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JOHN FEINSTEIN

**LAST
SHOT**

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"The bus just pulled up," Stevie heard one of them say. "Is there a crew there? We'll get people to the entrance hallway in about thirty seconds."

"Sounds like the Purple Tide has arrived," Stevie said to Susan Carol as the two CBS types swept past them and through the double doors without so much as a glance in their direction. Roger Valdiserri had been right. Apparently the CBS people didn't care if anyone from the media walked into their compound. And anyone who made it into their compound another way was obviously cleared to go through the double doors to the locker room hallway. Thus the surprising absence of security people. Stevie had been beginning to think even the bathrooms would have security guards.

"You want to walk down there and see if there's anyone interesting from CBS to talk to?" Susan Carol asked.

"Maybe," Stevie said. He was looking to his right, where there was a shard of light coming from the other end of the loading dock. "I wonder what's over there."

"Nothing probably," Susan Carol said.

"Let's take a quick look."

He led her toward the spot where the light was coming from. There was a lot of stuff stored here, piled up on the back end of the dock. The light came from a back entrance to the Dome that was about twenty yards from the loading dock.

"Nothing here," Susan Carol said. "I guess we—" She stopped in mid-sentence. "Hey, look who's here."

She pointed across the dark, open area to the outside door. Stevie could see a group of young men in purple-and- white sweats coming through the doorway. "Straight down this hall to the end and turn right, gentlemen," someone they couldn't see was saying. "Your locker room is the first one you come to on your right."

"As if they can't read the signs," Stevie said.

"He must have forgotten that they're student-athletes," Susan Carol said.

Stevie laughed. He hated to admit it, but she *was* kind of funny.

"Well," she said. "Should we head—"

She stopped in mid-sentence again. Stevie turned and saw one final purple-and-white-suited player walk through the doorway, peering around as if to make sure no one was there. Stevie recognized the floppy blond hair right away. It was Chip Graber. Right behind him was a man in a charcoal gray suit who was also looking around in a suspicious way. Instinctively, Stevie took Susan Carol's arm and stepped back so they were hidden behind some rolled-up Astroturf.

Graber and the charcoal suit finally seemed satisfied they were alone, then walked toward the loading dock until they were almost directly below Stevie and Susan Carol—who were both frozen with surprise and curiosity.

"Okay, Chip, we've got about two minutes to get this straight before the press conference," the suit said. "You can't get cold feet now."

"I never had *warm* feet," Chip Graber answered in a stage

whisper, still plenty loud enough for Stevie and Susan Carol to hear. "What if I won't do it?"

"Then the team gets stripped of all its wins and your father gets fired. We've been through this. . . ."

There was a long silence. Stevie wondered if perhaps the conversation had ended, but there were no signs of movement below. Susan Carol started to open her mouth to say something, but he put a finger to his lips to indicate she should stay silent.

Just when Stevie thought he was wrong, he heard Graber's voice again. "This is unbelievable."

"Hey, Chip, the world's a cold place sometimes. Cooperate and you'll be a millionaire in a couple of months. Your dad will get a big contract extension for making the Final Four. Quit whining, do what you need to do, and we'll all walk away happy."

"But what if we lose Saturday? There's no guarantee we'll win that game. Why does it have to be Monday?"

"That's not something you need to worry about. You just play your butt off against St. Joe's and choke against Duke. We'll take care of the rest."

"I'll get you for this. All of you."

"Please. You don't even know who *we* are. And if you try anything with me, the roof will fall in on you and your dad. Now let's go. You've got a press conference."

This time they could hear footsteps walking away. Stevie and Susan Carol stood stock-still for a moment looking at one another.

"What did we just hear?" she asked finally.

“Well, unless I’m crazy, we just heard the best player in the country being blackmailed to throw the championship game.”

“Yeah, that’s what I heard, too. But he has to win tomorrow. Isn’t that weird? I don’t know very much about gambling, but if someone is trying to make a lot of money by betting against Minnesota State, why wait until Monday?”

“That’s what Graber asked. There’s got to be a reason why it has to be Monday. And he said he had to lose to *Duke* on Monday. How’s he know Duke will win tomorrow?”

For the first time since they had met that morning, Stevie thought Susan Carol looked lost. “What do we do?” she asked.

Stevie shook his head. “I don’t know. Tell someone?”

“But who?” she asked. “Who’d believe us?”

“Good question,” he said. “I barely believe us. Man, I wanted a story no one else had, but this is insane. Let’s get out of here. It’s spooky.”

She didn’t argue.

As they opened the doors that led back to the hallway and the bright lights hit Stevie’s eyes, he felt like he was leaving a movie. But there was no leaving. Now he and Susan Carol were *part* of the movie.