THE TROUBLE WITH TROOP 94

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Big River Entertainment

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Usually, acknowledgement pages are used to thank people who helped the author bring this novel to life: agents, publishers, editors, friends.
But I want to do something different.
Thanks for taking a chance
Robbie, Sawyer, Arnav, Alex, Adam and, maybe even Kyle or Burnside.
You may be looking for the same things they are.
And that's ok.
You'll find it.
And everything starts to get better.
You got this.



PROLOGUE

The Pacific Northwest: Olympic National Park: October, 1999: Near Midnight.

"Just keep moving. Keep pushing forward. Keep moving. Get to the tree line and maybe I'll be safe."

That's my mantra right now. My heart's pounding so hard it's punching its way out of my chest. My ears are pounding with the beat of every pulse. I'm sweating so hard, it feels like I just got out of the shower. Every inch of my skin is slick, slimy and sweaty. Bits of mud, tree leaves, sticks and bugs are stuck everywhere.

"Find your clothes. Stay off the trail. They'll be looking for you there. Stay on your feet, look for the others. Stay quiet and don't get spotted."

As I run, branches whip across my skin and add more scratches to the collection across my body. Every branch I hit sticks more pine needles into places where pine needles should never go. I can't tell you how many branch whacks to the nuts I've taken. And don't even get me started on my bare feet. Every step grinds more pine needles, sticks, rocks, mud… or maybe not mud between my toes. Yeah, let's not think about that one.

My legs look like a cheese grater attacked them. Every bug in the forest is feasting on every exposed crevasse. I smell like a toxic mix of sweat, lake water, body odor, and onion rings. They can track me by the scent alone.

I'm clutching a shoe in one hand and a pair of underwear in the other, neither of which are mine; both from different people. When we scattered, we panicked and grabbed whatever was nearby. Where are my own clothes? Who knows? They're probably gone, floating downriver heading out to the Puget Sound. Tomorrow morning some fisherman is going to find them snared in his nets.

The others are out here too, but I can't hear or see them; and there's no way I'm calling out. That's exactly what Kyle and his Red Devil squad want. One yell and they have easy triangulation. One shout and I'm done. Capture. Humiliation. Game over.

If I get caught, I don't just lose this competition, I lose everything. My reputation at Queen Anne High will be torched. For the rest of my high school years, I'll be known as the naked idiot sprinting through a national park at midnight. If I'm caught, I'll also get kicked out of scouts; we all will. That's what they want.

Three months ago, I would never be in a situation like this. I would be home alone in my room playing games on my PC. Three months ago, I was unpacking boxes in my new Seattle bedroom. Mom would be talking to me about this move being a "fresh start" and "new opportunity." Now fast-forward to this: me, buck naked, running through a forest, dodging capture, sweaty and smelling like ass.

This fresh start didn't stop the mosh pit of confusion, conflict, and loneliness that started two and a half years ago when my dad died. One morning he drops me at school, same as always. That afternoon, mom's picking me up, telling me he's never coming home again. Since then, it's a swirl of shock, depression, anxiety, and repeat.

Then Mom drops the Seattle bomb, and we haul everything across the country. This current mess kicks off when I find the old photo album. I'll explain that later. First, I need to find some pants.

Right now, the only thing keeping me moving is panic and the absolute terror of becoming Queen Anne High's naked legend. Somewhere out there, Kyle Kelly is licking his chops and drawing up search grids with his little stormtrooper patrol. And if Kyle catches me, he wins, his mom wins, and I'm finished.

I can't be. Not yet. Not with everything riding on this.

"*Keep moving. Keep pushing forward. We win the trophy, and everything changes,*" I tell myself.

Best. Weekend. Ever.



CHAPTER 1
WE'RE ON THE EVE OF DESTRUCTION

"Four days on the road and I still don't know where I'm going.
Home is just another word for when this storm stops blowing."
-RUMSPRINGA Track 2 "Landing Gear"

Seattle, Washington, Queen Anne Hill, August 1, 1999

After four days of driving from Rochester to Seattle, we're finally here. I know this country is big. But when you drive it, there's a whole lot of nothing out there, especially once you pass Chicago and Minneapolis. The Minnesota lakes, the Badlands, Theodore Roosevelt National Park all blend together, broken up with stops to see the world's largest frying pan, the world's largest ball of twine and something called Corn City. Add a soundtrack of your mom's favorite 80's new wave tracks, you've got a trip that turns your brain to mush and your ass into a swamp. Don't get me wrong, my mom is great, and I'm glad we're together. But this was not a summer vacation joyride.

Mom and I moved into our new house yesterday. I take a break from unpacking boxes to take a walk around our new neighborhood, Upper Queen Anne Hill. The sun is setting and streetlights are starting

to flicker around the city. I see the Space Needle and Mount Rainier in the distance. The setting sun is casting an orange glow across the Puget Sound, where the ferries are cutting across the water making their last runs home. I admit that this place, my new home, is beautiful.

My mom bought an old house that needs some work, with a few creaky floorboards and some windows that stick when it rains. It smells like cedar wood, lemon scented cleaner and new paint.

The houses climb up the hills like giant steps, each one with its own personality and history. This morning, the clouds rolled in from Puget Sound and made the neighborhood look like something out of a mystery novel.

My father is not in the picture. Two and a half years ago, he died in a freak accident at work. He was a millwright working in factories, installing and repairing large industrial machines.

Every morning, he walked me to school. On the way, we would stop at the doughnut shop, and he'd get his coffee, and I got a doughnut. We had to keep it a secret from mom. She'd complain that I was eating too much sugar. Once he dropped me off at school, he went to work.

Mom told me his leg got pinned between two heavy machines, crushing it. He never recovered. He died in the hospital two days later. I never saw him in the hospital. I think my mom knew he was going to die. So, she didn't want me to see him that way. I'm glad, in a way, that she did that. Now I remember all the good things about him, like comic books and crazy music.

He wasn't like other kids' dads. He didn't take pride in his lawn. He never spent weekends comparing fertilizers and executing perfect mowing techniques. He was always building and fixing things and he rarely sat still. The garage was always filled with projects in progress like a giant model rocket he was building, an old motorcycle he was restoring, an amplifier he was rewiring, and shelves of tools organized in a system only he understood.

He made me laugh every single day. He found humor in everything, even in the most boring moments. When he assigned me chores, he ended up doing them with me. Washing dishes, cutting the lawn, and cleaning the house, he was always helping. When it snowed, I would shovel the driveway. But when my dad joined in to help, it ended up in

a snowball fight. He'd sneak up behind me with a shovel full of snow and dump it in my parka hood. Then we'd be engaged in an epic snow battle that left us covered in snow and laughing until our sides hurt.

He devoured countless books and magazines, from comics to political and scientific publications. All around the house, he had books stacked on every subject. And he read all of them, not just collecting them for a show. When it was time for me to do my homework, he'd sit at the table with me, reading his book. We did it together.

He was also a big-time comic book fanatic. He really loved the weird indie stuff; the comics few others bothered with. Our trips to his favorite comic bookstore were like an extra birthday. And Comic Book Day in May was always a jackpot day. He'd split my haul into two piles: one stack of "must-reads" for my education in comic book history, and one stack of whatever I wanted, no judgment. He would just let me loose in the store to flip through the bins of books, letting me pick out whatever grabbed my attention.

"A superhero is just an ordinary person who has something extraordinary happen to them," my dad taught me. It sounds simple, Except it's not. Because what the hell does *extraordinary* even mean? I looked it up: beyond what is usual, ordinary, regular, or established.

"So, do only superheroes get to be extraordinary?" Do I need to get bitten by a radioactive spider? Hit by gamma rays? Grow claws out of my knuckles? Because honestly, right now, just weeks after my fourteenth birthday, I don't feel extraordinary. Just the opposite. I feel like I just blend in like that bland color of paint in school hallways.

To be honest, I don't know if I'll ever have what it takes. I just don't feel extraordinary. So, what happens to ordinary kids like me? What about the other Robbie McDaniel's out there? What about the kids sitting right in the middle? How do we get to be extraordinary or do something extraordinary, whatever that is?

You may understand this. But to me, here's how it feels at my age. At school and in life there are three buckets.

Bucket One: Super Achievers. Straight A's, honors classes, captain of three teams, resume builders. Annoying, but kind of impressive.

Bucket Two: The opposite end of the spectrum from the Super Achievers. These are the Strugglers. School's a struggle every day. They

get labeled lazy, stupid, and unmotivated. Not true, but not a lot of people want to put in time to help them out.

Bucket Three: That's me. The middle kids. Invisible. Grades are fine, not great. Never causes trouble. Never rock the boat. We're the NPCs in everybody else's story.

That's me: Robbie McDaniel. Mr. Middle Bucket. Right now, I feel like I'm running on autopilot. I'm just background noise in someone else's show. I hope there's something extraordinary hiding in this ordinary kid who's fighting off social anxiety with low grade depression.

Dad.

He also loved music. But not just songs you hear on the radio. He enjoyed discovering new bands and lesser-known stuff. He listened to everything. I remember Uncle Jack, his brother, telling me he was a retired punk rocker. He played in a band when he was younger. And yeah, he had an album out. The best thing about that band is how he met my mom. My dad and my mom's brother were in the band together.

My mom was just starting college. She told me at first she wasn't a fan of their music, but she was really attracted to my dad. I can tell she loved him. Sometimes she's so serious. And he was the exact opposite of that. So, I guess they balanced each other out. She was all about plans and schedules, while he lived in the moment. I know she really loved my dad. Now she's a lawyer. Now he's gone.

Ever since he died, my mother has this permanent sadness hanging over her. Maybe that's why she took this new job in Seattle. Maybe she needs this push of the reset button; maybe she needs a start over. I get that. I can use a reset, too.

It's the first week of August, two weeks before school starts, which adds even more anxiety to my life. Not only do I have to deal with figuring out how I'm going to fit in at this new school, it's also going to be my first day of high school. I'm going to get my ass kicked. I just know it. I have this anxiety-fueling daydream where I'm wandering endless hallways, trying to find my classes while everyone else seems to know exactly where they're going.

It's August, and there are only four and a half months left in the year. The news is filled with warnings about this thing called Y2K. A lot of people think computers will crash, and civilization will collapse

when the new year hits 2000. Some say it's a hoax; others predict disaster. So, for me right now, there's a lot of uncertainty and it feels overwhelming, especially with starting at a new high school, a new city, and no friends.

Sometimes, I wish life had a pause button so I could catch my breath and figure things out. I often wonder if anyone else feels as lost as I do.

I stand on the hilltop overlooking the city.

"Does anybody else out there feel the same way?" I ask myself.

"Or am I in this alone?

***

So here I am on a boring Tuesday afternoon. I need to get my room in order and my desk set up in time for school. My mom is meeting with her new coworkers in the city. So, I'm home alone. I try taking a whack at unpacking the tower of moving boxes cramming my room. The first box I open is a stack of on vinyl record albums. These were my father's. I do a quick flip through them looking at the names of the bnds: The Clash, The Replacements, Pretenders.

In the next box, I find an old photo album. The avocado green fake leather cover makes it look like it's from the 70s. It's dusty as hell. Years have passed since anyone opened it. On the front cover is a strip of faded, torn masking tape. The glue is so old; the tape is barely sticking to the cover. Written in pen are the words *Rochester, New York.*

"This must have been my father's album," I tell myself. I've never seen this around our old house. I wonder where he kept it. Years of use had worn the corners smooth and cracked the spine in several places before someone tucked it away and forgot about it.

I blow off the other boxes to take a break. I flop down on my bed with the album and start flipping through the pages. The first few are all baby pictures. This must be my dad. Every picture is a goofy baby face, always smiling, always laughing. The next few pages have his birth and baptismal certificates. Then there are a few congratulations cards.

Each page slowly marches me through time, and I see my dad grow a little older; little league, first communion at Holy Family grade school, eight grade graduation, family gatherings at Christmas, first day of high school. I watch him grow up through the changing styles,

big bell-bottom jeans giving way to tight jeans, long hair to short, always with that same goofy smile.

The funniest pages are his high school years. Now the same faces start showing up in the photos. In every picture, they are together, arms around each other's shoulders, caught mid-laugh or making goofy faces at the camera. These aren't just posed school photos; these are actual moments, captured forever. I feel sad and lonely. Jealousy is taking over.

"I want friends like this," I say to myself.

Staring at the photos, I realize this must be his squad, his gang, or his team. Whatever you want to call them, these were his friends. Here he looks truly happy. The laughter is bigger. The photos have more energy. These were good times. Each image told a story of inside jokes and shared adventures, of bonds that seemed unbreakable.

Looking at these photos, I feel closer to him because I'm seeing a part of his life I'd never known. But I also feel further away, because so much of his life is still unknown to me. He never told me these stories. I fear all this will disappear.

As I hit the second to last page, the story starts making sense. These weren't just a group of guys he was hanging around with. This was his Boy Scout patrol. These were the guys he had been with since day one of Tenderfoot rank. You could tell they had his back, and he had theirs. The photos showed them on camping trips, faces lit by the campfire, working on merit badge projects together, helping at community events. There was an entire page of photos from a camping competition. He and his patrol won first place. They stood among the trees, arms around each other, holding their trophy high above their heads. Each image is like a piece of a puzzle I never knew existed, showing me a side of my father that was hidden in this dusty album.

"I want this," I tell myself.

On the last page of the album, I spot a photo that stops me cold. Never in a million years did I think I would see this. It's a portrait of my father. My crazy pre-punk rock, father. The individualist. The hyperactive man that always thumbed his nose at the way it was supposed to be done, but as a kid, a little older than I am now.

I've never seen him like this. Here he was clean cut, dressed up, wearing a Boy Scout uniform. He was an Eagle Scout. This is the last

thing I ever expected to see. I look at this picture and he's wearing a *uniform.* And not one tattoo on his arms! I always knew him with a full sleeve of ink, running down both of his muscular arms.

"What the hell?" I ask myself.

Nothing against uniforms. But seeing my dad in this full scout gear is blowing me away. The same guy who'd spent weekends covered in motor oil, blasting music too loud while he rebuilt engines, here he is standing ramrod straight in a pressed khaki shirt, chest covered in merit badges. My brain isn't processing it. Yet here he is, part of something, and looking proud of it.

Someone took these photos at a ceremony. He is standing tall, shoulders back, with this silly smile that I'd seen a thousand times before. Behind him stands his Scoutmaster, a hand on his shoulder, both beaming at the camera.

The merit badges on his sash tell stories of adventures I'd never heard about, skills he learned. Each one stands for a challenge met or a goal achieved. I always remember him as an individualist. He was a guy who did things for himself, an independent thinker.

Seeing him this way is confusing to me. He wasn't alone as I thought. These photos tell me a story. They show me a kid who'd found his place, who built connections. The misfit I knew had once been part of something structured, organized, traditional, and he'd thrived in it.

People tell me a picture tells a thousand words, but these photos are doing more than that. They're challenging me to start my own story. I realize he had something I haven't had yet. My dad found something I'm still searching for: my tribe. He lived life on his own terms, surrounded by the friends he'd chosen. Looking at these photos, I can almost hear their laughter and feel the friendship. These weren't just friends; they were brothers.

The ache in my chest isn't just missing him. I want what he had, a sense of belonging, being part of something that matters. Here I am in Seattle, starting fresh, and maybe that isn't such a bad thing. Maybe it's my chance to find my own tribe. But where do I start? Where do I look? With this new year coming, what am I going to do that makes me extraordinary?

Closing the album, I run my fingers over its worn cover. The masking tape with "Rochester, New York" written on it feels like a label from another life, my dad's life, before he became the person I knew.

I want to find what my dad had. And I am ready to go looking. It's time to write my own story. And somehow, holding this album of my father's past, I feel more alone, more lost.

"It's time for me to get to work," I tell myself.



CHAPTER 2
ALIVE AND KICKING

Nobody listens to the quiet ones,
so let's stop being quiet."
- RUMSPRINGA Track 3 "Loud Enough"

Monday morning, August 16.

My alarm chirps at 7:15am. I keep my eyes closed and let it die. 7:20 am. The back up alarm goes off, that annoying beeping. I'm ignoring it again, knowing I'm making a mistake. School starts in forty minutes. Screw it, there's no time for a shower.

My mom has been up for an hour. I can smell the bacon cooking. Earlier she knocked on my door twice, each time with increasing urgency. Once again, she knocks, then opens my bedroom door without waiting for a response.

"Mom! I'm in my underwear!" I quickly grab my quilt and cover up, pulling it tight around my shoulders.

"Sorry, honey," she says. "It's way past time to get up. I'm leaving in ten minutes if you want me to drive you."

She started her new job last week. So, she's been getting up early and out the door before me. Last week, her leaving while I slept in was fine. Today starts a whole new schedule, one that I'm already screwing up.

"That's fine. I'll walk," I tell her. The school is only a fifteen-minute walk from my house. If I take my board and cut through the park and past the community center, I can make it.

"Okay. Have a great day. I love you," she says lingering in the doorway. As she starts to close the door, she notices the green photo album on my floor. "What's that?"

I sit up, suddenly more alert and more defensive. It's obvious I look like I'm trying to cover for something, like she caught me doing something wrong.

"I found that in a box of books that were put in my room by mistake," I tell her. "I wasn't snooping."

"No. It's Okay. Did you like looking through it?" Her voice softens, taking on that careful tone she uses whenever we discuss anything related to Dad. I sense her sadness surfacing. I hesitate, picking a loose thread on my quilt.

"Yeah, but…"

"Yes? But what?" She asks me, stepping fully into the room, picking up the book, flipping through the pages, and sitting on the edge of my bed. "He always hated how his ears stuck out in that picture," she says with a smile that didn't quite reach her eyes. "He said the uniform made him look like a dorky bus driver."

I don't laugh. Not right away. Then I can't hold it back and snort a laugh through my nose.

"He does," I say. "But I didn't want to say anything."

"He loved this photo," she nods, pointing to a shot of dad with her at some outdoor concert.

We sit, flipping pages in silence. She points at one photo of him holding a pie tin like a trophy. "That was the Peach Cobbler Incident. He caused a big fire in the mess tent. But he still won."

She glances over at me. "He wanted to tell you these stories. But… well." She didn't finish. She didn't have to. We look in silence, picture after picture.

"Mom? The pictures in the back, him being an Eagle Scout." I flip the pages to the back of the book, pointing at some pictures. "I never knew he did that. Why didn't he tell me? It seems so unlike him wearing all those badges and uniforms."

"Actually, it was exactly like him," she replies. "He often told me that everything he learned when getting his Eagle rank, he used throughout his life. Those experiences shaped him in ways that stayed with him, even if they weren't obvious."

"Really?" I ask. "Even the music and band stuff?"

"Yes. You may not recognize them. But those boys are the boys that eventually formed the band." She smiles, lost in memory for a moment.

"He told me it wasn't about learning skills and building a resume. He told me it was more about the people he met, learning how to discover new things, and learning for yourself. Finding what you're passionate about, even if it's not what you expected. He always spoke of those days fondly, especially the summer camp trips with the boys."

"Well, then why didn't he sign me up?" I ask. "Didn't he want me to do the same thing? To have those experiences?" The questions come out more bitterly than I intended.

"I think he would have liked that," she replies. "You were at the age of joining. I think if he was still with us, he would have talked to you about it. But then the accident happened," she sighs.

We sit there in silence for a moment, thinking, and remembering together.

"When he joined," she starts again. "He just talked to some friends at school, and they joined too. And for you, it would have been your decision. I know he wouldn't have forced it on you. And neither will I. He believed strongly that the best experiences are the ones we choose for ourselves."

"Okay." I pause, looking at the album with fresh eyes. "I'll put the album in your room before I head to school."

"No need." She smiles, standing up. "It's better here with you, not gathering dust on a closet shelf. Maybe you'll find more surprises about your dad there. Have a great day. I'll see you after school. I love you."

"Thanks," I manage to squeak out. The word was inadequate for what I'm feeling. I truly love her. But I can't get myself to say it. The right words jam up and go nowhere. Is that typical for kids and moms?

She closes my bedroom door and walks downstairs, her footsteps echoing throughout the new house. From my window, I watch her get in the blue minivan we'd driven across twelve states to get here and drive down the hill to work.

I roll out of bed, my feet hitting the cold hardwood floor. I start looking for some clean clothes, opening drawers that are still only half-unpacked. Crap, last night I forgot to change my laundry from the washer to the dryer. Well, it's going to be a banner first day. No fresh underwear, no clean jeans, no shower. Nothing a little body spray can't fix. Just get me through this day and I'll get my act together. I grab my backpack and head out. Halfway to school, I realized I forgot my lunch. I'm determined to make this day as difficult as possible.

***

Back in Rochester, the high school I would have gone to has three hundred kids. That was manageable for me, a perfect size where you know people but could still find your own space. I knew most of those kids, having grown up with them, sharing teachers and inside jokes. But here, Queen Anne has 1,700 kids; a number so large it triggers my anxiety.

Queen Anne High looks like a small college campus with four main brick buildings surrounding a courtyard with two smaller older buildings and an athletic field behind them. My stomach drops like I'm in a free-falling elevator, and I blink to clear the fuzz. The courtyard feels like an oversized pinball machine, and I'm bumping between groups of people where I do not belong. To the right are athletes in letterman jackets talking about the upcoming season. To the left are the theater kids singing the newest show tunes. On the benches are the tech kids hunched over a phone like it is a lab sample. Everyone finds their group. I keep bumping and walking.

This new school is five times bigger than the school I was expecting to attend back home. I don't know anybody. I don't know where anything is. I stink, thanks to my morning laziness. So, what could go wrong for this skinny, insecure kid with mild anxiety and depression? A kid who's been on medication since Dad died two and a half years ago, though I hate admitting that to anyone.

I have my schedule printed out; the paper already creased and sweaty in my hand. My first two classes, Freshman Composition and Introduction to French, are in building four. I find the building and class. My third period is Study Hall. I cross the courtyard to building one and into the massive hall. As I walk in, I'm overwhelmed with

anxiety. Everyone in the room has paired off or formed groups. I sit at the first available table with an open chair.

"Sorry, this table is reserved. Study group," a sophomore girl tells me.

I make my way down the rows of tables to find another seat.

"Taken."

"I'm saving this for a friend."

"Science club only."

"Reserved, study group."

After a few more tries, each one more humiliating than the last, I make my way to the back of the room. I see an open seat at a single table. The room fills with the low hum of excited reunions, friends catching up after summer break. After all, on the first day, there really isn't anything to study in the study hall. It's more of a social hour, which makes it even worse for someone with no social connections. I sit in silence, listening to the other kids' conversations.

"Did you go up to Whistler this summer? There are new mountain biking trails!"

"We camped for a week in Olympic National Park. You should have seen the elk!"

"I did a Kayaking trip off Bainbridge Island."

"Football training camp was brutal this year."

"Summer School. Parents made me take extra math."

"I worked part time with my dad. I learned how to code."

It becomes obvious that these kids have a life here. They've always been here. They know each other. They do the same things, go to the same places, and understand the same references. When one person tells a story of what they did, the others understand, because they've been there.

I have no story to share with these people.

***

Weeks pass and I learn room numbers and bell times. I learn where I'm supposed to be and when. But I don't learn names. It's the end of week three and I'm good at classes but bad at people. I never felt so alone in my life.

"*How do I meet new people?*" I ask myself every day. I know I've always been an introvert. But the loneliness feels more intense this time.

The stress of loneliness and belief that I am a total loser shows itself when I have dinner with my mom. It's the most embarrassing part of my day.

"How was school today?" She asks. I know she isn't prying. She's genuinely interested. I don't want to answer. Because I know what she's going to ask next.

"Fine," I reply. I want to shut this conversation down as quickly as possible.

"Did you meet anyone?" She presses gently, hoping for more.

There it is. The question I hate getting and hate answering. Every time I need to answer that question, I am verbally admitting that I am incapable of making friends. I'm a loner. I'm a loser.

"Stop asking!" I wish I could yell at her. But I won't. I know it's not her fault.

"No," I reply with a noncommittal shrug never looking up from my plate as I twirl the spaghetti noodles around my fork. Every time I answer that question, I feel like I let her down. Especially tonight, she made my favorite dinner. I know she is trying to make me feel better. And I still disappoint her with another answer of failure. The word makes me feel like I failed a test she never gave me. She made my favorite, and I still cannot give her a win.

"I'm going to go out skating. Is that okay?" I ask her.

"Of course." She looks at me. "Have fun."

I get up and start to clean the table of the dishes. She stops me.

"Never mind those," she says. "I'll take care of them. You should go now before the sun sets. Go, have fun."

"Thanks." I lean over and give her a kiss. I pick up my board and head out the front door. On the porch, I turn around to give her one last wave goodbye. She sits alone, looking down at the dirty dishes and empty table. It's obvious she's just as lonely as I am.

I jump on my board and skate down to the local community center. The center has a large parking lot that's empty at this time of day. The lot is smooth and free from divots and gravel, perfect for skating. I start out with a few large loops around the outer edge of the lot. The long sweeping loops are relaxing. Then I cut into the center and try a few moves. I work on my ollies, wheelies, and tic tacs.

After a few minutes, a group of kids my age skate in, circle the edge of the lot, and roll to the far end. I know they see me; but they don't acknowledge me. Maybe they think I am trespassing on their turf. I keep watching them make their moves. They're pretty good. They pull off a few kick turns.

"I can keep up with these guys," I think to myself. I skate around the center of the lot and pull a few tricks. I do the exact same moves they're doing.

"Hopefully they'll see I can keep up and invite me over," I think to myself.

I pull a few kick turns and wheelies. I'm just as good as they are. And I know they see me. I even wave at one of the kids watching. But no luck. They look away, hop on their boards and roll out of the parking lot, and down the street. I roll over to the street and watch them continue down the hill.

"I'm here, but I'm not invited. I'm just a ghost. Do I exist here, or am I just background static? If I disappeared tomorrow, would anyone even notice? In Rochester, I wasn't popular, but at least I had people. Here, I'm just an NPC."

I stay at the top of the hill, looking at the sunset over the Puget Sound. From here I can see the entire city, from Lake Union to the Space Needle all the way down to the Kingdome.

"But where do I fit in? Can anybody out there give me a clue? Just point me in the right direction."

I skate home and watch some TV with my mom. At about ten, I go to my room. As I get undressed and crawl into bed, I'm pissed off at being so lonely. I feel abandoned. When we first moved here, my mom bought me a bunch of postcards with photos of the city. I sent them to my friends back home. As I lay there in the dark, I realize not one of them has written me back.

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Two weeks later, August 30. Today I'm trying out for the fall league soccer team. I played in the spring and summer leagues in Rochester. I play Right Back, a defensive position that suits me. My role is to protect the sides or wings from the opposing team's offense. If the ball came my way, my task is to pass it quickly to an offensive midfielder. Simple, low pressure.

Like everything in this school, these kids have been playing together since they were little. They grew up together, learned together, played summer leagues together, probably starting in expensive youth leagues before they could even tie up their own cleats.

Again, I am an outsider. I'm doing everything I can to get noticed. But the coach barely puts me in during scrimmages. He's obligated to give me some time to play. That's probably a rule somewhere, but it's obvious he picked his team before I even stepped onto the field; and he's giving them the bulk of the playing time.

"If I'm going to make this team, I need to stand out, get myself noticed, even if it means taking a risk and pissing some people off," I tell myself getting frustrated on the sideline.

All during the workout, I notice the other scrimmage team's offensive midfielder, a tall lanky kid with short buzz cut red hair. The first thing I notice about him is his uniform, it's perfect. Shirt, shorts, socks, and shoes are brand new out of the box. His uniform perfectly matches the school colors. But this is a tryout, not a match. The rest of us are in grubby workout clothes.

As I watch him play, I notice he's very controlled. His playing is *safe*. His passes are crisp, mechanical, like he'd run this exact drill a thousand times. It's clear that he was coached to do this. But he isn't playing in the moment. Every step seems safe, precise, and rehearsed.

He moves the ball cleanly, always makes the pass as the play is designed, and seems content to play conservatively. He's the kind of player coaches like because they are reliable. He does exactly what he was taught, nothing more, nothing less. He passes when pressured. He pushes forward when there is no opposition. He plays like a kid who has been coached since he was little, whether he liked it or not. He's showing the adults he will do what they taught him.

But still, there's something off with his play. He's slow. He's winded. He plays like he expects the game to come to him, instead of going out and making plays. He's entitled. I notice when something goes wrong, a bad pass, a steal, he's quick to blame. I've been a midfielder before, and I know I'm better than this kid. This is my opportunity to get noticed, to shake things up.

I convince another kid trying out to switch positions with me, just for a round or two. Okay, I admit it; I promise the kid ten bucks. But

what the hell, it gets me in the game. Now I can play against the red-haired kid. I can show the coach what I can do.

Six minutes playing on the field, and I see my chance. The opposing team advances. The red-haired kid is playing opposite me; his movements are efficient, if a little predictable. His eyes flick toward the sidelines, just for a second, like he's checking whether the coaches are still watching. He snaps back into his script, ball tucked close, every move controlled.

He's setting up for his usual clean pass, his eyes flicking to his intended target a split second too long. I read his play and see what he wants to do. I cut across his lane and his composure cracks. This resistance isn't in his playbook, and I see the frustration on his face. I predict his angle of attack and lunge, cutting him off. My challenge, a sudden, aggressive shift, confuses him.

"What the hell?" He hisses in shock, annoyed that somebody dares to challenge him. He regains his footing, and leans into me, his elbow digging into my ribs as we tangle for the ball. He moves to pivot, trying a fake pass to throw me off, I hold my ground, matching his strength, forcing him into a real struggle.

He tries to keep the ball tucked close, shielding it with his body, but I'm relentless, pushing him, disrupting his rhythm. He glares, his face tightening with frustration. This isn't his usual easy game. He feigns a stumble, trying to draw a foul. When I don't fall for it, his frustration boils over. He tries a quick, low kick at my ankle; a dirty play aimed not at the ball, but at me. I shift my foot just in time, feeling the wind of his cleat where my ankle had been. I dig in and push back. We go shoulder to shoulder, neither one of us giving an inch.

"You're dead after this," he mutters under his breath and swings again. This time, I hold my ground. Lifting his foot again, he thrusts trying to dig his cleats into my ankle! I shift out of the way just in time as his foot comes smashing down into the dirt, causing him to lose his balance. He tries to give me a hip shove to push me away. But the move backfires. He trips over my forward leg and hits the dirt. When he lands, it's obvious he is exaggerating how hard he hit and fakes an injury, trying to get the ref to call a foul. But it doesn't work, which pisses him off even more. I intercept the ball and have some open field. I'm going for it.

The sidelines erupt in shock and outrage. I hear the red-haired kids' teammates laughing at him. I'm the new kid that embarrassed him. I push downfield hard, taking advantage of their stunned reaction. If they're stunned because their usual play was upset, I'm taking advantage of that.

I push toward the goal, just one defender between me and the keeper. The ball rolls ahead, and I sprint after it like my life depends on it. My lungs burn. My legs are jelly. I see the keeper off his line. One quick glance, I'm on side. One clean strike. It sails. And then it sinks into the bottom right corner of the net. The goalkeeper never had a chance.

I'm proud of myself. For five seconds, I let it sink in; I just clowned the golden boy. Then I look up and see Coach turning his back. The defense would reset like nothing happened. But I won't forget it. I did it.

As I leave the field, I see the red-haired kid huddled with a group of guys glancing at me. I think about going up to him to smooth things over. Let's get started on the right foot. But then I see the way he looks at me, I am dirt on his cleats. His boys flank him like bodyguards. He doesn't want my handshake. In his mind, he just declared war.

I steer away and walk past them through the gate and off the field. I see the coach dropping some equipment into his car.

"Coach, can I ask you something about the tryouts?" My voice is tight. He can tell I'm nervous.

"Hello, Robert," he starts.

"Robbie," I interrupt. "My name is Robbie."

"Yeah, sorry Robbie, I know it's tough. We have a lot of strong players this year. You played well, but I have to make some tough decisions."

"I understand," I say, trying to hold my ground. "But I think if you give me more playing time, you'll see what I can do."

"I'm sorry, Ron. We already have too full of a roster. Our system is set and very difficult to pick up."

"So, no consideration for the new guy," I mutter under my breath.

The coach gives me an evil eye. "Excuse me. You can always try an intramural club." He slams the trunk door shut gets in his car and pulls away.

As I walk back to the field and past the bleachers, I notice a lanky kid with uncombed curly hair sitting on the top bleacher.

"Nice steal," he yells at me.

"Thanks." I look up and can't see much since the sun is behind his back and in my eyes. All I can make out is a skinny silhouette, big ears and curly hair.

"Don't worry about Kyle," he says. "He yells a lot because he's a spoiled brat."

"Kyle?" I'm not sure who he was talking about. "The red-haired kid. Kyle Kelly. The kid who's always pissed off. His parents own two car dealerships. So, they're loaded. So, they buy Kyle's way onto every team and activity," he tells me.

"They buy his way onto a team?" I'm confused. "Is that possible?"

"Sure is," he says. "They don't give money directly. But the school has new uniforms, the weightroom has new equipment, the field has a new scoreboard, somebody pays for all that stuff."

I look across the field on the scoreboard. The kid is right. It's brand new. Across the top I see a bright green and white sign.

SCOREBOARD COURTESY OF KELLY MOTORS.

Come see us at our two locations!

Then Kyle and his crew walk behind me. I tense up, expecting a shove, but he passes without a word.

"And he's a soulless ginger," the skinny kid shouts laughingly, making sure Kyle hears every word.

"Piss off," Kyle snaps, flipping him the bird.

"Nice defense out there," the kid taunts Kyle again. "Hey Kyle, is it true your dick is so small it can't even cast a shadow?"

Kyle whirls around, his face burning red with rage. For a moment, I thought he would charge up the bleachers. Kyle didn't, but a few of his goon squad teammates started up.

"See ya!" The kid jumps up and bolts down the row of seats, vaulting the fence to safety.

Dumbfounded, I'm left standing here.

Who was that kid? I ask myself.

As I walk to the locker room and reach the front of the building, I notice Kyle standing to the right of the entrance talking to two adults and two boys slightly older than him. This must be his family, his par-

ents, and probably his brothers. The father is a tall man. I can clearly see where Kyle inherited his height. He's wearing a full suit and tie. The mom has a short blonde hair cut, wearing a matching track suit with bright white expensive and trendy tennis shoes. I can barely hear what they are saying.

I can tell Kyle is getting chewed out. Kyle's shoulders are locked into the same rigid posture he has on the field, thinking perfect form can hide the panic in his eyes.

"How could you let that happen?" The mom scolds Kyle as he keeps looking at the ground.

"Yeah," the brothers chime in over her shoulder, clearly mocking him, throwing fuel on the fire.

"That was disappointing," the father adds. "It was a sub-par performance all around. Why are we paying for private coaching if you are going to forget everything?"

"What a waste," The brothers chime in. They clearly love it when the youngest screw up. It gives them an opportunity to pile on.

"I'm sorry," Kyle squeaks out, not looking up from the ground. "That kid is new. I didn't think he would be that aggressive."

"Well, you better start thinking, mister. No D1 coach will consider you. It will be a community college for you. Do you want to experience that kind of embarrassment? I don't," she lays into him.

As I walk past them, I see Kyle grabbing his stomach. He looks like he's going to get sick. I keep my head down and go inside to change. In the locker room, everyone is laughing and celebrating a great practice. I might as well be invisible. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Kyle walking out of the bathroom section of the locker room. Did he get sick after getting chewed out by his parents? He starts making his way down our row of lockers. My muscles tense as he approaches. He leans in close, his breath hot on my ear.

"Never pull that bullshit again," he sneers at me. I want to answer, but I say nothing. I fear his goons will show up and start something.

After everyone changes, I watch as they all leave together. The same kids who'd play together, change together, now leave and walk home together. I shoulder my backpack, trying to stave off the feeling of loneliness. As I round the corner of the lockers, I spot another kid sitting alone at the far end of a bench.

He looks up at me. "That was a good steal. Great goal too. You can handle the ball."

"Thanks." I glance around the empty room. "I didn't see you out there. Do you play?"

"No. I just help with the equipment," he says. He sounds embarrassed.

"I don't think the coach liked my steal," I tell him.

The kid lets out a dry laugh. "Oh, he liked it. But he's not allowed to say that." He pauses, studying me. "Look, I hate to break it to you, but you won't make this team. Not because you're not good enough, you are. That's not the deciding factor here."

"What the hell? Then who decides?"

"The parents." His voice is flat, a matter of fact. "Every starter on this team has a parent pulling strings. They're all members of the Queen Anne High Sports Booster Committee."

"What's that?" I ask.

"They're the money people," he explains. "They run everything, the barbecues, car washes, fundraisers. The school's budget is always being cut, so these parents bankroll it all: equipment, uniforms, travel expenses." He lowers his voice. "But there's an unwritten rule: their kids play. No matter what." He shakes his head. "These parents are obsessed with getting their kids into college. They'll do anything for playing time, anything to get their kids noticed by recruiters." His voice dripped with contempt. "It's all about padding resumes. If you want to be on this team, you need a parent willing to play the game."

"Thanks." I don't know what else to say. So that's how this works. I get up and walk away. Before I leave, I turn to him.

"I'm Robbie. I'm a freshman," I say.

"Alex." He stands up and starts walking towards the equipment room. Now I can see why he didn't play today. His right foot is in a walking boot supporting his ankle.

"Did you get injured while playing?" I ask.

"Something like that," he mumbles in a non-committal way. "They... I injured it in summer league." I can tell he doesn't want to talk about it. Alex turns and hobbles into the equipment room.

Exiting the locker room, I walk down the empty hall toward the side exit. It's almost five, and the building has a hollow feeling. It feels

like the building is finally getting to rest after all the chaos that occurred in its halls today.

Halfway down the hall, I pass a giant bulletin board. Fliers and announcements cover every inch. All week I passed this board multiple times. But I never noticed it because I was keeping my head down and trying to figure out where I needed to go.

A banner across the top reads **"CLUBS AND ACTIVITIES. GET INVOLVED!"** Below it, a chaotic wall of paper fliers fills the board. Each flier competes for attention; Music Club, Tuesdays at 4:00, Chess Club Wednesdays during lunch, Bible Study, Anime Society Friday afternoons. There is also some magic marker graffiti, "Furies Unite!"

What the hell is that? I think. Someone also wrote, "Sawyer was here, but you weren't." and "Kyle eats it!" There's also a dark smudge of marker at the bottom. It looks like someone tried to clean it off: "Arnav Patel: Curry Stink. Go Back to Where You Came From." But it's a simple green flier in the lower right corner that catches my attention.

BOY SCOUT TROOP 94
THE BEST TROOP IN THE TRI-COUNTY AREA
MEETS
EVERY WEDNESDAY NIGHT AT 7:00 pm.
QUEEN ANNE HIGH SCHOOL OLD GYMNASIUM.
CAMPING, HIKING, MERIT BADGES
3-TIME SCOUT DISTRICT COMPETITION CHAMPIONS!

Looking at that simple green flier, I remember those photos of dad with his patrol. There was something different about them, something real. He wasn't trying to pad a college application or please his parents. In those photos, he just… belonged.

I remember he became an Eagle Scout. I don't know what that will take. But something inside me, some quiet voice is telling me that this matters. Doing something. Winning something. Doing something extraordinary.

"*Give it a shot,*" I whisper to myself.

I pull out my notebook and copy the information. If the soccer team doesn't want me, then maybe this is my chance to do something different. Something unexpected. To win once. Maybe this is my

chance to find that extraordinary something. The camping and hiking sound great. And winning a competition, whatever that is, sounds great too.

"I've got this," I tell myself.