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THE BRACELET
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Chapter 1

The summer of 1966 faded as the tips on the otherwise green leaves displayed that slight pale yellow tint signifying the approaching fall. Insulated from the progressive influences of urban life, Cumberland, a small town tucked away in a quaint valley between the Allegheny Mountains of Western Maryland, remained unchanged by the times. People still left their doors unlocked at night, talked openly to strangers, and family and friendships were a top priority. Untouched by the anti-war movement and the sixties' subculture of "sex, drugs and rock and roll," an air of innocence flourished. The skyline boasted more church steeples than smokestacks, making it an ideal place to grow up.

High school football occupied the town folk's attention as the main source of fall entertainment. On Friday and Saturday nights, Greenway Avenue Stadium came alive if one of the two city high schools teams played at home, where thousands packed the place to root on their favorite team. If you lived there, you either rooted for Fort Hill or Allegany - there was no middle ground. Their rivalry dated back to the nineteen twenties, settled each Thanksgiving Day on the gridiron in a football spectacle known as "The Turkey Day Game", the emotion and pageantry surpassed only by that of the Super Bowl, some would say. On that day, the south end of town brandished red and white decorations, Fort Hill Sentinel colors, the north end, flaunted blue and white in support of the Allegany Campers. The population of the small town exploded as hordes of alumni made their journey back to Cumberland for their traditional Thanksgiving meal with family and to attend the big game. The entire season hinged of this one game and the coveted bragging rights for the following year.

Kurt Robertson, the quarterback and captain for Allegany, led the Campers to an undefeated season last year and the town's many Allegany supporters pinned their hopes on him to deliver the championship for the upcoming season. As one of the most scouted high school quarterbacks in the country, he was a sure bet to get a football scholarship.

Talk about tall, dark and handsome ... that described Kurt to a T. His family, rich with tradition on the gridiron where his father, his uncle and several cousins were standouts at Allegany High, placed high expectations squarely on Kurt's shoulders. A perfectionist, much like his father, Kurt strived for excellence, both at football and in life. As a straight A student, he had difficulty living with himself if, on the seldom occasion, he fell just slightly below that standard.

Woody Hayes, who built a football dynasty at Ohio State University had a keen eye for Kurt and recruited him heavily. Kurt wanted to be a doctor, like his father. But, first he wanted to play college football for a Division I school, preferably for The Ohio State Buckeyes. That had always been his dream.

As a National Honor Society standout, Molly Turner had it all – one of the top students in her class and one of the most beautiful. Her dark brown hair fell just below her shoulder blades. She had stunning brown eyes and the complexion of a porcelain doll. Her talents went far beyond the classroom. Blessed with an outstanding singing voice, she could also dance like a dandelion seed on a soft wind. Molly nailed down the lead in the school play for the past two years and was recently selected captain of the Allegany cheerleading squad.

Her circumstances were much different than Kurt's. The product of an affluent family, Kurt's college education was almost guaranteed, even without a football scholarship.

Molly's road to a higher education would be much more challenging. The daughter of a hard-working factory worker, her family struggled economically, leaving a scholarship as her only option for college.

Molly and Kurt had been schoolmates since the seventh grade. What began as a close childhood friendship blossomed into something more serious over the years, a special bond rooted deeply in mutual admiration and respect. They considered each other as best friends and had been going steady since the beginning of their sophomore year.

The blistering late August sun beat down unmercifully onto the dry turf. Clumps of grass dotted the otherwise barren and dusty practice field at Allegany High School. A haze lingered sluggishly in the humid afternoon air, making the surrounding mountains appear as if they were created by the brush of an impressionist.

The offense and defense squared off, separated by a small leather ball spotted just inside the forty yard line.

“Ready, set, hut-one, hut-two.”

The center's snap set into motion a controlled sort of chaos. The offensive and defensive linemen collided with violent force as a thick cloud of dust rose from a dry, bald spot on the field. As Kurt dropped back into the pocket to pass, he looked down field for an open receiver. Steve Liller, a defensive back, and Tim Strickland, a linebacker, pierced the right side of the line and both hit Kurt at the same instant. The might of the collision knocked him to the ground, causing the ball to pop up into the air before it hit the ground and bounced forward. A mad scramble ensued before an offensive lineman

wrestled the ball from a heap of players. The shrill blast from a whistle called the commotion to an abrupt halt as Kurt spit dirt through his face mask.

“No, No. No!” Coach Merrill – a real hard-nose, growled. “Kurt, how many times have I told you? You have to read the blitz, son! Read the blitz! If you see it coming, roll out of the pocket and hit your short receiver. Strickland! Liller! Way to penetrate. Who was supposed to pick Strickland up on a blitz?”

“I was, sir,” an offensive lineman said sheepishly.

“Well, you didn’t now did you? Your quarterback is on his ass. He can’t throw the football if he’s on his ass, can he?”

“No, sir.”

“Okay, let’s try it again!”

In the midst of rigorous “two-a-days”, practice from eight to eleven in the morning, and then from three to five in the afternoon, fatigue plagued the team, overcome only by their resolve. The 1966 Allegany Campers were seasoned and they look tough. Losing only two starters to graduation, the offensive unit virtually intact from last year. The entire town shared in the excitement and the prospect of the season ahead.

Kurt took criticism to heart when it came to football, and in general. A pleaser, he wanted to make those he admired proud. Lining up behind the center, he counted out the cadence. The center’s snap plunged the ball hard into Kurt’s waiting hands. This time he read the blitz and rolled right, rifling the ball to Mike O’ Donnell, who caught it and ran about eight yards before being tackled.

“Alright! Much better this time! Everyone gather round and take a knee.”

The players jogged over to Coach Merrill, a cloud of dust rose from the parched earth and followed them. They settled in for their post-practice talk.

“That was a good practice. We have a scrimmage next week against Altoona. They’re a weak team this year, so we shouldn’t have much trouble with them if we play like we’ve been practicing.”

Coach Merrill dismissed the team and they headed to the showers. Exhausted after the hard practice, they still had enough youthful energy to play typical locker room pranks, snapping each other with their towels outside the showers and playing dodge ball with bars of soap. Sometimes this horseplay would lead to the inevitable fight when someone went over the line.

After showering out, Kurt and some of his teammates went to the local hangout, Mason’s Barn, for something to eat. Mason’s Barn was the classic drive-in restaurant, complete with menus and speakers at the curbs in the parking lot.

Two cars loaded with athletes pulled into adjacent parking spaces. They all jumped out and gathered at a picnic table, joining some other classmates who had been there for a while. Laughter filled the air as they bantered about, talking and joking around. After a few minutes, Kurt peeled off and went inside to talk to Molly, who waitressed there.

“I can’t talk now, Kurt. Too busy.”

“Can you go out tonight?”

“I work until ten.”

“What about after work? I can pick you up when you get off.”

“I’ll have to check with Mom and Dad first.”

“When you get a chance, give them a call and find out. I’m going back outside with the guys.”

Molly busily attended to the tables in the restaurant, occasionally glancing out the window where she could see Kurt surrounded by his buddies and several girls who laughed at his jokes. Honestly, it made her a bit jealous and filled with envy that she had to work while everyone else was out in the parking lot having fun. She looked at the clock - Six-ten. *Would ten o'clock ever arrive?* She took her break and called home.

“Mom?”

“What is it, Molly?”

“Kurt wants to take me out after work. That saves you a trip to pick me up. Can I go?”

“I don’t know. That’s awfully late.”

“I’ll be home before curfew.”

“Let me ask your dad.”

Her mother put down the phone while Molly anxiously awaited her answer. It seemed like forever before her mom got back on the line.

“He said it would be alright. Just be home by curfew.”

“Thanks, Mom!”

She hung up and ran out to the picnic table to join Kurt and their friends where she was greeted warmly, but not before the three girls hanging on Kurt made their hurried exit. After exchanging greetings she took Kurt by the hand and led him over to his car.

“What did your parents say?”

“They said it would be okay.”

“Great!”

He put his arms around Molly and gently kissed her, causing her to peek over her shoulder toward the restaurant windows.

“Not here, Kurt. I’m working.”

“Nobody can see us.”

“Are you kidding? We’re standing in the middle of the parking lot!”

She pulled away ever so slightly as a gentle smile graced her full lips. Kurt walked her back inside. As they reached the door he leaned in and gave her a quick kiss on the lips which was met with a bogus objection.

“Kurt!”

He smirked, then raised his fingers giving her a slight wave.

“I’ll pick you up at ten.”

Molly blew him a kiss.

As Kurt drove home, his elbow hanging out the open window, he turned on the radio to catch the last of the song “Summer in the City” by the Lovin’ Spoonful, tapping his fingers rhythmically on the steering wheel. Pulling into the driveway, he kept the car running to hear the rest of the tune. As the music faded to a commercial he turned off the ignition, jumped out of the car and ran up the steps into the kitchen, finding his parents sitting at the kitchen table finishing up their evening meal. He caught the cautious glance of his father, then his mother lit into him.

“Where have you been? I held supper as long as I could. We were waiting for you!”

His dad cocked his head to the side as if to say, *I told you about this before.*

“Sorry, Mom. I went to Mason’s after practice and I guess I just lost track of time.”

“You should have called, Son,” his dad piped in.

“Yeah. I guess you’re right. I should have called.”

“Your plate’s in the oven. I kept it warm for you,” his mom said in a conciliatory way.

Kurt winked at his mom and smiled.

“Thanks, Mom.”

This triggered a sympathetic grin from her.

“How was practice?” His dad asked.

Kurt took his place at the table and gobbled a mouthful of chicken before answering.

“It was good. I screwed up a couple of times and Coach was riding me a little. But, all-in-all it was good. I’m tired though.”

“Well ... the way you’ve been running, it’s no wonder. Practice twice a day and then going out every night. You need to stay home tonight and get some rest.”

Kurt thoughtfully chewed his food. Without looking up he said, “I promised Molly I’d pick her up after she got off work and we’d spend some time together.”

An awkward silence followed. His mom glared at his dad, her usual prompt for him to say something.

“I don’t think so tonight. You need to stay home and turn in early. You have practice in the morning and you’ve got that scrimmage coming up in Altoona.”

“But Dad ... I promised her.”

“You’ve got a lot riding on this season. I think it’s best that you take a night off. Get some rest.”

Kurt kept shoveling in the food, dipping a piece of chicken into his mashed potatoes and gravy with his fork.

“But she made special arrangements with her parents. She told them I was picking her up after work. Come on, Dad.”

He and his dad made eye contact. Then, he looked over at his mom who gave his father another one of those looks. Anxiously tugging on his ear, then looking back at Kurt’s mother, his father sat pensively for a second.

“He’s been working hard. I don’t see any harm in him seeing Molly for a little while tonight. Unless you absolutely disagree.”

Kurt’s mom clasped her hands together and paused before looking at Kurt’s dad.

“I can always count on you for support, can’t I?”

Then she cracked a smile bringing some levity to the situation.

“Can I, Mom?”

“Alright, but tomorrow night you’re coming home from practice ... on time ... and you’re staying in for the night.”

The tension lifted from the table.

“Thanks, Mom. Who loves ya?” Kurt retorted with a chuckle.

Kurt arrived back at Mason’s Barn a little early and went inside for a soft drink while he waited for Molly to finish up. Promptly at ten, she grabbed her purse and she and Kurt drove off, waving to some friends as they pulled out of the parking lot.

Kurt and Molly spent most of their spare time together. They were the envy of practically everyone at school and even the faculty took kindly to their fondness for one another. Too late to catch a movie, they snuck into Constitution Park, their favorite place to talk and be alone. Kurt pushed Molly on a swing at the playground as they told each

other about their day. Kurt told Molly about his mistakes at practice and about how Coach Merrill got upset with him. It bothered him a little.

“Don’t be so hard on yourself.”

“Yeah, but I can’t let down. A lot of people are depending on me.”

Kurt felt the pressure from every direction ... his father, his coach and from the town’s people. Everywhere he went people asked him what kind of season he expected to have. He didn’t want to disappoint all those who counted on him leading the Campers to a successful season.

“There’s more to life than football, you know.”

“I know, but from now until Thanksgiving, football is the main thing. I need a good season if I want to get a football scholarship.”

“Do you think you’ll really get a scholarship to Ohio State?”

“That’s my dream – to play for Woody Hayes and the Buckeyes.”

“I hope I can get a scholarship there too, so we can be together.”

“I do, too. I couldn’t imagine being away from you.”

“That’s a real possibility, you know?”

“Let’s not talk about it. We’re together now and that’s all that matters.”

“Do you think that will always be the case?”

“If I have anything to do with it we will.”

Kurt and Molly remained at the park until past eleven, then left to make sure they made it home for Molly’s curfew at midnight. If just a minute late, her father would be all over her ... and all over Kurt, as well. They parked in front of Molly’s modest home, a small rancher. Being an only child, her parents were very strict.

Molly leaned in and kissed Kurt gently on the lips. He responded tenderly, telling her that he loved her. Just minutes into their make-out session, the porch light began blinking, the signal that Molly's father always gave when he wanted Molly to come in the house.

"I better go in. Daddy will have a fit if I don't."

Kurt stole another kiss, pulling Molly ever closer to him. She cupped his face in her soft hands and looked directly into her eyes.

"Can't you stay out a little longer?"

"I can if you want to meet my Dad at the door."

"No thanks."

They both laughed. Kurt walked Molly to the front door where they embraced and kissed passionately. Midway through their kiss, the door opened and Molly's father poked his head out.

"Good evening, Mr. Turner."

"Evening's over. It's past midnight ... you know. That means it's officially morning. Time to come in, Molly."

Molly looked at Kurt, wanting to kiss him again, but not in front of her father.

"Good night, Kurt."

"Good night."

"Goodbye, Kurt," Molly's father said with a bit of sarcasm.

"Good night, sir," Kurt said politely, though his thoughts were not so polite.

The week went by in a flash. Molly worked a full schedule and cheerleading practice occupied most of her remaining time. Kurt, had football practice twice a day as Allegany prepared for its pre-season scrimmage against Altoona, leaving them little time to spend together. Overall, Coach Merrill wasn't satisfied with the team practices. He felt they were ill prepared and not focused, putting him in a foul mood most of the week.

The sun rose faithfully on Friday morning awakening Kurt to the smell of pancakes and bacon. He flung his feet over the side of the bed, rubbed his hands over his face, then staggered into the kitchen where his mom prepared breakfast and his dad sat at the kitchen table reading the morning paper.

"Mornin'. You all ready for the scrimmage today?" Kurt's father asked as he looked up from the paper.

His mom quickly turned away from the stove to bid Kurt good morning.

"Yeah. I'm ready. Have some butterflies in my stomach. I guess that's a good thing."

"Tells me you up for the game," his dad replied.

Kurt sat down at the table while his mom served up the pancakes and bacon. As they ate their meal Kurt's father quizzed him about the game, and any new plays they would be trying out in the scrimmage. His mother had a quiet worry on her face as she always did before a game. She constantly had a concern about Kurt getting injured. She liked the competition, but felt that football was way too violent. Honestly, she wished he would have taken up golf or tennis. His dad showed concerned too, but more about Kurt's performance than the possibility of him getting hurt.

His dad took the day off, and he, Kurt's mother, Joey, Kurt's younger brother, and Molly were going to follow the bus up to Altoona to watch the game. After breakfast they

all got in the car and headed over to Molly's house to pick her up before dropping Kurt off at the school. The cheerleading squad didn't participate in the scrimmages, so Molly managed to get the day off work to go and cheer Kurt and the team on from the bleachers. On the way to Molly's house, Kurt sat silently in the back seat, his head down, thinking about the game. He sure perked up when Molly came running out of her house toward the car. She jumped in the back set and gave him a peck on the cheek. They held hands all the way to the school.

Kurt gave Molly a kiss before getting out of the car. His brother made some sort of a smart remark about the kiss prompting Kurt to punch him in the arm and laugh.

"Your time will come you little brat," Kurt said kiddingly.

His mom got out and gave him a hug and a kiss. As he walked in front of the car, his dad gave the horn a quick toot, then stuck his head out of the window.

"Good luck, Son. Do your best."

Kurt nodded as he walked and, without looking back, went straight into the school's gym. When he got into the locker room, a number of players were already dressed in their uniforms. Kurt went to his locker and suited up. Coach Merrill soon made his appearance telling everyone to hurry up. He gave them a quick pep talk as they got ready, then the team jogged in line out to the awaiting bus. The trip would take about an hour, plenty of time for them to get their adrenalin pumping. On the way Kurt led the team in fight songs and a round of "One Hundred Bottles of Beer on the Wall" which always drove the coaches nuts. The songs, and the rumbling of the wind through the open bus windows made it impossible to hear anything else. Coach Merrill and the assistant coaches went over plays in the front of the bus, struggling to talk over the racket.

As they drove up to the parking lot outside the stadium at Altoona High School, the bus got quiet. Altoona, a perennial powerhouse in Central Pennsylvania, struggled the last several years. They were young, unseasoned, and had a brand new coach. A rookie to coaching at the high school level. The Campers were expecting an easy win.

Allegheny ran onto the field with little fanfare. The stands were dotted with about a hundred people, mostly students and parents of the players. Allegheny won the toss and elected to receive. Their offense appeared lethargic and they were forced to punt from deep in their own territory. Altoona returned the punt forty-seven yards and were already in Allegheny territory. They turned the opportunity into a quick score and got off to an early lead. That's about the way the remainder of the day went. Allegheny turned the ball over on numerous fumbles, Kurt threw three interceptions and they could get nowhere on the ground. Their defense played miserably, allowing thirty-four points. The offensive line performed wretchedly, as well, resulting in Kurt spending much of the game on his backside after being sacked over and over again. Kurt and the offense scored one lonely touchdown and the point after failed. When it was over, Allegheny got beat 34-6. Though the entire team played sub-par, Kurt's poor performance seemed to stand out the most.

The team got back on the bus with far less enthusiasm that they had gotten off. Each player took their seat and on the return trip to Cumberland, not a sound could be heard, except the wind rustling through the open windows. Coach Merrill never said a word. But he had plenty to say when they got back to the locker room at Allegheny.

“Great game guys!” He yelled mockingly.

He shook his head before chucking his clipboard against the wall where it broke into pieces. That certainly got their attention.

“You played like a bunch of freshmen! I’ll take that back! You played like a bunch of freshmen girls!”

He berated them for about fifteen minutes.

“We’ve got our first game of the season in two weeks. You’re certainly not ready, not even for a powder puff game! Kurt ... you looked like shit out there today! Do you want to be our starting quarterback this season?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well then you better start acting like a leader out there. You’ve been coasting through the entire process since we started practicing this season. Where’s your commitment? Where’s your drive? Maybe you’ve been letting all those headlines you got last season go to your head! Is that it?”

Kurt assumed it was a rhetorical question and didn’t answer. He just sat there with his head down, looking at the bench in front of his locker which he straddled.

“Well, Mister Superstar? That was a question!

Almost inaudibly he answered, “No, sir.”

“Speak up, young man!”

“No, sir!” He shouted.

Then the coach proceeded to go through the lineup, player by player, throwing insults and criticisms of how each of them failed the team making the locker room a hellish place to be at that moment. Coach Merrill wasn’t accustomed to losing. He hated it worse than just about anything. Nothing made him curse more than losing ... except a loss caused by a lackluster performance.

He turned to walk away and the team began undressing, preparing for the showers. Merrill quickly spun around.

“Nobody move! We’re going back out on the practice field and we’re going to break this miserable performance down. Those of you who have your parents waiting ... Go tell them to come back and pick you up at five-thirty. We’re gonna have a practice!”

This was particularly bad news for Kurt. He planned to take Molly to the park for a cookout, lay by the pool and spend a relaxing day together. The walk to his parent’s car seemed like a ten mile hike. When he got there, he told them about his new agenda for the day. Molly was disenchanted. Kurt could sense his father’s disappointment in his performance. His mom looked ill at ease.

The mid-afternoon sun burned down on the practice field, intensifying the heat and humidity to the point where it became unbearable as Coach Merrill put them through drill after drill, re-enacting the plays they screwed up in the game. He ran them through the ringer until they were thoroughly spent. Blowing his whistle, he called out at his players to gather around him.

“I hope you all learned something today in Altoona. And, I certainly hope you learned something here at this practice. If you learned nothing else ... I think you learned never to play a game like that again. Never ... Never take any team for granted. You went out there thinking you had this game won before it started. You got your asses handed to you today. It was a damn embarrassment. Now take the weekend off and think about how all this made you feel. But, before you shower I want you to give me ten good laps while you think about how you’re going to come out here and give one hundred and ten percent on Monday.”

After his laps, Kurt showered out and waited outside the gym for his father to pick him up. There were several other players waiting, as well. No one said anything. They just waited in silence and one-by-one their parents arrived.

Kurt got into the car, immediately rolling down the window. Plum worn out, he felt terrible – physically and mentally. For the first few minutes on the ride home. Kurt and his father didn't speak. His dad nervously tapped his fingers on the steering wheel. Kurt reached over to turn on the radio and his father quickly clicked it off and turned to him.

“What was wrong with you out there today?”

Kurt let out a loud sigh and looked out the window.

“Don't want to talk about it?”

“No! I heard enough shit from Coach Merrill!” He yelled.

“Watch your mouth, Boy! You're not talking to one of your teammates here. I'm your father and you *will* respect me.”

“Sorry, Dad. I'm sorry.”

A tear ran down Kurt's cheek, not unnoticed by his father, who upon seeing it felt badly. He suddenly realized the enormous pressure Kurt felt.

“I'm sorry, too. It just wasn't your day. There will be other days for you to shine, and I have confidence in you that you will.”

Kurt looked over at him, then back out the window.

To make it seem somewhat better his father offered, “It would have helped if you had some blocking out there. Where was the offensive line today?”

“We all played like crap. Like Coach said, we took the game for granted. It won't happen again, I can assure you.”

“Let’s forget about it for now. Mom’s got super waiting. You look like you could use a good meal.”

Chapter 2

Kurt's mother let him sleep late. He woke up to the sound of the lawn mower running outside. Jumping up, he fell back onto the bed as a sharp pain erupted in his right hip. Looking down, he observed a huge bruise running from his buttocks to midway up this side. Yesterday, he spent a good part of the game on his rear end, a side effect of getting sacked about six or seven times. He rose more cautiously to look out the window only to see his father cutting the grass, one of Kurt's chores. Stumbling into his pants, he threw on a t-shirt and limped out into the backyard, barefooted. As he approached, his father shut off the mower.

"What are you doing? That's my job."

"You had a hard day yesterday ... the scrimmage, then the practice. I figured I'd let you slide on cutting the grass. Besides, I could use the exercise. Why don't you take Molly to the park like you planned to do yesterday?"

"She has to work until two."

"Well, that leaves you plenty of time until the park closes. Go and enjoy yourself. Mom will pack you both a picnic lunch."

"Sure you don't want me to finish cutting the grass?"

His father smiled and said nothing. Pulling the cord on the mower to start it up again, he resumed cutting the lawn. Kurt walked into the kitchen where he discovered that his mom had placed a bowl and a box of cereal on the table. There was a note beside the bowl.

Kurt,

I went to the grocery store. Be back in a little while. Eat some breakfast and get some rest. I'll pack you and Molly a picnic lunch to take to the park this afternoon. See you soon.

Love,

Mom

Kurt grabbed a jug of milk from the fridge and poured it onto his cereal. His father's empty bowl and a half cup of cold coffee sat next to the newspaper. Reaching for the paper, he quickly turned to the sports section, thumbing through it until he came to a small headline at the bottom of page two. *Allegany destroyed by Altoona in Pre-Season Scrimmage*. The article was small, but it gave a brutal account of their defeat. Below it appeared another small headline. *Fort Hill Easily Handles Ridgeley Blackhawks*. After reading the articles he walked the sports section over and placed it in the trash can, slamming the lid down hard.

While in the shower, he got a better look at the bruise on buttocks and side, also discovering several scrapes and bruises on his arms, and the pinky finger on his left hand was swollen.

Emerging from the shower, he put on a pair of shorts and walked out into the living room, a towel draped over his bare shoulders, his short hair still dripping. About the time he sat down in the recliner to watch TV, his mom came in the kitchen door juggling two bags of groceries. He got up to help her, then went out to the car to get the rest of the bags. His mom held the door open for him as he reentered with last of the groceries.

"How do you feel this morning?"

"Tired and sore."

His mom noticed the bruise on his side.

“Kurt! That looks awfully painful.”

“You’re telling me. I’ll be okay.”

She looked at him, shaking her head.

“Really ... I’ll be fine.”

“I’ll pack you and Molly a picnic lunch and you can go to the park for the afternoon.

Sorry you had to cancel your plans yesterday.”

“She works until two. I think I’ll ride out to Mason’s Barn and tell her I’ll pick her up after she gets off.”

“She already knows. She called this morning to see how you were doing. I suggested you and her go to the park and she was excited about it. She took her swimsuit and a change of clothes to work and said she’ll be waiting for you there.”

Kurt smiled. “Thanks, Mom.”

He went back into his bedroom to finish getting dressed. As he brushed his teeth he stopped to think for a moment, thankful for the parents he had. Typically, and as he came to expect, they were always there for him, uplifting him when he felt down. Through thick and thin, they were extremely supportive ... his biggest fans. Well ... almost. Joey, Kurt’s ten-year-old brother idolized him. To Joey, Kurt seemed almost God-like. Joey had his own football aspirations, and he was quite good, playing halfback on the LaVale Packers, a peewee team in the community.

His little brother spent the night with a friend, Bobby Sloan, and Kurt’s mom asked him to drive to the Sloan’s house to pick up Joey and Bobby after he got dressed. The Robertsons were reciprocating babysitting duty, as Bobby’s parents were going to the

movies that night. Joey and Bobby camped out in the Sloan's backyard the night before. When Kurt arrived at the Sloan's, Bobby's mother greeted him at the door and invited him into the house. In the living room sat Bobby's father, flanked by Bobby and Joey. It looked like the waiting room at a dentist's office – frowns everywhere. Bobby's mother followed Kurt into the room and stood there with her arms folded. Kurt didn't know what to think. *What was wrong?*

Bobby's father stood and shook Kurt's hand before getting straight to the heart of the matter.

"It seems there were some extracurricular activities taking place last night while the boys were camping in the backyard."

Kurt looked puzzled.

"Do you want to tell your brother what you and Bobby did last night?"

Joey looked petrified, glancing first at Mr. Sloan, then at Kurt, his eyes welling with tears.

"Well?" Mr. Sloan queried.

"Well ... Bobby and I decided to take a ride on our bikes last night after Mr. and Mrs. Sloan went to bed."

"Yeah. I went out to check on them and they weren't in the tent. The garage door was open and their bikes were gone. I got in the car to look for them and found them up at the school riding their bikes in the parking lot. It was after midnight. I tried calling your house this morning but there was no answer."

Kurt observed Joey's face, all riddled with guilt.

“If we didn’t have plans tonight, Bobby would be staying home. Your bike stays here, young man. And you can cancel your plans for camping out at Joey’s tonight. I’m sure Mr. and Mrs. Robertson won’t allow it either.”

Kurt apologized to the Sloans and assured them he’d speak to his parents about the incident. As he loaded Joey’s bike in the trunk of his car, Joey and Bobby jostled for a seat in the front ... “shotgun” they called it. Kurt scolded them, telling them both to get in the back.

While driving back home, he glanced in the rearview mirror spotting the young “criminals” just sitting there with the most pathetic looks on their faces. Joey looked mortified, knowing what his father was going to say when he heard this little bit of news. As they passed the Rexall Drug Store Kurt smiled to himself, slowed down and made a U-turn. He pulled up in front of the store and turned around to face the boys.

“You guys look like you could use a drink.” He laughed. “Let’s get a soda and talk about this.”

For the first time that day, smiles came to their faces. The car doors slammed in a measured cadence and they walked up to the soda fountain bar inside. As they took their seats, Kurt ordered three Cherry Cokes. Joey and Bobby immediately began sucking the sweet liquid through their straws, pausing at the same time.

“What were you two knuckleheads thinking last night?”

Joey and Bobby laughed nervously.

“It’s not funny, guys. Dad’s going to have a fit, Joey!”

Inwardly, Kurt was laughing, too. He remembered some of the bone-headed shenanigans he pulled while camping out as a youngster. But, for the purposes at hand, he maintained his composure and attempted, at least, to act like an authority figure.

“How was the game yesterday? I heard you lost.” Joey tried to change the subject.

Still very upset about how the scrimmage turned out, Kurt wasn’t all that crazy about the question.

“We’re not here to talk about the game. We’re here to talk about your little midnight expedition last night ... or shall I say this morning?”

“Do you have to tell Mom and Dad?”

Kurt thought for a moment. He didn’t really want to tell, but he knew his parents would find out about it anyway from Mr. and Mrs. Sloan.

“I’ve got no choice. You know Bobby’s mom and dad are going to spill the beans. I’m not going to throw myself on this grenade, that’s for sure.”

“Come on, Kurt.”

“I’ll do what I can to break it to them as gently as possible, but I have to tell them.”

Just about then Bobby reached the bottom of his drink, his straw making the sound a straw makes while struggling for more Cherry Coke. He lifted his head and licked his lips.

“Thanks, Kurt.”

“You’re welcome, Bobby. Now we ought to get going. Time to face the music.”

Joey drew on his straw until he hit bottom, then moped out to the car, slowly shutting the door behind him. By the time they got home, Kurt’s father had finished cutting the grass and stood, eating a sandwich while leaning against the counter in the kitchen. He

took a large swig of water and greeted Kurt and the two little campers he had in tow. Kurt's mom was cleaning the bathroom, so Kurt figured this was as good a time as any to bring up Joey's indiscretion. Kurt tried to soften the blow, reminding his father that he had done the same, and even worse, when he was younger. Actually, Kurt's dad took it rather well. Yes, he reprimanded Joey, and Bobby, too. The punishment? No more backyard camping for the remainder of the summer. The good news? Summer was almost over. Though disappointed, Joey realized it could have been much worse, escaping one of his father's notorious spankings. After the boys left the room, Kurt and his dad shared a conspiratorial laugh about it.

Kurt went into his room to finish getting ready for his day. He found a letter his mom placed on his dresser from his cousin, Kevin, which came in the mail that day. Kevin was the son of Kurt's father's brother. He graduated from Allegany two years before. A football standout, he chose the Marines over college football. He lettered in three sports and had plenty of college scholarship opportunities, but felt a duty to serve his country figuring he would go to college when he got out of the Marines. Kevin and Kurt were very close, like brothers. Kevin wrote Kurt regularly from Vietnam, telling him what it was like over there. Kurt often bragged about his older cousin. He was Kurt's hero.

Hey Buddy!

How are you doing? I guess football season is about to start. Are you enjoying the two-a-days? I know I always did ... NOT! I'm sure Coach Merrill is as contrary as ever. I sure miss him, though. He's a great coach. Really cares about his players. Things over here have been pretty boring. Haven't seen any combat yet. Just waiting around. The food sucks and the bugs are so big they could carry you away. How's things between you

and Molly? I wish I could be there to see your first game ... and especially the Turkey Day Game. But, I guess I'll be stuck over here. Say hello to your mom and dad. Give Joey a good stiff punch in the arm for me, will you? And give Molly my love. I'll write again as soon as I can. Take care!

Kevin.

P.S. I've enclosed a picture of me and some of my Marine buddies with a little message for you.

Kurt looked at the photo of Kevin and several of his fellow Marines, all holding up cans of beer, smiling and proudly giving Kurt the finger. That was *so* Kevin – carefree and living life to the fullest, no matter where he was. While staring at the picture, Kurt looked back on all the fun times they had together. Even though Kevin was two years older, he always let Kurt pal around with him and his friends. A smile came to Kurt as he remembered when Kevin scored the winning touchdown in the 1964 Turkey Game against Fort Hill. He was awarded the game ball on which Coach Merrill painted the final score. Before going off to boot camp, Kevin gave the ball to Kurt, who placed it prominently on his dresser. Kurt walked over to the ball. Picking it up, he looked down at the score ... 21-14. He tossed it up in the air slightly, catching it and putting it back in its place.

Running late, Kurt went out in the kitchen and grabbed the cooler full of food his mom packed, stopping to yell goodbye to his mom and dad ... wherever they were. He carried the cooler out to his car, removing Joey's bike from the trunk before backing out of the driveway. As he drove to Mason's Barn to pick up Molly, all the windows were down, the radio tuned to WTOP, a popular AM radio station and the song "Wild Thing"

by The Troggs, the number one song at the time, played at full volume. Kurt loudly sang along. He just loved that song. He couldn't help but laugh aloud while thinking of Joey's predicament.

Rolling into the Mason's Barn parking lot he saw Molly waiting outside the front door holding her beach bag. She waived when she saw him and a smile stretched across Kurt's face. He leaned across the seat and shoved the door open for her to get in. She welcomed him with a kiss and they drove off.

"What did your mom make us for lunch? I'm starved."

"I think she fixed some fried chicken, potato salad and baked beans. I'm kind of hungry myself."

They arrived at the park and went into their respective dressing rooms to change into their bathing suits. Kurt finished first and waited outside the women's dressing room for Molly, sitting on the cooler. *What's taking her so long?* Then, she appeared. It was worth the wait. She wore a cute little red bikini which accentuated her petite figure. Kurt took it all in with a smile. He hoisted the cooler onto his shoulder and Molly walked ahead of him, allowing Kurt to enjoy the view. They found a semi-secluded spot under the trees at the far end of the pool, their usual place.

Molly spread a blanket out on the grass while Kurt plunged his hand into the ice filled cooler and pulled out two Pepsis, handing one to Molly. Tom Beyer, better known as "Cowboy" by his teammates, approached with a football tucked under his arm. Tom played fullback on offense and middle linebacker on defense. He led the conference in rushing last year and was a hard-hitting linebacker. Well known for his off the field antics, he took pride in his role as the class clown. Tom invited Kurt to join him and some

other guys who were playing a game of two-handed touch in the field adjacent to where he and Molly were preparing to sit.

“I just got here, man. I’m going to sit down and relax, have a Pepsi and eat some lunch. Didn’t you get enough football yesterday?”

Tom tossed the ball in the air, spinning it off his fingers, then catching it.

“I can never get enough football.” He grinned.

“I’ll catch you later.”

Tom turned and threw the football to another teammate, then sprinted off to rejoin the game. Molly took a bottle of Johnson’s Baby Oil out of her bag, handing it to Kurt. Positioning herself on her stomach, she asked him to rub some oil on her back. More than happy to oblige, he squeezed out a generous amount of oil.

“Not that much!” She protested as the oil ran down her back and sides.

“Sorry about that.” Kurt laughed as he slathered the oil into Molly’s pale skin. He rubbed the surplus on his chest before Molly asked him to lay on his belly so she could rub some on his back.

While rubbing in the oil, she noticed the deep blue bruise on his side.

“What happened to you? That looks awful!”

“I got beat up pretty bad yesterday. You ought to see my butt cheek.” He laughed.

“No thanks. I’ll take a pass on that,” she said while giggling.

Once they settled in, Molly got out the food and they ate lunch on the blanket. She asked Kurt if he heard from Kevin lately. He told her about the letter he received that morning, and of course about the special message Keven sent him in the photo. Molly couldn’t stop laughing when he told her about it.

“Kevin told me to give you his love.”

“You need to give me his address. I’d like to keep in touch with him while he’s over there.”

After their meal, Kurt suggested they take a swim.

“We have to wait a half hour to go swimming, or we could get stomach cramps.”

“Do you really believe all that?”

“That’s what everyone says.”

“It’s a bunch of bunk. Come on.”

Kurt stood and extended his hand to Molly. She took it and they ran to the pool. Kurt recklessly dove in, Molly followed more cautiously. Holding her nose, she jumped in feet first. As soon as she surfaced, Kurt splashed her, then walked over and put his arms around her. They bobbed together in the water while as they talked and laughed. Kurt swam over to the far side of the pool, then back, showing off a little. When he reached Molly, he dunked her before pulling her up and giving her a kiss. They were so happy to have the day to spend together, not having to practice or work. After about forty-five minutes, they returned to their blanket and laid in the sun to dry off. Kurt turned on his transistor radio and they listened to some music, their solitude interrupted when Debbie Diamond and Steve Liller joined them.

Debbie, also a cheerleader and Molly’s best friend, had a great sense of humor, almost a requirement for dating Steve, a teammate and friend of Kurt’s. Steve, small but mighty, played defensive back. Coach Merrill really admired him for his spunk, and just about everyone enjoyed his playfully cocky attitude. Kurt and Steve’s initial meeting was a bit unusual. They met as sophomores in science class. At the time, they didn’t really know

each other. While taking a test, Steve sat behind Kurt trying to sneak a peek over Kurt's shoulder for an elusive answer to a question on the exam. Kurt wasn't cooperating so Steve took the liberty of poking him a few times with his pencil, hoping he would accommodate his inquisitive eyes. Kurt accommodated him alright. Standing up, he pulled Steve out of his chair and punched him. A fight ensued with desks scattering every which way. The teacher broke up the fight and gave them each a handful of detentions. After their first detention, they had to hitchhike home – going in the same direction. They did this every afternoon after their detentions for about a week and a half. By that time, they had become best friends. Funny how things turn out sometimes.

The couples talked for a while before Tom Beyer came back with Mike O'Donnell, another Allegany teammate. Tom, as usual, had a football in his hand.

“You pussies want to play some football or are you just going to sit there holding hands?”

He laughed and tossed the football to Kurt. Kurt looked at Molly and she gave him the “go ahead” look. Steve stood up and motioned for Kurt to toss him the ball. The four guys disappeared into a gang of boys where they chose sides and began to play. As Molly and Debbie watched, they talked about their upcoming senior year. It was such a care free and innocent time.

After the game, Kurt and Steve trotted back over to where Molly and Debbie were sitting. They grabbed the girls and headed for the pool to cool off. Steve and Kurt took turns diving off the diving board. It quickly became sort of a friendly competition, but Kurt upped the ante when he ascended the ladder to the high dive. Molly watched with concern as he did a one and a half, sticking the dive in perfect form. Steve, not to be

outdone, climbed up the ladder and walked to the end of the board. He turned, extending his arms in front of him for balance.

“Steve ... you’re going to kill yourself,” Debbie yelled from below.

He turned and looked down at her, smiling all the while. Debbie covered her eyes. Steve’s heart pounded in his chest as he bounced slightly before hurling himself into a back flip, over-rotating and landing flat on his back, causing a gigantic splash. The “smack” of his back hitting the water caught everyone’s attention, the moans of onlookers could be heard clearly. Debbie removed her hands from her eyes just in time to see Steve surface, his eyes wide as saucers, as he screamed in pain. Kurt and his teammates laughed wildly. Steve climbed out of the pool using the ladder, his back beet red and his face beaming with a firm ornery grin, as usual. That was Steve - fearless, yet often times foolhardy.

“Dang! That hurt.”

Molly, feeling his pain, kindly handed Steve a towel. Debbie was less sympathetic.

“Sometimes you can be such an idiot.”

Kurt piped in, “Most of the time he’s an idiot!”

All the bystanders started laughing and applauding as Steve took an appropriate bow.

“Thank you, my good fans.”

Debbie grabbed him by the arm and led him back to Kurt’s and Molly’s blanket.

“Way to go “Lil”” someone shouted out from the crowd as Steve turned and waved.

The four made plans to meet at Mason’s Barn for a burger later on. Kurt and Molly stayed at the pool until about sunset. Molly went to the pay phone and checked in with her mother, asking if it would be alright to go to Mason’s Barn for a bite to eat.

“I’ll be home by ten.”

She got the green light and shared the good news with Kurt. The thought crossed Kurt’s mind that he should call his parents also, but he felt that might appear somewhat “un-masculine”. Good thing Molly convinced him it was a good idea. He figured, that since she brought it up, it would be more acceptable.

Mason’s Barn was packed, with no place to sit inside and just a few parking spots remained. Kurt drove around the parking lot twice before eyeing a parking spot at the very end of the lot. Steve and Debbie saw them pull in and walked over to Kurt’s car, climbing in the back seat. Where they sat there laughing about their day, and especially Steve’s glorious back flip. He could still feel the sting. They ordered something to eat through the curbside speaker. Steve and Kurt relived their scrimmage against Altoona and the grueling practice after the game.

“I’ve never seen Coach Merrill so pissed,” Steve opined.

“Yeah. Me either. Hope to never see it again. I’ll bet practice on Monday’s gonna be a doozy. He was on me like a duck on a June bug. I guess we did go into the game a little cocky.”

“Probably. I’m glad I got an interception. At least I did something right.”

“What are you saying?” Kurt jazzed.

“Well ... you did get dumped on your ass a few times. Not much offense.”

“Your defense gave up thirty-four points. What was all that about, anyway?”

They started laughing.

“We won’t be laughing come Monday morning,” Kurt quipped.

Molly and Debbie talked about the upcoming football season and some new cheerleading routines they'd been practicing. Their conversation ended when the waitress came with their order.

"Hi, Kurt," she said flirtatiously. "Here's your order."

As she sat their tray in Kurt's window she stuck her head inside and saw Molly.

"Hey Molly."

"Hi, Brenda."

"You should be glad you got off early today. It's been crazy here all day."

"Glad I missed it."

"You should be. That'll be six dollars and fifty-eight cents."

Steve reached into his back pocket for his wallet.

"Oh, no. I forgot my wallet."

Everyone laughed.

"Again!" Kurt joked.

Debbie gave him a stern glare. He shrugged his shoulders and grinned. Kurt turned around, "Are you serious?"

"Fraid so."

Kurt let out a gasp while retrieving his wallet, pulling out a ten and handing it to Brenda. She counted out his change and handed it to him. Kurt passed out the burgers and fries and carefully handed each of them their soft drinks.

"Hey Lil? I think that makes your debt to me over ten thousand dollars."

"I'll pay you back just as soon as my uncle straightens out ... He's a hunchback." He laughed while munching on his burger.

The place was alive as teenagers hopped from car to car visiting with their friends. The picnic tables under the outdoor roof were filled to capacity. A parade of cars drove around and around in the parking lot looking for a place to pull in and park. School started in about two weeks and they all were taking in the last days of summer.

Molly and Debbie got out of the car to go inside and use the bathroom. Tom Beyer took the opportunity to come over to Kurt's car and advise his teammates that he and Mike O'Donnell had a bottle of Jack Daniel's in Mike's car they were willing to share. They all sprinted over to the car which was filled with football players. No room for Kurt and Steve, they stood outside. Mike handed the bottle out the window to Steve, who took a swig and passed it to Kurt. Kurt looked around, then took a drink, handing the bottle back to Tom. They passed it around a few more times before Steve and Kurt returned to Kurt's car, wanting to get back before the girls returned. Kurt ate the last of his burger, then scarfed down the remaining French Fries that were in Molly's bag.

Molly and Debbie came out the front door, followed by three other cheerleaders. They all stopped at a table to join some other friends and motioned for Kurt and Steve to join them. When they arrived, Kurt noticed Roger Smith in the crowd. Bad blood boiled between them. Roger was always hitting on Molly, just to spite Kurt. Molly was polite to him, but definitely showed no interest. She knew Kurt didn't like him. Roger and Kurt competed for the starting quarterback spot in their junior year. Kurt won out and Roger never got over it. He quit the team and had become Kurt's greatest critic. Kurt and Molly stood around the table and talked for a while. Steve and Debbie decided to go parking.

“I heard you had a great scrimmage against Altoona yesterday,” Roger cynically yelled out to Kurt. Silence came to the table, everyone recognizing the offensive nature of the remark while they awaited Kurt’s response. Kurt didn’t engage.

“Maybe I should come back out for the team. I hear we need a quarterback.”

That did it. Kurt walked over to the other side of the table and confronted Roger.

“Why don’t you get up off your candy ass and say that to my face!”

Molly grabbed Kurt by the arm and ushered him away. He went willingly until Roger stood up and said it again, instigating who yanked his arm loose from Molly’s grip and marched back over towards Roger. A few of Kurt’s teammates moved in front of him to block his way.

One of them yelled back to Roger, “Why don’t you shut your fat mouth and sit down.”

“I’ll shut it for him,” Kurt bellowed as he tried to break free.

Molly grabbed him and with the aid of his teammates they walked Kurt back to his car.

“Come on Kurt. He’s not worth it,” one of them said.

Kurt gave Roger one last gawk before getting into his car. Molly got in the other side before Kurt backed out of his parking space and squealed the tires as he pulled away.

Looking over at Kurt, Molly grasped his hand while rubbing his shoulder.

“Why do you let him get to you like that?”

“He a loud-mouthed punk.”

“Yes. That’s exactly what he is. Now, let it go.”

She leaned in and kissed him on the cheek. While turning on the radio she noticed the time on the dashboard clock.

“Oh, no. It’s quarter after ten. I promised Mom I’d be home by ten o’clock.”

“You’ll be home before ten thirty.”

As they pulled into Molly’s driveway Kurt turned to her and smiled.

“See, I told you. It’s ten twenty-eight.”

“Funny. Real funny. I’m probably in big trouble.”

Kurt went in for a good night kiss. As their lips meet, Molly backed away.

“What’s wrong with you?” Kurt asked.

“Is that alcohol I smell on your breath?”

“I don’t think so.”

“You’re lying. I can smell it.”

“Okay. Steve and I had a few swigs with the boys when you and Debbie went to the bathroom.”

“Let me guess, one of the boys was Tom Beyer, right?”

“Well, yes ... he was there.”

“It was probably his bottle, wasn’t it? That’s why I don’t like you hanging around him. You’ve got too much going for you to throw it all away. Drinking is for losers, Kurt.”

A blinking porch light pierced the darkness.

“I’ve got to in. I’m in enough trouble.”

Kurt tried to resume their kiss, but Molly pushed him away, exiting the car. He got out of the driver’s side to walk Molly to the door, but she indignantly and purposefully walked away turning just before getting to the front door and saying, “I can walk myself

to the door. All I need is Daddy smelling liquor on your breath!” She opened the door, slamming it behind her without looking back.

Chapter 3

The phone rang and Molly picked it up.

“What got into you last night?” Kurt asked, as if he didn’t know.

“Kurt, you know how I feel about drinking. I don’t like it one bit.”

“I’m sorry, Molly. I just had a little sip.”

“And that’s supposed to make it alright?”

Kurt didn’t say anything an obvious quiet replaced the conversation. Molly punctuated the silence.

“Well?”

“Well what?”

More silence.

“You know what!”

Kurt remained mute, then ...

“Did you get in trouble?”

“Dad was pretty sore about me getting home late.”

“Well, your normal curfew isn’t till midnight. Why was he so bent out of shape about you getting home at ten-thirty ... on a Saturday night?”

“Because I told my Mom I’d be home at ten.”

“I’m really sorry.”

“It’s my fault. I just was having such a good time the night got away from me.”

“Do you want to go to the pool again today?”

“I can’t. After church we’re going to my grandparents’ for dinner. I’d invite you along but I think Daddy’s still mad at you for bringing me home late. I’m afraid to ask.”

She held the phone away from her mouth.

“Okay, Mom. I’ll be there in a minute.”

She came back on the phone ... “I’ve got to go. Breakfast is ready. Call me tonight.

We can talk then. Got to go. I love you – Bye.”

She hung up before Kurt could reply, re-enforcing her annoyance at his drinking with his friends and making it abundantly clear.

Kurt walked into the kitchen where his mom prepared breakfast – scrambled eggs, hash browns, bacon and toast. The Sloans had already been there to pick up Bobby. They told Kurt’s mom and dad about the camping incident on Friday night, reopening the wounds that were just beginning to heal. Joey sat quietly at the kitchen table, the troubled look on his face begged Kurt to come in and sit down to take some of the heat off him. Kurt’s father neglected to mention anything about the happening to his mom. He said he meant to, but it slipped his mind. The expression on Kurt’s mom spoke volumes. Both Joey and his dad were in the doghouse. Kurt didn’t know whether to sit down or go back in his room to avoid the controversy. His mom settled it for him.

“Sit down and eat before your breakfast gets cold.”

Great. Now Kurt had to listen to his mother lecture Joey in between stern looks she cast upon his father for “forgetting” to tell her about the whole embarrassing incident. She was hot! Forget just not having any camping outings for the rest of the summer. His mom upped the stakes for Joey, totally grounding him until school started in two weeks. She also sentenced him to an exorbitant amount of household chores. Kurt sat quietly and ate his morning meal, trying as best he could, to stay out of the fray.

“We’re going to skip church today, though Joey certainly would benefit from going.”

She looked at Joey with a steely glare. Then she proceeded to advise Kurt about the family's plan for the afternoon, driving up to Deep Creek Lake and going out on their neighbor's boat, and spend the day at their cabin.

"They've been asking us to go all summer and we haven't been able to go. We're running out of weekends."

A good excuse to get out of going to church, Kurt thought, but he really dreaded going. The Johnson's had a nine year old son, great for Joey, but they also had a fourteen year old daughter who had a mad crush on him. He found her a bit creepy, the way she kept staring at him and smiling through her braces all the time.

"Do I have to go?"

His mom glared at him.

"Yes. You have to go."

"But, I didn't do anything wrong. Why do I have to go?"

"Because they invited us. *All* of us," she snipped.

"But, I was planning to go to the pool and hang out with the guys."

Her expression was strong enough persuasion for Kurt to just go along with the program.

"Okay. Okay."

His father concentrated on his scrambled eggs without looking up, trying his best just to blend in with the kitchen table. Kurt's mom was on a rampage.

As it turned out, the day wasn't all that bad. Kurt enjoyed the water skiing, found the food tasty, and best of all, the Johnson's daughter took a friend who occupied her

attention for most of the day, except for those few awkward moments when she ogled at him with her oafish smile.

They didn't get home until after seven. Anxious all day to talk to Molly, Kurt gave her a call as soon as he walked through the door.

"How was your day?" He asked.

"It was enjoyable. Grandma made a delicious dinner and a scrumptious apple pie for dessert. Grandpa brought his guitar out on the porch after, and we all sang songs while he played."

"What did you do today?"

"We went up to the lake with the Johnsons and went out on their boat. The lake was like glass and the water skiing was fantastic."

"Did you have fun with your little girlfriend?" Molly said in a mocking fashion.

"Ha-Ha. That was lame. She brought a friend who kept her out of my hair all day. I got a bad sunburn, though."

"Oh, you poor thing," she jeered.

They talked for well over an hour before Molly said she had to go.

"Do you work tomorrow?"

"Yeah. And after work I have cheerleading practice."

"This is the last week for our two-a-day practices. I'll be glad when that's over. I just know Coach Merrill's going to practice us hard tomorrow. I sure hope he got a chance to relax a little bit this weekend. He sure was intense on Friday."

"Maybe he's cooled off by now."

“I sure hope so, but I have a feeling practice is going to be a real beast. You think we can see each other after we get done practice?”

“I think it would be better if we took a night off. Dad’s still a little irked about me coming home late last night. Call me when you get home. I’ll miss you.”

“I love you, Molly. And, I’m sorry about last night.”

“Apology accepted. I love you, too. Night.”

“I’ll be thinking about you all day.”

“Same here.”

Kurt hit the nail on the head. Practice *was* a real beast. Coach Merrill started off the morning practice by having them run five miles ... in full pads. His shoulder pads irritated his sunburn and the skin on his back felt like a thousand pin pricks. After their five mile run they scrimmaged, followed by wind sprints, more scrimmaging, and twenty grueling laps around the field to cap it off.

Kurt went home, ate lunch and took a nap. In the middle of a wonderful dream his mom awakened him up and told him it was time to get up and go back to practice. He had been in such a deep and pleasant sleep – one of those where you wake up with drool running out of the corner of your mouth.

As he drove into school, he dreaded what awaited him. The thermometer already reached ninety-three degrees and the humidity made him feel like he hit a wall when he got out of his car. The locker room felt sweltering as moisture ran down the walls. He donned his pads and ran out onto the practice field where the hell began all over again. Relentlessly, Coach Merrill put them through their paces, running drill after drill until

they got it right. He singled out Kurt, making practice particularly miserable for him. Determined, not to let Coach Merrill get the best of him, Kurt pushed himself keep up the pace. By the end of practice his head thumped miserably as he gutted out the oppressive workout. The final punishment was running laps at the end of practice. Kurt had to stop twice to throw up. After practice the locker room seemed like a funeral parlor – quiet and everyone sulking. The usual after practice horseplay and laughter were noticeably absent, all too exhausted or any roughhousing.

Kurt pulled in the driveway and went straight to his room to lay down. Concerned, his mom came in to tell him supper was ready. Too exhausted to eat, he told his mother he wasn't hungry. He just wanted to lay on his bed. His shoulder pads rubbed his sunburned skin raw, so he turned on the fan in his room letting the cool air blow on his blistered shoulders and back. Too tired to call Molly, he fell asleep with his clothes on, finally getting up at about ten o'clock when he went out in the kitchen to fix himself a sandwich. After washing it down with a cold glass of milk he returned to bed and slept the remainder of the night. Molly sat home waiting for the phone to ring. She yearned to hear Kurt's voice, but he never called. Frustrated, she went to bed.

The next morning, it started all over again. Coach Merrill gathered them all around after they took the field.

“Okay, men. I need another hard practice out of you again today. We scrimmage Ridgeley on Friday here at our field. It's our last scrimmage before the season starts, so we have to be sharp. Tomorrow's practice will be a little easier. Thursday well have a light practice in the morning and in the afternoon we'll just go over our game plan.

Friday's scrimmage will be a good test to see how we match up against Fort Hill. They handled them pretty easily. If we're prepared we should do the same."

Ridgeley had a good team. Located just across the Potomac River in West Virginia, they went nine and one last year and won their conference. Allegany wouldn't face them in the regular season. After the short talk, the grind began anew. Morning practice proved to be strenuous, but Coach Merrill took it easy on them in the afternoon. He could see that things were starting to come together.

Kurt went home and ate supper with his family. He asked if he could go to Molly's house after he ate. His mom and dad consented, so he called Molly to see if it would be alright. She asked her parents and they agreed. Kurt got there at about seven-thirty. Molly met him at the door and escorted him into the living room where her parents sat watching a baseball game on TV. Her dad was a rabid Pittsburgh Pirates fan. They were playing the Cincinnati Reds. Kurt liked the Pirates, as well, giving him some common ground with Molly's father.

Molly's mom fixed them chips and dip and brought in some homemade root beer. Kurt and Molly's dad talked baseball and the upcoming football season. He quizzed Kurt about the team and his chances for a football scholarship. They also talked about their favorite NFL team, the Baltimore Colts providing another interest they had in common. The evening was going great. Kurt liked Mr. Turner, but sometimes he could be a bit grumpy and over-protective of Molly. Kurt understood, though. He respected Mr. Turner as hard-working man who didn't have a lot to show for it. Kurt empathized with his frustration. But their mutual love for sports served as a bridge over all of that.

By the seventh inning, the Pirates had the game well in hand. It was a blowout ... eleven to three. Mr. and Mrs. Turner turned in early giving Kurt and Molly some time alone. They went out on the back porch and sat in the swing. Molly turned off the porch light making the atmosphere a bit more romantic. The calling of an occasional whip-poor-will and the constant songs of the Katydid offered the soundtrack for their evening together.

Things got amorous. Molly kissed Kurt and he responded. They kissed more passionately and they both began breathing heavily. Kurt's hand reached for Molly's left breast. She pushed it away. Undeterred, Kurt repeated the move. Their lips parted.

"No Kurt."

"Come on Molly. I love you."

"I know you do. I love you too, but the answer's still no."

They laughed nervously.

"Well ... you can't blame a guy for trying."

"No ... but I will if he tries it again." She laughed.

"That's what I love most about you. I respect you, Molly."

"That's nice."

She kissed him again, then jumped up to get them a refill of root beer. When she returned, she found him nodding off.

"Well! Too much excitement for you?" She kidded.

"I'm sorry, I'm really tired. Coach Merrill has been running our butts off this week. I still haven't recovered from last Friday."

"I can't believe the summer is almost over. School starts next week."

“I know. I can’t believe it either. It’s been a great summer, though. We had a lot of fun. I’ve enjoyed spending time with you.”

“Me too. It just went so fast. It’s hard to believe we’ll be seniors this year.”

“Yeah. One more year to go.”

Kurt looked into Molly’s eyes. He got serious. “Let’s make it a good one.”

She smiled and said, “I love you.”

Their lips meet in another long kiss. They held each other closely and sat quietly, reminiscing about the summer, how much fun they had ... and what the future held. The uncertainty cast fear into their hearts.

“This time next year we’ll be going off to college,” Molly said reflectively.

“Hopefully we’ll be going off to the same school. I couldn’t bear not having you with me every day.”

“Like our favorite Beach Boys song says ... *“Don’t worry baby, everything will turn out alright,”* Molly said in a sentimental tone.

“I sure hope so.”

“So do I.”

Wednesday morning started out for Kurt as every other day had in August. He found himself thinking of Molly throughout morning practice. Molly went to the pool with some cheerleader friends. They laid out in the sun with intermittent dips in the cool water to escape the heat and humidity. As they listened to music play on the loud speaker at the pool, Molly couldn’t help thinking about the misery Kurt must have been going through. Coach Merrill could be such a hard-ass. But, in his heart, he loved his players. They were

like sons to him. He wanted them to be successful – for them to look back on their high school football experience and feel proud that they gave it their all. But, sometimes he just pushed too hard. She realized how hard Kurt had worked this summer, and prayed that he got his wish ... to play football at Ohio State. She also prayed that she would get a scholarship to Ohio State, as well, so they could be together. Her grades were certainly good enough, but the competition to get an academic scholarship to Ohio State was fierce, especially for an out-of-state student.

When the team returned for their afternoon practice, Coach Merrill was in good spirits. He felt the team was focused and on the right track. This made him happy. His players liked it much better when he was happy because it was a lot easier on them than when he wasn't. Kurt shined in the afternoon offensive vs. defensive scrimmage, hitting his receivers with regularity, reading the defense and even having a good ground game. The team seemed more focused than any point in the summer practices. After about an hour, Coach Merrill blew his whistle, signaling the end of practice.

“Okay, guys. Gather round and take a knee. You're lookin good. I'm really pleased by the effort you have been giving. No laps today. Go shower out and have fun for the rest of the afternoon. I'll see you back here tomorrow morning. We'll run through some plays without pads and that will be it. No afternoon practice.”

The team couldn't believe what they were hearing as they eyeballed each other in amazement. No laps? No afternoon practice tomorrow? They weren't about to stick around and give Coach Merrill a chance to change his mind. A stampede ensued for the locker room. Once inside, they celebrated ... singing in the shower, towel fights and an occasional bar of soap being launched at someone's ass cheeks. Back to normal.

The cheerleading squad continued to work through their routines in the gymnasium. After practice, Kurt and some of the guys walked over to the gym to watch them for a while. Mrs. Murphy, the cheerleading coach, wasn't too keen on the football players gawking at her girls, feeling it an unnecessary distraction, but she let it go. Molly tried to concentrate on her cheers, but couldn't resist looking up to see Kurt. She timidly waved. Kurt nodded his head in response, careful not to attract Mrs. Murphy's attention to their casual display of affection. He and Steve waited around until after the girls' practice wrapped up.

Molly and Debbie quickly ran up to their boyfriends after Mrs. Murphy dismissed the squad. Kurt greeted Molly with a big hug. Steve and Debbie disappeared for some private time together.

"Coach Merrill let us off early."

"I see that," Molly said as she wiped some perspiration from her brow."

"I didn't know cheerleaders sweat," Kurt joked.

"We don't. We perspire," she said, coyly.

Kurt grabbed Molly's hand and they walked to the water fountain where they each got a drink. Then, they walked out to the steps in front of the gymnasium.

"I wish you didn't have to work tonight."

"So do I."

"Do you think it would be alright with your folks if I picked you up after you get off?"

"I don't know. I have to work until eleven. That's pretty late."

"Tell them I'll take you right home. It'll save them a trip."

"I'll ask."

Kurt waited with her until her mother arrived to pick her up after practice to take her to work. Molly ran to the car when her mom drove up. Kurt watched her as she leaned in the window, hoping her mother would agree with their plan. Molly turned and ran back to him. She was smiling ... a good sign.

“She said yes! But, I have to go straight home.”

“That’s great. I’ll be out there anyway. I should get there around eight, eight-thirty. Going to hang out with the guys for a while.”

They kissed, and Molly ran back to the car, waving as they drove away from the school, yelling out the window.

“I’ll see you later!”

Kurt arrived home and ate supper. He and his dad talked about practice, and the upcoming scrimmage on Friday against Ridgeley. Joey listened intently, interjecting his football triumphs from his afternoon practice.

“That’s great, Joey. I’m looking forward to seeing your first game next Saturday,” Kurt said as he gave him a noogie.

“Ouch. That hurt.”

“Don’t be such a sissy.”

“No rough housing at the table,” their mother interjected. “Joey, why don’t you start cleaning up the table? You can help me dry the dishes when you’re done.”

“Your sentence should be about over shouldn’t it?” Kurt laughed.

“Don’t be a wise guy. I still have another week.”

Kurt’s dad looked over at his mom and smiled. She cocked her brow as if to say, “*Don’t say a word.*”

While Joey and his mom did the dishes, Kurt and his dad talked more football. His father, pleased to see Kurt's enthusiasm return, offered him encouragement. He knew the two-a-days weren't much fun, remembering them from when he played. He offered Kurt some words of encouragement, telling him how proud he was to have his as his son. Not wanting to leave Joey out of the spotlight he exclaimed, "I have two of the finest football players in the area."

Joey turned away from his chore and smiled at his dad. His mom affectionately rubbed his head before handing him another dish to dry.

"Kurt, I won't be able to go to your scrimmage on Friday. I have to make my rounds at the hospital."

"That's okay, Dad. I understand. It's only a scrimmage, anyway."

"Mom and I will be there!" Joey said as he flung the towel around in the air ... "Go Allegany!"

"Calm down, Joey. And, pay attention to what you are doing. Those dishes aren't even dry. Here." She handed him another dish.

"Coach Merrill is having a light practice in the morning. No pads. We're just going to run through some plays. If it's alright, I was going to go out to Mason's Barn and hang out with the guys for a little while later this evening."

Kurt's mom turned from the sink.

"Don't you think you should stay home tonight and get some rest?"

"I told Molly I would pick her up after she got off work to save her mom a trip out there."

“Why do you always make plans, *then* ask if you can do it? What time does she get off?”

“Eleven.”

“That’s awfully late. It’s up to your father.” Giving him that stare of hers.

Kurt’s father paused a moment, weighing the consequences of his answer.

“Dad?”

“I suppose it will be okay. But, you need to take her right home and then get back here before eleven-thirty and hit the sack. You understand?”

“Yes, Sir. Thanks, Dad!”

Kurt pulled into the Mason’s Barn parking lot at about quarter after eight. His friends were waiting for him at a couple of the outside tables. The usual suspects were there ... Steve Liller, Tom Beyer, Mike O’Donnell and about half the football team. They all jokingly cheered, as he walked up to them.

“Here comes our captain,” one of them mocked, prompting a huge grin to blossom on Kurt’s face.

Wednesday nights were usually slow and there wasn’t much of a crowd, but Kurt and his friends were making the best of it. Things got pretty loud and at one point in the evening Ed Mason, himself, had to come out and tell them to settle down.

“Just keep it down to a roar guys. Could you please?”

“Yes, sir, Mr. Mason. We’re just blowing off some steam,” Tom Beyer assured him.

Ed Mason, the owner of the restaurant, turned around to walk back inside. Before he reached the door he looked back to bid the team good luck for the upcoming season. He

had to be careful, though. As an Allegany grad, he felt compelled to pull for his alma mater, but students from all the other area schools were his patrons, too. As he closed the door behind him he couldn't help but smile at their youthful exuberance.

At about closing time, everyone scattered. Kurt hung around until Molly finished cleaning up. He watched as she closed the door behind her and walked up to the outdoor table where he waited for her. *She looks so cute in her little waitress uniform*, Kurt thought. It made him smile. When she saw him she returned the expression before breaking into a run and giving him a welcoming hug and kiss. They walked, hand in hand, to the car. Kurt opened her door and she slid over on the seat to be next to him. He opened the driver's side door and hopped in, giving her another kiss when he landed on the seat.

After pulling into Molly's driveway, Kurt turned off the ignition and they began talking. Molly turned to him, giving him a gentle kiss. He reciprocated and they became entwined in each other. Out of the corner of his eye, Kurt kept watch on the porch light, anticipating it blinking. It remained dark. They kissed some more. Still no flickering porch light. Either Mr. Turner was asleep, or he was cutting Kurt some slack. Either way, Kurt felt nervous. He glanced down at his watch - almost eleven-thirty. *Damn!* He thought. *Of all the nights to have her dad not manning the lighthouse, this is the night I promised Mom and Dad I'd be home by eleven-thirty.*

"I've got get home. I promised Mom and Dad I'd be home by eleven-thirty.

Molly busted out laughing.

"Well isn't this ironic? The one night my Dad leaves us alone and you have to go home early."

“My thoughts, exactly. But, I’ve got to get home.”

He got out of the car and went over to the passenger’s side to open the door for Molly. She exited with a broad smile creeping across her face.

“You’re never going to let me live this down. Are you?”

“Nope.” She giggled.

She gazed up at him, still smiling, and gave him a goodnight kiss.

“You don’t have to walk me to the door. Get back in the car and get home before you’re late.”

She gave him another tender kiss, told him she loved him and sent him on his way. He watched her until she got to the front door, where she turned and waved. And, just for good measure, she reached inside the door and flicked the porch light a couple of times while laughing hysterically.

Kurt got home about ten minutes late, but his parent were already in bed. He tip-toed past their bedroom and quietly got into bed.

“Goodnight, Kurt,” His dad could be heard saying with a laugh ... just to let Kurt know he still wasn’t asleep.

Kurt smiled, “Goodnight, Dad.”

Practice went smooth the next morning, mostly casually running through plays with no contact. After practice, Kurt and some of his teammates went to Constitution Park for a swim and to hang out. Molly was busy working and then had cheerleading practice late in the afternoon. The Cheerleading squad was going to cheer at the scrimmage tomorrow as a warm-up for the season opener. Kurt liked having Molly on the sidelines when he

played. It always gave him inspiration. He loved how she came up to him after the games showing off her bright smile ... win or lose. He looked forward to the start of his senior year.

Friday morning was cloudy and not as hot as it had been, a welcomed relief. The scrimmage against Ridgeley was scheduled for ten-o'clock. Kurt got to the school at eight for a team meeting and to prepare for the game. This was their last scrimmage before the season started and after last week's disaster in Altoona he welcomed having another chance to redeem himself. He felt extremely nervous, more than usual. The entire team seemed on edge.

Word circulated around the locker room about a party at Tom Beyer's house that night. His parents were going out of town which presented the perfect opportunity for an end of the summer blowout. They even had a pool in their backyard. He knew it would take some convincing to get Molly to go. Tom had his older cousin secure a keg for the occasion.

Allegheny kicked off. The Blackhawks got nowhere. The first quarter was kind of boring as the teams traded possessions several times, neither of them scoring. They were pretty evenly matched, though Ridgeley's defensive line dominated. They sacked Kurt three times and effectively shut down Tom Beyer's powerful running game. Kurt became frustrated and he let the offensive line know it when they were in their huddle.

"Come on guys! Can you block your man for cryin' out loud! Give me some time back here to do my job.

He needed better blocking and had no time to pass the ball. Coach Merrill became impatient, too. When the offense came off the field he pulled some of the offensive

linemen aside and took them to task. Whatever he said sure lit a fire under them. On the next set of offensive downs Allegany marched down the field putting the Blackhawks back on their heels. They were making holes big enough for Tom Beyer to drive a truck through. He gobbled up yardage like a bulldozer plowing through a light snow. Allegany eked out a touchdown towards the end of the first half on a short pass Kurt threw to Mike O'Donnell. The point after was good putting Allegany up 7-0.

At the half, Coach Merrill rode them hard in the locker room. He went off again on the offensive line, diagraming some plays and giving them instructions. When they took the field for the second half, they were a different team. For the rest of the game they man-handled their opponent. The end result was an easy win 35-14.

After the last play, Molly ran out to Kurt and gave him a hug. He was dripping wet with sweat, but she didn't care. Joey beat his mother out on the field where he mauled his older brother, congratulating him on the three touchdown passes he threw and his fourteen yard dash into the end zone on a running play. This made Kurt feel even better.

"Hey, Joey?"

His little brother gave him his undivided attention, wondering what he wanted.

"Here ... catch!"

Kurt tossed him his slimy mouth guard and began laughing. Joey's reflexes got the best of him as he caught it, then quickly flung it back to Kurt.

"That's gross!"

Kurt and his teammates laughed. His mom gave him a disgusted look, but even she couldn't contain her laughter. It began to pour so Joey and his mom ran back to their car.

Kurt and Molly dashed into the gym where they talked briefly before Kurt headed to the showers.

“I’ll wait for you out here.”

“I won’t be long,” Kurt told her.

A festive mood invaded the locker room. All the players gathered around Coach Merrill and carried him to the showers as friendly retribution for the hell he put them through during the preseason. The Coach got wind of the party conspiracy at Tom Beyer’s house, but he didn’t say anything, pretending not to know. In his mind, the boys deserved to celebrate, thought he wasn’t keen on the idea about the keg of beer. But, he knew he wasn’t going to be able to stop it.

Kurt invited Steve and Debbie back to his house for lunch. He *did* have the foresight to warn his mother in advance, which she appreciated.

Kurt and Molly pulled out of the parking lot, followed by Steve and Debbie. About a mile down the road, Steve sped by Kurt’s car, looking over and smiling while giving Kurt the finger on his way by. Kurt responded by mashing down the accelerator to catch him.

“Slow down, Kurt! Just let him go. We’ll catch up to them at your house.”

He obliged.

On the drive home he brought up the party to Molly. She wasn’t too happy about it.

“Is there going to be alcohol there?” Although she already knew the answer to her question.

“I don’t know?” Kurt answered and immediately tried to change the subject.

“I do.” Molly replied. “If Tom’s having a party with his parents out of town, there will definitely be alcohol involved. I don’t think it’s such a good idea.”

“We’ll stop by for a few minutes. If there’s drinking, we’ll stay for a while, then we’ll leave,” he said to appease her.

When they arrived at Kurt’s house, Steve and Debbie were already there, leaning up against Steve’s car in the driveway. As they entered the kitchen, they saw that Kurt’s mom had made some sandwiches for them and the table was set. After lunch, Steve and Kurt went out in the back yard to pitch some horseshoes. Molly and Debbie stayed inside and talked to Kurt’s mom while helping her clean up the dishes.

Kurt’s mom had to leave to take Joey and a friend to the pool. She decided to relax Joey’s restriction, figuring she would give him one last outing before school started. After all, he had dutifully completed all his chores and felt somewhat sorry for him. He’d been moping around the house for almost two weeks since his unfortunate camping incident. Molly and Debbie remained in the kitchen, talking at the kitchen table.

“Did Steve say anything to you about the party at Tom’s house?”

“Yeah. We’re going, are you and Kurt?”

“You know his parents will be out of town, don’t you?”

“Yeah. That’s the whole reason for the party,” she laughed.

Molly looked uncomfortable.

“What’s wrong with you?”

“I don’t know. I just know there is going to be drinking there.”

“And your point is ... ?”

“It just doesn’t seem like a good idea to me.”

“It’s the last party of the summer. It’ll be a blast. You’re going aren’t you?”

“I don’t know. I want to talk to Kurt about it.”

“Don’t be such a prude. We’ll have a great time.”

Molly didn’t respond. She walked over to the sink and drew a glass of water. Just then, Kurt and Steve burst into the kitchen laughing.

“Well ... who won?” Debbie asked.

“Who do you think?” Kurt boasted. “Don’t forget Steve, you owe me two bucks!”

“Yeah, you lucky dog. You’d be owing me two bucks if you hadn’t pulled that ringer out of your rear end.

They all laughed.

“So ... the food from the other night, about three lunches, all the other money you’ve sponged off me through the years, and now the bet you just lost ... that’s about twenty grand you owe me.”

“Just as soon as my uncle straightens out.”

They all laughed again.

As Steve and Debbie were leaving, Steve turned and hollered back to Kurt.

“We’ll see you at Tom’s party tonight. I hope that keg’s real cold!” He grinned.

“Later.” Kurt yelled back to him.

Molly waited until Steve and Debbie were out of the drive way.

“Thought you said you didn’t know if there was going to be alcohol there?”

“You knew better than that,” he sniggered.

Molly wasn’t amused.

“But what if his parents find out? What if we get caught?”

“Like I said, we’ll just stop by for a while, then we’ll leave before it gets too wild. I promise you, I won’t drink.”

“Promise?”

“I just did!”

Kurt picked up Molly at about seven-thirty that evening. On the way out the door, her father gave her the usual reminder.

“Be home by midnight.”

“I will Daddy.”

“Don’t worry Mr. Turner. I’ll have her home on time.”

“Worry? Why would I worry?” Mr. Turner said sarcastically.

When they got to the party, it was in full swing. Seeing Kurt and Molly come out the back door, Steve did a cannonball off the diving board soaking them both. Some of the guys grabbed Kurt and threw him in the pool with his clothes on. He climbed from the pool a little pissed, as he pulled his sopping wallet from the back pocket of his shorts.

Holding it up, he yelled, “Nice, guys. Real nice!”

Molly was already on edge. In the corner by the keg, several of the players gathered for a beer chugging contest. Steve called Kurt over. Molly gave him that *don’t you dare* expression. He smiled, taking her by the hand and leading her over to the keg. Steve handed Kurt an ice cold brew.

“To the end of summer. And ... to the end of two-a-days,” Steve offered a toast.

Steve and his teammates chugged down their beers. Kurt glanced over at Molly, standing there with her hands on her hips. This persuaded him not to take a drink. He simply lifted his beer to acknowledge the toast.

“What’s wrong with you candy ass?” Tom bellowed.

“Just don’t feel like drinking tonight.” Then, he looked Tom in the eye and said sternly, “You got a problem with that?”

Tom got the message, saying nothing more about it.

After about a half hour, Kurt and Molly circulated to say their goodbyes and left the party, driving to Constitution Park. Molly climbed aboard the merry-go-round and Kurt pushed hard to get it going before jumping on.

“Thanks for not drinking. And, thanks for leaving early.”

“I told you I wasn’t going to drink and that we wouldn’t stay long. Didn’t you believe me?”

“Sometimes with you I don’t know what to believe.” She looked over at him with a feigned smile.

As the merry-go-round slowed, he reached over and grasped her hand while gazing into her eyes.

“Give me *some* credit here. I love you. I respect you. You’re the most important thing in my life ... except, maybe for football.” He began to laugh.

She flippantly punched him in the arm.

They stayed at the park for a few more hours, talking and kissing ... more kissing than talking, though. They pulled into Molly’s driveway at about eleven-thirty, spending their remaining time in the car until the porch light began flashing at about five past twelve. This splendid summer had finally drawn to an end, leaving them both with wonderful memories they would carry in their hearts throughout their lives.