

CHAPTER ONE

They say that love will make a man do crazy things. And even though on that Thanksgiving morning I was still five years and change shy of being what almost anyone might consider a man, I was about to set off on a path of proving the truth of that saying many times over by doing the craziest things I'd ever done and probably ever will do, all in the name of love. There was nothing anyone could have said or done to stop me. The uncontrollable love had burned deep inside me for well over a year, becoming more of an obsession. An obsession not over a girl but a gaming console. The most awesome console ever: the Sony PlayStation 4.

My whole crazy streak started with a harmless game of catch. My best friend Wes Jackson and I were tossing the pigskin in my backyard on what seemed like the perfect fall day in Arlington, Virginia. The sky was as cloudless as it gets, the sun was shining a bright gold that naturally complemented the leftover autumn leaves, and the temperature, while a little on the cool side, was still warm enough that you didn't need anything more than a sweatshirt or light jacket.

"Hike!" Wes barked, and then dropped back with the football.

I immediately took off, sprinting for the other side of the lawn. "Chuck it!" I screamed in between gulps of air, my sprint quickly becoming a lumbering waddle.

Wes just waved me on and shouted, "Deeper!"

I put my head down and fought through the fatigue. As I kept going I could hear Wes

giving his own play-by-play.

“The clock is winding down,” Wes said hurriedly, as if there were an actual game clock about to expire. “The ’Skins need a touchdown to win. Jackson jukes a defender! He has his man Murphy deep! Does he see him? He does! He lets it fly!”

While I’ve always thought Wes’s play-by-plays were a little over the top, they at least let me know when he was finally going to throw the ball. He would always “let it fly.” And thankfully, he had. The pass was long overdue. My calves were burning and I was almost in my neighbor’s yard. I turned my head to locate the Hail Mary. The ball floated through the air, right toward my outstretched hands.

“It couldn’t have been thrown any better,” Wes shouted in his announcer voice. “It . . . It . . .”

It bounced right off of my hands and landed in my neighbor’s shrubs.

I’m sorry. Did I call it a “harmless game of catch”? Yeah, well, that probably wasn’t the best way to describe what we were doing, at least not on my end. A harmless game of drops is definitely more accurate.

I dug the ball out of the prickly bushes and whipped it back to Wes. It was one of my classic “rock skippers.” That was what Wes liked to call them because the ball would skitter across the grass like I was skipping a rock on water.

Wes got down on one knee and caught the football like a shortstop fielding a tough grounder. He tossed the ball to himself while I jogged back to meet him in the middle of the yard. “It’s pretty pathetic that the ’Skins can’t even win when we’re pretending,” he said, shaking his head.

“That’s all about to change,” I said, a smirk crossing my face as I came to a stop. “After Christmas, we’ll be scoring our touchdowns on Madden, thanks to my new PlayStation 4.”

Wes rolled his eyes and groaned. “Please,” he begged, “I’m telling you this as your best

friend, just let it go.”

That’s probably not the reaction you were expecting. I bet you’d be way more excited if your best friend told you he was about to become the proud owner of a PlayStation 4. After all, I’m sure you know just as well as any other kid out there that your best friend getting a new gaming console is basically the same thing as you getting a new gaming console. Or, at the very least, it’s like 75 percent the same.

I’m sure Wes figured his skepticism was justified. It wasn’t exactly the first time that I had insisted I was getting a PlayStation. Maybe I had made the same claim before the previous Christmas, and then before my birthday, and then before every holiday thereafter, even the ones that don’t traditionally involve presents. But just because no one else (most importantly, my parents) had gotten on board with the idea that getting me a PlayStation for the Fourth of July made sense—it is America’s birthday, after all, and you can’t have a birthday without presents—didn’t mean I was wrong, right?

Wes continued, “I know you love the PlayStation 4, but haven’t you heard the saying, ‘If you love something, let it go’? So just let it go.”

“If that’s really true, then you should probably let Buster go and see what happens.” Buster was Wes’s pet Rottweiler, and I knew that he would never even consider just “letting him go.” Would he let Buster lick his face right after he’d chewed on a dead squirrel? Sure. I’d seen that happen. It was nasty. But Wes would never let him go. I figured I had him with his own logic.

“That’s totally different. I already have Buster.”

“So?” I said, sticking to my argument.

Wes took a deep breath and sighed. “I’m just trying to protect you. I don’t want you to get your hopes up only to have them crushed again.”

“The only thing that’s gonna get crushed is our online opponents.”

Wes shook his head. “And you wonder why you’ve gotten a reputation.”

“What are you talking about?” I said. This was news to me.

“Never mind,” Wes said, backtracking.

“What’s everyone saying?” I asked again, but Wes didn’t respond. “Tell me,” I demanded. “A kid has a right to know his reputation.”

“Fine,” Wes relented. “They’re all saying you’re like the boy who cried wolf. Only instead of wolf, you cry PlayStation.”

“First off,” I said, defending myself, “I’ll be thirteen in five months. So I’m hardly a boy. And second, if you remember the story about that boy, then you also remember that he did eventually see the wolf.” I gave a half-smile and tilted my head to drive home my point that I could still see the wolf at some point in the future. Of course, my gesture was totally misinterpreted.

Wes’s eyes lit up. “What are you saying?” he exclaimed. “You already saw the PlayStation?”

“Well, no, not exactly,” I stammered. I watched all of the enthusiasm wipe from Wes’s face, gone even faster than it had arrived. “I haven’t seen it,” I quickly added, “but I did figure out my real problem.” I grinned again, aiming to help Wes regain his glimmer of hope.

Wes just scoffed. “What’s that, that your parents don’t want to get you a PlayStation?”

“No,” I said, not amused by his joke. “My problem is that I’ve been way too aggressive with my approach. Adults don’t like to be told what to do any more than kids do.”

“I guess that’s true,” Wes halfheartedly agreed.

“Of course it is. That’s why this past month, I’ve been much more subtle and strategic. An off-the-cuff reference here, a circled newspaper ad there. I even DVR’d a couple *Oprah* episodes and paused them on the right commercial. It might not seem like much, but it adds up.”

“I applaud your efforts,” Wes said. “But that’s hardly proof that your parents are getting

you a PlayStation, and definitely not reason for any excitement.”

“You want proof?” I said. “How’s this for proof? A couple days ago, I overheard my dad tell my mom that he was my age when he got his first Nintendo. And guess what? She didn’t argue with him either.”

“Why would she argue with him? It’s not like she’d know how old he was when he got his Nintendo.”

“That’s not the point,” I sighed. “He was obviously using that as an example to show her that I’m old enough because he thinks I should get one. The fact that she didn’t argue means that she’s at least on the fence. That’s a yes and a maybe, which is almost always a yes in parenting decisions.”

“Don’t you think you might be reaching on that one?”

“Am I? Or am I not reaching at all?”

“I’m pretty sure you are,” Wes said. “Regardless, your evidence is circumstantial at best. At worst, it’s a lot less than that. Face the facts: Until you actually see the wolf and get visual confirmation, you don’t really have anything.”

“And how do you expect me to get that? It’s not like my parents are gonna just leave the box out in the open or forget it in the car.”

“I think it’s pretty obvious what you gotta do.”

“No! No way,” I said, knowing full well what he was implying. “I’d rather be pleasantly surprised on Christmas.”

Wes shook his head in disbelief. “You can’t be serious. When has any kid ever been pleasantly surprised on Christmas? Disappointed? Yes. Surprised? No.”

He did have a point. While last Christmas had been particularly rough—it didn’t help that the wrapped box for the radio-controlled helicopter my parents had actually bought me was the exact size of a PlayStation box—it wasn’t like the disappointment was an anomaly. The truth

was I couldn't think of even one Christmas where at least a couple top-of-the-list items hadn't been omitted from my holiday haul. Even so, I was still hesitant to sign up for what Wes was suggesting.

"I don't know," I said. "I don't feel right snooping around the house to try to find where my parents hide our presents."

"You don't have to search the whole house. There's only one place parents really hide presents." Wes paused. He glanced from side to side, making sure no adults were watching or listening, before whispering, "Their bedroom."

"Even worse!" I blurted. I calmed myself and then whispered back, "Did you forget what happened to Gary Templeton?"

Gary Templeton was a former classmate of ours. Starting in first grade, he would sneak into his parents' room every morning and swipe a couple quarters from his dad's change jar. By fourth grade, he was the richest kid in school. Most kids would probably let that kind of wealth go to their heads, but not Gary. He was really cool about it. He would always buy me and some of the other brown-baggers à la carte stuff at lunch.

But everything changed one day, when Gary walked in on his parents doing "parent things." The Gary we knew and loved disappeared that instant. When he finally returned to school after a weeklong absence, he didn't joke around or hang out anymore. He just sat by himself, staring off into space, probably trying to forget what he'd seen. Weekly trips to the school counselor didn't seem to do much good either. After the year ended, Gary switched schools. No one knows what happened to him after that, but there are rumors that he dropped out before even graduating the sixth grade.

Wes didn't buy my excuse. "Gary Templeton was overconfident, and he got sloppy," he said. "He didn't even check to make sure the coast was clear. He just barged in. That's a rookie mistake. You're older and wiser than he was."

“So I suppose you already know what you’re getting?” I said, half-hoping Wes would say that he didn’t, and then we could just move on from all our talk about sneaking around. But that wasn’t the case.

“Of course,” Wes said, beaming. “I’m getting a leather bomber jacket. I got my confirmation last night.”

You probably think I’m kidding, but I’m totally not kidding. He seriously said he was getting a bomber jacket. I was as confused hearing that as you probably were reading it. Granted, I know less about style than I do about throwing or catching footballs, but that still made no sense to me.

“What?” Wes said, reading the look on my face. “Like in *Top Gun*. The movie. They’re coming back. You’ll see. I guarantee you’ll be asking for one for your birthday, but by then it’ll be too warm for you to even wear it.”

“Yeah, sure. It sounds really cool,” I said, pretending to agree. Even if it was the coolest coat ever, there was no way I would ever ask for it over a PlayStation, not even an old one.

“It is cool,” Wes said. “But I’m saving my real excitement for Christmas morning. After all, you can’t count your Christmas presents until they’re unwrapped.”

Before I could agree, my mom yelled from the kitchen window, “Mitchell Murphy, it’s time to get ready.”

My mom is pretty much the only person who actually calls me Mitchell, and that’s usually only when she wants me to do something or is punishing me. Everyone else just calls me Mitch, Murphy, or Murph. Although one time, when I was in fifth grade, a super cute sixth-grader did call me stud-muffin. She might have just said that so I’d give her my chair in the cafeteria, which I gladly did, but I think the compliment still counts.

“I’ll be there in a minute,” I shouted back to my mom.

“Make it half a minute. You still need to shower.” She shut the window as soon as she

finished.

For the record, I didn't need a reminder to shower. I can't imagine many seventh-graders do. But that's just my mom. When I turn forty she'll probably wish me a happy birthday and then tell me to brush my teeth. She'll definitely tell me to floss.

Wes lobbed the ball to me underhanded. I'm not trying to brag or anything, but I caught it that time.

"I'll call you later," I said.

"Two words," Wes said as he hopped on his bike. He held up a finger for each word.

"Visual. Confirmation."

"Yeah. I know. I'll think about it."

"Don't think. Do. For your sanity and mine."

As Wes pedaled away, I couldn't shake his words from my brain. He had put a bee in my bonnet. Well, not my actual bonnet. I mean, I don't wear bonnets, or even own a bonnet, just in case you started imagining me in one. It's just a saying that my mom always uses, so I used it. You know what? Forget I even said anything about bees or bonnets.

All you need to know is that Wes was right. I couldn't wait until Christmas morning. I needed to know if I should stay excited or if I should start bracing myself for the eventual letdown. I needed a visual confirmation, and I was determined to get one.