyone today with a comeback for the books!"*

*"Well, not really. I mean, it was only a sixteen-point deficit. Also, since when are prep school games in our contracts? I need to talk to my agent about this."*

"Don't give them any space! Full-court press!" Marcus shouted.

The ball was inbounded to my guy. *Don't reach*, I thought. The last thing I wanted was to foul with five seconds left on the clock. Even if he made the free throws, we'd barely have time to get a final shot up. I took a deep breath and kept my hands in the air. He dribbled to the left, then to the right.

"Swing it!" his coach shouted from the sideline.

The clock was down to three. As he searched for an open man, he took his eyes off me. Here was my chance.

I swatted the ball from his hands and made a fast break for the basket. The crowd erupted! I dribbled to the hoop and shot.

Based on the cheering that echoed through the gym and the way the team lifted me up in joy, I figured I'd made the basket.

## CHAPTER TWO

“Make way for the future of Granger hoops!” Marcus shouted as we walked together into Will Thompson’s (much-too-large-to-be-legal) house. Marcus had convinced my mom that I had to come party. He gave her his solemn vow that he would look out for me.

My mom told Marcus that I could go under a few conditions: I had to be home by midnight. I couldn’t drink anything except water or soda. And I couldn’t get “fresh” with any young ladies. This made Marcus laugh out loud. Sean and I followed Marcus’s lead as he walked over to Will Thompson III, who stood by a cooler of beers. Will was a post-grad senior and a strong defender, but he relied too much on his jump shot, which most of the time clanked off the rim. He was a legacy kid: both his father and his grandfather had attended Granger. His family made

huge donations to the school, which translated to Will's getting lots of playing time, even when he didn't necessarily deserve it. All that playtime still hadn't gotten him recruited to Trinity College, so he was gracing the Granger School with another year of his presence and his parties.

Will was tall and lanky but had terrible posture, so to me he always looked like a question mark with floppy dirty-blond hair and thick eyebrows. By contrast, everything about Marcus screamed superstar in the making, from his red Jordans, gray jeans, and leather jacket to his all-AP class schedule to his talent on the court. I'd have been annoyed with him if he weren't so nice.

"Marcus! What up, playa?" Will asked, peering at us through oversized clown sunglasses.

Marcus and I looked at each other. I was silently asking if this guy was serious. Marcus had a look of resignation that said yes, indeed he was.

"Need a drink?" Will asked as he tossed me a can of Natty Light. Will was wearing an unofficial Granger Gunners T-shirt. Underneath the Gunners logo it read  
HERE TO STAY.

We'd been relegated to the basement, which was bigger than my home, a two-bedroom condo in Somerville. I didn't know what Will's family had done to amass this kind of wealth, but I knew the dude could afford more than Natty Light.

"Thanks," I said. I held the can, knowing full well I

wasn't going to open it. I would put it back in the cooler later. My mom wouldn't let me out of the house ever again if she smelled beer on my breath when I got home.

"That was a *nice* game you played, man. I didn't know you had it like that," Will said to me. He put on this Riff Raff-style accent he didn't have at school. I guess he spoke like that to anyone with more melanin than him, which included Marcus, Sean, and me.

This is the part where I'm supposed to use food metaphors to describe everyone's respective complexions. It makes me cringe a little, the way all the books we read in English class describe people's skin color using food metaphors. One day, when we were reading yet another description of a character with skin the color of caramel or chocolate, Elle pointed out that people aren't edible. I'd been thinking a lot about that. I thought about most things Elle said. Then I felt guilty when those thoughts spiraled to the two of us making out.

In food terms, I'd have deep olive skin, which I don't get, because aren't olives green? Anyway, Will is white, Marcus and Elle are black, and I am brown.

My mom, who is of Persian descent, was born and raised in the States. My dad grew up in Jordan and met my mom in Boston. He was Arab and had really light skin, and my mom is on the darker side. I came out somewhere in between.

"Your house is amazing," I told Will.

Sean stole the beer out of my hand. He flicked open the tab and took a swig. “Ahhh, that’s fresh,” he said, as if he drank beer all the time. The faker. His moms would be so disappointed.

“Oh, this old pile of bricks.” Will said. “I can’t complain, man. I’m blessed.” It was almost like everything that came out of his mouth was something he’d rehearsed in a bathroom mirror. “You peeping on any bitches here tonight?”

I looked at Marcus as he pinched the bridge of his nose before turning away for a second. I couldn’t tell if he was stopping himself from laughing in Will’s face or if he was annoyed beyond belief.

“No worries,” Will continued. “I got you. We got some fine chicks here tonight. You feel me?” He put his fist in the air, ready to be bumped.

I tapped it lightly with mine. I didn’t want to be rude.

“Thanks. We’ll go *peep*,” Sean said, never one to sugarcoat his displeasure at the hypocrisies of high school nonsense.

“How about we say hey to some of your new fans, Beej,” Marcus said, nodding in the direction of the New Crew, the most popular girls in the junior class.

“I don’t know if I’d know what to say to El—to the group,” I said. I could feel my face getting hot. “Are they fans? Really?”

“Marcus, may I have a word with your teammate?” Sean asked, scratching the back of his head.

“I’ll see you two over there. Remember, I promised your mom: no getting fresh.” Marcus wagged his finger at me before he walked over to Elle, Erin, and Jessica.

Sean put his hands on my shoulders, ready to deliver a patented inspirational speech. “Are you seriously not going to take this opportunity to talk to beautiful women?” he asked.

Sean and I have a lot in common—we love graphic novels, Stephen King, the Celtics; we both have jet-black hair; neither of us has a dad—but we differ in some ways too. He’s half Japanese and half Irish, he’s almost always in the ceramics room at school, and he’s had sex. He doesn’t lord it over me, which is nice. If the tables were turned, I would bring it up *all* the time. Sean never acts like he’s superior to me because of his carnal knowledge, except when a group of pretty girls is standing nearby. Then he’s the authority on talking to the ladies, though that night I didn’t see him walking over to the New Crew on his own.

“Let me tell you something, Beej. Tonight is your night! You won Granger the game. We know athletics are the only thing people care about. Is that depressing? Sure! But you’re a beneficiary now! Your mom raised you to be an upstanding young chap, you’re smart, you’re tall, and you can put together a mean bowl of cereal. You’re a catch! Now we’re going to go over there, and we’re going to talk to those girls and impress them with some witty repartee,

because the alternative is talking to ass hats like Will. You got it?”

“Can you imagine wearing an ass for a hat, though?” I asked in a weak attempt to kill my nerves.

“It’s all I think about,” Sean deadpanned. “You’re deflecting. I appreciate that, but now is the time to step up, yes?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I got it.”

“That’s my guy. And break!” Sean slapped my shoulders as though we were leaving a huddle, but I didn’t move.

The New Crew was standing with Marcus, hanging on his every word. To be fair, I sort of felt the same way when I talked to him. Elle and Jessica flanked their fearless flaxen-haired leader, Erin Wheeler, who wore a tight jean jacket over a skimpy black shirt. The three gorgeous young ladies were on yearbook staff. Some seniors had started calling them the New Crew when Erin and her friends were sophomores, and the name had stuck. They were to “run” the social scene once the senior yearbook girls graduated, though seniors cared less about the social hierarchy the closer they got to graduation. Drew Young, Erin’s boyfriend, was there too. They were the “It” couple of our grade.

“Are you sure you want to go over there?” I asked Sean.

“Now or never,” said Sean.

“How about never,” I said, but Sean had already gripped my T-shirt and was tugging me toward them.

“Hey, guys,” Marcus said, opening the circle to admit Sean and me. When Drew saw me coming, he made a break for the booze.

“Hey,” Erin said, acknowledging us momentarily before checking her phone.

I’d never gotten a read on Erin over the years. She’d never been mean to me specifically, but there was a frostiness to her. The rumor was that she’d have to be held back a year if she didn’t get her grades up, but so far she was managing to stay in our class.

“Hi, Bijan,” Elle said. My heart felt like the Grinch’s, expanding three sizes with Elle’s voice evoking all the Whos in Who-ville singing on Christmas Day. “You played really well tonight.”

Once, I managed to start a conversation with Elle at a sophomore dance. I said “Hi, Elle.” When she said hi back, I froze. I hadn’t planned for her to say hi back! I smiled a lot, and then, when I couldn’t form any more words, she politely excused herself to get some punch.

Did I put Elle on a pedestal? Yes. Did she have reason to be on that pedestal? Absolutely. She was brilliant, kind, and stunning. She nibbled on her pencil erasers during English class, which was so cute . . . not that I looked at her all the time! Mostly I said “hey” to her during English class, which was a step up from “Derrrrrr . . . uhhhhh . . . you’re soooooooo pretty.” I’d never said that out loud, but I’d been tempted to.

*“Bijan Majidi is not one to choke under pressure, yet he seems to be faltering now, Reggie.”*

*“He had better start saying something soon, Kevin, or she is going to think he is super creepy.”*

“Hi, Elle. You too.”

*“Did he just say ‘you too,’ as though she played in the game?”*

*“He sure did, Kevin. He sure did.”*

Her high cheekbones and long eyelashes were making me incoherent. “Sorry. I mean, uh, thank you. W-we all played well, so . . .” I stammered as my face grew hot. I caught Jessica looking at me with surprise and heard Sean clear his throat. My face must have been burning like an animated case of athlete’s foot in a Lotrimin commercial. Elle didn’t say anything, but she was smiling.

*“Not a bad recovery . . . Maybe she didn’t notice?”*

*“Are you serious, Kevin?”*

“But enough about us,” said Marcus, saving me from embarrassing myself further. “What’s going on for the rest of tonight?”

“Well, Drew’s probably going to pass out soon,” Erin said, watching Drew chug down something in a red Solo cup while other guys from the team cheered him on. “So I guess not much.” For the life of me, I will never understand what girls see in Drew Young.

Erin’s phone buzzed again. She let out an exasperated sigh at her screen and shoved the phone into her jeans pocket. “Yeah, I’m not looking forward to driving him home later.”

“You could leave him here,” Sean said with a shrug before taking another swig.

“That’s not a bad idea, actually,” Erin said. Beer frothed down Drew’s chin while he high-fived his whooping buddies. Will and his pals joined in, jumping and yelling.

“Excuse me a moment,” Marcus said as he walked over to his teammates. This left Sean and me alone.

Alone.

With.

The.

Girls.

I was not prepared.

“All this party is missing is a piñata full of hundred-dollar bills, right?” I asked with a little chuckle that quickly turned into a whimper because Jessica was staring at me like I had just expressed my undying affection for jockstraps. “Is there any food, or is that not a thing at this kind of party?”

“That would be a *fun* party,” Elle responded. “Unlike this one. I was kind of hoping to have a girls’ night with my friends at home.” She said the last bit while looking at Jessica.

“I couldn’t not come to his party,” Jessica said. “I’m his girlfriend.”

“When it’s convenient for him,” Elle grumbled. “He hasn’t said much to you or your friends all night.”

“You can do better,” Erin chimed in.

“Maybe some of us aren’t as picky as you, Elle,” Jessica said, ignoring Erin. “It’s high school and he’s hot. Enough said.” Jessica’s freckled face became a little pink.

“Will is pretty handsome. For a Neanderthal,” Sean interjected.

“Sorry . . . Remind me, why are you here?” Jessica asked.

“I’m here as Bijan’s moral support,” Sean said. “Plus beer. Moral support and beer.”

Jessica put her focus back on me, ignoring Sean.

“So, are you, like, on varsity now?” Jessica showed off her toothy grin. “Will didn’t mention you were going to play.”

“It was a last-minute thing. Kevin was pretty badly injured last game, so Coach Johnson asked me to fill in,” I said.

“I was just asking because we already took the team photo for yearbook,” Jessica said. “But we can totally add a separate photo of you.”

“Yeah, like an action shot of him scoring the winning hoop tonight,” Sean said, slapping me on the back.

“How is the yearbook coming along?” I asked Elle. Opportunities to talk to her at a cool-kid party didn’t come very often. Now that I was here, I wanted to make the most of it.

“Well, it’s—” Elle began.

“It’s so much work, but it’s *so* rewarding,” Jessica answered, cutting Elle off.

“Sorry, I was asking Elle,” I said. Jessica wasn’t grinning anymore. She took a sip from her drink and glowered at me over the rim of her cup.

“No way,” Erin said, looking behind me, as her face turned a shade of pepperoni.

I turned my head to find Stephanie Bergner and Noah Olson walking down the stairs. People usually rolled their eyes whenever Stephanie spoke, and a lot of guys called her Busted Bergner, but she was okay. She was a little intense, but it was kind of cool how she was involved in *everything*. She was in the finance club and on the debate team, and she was my grade’s student council representative. She also played the cello in orchestra and at all the school talent shows. The cello didn’t exactly get the crowd going, but she was good at it. I liked the way her face scrunched up when she played.

Stephanie, all five foot two inches of her, still in her school uniform and penny loafers, marched over to us. A pink headband held her wavy light brown hair in place.

“Fellow juniors! Nice to have solidarity in numbers,” Stephanie said as though she were campaigning for next year’s student council election. Noah lingered behind her. He gave me a bro nod.

Noah was pleasant most of the time. We had been lab partners in chemistry sophomore year. He was reliable and did his work, but he always felt the need to look over my answers before handing them in with his, which bothered

me. I got better grades on our tests, but he was sure he was smarter than me.

“What are you guys doing here?” Elle asked. Her tone wasn’t malicious. I think, like the rest of us, she was surprised that Stephanie had decided to be social.

“Yes, why are we here?” Noah asked. He seemed annoyed to be at the big party of the weekend and not alone with Stephanie. He was wearing “date night” clothes: chinos and a tucked-in Ralph Lauren button-down. His hair was slicked back with gel.

“She’s here for the same reason we all are. To have a great time,” Sean deadpanned before letting out an unapologetic burp. Mama Hana would have been disgusted. Mom Jane would have been pleased that Sean was trying, in his own way, to make a newcomer feel welcome.

“I got a text that there would be a party this evening,” Stephanie explained. Erin’s green eyes widened, as if she was shocked anyone would invite Stephanie Bergner to a Thompson house party. “I thought it might be good to get some signatures while people are in a compliant state.”

Noah, as if on cue, passed her a clipboard. He seemed to be enthusiastic about causes, but only when Stephanie was involved. I’d never seen him take on a community project on his own.

“What’s the petition for this time?” Jessica asked. “Not enough kale in the cafeteria?”

“I am willing to let that little jab slide. It would be wonderful if you would participate in our mascot change campaign, Jessica.”

“You can’t let that go, can you?” Erin asked. At the end of last year, Stephanie had written a guest opinion piece for our school paper, the *Granger Gazette*. In it, she’d said that our mascot, the Gunner, was inappropriate for a school environment. Initially, it hadn’t struck a chord. For the most part, we all kind of went about our day-to-day lives and got ready for summer vacation.

That was until Will Thompson’s grandfather, who was a member of the school’s board of trustees as well as an esteemed donor, got wind of the article. He wrote his own op-ed for Granger’s glossy alumni magazine, discussing his disappointment with the lack of respect for tradition.

Mr. Thompson’s piece galvanized Stephanie’s cause, and suddenly a group of students and their parents began to voice their opinions online and in person at school events. I’d thought discussion would die down over the summer, but Stephanie and a sizable group of students hadn’t forgotten about it when they showed up at this fall’s homecoming game. She and Noah had made T-shirts. On the front was a graphic of the Gunners rifle crossed out Ghostbusters-style. NO TRADITION OF VIOLENCE was written on the back. Fifty or so students lined up on the sidelines along with Stephanie, wearing the shirts. Nobody booed

them. People noticed and gave them dirty looks, but the only booing during the game was when the refs made calls in favor of Armstead Academy's team.

"The petition is to change the Granger School's mascot from the Gunners to something nonviolent but still in line with the school's history," Stephanie said. She blinked an awful lot. It must have been stressful, being that smart around people who didn't appreciate it.

"We're hoping to work with the administration on choosing a more inclusive mascot," Noah explained. "As soon as we have enough signatures, we can make a motion to meet with the board of trustees."

"I like the mascot the way it is," Jessica said. Stephanie wasn't going to have much luck with this crowd.

"You have a right to your opinion, however backward it may be," Stephanie replied. Elle laughed, and Erin smiled a little before she remembered she wasn't supposed to be amused by anything Stephanie Bergner said. Her face reset to ambivalent frostiness, but Jessica had already noticed. She nudged Erin with her elbow.

"I don't think this is the time or place for a petition," Erin said. Stephanie squared up to Erin, her penny loafers toe-to-toe with Erin's Frye boots. Erin stared right back at her, like she was trying to figure out which planet Stephanie came from. Were they going to have a catfight?

"You weren't invited tonight," Erin said coolly. Stephanie's face crumpled. I knew I shouldn't get involved,

but I had never seen Stephanie Bergner cry. I didn't plan to if I could help it. We nerds had to stick together.

"I invited her," I lied.

"You what?" Erin and Noah asked me in unison.

Everybody stared. I couldn't be sure, but Elle might have smiled a little. Maybe that was wishful thinking.

"You invited her?" Erin asked. She was giving me a kind of evil squint. I wondered if *we* were going to fight. I wouldn't last a round of that battle.

"Yeah, I texted her after the big win. Wanted my buddy here to celebrate." I grinned at her. Stephanie stood up straight, her chest puffed out like Andre Iguodala's after he scored a three-pointer. "Should we get some people to sign?" I asked, offering my elbow to her like dudes do to women in old movies.

"I would be amenable to that. Thank you," Stephanie said, linking her arm with mine. We moseyed over to the other side of the room, where some of the boys' varsity ice hockey team members were playing beer pong. Three of them were wearing the same *HERE TO STAY* shirt Will had on. I had a feeling they wouldn't be signing Stephanie's petition.

Her arm felt good linked with mine, and it sucked when she pulled away. It would be so great to walk around like that with a girl all the time. Well, not all the time—I'd have to unlink to go to the bathroom—but it'd be awesome to walk with someone who was as proud of me as I was of her.

“Thanks for saying that,” Stephanie said as she adjusted her headband, making sure her long brown hair was tucked behind her ears.

“No sweat! Next time I win the social lottery prize, I’ll invite you for real,” I said.

“I meant the buddy portion. I don’t have that many *buddies* at present, aside from Noah. I saw the game. You were very good.”

“Thanks! I guess I played well enough to get invited to one of these things. Are we supposed to be having fun now?”

“We’d probably have a better time if we were drinking. Only I find the notion of not being in control of myself a little unnerving,” Stephanie said, looking over her shoulder at Jessica, Elle, and Erin.

“Well, that’s a better reason than being terrified of your mom,” I said. “If my mom smells me reeking of booze, she’ll lock me up in my room until the dystopian future arrives. That is, if we aren’t living in one now.”

“I’m fairly certain we are,” Stephanie said, taking in the landscape of girls snapping selfies and dudes shotgunning beers, foamy suds spilling onto the light green carpeting. Sean was shotgunning. I knew I shouldn’t have left him alone with seniors. “Shall we ask your teammates for some signatures?”

“Oh, well, they’re not exactly my teammates. I mean, I’m just on loan from JV,” I said, but she kept walking. She was on a mission.

“Gentlemen, good evening, and well done on a great game,” she said as she approached them.

“Busted Bergner! What’s good?” a rosy-cheeked, droopy-eyed Drew Young asked. Stephanie flinched a little. I’m sure she was aware of the nickname, but that was different from hearing someone say it to her face.

“Always a pleasure to see you, Drew,” Stephanie said dryly. “We were wondering if you would be interested in signing a petition to change the school’s mascot to something less violent but still formidable?”

Drew looked at her clipboard as he took a long swig from his cup. Then he looked up at me. He seemed more annoyed with me than he did with Stephanie. He slapped his heavy hand on the back of my neck.

“Hey, man, come celebrate with us and quit wasting time with her,” Drew slurred, slamming a can of beer against my chest. That would leave a bruise.

“Thanks,” I said as I clutched the can. Drew’s breath smelled like cold cuts that had been left in the sun too long.

“Go ahead. Drink it,” Drew said. His eyelids fluttered. He wobbled a little too.

“I think you’ve had enough for the both of us, man.” I patted his shoulder. He jerked away from me.

“Drink the beer. It’s just a Natty Light. Allah’s not gonna mind.” His smirk was suddenly not so playful. “If you don’t want my beer, it’s cool. I mean, it’s weird, but

it's fine," Drew said. "You played one good game. One. So what? I bust my ass every game and at every practice."

*"I used to have my fair share of dealing with trash talkers, Kevin. You gotta give what you get! John Starks learned that the hard way in the 1995 playoffs. You remember that series?"*

*"Not the time to reminisce, Reggie. Not the time."*

"You're right. It was just one game. For now."