

THE  
**BIG  
SCORE**



OG MACIEL

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The Big Score

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*As always, to Elizabeth, Yv, Kate, and Iza.*



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# 1

## Cake By the Ocean

I'd heard it said that the secret to getting a group of complete strangers to sing along with you is picking a catchy tune, one that no matter how many times you've listened to it, you will always find a reason to listen to it again. If the song has a handful of cusses, especially in the chorus, then you've pretty much got a winner, and tonight that's exactly what I did.

Propelled by the voices of a large portion of the New Bern High student body, I moved around the stage, holding the mic as if I'd always lived on it, and though that was far from true, I managed to work the crowd into a wild craze as I prepared to deliver the final chorus.

"Talk to me, baby," I shouted. "I'm going blind from this sweet, sweet craving. Let's lose our minds and go—"

"FUCKING CRAZY," the entire gym shouted in unison.

"Ah ya ya ya ya I keep on hoping we'll eat cake by the ocean." I finished to a thunderstorm of clapping and whistles and was whisked away to make room for the next act.

I'd barely got down the steps leading down to the gymnasium floor when I was mobbed by my cousin.

"Holy shit," Hannah cried. "I can't believe you just did that." She laughed, bear-hugging me and almost making us tumble into the two nervous contestants waiting backstage.

"Oh my God! I can't believe I actually did it." I laughed. "I know I said I'd

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do it, but I never thought I'd actually have the courage!"

Hannah squealed. "When you said you had an idea for letting people know who you are, I never thought you'd sign up for the talent show. That's pretty badass, considering you just moved here."

I beamed. "I guess that made it easier, you know? I mean, if nobody knows who you are, you can be whoever you want to be, and nobody'd be the wiser."

"Well, you've done it! Let's go watch the rest of the show." Hannah pulled me out and through the curtain that walled the entrance to the stage.

People looked at me and nodded, giving me high-fives and pats on my back as we walked across the gym floor to find a place where we could watch the next contestants.

First, there was a group of students wearing kimonos and practicing a kata routine, which inevitably ended with a series of demonstrations of their prowess in breaking boards with their hands, feet, and even their heads.

The last contestants for the evening were three girls from the cheerleading squad, or at least that's what I assumed since they were wearing skimpy cheerleading outfits, waving colorful pom-poms, and had their hair up in pigtails. They did one of their football game routines to the beat of Dua Lipa's "Levitating," and ended by screaming "GO BEARS, GO!" to the delight of the jocks in attendance.

"Here we go," Hannah said. "They're about to announce the link to the survey where everyone will choose the winner."

"Oh. So there's no panel of judges? The winner will be chosen by everyone here?"

"Duh. This is twenty twenty-one, you know?" Hannah joked. "Whoever has a phone and cares enough to vote can help select the winner."

As if on cue, the link to a survey was displayed on the only screen hanging from the rafters, and everyone on the gym floor started typing furiously. The screen updated the results as they arrived in real time.

I could hardly believe it when my name showed up in the Top 5 list displayed on the screen. I was only four votes shy of fourth place, a boy named Toby who'd played "More Than Words" on his acoustic guitar, and only eleven votes away from first place, currently occupied by Suicide Squad, the cheerleader

group.

“Suicide Squad is only in first place because most of the boys voted using their penises and not their heads,” Hannah said a little too loudly so others could hear her. “I bet you the number of votes for them would be proportionally lower to the amount of skin they showed during their performance.” She rolled her eyes and pretended to gag.

I mocked being outraged. “Hannah!”

“It’s true! Seriously, where’s the talent in showing everyone you can spell TEAM while putting on a soft-porn act?”

“If you think it’s too easy to look that good on a tiny skirt, why don’t you do it, Hannah?”

Hannah was taken aback by the question that came from somewhere close to her in the crowd and was ready to launch into a tirade when she recognized the person who spoke.

“Alex! Of course it had to be you.” She laughed. “Only someone with a peanut brain like yours would say something like that.”

“No, seriously,” said the boy with blond hair who was trying to make his way to us through the crowd. “I’d just *love* to see you dressed up like a cheerleader.” He had a mischievous grin on his face.

“In your dreams!” Hannah pretended to look disgusted, but she hugged him as soon as he was close enough.

“More than you can imagine,” he replied.

“Alex, this is my cousin Kate. She moved here from Hawaii, just yesterday.”

I looked at the boy standing in front of me, not really knowing what the norms for introductions were in this group. Should I extend my hand for a handshake, give him a fist bump, or did they do a mock kiss on the cheek, like I’d seen some older girls do at social events? I was spared the effort of making up my mind when Alex gave me a bear hug.

“Welcome to New Bern High, Kate,” he said, lifting me up a few inches off the floor and gently putting me down. “I hope you can help your cousin become a little less blind to the fact that the man of her dreams is right under her nose.” He winked at Hannah and received an elbow to the ribs in response.

I was about to say something back to Alex when I realized that the entire gym

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had fallen into a dead silence, apart from the theme from *Jeopardy* that was still playing in the background. I turned to ask Hannah what was going on but was surprised into silence at the sight of her and Alex staring open-mouthed at something behind me. More unnerving yet, everyone around was staring at me, reminding me of a dream I had when I was nine and dreamed that I'd finally gotten my period while I stood in front of the whole third grade class.

I surreptitiously pinched my thigh to make sure I wasn't sleeping, and when that made me squeak with pain, I looked back to Hannah for reassurance, but she was still looking past me, over my shoulder. I was way too afraid to turn around.

"Hannah," I hissed. "What the heck is going on? Why is everyone looking at me?"

Hannah put both of her hands on my shoulders and gently turned me around. "You, my friend," she said, "just won the competition."

I turned around, not quite understanding what she was talking about, until I finally saw what everyone had been staring at. The final votes had been submitted and the results showed that I had won, beating Suicide Squad by a single vote.

Both Alex and Hannah lunged at me from behind, knocking the air out of my lungs as they congratulated me, immediately setting off a massive roar of applause and cheers, as wave upon wave of well-wishers voiced their appreciation.

I was doubly surprised when I realized that, somehow, I was back on center stage and was again standing in front of everyone. Mr. Krakow, the principal, was shaking my hand and giving me a certificate, while an older woman, perhaps his wife, took pictures with her phone of the two of us.

I was finally brought back to reality when I noticed Mr. Krakow looking at me with questioning eyes, holding a microphone to my face. "Sorry, did you say something?" I mumbled.

Mr. Krakow laughed. "What is your name, young lady? Do. You. Have. A. Name?"

"KATE," I shouted. "Sorry." I tried again, softer this time. "Kate. My name is Kate."

## CAKE BY THE OCEAN

“Okay, Kate. And what grade are you in? I can’t say that I recognize your face...”

“I-I just moved here yesterday,” I continued. “I’m a junior and start school on Monday.”

“Well, welcome to New Bern High, Kate. I’m certain you’ll be quite popular this year,” he said, shaking my hand one more time. “Let’s hear it for Kate, everyone!”

Amidst the clapping, cheering, and even some boos, I frantically looked for Hannah and a way to make everyone stop looking at me, if only for a couple of minutes. I’d gotten more than I’d hoped for when I set out to participate in the contest, and right now what I wanted most of all was to vanish and reappear in my bedroom, away from the spotlight.

As if someone had listened to my unspoken wish, the DJ started playing a dance beat, the lights dimmed, people started dancing, and I was rescued by Hannah once again.

We danced and laughed and enjoyed the party until the end, and when I finally got back home, I’d been hugged by and shaken hands with so many new people that sleep, when it finally came, gave me a merciful break. I’d need to be on my best form if I was going to be accepted by my new schoolmates on Monday morning.

# 2

## Emblems

After a couple of days spent moving into the new house and unpacking just enough of my belongings to ensure that I had something to wear on my first day of school, I woke up early Monday morning and had a quick breakfast of yogurt—plain Greek—with chopped dates. I then grabbed my beat-up teal-color Quiksilver backpack, hopped on my skateboard, and set off to the high school, only six blocks away.

After checking in with my guidance counselor and receiving a ton of papers with information about the many programs offered by the school, I made a quick pitstop by my locker to drop off my skateboard. Then I followed the little laminated map I'd received to get to my first class.

U.S. History was on the second floor. I managed to find an empty desk close to one of the wide, tall windows toward the back of the room. After history, I had Biology, English, and Calculus before I could finally go downstairs to the first floor for lunch period, where I could be with Hannah.

The cafeteria was exactly like any other high school lunchroom I've ever seen, with several rows of flimsy-looking plastic tables with their flimsy-looking plastic round stools, arranged in no particular pattern other than providing just enough room for people to walk around them. Even before I could open the double doors, I could tell by the loud humming sound coming from the other side that the cafeteria was already crowded. When I did open the doors, almost hitting someone in the face in the process, I was welcomed

by the cacophony that can only be made by a horde of hungry teenagers.

I looked around, feeling the weight of my most regretful thoughts about moving to a different state and having to make new friends. Why couldn't my parents have let me finish high school in Hawaii? Wouldn't it have made more sense to wait until I was done with high school in a couple of years, before my parents dragged me across the entire continental United States to North Carolina?

I was awoken from my reverie when someone called out my name. "Yo, Kate! Over here!" Hannah was waving from a table close to the end of the food line. "I saved you a seat."

I walked over to her, awkwardly trying not to step on anyone's backpack and making sure not to look too much out of place.

"Y'all, this is my cuz, Kate. She just moved here from Hawaii, what, like three days ago?"

I nodded, taking advantage of the moment to look around the table. I was getting curious looks from the group of mostly girls.

"This is Tish," Hannah said, pointing to the brown-skinned girl with her hair in a bob sitting across from her.

"'Sup?" Tish said.

"Liza and Natty," Hannah continued, nodding to two other girls sitting across from her and to the left of Tish. "And this is Abby," she said, nodding to the girl sitting next to her.

"Watch out for Abby, Kate," Tish said, rolling her eyes in mockery. "She's a senior."

Everyone giggled and Tish got hit in the face with a chunk of mashed potato. "Eww! You're disgusting, Abby."

"Don't be such an a-hole, Tish," said Abby.

"Don't take your frustrations out on me. It's not my fault Torres got to the Beamer first!"

"Oh snap!" Liz and Natty said in unison.

Abby wasn't fazed. "If you think he's so good, why do you keep begging me to let you come with me? Maybe you should ask him to let you harv—"

Hannah jumped in. "Guys, guys. This is not the time or place to talk about

that. Okay?”

Up until then, I’d just sat there and listened to the quick exchange between the girls, but something about how Hannah stopped the discussion made me think there was more to it than they were letting on. Either way, Tish and Abby stopped arguing and the girls turned their attention back to me.

Liza was the first one to start. “So you’re from Hawaii, huh? Why would you leave paradise to move to godforsaken New Bern?” she teased.

“Betcha they don’t have sweet tea there,” blurted Natty.

“Our grandparents are from here, actually,” I answered. “When our tutu passed away last year, they left us their house on Bicentennial Avenue. It took a while for Mom to convince Dad to request a transfer, sell our house in Kailua—”

“What’s a tutu?”

“Not *what* is a tutu, Tish. *Who* is a tutu,” Abby said from the corner. “Tutu is the word for grandparents, dumbass.”

“Bite me!”

“—and move to that house,” I finished.

Liza was undeterred. “Cool! How do you like New Bern so far, the birthplace of Pepsi?”

I was surprised. “Is it really?”

“What? The birthplace of Pepsi? Yup.”

Lunch was soon over, and I hurried to Home Ed in the basement, promising Hannah that I’d wait for her outside the main entrance after school so we could walk back home together.

Hannah was already outside waiting for me by the time I picked up my things from my locker. “You don’t seriously plan to ride that thing all the way home, right?” she said, pointing at my skateboard.

“Why not?” I teased. “You folks are too comfortable with your SUVs and gas-guzzling cars. What ever happened to walking to school or at least riding a bike?”

“You clearly haven’t experienced a summer in North Carolina. It gets *hot!*”

“I’m gonna have to get the wild North Carolinian out of you one of these days. Just watch it, you’ll be riding a longboard skate before the end of the

## EMBLEMS

year.” I laughed and hopped on my board. “I’ll just go slow and you can tell me what happened at lunch.”

“What do you mean? Are you talking about Tish and Abby?”

“That too. What’s up with them? Do they hate each other or something? But no, I’m talking about the thing they stopped talking about when you interrupted them.”

“Oh, that.”

“Yeah. What was that about a Beamer and a boy named Terence?”

“Torres,” she corrected me.

“Right. Torres,” I said, performing a fishtail and almost sending myself ass over heel onto a patch of gravel. I brushed myself off and got back on my board. “Oh, and a Beamer is a type of a car, right?”

“I dunno.” She shrugged. “I only know how to ride in cars.” She stuck out her tongue at me.

“Are you going to tell me what that was all about or am I gonna have to whack you upside the head with my board?”

“Sheesh, look who’s oh so impatient. Okay, I’ll tell you, but you’re gonna have to *swear* you won’t tell anyone about any of it.” She looked serious for a moment.

“Oooo, I’m getting scared here, cuz,” I began but stopped when her expression remained serious. “Oh, you are serious, aren’t you? OH, this is gonna be good, isn’t it?”

“I’m dead serious, Kate. You *cannot* repeat this to anyone. You’ve got to promise.”

“Okay, okay, I promise. Now, spill the beans already. I’m dying here,” I said, jumping off my board and walking next to her.

Hannah took a long, deep breath. “Do you know what car emblems are?”

“Car emblems?” I squeezed my brain trying to remember if I’d ever heard that term before. “Hmm. Can’t say I do, really,” I said with finality. “What are they?”

“I’m not surprised you don’t know,” she said with a hint of superiority. “Most people go all their lives without ever noticing them. That’s how insignificant they are.” She took another deep breath and continued. “Emblems are

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those plastic, well, sometimes they're metal, decorations that car companies stick to the back of cars."

"What plastic decoration? Are you talking about those plushy dice people hang around their mirrors?"

"No, dummy! Not inside the car. Outside. Right on the back of the trunk."

"Sorry. I have nooo fucking clue."

"Here." She grabbed my arm and pulled me to the driveway of the nearest house. "See that car right here? This"—she looked hard at something behind the car—"this Accord?"

"Yeah."

"See how the name Honda is glued to the back of the trunk?"

"Yeah."

"That's a car emblem."

My confusion must have been clear. She rolled her eyes, sighed again, and spoke as if she was talking to a five-year-old. "Every car has a car emblem, some more than others, but they all have at least one."

"So what? What's so important about them? You said yourself that nobody pays any attention to them."

"Here's the thing. Ever seen a Maserati up close?"

"No. We prefer to walk or bike or skate to places in Kailua." I was ready to pounce on her if she called me a dummy or baby-talked to me again.

She looked unfazed. "If you'd ever seen the emblem for a Maserati, you'd see just how beautiful it is. Imagine a metal crown with a metal trident poking out from the top. It is *gorgeous!*"

She had an airy look on her face and was staring out at something only she could see.

"Okay. Now that I know what car emblems are and just how *cool* they are," I said sarcastically, trying to make air quotes while holding my board, "what does that have to do with Torres and Abby?"

Hannah grabbed my arm and stared into my eyes. "They take them," she whispered.

"THEY STEAL THEM?" I shouted.

"Shhhhhh," she hissed and slapped her hand over my mouth. "Are you

crazy? Do you want the whole world to know?”

“Sorry.” I laughed. “I couldn’t help it. Why do they steal them? Can you sell them? Are they worth a lot of money?”

“You don’t do it because of money. Some lame people sell them on Ebay—”

“Ebay? People still use Ebay?”

“—or a collector—”

“A collector? Who collects these things?”

“I don’t know, Kate. You do it because some of these emblems are really cool. You do it because it’s dangerous. You do it because it’s cool.”

“Huh.” I wasn’t buying it. “What’s dangerous about it? You just walk up to a car, pick one of those bad boys up, and walk away, right?”

“Wrong.” She looked defiant. “Some emblems are attached to the car with plastic pins. Some are attached by metal pins. Some are only lightly glued on. The trick is to get them off without scratching the car—we’re not vandals, you know—and without making a loud popping sound, which happens a lot with emblems attached by pins.”

“Wait. You steal these things too?”

She looked sheepish. “I did. Once.”

*Now we’re getting somewhere*, I thought. “What happened?”

“I got caught.”

“Who caught you? The police?”

She sighed. “Yes. Well, no. Not really.”

“What do you mean?”

“Todd caught me,” she spat.

“Uh, hello? Did you forget that I just moved here? Who the hell is Todd?”

She started walking, forcing me to catch up.

“Who’s Todd?” I asked again.

“Todd is the sleaziest, most disgusting, most insignificant mollusk to ever come out from New Bern High. He’s a nobody who thinks he’s someone special, god’s gift to the world. Argh!”

I wasn’t sure what to make of that. “Okay, so this mollusk caught you stealing emblems? Do I have that right?”

“Yes!”

“But he’s not a policeman?”

“He’s a deputy to the sheriff.”

I couldn’t keep the annoyance from my voice. “So he *is* a policeman.”

“No!” she shouted. “He’s—he’s Todd, a has-been high school quarterback star.”

“What happened to him?” I was genuinely curious.

“I don’t know! That was before I started high school.” She started walking faster now. “Tish told me he busted a ligament or a tendon or something in his knee during a game in his senior year. He had to be carried off the field. His dad took him to a specialist in Chapel Hill, and they said he’d never be able to play professional football.”

“Shit!”

Hannah could barely keep her anger in check. “Serves him right. I heard he had a couple of offers to play college football tuition free, but he lost all that after the accident.”

“Let me guess the end of the story. This Todd did not go to college and stayed here, eventually choosing to join the police and serve his community to the best of his abilities. The end.”

“No. Todd is an arrogant asshole, using his police uniform and metal baton to intimidate kids and get his way with some of the girls. Like I said, he’s just... eww.” She shuddered.

“So what happened? He caught you stealing and then what? Did he try to *cut you a deal* in exchange for a favor?” I couldn’t help laughing but quickly covered my mouth.

“This isn’t funny, Kate.” She was really upset now. “He caught me right when I was removing the last pin of this ginormous, sick emblem with the word Chevrolet about this big”—she held her hands three feet apart—“and all I could do was get rid of my knife—”

“You had a knife?”

“Yeah. Did you think we use our nails or pluck them with our awesome telekinetic mental powers? I slid my knife to the ground and kicked it into a bush, but there was no way I could hide that emblem.” She looked down. “So he caught me and told me if I didn’t kiss him and agree to go out on a date,

he'd tell my parents."

"Did you? Did you kiss him?"

"Heck no! I kneed him right in his balls and ran like a bat out of hell home."

She laughed. "If he walks now with a limp, you got me to thank for that."

"And what happened to the emblem? Did you drop it?"

"Heck no! It's in my room. I hid it inside the closet. After that day I promised myself I'd never steal anything else for as long as I live. But that Chevrolet emblem? That beauty that almost landed me in juvie or even raped? That baby belongs to me and no one can take it from me," she said with pride.

Before either one of us noticed, we were standing in front of her house, and she was inviting me in for a snack. As much as I wanted to see her emblem and ask more questions, I'd promised Mom that I'd go straight home so I could unpack more of our things and help with dinner. I hopped on my board, told Hannah I'd swing by her house tomorrow morning so we could walk to school, and rode home. Funny how things are. I now couldn't see a car without looking for what kind of emblem it had and wondering, would it make a sound if I tried to take it?



## About the Author

<https://www.amazon.com/author/ogmaciel>

Og Maciel is a Brazilian-American software engineer and author of fiction and short stories. His works include “Software Quality Engineering: Tales From The Trenches,” “I.C.Q - A Novel,” and “The Big Score.” He lives in Chapel Hill, NC, with his wife and three daughters.

**You can connect with me on:**

- ⌚ <https://omaciel.github.io>
- 🐦 <https://twitter.com/OgMaciel>

## Also by Og Maciel



### I.C.Q. - A Novel

Auggie Benson is a high school senior from Northern New Jersey who freelances as a software developer and hacker after school. When he expands his clientele from AOL to I.C.Q. users, he meets Clarissa, a senior from a nearby high school. Communicating exclusively through the new I.C.Q. platform, Auggie and Clarissa quickly become romantically entangled and learn to navigate the ups and downs of an online romance — a romance that is cut short, as Clarissa receives an unexpected graduation present from her parents and leaves for Europe. They write to each other often but there's just one problem: Clarissa never sees Auggie's letters until the end of her trip. Can their relationship survive?

Set in the emerging world of fast-paced internet communication, this romance will not only have you at the edge of your seat, wondering what will become of Auggie and Clarissa, but will also delight you with its evocation of the music, popular culture, and topsy-turvy dating landscape of the 90s.