

Master  
of  
the Mini

*A boy who loses at everything must learn to win in the  
cutthroat world of miniature golf*

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Art by Christopher Gibson at [ChrisDradargraphics.ca](http://ChrisDradargraphics.ca)

## DEDICATION

We can't all be sport heroes but a lot of us wish that we were. This book is dedicated to all those who wish to excel at the sport of their dreams.



This was it. One shot. Win or lose. Hero or zero.

The crowd was hushed. For one moment, everyone silently agreed to be quiet. You could have heard a pin bounce off the concrete. It was as if time had slowed down. My senses were heightened. I looked at the crowd. My friends. My family. My father who had never seen me take a shot before. Their warmth and hope bathed me in their belief. That feeling quickly left me as I gazed at the others in the gallery. My enemies, glaring, hoping I would miss the final shot and my chance for glory would be over. My confidence wavered.

This was Orlando, Florida, on one of the world's best mini golf courses. Ever. Not for the faint of heart. You didn't take your family with little kids to this course. There were no easy shots. No hole-in-ones. This was the equivalent of the hardest golf course in the world. It would eat you up and spit you out into a crying mess. This course was for the pros. A pro like me, although I wouldn't have said that just a few months ago. Back then, I was a nobody. Couldn't win if my life depended on it. Which it didn't; I guess I liked sounding dramatic.

Now I had an opportunity to make a difference. My desire to win the gold overwhelmed me. To capture the cup. To be a star with my friends. To make my dad proud of me.

I looked down the end of the green. The obstacles were immense — so many things could go wrong. I cleared my mind and tried not to focus on the things I couldn't control. I concentrated on the things I could. Everyone looked at me, urging me to hurry up. I reached down and picked a small blade of grass. I flung it into the air, watching which direction the

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wind took it. It sailed a bit to the right. I adjusted accordingly and pulled my putter back.

An explosion occurred behind me as I took the shot. And then the real disaster happened.

## Chapter 1

### The Empty Shelf

Earlier that summer

My trophy shelf mocked me. It looked lonely and forgotten. Brown wood with four rows. I stared at its dusty shelves, trying to visualize what hardware I could win, anything that I would be proud to say of, "Look at this! I won this fighting ten guys in an eight-sided ring." I imagined my great fighting ability. Or "I swam through crocodile- and shark-infested waters to reach this remote island." I visualized plowing through the water at inhuman speed. Or, "This trophy is for the longest free fall without using a parachute." I could feel the wind blowing on my face as I broke the sound barrier.

Okay, maybe I aimed a bit high, but the reality was I was desperate to win at anything. I'd take a spelling bee trophy (even though it was not very physical, and my younger sister was technically a better speller than me). I stared at the shelf again. Actually, to call it a trophy shelf is a bit misleading. I'd have to win a trophy first. Now, I should just call it an empty shelf. I imagined a gleaming pile of hardware glowing on the wall with pictures of me celebrating with various top athletes. Everyone would want their picture taken with me. I sighed.

It was time to go look at a real trophy shelf. I walked out of my room, down the stairs to the main floor. I creaked open the door to my

dad's office. Framed photos of him covered the far wall. Pictures of him with his teammates in the decathlon at the Olympics. He was away for months at a time, competing at track events around the world. Mom, Kayleigh, and I missed him while he was gone. The house felt empty when he wasn't there.

I sat and looked at his trophy wall (not a shelf, a wall!). My dad played lots of sports (football, baseball, basketball) and excelled at everything. The wall had individual and team trophies, lots of 1<sup>st</sup> places, all kinds of MVPs and a bunch of hats/shirts from tournament wins. He had a special sports memory. He learned how to be good right away and rarely repeated a mistake. Every team he played on, he was their star. Everything came easy for him. He was tall, muscular, and fast. I always wished I could look more like him.

Instead, I was small and slight (more like my mom) and not particularly athletic. That I heard every day. Some people were polite about it, like the neighbors or my teachers. "Don't worry, dear, you'll have a growth spurt and look more like your dad any day now!" Others were not so kind: "Hey, shrimp, too bad you're not big like your dad," as I got shoved around the school lockers.

Kids are cruel, and I heard the whispers that my dad wasn't even my father. My mom insisted that I had many of my dad's features, from his eyes to his nose to his hair. She told me that sports weren't my strength, but I had lots of time to discover what was.

But Dad was good at every sport, why couldn't I be at least good at one? I was twelve — there must be some sport that I could win at. Something that would make my dad proud of my athletic ability,



something that would shut people up and prove that I was my father's son.

"What you are looking for, dear?" I wheeled around in Dad's chair as my mom poked her head into the office.

"Just looking at pictures of Dad."

"We all miss him." She put her arm around my shoulder. "Three months to go, and he'll be back from decathlon world events. His Olympic training and games take him all around the world."

"But he'll miss the whole summer," I cried. "Why did he have to be away during the best time of year?" I was bitter — a summertime of family activities stolen from me. Everybody else got to have their dad around for the school vacation.

"I'm sorry, dear. Dad loves and misses us. Part of training for our country is that is must be away from us sometimes. You know how important he is to his team."

"We're important too, Mom," I whined, feeling a little sorry for myself. "Sometimes it just doesn't feel fair at all."

Mom walked over and gave me a big hug. "You'll get through this. Besides, I have a feeling you and your friends are going to have a great summer together." She stroked my head and walked back out to the living room. I looked around Dad's office one more time, soaking up all the gold in the room. All the accolades. All the trophies. All the glory from his victories.

Today was the last day of school. With it came the promise of summer. I hoped for once, summer would be exciting. I wished there was a sport that I could be good at. Maybe even become a winner?

## Chapter 2

### The Last Domino

“Okay class, I need everyone’s attention. Tyler has been working on this project for the last few weeks, and with the last day of class, he is ready to place the last domino.”

Mrs. Carmichael looked over her class. The voices went silent. No one wanted any trouble on the last day of school. Everyone was counting the seconds to freedom. I should have as well, but I’d begged Mrs. C about a month ago to do my final Physics project on the back table in the classroom. She had eventually conceded, but I had been living with the stress that someone would bump my experiment before it was complete. I had come up with the ultimate demonstration on the laws of motion. I called it “The Domino Effect!”

I got the idea from watching a game show in Japan. They did the craziest stunts in order to win the grand prize. On one show, the contestant built a complete domino city in a gymnasium. The city was amazing; it had towers and parks, and the chain reaction blew my mind. He used hundreds of thousands of dominos, but the effect was over in less than two minutes. But the crowd, the CROWD! It exploded like they had just seen the most amazing thing in the world. They slapped his hands, carried him on his shoulders, and he, of course, won the grand prize. My experiment would be on much smaller scale.

In the back of our classroom was a big, heavy desk with old textbooks. I cleared them off to set up my ultimate experiment. I designed it as an amusement park domino set. Each day after school, I set up a different part; a Ferris wheel, a merry-go-round, even an animal barn, all connected with dominos running from one end of the table to another, going from one level to another. It would be my crowning achievement and achieve a perfect Physics mark.

"Everyone gather round the table. Tyler is going to demonstrate his physics experiment," Mrs. C directed. Around the room, I could see indifference and boredom. Only my two best friends, Patrick and Lily, gave me the thumbs up. I walked around the table, ready to knock over the first domino.

"The Dominos of Doom," I said, and then blushed, realizing I had spoken out loud.

"What a loser," a voice from behind replied. I turned, but there was no need. There was only one boy who hated every non-sports person in the room. Zac. The natural athlete. Bigger. Stronger. Meaner than anyone in the class.

"Tyler. Are you ready?" Mrs. C asked. I scanned the table. I had measured every domino distance and angle to make one continuous movement. I was a poor athlete, never enough strength to hit a baseball very far and never fast enough at track. But I did have one super power. I could always figure out the angles. I had planned this experiment from start to finish, and it would be completed with the push of one domino.

"Let's do it!" And I pushed the first domino. It tumbled, taking the next one with it. Then a third. And a fourth. The dominos around the table began to fall. My disinterested classmates became more animated, taking in the spectacle. The first obstacle was the Ferris wheel. The dominos went on an incline falling forward, their inertia pushing the dominos forward and propelling the wheel to spin. As the Ferris wheel made a full rotation, a small figure tumbled forward, causing the next row of dominos to fall.

"Cool!" commented one of the girls.

I was pumped by her feedback. The next setup was for the animal barn. Each domino would trigger a different animal to come out its stable. The class watched and the dominos advanced, and I waited for their reaction.

"Snap!" The barnyard was smashed by the curtain from the window. The wind slammed it into my work. Dominos went everywhere, causing all my hard work to go spinning in multiple directions. The curtain's momentum swung back and aimed itself at the Ferris wheel like an angry dog.

"Smash!" The Ferris wheel pieces went flying. I was too shocked to move, my month of work ruined by the careless action of someone opening a window. I expected my classmates to react with horror, but instead they were gleeful. Like spectators at a monster truck rally, they reveled in the destruction. They pointed to the chaos across the table like it was an event, unlike a disaster. Only Mrs. C reacted in the situation.

"Patrick! Close that window!" she ordered. My friend reacted immediately and pulled the window shut. The curtain stopped moving and returned to its position, stationary to the window. But it was far too late; the damage was done. The vast majority of dominos lay strewn across the table. Hours of work were gone in seconds. The beauty of the dominos dropping one by one was gone. My work was destroyed.

For a second, all was quiet, as if no one wanted to react to the mess. Then snickers and giggles broke out across the classroom; my bad luck was amusement for all. Someone's phone snapped shut – why did I have a feeling that my tragedy had been filmed? Now I was a loser for all the world to see.

"Enough!" Mrs. C brought the laughter to a quick finish. "Who left the window open? That window was shut all week. Why did someone choose to open it now on a windy day?" The room became deathly quiet, as if no one wanted to take responsibility for my mess. But as I looked at Zac, I knew who was responsible when he flashed me a vicious grin.

"Anyone?" she asked again, and Zac's grin melted into seriousness, as if he was concerned as well. Seconds later, when no one answered, she turned to me.

"I'm sorry we didn't get to see the full results of your experiment. An 'A' for effort." She then turned to the class. "Please return to your desks, and we'll finish off the lesson."

Lily touched my elbow to reassure me, while Patrick gave a sympathetic nod. I didn't care so much about the mark. I just wanted to show my classmates that I could do something cool. Something they would

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appreciate and tell others about. But that wasn't going to happen, and my work was ruined.

*I knew who did it, but I was too chicken to do anything about it.*

## Chapter 3

### School's Out

The bell rang. Two months of freedom had begun!

Well, it should have begun, but the school bullies fixated on me and my friends. Mostly me. Every Friday, almost like they needed a boost before the weekend, they would find some way to humiliate me, sometimes in front of my friends, sometimes in front of the class, and sometimes all by myself. This last day had to be different. Instead of taking my punishment, I planned to fight back. Not physically; that's not who I am. But with the only weapon I had, my mind.

I dashed out of the classroom first, before they could get me, Zac and his two meathead friends, Don and Dave. I don't think they had enough words for one person, so Don and Dave typically finished each other's sentences. And they followed Zac wherever he went and did whatever he asked. Which usually wasn't very nice. I had so many wedgies in first term that I stopped wearing underwear for a week to throw them off. I know, not a pretty picture.

I slid into the hall, zig-zagging around my happy peers. I would be happy too if I made it out of school in one piece. I went to the end of the hall and stopped in front of the washroom door. *Wait for it.* I saw Zac looking around feverishly until he caught a glimpse of me. Mission accomplished. I now had thirty seconds until the three of them marched

through that bathroom door. Fortunately, everything was in order. A chair, a piece of twine, a bucket, and a bottle full of a questionable liquid. It wasn't that questionable; I created it in science class. I call it the "Tyler Slime," thick but not too slow-moving or runny like water. And it stank. A lot. I could only hope that Zac would be in first through the door.

I jumped on the chair, slid the twine through a hook I had planted earlier in the ceiling (a good plan always needs preparation), and poured the liquid contents into the bucket. Ten seconds. I wrapped the twine around the bucket and the handle, pulled in front of the door, and tied off to the door handle. The force of the door swinging in would tip the bucket, and surprise, Zac would be slimed. I admired my work. It wasn't a difficult prank, but I used the power of physics in my day-to-day life.

I'm not like most students: I kind of enjoyed school, especially the science part. My Physics teacher feels I've got a real talent at seeing all the angles. I'm good at calculating tough equations in my head and work out the solution on the fly. Unfortunately, there are no trophies for Physics class.

Twenty-five seconds had passed; I ran toward the window. Not a big opening, but enough for a skinny kid like me to slip through. I landed on a bag of peat moss the gardener was going to use for the grounds. I heard the door kicked open. A splosh. A scream. "YUCK!" the voice bellowed, and it sounded too girlish to be Zac. It sounded like I caught one of the twins instead. I'd enjoy whatever small victory I could. I turned towards the buses coming into the parking lot when I felt a jolt from behind. Could they have caught up with me so quickly?



“Hey, home slice — ready for a summer to remember?” The fist punched me on my left shoulder. Normally your reaction to being hit is to hit back. Except with Patrick; that’s how he says hello to his friends. Let me tell you a bit about Patrick. He didn’t always live on our plane of reality. He preferred that we call him “Trick” instead of Patrick as his nickname. Only a few of us called him that.

He always walked around with a pair of black sunglasses on, even when there was no sun. Or if it rained. Or at night. You get the idea. He wore them all the time; I even teased him that he wore them when he slept. But despite that and many other peculiarities, I could always count on him.

“Oh yeah...” I was still living off the glow of my prank. “We’ll make this summer awesome,” I enthused.

“Hello, boys — what are we doing for the next two months?”

Trick and I both turned to a girl’s voice. This was Lily. We’d known each other since primary, and we’d always been friends. She was pretty cool for a girl, but she could be a bit crazy at times. She talked through every decision like she wanted you to help her decide. I used to give advice, but she always seemed to do the opposite of what I suggested. Now I didn’t bother. But even when she decided what to do, she was forever talking about the other options. Like she was second-guessing herself and should have made a different choice.

The two of them weren’t perfect (and I certainly wasn’t), but they were my best friends.

"I've got big plans," I said, standing tall. "I'm going to win my first trophy this summer. My dad will be so proud of it when he returns in the fall."

"In what? Science?" Trick teased. He knew I was allergic to sports and physical interaction. The three of us sat down at a school bench while classmates ran by us to catch their bus. Hopefully our bus would get there soon before Zac and his buddies caught up with me. I contemplated an answer, but Lily offered a suggestion.

"The softball team went to the nationals last summer. You should try to get on the team this year. I bet they could win."

"That would require Tyler catching a ball. That's not going to happen any time soon," Trick offered.

"Trick!" Lily yelled and gave him a friendly shove.

"He's right, Lil. I throw like a girl, and I couldn't catch a ball if my life depended on it. I'd be lucky to make the bat boy for the team."

"I'm not sure what's wrong with throwing like a girl, but we'll move on." Lily shifted gears. "The community center swim team is going to be strong this year. Maybe you can get on the wait list for the team."

"Be perfect for Tyler if he didn't sink like a rock. Can team members wear water wings?"

I shook my head at the insult. I knew Trick's jabs were well-intentioned. Heck, he was right. As an athlete, I was hopeless at all sports I had tried. The other kids in my gym class teased me when they saw me scratching my leg. Zac had accused me of being allergic to sweat.

"Maybe you're looking at this the wrong way," Lily offered. "I bet your dad could care less if you won a sports trophy."

I shook my head. "That's where you're wrong. At my age, he had already won a dozen sport trophies. Every time he comes back from decathlon training, his teammates are always asking him about when his son is going to follow in his footsteps."

"Buddy," Trick added. "You and your dad are completely different. He can compete at a high level at so many events. Out of the ten sports of the decathlon, he's amazing in all of them. He's a big, strong, athletic guy and you're..."

"Skinny? Uncoordinated? A loser?" All suggestions I offered seem to fit the bill.

"A late bloomer," Lily chimed in. "You need to go easy on yourself. Find your hidden talent and then practice to make yourself really good."

*Good advice, but what was I good at? Every sport I tried ended up with me being the last person picked for any team. I was hoping not only to be good at a sport, but also to excel as the best. It wasn't like I had tried every sport, but every time ended in disaster. Was there any sport out there I was good at?*

Suddenly, a wad of tape hit me on the side of the head. It didn't hurt but shocked me out of my thoughts. I turned and immediately regretted my decision when I saw the hulking shadows walking toward us.

"I've been looking for you, 'Tiny' Tyler. My boys aren't too happy with you."

Here comes the great Zac Bishop, sports hero extraordinaire. Good at every sport. Most valuable player in multiple school sports. A poor loser and an even worse winner. Bigger, taller, stronger. Everything I wasn't. Of course, he always traveled with his two flunkies, Don and Dave. They

weren't brothers, but they looked so much alike, they were mistaken as twins all the time. Zac looked like he didn't get hit by my prank, but Don looked like something wet must have caught him on the shoulder and had dripped down the front of his shirt. Life's little victories.

"Check out the geek squad. Didn't you losers hear that school was over? Are you guys so sad that you have to stay around here and cry about your summer?" He rubbed his eyes to pantomime the tears.

"Don't you have some elementary kids to beat up, Zac? I'm sure they have some juice boxes for you to steal." Lily was brave, but she also knew Zac and his buddies wouldn't hurt a girl. That rule didn't apply to Trick and me.

"Still getting the girl to fight your battles, Tyler? She's got more guts than the two of you combined." Dave gave me a shove backward, and I almost tumbled onto my butt. I always froze when I was around Zac, I had no idea how to fight back. "Bunch of weaklings. You spend so much time with your nose buried deep in your computer, the only workout you get is with your fingers." Zac wiggled his fingers, which got an immediate laugh from Don and Dave.

"Burn!" yelled Dave as he slapped hands with Don. Zac stepped menacingly closer to me. I forecasted pain in my future and pulled back. Instead of hitting me, Zac pulled out his phone as if to broadcast his latest victory. I couldn't help myself from looking. His phone was connected to a video uploading site. Set prominently on the main page was titled 'Tyler the loser.' My dominos were featured as today's attraction as the video played with them crashing down over and over again.

"Your facial expression was priceless Tyler. I've already had thousands of comments on how pathetic you look." Zac took great pride in embarrassing others. My emotions went into a tailspin – I could see some of the awful comments left behind. It made me feel worse about myself than I already had. If that was even possible.

"Put your phone away Zac," Lily yelled and swiped at his phone. "No one cares about what you and your trolls think." The problem was that I did care. Just like my Dad thrived on admiration of his sport achievements, I wore every defeat on my sleeve.

"Why are you children still on school property?" an adult female voice yelled out to us. We all turned around to see our teacher, Mrs. Carmichael, exit out of the school doors. She was at least a hundred years old and constantly talked about the past. She drove us crazy with her talk about living before electricity and running water. Sometimes I felt like she enjoyed living in the past more than the present day. But today her present timing was perfect, and Zac and his buddies began to back up.

"Just saying our goodbyes, Mrs. Carmichael, for now," Zac added under his breath. The three of them walked toward the school buses while staring back at us.

"Go home, boys," Lily teased while waving mockingly to them.

Trick grabbed her hand. "Why do you do that? It just winds them up for next time."

"Somebody's got to stand up to those bullies," she angled her head at us. "I don't see either one of you stepping up." We shook our heads and started walking.

"You don't understand, Lily. Guys are different. If they want to hurt us, they will. Especially Zac, he's got a mean streak," I said.

"And girls can't be mean too?" She stared at us in disbelief. "Please. Compared to some of the girls in our grade, those goons are sweethearts."

"Let's forget about those guys. We've got a whole summer to fill. And my dad is offering to take us to the amusement park tomorrow!" Trick exclaimed. Lily and I smiled. His excitement was infectious. And he was right. Instead of wallowing in my need for a trophy, a day of fun was welcome.

"You're right. What time do we meet at your place?" I asked Trick.

"Eight. Park opens at nine. We'll get in first for the lines for the best rides."

"Don't forget to go on some of the rides I want," interjected Lily.

"Of course, Lily," I said, knowing she wanted to go on some girly ride. Maybe I could win a trophy for going on the scariest ride the most times in a row?

"And Tyler? Don't worry about what sport to play," Lily said.

"Tomorrow, let's just enjoy our summer."

## Chapter 4

### The Park of Parks

I jumped out of bed, excited about my day. My mouth was dry, and I went to the bathroom for a glass of water. Just before I went in, I spied my younger sister Kayleigh watching me from her doorway.

"I get the washroom first!" I yelled triumphantly as I dashed in.

My sister and I had a strange relationship. We constantly wanted the same things at the same time. When dad was away, we usually needed Mom to take us to events that always happened at the same exact time and locations far from each other. Or we wanted to watch different movies at the same time on the main television. Or she wanted pizza and I wanted nachos, and Mom ended up making some other random meal that neither of us liked. It made us extremely competitive for everything in the house. For some reason, Kayleigh usually won our battle of wills with Mom. You can't always compete against the cuteness factor.

I ran a cup under the faucet and drank lukewarm water. I walked over to the toilet and lifted the lid. Before I could sit down, something popped out of the toilet. It was a doll about a foot tall, with a disgusting scary face on a spring. It was like a jack in the box for a toilet. I screamed and fell back, my pants already at my knees. I tried to reach for something and grabbed the only thing I could find, the towel rack. It ripped from the

wall, and I landed on the floor hard, screaming in terror. I lay confused, and when I looked back up, my mom and Kayleigh were looking down at me. At first, I thought they were concerned, but then they looked like they both going to explode. Then the two bent over with laughter.

"You shouldn't have done that, Kayleigh. You could have scared your brother to death." My mom tried to look serious, as if she was scolding Kayleigh but failed as she had to hold her chest to keep from laughing too loud. My sister had no filter on her joy in tricking me and was pointing in glee as she jumped around the bathroom.

"I've been planning this for days. I didn't realize it would scare the pants off you," she mocked. I turned even redder as I realized that my shorts were at my ankles as I lay in my underwear. "Best. Prank. Ever," she screamed as she ran out. "I can't wait to tell Dad," she wailed as she ran down the stairs.

I looked at the towel rack in my hand and the hole in the gyprock in the wall. I pulled my shorts up as my mom tried to look away.

"Thanks for warning me, Mom," I said sarcastically. "Look at the damage I caused. I could have got hurt."

My mom stopped laughing and became serious. "I'm sorry, Tyler. I know how much your sister and you like to pull pranks on each other. You're right, this one did get out of hand." She looked at the towel rack in my palm.

This was not how I wanted to start my summer.

\*



"What's the red mark on your arm?" Trick asked as his dad's car pulled away from my house. He was wearing his sunglasses, even though the sun was still low in the sky.

"It's nothing," I blushed, not wanting to get into my sister's prank. I changed the conversation. "Lily, which ride do you want to tackle first?" We agreed that we would pick our favorites at the start before the lines got too long. Before she could respond, Trick interjected.

"I think she wants to go on the 'Speed Demon' rollercoaster. I hear 'One Word' Mike is working that ride." Since I sat in the middle in the back seat, Trick immediately ducked down as if he knew Lily would be coming flying with a fist. My shoulder wasn't so lucky.

"Ow," I yelled.

"No horseplay back there, or I turn the car around right now," Trick's dad warned.

"Yes, sir," the three of us answered in unison.

"Watch it," I whispered to Lily. "You'll get our day cancelled!"

"Tell it to big mouth," she growled and folded her arms. "He doesn't know anything about Michael." I could tell she wasn't going to be talking to us for the rest of the drive.

"Nice comment," I hissed.

"You know it's true," he whispered back. And the thing is, he was right. Mike "One Word" Simmons was this quiet pretty boy that was a grade ahead of us. He'd never gave an answer longer than one word. It was like he treated words like money; he never wanted to give too much away.

Teachers would often beg him to be more descriptive with his answers. He always answered yes, then silence. Then, after a moment, as the teacher expected a little more elaboration, they'd eventually give up and move on. Either way, the guy had the vocabulary of a five-year-old. I had no idea why she liked him.

"We're here," Trick yelled, pointing to the main entrance. I looked up and the three of us stared at the huge archway over the road. The robot face lit up and smiled down at us. We had arrived at Future World! The motto always got me. *'Live the future, today.'* I wished I lived in the future; maybe I could have taken some pill that would make into a super athlete. Trick's dad slowed the car to the roundabout and eased us into the parking lot. We were early, but there were already hundreds of cars ahead of us. A parking attendant waved our car into an empty spot. A futuristic character called Nebo looked down from us on a light pole.

"Remember where we parked!" Trick's dad told us.

"Hey, the bus is coming!" Lily yelled. The four of us ran to the nearby bus stop as if our life depended on it so we could catch a ride to the main entrance. We didn't need to kill ourselves; there was a bus every few minutes. Trick's dad followed calmly behind us. The bus came to a stop, and we jumped on board. Futuristic dance music pumped through the bus speakers, making us even more anxious to get to the front entrance. I felt like I was going to float out of my seat. As the entrance approached, a robot mascot with a golf club marched toward us handing out flyers.

"Talk about a lame costume," Trick whispered to me as he twisted around the robot while chasing Lily and his dad. I zipped when I should have zagged and ran straight into the robot. He had a better center of

gravity, since he barely moved, and I landed flat on my butt. I bet the mascot was laughing inside of his suit. I looked up and saw he had his hand outstretched. I went to grasp it to be pulled up, but he shook his head. I looked at the flyer in his hand.

*Great — here I am on my butt, and he wants me to take his stupid piece of paper. I wonder if my sister put him up to this. I took his piece of paper, and the mascot quickly disappeared, chasing after a couple of giggling girls. The flyer said: Mega Golf World! The world's craziest miniature golf course. Challenge your friends to the most unique golfing challenge in Future World.*

"Are you coming?" Lily yelled from the admissions booth.

\*

*Future Foods Emporium – 1:00 p.m.*

Trick's dad had forced us to take a lunch break, although the three of us could have gone down the robot space tunnel rollercoaster for a third time.

"That ride was intense!" I exclaimed, shoveling fries down my throat and swallowing a chocolate shake.

"Can you not talk with your mouth full? I don't need to see your meal. Gross!" Lily complained.

"But he's right. And the lines are so short, we barely had to wait twenty minutes to get back on again," Trick added.

"Are you guys going to try another part of the park this afternoon? I'm getting bored of watching you go down the same rides," Trick's dad asked. Before we could answer, his phone rang, and he motioned with his finger to stay put while he took the call. He stepped away from the noise of the restaurant. Trick gave me a nudge.

"Guess who just showed up?" He pointed across the room. "Lily's boyfriend just arrived!"

"What?" Lily seemed confused by the comment and looked over.

"It's One Word Mike!" the two of us yelled gleefully. Now, just to make this clear, Mike was not Lily's boyfriend. They barely talked to each other. I mean, he barely talked, period. But we loved to tease Lily, and we loved it when she reacted so strongly.

"Whatever. He's just a boy in our school." She scowled but didn't look away.

"He's so dreamy," Trick mocked, holding his face between his hands.

"And so strong," I added while trying to make my eyes as big as possible to stare at Mike. A French fry hit my forehead. As the ketchup dripped down my face, I started to realize that I might have pushed it too far. Trick did not make the same realization.

"Hey, Mike, over here," he yelled. He gestured wildly to our table, and Lily began to look for a place to hide. A wide-open cafeteria didn't offer her many options and she couldn't hide in the washroom since she would have to go right by him. Mike was over to us in seconds. Trick became our official spokesperson for the group.

"What's going on?" Trick put his hand out for a high five.

"Dude." A corresponding slap.

"You been here all morning?"

"Yo." A reflective nod.

"This place is the best. I could stay here all day."

"Always." Mike's long hair came over his eyes as he nodded again.

Lily looked at him out of the corner of her eyes.

"You know everybody?"

"Sup?" *Was that two words?* I gave him a thumbs up (*dork alert*) while Lily gave him a half smile.

"What's your favorite ride?" Trick asked, and I leaned forward, anticipating that he would have to use more than one word.

"Coaster." He indicated outside the windows and gave a big smile. Across the restaurant, a couple of Mike's friends pointed at the door. He nodded toward them and looked back to us.

"Later." He waved and worked his way into the crowd out toward the door.

"Wait!" Lily yelled, but her voice was swallowed by the noise of the restaurant. If Mike heard her, he didn't turn around, and few seconds later, he was gone with his friends.

"Was that your one-word goodbye to Mike?" Trick teased.

"Shut up!" She punched him hard on the arm.

"Ow!" He rubbed it, and I knew it must have stung. He looked ready to retaliate when I shook my head. Lily's face was conflicted; I think she liked Mike, but she didn't want us to know about it. I changed the subject.

"Where to next?" I dumped my food tray items in the garbage, pulled out my theme park map, and the three of us stepped outside. The sun was hot, and it took a second for my eyes to adjust to the brightness.

"Where's my dad?" He looked around the crowd of people. His dad waved to us and began to follow while talking on his phone.

"Let's go to the mountain coaster!" Trick pointed to the map.

"No way, we just did that one. You guys promised we could go to the Robo Zoo. Come on, Tyler, you're the tiebreaker. Where to next?" Lily asked.

The sun was in my eyes, and unlike Trick, I didn't wear any sunglasses. As the glare faded, a sign ahead caught my attention.

## Mega Golf World

I opened my pocket and pulled out the flyer from the park's entrance.

This was what the mascot at the entrance had been pushing. For some reason, I couldn't take my eyes off the course. A cornucopia of flashing lights dazzled my senses. I walked forward like a moth drawn to the light. A robot on an overhead wire sailed past my head, yelling at me.

"Come play! Come play! Once you enter, you have to stay!" As I walked toward the gate, the fake ground shook, knocking me to the side. The robot returned, sailing overhead again.

"Watch out! Watch out! If you are slow to play, I have to shout!" it yelled. Trick's hand stopped me from going forward.

"You want to play mini golf?" He asked. I could feel the word "lame" hiding in his words.

This wasn't mini golf; this was controlled mayhem. The course was set up to distract the player, creating challenges to make it nearly impossible to get the ball in the hole. The sounds, the lights, the props jumping out to scare you. You had to be insane to want to play this. And yet I did.

"Absolutely! Are you guys coming?" I knew my best friends would follow me in. They both looked at each other and they each made a face like they were talking telepathically. I could tell they were less than enthused. I didn't care. I just knew that I had to go in.

"When's the last time you played?" Lily asked as we approached the main desk.

"Maybe when I was five," I answered. "It was before Dad spent most of his summers away training and we had an afternoon together. I think I lost three golf balls and threw up my cotton candy on the last green."

"Sounds like a wonderful time," Trick mocked.

"Funny thing is, it was." I thought any memory was pleasant, since time had always been scarce with my dad.

Across the counter was a dozen of metal golf clubs for putting. A wire basket of well-used multicolored balls was stacked on the right with a pencil and scorecards. Everything a player could want.

"Can I help you?" We turned. An older guy (well, older than Trick's dad) approached. He was tall, thin, and wore the ugliest pair of golf pants I had ever seen. It was a rainbow of hideous plaid colors going in random directions. You could spill your meal on them and never notice the stains. His head was bald, but it looked like all his hair had moved to his face.

"Can we grab a club?" Trick motioned to the counter.

"You can." He swung behind the counter. "If you want to play?"

"Well, duh, why else would we be here?" Trick countered.

"To see the beauty of the course. The lie of the greens. The countless obstacles that will bring a player to their knees." The three of us looked at each other. Was this guy for real?

"Do you work here?" Lily asked as the man began to search through the ball basket.

"Not really," he answered, only half paying attention to us. He tossed a couple of balls into the garbage.

"Then what do you do?" I asked sincerely. He stopped fishing through the defective golf balls and looked at me with interest. He stared deep into my eyes.

"I design the best mini golf courses in the world. Not the state, not the country — the world!" He raised his arms into the air to validate his claim. "Everything you see on this course today comes from here." He pointed to his head.

Okay, this guy was a bit high on himself.

"Cool. Bet you could walk us through the course and show us how to get a low score," Trick suggested.

The old dude raised an eyebrow, as if Trick was asking an unusual question. If he was going to brag, he should show us around. "I don't think I have the time."

"But you're just throwing away golf balls," Lily mentioned. "Come on." His eyes softened at her request.



"How can I refuse such a lovely lady and her friends? Come. I will introduce you to the magic of mini golf." He grabbed four clubs, and we followed behind him. As we turned the corner, it felt like we had stepped into another planet.

The golf greens were silver, with metallic edging that reflected the sunlight. At the start of each green, there was a robot head that spoke to the golfers before you shot. To the right, one of the greens was at an angle, which seemed to make it impossible to get the ball in the hole. In the center of the course, a huge rocket ship was stationed directly over the hole.

"Now that's going to be impossible." Trick pointed at the same green.

"Everything is possible," the old guy stated. "The hole can't beat you — only you can beat you."

"That's very Zen," I answered. He looked at me strangely, as if he couldn't tell whether I respected him or if I was mocking him. I wasn't sure myself.

"Let me show you something about the game of golf. You, sunglasses. Take a shot." He gave Trick a putter and a ball and motioned to the first hole. Trick put his ball down and sized up the green. It was long, with several sand traps through the middle. Each side sloped toward the center, and if you shot too lightly, you would automatically fall into the trap. The edges on the green were very low, so if you shot too hard, you would go off the green and take an extra stroke.

"You're taking too long," the robot head squawked at the start. Trick made a motion with his club, as if he was going to let the robot know

what he thought. The old dude met his eyes as if to say, *knock my robot's head off and I will do the same to you.* Trick got the message and tapped the ball. It went about halfway and then rolled into the sand trap.

"It's impossible!" he whined.

"Next." The old dude motioned to Lily.

"Sure," she answered, "on one condition."

"Okay?" He looked puzzled.

"Tell us your name."

He smiled at her request. "Call me Arc." He gestured grandiosely.

"Seriously, dude," Trick answered sarcastically. "That's like a rapper or wrestler name. How did you get it?"

"I'm an engineer by trade, and I work a lot with mechanical objects. People saw me working with an arc welder so much that they just decided to call me Arc after that."

"I like it," Lily piped up. "Any tips, Mr. Arc?"

He smiled again. I think he liked the way she talked to him, almost in a grand daughterly way. He motioned to the right side.

"Try to shoot up that side; it's an easier lie than what sunglasses took."

Lily focused, took her time (but not too long for the robot to chirp), and shot her ball. It sailed long, farther than Trick's shot, but still landed in a far sand trap.

"Better." Lily seemed pleased with result. "Tyler..." She motioned to me. I stepped up to the green and considered my options. Both approaches taken by Lily and Trick had ended in failure, and there didn't seem any

reason to repeat them. But unless you hit the perfect speed to prevent going into the sand trap or spin off the green (which would take a hundred shots of practice), there had to be another option. I looked and looked. It was like I could break down the visual world into physics equations. And then I saw it, the calculation that would work.

I banked the ball off the right side so that it sailed forty-five degrees to the next barrier and then banked off that until it barely missed the next sand trap. It had enough momentum to sail pass the final sand traps until the level part of the green.

"Lucky shot!" Trick commented.

Arc raised an eyebrow. "Interesting mechanics. How did you know the angles?"

"Physics," I replied, as if that was answer enough. He raised his other eyebrow but said nothing as we finished the green. Lily wrote our scores.

"Ready for number two?" Lily beckoned to the next hole.

"Let's skip this," Arc suggested, "and try hole number five." The three of us looked at each other.

"Okay," I replied as the four of us scooted around a family playing on green three.

"This guy's kind of creepy, don't you think?" Trick whispered to me.

"Yeah. But how cool is it to have the designer of the course walk around with us."

We stepped up to the fifth green, which was a futuristic moon walk. The green was littered with craters that you had to navigate around

before landing in a spaceship. In each crater, different objects appeared to jump up at different intervals with a telltale burst of air.

"This looks easy enough." Trick put his ball down. "Just stay away from the holes." He hit his ball lightly along the edge and went around several holes, just resting before a large crater. Trick smiled and was about to make a comment when a hand reached out from the crater and took the ball. Seconds later, the ball rolled out a hole on the side to the front of green.

"Looks like Martians took your ball!" the robot at the start of green jeered. Both Lily and I giggled while Arc looked smug.

"Thanks for testing the green." Lily motioned for him to step aside. She hit her ball and put herself right behind a big boulder. "I may have to take an extra shot to the hole, but it's better than having my ball taken away." She looked at me. "Okay, superstar, show me how to beat this hole."

I looked at the green, my mind focused on the task. The world became quiet, outside noises disappeared, and all I could hear was the sound of my breathing. The course became a series of angles and possible trajectories based on the type of shot I could take. It felt like I was doing my physics homework. Which I loved. Unfortunately, as I saw each shot executed in my head, the same result played over again and again. Each failed shot was a flashing red. Maybe this was an impossible hole. Then something Trick had said resonated with me. I played the shot in my mind. Then I knew what to do.

I stepped up the green. It may have been my imagination, but all three of them seemed to be keenly interested. I looked ahead and shot my ball directly into the main crater.

"Hah! You messed up pal," Trick yelled, watching my ball rolling to disaster. I put my finger over my mouth. The ball rolled straight in the crater and disappeared.

"Sorry, Tyler. That probably adds an extra stroke," Lily said. Then the hand shot up, and my ball flew high in the air. It came down behind the row of craters and rolled toward the flag. My friends were dumfounded, but Arc just smiled and stroked his chin.

"Very smart. How did you know?"

"I wasn't sure, but I noticed the trajectory when the hand comes up and figured why try to evade the craters when I could use them to my advantage. It's all just physics." For once, I felt really good about my skills. But all of that changed seconds later.

"Well look here — if it isn't the Loser Patrol with Tyler the Terrible." And just as quickly, all my good feelings disappeared as Zac and the D brothers arrived.

My stomach felt sick; even the summer wasn't safe from these guys. The three of them had walked up behind us. None of them had golf clubs. They must have seen us from the main walkway.

"Actually, Zac, Tyler is ripping up this course. He's a natural. I bet he can beat you." I turned to Trick and gave him a look to shut him up.

"Really?" Zac laughed. "Maybe you'd like to play some real competition. Hey, jerk wad, give me your club?" He took it from Trick, and his two buddies crowded around the next hole. Zac looked at Arc. "Who's the old guy? Are you playing mini golf with your dad?" He laughed, and Dave and Don acted like it was the funniest thing they had heard all day.

"I designed this course, and I don't remember inviting you to join us." He held his hand as if to give the club back to Trick. Zac wasn't fazed; I had seen him talk back to almost everyone at our school. Our principal was about the only one who put him in his place.

"Is this your way of backing out, Tyler? You're such a loser that you get some old guy to fight your battles. Maybe I should play him?" Zac taunted.

I gritted my teeth. I felt more confident now than I ever had, and I wasn't going to let this bully spoil my good mood.

"One hole," I said. "Winner gets to stay. Loser goes packing."

"Wooooohhh!" Dave shrilled.

Zac stared at him and then looked back at me, less than impressed. "Deal."

"You go first," I said and stepped back from the sixth hole. He looked at me warily, took Trick's ball, and dropped it on the green.

Now, I'll be the first guy to tell you I couldn't stand Zac. He was arrogant, rude, and thought the world revolved around him. But the reason he acted like he was the best was that he back everything up. He was good at every sport he did. I had no doubt that he would be good at mini golf. I just hoped that for once, I was better.

Zac sized up the green; he wasn't just a dumb jock, he could plan out his moves. This green was tricky — there was a teeter-totter halfway down. If you hit it right, you would travel right over a water trap. Miss it and you would have to take the long way around, taking a couple of extra strokes. He tapped it easy — not enough to make the teeter-totter but

close enough to make it on his second shot. But his ball was right in front of me to block my shot.

"Go ahead," I offered. "You can take your second shot. I'll play through afterward."

"No," Zac replied. "You have to go. You let me go first. That's the risk you take. Move me out of the way or play around me." My mouth dropped. Whatever momentum I thought I had evaporated. Maybe I could hit a few lucky shots, but I didn't know the rules. Zac had outplayed me with one stroke.

"He is correct," Arc offered. "According to the WMF, you will have to look at other options to reach the hole."

"WMF? When did this become a wrestling federation?" Trick asked.

"World Mini-Golf Federation," Arc said without a trace of humor, "is an officially sanctioned body that governs the rules of miniature golf."

"Yeah, what he said," said Zac. He was just glad he could play dirty and be fully sanctioned to do so.

"Wow, this is even nerdier than I thought," replied Lily.

I looked at my shot. Zac had blocked the shortest way, so I would have to go around him. I measured my shot accordingly and lined up.

"Getting old over here," Zac yelled just as I was about to take my shot.

"Hey, shut up!" Trick yelled. He instantly regretted his comments as Dave and Don took a step forward.

"Enough! No more distraction, or this player," Arc pointed to Zac, "will get green card and an automatic stroke for penalty for poor sportsmanship."

"Green card?" Don asked. "Zac's not from Mexico."

"No more questions. If you bothered to read the rules, the green card is the first penalty card starting with green, then blue, yellow, and red," Arc answered.

"Like soccer but with more colors," Lily added.

"Exactly." Arc nodded towards her.

I scanned the green and looked at the angles. I mentally calculated the shot I would need to make. I hit the ball. I kissed the side of the green, went past Zac's ball and close to the corner of the teeter-totter. It wasn't the quickest way, but it was the best shot with what I had. Zac raised an eyebrow as if he was impressed but wouldn't dare give a compliment.

He prepared his second shot. It was tricky, because if he didn't hit it straight, the ball would fall off the teeter-totter into the water trap below.

"You can do it, Zac!" Dave yelled.

"Shut up!" Zac answered.

He slapped the ball a bit too hard, and it wobbled halfway across before falling off the teeter-totter. But with typical Zac luck (unlike mine), the ball's forward momentum hit a small rock in the water and skipped out onto the green. Zac played entirely cool.

"Oh, yeah. I meant to do that! Come on, nerd boy, try to top that." And a funny thing happened. Even with his confidence, I knew it was his



dumb luck that had kept him in the game. I was becoming motivated to beat him once and for all. I looked at my options. A safe shot would bring my ball close, and I could probably hit it in the hole in another stroke. But I was willing to take a risk. It was stupid to go for it; the last time I had played miniature golf was as a kid, and now suddenly I was taking chances that someone with years of experience would only try.

"Going to need to start shaving soon," Zac commented.

"Leave him alone!" Lily countered.

"Guess a girl has to defend a loser like Tyler," Dave bellowed.

"Can you guys shut up?" Trick yelled.

"Why don't you try to make us?" Don waved his hand. Suddenly my confidence evaporated as every doubt from school came back to haunt me. For years, these guys had been on my case, always there to point out my mistakes. Maybe I didn't deserve to be good at anything. I would always be perpetual loser, someone my dad would be disappointed in.

"Enough!" Arc yelled, and all of us knew he meant business. None of us wanted to mess with an adult, especially one we barely knew. "This is not the place to play childish games!" which was funny, because we were at a miniature golf course in a middle of an amusement park. He looked at me. "Take the shot."

I looked down the green, nervous and unsure but willing to try. I pulled my club back, took the swing...

"Loser! Dave yelled.

...and I sliced the ball right into the water for an extra stroke. Zac then hit his ball, and it rolled into hole. He had won. Again. Just like he did at everything in life. And I had lost. Just like I always did. Our roles were

set, and no matter how hard I tried to change things, everything remained the same.

“Step off, loser!” Zac jerked his thumb back to the entrance.

“Come on.” Lily tried to console me.

“Let’s go back to the roller-coaster,” Trick suggested, trying to divert my attention. I looked toward Arc, but he had already walked back to the start and disappeared into an office. He obviously had no time for a loser. I was a perfect zero. Again.

## Chapter 5

### Lessons

*"You seem quiet, dear. How was the amusement park?" my mother asked. I was moping on the couch, staring off into space. I didn't answer, preferring to wallow in my misery. My mom waited a few more seconds and then asked again. "It's okay if you don't want to talk about it. I'll understand."*

The problem was that I kind of did want to talk about it. With Dad away so often, Mom was really my confidante when things weren't going well. I sighed and took her up on her offer.

*"Are you and Dad ever disappointed in me?" I looked up, seeing if her face gave a different reaction from her words.*

*"Disappointed? Never. You are a great student, son, brother, friend. What would we ever be disappointed in?"*

*"Seriously?" I countered. "Dad was such an athlete in school. Look at the trophies in his office. He won every competition he entered. He's a natural. He's fast, strong, and coordinated. Everything I'm not." Mom gave me a look as if she discounted everything I just said. She sat beside me on the couch. "Don't even think of disagreeing with me," I countered before she had a chance to respond.*

*"I'm not." She surprised me. "Your dad was an amazing athlete in school. He set many records, and his name is all over the trophy shelf at the high school."*

"If this a pep talk, it's a major fail," I said icily, turning my head away from her to the window. I felt her hand on my shoulder.

"But he struggled with his courses. He was never an honor student like you and had to work hard just to get a passing grade. Tyler, if there is one thing I've learned in life, it's that you can't measure yourself by the success of others. You need to find those things that make you happy and work hard. You don't see your sister trying to be a mini version of your dad."

"Aw, Mom. She's a girl." Then I realized she probably could beat me at a lot of sports.

"I'm sorry if you feel bad about yourself and wallow in all the things you aren't good at. I might as well give you a blanket, and you can go hide in your bed," she smiled at me.

"Mom!" I yelled, but I partially smiled too. She had a way of cheering me up. "I just feel like such a failure for Dad. There is nothing I'm good at. I couldn't get a trophy at a sport if I was the only one competing."

"Enough of this pity party. Go help your sister with your chores."

"Aw, Mom!"

"Don't shirk your duties. When your father is away, we all have to pitch in."

"Fine. Where is she?"

"In the kitchen washing dishes."

"I hate washing dishes," I blurted. My mom gave me a cold stare that made me regret my comment.

"None of us like washing dishes. Enough of your sass. Go. Now."

I walked into the kitchen knowing I was a hair away from being punished. I saw Kayleigh at the sink, spraying water at a dish.

"Can I wash?" I asked as a dishtowel was flung at my head. As usual, I missed it and had to pick it off the floor.

"Too late," Kayleigh said. "You were so busy crying on the couch that I started without you."

"Well, I doubt you had a day like mine," I started.

"Really?" She gave me a stare that resembled Mom's. "You got to go to an amusement park with your friends while I had to stay home. Tell me about your horrible day?"

You know, she might only be eight years old, but sometimes she was as smart as an eighteen-year-old. I realized that in perspective, my day had been pretty good except for losing the miniature golf game.

"Still waiting," Kayleigh said and sprayed me a little with the dish hose.

"Okay, I might have been a bit dramatic."

"A bit. You mope around like the world is about to fall in." She grabbed a spoon from the sink and started speaking into it. "Oh, look at me," she wailed, doing one of worst impersonations of me I had ever seen. "I can't win at anything."

"I do not," I countered, less than convincing as I dried another dish.

"I have no friends." Kayleigh pretended tears were falling from her eyes then stopped. "Except I have two friends that I do everything with. I'm so confused."

"Mom," I yelled without much enthusiasm.

"I get such high marks in school, but I'm always miserable." Okay, her impersonation of me was getting better.

"Wait until you're my age. You'll find it's not so easy."

"Oh, life is so hard for me," Kayleigh wailed, trying to sound like me.

"Stop it!" I flung some water at her.

"No, you stop it," and she threw a sponge at me. I took some soapy water and threw it right at her face. I heard the doorbell sound, and Mom walked to our front door.

"It burns," Kayleigh cried. "I can't feel my face. I'll never see again." Kayleigh's dramatics were world-class; as much as she mocked me, she was ten times worse. I was sure she would major in theater when she was older.

"Enough!" Both of us jumped a little because we hadn't realized Mom was in the kitchen with us. "Tyler — stop being so sensitive. Kayleigh — stop antagonizing your brother."

"But Mom," we cried in unison.

"But nothing. I will finish the dishes. Kayleigh, go clean your room. Tyler, you have company."

"Oh, no." Kayleigh put her hands on either side of her face. "Tyler will have someone else to cry about how tough his life is." I threw the dish towel at her, but she was too fast as she ran through the door.

"Tyler..." Mom motioned to the living room and front door.

"Who is it?" I quizzed.

"A Mr. Jordan. An older man, said he met you and your friends at the amusement park today."

"Really?" My face must have shown surprise, because my mom had to prompt me.

"Yes, and he assured me that you guys did nothing wrong. Is he hiring for a job?"

"I don't know," I answered truthfully.

"Well, if you need me, I'm here in the kitchen." I walked out into the living room and noticed Arc sitting on my couch. I wasn't sure what to say to him and had no idea why he was there.

"Ah, hi." I waved. "How did you find me?"

"You don't realize how sophisticated the security measures are at the park. Your picture was taken when you entered the gate and you filled out your contact information when you bought your day pass. The rest was easy when I mentioned you could be a security concern," he joked.

"You did what?" I didn't like his ability to find me so easy but decided to let him continue.

"So, is it true that you had never played miniature golf before today?" he asked.

"Not quite. I haven't played since I was a little kid." He waited for me to elaborate. I continued. "I played once when I was five."

"How old are you now?" he asked.

"I'm eleven. I remembered when my dad was back from work, and he took me out one weekend. I never forgot because I shot the golf ball

into a small pool over and over. My dad was patient with me, but eventually another family asked if they could play through. I wasn't very good."

"But today you were good. Excellent, actually. Why do you think that is? Are you good at other sports?"

I looked down at my skinny frame. "I am the opposite of being good at sports. I'm so bad that when they pick teams, it's a foregone conclusion that I will be picked last. No matter how bad the other players are."

"So, tell me how you did it? How did you evaluate the green to hit the ball into the hole?" He stared at me as if his eyes were burrowing into my brain. Did he think I was cheating? Or he thought I lied and played mini golf all the time. Or used a remote-control ball. Or mind control. Maybe he thought I was trying to read his mind right now.

"Are you trying to see what I am thinking?" he asked. I almost fell off the couch. "I wouldn't bother. You'd be disappointed if you could read my thoughts."

"Actually," I stammered, "I feel like this is a joke. Like you're going to get my hopes up and then when I get excited, tell me what a loser I am."

"Wow. You do have some self-confidence problems. Too bad that kid Zac couldn't lend you some of his. He seems to have plenty to spare." His comments made me laugh.

"Zac is good at everything. He has good reason to be confident."

"He's good now because he developed early. In a few years, once other boys catch up, he'll be another player on the team. He'll probably get worse, because he's lazy and doesn't work hard to get better."



I stared at him. "Are you some type of predictor of the future?"

"Hardly." He stroked his beard. "I've been around enough young people to know who has promise and who won't make it."

"And which one am I?" I leaned in to hear his response.

He looked thoughtful and was silent for a second. "I'm not sure yet, but you intrigue me. I don't know if you have raw talent or just beginner's luck. I'd like to see you matched up against some pros. What are you doing this weekend?"

"I don't think I have anything, but I'd have to ask my mom."

"You ask her if you can play in the Orlando Invitational on Saturday."

"This weekend?" I gulped. "But how will I prepare? There's no time. Is there a fee? How will I pay it? Do I need my mom's permission?"

"Whoa, slow down." Arc seemed to take pleasure in my excitement. "Yes. I will help. Yes. I will pay it. Yes. And I'm sure she will give it." He smiled back at me as I went over in my mind the answers he had given to my questions.

"Okay. This seems to be too good to be true. What do you want in return?"

He scratched his chin as if mulling over several demands in his mind. A few seconds passed, and just as I was about to remind him again, he spoke. "You'll be my walking billboard. If you are successful, you will advertise my engineering services. In return, I agree to train you. I want to learn more about how you analyze the angles. If there is a way I can

duplicate your process for others, I can train other miniature golfers using the same method.”

“And make money?” I nodded as if seeing his motivation to help.

“And make bucket loads of money. If I can figure out how you do it,” he pointed to my head, “I could revolutionize the miniature golf circuit.”

“What do you mean miniature golf circuit? Miniature golf is just something kids play with their parents.”

Arc shook his head and moved closer to me. “You are about to enter the world of a sport people know nothing about. Everybody thinks miniature golf is a kid’s game with silly obstacles. There are prizes, news coverage, teams, and prize money. The Europeans are years ahead of us, but we still have some good tournaments in North America. Miniature golf requires a fine line of athleticism, high mental IQ, and the ability to focus on a single objective when the world is watching you. It is like golf, but with so many more obstacles. More challenges than you could ever imagine.”

My head was swimming. I had gone from Loser Ville (population me) to an invitation to a tournament. Could today have been a fluke?

“Just to prove today wasn’t just luck,” Arc started — I swore this guy could read my mind — “I need to have you out to practice. To make sure I can polish your skills.”

“Can I bring my friends?”

“Absolutely.” He got up to leave. “If they make you play better, I want them around. But if they distract you, they’ll have to go.” He grabbed the door handle to leave.

“They won’t.”

"Say goodbye to your mom and make sure you have her permission to train. Here is where you need to meet me." He handed me a piece of paper. Very old school.

"Thanks, I really appreciate this."

"Tyler," he looked down at me, "you seem like a good kid. Don't let other kids get to you. If you can focus on the game, you'll go far." He waved and walked down my front driveway.

I blinked as he drove off. Was a flash in the pan or could I make it as a miniature golf player?

## Chapter 6

### Training

"He wants us to go where?" my mother exclaimed. She was less than impressed by the address Arc had given us. It was an older industrial park in Orlando; many of the businesses were construction or manufacturing. Some of the signs were weather-worn, and a couple of buildings looked closed up.

"He said you could drop the three of us off and we would begin my training for the miniature golf tournament this weekend."

"Here in this place?" She waved incredulously at a dilapidated building. I looked at Lily and Trick, who just shrugged. Kayleigh had no problem sharing her opinion from the back seat.

"I won't send my kid in an area like this," she quipped, doing her impersonation of our mother which sent the car into a panic.

"Keep your opinion to yourself!" I barked back at her.

"Tyler do not yell at your sister," my mother screamed, turning the wheel a bit too sharp.

"You know, Mrs. Martin," Trick started, "my dad said you can be a bit of a helicopter parent. Maybe you are hovering too close to Tyler.

"Shut up, Patrick!" me and my mother yelled in unison.

"Hey look — we're here." Lily pointed.

The warehouse was the one bright spot in the industrial park, newly painted, and a big, glowing sign in the window saying, "Jordan's Course Design,". Next to the building was a beautiful Bentley parked with a couple big pickup trucks in the parking lot. I took my mother's silence as approval of the place. We parked, but before we could get out, she locked all the doors.

"Mom!"

"One second, Tyler." She looked at me and scanned my friends. "Kayleigh and I are coming inside so I can see this place and talk to Mr. Jordan myself. If I don't approve, then I am not leaving the three of you here. Is that clear?"

"But this is my big chance," I cried.

"Do I make myself clear?" she repeated and fixed her gaze on me.

"Crystal," I answered, my head down. Mom unlocked the doors, and the five of us went inside.

We walked into a reception area where an older lady greeted us like long-lost friends.

"Ah, you must be the Tyler I have heard about. Welcome, I'm Lorna Jordan. I'm George's sister. You and your friends are welcome to spend the day here if you like. So are you, Ms. Martin." She coaxed my mother towards a kitchen. "There are free snacks and drinks. I'm been even known to keep a bottle of wine here for the adults, if you so indulge." She winked at Mom. My mom seemed a bit taken aback by the hospitality.

"Lorna, before I leave my son and his friends behind, I need to see the whole building and meet Mr. Jordan. You understand, don't you?"

"Completely," She smiled. "Although you are welcome to stay, I want to you know that your son and friends are as safe as can be. Please let me give the grand tour." She ushered us down a long hallway that had semitransparent glass on either side. Lily pointed at the staff working on computers.

"What are they doing?"

"This room is for the drafters, the digital architects of our miniature golf course. They will design 3D representations of every golf hole that has been ever designed. They manipulate them, add slopes and obstacles, and try to create the next great miniature golf green."

"Hey — he's playing video games." Trick pointed to a computer screen. The player waved to us as he took a practice golf swing.

"Actually, he's working. He modifies the course in the computer and hits the ball, adding slope, wind, temperature, and so on to see how it affects the chances of putting it into the hole."

"Wow, I want to work here," Trick said enthusiastically.

"Temperature affects the game?" my mom asked.

"Absolutely. A ball can move faster or slower depending on the heat and humidity. The real professionals have different golf balls depending on the weather conditions. A heavier ball can be used for a windy day."

"What are those guys doing?" Lily pointed to other side of the hall. There were several carpenters cutting boards and nailing rims onto future golf holes.

"That is the practical side of our work. The woodworking and metal shop. They make practical elements of what is designed on the computer. You can't sell a design until you have tried out it first. Sometimes what

looks cool on a computer is a bust in real life. Besides, there are a lot of professional golfers that demand new and improved golf greens every year.”

“Wait a second,” my mom interrupted, forcing our group to stop.

“Are you telling me that there are professional miniature golf players?” She looked like she couldn’t believe it.

“Absolutely. High six figures once you throw in sponsorships and prize money. A good mini golfer can make a successful living, even if you don’t see them on television every weekend.”

Trick’s jaw dropped. “Can I make a living as a caddy for a professional mini golfer?”

“What are you going to carry, my one putter?” I answered sarcastically.

Mrs. Jordan shook her finger. “Not true. You can have many different putters to go with your many different golf balls. But no, a miniature golf course rarely needs a caddy.”

“Where do most professional miniature golfers come from?” Lily asked.

“There is a World Mini Golf Sports Federation made up of thirty plus countries. Miniature golf is especially big in Europe. Seven out of the top-ten ranked mini golfers are European. They take it seriously, and most of our sales are over there. The United States has the best courses in the southern part of the country, especially around here in Orlando.”

“What’s at the end of the hall?” I pointed to the double doors.

“This is where all the real magic happens.” She opened the doors, and we stepped through.

The warehouse opened into a vast area the size of a small football field. The ceiling reached about three stories high with large skylights. In the interior was dozens of miniature golf greens of varying degrees of difficulty. Every type of obstacle was here, from windmills to mountains to rivers. There were jungles to deserts to snow to beaches; it was like every kind of environment was represented. My smile was wide. This was like all the best miniature golf courses rolled into one.

Directly in front of me, Arc emerged from a hole in the ground. He exited through a volcano and stepped toward us. "Welcome to our workshop, where dreams are made." He walked to my mom and shook her hand.

"Is all of this yours?" my mom asked.

"Yes. My company has been developing the top miniature golf courses across the world for twenty-five years. I test every new course personally before I lend my name to it. My company owns dozens of courses around the world, and we develop lots of accessories for players."

"So, is teaching my son part of your business?" Mom asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Mom!" I yelled.

"That's okay," Arc answered and motioned us to sit at a boardroom table in the far corner of the warehouse.

"This is amazing," Trick exclaimed, barely able to focus. I pushed his jaw shut because he couldn't stop staring at our surroundings. Arc waited until everyone sat down before talking to my mother.

"Mrs. Martin, my business is built on the ability to build courses with something unique or challenging in its makeup. We create design leadership in the world of miniature golf. Most people don't take this world,"



he gestured with hands to encompass the warehouse, "seriously. They believe it's childish, that there is no real skill. Most believe, to take a word from these kids, that it is too 'old school.'" I cringed at his attempt to try to talk like a kid.

"That's kind of lame," Lily commented as if reading my mind.

"Let him finish." My Mom put a finger to her lips to prevent any further interruptions.

"I always felt that I was strong in identifying a future course or merchandise that has an edge or strength to succeed in the marketplace. When I saw Tyler play at one of my courses the other day, I watched a raw talent that I haven't seen in a while. I'm good at spotting talent and he may have that 'it' factor. The ability to see the green in a way few opponents can."

"Tyler — what do you have to say? Can you describe this ability that he sees in you?" my mom asked. I looked at her, Arc, and then the rest.

"Mom, I don't see anything in me that's special," I answered truthfully. "But when I played mini golf, I felt like everything that I learned in math and physics came into play. It's like I could see the different angles and results. I could visualize the result by dozens of possible club swings. It's hard to describe; but for once I felt comfortable making decisions."

"And Mr. Jordan, do you feel Tyler can become a very good miniature golfer? Maybe even a champion player?"

"I honestly don't know. I think Tyler has raw talent, but half of this game is mental. Based on my little experience with him, he seems to lack confidence. That can be a game-changer."

"Confidence," Kayleigh laughed, "is the opposite of Tyler."

"Shut up," I yelled, embarrassed.

"Enough, you two," my mother commanded. "Tyler, what do you want?"

"I want to be good at something. If Mr. Jordan says I have a chance at being good at mini golf, I want to try."

"Even if you fail?"

"Yes. Even if I fail." This time, my sister didn't have a smart comment, and both of my friends looked at me with pride. If miniature golf was my special skill, then I had to try. To show Dad that I could win at one sport.

"Then it's decided." Arc stood up. "Let me train him for the summer. See if he can compete at this weekend's tournament and make it to the next round.

"Are you going to push him to the limits? Make him climb mountains with rocks on his back?" Trick asked enthusiastically. "How about wrestling alligators? Jumping out of airplanes?"

"Trick!" I tried to correct him. "This isn't wax on and wax off. It's not the *Karate Kid*."

"Oh, it's that and so much more." Arc smiled.

"What?" my mother replied, panic creeping into her voice.

"Joking." Arc laughed. "Although your friend lives in quite a fantasy world. Maybe we should make him a trainer. See if he wants to follow you through his training regimen."

"Hah, that would teach him," Lily answered.

"What would this training actually entail?" my mom asked. Arc waved his hand around the warehouse. "All of this and everything you saw coming in. Miniature golf doesn't have a huge physical component to it. Yes, you should be in decent shape, but you don't need to run marathons or bench press hundreds of pounds to be successful. It's much more a mental game. You need to understand the course. Analyze the slope, measure the wind, go through dozens of shots in your mind before taking the one that will make you successful. If I have time, I will get into the ability to read your opponent's weaknesses."

"And Tyler can learn all of that here?" Kayleigh asked. For the first time, I felt she might be jealous of me. Almost.

"Only if he applies himself. If he doesn't work hard, then he won't learn." I looked at Arc, realizing that this was the opportunity I had wanted all my life. The one that could make me a winner in my dad's eyes.

"I feel like there is a catch?" my mom asked, bringing the excitement level down a notch.

"There always is," Arc nodded. "Tyler has to win. This week's tournament only takes the top-ten finishers to the next round. I will be sponsoring several players, including Tyler. But if he doesn't place, then my sponsorship and job end. If you aren't representing my products, then I'm not making money." The room became quiet as his statement sank in.

"A lot of pressure to put on a young boy," my mother asked.

"It is. And he doesn't have a lot of time to prepare. But there will be lots of other players his age with other sponsors under the same conditions. Tyler, I'm giving you an opportunity, but only you can decide if it's right for you."

All eyes were on me as I pondered my decision. I thought about my dad. He never shied away from a challenge, no matter how tough. If I asked myself, 'What would Dad do?' I knew the answer right away. This was my time.

"Can I Mom?" She smiled at me, and I knew her answer before she replied. "Yes!" I high-fived both Trick and Lily.

"Take Mr. Jordan's comments seriously. If he says you're not working hard, then it all ends. Understood?"

"Yes, Mom."

"You know this is a package deal." Trick stepped forward. "For Tyler to succeed, his friends need to come with him."

"Really?" Arc seemed amused.

"Absolutely. It's a nonstarter otherwise." Trick tipped his sunglasses and leaned forward while pointing back at me. "Tyler's a nervous wreck without Lily and me." He hesitated a second. "Well, mostly me." I saw Lily reaching for a golf club as if she was about to aim it at Trick's head. Arc put his hand up as if to stop this mock violence.

"Well, I do have some part-time openings in promotions. Maybe help at some charity events? Any chances the two of you are good in sales?" Before Trick could answer, Lily stepped forward.

"Sir, we'll make your products the hottest thing with kids. And trust me, we know what they like."

*Arc laughed at her bravado.*

*"What she said," Trick added, not able to top her.*

*"Then it's settled." He motioned for all of us into a huddle and proceeded to give us a big bear hug. "You three are in for the challenge of your lives!"*

*Everyone was excited and danced around the room. I couldn't help myself and gulped. Trick and Lily were my best friends; I was overjoyed that they would be here with me.*

*But I had to prove myself this weekend or all of this would come to an end.*

## Chapter 7

### Pretournament Blues

"You can't do it!" Arc yelled. I took the shot and missed for the fifth time. His courses were impossible. He shook his head. "This is your Achilles heel. You can't win this weekend unless you get over this."

"My what heel?" I answered, frustrated and tired. We had been practicing for hours, and it was getting me nowhere. He motioned to me to sit down. I put down my putter and sat on the green. Arc sat beside me.

"Do they teach you anything in school, or do you just search the Internet every time you have a question? Forget your noodle, just ask Google." He tapped the side of his head.

"The heel?" I asked again, waiting for him to get to the point.

"Do you know what Greek mythology is?"

"Yeah — bunch of gods who would do stuff to mess around with humans. I think I saw a couple of movies about it."

Arc shook his head at my response. "Well, for those who still read, Achilles was supposed to die young, so his mom did what any mother would do..."

"Wrap him up with bubble wrap and make sure he never leaves his house?" I offered, thinking of some of my classmates.

"Dip him in the rivers of the Styx, making him invulnerable to harm."

"Oh yeah, every mom has access to that," I replied sarcastically.

"Why was his heel weak?"

"Because she dipped him into the water, so her hand that was holding the foot was never dipped, exposing his one heel."

"Pretty dumb. She should have dipped her whole hand in, then she could have been covered as well."

Arc shook his head as if this line of conversation was going nowhere fast. "Listen, Tyler, you're a good kid. You have some talent. You're smart..."

"Keep it coming." I was enjoying his compliments.

"But you have a mental block that is going to make you fail every time. Not just in a miniature golf but in other parts of your life. Every time someone says something negative to you, you break down mentally. You fall apart. Everyone must face adversity. People will say mean things to put you down. Did something happen to you that made you so scared to lose?" He was silent and watched for my reaction. I thought about growing up with my sport failures.

"There is no big event," I said. "But did you have a dad who was great at everything? Winning every sports award possible. There is a shelf of trophies at my school, and I swear half of them have his name on them. I'm not built like him. And I can see that in my teachers' eyes, my friends, and family. I'll never be as good as him."

"Have you talked to him? I doubt he has won everything he has ever played. Losing is good. You learn from it. The best sports players in the world have always lost important games."

"But you have to win at something!" I yelled, becoming more emotional than I planned. "I've never won at anything! I've never come close."

Arc eyed me curiously. "I think you're afraid to win, Tyler. Losing's easy. You just don't have to try. You can make up excuses. No one expects anything else from you. Losing is what you know. Is being a sports hero like your dad really what you want?"

I stood up. I was shaking, so I took a few steps forward and then sat down again. I felt my eyes welling up, but I fought back the tears. "I just want to be good at one thing. One thing to prove I'm worthy of being my dad's son! So, he won't be embarrassed by me."

"So why sports? You seem like a smart kid. You could show him high marks or a science or math award."

"Because, I feel like I'm not his son unless I can excel at sports like him. I want him to be proud of me!"

"Based on how your mother's reaction, I think he already is. Where is he?"

"Training for the Olympics in Europe and Asia. Won't be back until after the summer is over."

"You miss him?" Arc didn't need me to respond; he could see the look on my face. "Come on, let's get out of here."

"Can I go home?" I asked, exhausted from talking and practicing.

"Yes, but we have one stop to make along the way."

Traffic was busy for a weekday, and I saw lots of license plates from other states. Why people came to Orlando in the summer, I would never understand. Arc was quiet but gave me a look every couple of minutes,



so I knew he was thinking about me. A lot of what he said made sense, even if I couldn't embrace it completely. We turned off the interstate and went towards a huge arena. The sign "Orlando Solar Bears" flashed out in digital letters. He was taking me to a hockey rink!

We parked and got out of the car.

"Miniature golf training isn't enough. Now you want to teach me to skate?"

"Be patient. I want to show you something inside." We walked in the main set of doors into what seemed a public skate. There were about a hundred kids with parents skating clockwise around the ice surface. Compared to the air outside, the air in the rink was refreshing. The ice machine must have been working overtime to keep things cool with the outside heat. Many of the Plexiglas boards were foggy with moisture. Arc steered me around a bunch of kids putting their skates on and took us to the glassed-in foyer where fans could watch the action in the rink. I noticed a picture on the wall of a man being hugged by a hockey player. He looked a lot like a younger version of Arc.

"Were you a hockey player?" I asked.

"No, and that's not me." He pointed to the picture. "That's my father." I looked at the picture again; it did look like it was taken a long time ago.

"Why is the hockey player so happy to see him?" I looked at the broad smile.

"My dad helped build the first refrigeration unit in the state. People forget how complicated it is to create a sheet of ice that will last in one of the hottest states in the country. Without my dad, there would have

been a lot of sports heroes who would never have gotten their start. Look at those kids out there." He pointed to the rink as several families were leaving the ice. "Many of them now have the opportunity to live their dream or just have fun."

"I would love to be a hockey star. The money, the fame. Everybody loves them." I sat while Arc nodded.

"But to me, the real heroes are the people who create the environments we play in. The rinks, stadiums, the fields. There is so much that goes into making these environments an ideal, fun place to be in. But most of us take it all for granted. My hero was my father, and I marvel at what he could create."

"Is that why the hockey player is hugging him?"

"Yes." Arc smiled. "Players could see the hero in my dad. That guy became a professional hockey player, and he always felt he owed his livelihood to my father's work."

"Talking about the past again?" said a voice from behind. I turned and saw a heavy-set man with flapping jowls and a red face. He held a tissue in his hands, and under his nose was red, like he had a perpetual cold.

"Always a pleasure to see you, Lester," Arc said coldly. By the sound of his voice, I could tell that wasn't true.

"And who is this young charge you have with you?" Not waiting for a response, Lester stuck out his hand. "My name is Mr. Prichard, I run this establishment and several other sport stadiums in the city."

"My name is Tyler. It's nice to meet you." I put out my hand, and it was immediately swallowed by Mr. Prichard's. This guy was big.

"Tyler is a summer intern. He's learning to become a star mini golfer," Arc said.

"Mini golf, yes — glad to hear that kid's business is still surviving. Why you could never graduate to an adult's sports, I'll never know." He motioned to the room as if pointing to the rink.

"Not everyone can have their parents' business handed to them," countered Arc. Okay, it was official; these old guys did not like each other.

Mr. Prichard made a sound between a laugh and cough. "It's not what you get, it's what you make of it," he countered.

"Can you tell me about this arena and how it was built?" I interrupted, trying to stop their back-and-forth banter. The two of them looked at each other as if waiting for one to start. I looked at another photo of a large man who seemed like a younger version of Mr. Prichard.

"Your dads knew each other. They were friends, weren't they?"

"They worked together," Arc answered.

"They were partners until his father broke their contract," returned Mr. Prichard.

"Which *his* father caused by lying," countered Arc.

"So, the two of you grew up together?" I asked.

"Yes," they replied in unison but refused to look at each other. They had been friends, and now they disliked each other. Something happened to them, and they had never gotten over it.

"Can I see some more of the arena?" I asked. The question was directed to Arc, but Mr. Prichard assumed I meant him and immediately beamed.

"Well, fortunately for you, I have a few minutes. Please follow me. I'll show you where all the magic occurs." We walked over to the press box, and he motioned me to sit down. Families were leaving the ice surface as the skating hour had ended. I was sitting between the two nemeses. "Do you know what happens when the ice is melted away?"

I knew this from going to a concert. "Concrete," I answered, proud of myself. "Then they cover it with ice."

"Correct, but how do they cover it with ice?" I didn't know.

"Let me answer that, Lester," Arc interrupted. "You see, there are pipes that run underneath the concrete. Thousands and thousands of feet, in a rink like this," he looked at Mr. Prichard, "the piping is plastic, but at a professional rink, it's made of steel to freeze more quickly."

"Which isn't as important here, because it is a community rink, which typically keeps its ice surface, but in a large facility that can have hockey one night and a concert the next, it is important to be able to freeze and unfreeze quickly," Mr. Prichard explained. "It is important to understand the business side of things." His look lingered on Arc.

"Is it water that freezes in the pipes?" I asked.

"No," said Arc, "what they use is a chemical called ethylene glycol, which has a lower freezing point than water.

"Does it look like water?" I asked.

"Not really; it is odorless, syrupy, and colorless. It's like antifreeze in your car, and you don't want to drink it. But if engineers like my father hadn't developed it, there would be no way a place like Orlando and many other warm cities could create an ice surface."

"And if people like my father hadn't created the business, then no one else could enjoy it." Mr. Prichard made his point.

"Then in reality, both of your fathers were responsible for allowing kids and adults to learn how to skate," I chipped in and watched the expression on their faces. They thought about my comment and were silent for a moment. Then Mr. Prichard changed the subject.

"So, George, why are you and Tyler here today? I assume the trip down memory lane is an added bonus?"

"Actually, we need to borrow your ice surface for a few minutes. If I remember your schedule, there is about thirty minutes before the next public skate?"

"Yes? Are you taking your miniature golf course to the ice?"

"That's possible." Arc raised his eyebrow, as if getting an idea.

"But no, I want to try something different with Tyler. Can I borrow the goalie board you use during the contests?" Now Mr. Prichard's eyebrows raised.

"Yes. But only if I get to watch," he smiled. We stood up and walked around the boards and onto the ice. I had skated a few times at birthday parties, but I was surprised at how slippery the ice was under my sneakers. Arc walked slowly but made small steps so as not to slip. Mr. Prichard followed us along the stands and pulled out a piece of wood from behind one of the benches. Arc walked over and then slid it down toward the net. He stood it up and tied a few small ropes through holes and lashed it to the net.

I looked over at Mr. Prichard and wondered what had happened to the two of them as kids that made them dislike each other so much. Why

had Arc brought me here if he knew he might run into Mr. Prichard? I felt something hard brush the back of my leg. I turned and was handed a hockey stick. There were five pucks lined up across the center line.

"Sorry, I don't play hockey."

"Not what I'm trying to test. Try to aim this puck at that small hole by the goalie's legs."

"I'll be lucky if I can hit the net, let alone into the hole."

"Just try," he encouraged and stepped back. I sighed. I didn't understand what this was supposed to prove. I pulled my stick back and slapped at the puck. The momentum was too much, and I lost my balance and landed right on my tailbone. It hurt. The puck moved about three feet.

"I didn't know this was a comedy act." Mr. Prichard slapped his knee. I glared at Arc, but he simply motioned for me to try again. I breathed in and concentrated on the angles. I took another shot. The puck traveled about halfway to the target and then stopped between the net and blue line.

"That's okay," Arc said. "You need to take several shots before you can understand how hard you have to shoot on the ice to make the full distance. Try again."

I shook my head, wondering what we were trying to accomplish. I looked at the cutout of the goaltender and shot the puck again. This time it was hard enough and clunked on the wood but did not go through the narrow hole.

"At least he can hit the target," Mr. Prichard yelled.

"Okay," Arc ignored his former friend, "now you have assessed the force needed, check the angles. Look at your stick and the hole." I nodded

and lined up the puck, making sure I shot from the exact same spot as last time. I looked at the angles, measuring the velocity required, checked the vectors, and calculated the resistance, all things that would make my Physics teacher proud. Part of me didn't realize that I was doing all this, and that made it cool. I shot the puck.

The puck traveled the length of the ice, heading straight to the net. It passed the blue line then between the two red circles as it approached the goalie's crease. *Thunk!* Right through the hole, only wide enough for the puck perfectly placed to go through into the back of the net.

"That was lucky!" Mr. Prichard jumped up and clapped. "I think I have only seen that happen twice in the halftime show. You have to hit it just right."

"Do it again," Arc commanded.

"You can't do that again. That's one in a thousand. I'll bet you twenty dollars he can't score twice." Mr. Prichard laughed.

"Deal," Arc replied, not even looking at his friend but focused on me. "Come on, Tyler, you can do this. Use your gift." He smiled at me, and all my doubt evaporated. Suddenly it didn't matter that I had come in last in laps around school. It didn't matter that I couldn't climb the rope course in gym. It didn't matter that I was picked last every time for dodgeball and was always the first one eliminated. I could do this.

I placed the puck in the exact same spot as before. I measured the angles once, twice, three times in my head. I knew how hard to hit the puck. I leaned back my stick. I aimed the puck.

"No way he can do that," a voice said from the stands. I looked up and saw a boy with his mother as they were getting their skates on.

"Kid got lucky once. He looks so skinny, I think the stick has more weight on it than him," an arena staff joked from the Zamboni.

"Come on, we got paying customers waiting," yelled Mr. Prichard. I took the shot, and the puck floated down the ice, just like last time. It passed the blue line, the red circles, and then hit the boards, totally missing the net.

"Looks like someone owes me some money." Mr. Prichard beamed. I looked dejectedly at Arc.

"I'm sorry I let you down. I got rattled."

"It's okay." He put his arm on my shoulder. "I just wanted to show you that your gift can excel at our things other than miniature golf. You are so much more than a kid who can see the angles. If you could just focus on the task and ignore the comments of others, you could accomplish a lot."

As we walked off the ice, I tried to measure his words. How could I succeed at anything in life as long as there were always people telling me I was going to fail?



## Chapter 8

### Go Big or Go Home

The gator circled greedily around its prey. Its tail swished silently through the muddy water, its movement invisible. The smell of meat filled its nostrils as it took a few seconds to enjoy the hunt before the meal. Then everything became quiet, and for a second it was almost as if the gator had disappeared. Then it leaped into the air, grabbing airtime that would make a basketball player jealous. The raw chicken on the pole never had a chance. It grabbed its meal and splashed back into its habitat to digest it. The crowd yelled its enthusiasm.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the state of Florida's miniature golf tournament has officially begun. We thank Zeus, our resident alligator, whose good luck starts the tournament each year. May the best player win!" The announcer may as well have been broadcasting the final game of the World Series with all the excitement he was trying to generate. Lily shook her head with disgust.

"What a barbaric way to start the tournament. What if some year Zeus decides to take a bite out of someone's butt instead of the chicken?"

"Now that I'd like to see," Trick chimed in.

"Relax, this is the standard opening every year for the tournament. You should see how they open the world championship in Europe," Arc said.

Between the gator, the hundreds of fans, dozens of players, and the raw excitement in the air, I was feeling overwhelmed. This was so unlike anything I had ever participated in. My stomach had more than butterflies; it felt it was going to fly right out of my body. This was easily the most exciting day of my life.

"Are you coming?" Trick asked. I nodded and walked toward the registration table. Today, I was playing at the Congo Waterfall Miniature Golf on International Drive in Orlando. According to Arc, this was one of the more difficult golf courses and the site of the state finals. Seventy miniature golfers had been invited for ten possible positions. Thanks to my sponsorship, I was invited to the tournament even without my lack of credentials or previous wins. The age limit was under fourteen, so I would be playing against players with more height, more reach, and more experience than myself. Like I needed any more disadvantages. An older lady with kindly eyes looked up at me and my friends.

"Name, please?"

"Tyler Martin."

"Your sponsor?" I motioned back to Arc. The lady's smile kicked up a notch.

"Oh, you're with Georgie. You must be pretty good." She threw back her hair as if she was flirting with him.

"Hi, Agnes, it always a pleasure to see you." Arc coughed, obviously embarrassed by the attention.

"It's been too long since I saw you. Your sister is doing well?" I got the feeling that she could talk to Arc all day.

"She's doing wonderful. I'll be sure to tell her you asked." He looked like he would do anything but.

"Okay, Tyler. How many years of experience?" I looked back at Arc for help.

"He's a new recruit, Agnes. This will be his first tournament."

"*Stanna!*" A foreign voice spoke from behind. A girl around twelve stepped forward, her hair pulled back and her face in full pout. The crowd stepped aside so she could walk through to the table. Voices from everywhere spoke in a hushed yet reverent tone.

"It's the Swede!"

"She is the world champion."

Whoever she was, everyone seemed to know her. Except me.

"Are you telling me that anyone can get into this tournament now? *Vad är världen på väg?* What is this world coming to?"

"Elsa, everyone has a right to play. Just like you, as European champion, have the ability to enter any tournament you wish," Agnes offered, although she seemed a bit in awe of the girl.

"I am a champion. I have won countless tournaments. I have years of experience. What does this participant have?" She waved her hands over me like an invisible force field so as not to touch me. For a moment, no one spoke.

"In this country, everyone has a chance to play," Trick yelled from behind.

"And anyone can win," Lily countered.

Elsa looked behind me and laughed. "How cute. The little player has a fan club. Does he have a name?" She looked right at me, and her blue eyes seemed to wash over me. Finally, I collected myself.

"Tyler." I offered my hand, which she looked at and ignored. "I look forward to playing against you," I said sincerely.

She laughed as if she'd heard the funniest thing in the world. "Dear TIE-ler," she giggled, "you won't be playing with me. You'll be watching me destroy you and all of the other players in this joke of a tournament." She looked down at me, since she had a couple of inches of height on me. "Poor little boy. I am the *mästare* of Europe. A champion. And the players over there are worth ten of you. But this is a fantastic opportunity for you to watch," she waved her hand over her body as if placing a magic spell, "and learn from the best."

"Dotter? Who are these people?" I looked up, way up to a towering man over six feet tall. He looked he could bench-press a small elephant, and his chest was thick as large tree.

"These people are nothing, *far*. This little boy is making all of us laugh. Ha ha ha!" Her voice was shrill, and laughter did not seem to describe it. The man just looked at us with contempt, and then they walked away from the table. I felt an arm on my shoulder.

"That is the great Elsa — as she has no problem telling you herself," said Arc. "She's as good as she says she is. And because she is a champion, she gets free travel and hotels to play in other tournaments of her choosing to help push her sponsors. Just ignore her. We don't need to beat her, just be one of the top-ten finishers." His confidence in me was

underwhelming but realistic. Everything about Elsa put my teeth on edge. How would I win anything against someone like her?

"Your tee time is at 10:50. Make sure you and your party are at the 1<sup>st</sup> hole ten minutes before you start. If you're late, you lose your spot," Agnes warned and then looked at Arc. "There is an after-party once the tournament concludes. Can I count on a dance later?" She winked. Arc cringed.

"If Tyler wins a spot, I'll be happy to have one dance with you," Arc said.

Agnes nearly jumped out of her skin with excitement. She looked directly at me. "If you need anything today, you be sure to let me know." She moved closer to me so quickly that it made me jump backward. "I have a lot of pull around here." Wow. I could not think of anything to say to that comment. Fortunately, another player came, and she began reviewing his admission. I looked at Arc.

"What was that about?" I asked.

"Just making sure you have every advantage possible. Remember — you have the ability, just not the confidence. Maybe if you get some special treatment, you start to feel like you belong here." He gave my shoulder a pat. "I've got a few calls to make. You and you friends have some time to kill. Go relax, mingle with the other players. Have some fun before you play."

"Do I have to?" I answered, more nervous by the second.

"That's an order." He sounded very much like my dad. He grabbed his phone and walked away into the crowd. I turned to Trick and Lily.

"What do think of the Swedish player?" I asked them.

"Wow! That girl was some kind of crazy," Trick commented.

"She's a champion. She can be a bit high on herself. Almost like half of the school's basketball team," Lily felt compelled to add. The three of us walked over to a quiet corner of the golf course. The jungle surrounded us, and somewhere above, a parrot squawked. I shifted slightly in my seat to avoid any unwanted surprises from above. Trick gave me a concerned look while adjusting his sunglasses.

"So, what do you think your chances are?" he asked.

"Not great. I'll be playing against golfers who have played mini golf for years. It's going to be tough to beat most of them," I answered honestly.

"But you can see all the angles, measure every probability to make the best shot. Who knew that being a nerd could be your superpower!" He grinned, and I couldn't help but join him.

"I agree," Lily said, "you can do this. If you place well today, you can get invited to the nationals. Your dad would be so proud. How does he feel all about this?"

"He doesn't know about today. He's been in a remote area of Bulgaria training with no cell service. Won't be back in civilization until next week. But I know the next time we call, I want to tell him that I did well today. I want him to be able to share my success with his other teammates."

"If I know your dad, he'd be happy no matter how you place," Lily offered.

Before I could respond, a hard slap hit me on the back.

"Welcome to Loser Ville, population you three!" Zac laughed at us.

For the first time that I could remember, he didn't have his two sidekicks, Dave and Don, following him around. Trick noticed the same thing.

"Don't you have some kids to steal lunch money from?" Trick tried to sound cool. Zac pulled his arm back as if he was going to throw a punch. Trick almost tripped when he stepped backward to avoid being hit.

"Hah! All talk. You couldn't fight your way out of wet paper bag."

"Zac," Lily interrupted, "what are you doing here? Isn't miniature golf beneath an athlete like you?"

"Nah. My dad is always pushing me to win at any sport. He pulled some strings to get me admitted. Said if I played well enough today, he will help pay for a trip for my baseball team to go to California. That prize money is begging to me right now. California, here I come." Zac looked at me as if I was something alien. "I'm surprised that you worked up the nerve to be here. Figured once the pressure hits, you'd be puking at the first hole."

"Least I have my friends here to support me," was the only thing I could courage up to say.

"Don't you realize that this isn't a team sport?" he teased while looking at me and my friends. "These guys can't help you. You don't get a caddy to carry your one club. This is you against a host of better, stronger players, and we," he leaned in so close, I could smell pizza on his breath, "are going to eat you up." He shoved me and laughed. He waved as he walked

away as if dismissing me before the tournament had even begun. I looked at Lily and Trick.

"He's right. I've got to get my head around this. If I'm going to win this, I need to start realizing that it's all up to me." My friends looked a little sad.

"You know that he's wrong, don't you?" Lily looked at me with concern. "Zac has no friends just people that he bullies. If he loses, he has nobody. Win or lose, you'll still have us."

"Yeah, bro. Forget about him. Go play, do your best. We'll see you at the eighteenth hole." We had a group hug, and I could feel their friendship. Then they walked away and disappeared into the jungle. The miniature golf jungle, that is. I knew they were right. But why was I still feeling so overwhelmed? People like Elsa and Zac fed off the discomfort of others. And I seemed only too willing to give them a full meal deal.

"Ten fifty! Golfers for the that tee time, please come forward," the announcer bellowed. I stepped forward, and another kid my age walked ahead of me. He was a couple of inches taller, with a red ball cap with logo of Tony's Pizza. He turned around, and I introduced myself.

"Hey, I'm Tyler."

"Tony." He pointed to his ball cap.

"You own a pizza place?" I asked incredulously.

"That's Tony Sr. I'm Tony Jr. Someday, all this will be mine." He circled around his head. I assumed the pizza place and not the ball cap.

"Okay, boys," Agnes walked to us and seemed to give me an extra smile. "You have ten minutes before the next group. If you take too long,



you will have an extra stroke added. No talking while the other player is shooting. Otherwise, go out there and have fun. Any questions?"

"Make sure you spell Tony right when I get the trophy, 'kay?" He wasn't bragging; he spoke with full belief that he would be the winner. *Am I the only kid in the world without confidence?*

"Oh yeah," Agnes laughed, "we'll make sure we get the correct spelling." She motioned to us to begin. I looked over the first green.

To reach the hole, you had to hit the ball around a mountain. You could go around and take an extra stroke or go through the center via a small cave. If player got stuck in the cave, you ended up taking an extra stroke. Part of the rules were that you weren't supposed to see anyone else play these holes until it was your turn. That way no one had an unfair advantage by watching others play. On top of that, many of the holes had been moved so that someone who had played the course before wouldn't have any advantage.

I stepped up to the hole and looked at my options, playing over dozens of scenarios. Using my love of physics, I watched as ball after ball failed to make it through the cave. Finally, one option worked. I put my ball down, swung my putter back and...

"Not so fast, little guy." Tony put his hand on my putter. "I go first." My first shot would have to wait. Tony dropped his ball on a small, concave rubber surface behind the line. He looked up at the mountain and swung his club. The ball was hit gently, almost too soft by my calculations. It climbed the hill, hitting one corner, then two, and slid toward the hole. But its momentum was too slow, and it didn't make it. The ball stopped

just outside, preventing me from going through in one shot. I guess watching and going second isn't always an advantage.

"Hey, how is he going to go through? That player is blocking the way. Make him take a second shot," Trick yelled from the crowd.

"I'm sorry, the rules strictly say that each player is to play through. There is no moving of balls to make your shot easier," Agnes said from the sidelines.

And there you go, no matter how good I was at calculating the angles, I wasn't going to be able to go through a ball. And I was off to a disastrous start.

"Don't worry about it, Tyler. Think of another way around," Lily suggested.

"Please, no more comments from the gallery." Agnes gave Lily a look. "Tyler, you have less than ninety seconds to make your shot. If you don't shoot before your time runs out, you will be assessed a penalty."

I looked at the long way to the hole and wondered if I could place well in this tournament by playing it safe. I knew the answer. How to go through the short way with pizza boy blocking my way? I couldn't go through him. I ran the calculations, knowing that time was running out. I visualized the shot I needed to make. I took it.

My ball traveled hard, banking off the first corner, charging toward the volcano. *Please no lava.* My ball stretched upward on the slope, coming closer to Tony's ball. Five feet. Three. One. And it wasn't slowing down.

"Hey!" Tony's look was one of alarm.

"Snap!" The two balls smacked into each other and both continued forward into the cave. One second. Two seconds. They weren't trapped underneath, and the two balls came out the other side. Both were a mere tip-in for a second stroke.

"Nice shot," Tony exclaimed. "I think I'm going to like having you as my partner." He smiled.

At hole ten, the waterfall gurgled overhead, splashing down and wetting part of the green. The hole had more water than green with wet traps everywhere, and any mistake would cost an extra stroke. I had the lower score on the last green and got to go first. It was a tricky shot with little margin for error. I had a very narrow piece of green to hit on. Too far to the right, and I would fall into a small pond. Too far to the left, and I would get washed away by the waterfall. I had to hit straight and hard enough to make it past the obstacle and down to the level below with the hole.

I looked over and saw Arc smiling at me. The last few holes had gone okay, but I couldn't afford any mistakes if I wanted to challenge for the top ten lowest scores. I measured the shot in my mind and played through all the options. I took the shot — it kept to the middle perfectly, but I had underestimated the pull of the water. My ball slowed down and came up short. I was stuck behind the cave wall and would have to take another shot to get around it.

"Thanks." Tony slapped me on the back. "Now I know I have to hit it a bit harder." He took his shot, and it barely passed my ball and went

around the bend. I kicked a stone off the green in frustration. Arc shook his head at me. Although he couldn't coach me, he was trying to get me to think rationally. I scanned the entire green. Was there another option? I only had sixty seconds to make my second shot, and my time was evaporating, I tried to think outside the box.

Then it came to me. It was risky, but the payoff would not only make up for the shot but would shave off another one. Time was almost up. I measured my delivery. I couldn't see Arc, but I assumed he thought I was losing my mind. And maybe I was. But somewhere down deep, I felt I could make it.

"Whack!" I shot off the green, straight into the pond. A collective gasp went up from the gallery. The ball ricocheted off a plastic lily pad and back onto the green below, putting me within one shot for the hole. I had taken a big chance by hitting through a water trap to shorten the distance to the hole.

"Blam!" Tony mimicked firing a gun with his finger. "Bro! You've got a wild side."

A few minutes later, we finished the hole. I smiled, and then got a tap on the shoulder.

"Don't forget to mark my score." He scribbled my total down.

"Right." I nodded, momentarily forgetting the etiquette of golf. "Why can't we mark down our own scores anyway?"

"Old-school," Tony responded as if that explained everything. "Years of tradition. Supposed to prevent you from giving you a lower score. Seriously," as he rolled his eyes and leaned in more closely as if sharing a

secret, "as if partners couldn't give each other a lower score." He winked at me. For a second, I thought he was being serious, and then he laughed. "The score card is just a formality. They have a judge at each green keeping score. Probably have a camera as each hole to double check."

I put the pencil in my pocket. "Why don't they keep the score electronically? You could record it on your phone?"

"Dude! I saw your trainer; he looks ancient. The sport is run by a bunch of old dudes like him. I think every one of them only had a pencil when they went to school. Helps them relive their childhood, if you ask me." I chuckled at Tony's analysis. We all hold on to the past a bit too much. The next green was still being played, so Tony and I sat on a bench, waiting for our turn.

"Why are you playing this tournament?" I asked innocently, trying to kill some time. As Tony's eyes lit up, I realized I wouldn't be getting the condensed version of the story.

"My dad was an avid golfer. He wanted to be a professional on the tour. Put all of his summer into training. But he just didn't have the body for it. He's short and stocky; the big golfers are tall and have a big arc for their swing."

"Your dad wanted you to follow in his footsteps?"

"Yeah, but I'm a lot like him, and he realized that I wouldn't be a professional golfer because I don't have the long ball. I can't drive like some kids my age that are taller. But I'm killer on the short game. Me and my dad have set up every type of obstacle course around my house. Down

the stairs. In the bathroom. In the kitchen. My mom is constantly yelling at us to get our clubs and golf balls out of the house.”

I smiled and wished my dad and I had similar experiences.

“When I was five, instead of the usual family vacation, we toured the best miniature golf courses in Southern United States. The two of us went head-to-head at every course. In the first few holes, it was close with my dad winning more often. But by the end of the trip, I was beating him every time. And he couldn’t be prouder.” He beamed, and I was jealous of the time he got with his father. I felt cheated that I didn’t get to see my dad for months.

“Yo, Tony! Get your head into the game. You’re next!” Tony turned. An older version of him was waving from the crowd.

“Relax, Pop! I got this. Give me a break already.” Tony stood up. “Come on, let’s go.” As we walked towards the hole, I felt something drop on the back of my head. I touched the spot in dread when Tony spoke up.

“Rain. Looks like a summer storm.” I looked up; the cloud above us was black and nasty. The droplets became more consistent, and I knew I was going to get soaked.

“Game delay!” The familiar voice of Agnes boomed through the speakers. “Please head to the clubhouse as we wait to see if the game will be cancelled.” I watched as a couple of volunteers covered our green with a tarp. I found these summer showers never lasted long. Tony and I ran to the clubhouse.

It was basically a big cafeteria with tables and chairs with most of the other golfers sitting and standing around. In the center of the room,

Elsa was speaking animatedly to a willing group of mini golf listeners. She swung her club like a sword, and by the way she was moving around, her story must have involved a wild animal she was slaying. She ignored us as we walked by.

"Want a soda? Tony asked.

"Sure," I replied, and he walked toward the counter. I started toward an empty table when a leg stuck out. I stumbled and almost recovered before falling forward. The ground was hard and cool, but my hands came out quickly before I could smash my face. I was lucky I didn't get hurt.

"Watch where you're going, loser, you almost hurt my leg," Zac sneered. He was eating some potato chips. His hair was slicked back by the rain, and he looked a bit disappointed that I wasn't hurt. Before I could answer him, a drink came flying, its flight in the air like chubby bird. It travelled in slow motion, the contents flowing out and soaking Zac's jacket. Zac jumped up like he was going to explode.

"Idiot! What is wrong with you?" he yelled into the smiling face of Tony, who held an empty drink tray.

"Idiot? You're the one with his leg in the aisle. You better go buy me another drink?" Tony yelled back. He was smaller than Zac, but he carried himself like he was bigger and unafraid. For the first time I could remember, Zac was speechless. He quickly recovered.

"Do you know how much this jacket cost me? My father will make you pay." Zac stuck out his finger at Tony but didn't touch him, only jabbing the air.

Tony seemed unimpressed. "Don't know. Don't care," he answered while barely looking at Zac, almost as if he didn't matter. But then he turned to face him. "Make sure you bring your dad to me, so I can explain how your leg caused the accident, and I have a whole room full of witnesses to back me up." He motioned around the room. We did have a small audience, Elsa no longer the center of attention. Zac's response was priceless. Tony had called out his threat, and he had nothing to fight back with. He grumbled under his breath, looked at me with hate, and walked off. Tony sat down.

"Bully of yours? Sorry if I wasted your pop. Just seemed like the best way to cool him off."

"That was the best-tasting pop I never had." I smiled. "Weren't you afraid of him? He's got a few inches and about twenty-five pounds on you."

"Naw. Guys like that are only dangerous if their friends are around. When they see they are going to lose, they run off. He travels with a pack, does he?"

"Most of the time. He's got two bigger friends who basically follow his every move. How did you get so tough?"

"Family of six. You didn't get to eat if you didn't stand up for yourself. You got any brothers or sisters?"

"Younger sister. Holy terror. Not as bad as Zac, although she's always trying to prank me." Tony motioned to me to come closer, as if he had some sage advice for my ears only.



"Keep your friends close, your enemies closer. Family, never let them out of sight. They're the ones who can hurt you the most." I grinned. I had a feeling his dad had a lot to do with his personality.

"Oh, isn't this sweet! The golf partners are bonding. Becoming friends, maybe? *Vanner?* You can both cry together when I KNOCK YOU BOTH OUT OF THE TOURNAMENT!" Elsa raised her voice so that all could hear her.

"Listen, Blondie. Take your fake hair and go back to telling your victory stories to your groupies. We're not drinking your Kool-Aid over here," Tony answered. I envied his composure and wit. The only words that would come out of my mouth would be a stuttering, nonsensical reply.

"I AM NOT A FAKE BLONDE!" she yelled a bit too vehemently. "I am Swedish. I am natural and I am beautiful."

"And very full of yourself," I answered and almost swallowed my tongue. Tony's attitude was starting to rub off on me. Elsa moved closer, as if my ability to speak amazed her.

"I have a lot to be full of," she whispered. "You and your friends can talk about me at the end of the day when you are sitting at home defeated."

"The rain delay is over," Agnes announced over the speakers. "The tarps are being removed and games will continue in ten minutes. Please return to your next hole." The cafeteria became a hum of voices as the golfers began to plan their next shoots.

"Man, you sure don't play well with others." Tony nudged me. "What was that all about?"

Jim Kochanoff

*"I don't know," I answered truthfully. "Bullies just go out their way to meet me."*

## Chapter 9

### Making the Grade

The rain delay had thrown a wrench into the playing schedule. Tony and I had to switch greens for our last hole. While we were waiting, we got to watch Elsa sink her last putt only because we had played this hole already.

"Quiet on the green. *Var tyst!* Be quiet!" a large man that had to be Elsa's father, yelled from the crowd. Elsa had an easy shot but was spending an incredible amount of time examining her options. I wasn't sure if she was thorough or just enjoyed the extra attention. She frowned and looked at a leaf on the green.

"*Inte bra!* No good!" She pulled out a what looked like a miniature vacuum cleaner from her pocket. She proceeded to vacuum up the leaf and all surrounding debris on the green.

"Is that legal?" I asked Tony.

"Yes. But most people just pick up the leaf and brush it aside. Elsa takes everything to a new level.

"Hey — you can come vacuum my house when you're done," a voice from the crowd yelled, and several people laughed. Was that Trick?

"Quiet, please," the green warden yelled to the crowd, which settled down. Elsa looked less than pleased. She pulled her putter back, and the ten-foot distance shrank in seconds as the ball disappeared into the hole. Behind

us an electronic scoreboard updated, and Elsa's name was at the very top. She pranced around the green like she just won the lottery.

"Thank you. Thank you, everyone. I am so honored to perform and show my excellence yet again." Her smile was hideous as she looked at the crowd as if everyone was beneath her.

"Paid autobiographies are available at the end of the program. Have your picture taken with a once-in-a-lifetime athlete. *Det bästa!* The best!" Her father waved professionally done pictures of Elsa that he was trying to sell.

"No merchandise is sold while other participants are still playing," the green warden said to Elsa's dad, who seemed not to hear. I looked up at the scoreboard. The final tallies were up. Elsa was listed first with the lowest score. A bunch of names I didn't know were from second to ninth. Tony and I were tied for the tenth and last position. And only one of us could move on. My heart sank. Why did it have to come down to this? Why couldn't I have played better so we both could move on? I looked at Tony, who also scanned the leaderboard.

"Hey, Tony," I started awkwardly. He put his finger to his mouth.

"Forget about it. Like my father always said, 'May the best man win. And the loser buys pizza.'" He fist-bumped me, and we headed to our green. The final green was a crazy hole. We stepped through a broken airplane prop that had crashed landed in an artificial jungle. There was a small lake that separated our green from the spectators. There was something swimming in the water (was that a log or Zeus the alligator?). I tried to put my game face on. From across the water, I could see my

mom, my sister, Arc, Trick, and Lily. Their smiles were infectious, and it relaxed me immediately. I turned my focus to the green.

It was a par four; they had saved us the hardest hole for last. I looked over the difficulty. The hole was sloped with little berms, so the green was never flat. There were small fake rocks throughout the green, creating obstacles. A large volcano stood in the middle of the green, with an evil-looking red liquid flowing down. I leaned over to touch and felt tubes that carried the fluid down. The green was a spiral that circled around and around before it came to the flag and the hole. The hole was elevated from the rest of the green, which meant you couldn't just tap the ball in; you had to hit it directly into the hole. Any miss and you would overshoot the hole.

"You have the first shot. Please shoot within the ninety seconds allotted," the green warden ordered Tony. He took his putter, dropped the ball, and measured the shot. It was a long stretch with a series of rocks blocking the way. You had to navigate several openings not much larger than your golf ball to navigate through.

"Here goes everything." Tony smirked and slapped the ball to its planned opening. It was a good shot but not quite good enough to get through. It kissed one rock and slowed to a stop in the opening. Not enough to roll back, which would have added a stroke, but lodged it firmly so that I couldn't use the same gap (which was the largest) to play through. The crowd gasped at Tony's close call.

"Good one, Tony! You'll sock the next one in!" his dad yelled from the crowd. His dad's support touched me, and even though I should have been jealous, I was glad that Tony's shot was okay.

"You're next." The green warden motioned.

"Go for it," Lily yelled across the water.

"You can do it, buddy!" Trick pumped his fist behind her. I smiled at their antics. Their cheers helped me focus on the task at hand.

I looked up the laneway and began to compute the gaps in the rocks. Tony's ball blocked the biggest opening, and the others were narrow. I played through numerous options, banking off the wall, how much force needed to be applied, and then I saw the best choice of action.

"Get going you loser, you're holding everything up." I turned, and a sea of people turned around and looked at the speaker. Zac looked a bit surprised at how much attention his comments gathered, and he slunk back into the crowd. The time ticked — five, four, I took my shot and sailed through the gap, putting myself in front of Tony's next shot.

"Do you want me to go next?" I asked, not wanting to make his next shot difficult.

"Nej!" The Swedish voice cut through the crowd. "The farthest player goes next — that is in the rules. Trying reading them next time. Maybe I'll even explain to you about the Heighten rule."

Unlike Zac, I couldn't see her through the crowd, but knew Elsa had spoken. Why did she get involved with a match on a nobody like me? However, the green warden nodded his agreement, so I stepped away from my ball, letting Tony advance. He sized up the ball; he didn't see many options. He looked at me as if to say he was sorry and tapped his ball through the gap, down the green. My ball was squarely in his way. Pop! His ball hit and still had enough forward momentum to continue going down the

green. My ball shanked to the right, off the green, and onto the side of the lava mountain.

It was a death shot. I would have to take an extra shot to return myself to the green.

"Ohhhh," the audience roared, agreeing with the assessment of my shot. I was toast.

"Stick a fork in him, he's done." Zac's familiar voice ran through the crowd.

"Sorry, bro. I didn't think my ball would hit you so hard." Tony looked genuinely sad. He didn't want to beat me this way. Before I could say anything, the green warden interrupted.

"You have sixty seconds to shoot. Please move your ball to the green and take your extra stroke." I took a step forward to do just that. Good old Tyler, always doing as he's told. Listening to his friends and teachers. But then I hesitated, because I knew if I moved that ball, I would never catch up with Tony. I would lose unless I came up with another solution. I had to be bold. I looked at the lava mountain with its red streaks flowing down to the green. And then it came to me. So bold, it was stupid. But I had nothing to lose. I knew what I had to do.

I stood by the mountain, my ball stuck precariously on its slope. The crowd started talking; they weren't sure what I was trying to do. I caught sight of Arc, who raised an eyebrow at me but made no motion for me to stop. He started to clap, and soon others joined him as they figured out what I was trying to do. A couple of people laughed, while others just

pointed and shook their heads. I'm sure they wrote me off as some stupid stunt.

"Come on loser, take your shot," Zac yelled. The green warden stepped toward him and grabbed him by the arm.

"Escort this player out. He's not welcome here." The crowd cheered as Zac was walked through the crowd away from the green. His look was priceless, as if no one had ever challenged his right to be mean.

I heard the call of a parrot as it sang through the air (real but kept in a cage). The roar of a tiger reverberated on the next green by a bamboo tree (through speakers). The heat of the jungle air flowed past my face (the fan blew a breeze past me). Then the illusion disappeared as someone crunched on their potato chips, the crinkling of the bag sounding like an elephant stampede. Even the alligator stopped eating and focused its attention on my mini golf hole. His eyes looked over me as if he was measuring his next meal. I shivered and turned away.

"You can do it, Tyler!" a female voice rang out. My mom was waving to me, and I knew that I had a chance. I had less than twenty seconds left. I needed to make my shot now or suffer the extra stroke anyway. I looked at the mountain, and instead of knocking it off, I hit it up. The ball sailed to the top just as the volcano exploded.

The crowd gasped, thinking I was done for. But after a few seconds, people started to point. The lava flowed in tubes, so it was no real danger. The ball descended, following the groove of the lava canal. As long as I hadn't misjudged a spot that might wedge the ball in place, the ball should continue to roll downward. It traveled right to left. I held my breath as it crossed the mountain and then worked itself back to the other



side. It slowed at a turn but didn't stop. Seconds later, it squirted onto the green, less than five feet from the hole. The people watching clapped. I had turned a monumental disaster into a one-stroke advantage. Tony walked up to me, smiling. Not the look of someone who had just lost his chance to make the top ten.

"That shot was epic. I'm glad I didn't take you out of the tournament." I put the ball in three. Tony finished in four, and as I looked at the leaderboard, I saw I had taken the tenth and final position. I was surrounded by my family and friends.

Arc patted me on the back. "Not bad for your first tournament. You get to play the next round. Trust me, though, it will get a lot tougher."

"Who cares," Trick yelled. "Look who got eliminated!" I looked at the leaderboard, and for a second it didn't register. Then it hit me. Zac wasn't on the list. Finally, I didn't have to worry about him anymore. My friends lifted me into the air, and for one moment, I felt like I had won it all. Victory was sweet!

## Chapter 10

### Calling Dad

"Are we calling Dad yet? Are we?" Kayleigh was as excited as I felt. Our dad was in Spain at a track meet. The team was very strict about communications, they only allowed it on specific days because they felt family was distracting. I thought it made no sense and even Dad got in arguments with the coach sometimes. But it was his last year, he was the oldest on the team and he decided to follow the rules to the end. It seemed like opportunities to talk to him were few and far in between. Luckily, for us, today was one of those days.

"Five minutes, Kayleigh. Can you brush your hair and look somewhat presentable for his video call?" my mom asked.

"She's going to need a lot more than five minutes," I sniped.

"Shut up, stupid brother," she answered.

"Enough! Do not call each other stupid," my mom yelled. I bit my tongue just in time, because that was exactly what I wanted to say. I ran to my room, eager to show my placings and picture from the tournament. Finally, I would have something to show him as an athlete.

"Kids. Get down here," my mother yelled. "He's going to call us any minute." I scampered down the stairs to the living room and jumped on the armchair.

"Owww!" Kayleigh yelled as I sat on her. "I'm sitting here, move over to the couch."

"Mom," I started.

"Move, Tyler. Your sister got there first. Now listen to me and review the rules while talking to your father. Do I have both of your full attention?" We both nodded and kept our mouths shut to review Mom's list.

"Good! We only have about ten minutes. You two get the first five, and then I get the second five. Share your time fairly and don't talk about yourselves for minutes on end. We also want to hear how your father is doing. Do I make myself clear?" She lowered her head, and you could tell she meant business. We nodded our heads in unison. Kayleigh put up her hand.

"We're not in school, dufus!"

"Tyler!" my mom yelled, and I shut up immediately. "What is it, Kayleigh?"

"Why does Dad get so little time to talk to us? Doesn't he love me?" For a second, I thought she was joking, pulling another one of his pranks. But the look of doubt on her face was real. My mother could tell the truth right away.

"Your father loves you so much, but training for the Olympics requires sacrifices, both on his part and ours. To do that he must be away for extended periods of time. He works out all day long and his coach feels that family are distractions which limits the time we can talk with him. His track meets are in all parts of the world, and it's not like he can home at the end of the day. But his time away has no reflection of his love for you. Understand?" Even though she was talking to Kayleigh, we both nodded. I

knew what my dad was doing was important to him, but I still missed him so much.

The phone rang, and the three of us sprang to attention. Mom grabbed the phone before it could ring a second time.

"Gordon?" A second passed, and then Mom's face flashed with a smile. "We're all here. The kids are ready to speak to you first. Here's Kayleigh." She handed to her phone over to my sister.

"Dad! You won't believe what we did in school this week." Pause.

My thoughts drowned out Kayleigh's conversation as I went over what I wanted to tell dad. This was my moment — I might have only come in tenth, but I made the cut. Finally, I could compare myself to Dad's athletic accomplishments.

But what if he didn't care? Mini golf wasn't as prestigious as football or baseball, but it was still a sport. My dad would be proud. Wouldn't he?"

"Tyler? Your dad is waiting for you." My mother held out the phone. I had been lost in my thoughts and missed Kayleigh's entire conversation. I reached out and grabbed the phone. I could see his smiling face in the upper right corner.

"Dad! Guess what happened to me this week. I won! I actually won at something. It was amazing. I made this trick shot that I never thought in a million years I could have made. But I did. Dad — I wish you were here. It would have been awesome to have you watch." I took a breather and was about to launch into another description when I realized

that dad's video image had gone blank. Had my dad heard anything I had said?

"Mom — I can't hear anything? Is Dad still there?" Mom took the phone and tried to establish contact with Dad, but with no success. Then she started talking to someone, but I didn't think it was Dad.

I looked over at Kayleigh. "It's not fair. Why does she get to talk to Dad and I don't?"

"I understand. We'll wait." She cupped the phone and motioned toward Kayleigh and me. "They are having technical difficulties. The coaching staff is trying to reestablish contact. He'll let us know as soon as your dad is on the phone."

I stomped my feet in anger. "It's not fair. Does that mean we'll get more time to talk with Dad?"

"Not likely. All of the team is given specific times to call their family. If we go past our time, it will impact everyone else's time." I was furious, but I had no one to blame. "Say you're sorry to Kayleigh for your outburst." I looked at Kayleigh, who had her arms crossed. She cupped her right hand over her ear.

"I'm sorry," I mumbled, looking at the floor.

"Can't hear you," Kayleigh crowed. "Did you say something?" I would have loved to wipe the smirk off her face.

"I'm sorry," I said louder, "that you are such an idiot!" I was unable to contain my frustration any longer.

"Mom!"

"Tyler, that is quite enough. Because of your temper, if we did get back on, I was going to give you my time to talk to your father. Instead, you will be lucky to get any time at all."

"But Mom," I wailed but regretting my words already, "it's just not fair!"

"Life isn't always fair, but the way you deal with your problems shows the type of person you are. I am very disappointed with the way you are acting." Her look was piercing, and I knew I was wrong. I wished I could take back my words.

"Mom — I'm sorry..." But before I could finish my sentence, a voice echoed from the phone.

"You're back!" My mother beamed. "Sweetheart, we all miss you very much. We can't wait until you return in the fall." Pause. "Yes, he's here, but he's let his temper get the better of him again. I'm only going to let you talk to him for a minute as part of his punishment. Here he is." She handed the phone to me. For a second, I reached out, but when I put the phone to my ear and mouth, no words would come out. It was like I had so much to say and so little time to say it, I didn't know where to start.

"Tyler? Are you there?" My dad's voice rang out.

"Yes, Dad. I'm so glad to hear from you. You wouldn't believe what happened to me this week." But before I could go into detail, he interrupted.

"I have a pretty good idea son. Your mom has emailed pictures of your big win. I was starting to worry about you. My teammates are always showing pictures of their children and the sports they excel at. I worked

hard to get to this point in my life and I want you to be challenged as well. I'm going to ask you one favor and I need you to promise me."

"Okay," I gulped.

"Mom told me about you going into my office and looking at my trophies. There is a reason why I strived so hard to compete athletically and I want the same success for you, but. . . ."

The line became static, and I couldn't make out his last words.

"Dad? Dad?" I asked, and I thought I could hear someone in the background, but nothing made sense. Mom took the phone.

"Hello? Can you hear me?" She listened for a few more seconds and then placed it back into the cradle. "The phone hung up. The coach warned me that this could happen. The area in Spain they're in has poor reception. We'll have to call again another time."

"Come on..." Kayleigh and I complained, but we realized that there was nothing we could do. I'd just have to text him and hope to hear back later in the week.

Better yet, if I could make it through the next tournament, maybe I'd have another achievement to share with him.

## Chapter 11

### Glow

The weekend was here, and I was going to the mall.

I ran upstairs to brush my teeth before Trick's dad came to pick me up. I stormed into the bathroom just as Kayleigh was leaving. She was in a sour mood and barely looked at me.

"Filled the water glass for you," she murmured and went to her room.

"Thanks," I replied, touched by her helpfulness. She had been less combative since Dad's phone call. Maybe she felt sorry that I didn't get much time with him.

I squeezed toothpaste on my brush and stroked around my mouth. Today, Lily, Trick, and I were going to hang out. I felt like the summer was a whirlwind and working at Arc's shop didn't give me much free time. I was really looking forward to spending time with my friends and having no responsibilities.

I spat into the sink and grabbed the water glass that Kayleigh had left behind. I took a swig as I tried to rinse, but I realized something was wrong. I immediately spat out the liquid and smelled the cup's contents.



"Kayleigh!" I screamed and heard laughter erupt from her bedroom. "This wasn't water you put in the cup — this was VINEGAR!!!!" Kayleigh doubled over with laughter as she came into the bathroom.

"And you were stupid enough to drink it! Couldn't you smell it?" She pointed at me like I was a freak.

"No," I replied, realizing that if I wasn't in such a rush, I wouldn't have fallen for her prank. I didn't know if I was madder at my stupidity or for Kayleigh's trick. I just knew I was fed up with her pranks. I threw up my hands at her. She stared at the sink and the partially empty glass.

She went into another laughing fit.

"You know, if you used your superpower for good, we would get along so much better."

"But I'd have a lot less fun."

Somehow, some way, I would find a prank that would teach her a lesson for good.

"That's what you always say," Trick replied as I sat with him and Lily sat in the back seat of the car. My house was long gone in the distance, but the painful memory of her prank remained.

"He's right," Lily added. "You have been saying for years that you were going to get her back, and you never do. It's her talent. She can prank with the best of them. She's got the shine." I slumped in my seat, not really wanting to listen.

"You know, there is usually one way to get someone back. To really embarrass them, if you use the right pressure," Trick's dad said from the

front of the car. The three of us jumped. It wasn't like parents to get involved with our conversations. Most the time they said they either didn't get us, or they found our conversations so trivial that they didn't want to get involved. Either way, he had piqued my interest.

"What do you mean?" I asked and watched as the mall approached. I knew we only had a couple of minutes before we were dropped off. I saw him looking at me in the rear-view mirror.

"What does your sister love the most? What does she need to have and can't live without? If you make your prank about that, she will fall for it." Trick's dad hesitated, as if he thought of something else. "Just make sure you don't do anything that would hurt her or put her in danger. That's taking a prank too far. Understood?"

I nodded.

Trick sighed. "Seriously, Dad. What would you know about pranks? I've never seen you do one in my entire life." Trick leaned forward as if he expected some wisdom from his father. His dad seemed to puff up in his seat.

"Back in university, I played a lot of pranks on my roommates in the dorm. One time, we climbed through the ceiling panels and dropped into my neighbor's room. He had a waterbed, and I took a hose and hung it out the window. The water came pouring out of the bed in no time. Then we crumpled up a bunch of newspapers and put them on his top sheet to make it look like he still had water in his bed. Later that night, we heard a crash when he jumped on his bed and hit the hard bed frame instead of the

water. He bruised his tailbone and walked funny for a week. It still makes me laugh when I think about it.”

*I wish I could think of an ultimate prank to play on Kayleigh. What does she love more than anything?*

“Stop here, Dad. Come on, guys, let’s hit the mall.” Trick motioned. His dad parked the car to let us out. I closed the door and waved my thanks.

“I’ll be back at 4:00 p.m. to pick you three up. Stay out of trouble.” He drove off.

“Trouble!” Lily laughed. “We’re like the lamest kids in the school. Nothing ever happens to us.”

“Jinx!” Trick and I yelled in unison.

“You know as soon as you say something like that, you have automatically cursed us,” I told her.

“Yeah, don’t put your unexciting life on us. I’m living vicariously through my buddy Tyler here,” Trick mocked, putting an arm around my shoulders. “Once he gets all the big sponsors, he’s going to need a caddy to carry his clubs around. I’m going to see the world,” he exclaimed as we entered the mall doors.

“There is only one club to carry. A putter! I don’t need a caddy to do that,” I explained, but I secretly enjoyed playing along with him.

“You guys are sickening. You do know you are talking about miniature golf?” Lily interjected into the fun of our make-believe celebrity. We headed down the escalator to the food court.

“When is the next tournament?” Trick asked.

"Two weeks. The top ten winners make the nationals, which just happens to be held here in Florida."

"What do you think your chances are?" Lily asked as we reached the lower level.

"I don't know," I answered truthfully. "Arc thinks I've hit a wall. I have moments of excellence, but I can't seem to be consistent. Self-doubt keeps crawling back." In the distance, I thought I could see Zac and his twin bullies, Dave and Don. They were laughing at someone, probably taking candy away from babies. We didn't need their added drama right now, so we ducked around a corner and sat at a table where they wouldn't be able to see us. The food court was crawling with teenagers and families with little kids.

"I don't know where your self-doubt comes from," Trick added. "You won a major mini golf tournament. You're a rock star! I would love to have your mini golf super power."

"Trick's right. Get over yourself already. So, you're never won at a sport. Cry me a river. Lots of people never win at sports." Lily stood on her chair. "Boo-hoo — look at me. I've never won a trophy. I'll never be a winner." She faked tears running down her face. How could either one of them understand? My dad was an athlete, a hero. All his teammates had children that were sport stars. I never compared and felt like I embarrassed my dad.

"Miss? I need you to sit down. If not, I'm going to have to ask you to leave." We turned to see a large, overweight man with a balding head

staring down at us. The mall police. The most respected guardians of our town. Not.

"Ah, sorry, officer. She didn't mean anything by it," Trick said.

"Just don't let it happen again. Girls shouldn't act that way," he answered and was about to turn away, already bored by our antics.

"Or what are you going to do?" Lily answered defiantly. She was in a mood and hated to be told what girls should do.

"Lily, get down," I urged.

"Or I will walk you out of this mall, and you will not be welcome to return." The guard gave a stern look that they must have taught him in rent-a-cop school that was supposed to be intimidating. It wasn't. It just made him look constipated. But he was in the right.

"Can't we all just get along?" Trick added. But no one was listening to him. Lily remained on her chair. This wasn't going to end well.

"Okay, miss, you're coming with me." The guard motioned and stepped toward her. Then a familiar face stepped behind the guard.

"Assist?" One-word Mike stepped behind the guard. He also wore a mall cop uniform, but I hadn't realized that he worked here.

"I've got her, Mike," the guard replied. And then he noticed the look he was giving the group of us. "Do you know these people?"

"Yes," Mike responded. The head guard did a double take between him and us, and an idea took root.

"You want to walk her out of the mall? Then I can circle back to the security center for my break." As I looked at his gut, I thought he must take a lot of breaks. But I kept that comment to myself.

"Her." Mike nodded and stepped forward like it was a done deal. He grabbed Lily, who was so frozen in awe that she didn't resist when Mike pulled her down. Actually, she became very willing to go wherever he took her.

"Oh, come on. Can't you give her a break?" Trick asked.

"No," Mike responded, much to the delight of the other guard. He motioned for us to move forward and grabbed Lily by the wrist. Instead of resisting, she blushed. We followed, resigned to our fate. We had been in the mall less than ten minutes, and we were getting kicked out. The other guard watched us leave, looking pleased by the actions of his protégé. We turned the corner of the food court, out of the view of the old guard. We walked to a set of doors leading outside of the mall. Just before we reached it, Mike released Lily.

"Go." He pointed back to a set of stairs leading back to the mall.

"You're us letting go?" Trick asked.

"Dude, he was just playing the other guard. Mike is awesome!" I exclaimed.

"Thank you, Mike." Lily smiled, but Mike was looking behind us.

"Hurry." He gestured to the rest of the mall.

"I guess the old guard is coming back," Trick said. Lily stood frozen to her spot, looking at her savior.

"Lily! Come on!" I barked. She broke her stare and ran to stairs. Mike watched us go.

"Bye," he mouthed. We ran up the stairs back into the main mall. Trick almost ran into a mother pushing her stroller. She glared at us as we marched past.

"I don't want to run into the other guard. Can we find some place to hide for a bit?" Lily asked. I looked ahead and saw a good option.

"How about right here?" as I pointed to the store. The room was dark but full of arcade games. In the corner there was a birthday party with young kids eating pizza. Trick and I stepped up to the counter. The sign above said, "The Putting Hole - Glow-in-the-Dark Golf." A teenager girl with a glow-in-the-dark t-shirt popped her gum and gave us a disinterested look.

"Are we going to be able to see in there? I don't want to play in the total dark," Trick asked. I figured he didn't waste his money.

"Seriously, Shades," she answered, "you boys ask the same question every time. Why don't you step inside and tell me if you can see? By the way, you won't need your sunglasses in there." She pointed at Trick and thumbed her finger at an entranceway. Trick wouldn't take his sunglasses off in the darkest cave, and he wasn't going to start there. We passed through a door with strips of plastic that hung from the top. When we got to the other side, it felt like we had entered another world. It was a large warehouse with multiple levels. The mini golf greens glowed, and there was graffiti of animals on the walls, ceilings, and even the floor. It wasn't dark at all — the place was lit up like a Christmas tree with spinning disks and banners hanging from the ceiling. I turned to Lily and had to stifle a laugh.

"You're glowing. Your white t-shirt is so bright!" I enthused.

"Well, duh. They use ultraviolet light. Everything white will glow. Look at Trick's teeth!" She pointed.

"What?" Trick answered, unable to see himself and desperately looking for a mirror. He was a dentist's dream. I looked down at my white socks and sneakers. They glowed fluorescent. This place was cool.

"Are you guys game?" I asked. They both nodded, and we headed back to the front desk to pay. The girl gave us the same bored expression but could tell that we were interested to play. She reached for some clubs and handed us a scorecard with a short pencil. She took our money and gave us bucket of balls.

"Here's the rules. No swearing or yelling. Don't crowd the people in front of you, and don't play the same hole twice, or you'll delay the people behind you. Once you play the final hole, the ball will be trapped in the green. If you want to play a second time, the next game is half price. Any questions?"

"Yeah, what if I lose my ball?" Trick asked.

"Well, since the balls glow in dark, you would the first one in the history to lose their ball. I guess you wouldn't finish the game," she sneered. Lily smiled at Trick's expense. I reached for an orange glowing ball from the bucket.

"Hey, I wanted orange," Trick exclaimed.

"Pick another color," Lily said. "You can't both have an orange ball. There are eight different colors!"

"Okay, okay," Trick answered and grabbed a yellow one. I smiled as I thought about my two best friends in the world. They were both unique.



Trick was the extrovert that really should have a filter before he talked. He tended to say what he thought, even if it didn't win him any friends. But you always knew what you were getting with him.

Lily was the ultimate thinker. She had to analyze everything to death before deciding. She just wanted to make the right choice, but sometimes you'd just wish she'd make any decision. Just don't tell her what to do.

"What are you looking at, Tyler?" Lily asked with a perplexed smile. "Afraid that your voodoo mini golf skills won't work in the dark?"

"Not at all. I'm just glad be to here with you guys." I grabbed them both around the shoulders as we walked in.

"What's up with him?" Trick asked.

"I don't know. I think his sister is getting to him." I shook my head at both of them, but in a fun way. I was with my two best friends, relaxing and having fun. What could ruin my day? Then as we started the first hole. I looked ahead and saw a familiar face. We had to leave!

"Come on, guys. I changed my mind. Let's go do something else," I whined.

"Whatever," Lily answered. "I just paid good money to play, and now you want to leave. Afraid a girl is going to beat you?" She pointed at herself.

"Actually, yes." I pointed four greens ahead of us, where a girl and her father were playing. It was Elsa and her giant of a dad. Dread welled up inside of me. Trick was the first to notice.

"Ah, the Swedish girl. Whoa, her dad is huge. What the heck do they eat over there?" The two of them were having an animated talk about her shot, so animated that they didn't seem to notice any other players around them.

"So what? They're far enough ahead that they don't even see us," Lily commented. "Even if they did, we're just playing for fun. There is no championship today. Who cares?"

She was right. But Elsa was so abrasive and mean, I just couldn't stand being around her. The fact she could back up her claims made her even more infuriating.

"Okay, let's play. But I'm keeping my back to them. And Trick, don't be too loud. I don't want you drawing any attention to us."

"Who, me?" Trick pretended he was hurt.

I smiled and lined up my first shot. Lily looked off into space.

"Are you thinking about him?" I asked.

"Who?" she answered defensively.

"One-word Mike — duh," Trick said. "What do you see in that guy? It's not like he can carry a conversation."

"Maybe girls like a guy who listens instead of someone who talks all the time." Lily stared at Trick so that he knew she was talking about him.

"Why do you like him? You didn't have any classes together, you don't talk to him, you don't hang out with him."

"Idioter!" a familiar Swedish voice said above us. I looked up, knowing who I would see. Elsa glared down at us from the green ahead of us. "You American boys are all the same. You don't understand girls because

you try to reason like boys. Think like a girl, and you might start to understand." Her head disappeared as she returned to her green.

"Man — how did she know we were here?" I asked.

"And when she did start giving advice? I thought she hated everyone except herself. Or maybe she just can't stop herself from putting other kids down," Trick added.

Lily leaned on her club and stared at us. "Do either of you listen to yourselves? You are so caught up in being critical that you not listening to what is being said."

"Which is?" I was uncomfortable.

"Girls are different than boys! You ask me why I like someone when neither one of you have no idea how to act around girls. Half the time you treat me like a guy. You can tell that I'm not a guy!"

Trick blushed. A couple ahead us looked behind, probably wondering what we were carrying on about.

"Lily, I'm sorry. We have no excuse. We're stupid. Stupid boys," I answered.

"Speak for yourself," Trick answered while hitting the ball forward. It disappeared into the mouth of a glowing alligator. "Why you getting so defensive? We're just joking around. We tease each other all the time."

"And sometimes I don't like it!" Lily was angry.

"You tell them!" Elsa spoke and stepped onto our green, club in hand. "Boys in my country are just as dense."

"Elsa, who are you talking to?" her father yelled back from his green.

"Play on ahead, Father. I'm going to finish with...these players," Elsa responded.

Great! Lily was angry with us, and now my main golf nemesis was teaching us how to talk to girls. How messed up was this? Elsa sized me up. Was I inferior to her, or did she think she was superior to everyone else?

"Why are hanging out with us? I thought all of us were beneath you?" I asked.

"You are," she replied smugly and swung her club. The ball sailed through a glowing mouth and landed close to the hole. "But I grow weary of spending my time with my father. His interests are not mine. I wish to spend time with people my own age. Even the three of you." Her smile was mischievous.

"Wow! With a personality like yours, please, come join us," Trick snapped sarcastically.

"I don't need your permission," Elsa retorted.

"Actually, you do," I quipped. "I don't know what your friends are like back in Sweden, but here we have to like each other to want to hang out."

"Not all the time," replied Lily. "It would be nice to have another girl for our group." Because of our disagreement with Lily, I knew then that I would lose any argument. Better to set the terms.

"Okay. You want to join us. Fine." I gritted my teeth. "But you want to hang with us, we have certain rules."

"Who made you the boss?" Trick smiled, and I knew he was egging me on.

"And these rules are?" Elsa asked, the corner of her mouth rising into a smirk. Oh, how I would like to wipe that smile off her face.

"Listen. Friendship isn't telling everyone how great you are. It's about listening to each other and helping when required. If I talked about myself all the time, I'm pretty sure Trick and Lily would never hang out with me."

"True dat," Trick answered, trying to look cool. Did he like Elsa?

"That's fair," Lily responded, "but let me add rule two." I leaned in closer. This was getting interesting. "Don't judge your friends. Don't belittle or question their choices. Accept them for what they are."

"Your rules are so illuminating," Elsa answered, but I sensed her sarcasm.

"Rule number three," Trick added, enjoying the opportunity to participate, "is protect your friends."

"From what? Is there a pack of wolves that follows you around?" Elsa laughed.

"Protect them from everyone else. Teachers. Parents. Classmates. Anybody who would hurt or make your friends feel bad. Lily doesn't understand is that we tease her about a boy she likes because we don't think he's good enough for her."

"Although he did protect us today. I think my opinion of him is changing," I pointed out.

"I don't care what you two think!" Lily exclaimed. "Remember rule number two." Trick and I both nodded, and I realized that neither one of us would tease her about Mike again. Unless it was really funny.

"So, if I follow your three rules, then I can finish the glow-in-the-dark golf with you?" Elsa asked. We nodded. I still didn't care for her attitude, but I was willing to give her a chance. She turned her head and looked at some golfers who just entered the course. "Are those your friends over there?" She pointed. I peered around a corner.

"Zac," I said.

"Don," Lily added.

"Dave," Trick finished.

"They're bullies from our school. They have it in for Trick and me. They're not physical with Lily, but I don't think they like her either."

"I remember the pretty one at the golf tournament. He definitely had it in for you." Elsa pointed at me.

"Do you think they saw us?" Trick asked.

"Why else would they be here?" Lily commented. "Besides, look at them, they're not here to play mini putt. They're looking for something,"

"Or someone," Trick said.

"What are going to do?" I asked.

"Come with me," Elsa commanded. Boy, did she like to be in charge. "No one is at the last hole. Let's play it out and come back later. We'll be out before they can catch up with us." I nodded. Good plan.

We climbed some stairs and went to the last hole. We stood above a big pit with a runway that played off into the wall. One wall was a cage with rows and rows of wooden shelves. The direction of the ball was random. Once it went down the runway and down the wall, it shot your ball

randomly around the green. Trick and Lily hit their balls quickly and then walked down to retrieve their ball. I pointed at Elsa to go.

*"Go ahead."*

*"You Americans are so gallant."* She made a face. I could tell that she thought the exact opposite of me. *"Please, go ahead so I can watch your form."* The way she smiled made me very nervous. She looked a cat ready to devour a bird.

*"Come on,"* Trick yelled from below.

My hands felt sweaty, and I dared not look at Elsa; she would just make me nervous. I hit the ball. My shot went off the board and off the tee. Maybe my golf skills were no good when I couldn't see the angles. Or I wasn't very good under pressure.

*"What a dweeb shot."* Two sets of arms reached under my armpits and pulled me off the ground. Zac stepped in front of me, and I could tell by the grip that Don and Dave were lifting me up.

*"Leave him alone!"* Lily yelled from below and started walking up the stairs back to our green. One of the arms lowered me as Dave went to block the stairway.

*"Playing mini golf with your girlfriends,"* Zac sneered and gave Elsa an examining look. *"You know, it was fluke that you beat me at the tournament."*

*"And yet we all did."* Elsa laughed. It was good to see she would take a dig at anyone. It wasn't just me.

*"Ha! Are you fighting for his honor? Because Tyler here couldn't fight his way out of a wet paper bag."*

"Why would you fight a paper bag? Is this an American thing?" Elsa asked. Zac looked confused, as if he didn't know if this was a cultural thing or if Elsa was mocking him. Dave shrugged while Don loosened his grip. I don't think these guys knew what to make of her.

"Why don't you go to the concessions while the big boys play?" Zac sneered. He gave her a playful push to let her know he meant business. She played it way over the top.

"Oh, no!" she yelled at the top of her lungs and tumbled to the floor. She put her hand over her forehead, like she was distressed. Several other golfers looked over our way.

"What's wrong with her?" Dave asked.

"What happened? Who are these boys?" Elsa's dad appeared from nowhere. Our bullies looked tiny next him. Their faces fell as their plan was falling apart.

"This boy shoved me," Elsa cried, and she even had me believing her, although I had watched Zac. She was working the room like a pro. Her dad looked like he was going to explode. He lifted Zac in the air like he weighed nothing.

"You hurt my daughter!"

"I barely touched her. This is all just a big mistake," Zac stammered. Don released his grip on me like he wasn't sure what to do any more.

"You Americans have made the mistake. I am tempted to teach you and your friends a lesson." Elsa's dad assumed his full height. He was about six-foot-five, stocky and hairy. His face left no doubt of the



interpretation of his actions. "But for now, I will take you to the authorities. Security can decide what to do with you." He carried Zac effortlessly down the stairs. Without their leader, Don and Dave silently followed, unsure of how to act and not wanting to escalate the situation.

The look on Zac's face was priceless. In the chaos, I took a picture with my phone. Elsa's dad disappeared through the door, and we were once again swallowed up by the darkness.

"I had better follow him," Elsa said to the three of us. "Shall we play another day?"

"Yeah. Let's take a rain check on our game," I added.

"Rain check? Why would you put water on a piece of paper? You Americans may speak English, but I swear I don't understand half of what you say. Until next time." She exited the door of the course. I literally felt in the dark as I looked at my two friends.

Was it true what they said, the enemy of my enemy is my friend?

## Chapter 12

### The Nightmare Fairy

It was late as I brushed my teeth. I double-checked my water to make sure Kayleigh hadn't played the switcheroo again on me. It was unlikely. She would never prank me with the same trick twice; she prided herself on her originality.

When we got back from the mall, my mom asked me if anything eventful had happened. I left out Elsa and Zac. I didn't want her to worry about my bullies. If she felt I couldn't handle myself, she'd never let me leave the house. The bonus was that Trick's dad had given me an idea on how to get back at Kayleigh.

"Hey, loser. Are you almost done in there, or do you need to look at your hideousness a bit longer?" Kayleigh asked from behind me. Usually I would take her bait and get angry. This time, I took it all in stride.

"No problem, Kayleigh. Anything for you." I stepped aside. She gave me a weird look, as if my kindness was trick.

"What's wrong with you? Did you hit your head on the toilet?" She smiled at her joke.

"Not at all, sis. Just want to make sure you're okay. Especially with what's been going on the street this week." I walked past her into the hallway.

"What do you mean 'on the street'?" she asked before I got to my bedroom. *Hooked her!*

I poked my head back into the bathroom. "Nothing. Forget it." Then I left again. Better that she dragged it out of me instead of looking too willing to tell her.

"Enough, Tyler, with your stupid comments. What are you trying to say?" *Good!* I could hear the curiosity in her voice.

"Well," I hesitated, not wanting to seem too anxious to answer her question, "you know what happened to Jenny Ferguson down the street?"

"No," Kayleigh answered, "I haven't seen her in school for almost two weeks." Fear was starting to enter her tone. "Where is she?"

The truth was that the Fergusons had gone on a trip to visit the mom's sister in Australia. They would be gone for a good three weeks. I knew that because one of neighbors was looking after their cat. But what I told Kayleigh was much more sinister.

"Jenny had a visitor last week and hasn't been back to school since. She pushed her family too far." It didn't hurt that Jenny was a bit of a hellion, like Kayleigh.

"Visitor? What are you talking about? It sounds like you are making this all up. I'm going to ask Mom."

"If you need to talk to Mom, go ahead. But she won't know what happened to Jenny." This was the turning point. Either Kayleigh's curiosity would get the better of her, or her need to report me to Mom.

"Fine. What happened?" Exasperation was taking over. I had her.

"Well, you know about the tooth fairy and the money she leaves you under the pillow?"

"Yes. What does this have to do with Jenny?"

"Well, there is another type of fairy that comes, but instead of giving you money, it gives you something else." For some reason, the bathroom felt like it was getting darker.

"What does it give you? Treasure? Food? Will you hurry up and get to the point!"

"You don't understand, Kayleigh. It doesn't give you something you want. No, it gives you the exact opposite. It gives you something you don't want. It gives you a...nightmare."

A look came across her face and for a second, I thought I had pushed the game too far. I'm not a good liar, and I worried that she would see right through me. Then she gulped, and I realized that she was falling for it.

"Why? Why did the Nightmare Fairy come to Jenny? What did she do?"

"I honestly don't know. But one of the neighbors said that she used to play tricks on her sister and her dad. Mean tricks. The Nightmare Fairy doesn't like pranks and punishes children for their badness. I don't think Jenny has been able to leave her bedroom since the fairy's visit."

Kayleigh's lower lip quivered. Part of her was thinking I was lying, but a larger part of her was thinking about the story and wondering if it was true. The imagination was always worse than any story I could tell. I just wanted to plant the seed. Make her think the worst.

"Anyway. Good night." I scampered off before she could ask any more questions. The bathroom was silent, and I wondered if Kayleigh had bought my tale. As I heard the water rush into the sink, I walked over to my bedroom and closed the door. Instead of being inside my room though, I tiptoed over to Kayleigh's room.

Inside was a disaster area. Clothes were thrown everywhere. I doubted she ever put anything away into her dresser. Her garbage can was tipped over, and more garbage was on the floor than in the can. Stepping around the room was an obstacle course, and I did my best not to step on a stuffed animal and give away my position. I thought I could stand in the middle of the room, and she still couldn't see me with all the clutter.

I navigated safe access into her closet. I didn't close it all the way because it would be impossible with this mess. I looked through the slats of the closet door and waited for my quarry. I didn't have to wait long.

"Goodnight, Mom. See you in the morning," Kayleigh yelled down the stairs.

"Good night, sweetheart," Mom answered, but she was also talking to someone else. She must be on the phone. That was good, because her being distracted would help my plan.

Kayleigh tromped into her room and stepped on whatever was in her way. She jumped into bed with more force than I deemed possible and turned off her light. The only glow was the lights downstairs and her nightlight in the far corner. I stayed as quiet as possible and realized the toughest part would be the next ten minutes as I waited for Kayleigh to drift to sleep. I looked through the slats of the closet door and could barely

make out her face. She seemed strained and tossed and turned for several minutes before settling down. Just as I was about to start my plan, the house creaked by the door. Kayleigh sat up ramrod straight and threw a plush sheep at the door.

"Stay out of my room, Nightmare Fairy, or there is more where that came from!"

*Perfect! She was on edge, time to strike.*

"Kayleigh!" a voice whispered from under the bed. "Come play with me," it beckoned. Kayleigh's breathing stopped as if she was wondering if what she heard was real. A minute passed, and the voice spoke again.

"Kayleigh. I'm lonely. Come visit me," the voice called her again.

"Who are you?" she answered, part curious and part scared.

"A friend," it answered.

"What kind of friend lives under my bed?"

"A sad one. I have no one to play with."

Silence. What was she thinking? I was starting to creep myself out. Was this going too far?

"Do you know Jenny?"

"Jenny who?" the voice playfully answered, as if it knew who Jenny was but didn't want to let on.

"You're the fairy, aren't you?" Kayleigh demanded. "I've heard about you."

"What have you heard? That I'm friendly and give away candy?" the voice teased.

"No — that you are a bad. A nightmare fairy! And I'm coming to get to you!" She looked like she was carrying a plastic bat, but fortunately, I had anticipated she would do that.

"Leave him alone, you bully!" Another voice spoke from her bookshelf. Kayleigh stopped searching under her bed and stared across the room.

"I'm another fairy. But I'm not as friendly as the guy under your bed." Kayleigh tiptoed across the room, trying to find the source of the second voice. It took everything I had not to break out in laughter.

Just before she reached the bookshelf, the first voice under the bed spoke again.

"Why are so mean? Why won't you play with us?" Kayleigh turned again and stared at her bed. She beat the floor with her plastic bat.

"Why don't you both come out? Are you afraid of me?" she yelled. I looked at the door, concerned that Mom might hear the noise.

"Oh, we're not scared of you," the voice under the bed said.

"Then who are you scared of?" Kayleigh yelled.

"We're scared of him!" the bookcase voice said. A pair of red eyes glowed from the window. They flashed intensely red and went dark.

"Mom!" Kayleigh screamed and ran from the room. I waited a second and then dashed over to bed and removed the walkie-talkie from under the bed. I removed a second one from the shelf and then ran to the window to pull the glowing eye light I had bought from the joke store at the mall. I could hear Kayleigh and Mom talking downstairs and knew I had seconds to get back into my room. I moved swiftly but quietly. My door was

open slightly, and I eased in without causing it to creak. I scampered across my floor and climbed into bed without making any large bumps. I placed my walkie-talkies and voice-altering gear under the bed. I closed my eyes as I heard Kayleigh and Mom coming up the stairs. Kayleigh would be all over me, and I knew I wouldn't have to wait long.

The two of them rushed around her room, searching for her nightmare fairy. After a minute of fruitless searching, they stopped making noise. I was next on their list.

"Tyler!" my mom yelled. I lay perfectly still, trying my best not to smile. My door opened, and I felt Kayleigh jump on my bed. Her impact momentarily knocked my breath out. I got up slowly and tried to appear as groggy as possible.

"What's going on?" I asked, acting confused.

"Were you in Kayleigh's room?" my mom asked.

"When?" I asked. "I just got to sleep."

"This is your fault! You caused the nightmare fairy to visit me," Kayleigh yelled.

"Nightmare fairy? What is that?" Mom asked.

"She scared Jenny. She hasn't been in school for weeks.

"Jenny's family have been on vacation for several weeks." Mom turned to me. "Tyler, are you responsible for this?"

"Mom, I'm trying to sleep. I was joking with Kayleigh earlier. I can't help it if she has an overactive imagination." I looked at Kayleigh, and she knew I had gotten her. She folded her arms. Mom tried to assess the situation.



"Both of you go to bed. Any more disruptions tonight, and you both will be punished."

"Mom!" both of us responded, but secretly my heart wasn't in it. Kayleigh tromped to her bed; I didn't need to look at her to know she was angry. I heard her door slam.

"Tyler?"

"Yes, Mom." I looked up.

"I know your sister is a pain sometimes, but go easy on her. It's her way of interacting with you. Her pranks are her way of spending time with you."

"Yeah, at my expense." But I started to feel bad about my trick.

"Maybe so, but now she's going to have problems sleeping all night."

"Mom..." I started.

"I know you didn't do anything. Stay in your bed. Goodnight Tyler." Mom closed my door. For the next few minutes, I could hear her consoling Kayleigh. I almost thought I heard Kayleigh crying.

I finally did it! I had pranked my sister. I got her after so many failed attempts. So why did I feel so hollow inside? Was I any better than Zac? Was I a bully, picking on my own little sister? Unfortunately, sleep didn't come easy that night for me either.

## Chapter 13

### The Range

"Fore!" Arc yelled, and the ball sailed two hundred yards down the fairway at the Green Acres Driving Range. A small tractor with a cage covering the driver came by seconds later to scoop up the balls into its cab. I noticed several golfers aiming their ball straight at the tractor and celebrating if they hit the driver's cage. Didn't he have a tough enough task without golfers trying to hit him?

"I still don't understand how driving the ball has anything to do with mini putt? Why don't we go practice on the green instead?" I asked.

"Tyler, you just don't get it. Sometimes to get better at something, you need to practice different muscles. Focus on different tasks. Do you watch many sports?"

"Yes," I answered, not understanding his train of thought. "I like watching baseball."

"Do you think all they do is hit balls all day?"

"Well, for the most part, yes. If you can't hit the ball, you won't make it into the pros." I felt like his point was lost on me.

"What about weight training? How are they going to hit the ball if they don't have any power behind their swing?"

"Well, yes—" I started to respond.

“What about running? Are they going to make it around the bases if they are slow? You can’t hit a home run every time.

“Fair enough.” I was starting to understand but couldn’t get a word in edgewise.

“What about flexibility? Can they leap into the air and make an amazing catch if their body isn’t stretched properly? If not, they are likely to get hurt.

“Okay! Okay! I get it. I have to train in many areas if I want to succeed. But I don’t understand how me slicing a ball forty yards in the wrong direction is going to improve my mini-golf game.”

“Really?” Arc asked incredulously. “How many times have we discussed this? Your game is amazing. I don’t know how you use physics to calculate the correct angle or to bounce a ball off the wall into the hole. In a perfect world with no distractions, you would be unbeatable.”

“But life is full of distractions,” I responded.

“Exactly. Your problem is focus. You let every negative comment or mean-spirited yell take away from your skill. No one else is beating you; you’re defeating yourself.”

“That’s easy for you say!” I raised my voice but self-consciously looked around because I didn’t want adjacent golfers to be privy to our conversation. “But I can’t help it. When I go to sleep at night, I go over everything that went wrong in my day. I get anxious over what I have to do tomorrow and the people I have to face. I’m not a robot. I can’t turn my feelings on and off when I need to.” I felt my face getting flushed, and I knew I was losing control.

"Relax, Tyler. No one expects you to ignore your fears. But you must learn how to control them, or they will control you. That's not golfing advice, that's a fact of life."

"Arrggg!" I sliced the ball to the left, and another golfer glanced in my direction. I wasn't angry at what Arc was saying. I knew he was right.

"Tyler, let me tell you a story about when I was your age."

Great, I was going to hear a story that happened to Arc in ancient times.

"You are not going to tell me about seeing people in their underwear, are you? You realize that doesn't work."

"And why doesn't that approach work?" Arc peered down his golf club at me.

"How can you focus on what you are doing if everybody's in their underwear? You start focusing on everyone's underwear instead of what you are supposed to be doing."

"Okay but that wasn't what I was going to say."

I sighed. *Let's get this over with.* "Okay what's the story?"

"Well, since you asked so nicely," Arc made a face at me, knowing my frustration, "when I was a boy your age, hundreds and hundreds of years ago," he added sarcastically, "I used to have a paper route and delivered the morning paper at six o'clock every morning."

"A paper! Everyone goes on their tablet to look up news online."

"I'm sorry, Tyler." Arc took another swing, and the ball sailed about two hundred yards. "Try to remember there was a time before technology. If that's not too hard."

"Yes, sir." I saluted him with my right hand over my forehead.

"Now, I was in a big subdivision, but I didn't have a lot of time to get the papers out before I had to go to school. It was important that I focus on my task, or I'd be late. And despite my work ethic for money, my teachers were less than sympathetic with me showing up after school started."

"So, what's the big deal? You throw a bunch of papers on front lawns on your way to school. What you have to focus on?"

"Ah, the naivety of the youth." Arc shook his head in mock exasperation. "Thinking everything is so easy because his biggest task is brushing his teeth each morning."

I rolled my eyes. *Why is it that old people always want to talk about how hard their life was when they were young?*

"The problem was when you were delivering papers there were a lot of distractions in the morning. There were cars coming and going, right and left, whizzing by you as you biked down the street. Many of them didn't even know that you existed, or if they did, they didn't care. Sometimes I was run off the road or splashed by a nearby puddle because somebody was in a rush to get to work."

"You should see my mom drive in the morning," I added, "at her speed, no paper boy would be safe."

"Well my biggest problem was not being able to focus because of one of the newspaper recipients. Mrs. Williams."

"So, what was the big deal about her?"

"Well, Mrs. Williams always let her puppy, Ginger, come out to play when I came by. I have never seen a puppy so cute that I lost about ten minutes playing with it. Then I would be rushing afterwards and miss some of my other stops."

"Doesn't sound like that big of a problem."

"It is if you want to keep your job. If I didn't find a way to focus on my route, and I would lose my job because I could only be late for school so many times," Arc added, reminiscing about his childhood years.

"So how does this relate to me?" I asked.

"My point is that I needed to focus on my job and not follow other distractions. Sound familiar?"

"Okay, I understand what you're saying. But what did you do?"

"Several things. There was no magic bullet. I needed to figure out how to get through my route and still make it the school on time. First thing I did was to leave fifteen minutes earlier each morning to do my route. If I gave myself a little more time, I might not be so rushed to get to school. Although as a teenage boy it was harder to get out of bed fifteen minutes earlier."

"I hear you there. Just fighting for the washroom in the morning at my house is enough of a challenge. But what did you do at Mrs. William's place?"

"I brought dog treats with me."

"Dog treats?" I asked. "How did that help?"

"Well, Mrs. Williams was excited by people seeing her puppy every morning. As a paperboy, I felt that I was part of a list of people in the

morning, from the milkman to other deliveries. The puppy still loved seeing me but giving the treat was my way of greeting her each morning while not sticking around."

"Did that work?"

"Yes. But I was disappointed that I couldn't spend time with the puppy. But it was essential if I was going to keep my job."

I thought about his story. Was there some way to lessen my distractions? To keep my focus on the game and ignore the negative thoughts?

Another golf ball ricocheted off the tractor's cage. I could see the driver inside flinch at the sound. How did anyone do their job with that distraction?

We finished the bucket of balls, and as we walked back to the clubhouse, the driver in the tractor approached. I waved to him as he drove past us.

"Hey! Can I talk to you?" I asked. The driver smiled, lifted the metal cage up, and stepped out. He was about forty and wore a ball cap. He was sweating. I could only imagine how hot it was in that enclosed space.

"Is there something I can help you with?" he questioned.

"I just wondered how you do it. Every day, people must use you as a target for their golf balls. I'm surprised you don't get hurt."

"Trust me," he banged his hand on the cage at the tractor, "nothing's going to get through this metal, no matter how hard they try."

"I'm sorry golfers make a target out of you. It must make your job harder," I said.

"I guess it comes with the territory," Arc offered.

The driver nodded. "I don't let people like that get me down. My job is to make sure people get balls when you come to the driving range. I try to focus on that. I've always been a glass half-full kind of person."

"Well, you have a great attitude," Arc offered. The driver smiled, nodded at us, and walked away into the clubhouse. I was motivated to find a solution.

"Tyler? What are you thinking?" I looked at Arc.

"I'm thinking that if he can take golf balls flying at his head, I can find a way to focus on my mini golf tournament!"



## Chapter 14

### Giving Back

"Arrggg! Why do we have to get dressed up for this?" I asked no one in particular while looking in the mirror. The bathroom door creaked behind me, and I turned around quickly. Kayleigh was standing there.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Yeah, like you really want to know. You just want to prank me before I go to the animal shelter event."

"Animal shelter," she said coyly, "what's that all about?" I felt like she had something behind her back.

"Kayleigh, I don't have time for your stupid pranks. If you do anything to me right now, I will tell Mom that you ruined the fundraiser for all the animals." Kayleigh backed off, and I slipped out the bathroom door. I ran down the stairs and heard Mom in the kitchen. She saw me and motioned to come over.

"Don't you look spiffy," she commented while adjusting my tie.

"I hate wearing a shirt and tie. It just feels uncomfortably itchy around my neck. Do I have to wear this?"

"Yes. Remember why you're here. Part of playing in the tournament this weekend is that some of the proceeds will go to a worthy charity. As a participant, you are expected to show your support at the fundraiser. I

would think that supporting dogs and cats who have no families would be worth your time." My mom looked down at me as if daring me to say she was wrong.

I nodded. I knew she was right; I was just apprehensive to see the other golfers. At least Trick and Lily were coming along with me. The doorbell rang, and I ran to the front door.

"Ready to raise money for the animals?" Trick cheered. I looked at him in his T-shirt and jeans.

"Why aren't you dressed up?" I asked.

"We're going to a dog shelter. The place will smell of cats and dogs. I'm not going to get my good clothes dirty." He looked at me as if there was no other decision to make. Lily stood next to him and was dressed much more formally.

"Never mind him, Tyler. I don't think he has any nice clothes to begin with."

"Hey, that's not true." But he realized he was going to lose the argument with both Lily and I against him. He changed the subject. "Did you tell your mom that if you see any kittens for adoption, you might bring one home?"

"Tyler!" my mom yelled from the kitchen, eavesdropping on our conversation.

"Mom, Trick's trying to get a rise out of you and check if you are listening to our conversation."

"Hi, Mrs. Martin." Lily beckoned to my mom and gave her a big hug.

"Oh Lily, you look beautiful. I don't know why you spend so much time with these two." She gestured at Trick and me. "A rose between two thorns."

"Mom!" It was so embarrassing, their girl talk. Besides, it was time to go. "Trick, your dad out front?"

"He's waiting in the car and ready to go," answered Trick.

"Have fun, you three. Make sure you raise lots of money for the animal shelter," called my mom. As we stepped outside, Kayleigh watched us from the top of the stairs. Trick stared back at her. She made a face as we stepped into the car.

"Your sister freaks me out," whispered Trick. "Sometimes I think her head is going to spin around." I laughed and slapped his hand in a high five.

Lily shook her head. "You know, the two of you know nothing about women."

"Come on, Lily, you gotta admit — she is creepy. You can't trust her; she's always trying to prank Tyler," answered Trick.

"Yea! And you and Lily you don't have to live with her. Try living in constant fear of what she will do next," I added.

"Well, I think you went too far with the whole nightmare fairy thing," answered Lily, effectively ending the conversation. Trick's father took over from here.

"All right, party people! Are we ready to have some fun?" He was in the front, seat moving around to dance music on the radio. Parents!

"Dad! You're embarrassing me in front of my friends." Trick was exasperated and kept his head down.

"You kids take things so seriously," Trick's dad answered as he pulled the car out of the driveway onto the street. "Did you guys ever think that your embarrassment is your problem?"

"But Dad, trying to act like us when you are clearly thirty years older doesn't fit. You're not like us."

"But if you ask Zac and his buddies, we're not like usual kids either," I answered, realizing that I was defending Trick's father's antics.

"Tyler's right. You should just let people be the way they want to be," Lily added.

"Oh, come on," Trick answered. "This is nothing like Zac. He's a bully who picks on anyone who breathes. I'm just telling my dad stop acting like us."

"You guys keep away from Zac. I've talked to his father, and he is no better. He thinks intimidation is how you talk to people. If Zac and his buddies bother you again at school in the fall, let me know, and I will tell the principal." Trick's dad was serious.

"The problem is Zac and his friends bully us when there are no adults around, so it's hard to prove," said Lily.

"Enough about Zac. Let's talk about something else," I said. "I really appreciate you guys joining me for the animal fundraiser."

"Are you kidding? I wouldn't miss this for the world. Besides, it's cool to see your Mini Golf Association helping a charity out," answered Lily.

"On top of that, there are going to be all kinds of prizes and animals," added Trick.

"Now, don't be getting yourself any ideas," said his dad. "We already have a dog that doesn't get nearly enough walking as it should."

"I was thinking more of a cat, Dad."

"My mom was telling me not to pick up an animal either," I replied.

"That's because you kids get excited to get the animal, but doing all the work sometimes gets forgotten," Trick's dad added while skirting the car through traffic.

After about twenty minutes of driving and several reminders not to adopt any animals, we arrived at the shelter. The parking lot was full, and there were several school buses stationed at the rear. This was going to be a well-attended event. Trick's dad dropped us off at the entrance, promising to pick us up in two hours.

The shelter was large; from the outside it appeared like a big warehouse. In the back I could see the outdoor fences for dogs with an area to roam. We stepped inside, and I expected the loud noise of dogs barking, but we were met by a red-haired girl at the front desk.

"Are you guys here for the fundraiser?"

"Yes, but where are all the animals?" I asked. She turned behind us and pointed to two sets of doors. One was labeled "Cats," while the other had a picture of a dog on the front window.

"The auditorium where the fundraiser is taking place is down the hall onto the right, but I get the feeling you guys would like to see some animals?" All three of us nodded vigorously as another girl walked by. "Sissy,

can you look after the desk for a minute?" The other girl nodded, and the redhead pulled us into a room with stacks and stacks of cages with cats, kittens, and even a bunny.

"You'll notice hand sanitizers all throughout the room. If you open a cage to pet a cat, make sure you wash your hands before petting another cat," the redhead ordered. "The chance of disease is high, and we don't want any of these cats to get sick. We even have a special isolation room for cats when we think they have a respiratory disease. We try to treat them before we bring them back to this room."

"Are most of these cats abandoned?" asked Lily.

"Sometimes we find kittens that were abandoned by the road; other times owners have to move, and they can't take the cats with them. There are even some estates where the owner has passed away, so we make sure that the cats find a new home."

"Hey, look over there!" Lily pointed to black and white kittens. I read the sign next to them; they were a brother and sister named Salt and Pepper.

"Yeah, those two come as a pair," replied the red-haired girl.

"What's up with that one?" I asked and pointed to a cat named Simon. There was a sign on the cage that said that the cat could not be adopted with any other animals.

"Simon is a bit skittish and doesn't do well with other animals. We think he was abandoned and may have been abused. He was found on the streets."

The poor cat's circumstances almost made me cry, and here my biggest worry was winning a mini golf game.

"Tyler has one of those looks," Lily asked. "Remember what your mother said about not adopting an animal."

"I know, I know." I turned to the redhead girl. "So where does the fundraising money go toward the cats' care?"

"Everything. Medicine, food, toys, transportation, and help to our foster families who look after the cats until they get adopted." I reached in to pet Simon. He initially pulled away, but I rubbed my fingers, and he came closer. He let me touch his nose as he rubbed his head against my hand. I thought I could hear a low rumble.

"Okay, I need to get out of here or I'm going to cry."

The three of us left the room and proceeded to the auditorium at the end of the hall. I waved back to the redhead.

As we entered the hall, we saw benches and seats down to the bottom. On the far wall was a screen for presentations, and at the bottom of the room was a podium with a large table. Several dogs on leashes were moving around.

"Look over there." Trick pointed. I turned and saw Zac at the far right of the auditorium.

"What's he doing here? He's out of the tournament. I thought only players could come to this fundraiser?"

"He's here because of his dad." Lily pointed to man beside Zac. "I think his dad's in construction, and he helped build the shelter. Guess there is no way to avoid Zac."

I didn't think he saw us, but before I could think of hiding, the lights dimmed. The presentation was about to begin. We moved to the benches on the very far right.

"Ladies and gentlemen, if I may have your attention please." A balding man with glasses stepped behind the podium and spoke into the mic. "Thank you for participating in our event today. Your sponsorship in our shelter will help many cats and dogs find their future homes." A smattering of applause went around the room. "In addition to the miniature golf association and the golfers in this room, we want to thank one of our major sponsors. Could I get Mr. Dick Bishop of Bishop Construction to stand up?" The balding man at the podium pointed toward Zac. The tall man who looked like Zac stood up and waved to the crowd, soaking up the applause.

"Now we know for sure how Zac got in here," commented Trick.

"Great. And I thought I was done with him when he lost in the tournament," I said. A person next to us gave a look to be quiet.

"But let's remember the real reason all of us are here. For the animals that we want to help. Can someone bring in our visitor?" The balding man motioned behind him, and a young girl came in with a dog.

It was a beagle, and it was full of energy, pulling on its leash.

"Popcorn just came to us last week. As many as you know, beagles are notorious for getting lost by following their noses. Popcorn was found on the highway, and motorists used food to attract her into their car. Today she is available for adoption, and I'd like to have the miniature golfers come have their picture taken with Popcorn." The crowd cheered as Trick pushed me from behind.



"Come on, get your picture taken with the beagle." I hated the attention, but I figured I could stand behind the others. I walked several steps to the podium when I got an elbow in my ribs.

"Ouch!" I exclaimed and looked into Elsa's face.

"Ladies first, my American friend. Unless manners are different than what we have in Europe?" It wasn't an argument I could win. I motioned for her to step in front of me and followed her down to the group below. There were about ten of us standing by Popcorn, and as I tried to get into the background, the speaker placed the leash in my hand.

"Stand right here son, beside the dog." The beagle looked at me expectantly, as if I had food. I knelt beside Popcorn and petted her with my right hand. A photographer rushed in.

"That's perfect, everyone gather around him and the dog." I felt hot breath on my neck. Even though I couldn't see her, I knew it was Elsa. It was hot in the auditorium, and the focus of attention made me sweat. I hoped this ended quickly. The flash momentarily blinded me, and I turned my head to the side. Popcorn must have gotten nervous, and she wiggled in my grasp.

"Hey, don't let her get away!" a voice yelled from the top the auditorium.

In my distraction, the leash had slipped off my sweaty hand. Popcorn barked and charged up the steps. A couple people tried to grasp her leash but missed. She charged from the auditorium into the upper offices.

"Get her!" a lady with glasses yelled. I couldn't outrun the dog, but hopefully I could corner her in one of the offices. Trick and Lily appeared to

my right. As I reached the top of the auditorium, a foot came out to trip me. I fell flat on the carpet.

"Should watch where you're going loser," yelled Zac. I hated him but at that moment I had no time. Trick pulled me up, and as we exited the auditorium, teenagers with animal shelter shirts pointed at us.

"You three go to those offices. We're going to check the investigation rooms down to the right." We needed no further direction, and my heart pounded with worry about what could go wrong.

We crossed a large common area with a reception desk. Past that were several offices and a boardroom.

"Trick. Lily. You guys look over there, and I'll check the boardroom." Trick nodded as I entered the boardroom. I saw a long table surrounded by about a dozen chairs. In the right corner was a small end table with several dog biscuits on top. I grabbed one and put it in my pocket. I listened and thought I could hear an animal chewing. I looked under the table and saw Popcorn eating something. She saw me but was more concerned about her stolen food. I took my treat and broke a small piece off.

"Popcorn, come and get it." She eyed me while finishing her treat. She tilted her head to the right.

One thing I've heard about beagles is that their stomachs are bottomless pits. They can eat and eat and eat. I was sure the treat I was offering would attract her. I just needed to get my hands on her leash. I took the small piece and extended my right hand under the table. Popcorn was interested, and she leapt towards me. Only I had made a mistake. Instead of my right hand, she jumped towards my left, which held the

biggest piece of the treat. She leapt through the air, grabbed the treat out my hand, and charged out of the room.

“Trick! Lily! Catch her!” I ran out of the room just as Trick and Lily were tripping over themselves to catch Popcorn. She evaded them both and flew toward the main door. Zac was there and reached down to grab Popcorn’s leash. *Was he going to help?* But instead, his back foot pushed on the door as he weakly reached for Popcorn, who went through his legs and out the open door.

The great Zac had reached an all-time low. He gave one of his creepy smiles as the three of us ran by him to the front of the building.

My heart sank as I watched cars moving around the parking lot. If Popcorn dashed into the street, she might get hit by a car. I heard barking to my left by a large construction dumpster and a couple of parked trucks. I breathed a sigh of relief when I saw that Popcorn had wrapped her leash around one of the posts of the construction scaffolding on the side of the building. She wasn’t going anywhere now.

I ran over and petted Popcorn; she seemed genuinely happy to see me. She started pulling on her leash, that was wrapped around a post. As I unwrapped the leash away from the post, she gave a final tug and pulled the post out of the ground. I looked behind me, and the wooden scaffolding that was held up by the post suddenly gave way. I took Popcorn and we ran away from the boards.

“Crash!” I watched the scaffolding collapse and smash into one of the trucks, splintering the windshield into thousand pieces.

"What did you kids do!" I turned and noticed Zac's dad. His face was fuming with anger.

"Is Popcorn okay?" the balding man with glasses asked just behind Zac's dad. I brought the beagle over to him, and she licked his hand.

"These kids have damaged my vehicle! They are responsible. Who is going to pay for my damages?" The three of us looked at each other; I wanted to say it was Zac's fault for letting Popcorn out of the building.

"Popcorn's leash caught around that post. We didn't think she was powerful enough to pull out the post. I'm very sorry," I said and looked down to the ground.

"I don't care about your apologies, kid," Zac's dad spat out. "You are responsible for the damages to my vehicle. Either you or your sponsor better come up with the cash, or I will pull my support away from this animal shelter."

"I'm sure the insurance for the shelter will pay for the costs. This is all an accident. The kids did not mean to damage your vehicle. We'll make sure it gets fixed," the man with the glasses said.

"You better make sure it gets fixed," Zac's dad warned. "Or you can kiss goodbye any more support from my company. Understood?"

Wow! This guy was just as bad as Zac. I guessed the apple didn't fall far from the tree. But he was right; I had lost my focus and allowed the dog to escape. When things became important, I messed up. My lack of focus had caused a disaster yet again.

## Chapter 15

### Pirates

"Are you here to find the hidden treasure?" The pirate wore an eye patch and surveyed us warily. He had a hook for his right hand, and elastics were tied all throughout his scraggly beard. Frankly, he smelled. This was taking the role a bit far. "We're here for the miniature golf tournament," I said as my mom nodded.

"Follow the garden path and turn right toward the tent." He leaned in closer as if to add some valuable information. "Be careful of the barracudas at hole eight. They can take a real bite out of your club. Arrr!"

I grabbed my mom's arm. I wanted to get away from the pirate as quickly as possible.

"They sure take the whole pirate theme seriously, Tyler. There are sunken ships, caves, and all kinds of pirate paraphernalia around this mini golf course. It almost feels like I've stepped into the pages of *'Treasure Island'*, my mom said as we went through the jungle.

I had been practicing all week. If I placed well at this tournament, I would make the nationals. If not, my miniature golf career was done, at least for this year. And I could go back to school the loser I had always been.

The Pirate Lagoon miniature golf course was impressive. The organizers even asked the players to dress up as well. I wasn't having any

part of wearing a puffy pirate shirt in this hot weather. As we went to the main tent, I could see Arc in the distance; he motioned to us.

"Mrs. Martin. Tyler. I hope you're ready for today. The competition will be fierce, hope you brought your A game." Nothing like ratcheting up the pressure. As a coach's pep talk, this left a bit to be desired.

"I'm about as ready as I'm going to be," I replied.

"We'll be watching from the sidelines. Don't worry, Patrick and Lily will be with us. Good luck!" My mom hugged me and walked out of the tent. I looked at Arc.

"Let's go over the rules before we start," I said. We walked over to a bench and sat down.

"It's pretty straightforward, Tyler. There are fifty participants. Only ten from this tournament will make the nationals in September. People who are playing this tournament are the best. They make the last tournament look like a bunch of kids. Don't try to get by this time with fancy shots. Keep them simple and stay focused to get the ball in the hole. Any questions?"

"Just one. What's the Heighten rule? Some players were talking about at the last tournament. I really didn't understand them."

Arc shook his head as if my question was the stupidest thing he had ever heard. "Stop worrying about things that will never happen and focus on today."

"Indulge me. I want to understand how that rule works." I was genuinely interested.

"Fine," Arc answered. "The Heighten rule happened over in France. A ball collided with a windmill and broke in half. It would never happen nowadays. I think the ball was cracked to begin with. It split into several pieces. When the ball is in play, you cannot replace it until the next hole. In this case, the player, Jonathan Heighten, had to hit the largest piece toward the hole."

"Was it a jagged piece?"

"Yes, it was an exceptionally jagged piece. In fact, the other pieces were much smoother and smaller. He had to flip it toward the hole. Why ask about a scenario that will never happen?"

"I just like to be prepared for all possibilities. I like to think of scenarios that might never happen but provide a workable solution just in case."

"Whatever works, Tyler, but honestly, focus on the regular shots." He arched his eyebrows. "The problem with miniature golf is that there are so many distractions. If you're mid-swing when something distracts you, it could add an extra stroke. At this tournament, if you get an extra stroke, then everybody else will be ahead of you and there will be no way to catch up."

I nodded, and the two of us walked ahead to the first hole. There was a table set up, and most of the golfers seem to be surrounding it, waiting for everybody to get into place. I looked around and saw Elsa over to the far right with her dad. If she saw me, she didn't give any indication. That was fine with me. She was a distraction I didn't need.

"Tyler, I want you to meet your partner for today," Arc pointed, and I peered into the thick glasses of another player. He was about my height, stocky, and looked a lot smarter than me.

"Hi Tyler, I'm Parker. I've heard about you; some science guy, figuring all the angles on how shots are made. That's really cool. I'm a bit of a science guy myself. Even have a laboratory in my home. That's in Virginia; we just flew in last night. I've been to Florida before, but is it always this hot? Speaking of hot—"

"Okay, boys, get to know each other," Arc interrupted. "I have to check with the organizers." He walked over to another tent.

"Did you know I have my own miniature golf course set in my home? It's because my dad's not around a lot. And my mom lives in California. Yeah, they're divorced; surprise. Anyway, my dad thought if I had a miniature golf at home, lots of friends would come over to keep me busy. If you need any help today, let me know and I can give you a few pointers."

Man, this guy talked like a mile a minute. I hoped he didn't talk while I was taking shots. This would definitely affect my focus.

"Thanks, if I get into any tight spots, I'll look for your advice," I offered, trying to be friendly. For a guy that I was competing against, he sure was helpful. We walked over to the main tent for the tournament information.

"I guess we get to go last," offered Parker.

"Why?" I asked.

"All the top-ranked golfers go first, so they get to finish before the rest of us. They set the scores that we have to match. Statistically,



most of the top-ten scores will be the first twenty players. Most of us will be lucky if we even get to the top half."

"Are you trying to distract me? I mean, I'm feeling more and more depressed by the second."

"Sorry, sorry. I just say things as quickly as they come into my head. I have no filter. Least that is what my dad says."

"Can we talk about something besides golf for a moment? My sponsor says I have a tough time focusing on things. But honestly, I find I need a distraction right now."

We walked over a small bridge. In the distance was a waterfall flowing through a very dark cave. I did not look forward to playing that hole.

"What do you want to talk about?" said Parker.

"Why do you play?" I asked. "Do you get a lot of enjoyment from playing miniature golf? Was your dad a player? What's in it for you?"

Parker put two fingers on his chin as if contemplating a very serious answer.

"I play because I miss my dad. He is away a lot traveling on business, giving advice to company mergers. I don't see him a lot. But when he is home, he spends all the time he can with me. Building the miniature golf course on our home was a project that we got to do together. He's ultracompetitive in everything, so I practice a lot just so that I can try to beat him. Which I rarely do."

In a way, Parker was like me. I was hoping to win at miniature golf to impress my dad. He played miniature golf, so he could spend time with his.

"Do you have any brothers or sisters?" I asked.

"No, my mom and dad divorced shortly after having me. What about you?"

"One younger sister who constantly terrorizes me and drives me up the wall. But I couldn't imagine my life without her." Suddenly, we were interrupted by the loudspeaker.

"Players! Please circle around the main tent so I can explain the overall rules for the tournament," a man yelled through a microphone. He was tall and wearing a red golf shirt. Something told me by way his mannerisms that he was a professional golfer.

"I want to welcome all players, sponsors, and families to today's tournament, our annual American classic." A smattering of applause came from the crowd. "All of you should be excited. We have some of the best junior miniature golf players in North America here today."

From the corner, Elsa and her dad were waving their arms wildly. The speaker got the message. "And of course, we have some international players here as well. I want to thank our game sponsor of Pirate Lagoons who have given us full use of their course today. I appreciate all of their staff here helping our players with their questions."

"The rules are simple. You've been paired with a partner for today's eighteen holes. Do not go over the allotted time for taking your

shot. You have ninety seconds for your first shot, sixty seconds for each shot after that.

"Your tee-off time is posted in the main tent. Please be on time. Anybody later than five minutes will be disqualified. There will be a referee at each hole to make sure players do not move balls and follow the rules of the world miniature golf association. The top ten players will advance to the world championship that will take place on September 15. This course will be created specifically for the championship and will be shrouded in secrecy until the course is played on that date. Any questions?"

A tall boy with long, black hair raised his hand. "Are there many places for me to stay when I play in the world championship on the 15<sup>th</sup>?" He asked. Well, this guy's overconfidence made Elsa look like a gem. The crowd of golfers laughed.

"I suggest you worry about this tournament before thinking about your accommodations for the final," the organizer answered. "Any serious questions?" There were a few snickers, but nobody asked anything more. At this stage, all players knew what to expect; now they needed to perform.

"Want anything from the refreshment tent?" asked Parker. "The board," he pointed up at the front with all the names of the players, "has us going last. And we can't watch any the other players at the holes in case it gives us an advantage."

"Meet at the practice green?" I asked. I had some nervous energy and felt that maybe taking some shots would help my nerves.

"Now. At this point I'm ready to go. I've got muscle memory. I'm not going to improve with a few practice shots. You go ahead, just meet me

in twenty minutes for tee time." He pointed to the first green. I nodded and walked over to the practice green. Strangely enough, I had it all to myself. The other players were relaxing, sitting in chairs, having something to drink, talking. Me, I was a bundle of nerves; the waiting was the worst part. I just wanted to play and get this over with. Good or bad. I heard something shaking behind me and turned face-to-face with a skeleton. A pirate prop.

"Ahhhh!"

"Scared of a few bones!" Zac taunted. *How did this guy get on the course?*

"Zac, what are you doing here? You're not even a player. Bug off or I'll get the referees to kick you off the course!" I turned my back to him and tried to focus on taking a practice shot. But if Zac was leaving, he showed no signs of it. He walked over to face me.

"You don't seem to understand loser. My dad is a major sponsor. I can go anywhere I want on this course. I can do what I want." He turned his head and looked around. "Unless your girlfriend is going to chase me off again." He looked a little unsettled.

"What is your major malfunction?" I looked up. He stood a good four inches taller than me. "There must be dozens of kids from our school that you could bully this summer. Why are you always interested in me?" Zac stared silently for several seconds. It was creepy. I realized that he relished torturing me.

"You're the worst loser of the bunch, Tyler. I guess you just deserve my attention the most." He gave me a shove, and I stumbled back a step.

"Who is this guy?" asked Parker, coming up from behind us.

"You got a fat boy to protect you now?" Zac taunted.

"Unless you're a player, your presence is not required in the practice area," a referee behind Parker stated.

"And don't body-shame me either," said Parker. "I just have a healthy body shape. And I guess this body is in the championship, and you're not." He smiled, and Zac being who he was, he tried to shove Parker to the ground. Fortunately, the referee intervened and escorted him off the green. Zac gave me a parting glare as he disappeared into the bushes. "Friend of yours?" asked Parker.

"The furthest thing from it. This guy is always on me; it's like he gets so much satisfaction from terrorizing me."

"I have so few friends. Having a bully might even be welcome," Parker teased. Despite my poor luck with Zac, I always seemed to get a good partner for these tournaments.

"Team 25 on deck, team 25 on deck. Tee time in ten minutes," the announcer yelled from the tent.

"That's us," answered Parker. The tournament had begun.

As I stepped to the first hole, I noticed another green, just on other side of us. From what I could see, the person across the course was

Elsa. She was so focused on the green and a ball, I don't think anybody else in the world existed to her. Well, except maybe her father.

She made the shot with ease, and her father gave a barely approving glance. She didn't really look happy; it was as if the conclusion was to be expected. Anything less was a disappointment. Her name and score immediately went up onto the scoreboard. What a surprise, she was in the lead.

"She is going to be hard to beat," I said.

"Well, don't try to beat her," Parker replied. "We'll just try to score in the top ten. Focus on getting the best score you can, rather than trying to beat the best person in the tournament." His advice was sound. It was time to focus and make the best shots possible.

Hole number #7

"Squawk! Pauley wants a cracker! Pauley wants a cracker!" the mechanical parrot yelled every minute, hanging from the side of fake palm tree. The noise was grating, and to avoid the distraction, you tried to shoot between the squawking. To make matters worse, a mechanical monkey tossed fake coconuts onto the course at random, and you never knew if your ball or your head was going to get whacked. This place was the land of distractions.

I was doing my best to get par on all of these holes. They were so hard — even with my ability to measure angles, most holes had little mounds around them that would redirect your ball if you hit it too hard or too soft.

"Tyler, stop being so serious. If you clutch your club any tighter, you're going to break the handle," Arc commented at one of the holes. Although he couldn't give me any direction on my shots, he was still allowed to give moral assistance. I nodded at him, realizing that we shouldn't converse.

"Why so tense, dude?" Parker asked. "Nobody's going to die by you missing a putt."

"I know, but my dad is the perfect athlete with a wall full of trophies. One time, I just want to make him proud of me. My goal is to win one competition. One event, so I can prove that I'm not some loser of a son."

"Time violation!"

"What?" I didn't realize how long I'd taken by talking to Parker. It felt good to talk to him about my reason for playing. But once again, I had lost focus on the task on hand. The referee came over to me and handed me a yellow card.

"If you take too long to take a shot again, you will get a red card," the referee stated.

"Does that mean I'll be out of the tournament?"

"No," answered Parker, "you'll get a third chance. But if you get a green card, they ship you right out of the course."

And there I thought a green card was a good thing to get.

### Hole number #11

We stepped onto the poop deck of a pirate ship, and I walked the plank to make our first shot. The goal was to hit around the deck of the ship to the hole beside an open treasure chest full of fake gold.

I looked up at the digital scoreboard at our scores. We were 20<sup>th</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup>. Not bad, but it wouldn't get us into the final. If we didn't start making a few birdies or take a few risks, we weren't going to make the final ten. This hole was a par five, so we had a chance to take a least a stroke off to improve our scores. I had to move quickly, since my penalty, I had been very cognizant of my time.

The hole was complex; you had to angle your shot around the deck at one end and find the hole at the far end. It was the longest hole so far and deserved the par 5. I looked carefully at any way I could find a short cut, some way to cut off a stroke to climb up the leaderboard. The plank over the end of the deck intrigued me. Although part of the course, it really was a dead-end. However, if you hit the ball over the edge, you could skirt around about twenty feet of green and the barrier of fake sword blades.

"Are you thinking what I think you're thinking?" Parker asked.

"Maybe — what are you thinking? Care to give me your expert opinion?" I noticed the time ticker was running down. "Quickly," I added.

Parker leaned down and examined the plank. "Low-percentage shot, but if you hit hard enough to make over the wall and backspin it onto the green, you could easily take a stroke or two off by getting a lot closer to the hole."

"Would you take the shot? I asked.



Parker shook his head. "It's tough shot, and I'd need several practice shots to get it right. I won't take the chance. However, I don't mind watching you."

I calculated the averages. I could see the vectors from my math assignment appear on the green, measuring speed and spin. Ten seconds before I took another penalty. Go big or go home. I would be going home if I missed this shot.

The ball popped from my club, sailed over the plank, spun over the barrier, and onto the green. The shot was perfect, and I set myself perfectly for a possible three on this hole. Arc smiled while my friends and family cheered. This time the risk had worked out.

### Hole # 13

My mother was born on Friday, August 13<sup>th</sup>, and considered thirteen her lucky number. When I looked at this hole, I knew I would need all the luck in the world. The green was on a slope with several fake palm trees throughout. It was hard to see the hole from the tee, and I walked around the green to check it out. The green was built on several tiers of varying heights. Too hard and you could overshoot the hole. Too soft and the ball would come right to you, basically adding a stroke. You had to find the right balance of power without any practice swings.

Over half of the golfers were done now, and a lot of them were watching from the sidelines. Either they were checking out their competition or hoping they that one of us would mess up. I could feel eyes upon me, and bead of sweat ran down my back. I saw my sister and mom

behind the crowd fence. Kayleigh had been much easier to get along with since my prank. I didn't know if I had slowed her down or if she was just prepping me for the mother of all pranks. She wouldn't dare try something here; Mom would kill her.

"My turn to go first," Parker commented. "Let me show you how the master does it," he joked. He cued up the ball and looked up the slope. I studied him and watched the follow-through of his club. It looked a bit light, but before I could warn him, he hit the ball. It climbed majestically, weaving around obstacles before slowing at the top of the slope. I almost thought my assessment was wrong and the ball was going to make it. Then, about two inches from the top, the ball stopped and then fell back. Right to where he started. He stopped the ball with his foot. Parker was disappointed — that shot might cost him his top-ten placement.

I looked at him but didn't speak. Nothing I could say would change the shot. All I could do was learn from his mistake. I was focused on the task. My physics class learning came to fruition. The ball vectors, force, and speed calculations ran through my mind. It felt like minutes of analysis, but I knew it only took seconds. Maybe this was my superpower.

A pebble hit the side of my head, breaking my concentration. I turned and looked in the crowd. Everyone stared back at me — no guilty faces stood out. Movement caught my attention. Was that Zac in the crowd?

"Time violation!" the referee spoke.

Damn! My distraction had thrown me off on my time management. He handed me a red card. "One more violation, and you will be disqualified from the tournament!" I was starting to hate these guys.

"What's going on, man?" Parker asked. "One more delay and you're out."

"I know, I know. Something distracted me. I won't make the same mistake again." *At least I better not.* I had to focus on my shot. I hit the ball, and it made the slope. At least I had learned from Parker's shot.

### Hole #18

The last hole was the hardest. It was called the island. Except for the walkway out to the green, it was completely surrounded by water. There was a low lip of wood on the edge of the green. Shoot too hard, and into the water you would go. Your day was over. I had heard whisperings from the crowd that at least eight people met that fate. I looked at the scoreboard — I had to shoot three on a par 4 to crack the top ten. If I shot a four, I would be tied with five other players and go into a playoff. Shot anything higher, and I was done for the day.

There were a lot of people watching Parker and me play. The only positive vibes I got were from my family and Arc. They waved and stood at the far end of the hole. I had to focus on their good thoughts if I was going to make this.

"You have ninety seconds to examine the hole before your shot," the referee commanded, and the time clock started. Parker and I walked the

hole, trying to get ideas. He gave me direction, since he knew he was out of the championship picture.

"If you hit the corner here and here, you should be no problem to stay on the green. But I can't see how you can take a stroke off. You should play it safe and try to take the others in the playoffs," Parker suggested. I knew he was right, but what were the odds of beating five other players over a couple of greens? I had a chance now to punch my ticket if I took a risk.

Then I saw it.

"What if I try the bridge?" I pointed to a piece of wood that crossed a water bunker that halved the distance to the green.

Parker snickered. "That bridge is an ornament. No one uses it to cross. First, you would have to land it at this exact spot at the start. Then hit it perfectly straight over, or you'll go into the water. But on top of that you must hit it soft enough so that you don't go over the green on the other side. Maybe put a little backspin on the ball."

"You're saying it's possible?" I asked with a smile.

"Yah. Like it's possible if I win the Powerball lottery for thirty million. Come on, Tyler, be realistic. You must hit the shot perfectly, and even then, your chances are low. Come on, let's look for another way." He kept circling the green, trying to find another option.

But I had already decided. I knew the choice was foolhardy. I knew the odds were low. But with less than a minute to assess the green, I knew no other options were going to jump out at me. If I made this shot, I was a hero. If I didn't, I would crash and burn out and be

forgotten. I glanced at Arc, who gave me a look as he was figuring out what I was trying to do. He threw up his hands. It wasn't a yes, but it wasn't a no either. It was probably the most support I was going to get for such a crazy idea.

"Time's running out," the referee yelled. I knew I had to get back to the start to get my shot. Any more time violations, and I was out. I looked around the crowd; their faces were probing me, trying to get inside my brain to understand the shot I was going to take. I saw no sign of Zac, which meant I could focus on the task on hand. I lined up my putter.

"No way I can talk you out of this?" Parker asked.

"None." I nodded back at him.

"Good luck." He tapped me on the shoulder.

I put the crowd noise out of my mind and ran the calculations. Vectors and speed were calculated over and over as I tried to translate the exact amount of force into my club. It wasn't easy — it's like the iconic moment of a movie where you try to switch the exact weight of your bag with the statue. Too much and the pedestal sinks down, and you are trapped. Too little and the traps of the treasure cave come out to get you. The results of a missed shot were not so dramatic, but I had to get it just right.

I hit the ball, and it flowed perfectly halfway down the green to sit right at the start of the bridge to cross the water. Several voices rose, and crowd began to murmur as they discussed what I was trying to do. Most thought I was crazy or stupid.

Parker took his shot, passing my ball farther down the green, willing to go around the course for the regular shot. I examined the bridge and realized how small the margin of error was. There was a reason; players treated this as an ornament and not a passage for a ball.

"Second shot time clock has started," the referee stated, and I knew I had one minute to make my shot. The shot that would determine if I was a hero or a zero. I needed all of my focus for this shot. If I didn't shoot the ball perfectly straight, it would sink. And Parker was right, the momentum of the ball from the bridge into the green would likely make it overshoot into the water beyond. I had to put backspin on the ball to keep it on the green.

"Ouch!" Something hard hit me in the back of the head. I rubbed my head and looked down on the green. A small pebble lay there. I scanned the crowd, checking for the thrower. No one seemed to register seeing the culprit. Then I saw Zac behind a tree, at a slight incline to everyone else. The perfect place to toss the rock at me. I pointed, and several people turned around, but Zac was gone. Time was ticking, and I looked like the one with the problem.

"Twenty seconds left," the referee said, noticing my distraction. There was no need to tell me; the count was registered in the score clock.

I focused on ball. I could not have any other distractions. FOCUS. Just like Arc said. FOCUS. Follow One Course Until Success. It was a cute acronym, and I had to admit it was easy to remember. But between Zac, the angry looks from the crowd, and the sheer difficulty of the shot, I was at my wit's end. I opened my eyes, and ten seconds remained. I had to take

the shot, for better or worse. Whatever happened after I took my shot was out of my control. But I knew if I concentrated, I could make this.

I hit the ball with one second left as the crowd gasped. It climbed the bridge and crossed the narrow wooden ramp. It wobbled and seemed to travel in slow motion. No one made a sound. I could have sworn it leaned a little to the right, but before it could fall into the water, it dropped down to the green on the other side. Now the hard part. It landed hard on the green and proceeded to coast to the water trap. Backspin slowed the ball down, but the forward momentum kept it moving to the water. I was afraid to watch and afraid to look away.

The ball wavered and rolled to a stop inches away from the water's edge.

I did it! The crowd went ballistic. Even the other golfers I that I would eliminate gave me a nod of respect. My Mom clapped like I had just won a million dollars, while Arc gave me his version of the slow clap. I had gambled and won.

After Parker went, I took the shot and made the birdie. The one stroke put me in tenth position. I would make the world championship, even with Zac's interference. Trick and Lily came rushing up to me.

"That was epic, Tyler. It was one shot in a million. Everyone around me said you couldn't do it, but I knew you could. Just like I told everyone."

"Liar!" Lily punched Trick on the shoulder. "You were so quiet watching the shot, and when Tyler made it, you screamed like a girl."

"Did not." Trick didn't sound convincing. My mom hugged me next, with Kayleigh bringing up the rear.

"You were fantastic, dear! Your father will be so proud." Her comments hit home. I wanted him to be proud of my accomplishments.

"Thanks, Mom! I just hope he'll be back in time for the world championships in September." The one person missing was Arc, and I was surprised by his absence. Then I saw him, and he didn't look happy. He motioned to us and pulled everyone together into a group.

"We have a problem! There has been a protest made against you, Tyler."

"Surprise! And this protest just happened as he won the last spot into the championship," offered Trick.

"No. The protest was lodged at the start of the day, but they didn't act upon it in case Tyler didn't make it to the next round."

"Who filed the protest?" my mom asked.

"One of the sponsors. He says that Tyler damaged his truck and is not tournament material."

"Zac's Dad!" I exclaimed. "That's bogus. We were trying to save the beagle. The shelter manager agreed it was an accident and their insurance would cover the vehicle damage."

"That may be true, but the tournament organizers took the complaint very seriously. The sponsor has asked that you be removed from the tournament."

"That's not fair. Zac put his father up to this," I yelled as the jubilation high of my win was replaced by anger.

"What did they decide?" My mom asked.



"The organizers decided to let Tyler stay in the tournament. He earned his spot."

"That's good," Lily responded.

"But," Arc continued, "they had to do something, or the sponsor would remove his funding, jeopardizing the final."

"What did they do?" I asked, dreading his reply.

"They removed my sponsorship for the finals. Unless you can raise ten thousand dollars in less than a month, you won't be able to compete!"

## Chapter 16

### Back to School

The yellow torture chamber rushed us toward our destination. Kids screamed, and the driver looked pained. I was depressed. The last tournament was two weeks old, and my dreams had been dashed. To make matters worse, this was the first day of school. I felt lower than low.

I looked out the school bus window and watched my surroundings. The street passed by, a man in a suit rushed to his car. A mother was yelling at her children, who were otherwise not listening to her. Everyone was stressed and unhappy. None of this was improving my mood.

The bus stopped at school and spewed us out. I saw Lily and Trick arguing by the bike rack. Neither of them looked happy, and the morning of ill will continued.

"Can we not discuss this now?" Lily exclaimed.

"Why not? It's a good idea," Trick answered.

"What's a good idea?" I asked, interrupting their conversation. Lily looked angry that I had overheard.

"About your golf sponsorship. I was saying we should brainstorm some ideas on how to raise your tournament fees," Trick offered.

"And I said that today is the first day of school. You have bigger things on your mind," Lily countered.

"I don't want to discuss this today. It cost ten thousand bucks to enter the World Miniature Golf tournament. Mom says we don't have that kind of money. Arc isn't allowed to sponsor me."

"But what if we raised the money? Like a charity. Odd jobs, car washes. You name it," Trick said.

"In two weeks? It's impossible. I can't raise a hundred dollars in that time. I give up."

"But you punched your ticket, Tyler. You made the shot of a lifetime. All the other players admitted that you have the skills. Maybe even good enough to win it all," Trick pleaded.

"It doesn't matter! Zac's father ruined it for me. If I haven't paid the admission fee forty-eight hours before the tournament, my place goes to the next person in line."

"Trick, let him be. Can't you see that you're just making it worse for him?" Lily pleaded. That's when I walked into a brick wall. Or rather the chest of Don, who felt like a brick wall. I looked straight up and saw his smiling face.

"Look it's Dumb and Dumber," Lily yelled at Don and Dave. Since they wouldn't hit a girl, Don pulled his fist back like he was going to punch Trick in the face. Trick lowered his head and closed his eyes.

"Don Karhowshi! The bell for the first day of school hasn't even started, and you have already earned your first detention," Ms. Carmichael yelled. Frankly, I was surprised she came back. I thought she would have retired by now. Don tried to defend his actions.

"But..." he stammered.

"They started it," Dave said.

Mrs. Carmichael didn't look like she was buying it. "I'm sure you can explain in detention why punching anyone in the face would solve your problems."

Don and Dave looked at each other but were smart enough to know that they were fighting a losing battle. Neither said another word.

"Bye, boys. Don, see you after school," Mrs. Carmichael said cheerfully. The boys scowled at us and moved off, saving their fight for another time.

"Thank you," I said, appreciating her help. I guess even adults can spots the bullies in the group.

"Oh, I'm not done helping you yet. Follow me." Lily and Trick gave me a surprised look, as we walked with her to class.

"Are you offering us study help for our first day?" Trick asked.

Mrs. C dismissed the comment with a wave of her hand. "My help is more directed to Tyler. I understand you had an interesting summer?"

"You heard about my mini golf tournament?" I was genuinely surprised. I didn't think teachers kept up with students outside of school.

"All the teachers did, Tyler. You have caused quite a stir among the staff. But we're sad that your status is in jeopardy because of the loss of your sponsor."

"Are you saying that the school wants to help out?" Lily asked with excitement creeping into her voice.

Mrs. C. stopped walking. "No, dear. The school can't show any favoritism to any one student. And even if we could, we could never provide money to a student. The optics would be a disaster — other parents would

not appreciate it. And there are so many other activities that need more money around this school.

"So, what help can you provide?" I inquired. Mrs. C. walked into the school, and we followed.

"You need fundraising help. As a staff member, I could help provide you a forum to raise money here at the school. If you have a great idea that's safe and supports school activities, then I would be happy to go to bat for you with Principal Skinner."

I thought about her offer. I only had weeks to go before the finals. Could I really come up with an idea and raise money in time?

"I don't know. There isn't much time, and that sounds like a lot of work," I started.

"Coming from the boy who spent hours setting up a complicated domino exhibit in my classroom. Come on, Tyler, don't give up. There are people who will support you."

"Maybe, but what kind of ideas would I need?"

Trick looked excited as an idea came to him. "I know! My grandmother has a big bingo night at her nursing home on the first Friday of each month. We could go there, try to win, pick up some ideas for something like that here."

The bell rang, and our conversation ended.

"You kids think about my offer. The school could be a great venue. At the start of a school year, kids are excited to attend any event," Mrs. C added as she disappeared into her classroom.

I was skeptical at best. It was nice that she had offered her help, but I was frustrated. While all the other players had sponsors and

could concentrate on practicing, I also had to raise the money just to play. None of this was fair.

“What are you thinking?” Lily asked.

“I’ll tell you at the end of the day. Let’s get through the first class,” I answered.

The three o’clock bell rang, and the chaos of school came to an end. The day had been mind-numbing, learning the rules of new teachers. Hour after hour of being told what you can’t do. I still hadn’t decided yet about fundraising, I stepped through the outside doors, as Trick and I looked for Lily. She was waiting for us by a bike stand. We waved at our bus driver and kept walking. It was too nice a day to take the bus home, and I needed time to think.

“So, what have you decided about the fundraising?” Lily leaned in as we were walking.

“I don’t know, Lily. Every time I try to do something, then someone like Zac, his father, or Don or Dave, always knocks down what I try to build. I don’t think it’s worth the effort,” I answered honestly.

“Oh, come on, don’t let the bullies win,” Trick pleaded.

I stopped on the sidewalk. “This isn’t a movie, Trick. The good guys don’t always win. Zac and his dad aren’t even in the tournament, and they are still screwing me up. If I know Zac, he’ll mess up any fundraising we try.”

“So that’s it, Tyler?” Lily asked. “You get a bloody nose and now you want to throw out all of your hard work from this summer.”

"Yeah, come on, buddy, if you keep going, you know we'll support you,"

Trick added.

I started walking again. Their support made me feel worse about my decision.

"I don't deserve you guys. By hanging out with me, you make yourself targets, you know."

"We don't care. It's worth it. Please don't give up!" Lily said.

I wondered why I was such a coward. My mixed-up feelings were interrupted as we passed the elementary school on the corner. There was a group of kids yelling in the schoolyard. I only half paid attention until I recognized someone's jacket. It was Kayleigh! We stopped and listened to the yelling.

"You put the whoopee cushion on my seat. You are always trying to prank us," a boy that was an entire head taller than her was saying.

"Whatever," Kayleigh responded. "My pranks are lot more complicated than a bag that makes fart sounds."

The boy seemed unimpressed. "How about I punch you in the mouth?" He cocked his hand backward to throw his punch. It was time to step in.

"Whoa, whoa!" I yelled. "You don't want to hit her." I showed some brotherly pride.

"How do you know her?" The bully looked us over. "You're not some family member, are you?" He was not intimidated by the three of us. "I'll just hit her later when you're not around."

Okay, this kid was smarter than I thought. I couldn't force him, like another bully, but I could use psychological warfare.

"No, dude." I tried to appear as unthreatening as possible. "The three of us are victims." I looked at Trick and Lily, who nodded but with confusion on their faces. The rest of schoolyard leaned in to hear our story.

"Victims? What do you mean? You guys are twice as big as her."

"But we're not as big where it counts." I tapped the side of my head as if to point to my brain. "She's pure evil."

"What did she do?" the young bully answered. I could feel the fishing hook grabbing into him; now I just had to reel him in.

"It's too horrible to describe." The bully appeared not to believe me, so I continued. "But if you really want to know," I leaned in as if to whisper a horrible secret, "she turned my pee green." I remembered the asparagus trick she pulled on me. The bully looked at his pants, and an expression of fear crossed his space.

"What did she do to you?" He looked at Trick.

"She attacked my number 2," he answered cryptically.

"What?" The boy didn't understand the bathroom terms, number 1 and number 2.

"His poop!" Lily said a bit too loud.

"What happened?"

Trick motioned to him to come closer. "She made it explode," he whispered. The bully looked scared now and turned to Kayleigh, who played along by nodding.

"She's not worth it," Lily explained. "Anything you do to her, she'll do back to you ten times worse."



The bully let Kayleigh go. "You don't scare me," he said while backing away.

"Well, your feet say something else," Kayleigh bragged. I gave her a look not to push her luck too far.

"Whatever," he sneered but continued to walk back to the school. The crowd around us dispersed.

Then Kayleigh gave me a look. "What was that for? Is this some kind of a prank?" She crossed her arms and dared us to tell the truth. Both of my friends looked at me to respond.

"We were just walking home, and I was telling them how hard it is to stand up to bullies. That no matter what you do, they always come back to ruin what you try to do."

"That's if you try to fight back the way they do. Try to match their brute strength. You'll always lose," Lily commented.

"But if you play some mind games, like we did with your friend," Trick motioned to the bully who had disappeared, "sometimes you can win."

Kayleigh smiled at me, but I wasn't sure if she believed our sincerity.

"I guess you aren't all bad." She punched me on the shoulder. "See you at home," and she ran off to her friends. The three of us continued our walk home.

"Do you think you two have a truce now?" Trick asked.

"Maybe. Although she can turn evil in seconds. I still don't trust her."

Jim Kochanoff

*"Have you changed your mind about the fundraiser?" Lily smiled as if anticipating my response. I scratched my chin, contemplating my answer.*

*"Trick — where is your grandma's nursing home?"*

## Chapter 17

### The Take

The three of us weren't sure what to expect when we visited Trick's grandmother at the Sagewood Retirement Home. Trick had explained that the facility was large, with over four hundred residents, and the weekly bingo night was a major activity. The doors slid open, and we walked up to the main desk.

"I'm here to see Stephanie Walsh," Trick asked. "Is she in her room?"

The receptionist was young and more interested in her phone than Trick's request. She took a second to finish what she was doing before she responded. "I think I saw her in the common room on my last round. Most of them gather there before going to the auditorium for game night." She thumbed to the right and went back to her phone. We walked down the hall toward the noise of seniors getting ready for the event. When the three of us turned the corner, I almost stopped in my tracks. Instead of a bunch of grannies getting ready for bingo night, I thought I had stepped into a tailgate party. There was screaming and food, but the face paint was what really threw me off. One woman had the words BINGO NIGHT scrawled on her fingers. One older gentleman had spots all over his face, I assumed to match the marker pens that circled the numbers on the bingo

cards. But Trick's grandmother seemed to be in the center of all of the activity. She saw us walk in and barreled over.

"Patrick! I'm so excited that you and your friends are joining us tonight. The girls and I are just having a bit of wine before we go down. To loosen our fingers." She winked, and I doubted the wine had anything to do with bingo. "Introduce me to your friends."

"This is Lily," Trick started, and his grandmother immediately hugged her. "You must be Trick's girlfriend. What a lucky girl!"

"She's not my girlfriend, Grannie!" Trick yelled. Lily just made a face like she was going to throw up.

"And this is Tyler." Trick pointed to me, and his grandmother hugged me with more force than I had guessed. She might be old, but I sure didn't want to mess with her.

"Tyler! I've heard so much about your miniature golf skills. A real Master of the Mini! Did you know I met my husband at a miniature golf course?"

"I did not know that—" I started.

"He had a short attention span, so I had to find him an activity to keep engaged."

*Was she making fun of miniature golf?*

"But enough about me, you three are here to try to take some of the nursing home's hard-earned bingo money." She coaxed us to come closer. "You better be careful tonight. If you want to leave alive!" There was silence, and then the crowd of ladies behind broke into laughter. How much wine had they drunk?

"Actually, Mrs. Walsh," Lily added, "we just here to learn about how to set up a bingo night at our school and thought we'd learn from the best."

"She's a keeper, Patrick. Make sure you invite me to the wedding."

"She's not my girlfriend!" Trick's face was turning red. She ignored him.

"Anyway, call me Stephanie. The only person called Mrs. Walsh was my mother," she laughed.

Suddenly, a loud bell rang throughout the room, and everyone became quiet; the pre-party was over. The jubilation changed to a business-like atmosphere. It was BINGO time. The mass exodus was overwhelming; I was so glad I wasn't at the front of the room, or I would have been trampled. I felt a hand on my shoulder as we were gently directed out of the room. We walked by the receptionist again, and she was still mesmerized by her phone.

We walked down the hallway, passing a convenience store and hair salon. This nursing home was a small community! We turned right, into a large auditorium full of activity. On the stage in front of us was a young woman in spotlight standing with a table and large spinning machine. Ping-pong balls with numbers lay at the bottom of the cage. Before the stage were dozens of tables, about seventy-five percent full. It was mostly seniors, but I also saw a few young adults and kids. Either they were family of one of the residents, or they lived near the nursing home and took part in the fun.

Trick's grandmother directed us to the far right, where there were a few empty tables next to each other. We passed one lady who made me do a double-take. Her hair had a blue hue, and she had a plethora of bingo cards around her — probably close to twenty.

"Can she play all of those cards at once?" I whispered.

"I can play even more when the pot is larger," the woman responded and stared at me through a pair of large-rimmed glasses. Despite her age, her hearing was keen.

"Enjoy your game tonight, Delores," Mrs. Walsh replied coldly.

"You too, Stephanie," came a similarly cold reply. There was some history between the two, but I didn't think either was going to volunteer it to me. A couple of tables over, an elderly man sat with several bingo cards, but what was around him caught my attention. There were at least a dozen troll dolls, each with a different color hair. They stood around the cards as if they were guarding them.

"I see you brought your friends out tonight, William," Mrs. Walsh commented as we walked by.

"You know they bring me good luck," the man answered while tipping his hat to the three of us. This place was some type of crazy. It was so bizarre that everyone else considered it normal. We reached the end of the aisle and picked a table that would seat the four of us. Mrs. Walsh took out a twenty-dollar bill.

"Patrick, you and Tyler go up front and buy us some bingo cards. Lily and I will stay and have girl talk until you boys come back." Lily smiled and played along. I could tell that Mrs. Walsh was really enjoying having us for

company. I followed Trick as we weaved in around tables to get to the front. Before we got there, I thought I heard a leaking sound.

"Psssstttttt. Come over here." Both Trick and I heard it and looked around for its source. We noticed an elderly man at a table serving refreshments. He beckoned us over. I walked over and tripped on an electrical wire that crossed the floor. I just recovered before I hit the table. A fire alarm hung on the wall.

"They should tape that down," Trick commented.

"Guys. Come over here." The gentleman motioned to us. He wore a flashy suit and an old hat like something out of a classic movie. His teeth shined as he smiled.

"Are you Stephanie's grandson?" He looked at Trick.

"Yes, and this is my friend Tyler. And you are...?"

"Anson." His hand shot out and shook both of ours. "I'm the bartender for these events. Can I mix you a nonalcoholic drink?" He seemed keen to please us.

"Sure," I answered, "what can you make?" I looked at about twenty different bottles of every distinct color.

"I'll make you a rocket ship. It's out of this world," he answered enthusiastically. Trick and I looked at each other. Silently, we wondered if talking a drink from a complete stranger was a good idea. Maybe we could dump it later. As he was making his concoction, I thought I'd make some conversation.

"So, any suggestions on how to win big at bingo night?"

He gave me a serious look. "Don't win. Even if you have a winning card. Lose. The ladies here are serious players. Outsiders aren't welcome. They won't let you out alive with your winnings."

"You're not being serious." Trick laughed disbelievingly.

Anson stopped mixing and stared at us. "Dead serious. Ask your grandmother, if you don't believe me. If you must get out quickly," he pointed to the far right of the stage, "there is an exit that will take you outside. Use it if you don't want to get attacked. They're like a bad zombie movie, but instead of wanting your brains, they want your winnings." His voice was serious. Then his mood changed. "Here's your drinks," he said merrily. They had so many colors mixed that the liquid had turned brown and did not look appealing. "And make sure you give this one to your grandmother." He handed Trick a bright blue drink that reeked of alcohol. Now we knew the real reason why Anson had asked us over. He was sweet on Trick's grandmother.

We headed to the front to buy our cards. We waved to the young woman by the number machine, but she ignored us.

"How many cards, boys?" An elderly woman approached us with an apron full of cards and cash.

"Twenty dollars," Trick answered and handed her the money.

"Need any help with the rules?" she asked kindly as she passed us our cards.

"I guess yell 'bingo' if we win," I replied cheerily.

"It's a little more complicated than that. Would you like some advice?"



"Sure," Trick answered, just wanting our cards so we could get back to our table.

"The ladies here are professionals. Laser-like focus. They play many cards at once, you'll rarely beat them at their own game."

"What kind of game should we play?" I asked, a little bit intrigued.

She smirked as if she was enjoying our willingness to play.

"Distractions."

"With what?" Trick questioned.

"Varies with the person. With some, you need to find their lucky charm and dislodge it." I thought about the troll family. I don't think I wanted to be the person who touched those charms.

"What else?" Trick asked, interested.

"See what the person likes and try to give it to them. Takes their mind off the game." She looked at Trick more carefully. "Is there a reason why you are carrying two drinks?"

"Yeah, the bartender gave one to us for my grandmother," Trick answered.

The woman smiled. "Sounds like you have already found one distraction. Good luck!" She gave us our cards and went on to the next person. We weaved back through the crowd and sat at our table. Trick handed his grandmother the blue drink.

"Where did you get those?" she asked, her eyebrow raised.

"The bartender, Anson, asked us to give it you. He was pretty insistent." Mrs. Walsh smiled and raised her drink toward the bartender. He nodded and smiled back.

"Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls. The official bingo games night is ready to begin!" The woman next to the cage of balls spoke into the microphone. She made it sound like it was a start of a boxing main event. If she said, 'Let's get ready to rumble,' I was out of there. I looked over at Trick and Lily; they seemed excited to play.

"I hope we win some money!" Lily gushed.

"The rules are simple. Form a complete line vertically, horizontally or diagonally. We'll have five games with a final jackpot of a thousand dollars. Initial games will have smaller pots and prizes. Is everyone ready to play!" She was met by a uniform cheer so loud, it hurt my ears. These people came to play.

"Then let us begin." She rolled the cage, and the numbers came tumbling down.

### Game 1 – B9

A gentleman in the front yelled BINGO and won a gift card for two at a local steak house. I realized that I was hungry and dipped my hands in a chip bowl. Then I realized greasy hands aren't the best for bingo.

### Game 2 – I28

A lady near our table screamed BINGO so loud, you'd think she had just won the lottery. She strutted to the stage and gave the royal wave to every table she passed. William picked up one of his troll dolls and pointed

it at the prizewinner. I swear he was passing on a curse. Her prize was a hundred dollars.

### Game 3 - N33

A couple jumped up and down and walked up together to grab their prize, free accommodation and a meal at a local hotel. Both tried to take the gift certificate. I hoped they were going together.

### Game 4 - G44

A younger woman (at least, young for the nursing home but older than my mother) pounded her fist on the table and rushed up for her prize of \$250. So far, I hadn't come close to winning a game, but I sure was learning about running a similar event. My dad's passion for sports had nothing on these bingo players.

### Game 5 - O63 - the final prize

"Players of all ages! It is time for the last game of the night. Someone in this room is going to leave a thousand dollars richer," the woman at the front of the room crooned. "Could it be you?" She pointed to a woman in the front.

"Darn tootin' it's gonna be me!" The woman stood and looked over the crowd with determination.

"Or could it be you?" The woman in front pointed at a man several tables back.

"That money is as good as mine!" he declared.

I don't know what these people were drinking, but I wanted no part of it. I decided to sit out the last game and watch the other players. I got up and stretched, leaning against the wall.

"This is a speed round. A ball will be drawn every thirty seconds until a winner yells BINGO! Nothing will delay the posting of the balls, so if you have to use the washroom, you better wait."

"How about you hurry up and start drawing some numbers," a woman yelled from the back and half of the auditorium laughed.

"Let's get this party started," the woman at the front yelled, and as if on cue, eighties dance music played through the speakers. This was one serious game. The ball cage starting spinning, and the crowd was whipped into a frenzy. The cage stopped, and the music ended. "BQ!" the lady up front yelled, and the game began. Trick walked up to me.

"What do you think? Did you think we could set up a bingo night for our school?"

"Maybe. But how are we going to advertise? What kind of prizes are we going to offer? What if it's a bust and I end up losing money?" I answered. Bingo night at the nursing home was a success, but they had been doing this for ages. How could expect the same kind of success for a one-off? Before I could think up any more excuses, Anson began waving at us again.

"What is it this time?" Trick asked. About a dozen balls had been drawn so far but no winner. We walked over, and in my rush, I forgot about the electrical cord I had tripped on before. I was walking too fast, and the cord wrapped over my right foot. My forward momentum pulled me toward

the wall. Instinctively, my hands came up, trying to catch myself. Unfortunately, my right hand came down on the red handle of the fire alarm. The lever snapped down, and the alarm immediately sounded. Seconds later, doors opened as orderlies came to evacuate the residents.

"But I can't go!" Delores yelled while an orderly tried to get her to leave. "I'm only one number away from completing this diagonally." She pointed. The man nodded but explained that all residents had to go outside. Trick's grandmother was no better.

"Take me last. I'm close to winning."

"Stop the game!" an elderly man yelled while being forced to exit.

"O63!" the woman at the front yelled. "The game will continue until the firefighters haul me away!"

"Bingo!" a young voice yelled, and for a split second, everyone turned to look at her. It was Lily. The alarm stopped suddenly.

"Everyone can return to their seats." A large man whose suit seemed a size too small ran in, out of breath. "I've called the fire department to confirm it's a false alarm and turned off the alarm for the sake of our residents. Fire fighters must respond to all alarms and will be here shortly. Someone is going to have to pay for the reset fee! In the meantime, you can either stay here or return to your rooms." What he said should have reassured everyone, but instead, tension hung in the air. Lily walked slowly to claim the prize while many watched her. The rest zoned in on me.

"He caused the alarm to ring. If he didn't, I might have won," a woman yelled.

"It's a setup; they had it all planned out," a man bellowed.

"Don't give them the money, it's fixed," another female voice echoed.

This was getting ugly, and it was all my fault.

"The bingo card is correctly filled," the woman said. "This young lady is a thousand dollars richer. Congratulations." But Lily looked anything but jubilant. The seniors inched toward the stage, and there was no way she was going to make it out. I had to think fast.

"Wait!" I said and weaved around the seniors to get up to the stage. Trick was right behind me. I went up to stage and grabbed the microphone. "I'm so sorry — this was an accident. We didn't want your prize money, we just wanted to learn how to do a bingo night at our school for a fundraiser." Some faces softened.

Then Lily came up the mike. "We'll use the money to pay the reset fee," she said. There were a few nodding heads.

"And the rest can go into next week's jackpot, giving the largest prize ever!" Trick added. A collective cheer went up.

"And free drinks on the house," Anson yelled from the bar, and that was the icing on the cake. Everyone was happy again, and the music played through the speakers. I hugged my friends and thanked them for saving me.

"It was touch-and-go there for a moment," I said.

"Good thing I'm quick on my feet," Lily added.

"Me too," said Trick.

"Well, thanks to both of you, we may not be any richer, but at least we can walk alive." Then my face darkened.

"What's wrong?" Lily asked.

"The bingo night seems like a fun idea to make money, but we have a problem."

"What is it?" Trick asked.

"How do I create prizes when I have no money? Without prizes, no one will come." They nodded as we sat down to think. Was I done before I even started?

## Chapter 18

### Evaluation

The smell of fresh coffee filled the air, and I breathed it in deeply. I was told that I was too young for coffee, but the café mocha they sold was to die for. I sat patiently as Arc brought a cup toward me from the counter. He sat down and pushed it towards me. I took a sip and tasted perfection.

"I love that look. So focused. You should use it on the mini golf course," Arc teased.

"I'll get right on that. Think they'll let me keep a thermos handy as I play my eighteen holes?" I laughed.

"It's good to see you smile, Tyler. After I lost the ability to sponsor you, I was afraid you would give up. You're such a talented player — I hate to see you get this far and not even play."

"Well, there is still no guarantee. Thanks to my friends, we have a fundraiser planned and the school will let me use their property. But \$10,000 is a lot of money to raise in one night. I still don't have big prizes to draw people in."

Arc smiled. "That's where I can help. I can't pay for your entrance fees, but I could buy a prize for your fundraiser. Technically, the prize can't go to you, but nothing stops the proceeds of the event."

"Awesome! What is the prize?"



"The most the rules say I can spend is \$1,000, so I was thinking an all-expenses-paid day at your favorite amusement park for four with meals and merchandise." Arc leaned back in his chair.

"Thanks so much, Arc. With my dad overseas, you have really helped me. None of this would have happened without you."

"Well, Tyler, you are largely responsible for your own success. You just needed a little nudge. Speaking of your father, do you think he will make it for the finals in time?"

"I hope so. They were supposed to be home by now, but another team track meet came up in Germany. He's planning to get a flight back the day before the tournament. I just hope he'll be back in time."

"I'm sure he will do everything to be here."

"I know. But I was thinking, even with your prize, it's still an uphill battle to raise the \$10,000 entry fee with one night of bingo. I still need another draw."

"I agree. That's why I have asked someone else to join us here." He turned around. "Looks like they're here now." He pointed out the window. It was Elsa! And her scary, hairy father followed behind her. How was she going to help? The two of them came straight to our table instead of the barista's counter. Elsa had a huge smile, while her dad wore his usual scowl.

"Tyler — you know Elsa," Arc said.

"Of course, he does. How could he not know the most famous person on tour?" If only I believed in myself half as much as her.

"And her father, Elias Larsson."

"Mr. Larsson is how you refer to me," he said coldly and did not offer to shake my hand.

"What is this all about?" I asked, confused. We sat down, and Arc gave his pitch.

"Because of Tyler's sponsorship issue, I can't pay his entrance fees for the World Championship."

"Such a shame," Elsa mocked but her attitude seemed a bit staged. Maybe she did care a little teeny bit if I played or not?

"But for my company, I still need to sponsor a top athlete."

"Hello, I'm right here." Elsa lived for the spotlight, while I cringed and looked for a dark corner.

"But one of the conditions of the sponsorship is that Elsa must appear at an event on behalf of my company. And in this case, I have chosen the bingo night for Tyler's fundraiser."

"Now wait a minute," Elias spoke up. You could tell he didn't like to be ordered around. "As Elsa's manager and guardian, I will determine if it's in her best interest to attend."

"Do you think I'm not good enough?" I said, sharpness creeping into my voice.

"*Kan inte skicka en kallon till örnskolan,*" was his cryptic reply. Elsa laughed at her dad's comment.

"What did he say?" I asked her.

"He said you can't send a turkey to eagle school. It's an old family saying; it means you don't belong."

"I got that part," I answered.

"You children talk amongst yourselves while the adults work out the possible details." He directed Arc to a table across the coffee shop, where they would be undisturbed from us. I had no problem with Elias leaving; my problem was with Elsa staying. After they left, Elsa stared at me with her penetrating eyes. I felt she was dissecting me like an insect. I shivered uncontrollably.

"Sounds like you need my help. It's no weakness to ask for my assistance; many others have needed my help before." *I was ready to gag.*

"Why do you think we need your help? Most people at my school wouldn't know who you are. Or would care!" If I was shaking her confidence at all, she gave no sign.

"How cute. Understand that it will be the people outside of your school who will come to see me. Because I am a true athlete. Now I need a coffee, go get me one." She dismissed me with her hand, as if she had given me her marching orders.

"No. I'm not your servant! If you want a coffee, go get your own." My mom would have been disappointed in my rude behavior, but this girl didn't get it. She expected to be treated like royalty, and everyone else was just there to serve her. She raised an eyebrow at me as if amused at my insubordination.

"I could tell my dad that I won't help you," she said. I looked over; he and Arc were deep in conversation. I decided to switch tactics.

"Does your dad go everywhere with you?"

"Of course. I'm a minor, and I can't travel alone. Plus, he handles the business side of things, so I can focus on my game. At the rate my

winnings are going, I will have all my funds I need when I graduate high school.”

“What for? Are you saving for university?” I asked.

“No silly. In Sweden, university tuition is free. I want to save my money to set up my own business. I plan on becoming an engineer and set up the first female run firm in my city.”

*Well I had to admit, Elsa thought big in just about everything.*

“Where is your Mom? Does she travel with you?” My question was innocent enough, but her face dropped when I asked it. She took few seconds to respond.

“My mom and dad separated years ago. They disagreed on my career. She felt all of the travel was impacting my education.” I hadn’t thought of that.

“Why are you here now when the finals are several weeks away? Aren’t you missing a lot of school?”

“Silly boy. With appearances, I can make more money by staying here. Plus, it’s expensive to fly back and forth. Our time zones are very different; they recommend a week to adjust. By the time I’d get used to the time zone at home, it would be time to travel back here.”

“You just skip school? Missing a month is a lot to make up.” I surprised myself by showing interest in her arrangement. On the other hand, she was her favorite topic of discussion.

“My father home-schools me when I’m on the road. He gets the school work that I miss, and I complete it and pass it in when I return.”

"It must be hard for you to be away from your mother for so long."  
I thought about my time away from my dad.

"It's hard for both of us. She misses me terribly, and now that she lives in another town, I don't get to see her as much as I like. You don't know what it's like with both of your American parents taking care of you. Living at home, going to own school with your own friends." For a moment she looked vulnerable.

"I guess so, but I don't get to see my dad for months at a time."

"Why, where is he?" I think that might have been the first question she asked that didn't relate to her.

"He trains for the Olympic track and field team in the decathlon." She looked at me oddly. I understood the express reaction. "Yes, my father is very athletic while I'm a work in progress."

Elsa laughed but it wasn't mean. She seemed to understand what it was like to have a very strong father figure.

"Do you miss him?"

"Duh, of course. Whenever my sister and I can, we message to him to keep in touch."

"Then in one way, having to depend on one parent for long lengths of time, we are alike," Elsa commented.

"In that way," I consented. "What's your dad like? He seems kind of stern."

I thought she would get angry and rush to his defense, but she agreed. "Father is stern, but he means well. He doesn't want me to be

distracted. He knows how talented I am and doesn't want me to throw it away on anything frivolous."

"I guess talking to me would fall in that category," I smiled.

"Very much so. But don't worry, I don't mind humoring you." Was she flirting with me, or was this another one of her putdowns? Seriously, girls are so hard to figure out. I was going to ask more about her mother, but Arc and Elias returned to the table. Arc did not look happy.

"I'm sorry, Tyler. I don't think we can get a deal done. There are too many conditions, and I only have so much sponsorship money."

"The problem I have," Elias started, "is that I don't want my daughter to support a potential competitor. Even one as poor as him. She only has to focus on one thing: herself."

"I understand, sir," I responded, and I really did. It less about me and more about Elsa. "You are just looking for your daughter's best interests. Thanks for considering the request. We'll do our best to manage the fundraisers without your daughter." I was sincere with my answer. Elsa wasn't part of my fan club and didn't owe me anything. Elias seemed surprised by my answer, as if he was expecting me to protest or beg for their assistance.

"I'll do it," Elsa said with authority. She smiled at me. It even seemed like a nice smile instead of the condescending one she usually wore.

"No, Elsa. I am your father and your manager. I make the decisions."

"Not for this, Father. I am still in charge of my career. He isn't competition; in fact, if he doesn't go to the championship, his replacement will likely be even better than him."

*Well, thanks for vote of confidence.*

"Maybe we should talk about this in the car." Elias motioned them to leave.

"No. My decision is final. If you don't accept a deal with them, I'll show up at the event anyway. And..." she seemed to hold the word, "I'll do it for free!" Her words had a dramatic effect on her father, as if the loss of income was a fate worse than death.

"Okay, okay. I see your mind is made up. Like your mother's, I know better than to try to change it. Let's go." He motioned for her to leave. Elsa got up from her chair and whispered in my ear.

"I'll see you in a week. Make sure I have a wonderful time." And she stalked out the door.

"It's a date," I answered and immediately regretted my choice of words. It didn't seem to matter to her as she exited.

"Well," Arc commented. "I guess you're talented off the golf course as well!"

## Chapter 19

### Preparation

The three of us were in the school gymnasium hanging the bingo banner over the stage. We had one more day of preparation left before the big night. There was some buzz at the school, but I had no idea if it was going to be a success or the world's biggest bust. Lily, on the other hand, had turned out to be the best organizer I could ever hope for. She had all the accessories, decorations, promotion, prizes, and volunteers set up for the fundraiser.

Trick and I were her gophers, going here and there to get what supplies she needed. Best of all, she had come up with a cool theme. In addition to the prizes for bingo night, she had created a face-off of Elsa vs. me in a miniature golf competition. Arc was bringing in his most complicated golf hole to the gymnasium. The challenge was Elsa and I would putt at various places on the green. People would buy tickets and bet on who would make the shot. Prizes were small, items we got at the dollar store. Even if they won, it was less than the ticket cost.

Fortunately, there was no gym classes tomorrow so we could set up the banners and stage equipment. We had rented the bingo balls and metal spinner at one of the promotional companies, and they would deliver tomorrow. Even our principal had gotten into it by agreeing to announce a



few game ball numbers before giving out prizes. We just had some last-minute details to work out.

"A little higher, please," Lily said as I raised the banner up, so it wasn't crooked on the wall.

"Not you, Trick, now you have just made it worse," she complained.

"Sorry!" He immediately lowered his end. "How's that?"

"Good. Now tape each corner and help me count tables." We finished and sat on the stage.

"Hey, Tyler," Trick said with way too much enthusiasm. "Did you hear who's working security tomorrow night?"

"I have no idea." I shook my head. "Why?"

"One-word Mike. I guess he's even going to wear his uniform from the mall."

"That's a good thing. It may keep Zac and his buddies from causing trouble. How did you persuade him to help?" I asked. Lily gave me an odd look, as if I shouldn't be asking. "What?"

"Why do you do that, Tyler?"

"Why do I do what?"

"Why do you always question why people want to help you? Not everyone is Zac!"

"Whoa!" Trick interrupted. "Don't be so defensive. Tyler was just asking. Did you promise Mike a date if he helps out?"

Lily blushed before she laid into him as well. "What is wrong with you boys? Can't I just ask a boy to help us without it being a thing? You

don't think anybody believes I'm going out with either one of you just because we hang out?"

"Ah, we're friends," I answered, starting to feel uncomfortable.

"Why would people think we were going out?"

"Exactly! But the two of you have no problem jumping to conclusions about Michael."

"Ohhh Michael," Trick and I yelled in unison. I think it was the first time she had called him that.

"But do you like him?" Trick asked as nothing Lily was saying was sinking in.

"He's a friend. But if you want to ask someone about who he likes, ask Tyler."

"What's that supposed to mean?" I stammered.

Lily walked up to me, ready to take the focus off of her. "All you talk about is Elsa this and Elsa that. For someone who says you don't like her, you sure talk about her a lot." She grinned evilly.

"You're crazy. She's my competition. I have to beat her. How could I like someone who starts and ends every conversation with herself?" Despite my protests, I could feel my face getting warm.

"The heart wants what the heart wants." Trick joined in.

"You too! What is this, some type of romance novel? What if I mention Mrs. Carmichael, are you going to say I like her next?"

"Whoa, who's defensive now?" Lily grinned, enjoying my discomfort.

"The more I try to explain myself, the more you don't believe me. Can't we pick on Trick instead?"

"Hey, leave me out of this." Trick whined as he was interrupted by footsteps.

"What are you ladies working on?" a voice said from behind. I didn't need to look. Maybe if I didn't turn around, he would go away. "Hey, loser. I 'm talking to you."

Zac walked into the auditorium with Don and Dave in tow. It was like the three of them were joined at the hip.

"What does it look like we're doing? Maybe you don't pay attention to class, but everyone knows about bingo night," Lily said.

"Heard about it. You losers are kidding yourselves if you think you'll raise ten grand in one night. I wish my father had gotten you removed from the tournament instead of just taking away your sponsor," Zac said.

"Thanks for that, by the way. What do care if I make the golf tournament anyway?" I moved to face him and he shoved me back.

"I just don't like you, Tyler. You don't know your place. You're a loser, always will be. Don't worry, once you don't raise enough money tomorrow night, it will be all over." He slapped his hands in a wiping motion as if to show I was done.

"Why do you have to make my like miserable? Is that what your father does to you?"

"You shut up about my father." Zac approached, and I could tell I had struck a nerve. "At least he's around. When was the last time your delinquent father did anything with you?"

"That's not fair!" Lily interjected. "You know he's training overseas."

"He knows," I added, not taking his bait but feeling angry just the same. "He just doesn't care." Zac motioned to both Don and Dave, and I could tell they were ready to inflict their brand of punishment.

"What is your guy's story, anyway?" I asked while looking at Don and Dave. "If Zac tells you to jump off a cliff, will you do that too?" Trick snickered, and the two of them looked at each other. Don spoke first.

"We have common interests. Besides, you and your friends are annoying."

"And it's fun," came the darker response from Dave. I was starting to realize that these guys had no redeeming qualities.

"You too are so big. Why don't you play football?" Trick asked, joining the conversation.

"Too expensive," Don answered. "We have five kids in my family. Not enough for all us to play."

"My mom doesn't believe in sports," Dave answered. "Says I should be spending my time at studies."

"Like that is going to happen." Don laughed and slapped a high-five with Dave. I guessed all of us had our problems at home.

"Enough talking, you two! Let's tear this place down." Zac motioned to the banner. He grabbed it and looked ready to tear in two.

"No!" Lily screamed.

"Enough!" an adult voice yelled from behind us. We all turned to see Mrs. Carmichael had entered the auditorium. "Zachary Bishop — you are to stop immediately! Your actions are deplorable. Your classmates have permission to use this gym, and you do not. You are to leave this minute, or

you will be suspended. Do I make myself clear?" Zac looked shaken, as if he didn't like being caught. Don and Dave were frozen, as if they weren't sure if they were in trouble as well. Mrs. C gave them the gears as well.

"Don't just stand there like statues, Donald and David. Unless you are here to help with the fundraisers, I suggest the three of you vacate the premises."

"Yes, Mrs. Carmichael," the three responded obediently. Zac jumped down from the stage, turned to me so Mrs. C couldn't see him, and glared. He turned back, smiled at our teacher, and they marched out the doors. I breathed a sigh of relief.

"You're a lifesaver, Mrs. Carmichael. Those boys would have ripped our posters into pieces if you haven't arrived in time," Trick said. Lily and I nodded.

"Well, when they walked by my homeroom a few minutes ago, I thought it worth a trip around the school. Sorry I didn't start here first," she responded. "Are you kids ready?"

"I hope so. Zac and his buddies may be right. It's going to be a challenge to raise \$10,000 tomorrow night, even if everything goes well," I said.

Mrs. C. motioned for us to sit on the stage. "It seems easier to give up than to try for the big goals. If you don't try, then you never fail."

"Is that supposed to be motivating?" Trick asked.

"Hold on, I wasn't finished. But if you never try, you never succeed either. Kids today are too worried about failing when they should be more worried about not trying. If you don't raise enough money, then the worst

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thing that happens is that you can't go to the golf championship. But if you didn't try, then you regret your choice for the rest of your life. You're lucky you have a family and friends who support you. You are already a winner in my books."

And she was right. But I had better watch out. Even with my friends, tomorrow night was going to be a challenge. And you can bet Zac and his buddies would be there to sabotage it.

## Chapter 20

### Bingo Night

The inflatable gorilla stood fifteen feet tall and swayed in the breeze. Its face roared at us. Next to it was a sign that said, *Bingo Night! School auditorium. 7-9pm.* I looked over at Trick.

"I find the inflatable a bit creepy. What do you think?"

"Lighten up, Tyler. It gets your attention. Besides, the rental company provided it for free. Hopefully it doesn't scare people away. Come on, let's get inside. Lily will kill us if we're late." We ran along the sidewalk toward the double doors to the entrance of the auditorium. A wall of sound greeted us. The auditorium was full of tables, with the ball cage and microphones on stage. To the far right was the miniature golf setup. Arc was screwing in the last platform. Lily motioned to us.

"We're all set. Doors open in thirty minutes. Let's hope for a big crowd!" She was more excited about this night than I was. She was an amazing organizer. Trick and I sat at the table next to the cash box, where we'd be selling bingo cards and supplies.

"Dude," Trick said. "Go see Arc and look over the mini course. You're going to need all the help you can get to beat Elsa," he grinned. I nodded and got up. I was halfway over to the course when Arc waved me off.

"Keep your distance. No one gets to look at the green until I'm finished. It might give you an unfair advantage."

"But this is only for charity. It doesn't really matter who wins or loses tonight. Does it?" I asked. Arc considered my request for a few seconds and beckoned me over.

"I guess you're right. Sorry, I'm used to competitions, and it's forbidden for any players to see the course." I walked down the side of the course. It was narrow but about twenty feet long, with all kinds of dips and valleys. It looked tough!

"Wow! There are more water and sand traps than the actual green carpet. You sure you're not making it too hard?"

"For you, my boy, anything is possible. Just use that brilliant brain and try not to get distracted by Elsa's antics."

"Why does everyone think Elsa will throw me off?" I felt myself blushing.

"Don't take it personally, Tyler. She throws everyone off, including adults. She has a way at looking down at everyone so that it makes you feel inferior. I'd say it's her super power."

"Are you almost done?" I bent down as he was tacking in green felt onto the floor of the course.

"Yes, hand me the glue gun," he said and pointed to a stack of tools and equipment adjacent to the green.

"Here you go."

As he placed a few dabs on the corner, he gave me a hard, long look. "What do think about tonight?"

"About what?"



“Do you think you will raise enough money? Ten thousand is no small amount of change.”

“I really hope so. The school and teachers have been great in promoting it over the last week. Now I know most kids aren’t necessarily crazy about bingo, but with the prizes and hopefully with their parents coming, we’re hoping for a big night.”

“And if you don’t raise enough money for the tournament fees?” Arc placed his hand on my shoulder.

“Then at least we tried, and we donate the money to a school charity if we fall short,” I answered, proud of my choice.

“Sounds like a loser thing to say.” A girl’s shrill voice came from behind me. Elsa had arrived! I turned to see she had something in her hand: a few hand-written signs. She handed them to me. I stared at their contents.

“Cancellation! Bingo night moved to next month.”

“Where did you get these?”

“They were stuck over your signs out front. Looks like someone is trying to sabotage your night before it evens starts. Any ideas?” Elsa asked.

I knew exactly who had done it. Zac and his buddies had sunk to a new low. Good thing Elsa saw the signs before students started arriving. That would have been a disaster. I had to make sure he didn’t interfere further.

"Excuse me," I said to Elsa and Arc. I ran back to Lily and Trick at the main table. I waved the signs at them. "Guess who did this?" I ripped one in half.

"Zac!" they replied in unison.

"What can we do?" Trick asked.

I thought about it for a few seconds. "Is Mike working the front door?"

"Yes. I'll go get him," Lily answered and headed to the front door. She came back about thirty seconds later with Mike in tow. He was dressed in his mall security uniform.

"Hey Mike," I said.

"Yo."

"We found these signs out front covering out main sign. We think Zac and his buddies are up to no good."

Mike read the sign and shook his head in disbelief. "Tracherous." He nodded.

"Can you do a walk around the school and make sure no more are taped up?"

"Always."

"And if you find any?" Trick asked.

"Destroy." He grinned and made a motion like he was strangling a chicken. Seconds later, he was out the main door.

"You know, he's starting to grow on me," Trick said, "although I still don't how he does a book report."

Several students came up to the table to buy bingo sheets and markers as Lily and Trick got down to business. I took a few steps back and watched them at work. The next couple of hours would determine my destiny. *Would we raise enough money?*

\*

It was almost seven, and my mom and Kayleigh came through the auditorium doors. They immediately spied me practicing at the mini golf course. My mom gave me a big hug.

"This is amazing, Tyler. I see some of our neighbors came out. You and your friends did an amazing job."

"Thanks, Mom. Hopefully all of this will be enough." Kayleigh was surprisingly quiet for a change. "What's up?" I looked at her.

"Mom made me promise not to pull any pranks tonight, but I see so many opportunities," she said. "But don't worry, I'll be on my best behavior tonight." She saluted me like a soldier, and I believed her. Almost.

"You guys go get a seat. The first-round game is almost ready to start." I looked around and noticed that One-word Mike was motioning to me from the main door. I started to approach him, but he pointed to the far right, between the stage and the mini golf course.

Zac and buddies were here! I walked over to scream at them. I never got the words out.

"Tyler! I see some empty tables here tonight. Looks like you won't get a full house after all. That's too bad!" Zac sneered.

"Too..."

"Bad," echoed Don and Dave. If the two of them had an individual thought, I had never heard it.

"No thanks to you and your signs," I yelled. "Good thing we caught them early enough before they could do any damage."

"Signs? What signs?" Zac said.

Two students stepped behind me. "These signs." Lily pointed at the ones in Mike's hands.

"Never seen them." Don smirked.

"Really? I figured it had to be one of you. No one else in our grade is stupid enough to misspell 'Canceled'," Lily jeered.

The smirk on Zac's face wavered.

"Cards?" One-word Mike offered. Although he was thin, he was taller than them. It added an extra dimension, since they were used to just bullying the three of us.

"We're not buying any stinking cards," Zac yelled, and to emphasize his point, he slapped a bingo card off the table.

Mike looked calm and pointed to the sign above the table. *All those in the gym must purchase bingo cards to participate. All loiterers will be removed.*

"No cards," Trick stated.

"No admission," Lily continued.

"Or else?" Don tried to sound tough but seemed unsure.

"Leave!" Mike pointed to the entrance they'd come in. It was a game of chicken, and everyone looked at each other for several seconds.

"Fine," Zac muttered and put down money for a block of cards. "My dad has lots of money." He glared at me. The three of them hunkered over to a table in the back.

"Those guys are going to be a problem tonight. Guaranteed," Trick said. "Keep an eye on them."

"Done," Mike responded and did a patrol of the auditorium. Lily stared at him in admiration. Trick caught her look.

"Isn't Mike wonderful?" he said in an overly exaggerated voice.

Lily threw a marker pen at him. "At least he's doing something," she said and saw that the lineup for bingo cards had grown during our little skirmish. "Come on, sell some cards," she ordered Trick. "And you, get over to the mini golf green; even if people want to see you lose to Elsa, it's worth cash." She nudged me away, and I took her advice. Across the room, Mrs. C stepped on stage and picked up the microphone.

"Is this thing on?" she said, but barely anyone could hear her. One of the guys from the Audio visual (AV) club came up and clicked a button. She tried again. "Good evening, students," she bellowed, and the feedback made most people cover their ears. The sheepish-looking AV student came up again and made another adjustment. We were off to an auspicious start.

"Welcome to the inaugural bingo night at Kingswood Middle School," she said. "Tonight's fundraising goes to one of our school's own, Tyler Martin, and a chance to compete in the World Miniature Golf Championships here in Orlando." The crowd cheered, although I wasn't sure it was for me or the championship. "I am happy to introduce Tiffany from Glow Productions who will be running tonight's numbers. Please give her a round

of applause!" The crowd cheered again, and the woman that was at Trick's grandmother's bingo stepped forward. At least we knew she could run the event.

"Boys and girls, students and parents," Tiffany began, wearing the same formal dress she had worn at the retirement home, "the rules are simple. I draw the numbers, you stamp your cards. If you get any row, horizontal, vertical, or diagonal, you're a winner!" A collective cheer went up. The crowd was getting into the fun. "At the start of each game, the prize will be announced. If you're a winner, yell BINGO and come up to the stage to have your numbers verified. Any questions?"

"Can we hurry up and start?" an excited student in the front row yelled. Everyone laughed.

"Then let's play BINGO!" She spun the cage, and the plastic balls began to tumble.

I headed over to Elsa, who had motioned me to get into place.

"Hurry up! We already have several bets placed on our shots," she commanded.

"Is anyone betting on me?" I asked.

"Silly boy! Betting is illegal, but people want to see me beat you over and over again. Come on, let's not disappoint them." The two of us lined up our balls and aimed for the target hole.

Sixty minutes later, I learned that she wasn't wrong. In about forty shots, I had managed to beat her only ten times. Despite the physics calculations that went on during my head, she was uncanny. Shots that I

calculated she couldn't make, she made. And she was so confident in every shot. Where I worried about failing, she focused on success. She really was world-class. The lineup had ended, and we decided to take a break. I bought her a pop, and we grabbed an empty table during one of the games.

"This bingo is very primitive, Tyler. It must be an American thing?" She looked down her nose at the players.

"Okay, Ms. Sophistication. What would you play in Sweden at your school?"

"We won't play anything; we would create. Twice a year, we would have a school art battle, where the most artistic students would compete against each other."

"Art battle? Would people throw paint at each other?" I joked.

Elsa shook her head. "Hardly. At the start of the night, a theme is picked, and a student has twenty minutes to paint based on their theme.

"Twenty minutes? That's no time at all. How you paint anything in that time?"

"Focus! You would be surprised by the artwork that they create in that time. What makes it harder is that all the students are watching and walking around the room while they are painting. At the end of the time, they put their votes in a ballot box. The top picks then compete again in a final showdown!"

"There is no way I could do that. First of all, I'm not a good artist. Second of all, of the people would distract me."

"Yet on the mini golf course, you have to perform in front of dozens of people." I wasn't sure if she was talking about me or her. If she was

talking about me, that was a compliment. Speaking of focus, I noticed that Zac and his clan were missing. It was too early for them to leave, which meant something bad was happening. I grabbed Elsa.

"Excuse you," she said curtly, "what are you doing?"

"Come with me. We have to get Trick and find out where Zac and his buddies are." We rushed over to the head table, and by their concerned faces, I knew something was up.

"Tyler, we have a problem," Lily began.

"I know. Zac and his buddies are missing. That means they are up to something. Bad. Trick, come with us." I grabbed him, but their concern seemed to be about something else. We didn't have time to discuss. We ran out of the auditorium into the hall.

"All the classrooms are locked. Where else could they be and still be in the school?" I asked Trick.

"Washroom. Cafeteria. Sometimes the band room is open," he answered.

"Check the washrooms. Elsa, can you check the girl's?"

"Fine," she responded. We ran into the boys. Both stalls were empty, and no one was at the sink. We dashed back out, and Elsa returned at the same time.

"No one in there," she responded. Trick and I looked at each other.

"The cafeteria!" we said jointly. The three of us ran through the cafeteria doors. There were dozens of chairs and tables, but no Zac and crew.

"Did they go outside?" I said.



"Wait!" Trick pointed at the slightly ajar band room adjacent to the cafeteria. "I think the light is on." This time we walked quietly. I could hear voices. We creep closer to overhear the conversation. I leaned high, Elsa to the middle, and Trick kneeled.

"You sure these will work?" Zac said.

"My brother used them in camp last year," said Don. "In an enclosed space, they work like a charm. They used them in one of cabins, and it stank so bad that no one could sleep there for a week. These stink bombs are the bomb."

"Yeah. Once we set these up, the whole auditorium is going to stink so bad that no one will be able to stay. Bingo night will be over," Dave replied, brandishing a lighter.

"Get the plastic off these now," Zac commanded.

Trick moved closer to the door and inadvertently brushed against it. It squeaked open. All three of them turned and saw us frozen by the door.

"Talk about people who stink," Zac jeered and noticed Elsa instead of Lily. "Looks like you got an upgrade in the girl department.

"You guys can't lay off for one night. Once we tell Mrs. Carmichael..." Trick started.

"Which we'll deny," Zac interrupted, pulling the string of stink bombs closer to him, "and blame it on you because you knew your silly fundraiser wasn't going to raise enough funds."

"Our word against yours," Dave pointed at Trick, "that we saw you lighting the fuse and tossing them into the gym."

I looked around the room. The only advantage we had was that we were closest to the door. But these guys were faster and stronger; we wouldn't make it halfway to the auditorium before they grabbed us. Unless we had other witnesses, we couldn't prove it was them. Elsa pulled out her phone.

"How's this for proof?" She grinned as she took a picture of Zac holding the string of stink bombs.

"Get her!" Zac yelled. As we backed up, Trick made a decision and rushed forward. He grabbed the lighter out of Dave's hands and fell down on the stink bombs. He lit the fuse before anyone could react.

"Fire in the hole!" he yelled, trying to replicate some old war movie. There was no time to save my friend, but I had two seconds to escape and close the door to prevent the stink bomb smell from escaping. I grabbed Elsa, stepped into the hallway, and slammed the door shut. I pushed hard, knowing that I would be overpowered shortly. Elsa pulled a full trashcan against the door. We heard a poof as if something exploded, and then the cries of the four of them.

"My eyes!" yelled Dave from inside.

"My nose!" cried Don. A terrible smell began to ooze from under the door and took the form of a green cloud.

"Get away from the door!" I yelled as Elsa stepped back. Seconds later, the door swung open and Zac and his buddies stepped forward, coughing and rubbing their eyes.

"You'll pay for this!" Zac yelled.

"Looks like you're paying for it now." Elsa smirked. "Do you Americans understand the word 'comeuppance'?" She was met by a lot of blank stares. "Truly, what is the education value in this country?" Trick came out of the fog, not coughing and without any eye issues.

"I was at the eye of the storm. I don't think I was affected." He took two steps toward us, but the wave of stink said otherwise.

"Best to stay back. You're nose-blind. The smell will sink in shortly," I advised. "Go to the washroom and clean up."

"Your friend is very brave," Elsa commented. "I don't have any friends that would take a bomb for me."

Trick perked up at the compliment.

"He's one of the best friends I have," I said while backing away. "How about we hug it out later?"

Trick gave a fake hurt look and then a smile. "You better go talk to Lily; we have bigger concerns than these guys." He pointed to the hunched-over coughing trio. Suddenly I remembered the look that Trick and Lily gave me when we at the table.

"We'll be back." I gestured and grabbed Elsa's hand as we ran back to the auditorium. We charged in out of breath a minute later as Lily looked up.

"Where's Trick?" she asked.

"Indisposed," I replied, "but he said there is a problem. What's going on?"

Lily pulled over the cash box and pulled out a calculator. "We're more than half through the night, and we only raised about \$4,000 plus

the golf trick green. It's not enough, Tyler. We need to sell more bingo cards. You need this auditorium to be packed!" My body suddenly felt old and tired. I sat in an adjoining chair. Was all this a waste of time? Was Zac right, and I was doomed to fail once again? I felt a hand on my shoulder. I looked up and saw Mom's kind face.

"What's wrong, dear? Shouldn't you and your friend be completing more trick shots? Every dollar counts."

"It won't be enough, Mom. Lily just did a total. We're going to come up short. It's not going to be enough for my admission fee." Before we could be interrupted, Mike came barreling in.

"Bus!" he yelled. Lily and I looked at each other.

"What bus?" I answered. "All of the students are here."

"Adults," was Mike's cryptic response. I turned to Mom, who was smiling.

"What's going on?" I asked her. Before I could respond, the doors barged open and dozens of seniors strolled in. In the lead was Trick's grandmother, followed by several familiar faces.

"Sorry we're late. It takes forever to get everyone moving for an outing. There had better be some bingo cards left. Me and my friends are ready to win some big prizes!"

I turned to my mother.

"After you told me about your adventure at the nursing home, I figured you could use some professional bingo players with deep pockets. I called the nursing home several days ago, and they were happy to send a bus over tonight."

I grinned and gave my mom a deep hug. "You're a lifesaver. This just might be enough to put us over the top!"

"Less talking, Tyler! Sell us some bingo cards!" Trick's grandmother encouraged. My mom sat next to Lily, and they began to sell cards in preparation for the next game. *We might just have a chance!*

An hour later, Elsa and I closed the miniature golf course. All told, we had raised nine hundred and eighty dollars. Not bad for bunch of golf shots. My arms were tired, but I was energized. Tiffany came out for the final game.

"Tonight's jackpot is for fifteen hundred dollars as well as gift cards to the outlet mall in downtown Orlando. Are you ready to win the grand prize!" The roar was deafening, and a rush of players went up for their last set of bingo cards. Would it be enough?

"I had my doubts about coming to this event, but whatever you Americans take on, you go for it a hundred percent. I hope you raise the funds," Elsa said. It was unusual that she talked about someone other than herself. And then she went back into character. "Although you're still not going to beat me."

Within a few minutes, everyone had bought their cards and sat down. They were ready. Tiffany called out her first ping-pong ball, and I could hear the markers scratching around the room. The auditorium doors opened, and Trick walked in. I approached and then backed away. He might not smell as bad as before, but he still was pungent.

"What happened? You stink!" Lily wiggled her nose.

Trick stopped his approach. "Sorry — I have been scrubbing nonstop in the bathroom. I think I'm going to have to bathe in tomato juice when I get home."

"Isn't tomato juice if you get sprayed by a skunk? What did you get into?" Lily asked.

"Zac happened," I answered and then turned to Trick. "Where are Zac and his buddies? I really don't want them coming through here."

"They left," Trick replied. "They didn't want to explain why they stink so bad and get in trouble about the stink bombs. Honestly, I don't know how anyone is going to take music class tomorrow."

"B6!" Tiffany spoke, and then there was a commotion in the corner.

"Bingo!" an elderly voice yelled. I turned and recognized a familiar face. It was the troll guy! And he had even brought a few of them with him. I guess they brought him good luck after all! He scurried up to claim his winnings.

"I won! I won! I never win at home," he crooned.

"Congratulations to William Scott, our grand prize winner!" Tiffany yelled, and the auditorium cheered. Now for the moment of truth. Lily ran up to the stage with a piece of paper, which she handed to Tiffany. Another student brought an envelope with the totals from the golf shots and concession sales. She typed numbers into her phone, nodded, and made the announcement.

"Many thanks to all participants tonight. We hope you had fun, win or lose, for a great fundraiser. Thanks to your efforts, a grand total of nine thousand two hundred and thirty-eight dollars have been raised.

Congratulations!" A muted cheer went up, since many people realized that ten thousand was the goal. Don't get me wrong, the money raised was fantastic, but I couldn't ask for the rest of it from my mom. Money was tight while Dad was away, and we couldn't just spend that on an admission fee. It had been a good fight, but I had lost. I wouldn't get to participate in the championship. Elsa sat beside me and almost looked sad. Then someone got on the stage and grabbed the mic. It was the winner, William Scott.

"I just wanted to say thank you to all the students for letting a bunch of seniors participate in your event. We don't get many road trips, but when we do, you can count on us to participate. I've never won a grand prize before, so I have decided that I would like to share part of the pot with the event. I donate eight hundred dollars to the fundraiser. All I can say is that Tyler better let us seniors come watch the championship!"

The crowd cheered, and Elsa gave me a big hug, followed by my Mom, Lily, and my little sister. Even Trick, which I regretted later. I did it! I had raised enough money to compete. I was going to the championship!

## Chapter 21

### Winner Take All

"Mom — where is Dad!" I yelled from the bottom of the stairs.

"His flight was rerouted due to mechanical difficulties. They landed in Jacksonville instead. He's going to have to drive here."

"Drive!" I exclaimed. "That's over two hours. What if he doesn't make it?" I had worked all summer to make my dad proud, and now he might miss my biggest moment.

My mom grabbed me and held me close. "Don't worry about the things you can't control. Your dad will do everything he can to make the championship. In the meantime, you need to get ready. Patrick and Lily will be here any minute. Make sure you have everything packed to compete."

I nodded, but I was still worked up about Dad. *Darn delays — why did they have to happen just as my Dad was coming home?*

I opened my backpack. I might not be a professional golfer, but I knew enough to pack sunscreen, a hat, water, an extra shirt, a rain jacket. I felt like I was going on a day trip instead of competing in the mini golf championships. I heard a knock on the outside door.

"Buddy!" Trick yelled and gave me a hug. You could still smell stink bomb on his skin. Not that I was going to say anything after his sacrifice. Lily stepped in behind him.



"Are you ready, Tyler? Biggest day of your life," she grinned.

"Hey," Trick interrupted, "don't try to add any more pressure. I mean, this is for all the marbles!"

"Enough, you two. I'm just glad that I have my two best friends with me. I wouldn't be in the championships without both of your help."

"True enough." Trick laughed.

"Ewww!" squealed Kayleigh from the top of the stairs. Why did she have to come? Oh right, Mom couldn't leave her home alone. "Are you guys done with the love-in? Seriously, it's a bit sick to watch."

"Jealous much?" Trick teased as Kayleigh rushed by him to the bottom of the stairs.

"Mom, we're ready!" I yelled. My mom walked down the stairs, straight toward me. She gave me a big hug. I pulled away, embarrassed in front of my friends.

"I'm so proud of you, dear. No matter how you do today, you're worked hard, and in my eyes, you are already a winner."

"Oh, gag!" Kayleigh said and put her hands on her throat to emulate choking. Mom ignored her.

"It would be still cool to win!" Trick added while Lily poked him in the ribs.

"Are we ready?" my mom asked.

Mini Golf World was located between Orlando and Kissimmee in an area of land that was reclaimed from the swamps. There was literally nothing there ten years ago, but due to the number of new tourists every

week and mild weather, some company decided to create the ultimate mini golf course. There were eight miniature courses on one site with various degrees of difficulty. Today's course had been secluded in tarps and barriers for the last week as they took the most difficult course and made it even harder. As we pulled off the tourist strip, we turned into a huge parking lot, which was already mostly full. The championship was a crowd-pleaser, and avid players, watchers, and families would be out to observe the event.

"Wow! This place is massive!" Lily exclaimed.

A man in an orange vest directed us to open parking spots to the far left of the courses. Once the car was parked, we noticed a map of Mini Golf World to our left. Each course was laid out:

- 1) Sports Field – 18 holes with every sports reference imaginable from footballs to baseballs. This course would not play to my strengths.
- 2) Magic Land – heavy on smoke and mirrors, I had a feeling my ball might do a disappearing act.
- 3) Jungle Cruise – lots of water and wild animals. I wondered if creatures would jump out at you, trying to throw you off your shot.
- 4) Outer Space – lots of craters and aliens. There looked like a few caves on the map, maybe some glow-in-the-dark holes?
- 5) Comic Book Heroes – an homage to heroes of old, many faces I didn't recognize (I guess to avoid copyrights). Still, the images on the map looked cool.

6) Fists and Fantasy – the images showed a bunch of trolls, orcs, and elves, and everyone seemed to be fighting each other. Lots of distraction on those holes.

7) Castle World – knights, archers, and medieval sets taken to extreme. By the look of some of the castle greens, it was very difficult, with multiple levels.

8) ???????

There was no description for number eight; I assumed that was the course that had been under tight wraps for the last week while they altered it. They even posted a security guard at night in case participants tried to sneak on for an early look. Suddenly, I had visions of Elsa's dad skulking around the worksite, trying to get an advantage for our daughter.

"Are you here for the championship?" a teenager said at the main gates.

"Yeah, he is," Trick answered for me. "How can you tell?"

"Most families are yelling and joking around, trying to pick the course they want to play. Your friend has that faraway look, like he's already thinking about the course. Your tournament is to the far left. Please stop when you get to the announcer's booth."

"Announcer's booth?" my mom questioned as we walked toward the course. "You've hit the big time today, Tyler!"

"Mom!" Kayleigh complained, "keep this up and his head won't fit through the archway." She pointed ahead. I noticed that she was clicking something in her hand as we were walking.

"What are you playing with?" I asked without attracting Mom's attention. Kayleigh gave one of her patented mischievous smiles.

"It's a lighter. I got it off the bully you guys met the other day. It's amazing what people will give away when they fear you."

"Well you're too young to smoke and it's too dangerous to play with. I'm telling mom."

"Tyler – ease up," Kayleigh cried. "I told you, I'm only using my powers for good. Just concentrate on winning the tournament."

"Whatever," I answered and focused on the task at hand.

As we walked through golf course, the place was chaos. Staff from the course were everywhere in their red shirts, trying to create order. There were miniature golfers doing stretches and talking, wondering what the new course would be like. The participants' families were watching from the sidelines; they couldn't be in the player's area but could observe from certain vantage points along the course. I counted a dozen big screens for people to watch the action. I wondered if Arc was here. A tap on my shoulder confirmed his presence.

"This is it, Tyler." He shook my hand and I waved to my family and friends. Since we were crossing the players only line, my mom embraced me one last time, while Kayleigh, Trick and Lily waved as they walked over to the spectators' area. Trick seemed especially chocked up as he wanted to give me something.

"What is it," I asked.

"I want to give you something for luck."

"Do you have a lucky charm?" I asked.

“Even better,” as he took off his sunglasses. It surprised me because he never took his sunglasses off. I don’t think I had ever seen the color of his eyes until now. He looked at me with squinting eyes like the sun was too bright. Was my best friend a vampire?

“Dude, what are doing?”

“I wanted you wear these glasses. The mini golf rules say you can use whatever you bring in. Go ahead, take them,” he shoved them at me. I accepted them not wanting to be ungrateful, but I was not ready for their effect as I put them on.

“These aren’t just any sunglasses, they seem to be able to control the amount of light hitting my eyes.” I looked up at the blazing sun and it was no problem, I wasn’t blinded at all, but dark areas seemed to be enhanced. Suddenly I realized that all these years, he hadn’t been wearing the glasses out of vanity. “Why do you wear these?” I asked, ashamed at my narcissistic behavior.

“I have photophobia, it’s an extreme sensitivity to light. Too much and it creates halos and headaches. I’ve had special permission to wear them because of my condition.”

“I’m really sorry, I always assumed that you wore them because you thought you looked cool.”

“And I’ve never told you or Lily because I didn’t want to be treated as a freak. But I’ve learned watching you struggle over the summer, you’ve taught me that you can’t always bottle things up. I may not be as open about my emotions as Lily but if I know I can trust the two of you and you won’t think any less of me. Even my condition.”

"Thank you for generosity but won't it hurt for you not to wear them?" I pushed them back to him, but he shook his head while pulling on a ball cap.

"I'll be okay for a few hours, especially with the hat and if I stay in the shade. I want you to wear these. It's my way of helping the team."

I felt like hugging him but boys being boys we slapped hands and then Trick walked over to my family. Lily stared at him like he was an alien without his glasses.

I grabbed Arc and we walked into the players' area. I guess he still had some pull as a tournament supporter, even if he was no longer my sponsor.

"Any last-minute advice?" I asked.

"Not much I can offer you now. If you can focus on the task at hand, you will do well." My dad's absence continued to bother me.

"I just wish my dad was here. So much of my reason for being here today was to make him proud."

Arc grabbed my shoulder, and we stopped walking. "I haven't met your dad, but something tells me that he is already proud of you." As much as his words should have consoled me, I still had that deep-seated fear that I would disappoint my dad, never measuring up to his trophy shrine.

"Players! Please proceed to the announcer's box for the breakdown of today's rules." The crowd became thick as Arc and I were pressed tightly into a crowd of people. We approached a woman and male announcer with headsets in a booth raised above the crowd. They both wore matching golf shirts with stripes, and apparently, they were husband and wife.

"Thank you, players, for attending the nineteenth annual World Mini Golf Championships here in Orlando, Florida!" A collective cheer went up from the players. "My name is Jolene Volente..."

"And I'm Harrison Volente," the man interrupted. "Today we will crown one of you golfers with the green jacket!"

"That's the green windbreaker," Jolene corrected. "And I see last year's winner, Elsa Karlsson, is here today. Give us a wave, Elsa!"

Elsa was in the middle of the crowd and gave a queenly wave.

"Well, players, I'm sure you are all dying with anticipation to learn the theme of this year's championship course." Everyone seemed to lean towards the announcer's booth.

"But first, a word from our sponsors," Jolene interrupted. A collective groan went up.

"Oh, come on, dear. These players have waited so patiently, maybe we should give them a hint."

*Okay, this duo is driving me crazy already. Just tell us!*

"A hint. Well, Harrison — what time of year is it?"

"The fall."

"What day happens in the fall? I can think a very scary day coming up in October!" Jolene motioned to small billboard and pulled off a curtain. She exposed the name of the course and eighteen tiny diagrams for the greens. "Halloween land!"

"That's right, Jolene. This year's course is the scariest one I have ever seen. I hope none of the players have a heart problem." Harrison produced a fake laugh.

I looked over to Arc.

"I hope you don't scare easily. If I were designing it, I would add a few frights. Maybe have a few thinks pop out at you," he suggested.

"Great. As if my focus wasn't easily rattled," I replied.

"Don't worry. I'll be following you from course to course. I can't advise you, but I'll definitely provide you with moral support. Remember, hitting a golf ball is not life or death. If you miss, you miss. Just try to relax and enjoy the moment." I nodded as I listened to the rest of the rules.

"Go to the organizer tent to our right for your partner list. All golfers must remain here until you are called. No one can watch the other golfers or check out the course beforehand," Harrison said.

"Can't let anyone have an advantage, can we?" Jolene added with a painted-on smile.

"The World Mini Golf rules apply — no exceptions. Everyone gets one warning for any unruly behavior. Act up a second time, and you will be escorted off the course," Harrison declared. "But most of all, concentrate on doing your best and have fun!"

Laughter went up from some of the players. People were at this championship for the money and trophies. Fun would be a distant third.

I followed the crowd and went to look at the whiteboard to see my tee time. I expected to go early, where the inexperienced golfers went in the major tournaments. I was surprised to see I was set to go last. And my pairing was none other than Elsa! I didn't know if she was going to mad



or happy because I would make her look good. I met her eyes across the group, and she looked like she was enjoying herself. She approached us.

"Congratulations! Being paired with me will bring some much-needed recognition. May even help your former sponsor with his business as well."

"Did you arrange this?" Arc asked.

"That would be against the tournament rules. Besides, what influence would I have over the organizers?" she responded carefully. Before Arc could ask further, a familiar face came over.

"George! What a surprise to see you back here." I recognized the kindly elderly lady from our first tournament. Agnes seemed overjoyed to see Arc again. Arc seemed less so.

"Yes, well, I was just heading to the spectator zone to watch the tournament." He turned to me. "Tyler, play your best. We'll be cheering for you, win or lose." He tapped my shoulder and started to head away, but his elbow was hooked by Agnes.

"Not so fast, Georgie. Let me take you to the VIP section. I should have a seat there right next to me." She pulled him away, and Arc looked forlorn. I laughed to myself. Everyone deserves to be happy. Before I could turn back, Elsa had gripped my hand and pulled me toward the start.

"What was this about winning or losing?" she said. "Top spot is already taken." She pointed to herself and beamed. "Everyone else is just playing for placement."

"Whatever you say, Elsa." I grinned and realized that I was no longer irritated by her overconfidence. It was her coping mechanism, her

way to deal with an overbearing father and to handle the pressure, but I didn't care. I just hoped that my dad showed up before the end of the tournament.

I pulled out my putter, and we went over to a practice green to warm up. All we could do was wait for our turn.

"What do you think of the course? Are you scared of Halloween?" I jested.

"Halloween," she shook her head, "is a North American phenomenon. You kids can't decide what to dress up as. We know scary and dress up as witches — *påskkärring* — and scour our neighbor for treats."

"Sounds pretty similar to us. I bet you'd make a great witch," I teased. Elsa made an exaggerated face, but she didn't seem mad. Maybe this wouldn't be so painful after all.

### Hole #1

Elsa and I stepped under the tent into Halloween Land. It felt like a huge arena broken into sections for the holes. Dry ice billowed out the entrance to add atmosphere but quickly dissipated as we approached the hole. There was a fine line between making holes difficult and impossible. Making us play through a fog belt so you couldn't see the hole would be unfair. This green was set up like a witch's den with a caldron perched over the hole. A series of animatronics moved around the green disguised as cats, trying to knock your ball. To make matters worse, the hole was on a slight incline — hit it too soft and you would come tumbling back to the start and add a stroke. I motioned to Elsa to start.

"You're too kind." She realized the advantage of watching her first shot. She was too good to care. She pulled out her custom putter; the club was probably worth more than my family's car. I clutched my father's department store brand club closely.

I looked around and realized there was a small crowd watching us. I didn't see my family or Dad.

Elsa hit the ball with a crack, and it climbed the hill, avoiding a running cat and resting perfectly at the top of the hill. It would be hard to top her shot.

"After you," she gestured while walking towards her ball. I could see her father at the far end of the crowd, stone-faced. She had her back to him, as if trying to avoid his gaze.

I focused on her shot. It was the best play — she could make it in four strokes if she played the remaining angles correctly. My mind wandered for a moment, analyzing all the angles. I was playing against the best in the world, players who had practiced most of their lives. I had one summer of experience and only an insane ability to see all the angles. I wasn't going to win by playing it safe. I had to take risks. I looked past the incline. There was an animatronic cat spinning on a groove every five seconds. If I hit at exactly the right time, the cat would knock me into the next section, potentially saving a stroke. Hit the ball too fast or slow, and the obstacle might knock me off the course or back to the start. I had to believe that I could make the shot.

"Quiet, please," the green keeper said to the crowd, which was shuffling while I decided on my shot. "You have thirty seconds left before a

penalty is called." All the calculations made sense if my timing was impeccable.

My ball rolled up the green incline toward the moving cat animatronic. Several people gasped as they realized the head-on collision with the robot cat. My ball raced ahead of the cat, but its speed was greater. As it swung around, it smacked my ball down the left side, well past Elsa's. I had easily gained a stroke, if I played the rest of the hole well.

"Lucky shot!" a voice yelled behind me. Was that Zac?

#### Hole #4

"That's unfair!" Elsa complained. She had hit towards the hole when her ball was rejected by scary clown that popped out of the green.

"I protest! This is supposed to be a miniature golf course, not a carnival. Elsa is being subjected to the randomness of obstacles. There is no skill in this course!" Elsa's father was furious, and I could see his reasoning. Miniature golf is a game of strategy and skill, but it's hard to plan for things that you didn't know were there.

"The tournament rules specifically state that players may face hidden objects during the course. All players have to face the same obstacles," a tournament referee sad.

Elsa's dad waved his hand at the official in disgust.

"It is your shot," the same official said to me.

My mind computed the angles, and I readied my shot. As I was about to hit the ball, something hard struck my head.

"Ouch!" I complained and looked at the official. He turned, and several onlookers swiveled their heads as well. I saw my family. Kayleigh looked as if she had seen something. She disappeared into the crowd to find my attacker. I shook my head and planned my shot.

The ball avoided several obstacles, including the clown. But there was a high lip around the hole that forced my ball to turn right, missing the hole by several inches. I swore at myself. These were the shots I had to make to be the best. I rubbed the back of my head. Had the rock thrown me off?

#### Hole #7

Plastic body parts hung down from the ceiling of the tunnel. The cave had a spotlight so bright that it gave me a headache to look around. I put on Trick's sunglasses and the green was easier to see. His gift had helped me when I needed it most. There was transparent plastic cut into the walls so that observers could watch us. A finger tapped my shoulder.

"Ahhhh!" I yelled, feeling my heart leap into my throat.

"Relax," Elsa said. "You take the first shot, since you were so good on the last hole." I didn't know if she was teasing me or if she was jealous. So far, we had been dead even in scores. There was a digital scoreboard with each hole. Half of the golfers were done the course — the best score so far was a couple strokes above par. If I could stay at par, I had a chance to place well. Maybe even win.

I tried to relax. Although I could intermittently see my family and friends, there was no sign of Dad. If he wasn't there in the next hour, we

would be done the course. I looked over to see Agnes who was trying to hold Arc's hand. He was resisting, of course. Why did he have to make everything more difficult? I laughed at my observation. I could be talking about myself. I hit the ball, and it ran down through the tunnel.

Hole #11

"Par 4," the official recorded her score. Her father was not pleased.

"You are better than this! It is the boy's fault, isn't it?" he yelled from behind. I felt his eyes on the back of my neck.

"No coaching from the stands," the official said and glared at Elsa's dad. "Any more outbursts, and you will be escorted off the course." Elsa's father made a face but remained quiet. I looked over at my partner.

"Is he right?" I asked. "Am I throwing you off your game?"

Elsa came very close until her nose was almost touching mine. "You give yourself too much credit, American. I have my own pressures to deal with. In case you hadn't noticed, this course is very hard!" She turned around and walked away. She was right; it was taking everything I had to focus on the game. I noticed Trick in the crowd. I walked over and stood so that I could whisper behind myself while Elsa took her next shot.

"Have you seen Zac here today?" I leaned my head back.

"There are a lot of people, but we haven't seen him. Yet. Lily is out looking for him. After the stink bomb incident, who knows what he might have planned here."

"What can he do? There are people and officials everywhere," I murmured.

"Are you serious? This is Zac we are talking about. He's about as destructive as anyone we know. I wouldn't put anything past him."

*Great, as if I don't have enough on my mind.*

### Hole #15

I hit the ball, and an explosion happened. Okay, I exaggerate a little. It was more of a pop. If the intent was to throw me off, they were several seconds too late. An official came by with a boy on either arm. Don and Dave.

"Do you know these boys?" the official asked. Before I could answer, Lily interjected.

"They're two boys at our school who are always getting into trouble. What did they do?"

"They set several firecrackers, causing disruption for one of the players. The players are demanding their parents be called in and banned from the course." For once, the two of them were silent. At least they hadn't affected my score, and Elsa and I were tied for the lead. The official pulled them away; the two seemed resigned to their punishment. Couldn't happen to two nicer guys. Problem was, where was Zac?

### Hole #18

"The End is near!" an animatronic crow screeched at us as we reached the last hole. We turned and listened to the announcers.

"Jolene, it all comes down to one hole. One hole to define this year's final winner of the prestigious green windbreaker."

"Thanks for stating the obvious," Jolene countered while giving him a playful look. "All the other golfers are through. The course leader is at plus one. If either of the two golfers left, Elsa Karlsson, world champion, and Tyler Martin, dark horse player with no championship history whatsoever, can remain at par, they will be crowned world champions."

I waited as the two announcers went through their spiel. They were whipping the crowd into a frenzy, building up anticipation of the final hole. I was so close to becoming a champion. Then I saw him.

"Dad!" I yelled. He was standing by Mom and Kayleigh, waving like he had been there for the entire tournament. I broke tournament protocol and ran to hug him.

"You made it!" I screamed and welcomed his big hug.

"I may have broken a few speeding regulations along the highway, but nothing was going to keep me away from seeing your big day." He looked so fit and strong, the athlete I always wanted to become.

"Sorry, the final hole is about to begin. You'll have about one minute before we have to proceed," interrupted the official.

"But it's my dad, and I haven't seen him in months," I pleaded.

"No, no. He's right, son. You go ahead, we'll have lots of time afterward. And son..."

"Yes, Dad?"

"I'm sorry. By talking to your mom, I realized that my sport accomplishments have put undue pressure on you. I don't want you to



become like me, I want you to be the best at whatever you are good at. Sport, school, music, I don't care. However, you place today, know that I'm proud of you."

I hugged him again and then focused on the hole. I felt good. I had played well, and now I was ecstatic to have my dad here to watch me for my big moment. Nothing was going to spoil this moment. Elsa waved a hand as if to get me moving faster. I lined up my shot. A huge clown's mouth with an evil grin faced me. It did little to throw me off, even with its maniacal laugh. Computations went through my mind. I knew where this ball was going to go. Just as I was swinging, a huge pop went off behind me, and I ended up hitting my ball harder than I had planned.

It sailed through the air, going toward one of the clown's evil teeth. It struck it hard but went through the mouth — but then the unthinkable happened. The ball broke and split in half! Just like the dreaded play of years ago. *The Heighten incident*. My ball had become *two* balls!

The crowd had parted like the seas, and people were looking at each other. Several dead firecrackers lay on the ground. With Don and Dave gone, it had to be Zac, but if he was there, he had blended into the crowd. Fortunately, I saw my savior as Arc rushed forward.

"The player should get a new shot. The distraction from the crowd caused him to miss the shot and split the ball." He spoke articulately, and I saw several people nod in agreement.

"Let me discuss this with the tournament manager. There will be a five-minute break," the official said and motioned to several people at the other end of the green. Elsa's dad was fuming at the delay.

"How does this affect my daughter? She should be able to play through. Why does she have to be delayed?" If anyone was listening, they didn't acknowledge him and remained in their huddle. Elsa herself seemed nonplussed.

"Was that your bully friend? He never gives up."

"You should check your English," I said. "There is no such thing as a 'bully friend.' You are either a friend or a bully."

"Maybe bullying is all he knows. In Sweden, the boys are always wrestling with each other to show who is the strongest. In America, they don't seem too different."

I couldn't imagine Zac wanting to be my friend.

The officials came over, and the look on their faces said everything.

"The rules state that the tournament is not responsible for actions of the spectators. Although all efforts will be made for quiet during the player's shots, the ball must be played where it lies. The shot cannot be taken over."

"Call the cops, kids, you just got robbed," a spectator in the crowd yelled.

"I protest this decision. This is unfair. The ball is split. What does he hit?" Arc asked.

"As stated in the decision of the tournament of 2005, the larger piece of the two must be hit. At end of the hole, a new ball can be given."

"That's impossible. The ball won't even roll now. I'll never be able to make it," I moaned, seeing the entire day go to ruins. And then I saw him. Zac was in the distance, laughing at my situation.

I was seeing red. Even on my best day, he couldn't help himself and had to ruin everything.

"It's him! His friends were already caught with firecrackers. He's the one who did it." I pointed. Zac's smile disappeared for a second as he backed away, trying to make his escape. Then he made a face I had never seen before. A face of absolute horror. He began to slap at his pants uncontrollably, like there were invisible ants biting him. The sound of firecrackers began erupting again and Zac leapt into the air like a wild bull. He immediately jumped into a small water feature and doused his pants to prevent more firecrackers from going off.

I looked over and saw the smiling face of Kayleigh. She gave me a thumbs-up. She must have set off the firecrackers in his pants. I was so glad I hadn't told Mom about the lighter. She had out-pranked them all!

Two officials pulled a sorry-looking Zac from the water. Photographers took pictures of the whole scene. Zac wasn't going to live this down anytime soon.

"It would appear we have found our culprit." The official stated the obvious. From behind Zac, though, came a familiar face, and he was furious. Zac's dad!

"What is going on?" He turned his head and watched Zac still beating down his pants. Apparently, firecrackers in your pants can run a bit hot.

"This boy was disrupting the match by lighting firecrackers. We will escort him off the course," the official said, taking a step back, intimidated by Zac's father's aggressive demeanor.

"How do I know this wasn't a setup? I'm a valuable sponsor. Unless you want to lose my dollars, you will listen to me. That boy over there," he pointed at me, "is the troublemaker. He shouldn't be even playing in this tournament. He's the problem — get rid of him." He took a few steps forward but never reached me. Someone bigger than him intercepted him. My dad.

"You are mistaken. I have traveled the world, but I'm always surprised that the loudest idiots are still in my own country. Wealth doesn't let you make your own set of rules. You are so far away from being right, you might as well get your own zip code." Dad looked imposing, and Zac's dad was momentarily off balance.

"My problem is not with you," he started, "it's that boy..."

"That boy is my son. Any problem you have with him, you have with me." Dad came face to face with Zac's dad. He was my dad, and even I was feeling intimidated. Zac's dad backed away.

"I'll leave it with my son. If he says he isn't responsible, then he's not leaving," Zac's dad stammered.

Great — as if Zac would ever back down. We had ourselves a stalemate. Then Zac did something I would never forget. Maybe he saw how physical my dad and his dad were getting. Or maybe he finally grew a conscience.

"Enough, Dad. I'll leave." He started to walk away, his jeans in tatters, and I swear you could see his underwear.

"This isn't over," Zac's dad said, first to me while backing away from my dad. "I'll make sure you get disqualified."

Then Zac stopped. "It's over, Dad. Let him finish the hole. He deserves that much." And for a split second, I thought I could see a moment of respect. One second where he didn't hate me and wanted to make my life a living disaster. And then he turned and left. I had a feeling that our relationship would be different now. But it was time to settle on the task in hand.

"I have determined that this half of the ball," the official pointed to the section on the right, "is the largest of the pieces and is the game ball. You have sixty seconds to make your shot." The crowd roared in disapproval. With everything that had happened in the last few minutes, it seemed so unfair. But then I thought about the summer. How I had struggled to find a sport I wasn't a loser at, and now I had found one that I had excelled in. The crowd was quiet, trying to predict how I was going to hit the ball. Problem was, so was I.

I had been using physics to determine how far a ball would roll or bank off an obstacle. I could do the math, but now I had a ball that didn't roll. It wouldn't move like other objects did.

"Thirty seconds left," the official answered.

"Give him a break," Elsa yelled. I nodded at her, thankful for the assist. But in reality, I didn't know what to do. Thirty seconds or thirty minutes, there was no play along the course that would work. No place it could roll.

"The end is near!" The animatronic fake crow with red eyes squawked at me from a pole near the hole. Its teeth were jagged, and for a fake animal, it was scary. If only it could fly away. That gave me an idea.

I calculated an aerial shot — if I hit the ball into the air and it sailed over the next set of obstacles, I could use the half ball to my advantage to stop rather than roll into danger.

I only had seconds left — I took the shot and hoped for the best.

The sound was a funny crack with half of the ball's weight missing. It flew over the board barrier, past the gurgling moat, around a slithering snake, and tumbled close to a sand trap ready to swallow my ball.

Miraculously, it didn't go in, but the ball did slide over the edge of the green a bit, flat side down. This would help with my lift for the next shot.

"Oooooohhhh."

"Ahhhh."

The crowd whispered its approval; it was a good shot even with a normal ball. With half missing, it was a miracle.

Elsa's dad frowned and yelled at his daughter. "Come on, Elsa! Don't disappoint me — beat this boy! There is lot riding on this next shot. Make it and you are a champion. Show me that you have it what it takes to be a winner!"

"Or what?" Elsa barked back him.

"Or I will take you off tour. You can go back to live with your mother!" Several people shook their heads, disgusted. Elsa looked mad but otherwise it seemed like she had heard these threats before. Suddenly I realized that even winners have their own problems. I looked over at my family and friends. They all smiled, and Trick gave me a thumbs-up. Maybe my losses in life weren't as big as I thought they were.

She lined up the ball. The course's unlevel surface could swallow a ball or run it off course. She looked angry, but maybe she played better that way. There was some rustling behind her that elicited several "shushes" from the crowd to be quiet. Her brows were furrowed as she concentrated; her usually cockiness was gone.

The ball moved down the slope towards the hole and picked up speed, going faster than she intended. It sailed past the hole, hitting a wooden ghost, and skidded off to the side. For Elsa, this was not a good shot, and her face told the story.

"Lura!" Elsa's dad yelled in Swedish. "You are a fool. You are farther away than your opponent, and he only had half a ball. You disappoint me!"

"The way you treat your daughter disappoints me," my dad interrupted.

Elsa's father looked like he was going to say something, but looking at my father's build, he seemed to think better of it. Instead, it was like a black cloud rested over his head as he stewed in his own anger.

"You are farther away from the hole. Please go again," the official asked Elsa. She made a face and was about to smash her club when I interceded.

"Elsa, you know better than anyone that you are the best in the world. Forget what your dad is saying, forget about the crowd, just concentrate on your shot. I know you can do it."

Her face softened at my words. "Why help me? Having me miss is the best thing for you. If I miss and you make your next shot, you are the

winner. What kind of game are you playing, Tyler?" She gave me a puzzled look. Before I responded, I looked over at my family and friends.

"If there is one thing I've learned about losing all the time, it's that winning seems like everything. Like you are missing out on the greatest thing in life if you don't win. But the funny thing is that that winning while someone is in pain or hurt is no win at all. You can do this, Elsa. Most players could not make this shot, but you can. I believe in you."

"Thirty seconds time left," the official interrupted. Elsa gave him a glare that made him shiver.

"Thank you, Tyler. There is more to you than meets the eye." She lined up her shot. I watched as she appeared to measure a difficult bank shot that would require bouncing off two surfaces to roll into the hole.

The ball rolled back toward the hole and bounced off a railing and toward a gravestone. It was angled in a way that deflected it back at the hole. It hit it and then rolled toward the hole, but most of its forward momentum was gone. It slowed further and almost stooped at the lip of the hole. It wavered and fell in. A beautiful shot.

The crowd roared its approval, and even Elsa's father clapped. His mood changed as her fortune turned for the better.

"Well, Jolene, it all comes down to one shot. If he can hit the ball in, then we go into playdowns for sudden death. An extra hole to determine our championship."

"Thank you, Captain Obvious," Jolene teased, "but although he made a miraculous shot last time, is it even realistic for this boy to hit half a ball into the hole? It would be a miracle."



“Quiet, please,” the official announced, “you have one minute to take your shot.”

I took a deep breath and soaked in the moment. Dozens of faces looked at me as if I was about to perform a complicated medical procedure rather than hit a golf ball. The last few months swam by as I realized that as important as the next shot was, it didn’t define me. I had changed a lot this summer, and that would remain, no matter what the next shot entailed. I studied the green with its Halloween props. In the light of day, they didn’t really scare me. People was what scared me — the way they treated me is what really affected my emotions. I had wanted to impress people with success for so long, I had forgotten what I wanted.

“You can do it,” said a voice from the crowd. I turned, and One-word Mike waved. For all my school life, he had never said more than one word. Now, in my biggest moment, he found the ability to say a bit more. I gave a big grin, and my friends cheered. The officials tried to quiet them, but I raised my hands to amp up the crowd. They responded with a roar. I didn’t care about the rules. I wanted to go out with a bang. Win or lose, I was going to enjoy this shot.

Everyone hooted and hollered, getting into the moment. The officials gave up trying to quiet them down.

“I believe in you son!” my dad yelled.

“Give it your best,” my mom cheered.

“Don’t mess this up, brother,” Kayleigh teased.

“This is your moment, buddy,” Trick bellowed.

Arc cupped his mouth. “You worked hard for this.”

"You're a winner no matter what happens," Lily said.

My heart welled with pride. I would make this shot.

Elsa smiled and whispered to me. "Maybe you Americans aren't so bad after all." I caught a grimace from her dad trying to shoo her away.

The time had come. I knew what I had to do.

I computed the shot. The ball was leaning over the edge of the green, affording me some ability to sail it through the air. It had to land right onto the hole; I would get no roll-in.

As I swung my club, I fed off the crowd's cheers and tried to mentally direct the ball to the hole. I hit it!

The ball flew over the ghost and past the cat. People watched as it came closer to the hole, and everyone leaned closer in anticipation that it would sail in. It came down perfectly near the front of the hole and landed round side first. It rolled, and the broken side flipped over just as the mouth of the hole opened, greeting the ball. The broken side lay on the lip of the hole, shaking, looking like the momentum would take it farther and fall in.

Then it stopped, half over the green and half over the hole. It didn't go in. I had lost!

Elsa jumped in the air, and her father ran in from the crowd to hug her. Her hug looked stiff and formal; I believed her joy didn't come from him. I felt a bear hug from behind.

"You were amazing, Tyler," my dad said. "You were a warrior out there against all odds. I've never been prouder of you." Tears filled my eyes, and my family and friends moved in to greet me. For someone who had lost,

I was jubilant. Like I had finally proven something to myself. The Rocky of miniature golf.

"Great shot." Arc patted my shoulder. "Although I thought you could have made it in. Not going soft on a girl, are you?" he teased.

"No, sir." I smiled. "I'm a competitor to the end." A man in fancy golf shirt approached our group.

"Great shooting, Tyler. I'm Jack Branagan of Elite Sports Goods. You are an amazing athlete. We like to sponsor the players who fight against all odds to win. It inspires the type of clients we market to."

"But I lost," I answered.

"Only by the smallest of margins. Besides, there's always next season."

## Chapter 22

### The Ceremony

“Toot do la loo!”

Dad played his kazoo. He was so bad at it, everyone around us began to laugh. My mom, Kayleigh, Trick, Lily, Arc and Agnes lined the hallway of our house. Dad played his kazoo like the pied piper while I followed behind. We walked into his office, a.k.a. the trophy room, for the grand ceremony. He had cleared space at the very center of the shelf for the prime spot.

Kayleigh marched in with my second-place trophy with a miniature golf player on the top. Its shiny head glistened in the sunlight. She stuck a ribbon on the base of the trophy. I moved in closer to get a look. The ribbon was homemade and said, *Number 1 brother*. I touched it, not believing what I was seeing.

“Hey, I’m your only brother. Should I be worried if I wasn’t number one?”

“Take nothing for granted, Tyler. I think Kayleigh is trying to show you that number #1 is always relative,” Mom answered.

“This ribbon isn’t going to explode, is it?” I looked at Kayleigh.

“Not today,” she answered and then turned away from me. Despite our truce, I really wondered if I could trust her.

Dad stopped the kazoo and clapped his hands to get our attention. "We are gathered here today to mark the very special occasion of second place in the world miniature golf championships!" We all cheered.

"Speech! Speech!" Trick called to me, and the room quieted. I looked around the room and realized my greatest supporters were here. I couldn't have done this without them. But I decided to have some fun.

"Although this trophy is about me and my greatness," I said, "I think it's important to thank all of the little people who supported me.

"I think I'm going to vomit!" Kayleigh said, and we all laughed.

"Seriously, I wish I could divide up this trophy and each give you a piece. You deserve it as much as I do. To Trick and Lily, you worked tirelessly to make sure I got my shot."

"I am a great organizer," Lily said.

"I even took a grenade for you," Trick added, and the others laughed.

"I want to thank Arc for his support and guidance. I think I would have given up several times in the beginning if I hadn't heeded his advice."

"All the advice in the world is useless, Tyler, if you don't have the ambition to try, fail, and try again. You were willing to make mistakes along the way, which allowed you to get better. I actually want to thank you."

"Why?" I asked.

"I may have taught you to focus your talents, but you and your friends taught me that it's more fun to share your life than to go it alone." He smiled as Agnes gripped his arm, both looked happy to be in each other's company. I continued my thankful list.

"Kayleigh, whose prank power was used for good when she exposed Zac for the bully he is."

"I used to think that Tyler gave me the most satisfaction to prank. I realize now that there is an entire world out there to expose to my genius."

"Be careful, dear — I do not want to get any phone calls from your principal," my mother chimed in.

"I want to thank Mom. You supported me with my dream to play miniature golf, even though I had no previous experience or aptitude to succeed.

"Seriously, Tyler, that is what mothers do."

"Lastly, Dad — you are the one who inspired me to succeed. Your trophy room made me want to succeed in one sport while you excelled at so many."

Dad took my hand. "Tyler, you have to understand that in my eyes, you are the real hero. I wish I had your smarts, your intelligence. Every mark I got in school was a battle, and I spent countless hours to barely scrape by. Your school marks are effortless — I wish I could be more like you. Have I ever told you why I got into the decathlon?"

"No," I answered, not sure where he was going with this.

"I knew I would struggle in university academically, so I had to get a sport scholarship to help get me in. I knew that unless I had something to keep me in university, I wouldn't succeed. Sports is all I knew. You're never going to have that problem Tyler — you are so much smarter than me when I was your age. You'll have so many opportunities."

There it was. I had been so focused on being like my dad when he really wanted to be like me. And somehow, I had mixed the best of both worlds to find something that I was good at. But would he agree with what I had planned next?

"I know that look, Tyler. What are you going to ask us?" my mother asked.

I took a breath and explained my opportunity. "Elsa came up to me after the competition..."

"To gloat," Trick asked

"Yes, and to suggest a partnership."

"Which is?" Lily asked.

"Apparently, every summer in Europe they have team championships for miniature golf. Teams are made of four players, usually from the same country, but sometime in certain circumstance they will allow certain players with a represented nation to play together."

"Are you asking what I think you are?" my dad asked.

"Mom, Dad. Would you be willing for me to go to Germany next summer for the world team miniature golf championship!"

## AFTERWORD

Dear Reader,

I hope you enjoyed reading the adventures of Tyler and his friends in the miniature golf world of 'Master of the Mini.' It is your support that rewards the long hours and constant rewrites that brought this novel to completion.

It's tough to make a career as an author. About 1% can truly make a living at it while the rest of us try to reach and entertain new readers. If you enjoyed this book, I ask that you leave a review on your favorite book retailers' site and tell others about the book.

Thank you for taking the time to read my novel. I hope it entertained, made you smile and provided enjoyment to your day.

Author

Jim Kochanoff



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jim Kochanoff is currently in a four-book deal with Silver Leaf Press in Massachusetts. The series is a young adult dystopian fiction with the first novel "Drone World" exploring the life of a teenage girl who thinks she lives in a perfectly safe city patrolled by drones, until she tries to leave it.

He signed a contract with Toonz Animation, Asia's largest animation for an animated pilot of his novel "Men of Extreme Action." He enjoyed book signings with his children's book "There's a Beagle in my Bed!" where the star of the book, "a beagle named Jellybean," accompanied him to book stores. It was a great draw to bring readers into the store and Jellybean was well feed and petted after many of these books signing. He is the former production manager of the animated children series, "The Hippo Tub Co." created by Canadian musician Anne Murray.

To learn more about Jim Kochanoff, please visit his website at [www.adventurebooks.ca](http://www.adventurebooks.ca)