

The Game

Nick ran down the carpeted steps two at a time as the doorbell rang again. His socks slid on the hardwood in front of the door. He timed the slid and grabbed the doorknob.

“Don’t run in the house.” His mom called from upstairs.

He shook his head but didn’t respond, then opened the door. Matt stood on the brick porch landing with his left hand in his pocket and his right hand holding the top corner of his skateboard. Matt was tall and thin, with dark eyes and long sandy blond hair. He looked like a long-haired Brad Pitt. The whispers and smiles he got from the sixth-grade girls in class seemed to confirm the similarities. To his credit, if he noticed the attention, it hadn’t changed him.

“What’s up, Hollywood.”

They slapped hands and Nick retreated away from the door so Hollywood could enter. Hollywood released the tip of his skateboard and rolled into the foyer.

“Is that Matthew?” His mother called from upstairs.

“Yes, mom.”

“He better not be skateboarding in the house.” His mother called.

He shared a glance with Hollywood as they both smiled. Hollywood shrugged and kicked the back of the board, tipping the front of it up to his hand.

“Yes, mom.” He called back.

“Why aren’t you ready Sims?” Hollywood flopped down on the couch and began bouncing on it as if testing its softness.

“I am ready.”

Hollywood stared at him, his mouth agape. His eyes were full of judgment. “You’re playing ball in that?”

Nick wore a windbreaker jacket, black with a highlighter yellow stripe that ran vertically down the chest. A lime green stripe ran parallel to it in the same direction. His pants matched, black wind pants with a highlighter yellow stripe that ran down the length of the leg on one side, and a lime green stripe that ran down the other.

“What you don’t like my warm-ups? I’ve got shorts on underneath ok.” They also matched the wind suit and were the same bright colors set against plain black.

“As long as you come to plan today, you know Emily will be there right? She’s their alternate. Will you be able to keep your head in the game with her eyes on you?” Hollywood asked.

Nick huffed and waved a dismissal at Hollywood. “Of course,” but he imagined Emily’s eyes on him as he missed shot after shot after shot. She began to giggle in his imagination and pointed at him. He closed his eyes and shook away the daydream.

“I’m more worried about Danny. The dude’s an eighth-grader, it’s not even fair.”

Hollywood shrugged, nonchalant as always. “He’s talented but overconfident. He relies so much on his athletic skills; he hasn’t really practiced anything else. He can’t hit a jump shot. You’ll see. He misses eight out of ten times. I even counted once, and I don’t do math.” Hollywood’s voice was even, matching his nonchalant demeanor.

The phone rang, interrupting their breakdown of today's opponents. Nick jumped over to the table and snatched it up.

"Hello." He shouted as he tried to untangle the coiled up cord that had been twisted too many things.
"Hello."

"Is this Sims?" Said a deep man-child voice.

It was the voice of Pudge, Mike, the third member of their team. His skin was dark, even darker than Nick's. He was short and about as round as he was tall. He liked to wear his hair in short, twisted plats called dreads that looked like spikes on his head. He'd survived middle school to this point by cracking jokes on himself and becoming the class clown. Nick thought Pudge had figured something out. If you're going to be made fun of anyways, might as well beat people to the punch and take some of the sting off of it.

"Yes, it's me, Pudge. Shouldn't you be on your way by now?"

"Shouldn't you, I ain't getting embarrassed by this fool on my own, I'd rather be playing Nintendo anyways. Hollywood over there?"

He nodded out of habit. "Yes, we're about to head over."

Something rattled on the other line. "Hello." His mom had picked up the phone upstairs.

"It's for me, mom."

"Hello, Mrs. Sims. Must I say you have a lovely phone voice. I bet you look absolutely stunning today." Pudge's voice had taken on a proper sounding tone, imitating an English accent. Nick felt like slapping his forehead.

"Well thank you, Michael." His mom sounded both flattered and appalled at the same time. "I'm sorry for interrupting boys." The phone rattled on the other end as she hung up.

"Stop making passes at my mom." Nick raised his voice with each word.

"You know she wants me." Pudge gave a half-chuckle into the phone. "Anywho, is our star player over there? He ain't wearing those skating sneakers, is he? Man, I can't stand when he tries to ball in those ridiculous things."

Nick glanced down at Hollywood's feet. Hollywood must have noticed his smile. His head jerked down and then back up. "What dude?"

"No, he's wearing his Jordans today."

"You're talking about my shoes?" Hollywood asked.

"Pudge hates your skater shoes."

"Those things are light as a feather dude," Hollywood replied, waving a dismissal towards the phone.

"Yeah, I heard him. You tell him they just as cheap too." Pudge said.

"We'll see you on the court, Pudge," Nick said and hung up.

"I'm ready. I've been watching the Bulls and I've picked up a few moves from Jordan since last Saturday." Nick said as he snatched his ball cap from the coat rack. He put it on sideways, with the curved bill hanging over his left ear, fresh prince style.

“Good, we’re going to need them, dude. You can be my Scottie Pippen out there today.” Hollywood said.

“No, I’m Michael Jordan on the court and you’re Pippen. I’m Batman, you’re Robin, I’m the Red Power Ranger, I’m Slater and you’re Screech.”

“Hold on dude. If I’m anyone from Saved by the Bell, it’s at least Zack.” Hollywood said.

Hollywood paused and a smirk started to form. “Pudge is Screech.” They said at the same time and then chuckled.

“Come on get ready, we have to be on the court in thirty minutes and I want to get warmed up first,” Hollywood said as he stood. He twitched his head to the side to part the hair out of his eyes. “And don’t worry about Emily today dude.”

He grinned and nodded, but Hollywood’s words were wasted. Emily was going to be at the court. He had to play well. He had to impress her, or he may lose his shot at her forever.

“You boys be home before dinner. And don’t skate in the middle of the road” His mom yelled after him as he shut the door.

“Ok, don’t freak out Sims but their third man, Jackson, couldn’t make it today and Emily is playing,” Hollywood said.

They had arrived at the court to a gathered crowd. The small, rusted, hand me down, tin stands the school rejected a generation ago were packed with middle-schoolers betting next week’s lunch money and stashes of candy bars on the outcome of the game. Even some of the high schoolers had gathered. They stood close to the parking lot smoking their cigarettes by their cars. He’d hoped to impress Emily today, not play against her. This was his nightmare.

He noticed they both were staring at him. Nick remained quiet for another breath. “I can’t guard her.”

“You were supposed to get Jackson, that was the plan. Hollywood gets Danny Douchebag and I get Timothy. That was how we were going to win.” Pudge said.

“I know.”

“I have to guard Timothy. I’m just too big-boned to keep up with Danny Douchebag or Emily.” Pudge said.

Nick and Hollywood shared a glance but said nothing.

“I’m big-boned y’all. I can’t help that I’m big-boned.” Pudge said with a smile.

“I can take Danny.”

“He’s quick. You sure you can handle him?” Hollywood looked unsure.

The alternative was guarding Emily. He couldn’t do that. Either she’d best him and lose respect for his game, or he shows her up and then she’d hate him for it. It would be different if it was just some other girl. But it was Emily.

“Yes, I can take Danny.”

“Bad move bro. You’re letting a girl like Emily get close to Fabio over here.” Pudge said as he pointed his thumb towards Hollywood as they walked onto the court. “I can’t believe it’s not butter.” Pudge imitated an Italian accent, horribly. “Yeah, she might want to butter up them lips of hers.”

“Pudge...shut..up,” Nick whispered playfully as they closed in on their three opponents.

Timothy was a sixth-grader, like them. He had red hair, shaped like a bowl, and freckles. He was average build, not particularly athletic. There was nothing special about the guy, other than he was lights out from beyond the arc. Danny held the basketball in his hands and smiled at them as they approached, like a lion watching his prey enter his den. His dark hair was cut short. He was tall, even for an Eighth Grader, his legs disproportionately longer than his torso, giving him the look of a small man on stilts. His dark eyes passed over each of them in turn. There was fury in them. He didn’t want to just beat them. He wanted to embarrass them. Nick started to second-guess his decision to guard Danny.

Emily was between them both. Nick tried to avoid staring at her, but his eyes had drifted over anyway. She was of average height for her age, which meant she was as tall as he was, just as every girl in their class had caught up to the boys. Her skin was pale, and her high cheekbones seemed to frame her dark eyes. Her thin dark hair was pulled back into a ponytail. Her body was starting to develop her womanly curves. Their eyes met as she noticed him staring at her. He held her gaze for a brief heartbeat. That was as long as he dared. He snapped his eyes back to Danny.

“Same rules as always. Half-court, play to twenty-one, three-pointers are two points, regular baskets are one point, have to win by two. Call your own fouls if you’re a bunch of sissies. Check at the top of the key after each score. We’ll start by checking to you first.” Danny said and held the ball up. “Who wants the ball?”

The game started rough. Before he knew it Danny had blown past him twice for easy layups. But it wasn’t long before Nick caught on to his movements. Hollywood was right, Danny was more athletic than skilled. He relied too much on a few moves. But as Nick began to make scoring harder for Danny, Timothy started to knock down jumpers from behind the arc. Hollywood kept them in the game with his quick jumpers. Nick added a few baskets of his own. However, once Emily started to come into her own, hitting several midrange jump shots, Danny’s team started to pull away. Now they found themselves down.

Danny dribbled to the top of the key. Nick followed, keeping his defensive stance. Something blurred towards his right. It was a pick, set by Emily. He stopped in his tracks before colliding into her. He tripped backward to avoid touching her, somehow managing to keep his balance.

“Switch,” Hollywood called. He was already guarding Danny. They were adjusting, trying to get Danny more open shots. Which meant...

Danny turned and passed the ball to Emily.

Nick stared at her, in shock of his misfortune. Her eyes met his, and time slowed. He didn’t break eye contact. His heart pounded, one time, two times. She blinked, ever so slowly. When her eyelids opened, her eyes were still on him. They were deep, dark pools, brown, but so dark her irises almost blended with her pupils. It was a stunning contrast to her pale skin but matched her coal-black hair. His heart stopped.

She dribbled the ball. The springing bounce of cheap rubber on the pavement was faint, distant, slow. She dribbled to his left. He was frozen, but somehow his legs shuffled to the side, keeping pace with her. His body held his defensive stance, acting on instinct alone. She smirked and dribbled back to his right.

His legs slide his body with hers again, staying in front of her. But she was advancing. He was retreating. At this pace, she would dribble in for a lay-up with little difficulty.

She spun her back to him, preparing to post him up. He panicked. Normally he wouldn't care about the contact, basketball was a contact sport. But she was a girl, and not just any girl. He was far too afraid of how his body might react if her flesh touched his.

She backed up. He tried to retreat, but his legs held firm. His instincts screamed to defend the paint, and his body had listened to them instead of his fleeting objections. Her back pressed against his chest. Her butt was dangerously close to his crotch. He was stronger than her, but the force she used surprised him and he backpedaled. She was so close he could smell her perfume. She smelled like a field of flowers.

She stopped her dribble and clutched the ball in both hands, preparing to shoot. He had been embarrassed enough. She would never like him if he seemed weak. He leaped into the air, coiling his right arm back for a block. As he rose, she pivoted into a lay-up. The ball bounced off the backboard and through the net. He'd fallen for the pump fake.

He winced and put his hands on his hips as he landed. His heart started beating again and seemed prone to make up for lost time. She still had the ball and was carrying it up to the top of the key. She grinned and glanced his way. Her eyes landed on him. Did they linger on him? He could have sworn that they had. Perhaps it was a taunt. No, she was measuring him up, judging his playing ability.

"You ok dude," Hollywood said.

"Yeah."

"You just got beat in the post by a girl," Pudge gave a half chuckle.

"Shut up. She's good."

"You ladies done gossiping," Emily said and smiled, "Check the ball, I'm ready to finish beating you goons."

"Good one sis," Danny gave her a nod and a smile.

"Dude, if you can't guard her, we are toast. We have to rotate off of the picks. Danny Douchebag can't be left without someone on him. He's too good to leave any breathing room." Pudge said.

"Let's just play."

Nick ran across the court to match up with Danny.

Hollywood bounced the ball to Emily at the top of the key and play resumed. Danny shuffled forward, nonchalant, so casual. But despite his height, he was quick and could turn on the speed in an instant. He kept his eyes on Danny's chest. Feet and arms can be deceiving, but the chest had to go where Danny went.

"You enjoy that brat? I heard a little birdie say that you had a crush on my little sis." Danny said.

Nick froze, his eyes bulged. Danny knew? Did that mean Emily...

Danny moved past Nick to the basket. Nick turned to try and keep up, but Danny rammed through Nick's shoulder. Danny leaped, caught a pass from Emily in midair, and finger rolled the ball into the hoop. He had jumped so high his fingers had almost touched the rim. Impossible, he was only an eighth-grader. He'd be dunking this time next year.

Emily clapped her hands as she stuck out her tongue, a quirk, not a taunt. She was having fun, and her smile seemed to brighten the very air around her.

Don't stare. Don't stare. Don't stare.

"Will you get your head in the game?" Hollywood said.

Hollywood had caught him staring.

"It is."

"Is it, because you just cost us two points in two plays. It was true. He looked like a novice. He'd agreed to this match up to impress Emily. Now he was starting to regret lacing up his shoes that morning.

"Check," Emily called to them. "It's nineteen us, fifteen, you guys."

"We can't keep this up. You need to guard Emily." Hollywood said.

"I'll guard her." Pudge raised his hand.

"No." Both Nick and Hollywood said at the same time.

"What, you let her have some of 'I don't believe it's not butter' over here. Why not share and give her some of this big-boned chocolate love." He placed both hands on his belly and gyrated his hips twice as he stuck out his tongue.

"Guard her," Hollywood said to Nick. His eyebrows rose. If there was one thing Hollywood hated, it was losing. His nonchalant nature had receded. Now he was getting serious. Hollywood tossed Nick the ball.

Nick walked to the top of the key, eyes down on the pavement. He couldn't look at her. Not her eyes, not even her face. He'd trip up and go all loopy. He needed to focus. So he allowed himself to stare at her feet.

"Check." He tossed her the ball.

The ball started to bounce as she dribbled. Her legs moved and he shuffled his feet with hers. But his was a step behind her. This wasn't working. He lifted his gaze to her chest. Where the chest went, the rest of the body followed. She couldn't get past him, but she continued to dribble, searching for a weakness in his defensive stance. Why didn't she just pass the ball? Was she trying to school him? He found himself blushing as he noticed the lumps beneath her shirt, the curves that poked out, forming what had to be...

He lifted his eyes, unable to focus on her chest any longer. His eyes met hers. He froze and for a second, he thought he saw the beginnings of a smile on her rosy lips. She stopped, jumped and shot the ball. Time rushed back to full speed. He turned to the basket. The ball bounced off the rim. He jumped for the rebound and dribbled it out past the three-point line.

She was guarding him now. But he didn't need to look at her. He studied where his teammates were. Hollywood was running in circles, trying to shake Danny. Pudge stood across the court in the corner, huffing air with his hands on his knees. Nick was on his own. He dribbled to his left. Emily stayed tight on him. He remembered what he'd seen on the NBA videotapes. He gave Emily a cross-dribble, bouncing the ball between his hands. She reached and poked the ball loose. He tried to recover but she got to it before he could.

She sprinted for the basket. He followed. She closed in on the basket. It would be an easy lay-up, one that would force game point. He couldn't let it go in, even for Emily. He jumped up as she jumped. The ball left her hand. He swatted at it, his fingers touched the tip of the ball, throwing it off its trajectory. It hit the bottom of the backboard and bounced towards the ground. But he was falling, as was Emily. He reached for her and rolled her up in his arms. He shifted his body and hit the ground with his shoulder.

They both ended up on the grass past the edge of the court pavement. He winced from the fall. Emily was on top of him. Their eyes met again and for a few heartbeats, they laid still. Then, she scrambled off of him in a rush.

“You ok?” Emily offered him her hand to help him up. He accepted it. He felt electricity as their hands touched. Her skin was smooth and soft. She helped him to his feet. She smiled at him. Not a normal smile, it was too broad and her eyes lingered on him too long.

“Good play.” She said as she patted him on the butt.

Nick widened his eyes. She smirked at him. Then her face shifted to a glare that said, you better not think about doing that to me.

He retrieved the ball, which had bounced out-of-bounds, and followed her back up to the top of the key.

“Emily,” Danny called. He took his index finger and slid it across his neck, then gave her a thumbs down. “Finish them” he said in a mocking deep voice.

“Oh no, I know he just didn’t just Mortal Kombat us,” Pudge said from the side.

Emily nodded. “Check.” She said.

Nick bounced the ball to her. “Check.”

Emily dribbled the ball back and forth between her legs. Nick watched her shoulders, deciding that was a good, safe point to keep an eye on. It was attached to her chest but wasn’t her chest. Anything to keep from looking into her beautiful...

His focus shifted up as he thought of her eyes. Their gaze locked and he was mesmerized, caught in Emily’s spell. The rest of the court disappeared. It was just her and him. She didn’t take her eyes off of his. She didn’t blink. How long had they stared at each other, five heartbeats, a dozen? He couldn’t tell. It was like time had frozen them in that moment.

She passed the ball to his right and the springing bounce of basketball on pavement woke him from the time freeze. Danny had caught the ball off of a pick and roll. Pudge had rotated to guard him.

“Help!” Pudge yelled. He was wheezing for air but tried to keep pace with Danny with his stubby little legs. Hollywood was shifting over, but Danny was heading Nick’s way. Nick left Emily to help Pudge. He got halfway to Danny before Danny passed the ball back to Emily.

No. Nick planted his feet and sprinted back to guard Emily. Emily stared at the basket, her lips pouched out in concentration. She gave a pump fake and dribbled towards the basket. Nick scrambled to catch her. She glanced at him over her shoulder, and then passed the ball to the corner of the court where Timothy stood all alone. No one was near him. It was a wide-open shot. That had been the plan all along.

Timothy shot the ball. It arched high and then fell. The ball bounced off the rim, up into the air. The ball continued to spin as it bounced off the opposite corner of the rim. Gravity was not their friend. It rattled around the rim as it fell through the net.

“Boom,” Danny yelled and threw his hands up into the air. “That’s game sissies. Get off my court.” The Eighth-grader slapped high fives with Timothy and Emily. In the stands to the side of the court, their peers began trading candy bars and quarters as the losers paid their debts.

Nick grimaced as Hollywood and Pudge walked towards him. Hollywood rested his hands on his hips. He didn’t try to hide his frustration. But the moment soon passed and he was back to his nonchalant self. Hollywood had put on a mask. He still hated the loss, but Nick knew Hollywood would never show it.

Pudge fell to the pavement, wheezing as he huffed in air. "I need a cheeseburger stat." He managed to say.

The other team approached and offered each of them a high five.

"Good game," Emily said in a soft voice. They slapped hands. She smiled at him. Again he thought her eyes lingered on him. Then she turned to leave.

Danny walked into his field of vision, blocking Nick from watching her curves as she left. "Good game sissy."

"Thanks."

"My sister likes you. You should go talk to her. I think it would make her day." Danny pounded his right fist into his left palm twice. "If you don't, I'll punch your face in dweeb."

"Dude, he's right you know," Hollywood said. "She's digging you."

"Cheeseburger," Pudge called again from the ground.

Nick took in a deep breath and started the long walk to the opposite side of the court where Emily had gone.

"Emily, wait up." Should he walk or run to her, maybe just jog. No just walk.

Emily spun around, confused at first.

He tried to clear his throat without it seeming odd. He didn't need to make this awkward. Just be cool. Be like Hollywood. She's just another girl.

But she wasn't just some other girl. His mind panicked as his thoughts went fuzzy. He stopped a few paces from her. Was he too close? Was he close enough?

He stared at her for a breath, then two, and her eyebrows lifted. A smirk began to form on her rosy lips.

Say something buffoon. He was making this awkward. That's so not cool.

"Good game Emily."

Good game Emily! He had already said that to her. This was a disaster.

"Thank you. You too." Emily's voice had taken an even more girlish tone, high-pitched; each word sounding almost like a giggle was behind it.

He needed to say something else but his mind was blank. She waited. Somehow her eyebrows lifted higher. She had a full-on smirk now, broad, but no hint of mirth in her eyes. That was his fear. She would go back to her friends and laugh at his attempt afterward. This was a disaster. Better to leave now and avoid the embarrassment.

"Umm...so...." He was muttering nothing. Abort now. Abort now. But his legs and body wouldn't listen to his mind.

"You're so good. Why are you an alternate? You should be on a team." Not bad, that's a start. Good recovery. Just talk. He had forgotten to breathe and remembered that might be necessary.

Emily shrugged. "I don't know. I guess no one wants to play with a girl."

"Forget that, play on my team." The words were out before he had time to consider them.

"What," She seemed more intrigued than incredulous. "You already have three members."

“Yeah, but Pudge can be the alternate, he won’t mind. It will get you on a team and you could play more. And we could play together more too.” Too fast, that may have been too forward. Oh, he’d screwed it up already.

“I’d like that.” She took two full steps closer. “Both. I mean the playing more and the hanging out with you more too.” She suddenly seemed nervous. She had tripped over her words, almost like he had. She tilted her head down and stared up at him from the top of her eyes. She was getting fidgety, lifting on her tip-toes and twisting back and forth.

“Oh, well, cool. I’d like to hang out more with you too.” What was happening? He’d never gotten this far before. This was almost worse. He was certain she liked him now. How had everyone else seen it and he hadn’t? Now, he didn’t know what to do. Now if he screwed this up, it would be the worst screw up of his life.

He paused and the silence stretched between them. It was getting awkward again he needed to say something.

Emily stopped fidgeting. She grabbed his collar and pulled him closer. She pecked her lips against his. It was brief, half a heartbeat, maybe a full one, but it felt like the heaven doors had opened and he was floating on a cloud.

“So what now? Do I meet you at your locker every morning?”

She smiled and nodded. “Sure, and you can carry my books. And we’ll eat lunch together in the cafeteria.”

“That’s fine, but I can’t leave my friends behind.” What was he saying, at that moment he’d follow her to the gates of hell.

She glanced over his shoulder. “Right, of course, I’ll bring my friends to eat with you for lunch. You’re friends with Hollywood so I’m sure the girls won’t mind.” She said.

“Ok, well, I’ll see you Monday morning then.”

She beamed and gave him a wave, “see you then boyfriend.” She turned to her friends with her mouth open wide and let out a girlish squeal. Nick’s pride surged at her excitement.

Nick floated more than walked back to his cadre of friends. Hollywood was smirking but said nothing. Pudge had recovered to his feet but was bent over with his hands resting on his knees.

“We have a new teammate.”

“You recruited Emily?” Hollywood asked.

Pudge grimaced. “Wait a minute. How you gonna treat a brother like that man?”

“She’s good and she’d be an asset on our team.”

“You know what. It’s ok. I’m fine with it. I’m more of a head coach type anyways. I’ll call plays from now on from the sidelines. I want you to keep playing Hollywood. You can have my spot. I’ll take this one for the team.” Pudge said.

Hollywood began, “Pudge, I think he meant...”

Pudge interrupted Hollywood. “It’s ok, you don’t have to thank me. That’s what friends do, right.”

“Congrats dude, you were smooth,” Hollywood said, turning back to Nick. They slapped hands.

“Oh, and her girls will be eating with us at lunch too. I hope that’s cool.”

"I'm fine hanging out with more chicks," Hollywood said.

"Yeah, well, they going to come for Hollywood, but leave with the Pudge man." Pudge stuck out his tongue and gyrated his hips twice and gave a half chuckle.

Nick shared a glance with Hollywood and they both shook their heads.

"Let's get back to my house. I can almost hear mom screaming right now."

"We playing some Nintendo?" Pudge asked.

They collected their skateboards and rolled away.