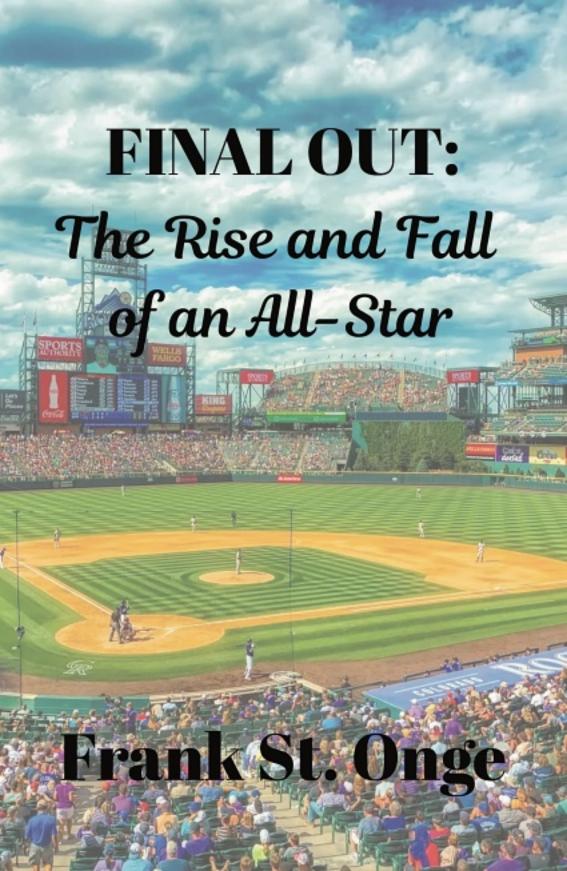


This is a fictional story of Casey Miller, a gifted baseball prodigy from western Pennsylvania. He has it all, looks and talent. He is on track to stardom until an injury leads him to take steroids and he sends his life into complete chaos.

Final Out: The Rise and Fall of an All-Star
By Frank St. Onge

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Chapter 1: Young Casey

It was a crisp, breezy afternoon, the sun steadily setting below a thick section of woods behind right field. The temperature had dropped making it feel more like late fall than spring. The small ballfield darkened by the minute, if there had been lights, they would have turned on by this point. There was a smattering of spectators bundled up sitting on lawn chairs or the small bleachers behind home plate. Little league baseball did not capture the community or inspire passion the way football did in this western Pennsylvania town.

The ballgame was in the bottom of the fifth inning, but it was becoming obvious that there would be no sixth inning due to the impending darkness. The home team was at bat, down 3-1 with one out and two on base. The batter, Steve Mahoney, was dug in at home plate swinging the bat back and forth waiting for the pitcher to throw. The opposing pitcher had struck out most of the batters he faced and was nearly unhittable, having surrendered only two hits to this point, but walked two batters this inning.

The pitch came in and Steve waved at it and missed. He backed out of the batter's box to adjust his gloves and helmet. As was often the case in little league, the equipment didn't fit the tall or short kids - Steve was one of the short stocky ones, thickly built from head to toe. The only helmet that fit his head was too big and he hated wearing his baseball cap underneath to keep it tight so, it had fallen over his eyes on his last swing. Undeterred, he stepped back up to the plate and repeated his swinging ritual. Unfortunately, the next pitch

caught the far corner at the knees leading the umpire to bellow out "Strike two"!

This time he did not leave the batter's box, staring inscrutably at the pitcher, willing himself to catch up with the next pitch to become the hero. The next pitch came in hard, bouncing in front of home plate, but Steve took a mighty rip anyway... striking out. The catcher boxed the ball in front of him to avoid any advancement by the base runners.

As he walked back to the dugout dejected, muttering and cursing, his best friend and star player gave him a pat on the back before taking the walk towards home plate. Casey Miller was the reason that anyone other than parents ever came to these games. As he approached the plate and took his stance left-handed, a buzz came up around the park. Even the other team's bench players stood up in anticipation of something happening. His teammates upped their chatter...Casey being the player with both hits against this pitcher. He was also hitting for a higher average and with more power than anyone in the league. When he hit the ball, it made a different sound, when he caught it flush, it soared higher and farther than when anyone else did it.

Casey's father yelled encouragement from the bleachers as he dug in and stood relaxed at home plate. Unlike Steve, Casey held the bat steady and did not appear to be anxious or nervous. The pitcher, on the other hand, was fidgety on the mound. He walked around a bit, pointed to his infield finally stepping up to throw. The first two pitches he threw were outside and high.

There was an air of concern around the park that the pitcher might walk Casey which strategically might have been the best plan, allowing him to take his chances with the next batter. But the third pitch was fired on the inside corner and Casey let the barrel of the bat fly.

"Crack!" was the sound that reverberated throughout the park, followed by a streak of the ball arching over the right fielder's head. It sailed majestically through the air well beyond the outfielder landing some thirty feet beyond the fence.

There was as much bedlam as twenty fans could muster for the home team. The parents and fans jumped up to cheer while Casey's teammates raced out to home plate to welcome their hero as he finished his trot around the bases. When he hit home he was pounded and patted by his teammates. Once back on the bench the umpire looked at his watch and consulted with both teams' coaches. After a brief protest from the opposing coach, the umpire ruled the game over. The players in the field were clearly disappointed as they walked off the field.

"Man, you crushed that ball!" Steve shouted over the din of the other players celebrating a hard-fought victory, his strike-out a distant memory.

"Thanks," Casey said on an even keel. Game winning hits and the adulation of his peers were all in a day's work for this budding superstar. It wasn't that he was shy or overly modest, but more his own expectation to succeed in these situations. At twelve years old, Casey was beginning to draw the attention of people throughout Beaver County for his sports exploits.

After the coach congratulated the players and made plans for their next practice, Casey spent a few minutes talking to his parents and their friends who came to watch then walked back onto the field to help Steve who was collecting all the team's equipment. They finished packing up all the gear and carried it to the coach's car. "So,

do you want to go down to the corner store and hang out?" Casey asked.

"Sure. Let me just drop off my glove at the house," Steve answered.

Both players lived within walking distance of the ballpark and despite it being a school night they had a good hour before curfew. For both kids, the best times they had in this small town were hanging out by the corner store, buying a soda, and going out back to hang with the other older kids. If they were lucky, someone would have a joint and they could get a little buzz before going home to bed.

Steve bought a root beer while Casey got his favorite, Dr. Pepper then they headed out back where some high school freshmen chatted. Along with the six boys were two of the most popular girls at the high school. For Steve, this was all good. He was a young-looking twelve, so the girls didn't often notice him, but here in the dark standing next to Casey, who looked a lot older, they would talk to him so Steve could stare at them. Both girls wore sweaters that highlighted their budding bosoms, allowing Steve's imagination to run wild.

One of the girls saw Casey and sauntered over. "I heard you hit another home run tonight," she cooed. Her name was Melissa, and she had a reputation as being a boy chaser. Although she was almost fourteen, Casey was still taller by six inches. By contrast, she was taller than Steve.

"I was just lucky, I guess," Casey answered in a matter-of-fact tone.

One of the other boys lit up a joint and started passing it around. Melissa grabbed it before Casey could and took a long drag then handed it to him. He took a hit then handed it to Steve. This would

not be the only time Steve got Casey's hand-me-downs. In fact, he lived to get the leftovers from his best friend.

They chatted and smoked until it was completely dark. Casey knew he would be in trouble if he stayed out any longer, so he excused himself from Melissa and nodded to Steve. On the walk back, Steve was in a good mood. "Melissa was looking mighty fine tonight, don't you think?"

Casey smiled but didn't say anything.

"Did you see the way her tits were trying to escape her sweater? I wanted to help her with that. "

"I did notice. They were hard to miss."

"You mean YOU were hard," Steve snickered.

"You could say that" Casey agreed.

"And she wants you man. She wants you badly."

"If she wants me, she can have me," Casey said gleefully as Steve veered off to go up his front steps. They waved each other off and Casey picked up the pace to get home before his parents got angry.

Seaver City was a bustling little borough forty miles north of Pittsburgh. In its heyday it had many thriving manufacturing plants born out of the steel industry. Those days were long gone, but it was still a good, quaint place almost close enough to Pittsburgh to be a suburb. For Casey, the good and bad side of growing up here was that his exploits spread quickly. Even at twelve years old, he was living his life to the fullest. In addition to being the star on his little league baseball team he was a budding track star, a football player, and a natural golfer. Since he was a big kid almost six feet tall, he looked older and was treated like he was already in high school.

Because of this, he and Steve could hang out with high school kids to learn about their bad habits.

Once when he was eleven, his parents found out he was smoking a cigarette behind the local drug store, and he was swiftly punished grounded for two weeks after school. From that point on, he determined that if he was going to maintain the freedom to hang out, he was going to have to be home by curfew each night and earn good grades in school. So, he set his sights on improving his study habits which helped immeasurably.

Casey's parents were older when he was born, it was considered a miracle to them when he was conceived after so many years of marriage. At that point, they assumed they would never have a child and when it finally happened it was cause for celebration. Now with his parents well into their fifties, most people mistook his parents for being grandparents. When his friends poked fun at his parents, Casey maintained fierce loyalty, always standing up for them.

Mr. and Mrs. Miller were both deeply religious, heading to church every Sunday to the Presbyterian in town. Along came Casey, always in tow attending religious studies himself. Normally, this would have been intolerable except for the girls that were in his class. On several occasions a little flirting led to French kissing in an empty hallway.

Casey was born ready to party. He understood the motto 'work hard, play hard' planning to live by it. With Steve as his pint-sized friend, his motto became 'live vicariously through Casey.' It was Steve's lifelong job earning his friend's patronage through making sure he got all the girls, pot, and cigarettes he needed.

There are other little league stars for their teams but eventually are passed by once they move to ninety-foot base paths. That was not the situation with Casey. His star continued to rise, each team he played for was immediately the best team in that league and unlikely to be beaten at that. Steve, on the other hand, mostly grew rounder rather than taller. He continued playing with Casey but rarely touched

the field, or if he did it was when the game was already decided. Many people around town wondered why Casey stayed friends with Steve, but having grown up with Steve as his best friend, he never felt the need to replace him.

Little changed for Casey when he got to high school, he just picked up in baseball where he left off in little league and Babe Ruth. Even as a freshman he started on Varsity, and in his sophomore year he was again the star. He also made the golf team play as the first seed on his team. He spent his free time either playing baseball or hanging out at the golf course at the edge of town that catered to the high school team. Because both his parents were working day jobs he had to travel mostly by bicycle. Most days, he would ride it to school in the morning then off to the golf course in the afternoon. And of course, after all his activities were finished it was back to the corner store to hang out.

Casey had fit in nicely with the high school kids when he was in junior high, but as he aged, he became the main attraction for the cheerleaders and other athletes. The store owners were a couple, never fussing or complaining because the group policed itself and kept to themselves. If anyone got too rowdy or tried to hassle a younger kid the elders, including Casey, would make sure that behavior stopped. The kids bought enough at the store to keep the owners happy, but occasionally they would talk to Casey about the smell of marijuana if it became obvious in the store.

Steve needed to stay close to his friend, since no one would talk to him without his association with Casey. That led to him becoming the equipment manager for the high school baseball team and getting a job working at the golf course. Initially he was given a caddie job, until the regulars complained about his total lack of knowledge of the sport. Not only was he terrible at giving advice but he had lousy vision and could never find the wayward shots.

Coupled with Steve's overall laziness, the course management couldn't wait to dismiss him from his post. Eventually, he settled into a more suitable job, that of working in the kitchen preparing meals and washing the dishes. Putting Steve near food was not necessarily great for the course's ability to make money, but it made things more enjoyable for him.

Early in his junior year Steve got his driver's license, giving him another opportunity to help his friend Casey by driving him around so he could stop riding his bike. Casey, however, still chose to ride his bike a lot of the time but if the weather were bad, he'd take the lift. Steve lived for those moments because he absolutely hated his home life. His parents, like Casey's, had him late in life. But unlike Casey, they already had six others. Being the baby of the family, he hated the way he was treated. He didn't want them to control him, but it usually felt like they were exhausted from work and having to deal with their older siblings. Meaning the easiest thing for them to do was to issue missives to him, although he mostly ignored any advice or admonishments.

Steve never believed his parents wanted him, hearing over and over that he was a mistake from his siblings. Despite their attempts at affection, he knew that his existence put an unwanted strain on them. But thanks to his two closest aged brothers, he learned how to acquire the things that would help him become more accepted at school and earn him spending money as well. Bartering for weed or booze became his specialty, his brothers helping him find hiding places for his stash that were safe from detection by their parents, but also in places that allowed them to share the booty.

Following Casey's junior year, the lovely Melissa got her driver's license, and life took on an even livelier tone for the budding star. She had been providing Casey with life lessons about how to treat a girl for the past couple of years and the two of them had done a fair amount of experimentation, but they still had not progressed much past heavy kissing and light petting. She was two years older than Casey and more experienced, which frustrated him a bit.

But that was about to change. Melissa picked up Casey one afternoon for a picnic at McConnell's State Park. On the drive out, conversation had been light, they talked about the school year and his exploits on the ball field that spring. She had just graduated and was talking about the six-week hairdressing course she was going to attend. Her family had little money, and she did not have good enough grades to earn a scholarship, so she was destined to live her life in Seaver City. This meant she needed to enjoy the little things in life-like hanging out with the town's star athlete.

They parked the car, pulled out a large blanket and a picnic basket and walked along the shore until they found a secluded area by the softly flowing river. It was a beautiful day, the sun high in the sky, warm, while a gentle breeze freshened the air. The woods were lush and green, and the setting couldn't be more idyllic. Melissa pulled out the blanket to smooth it out on a nice open flat spot near the creek and they took their spots on it. She wore a checkered button shirt that was tied down above her belly button, accentuating her ample bosom with skintight blue jean cutoffs that ended at her thighs, ensuring that she would have Casey's full attention. Just the flicking of her long flowing blonde hair was intoxicating for Casey, who was anxious with anticipation. Casey wore a Metallica T-shirt with loose gym shorts, not exactly what Don Juan would have worn.

She grabbed a sandwich and cookies from the basket to pass to Casey. The two of them sat and ate quietly, although he wanted to talk but he was afraid of breaking the mood. Frankly, he was too excited. After they finished eating, she untied her shirt and undid the top buttons to reveal a pink bikini top. She then shrugged out of her shorts to reveal the matching bikini bottom. Satisfied, she laid down to soak up the rays of the sun. Trying to stay calm and collected, Casey dropped himself a few inches away from her and mimicked her actions by taking off his t-shirt.

They weren't lying down long before Melissa reached out with her hand to join with his. This sent a jolt of electricity through his body, and he felt his temperature rising. Nothing had been said about her intentions today, but Casey was on full alert. He felt flush and more anxious now than he did batting with the game on the line.

Eventually, she rolled onto her side while keeping her hand joined to Casey. As she sidled up to him, her breasts brushed his arm. He struggled to keep his breathing under control and could feel her heart beating wildly through his arm.

"It's such a beautiful day, isn't it?" Melissa asked in a whisper. Her face was inches from his right ear, her breath sending tingles up and down his spine.

"It sure is. It's perfect," he forced out shakily. Just as he finished speaking Melissa surprised him by gently dropping on top of him planting a hard kiss on his lips. Suddenly, a rush of heat filled his body, and he felt embarrassed that his throbbing penis was pressing against her but couldn't do anything about it. She didn't seem to be surprised or unprepared for this development, however. She even pressed her pelvis down hard on his. The sensory overload was so strong he suddenly thought he was going to explode.

Melissa lifted her face above his and smiled, "I think I can fix your problem." With that, she slid down, grabbed Casey's shorts pulling them down to his knees. He instinctively reached down to pull them up, but she held him back with one hand while taking him with the other and thrusting his member into her mouth. Almost immediately he climaxed and shook violently. He had experienced an orgasm before but never with anyone else around. He had never experienced this kind of sensation. When he was done convulsing Melissa looked up and smiled back at him.

"Have you ever gone down on a girl before?" she asked him. "Uh, no. I've never done anything before," he answered.

"Well, it's easy. Just use your tongue and spell the alphabet." With that, she pulled off her bikini bottom and sat atop him. Casey had no idea what he was doing but he was too intoxicated by the smell of her raw sexuality to do anything but what he was told. Before long, she began to sway and moan. Within minutes, her knees tried to squeeze together almost crushing his head before springing off him and lying back down on the blanket.

Satisfied, the two resumed their soaking in the sun, this time while lying naked, feeling totally relaxed. Before long Casey was feeling the same urgency reenergizing his loins. This time the two fell into a more traditional exploration. Before long engaging in intercourse, feeling ecstasy simultaneously leaving them both satisfied and spent.

For the remainder of the day Casey could not take the smile off his face. He couldn't wait to tell Steve about his day. This was so much better than any Penthouse letters they could ever read. Melissa had begun his sexual exploration, preparing him for a frolicking and wonderful senior year.

Chapter 2: Casey grows up and turns pro

The high school years were good for Casey, the star player on both the golf and the baseball team made him a celebrity in Seaver City. Even as far away as Pittsburgh, Casey's name routinely appeared in the local newspapers with his exploits covered on most news programs. In baseball, he broke all kinds of records for western Pennsylvania, and in golf he even broke his home course record on his way to being ranked first in the district. By the time he reached his senior year he had four colleges offering him baseball scholarships and six others for both baseball and golf.

Casey had grown to six foot three by his junior year becoming the most sought-after guy by girls at his school. He had his choice of any of the cheerleaders but instead of taking his pick he let them all take turns. It wasn't that he was a hound dog, he just liked variety and enjoyed each girl uniquely. He genuinely liked every girl he took out, not like he was trying to break a record for conquests or looking for one-night stands. He never promised or asked for anything and the girls at the school loved that about him. His reputation for being a gentleman and a considerate lover was born out of that initial relationship with Melissa. She taught him how to pleasure women, and he found that giving was as good as getting. It helped that he had the build of an athlete and the looks of a movie star with his trademark crop of unruly blond hair curling around his ears making him both unmistakable and irresistible.

At home, Casey continued to be a model son in the eyes of his aging parents. But life at home changed for the worse when his father

became ill during his senior year, eventually becoming pneumonia. He spent some time in the hospital missing many of Casey's ball games.

The illness also kept him from attending any of his son's golf tournaments. His mother had to juggle a busy work schedule with his game schedule while also having to care for her ailing husband. Despite receiving disability benefits from his father's employer, the family medical costs piled up, which began to affect Casey's plans after graduation.

By the fall of his senior year, Casey had committed to Ohio State on a baseball scholarship, but he continued to rethink his decision with his mother struggling to pay bills. He argued that he should skip school to pursue his dream of playing professional baseball right away to contribute to the family income and help his parents in the process. But they were both adamant about him getting a college education as backup. They argued that he was already helping the family pay bills by not requiring them to pay for college.

On one rare evening when his father was home feeling relatively well, the family had a normal dinner together. Up until Casey's junior year dinners at home were a given for the family except when a game or a golf tournament got in the way. But now between Casey's senior workload and his father's illness these nights were a rarity.

"It's so great to be together tonight," Casey's mother said as she set down the last of the food and the family bowed their heads for grace.

After his father gave his thanks to God, he grabbed up some of the beef then passed it to his son. "How did you do today?"

"I had three hits and two ribbies; we won six to four."

"I can't wait to see how you do next year in college," his father said with a slight cough. He was getting thinner by the day, looked ten years older than he had six months ago, and was very pale. His plate was half full of food he would not come close to finishing. It compared poorly with Casey's overloaded plate that he would finish - then go for seconds.

"I've been thinking. I know we've discussed this before, but maybe I should get an agent and declare for the baseball draft next year. I'd like to be able to do my part to pay the bills."

Both parents began shaking their heads and turned to look at each other. "It has always been our dream for you to go to college. We can manage," his mother said with conviction, but her glance at her husband betrayed her voice which Casey noticed.

"I agree. Casey, we love you and we want the best life for you. I'll be okay and your mother and I will manage."

"Okay. But I can change my plans if you need me to," Casey replied. That answer satisfied them all and the room fell silent except for the sounds of contented eating and the banging of utensils.

Steve did not have the family economic pressures that Casey had, but he also didn't have any scholarship offers. He had also grown a lot since being the short kid who played little league baseball, but unfortunately, his growth was more in width than height. He was as proficient at eating junk food as his friend was at playing sports, but he dutifully stayed by Casey's side as much as possible. His best value to the baseball team was in securing and rolling joints for the players to take with them on dates. He also had an endless supply of condoms that many players found indispensable. His parents and siblings had all gone to Indiana University of Pennsylvania but dreaded the idea of being forced to go there and be away from Casey. The complaints about his parents forcing him to go to school were routine, often telling his friend about how invaluable he could be to him if he chose

to skip college to head straight to the pros. "Man, if you think I can get you good stuff now as the high school equipment manager wait until I have some money to play with. And with your skills and my ability to be a provider we'd make a great team," he said while the two were walking home from the ballpark.

Casey laughed. "Great. Now you sound more like a wife than a friend."

"Oh yeah? If I were your wife, I wouldn't spend my time finding ways to help you get laid."

"I thought it was a wife's job to do that work herself."

"Sure, if you want to have the same thing every night. I'm offering you a smorgasbord of women and all the booze, condoms, and drugs you could ever want."

Casey gave his friend a gentle nudge and the two kept walking and discussing the future together.

Senior prom night was a time for the two friends to forget about the future and enjoy one of the last special nights of a high school kid's life. Steve had little problem securing a date simply because he was Casey's friend, being so popular any girl would want to be in his entourage. At that point, half the cheerleaders and most of the jocks at school hung on every word he said as if he was E.F. Hutton.

Casey decided to ask the lead cheerleader to the prom, not because he felt especially close to her, but it seemed appropriate for the lead jock to take out the lead cheerleader. On top of that, Jennifer Thomas was a wild partier. The two had gone out from time-to-time over the past two years and were extremely popular 'spreading' themselves around. To make the date especially memorable, Jennifer's father rented a limousine for the entire night so they could

party safely in style. The limo had room for a dozen people and there was little doubt they would fill it.

Steve arrived at Casey's to await their chariot (and their dates), his mother greeting him at the door. She was a tall, big boned woman, with her hair transitioning from brown to silver, making it look streaked. She struggled with her aching joints, but not enough to keep her down. "Don't you look great!" she said while squeezing Steve into a strong bear hug. It wasn't easy for her to get her arms around him, but she did the best she could. Steve responded awkwardly to the hug but recovered enough to say thanks. In true Steve Mahoney style, he had picked out an electric powder blue tux with matching shirt and bow tie. The cummerbund looked a little like a sling shot used in medieval times to target the enemy, he resembled the cannon ball with extremities.

"I've got to take some pictures," she said to the boys as Casey hit the bottom step and entered the foyer straightening his bow tie on the black tux. For once, his hair was matted down in all the correct places.

"Why don't you wait for Jennifer and Sally to get here," Casey suggested confidently. He had really grown into his body and because of his constant notoriety had become quite comfortable with the attention that comes with celebrity status. Of course, the only paparazzi present now were his parents.

"Just one shot, then I'll wait for the girls before taking more."

Casey's father, who had been lying on the couch, gingerly limped his way over to take a better look. "You boys do look quite handsome tonight," Mr. Miller said breathlessly with a smile, but his ashen face made it obvious he was not feeling well.

"Pop. Why don't you lie back down? We'll bring the girls into the family room so you can see us all," Casey pleaded.

"If God wants me, he can have me. But if I'm here I want to take part in this," he coughed out undeterred. Casey gave him a quick hug and held on to his father to keep him steady.

Their dates came inside the house wearing long evening gowns that accentuated their curves, each hugging the Millers to whom they were no strangers. Another thing about living your whole life in the same town is that everyone knows everyone, both girls grew up in Seaver. Jennifer was dressed in a yellow chiffon dress and Sally, also a cheerleader, was decked out in red giving a fair warning to the siren she planned on being this evening.

There were a dozen pictures taken of the two couples in every combination of poses together and with Casey's parents before it was time to head for the limousine. It was a warm spring evening, so the girls only had to wear a sweater loosely tied around their shoulders, the guys were sufficiently attired in their tuxedo jackets. This was Casey's first limousine ride, he was in awe of the two long bench seats along the side and the full-length back seat. There was also a cabinet with wine glasses and a refrigerator. Where there weren't any windows there were mirrors with the moon roof open and ready for business. Sally turned on the radio and cranked out some tunes while Jennifer opened the champagne bottle and poured everyone a drink.

"I have another surprise for everyone tonight," Steve announced. As they each took their drinks Steve pulled a small bag out of his jacket pocket with some white powder in it, everyone immediately knew what it was. Casey had never done cocaine, but it was more out of a desire to stay focused on being a good athlete than it was for staying straight. He also knew he could never afford it. But Steve had a lot of ingenuity, knowing a lot of people in shady places. He was the school pusher and made a fair amount of money from selling assorted

varieties of pills and marijuana. He was a master at bartering and Casey suspected he knew how to 'borrow' money from his folks.

"Where did you get that?" Casey asked.

"Don't worry about it. I have my contacts."

Sally pulled Steve over to her and planted a big wet kiss on him, grabbed a small mirror from her purse and he poured some out. He came prepared with a razor blade cutting the pile up into four lines. "Does anyone have a dollar bill?" she asked.

Steve looked over at Sally as if she were a disbeliever in his talents and pulled one out already rolled up. He took the first hit, handing the bill to Sally next. Casey and Jennifer then took their turns Then Steve licked the mirror clean and quickly put the bag back in his pocket for later. It was a short drive over to the local restaurant hosting the big dance and they all piled out feeling euphoric. There was a smattering of applause as members of their class spotted three of the most popular students at the school. Their entrance into the building made them feel like celebrities with dozens of classmates making their way over to greet the group. Casey looked over at Steve, who was in his glory. He knew he would never get this treatment without him, but he was also a good friend, and it made him feel good to see Steve so happy. Sally was way out of Steve's league, but his friendship to Casey coupled with his ability to get drugs and alcohol guaranteed that he would be popular tonight. Sally had agreed to go with Steve after a night out with Casey, who knew Steve had a crush on her.

Truthfully, most of the kids at the school knew Steve for what he was. He was Casey's toady and a wannabe part of the glitterati. Still, he smiled from ear to ear, took Sally by the arm, and prepared to be announced into the hall. As part of the ceremony the star athletes

and cheerleaders would be formally announced so they lagged the other students to wait their turn.

The entire event was a blast for Casey. He and his sports buddies hung out together for a portion of the evening taking some turns dancing with each other's dates. Casey spent most of the evening dancing with Jennifer. She looked great, and the feel of her body as they danced together was intoxicating. She smelled so sweetly of flowers; a variety Casey couldn't place but made him want to bury his face into the nape of her neck. He couldn't wait for the prom to be over so they could pile back into the limousine and head down to a secluded spot along the river where he could enjoy her body thoroughly.

After the last song of the night played out, they managed to pile fourteen kids into the limousine for the short drive to their 'secret' secluded destination. The first order of business was to stop at McDonalds to pick up some more food and munchies then all sat back with many of the girls sitting on the laps of the boys for the rest of the drive. The limousine bottomed out a couple of times from potholes and the collective weight of its inhabitants, but overall, it got them to their destination without incident.

Thanks to some pre-planning Steve found a park that was secluded enough for everyone to find their own privacy easily but close enough to get to with a place for the limo to park. And of course, he had secured a couple of cases of beer having already hidden them down by the river. Upon stopping, everyone piled out and began walking away from the car, Steve grabbing their attention before they meandered too far away to direct them to the beer stash. He had thought of everything, even bringing blankets so everyone could lie

down comfortably instead of on the cold ground. Casey had never double dated with his friend, and although Steve had told him about some of his dates, he had doubts as to whether Steve had ever actually been intimate with a girl. So, the two pairs found a nice little patch away from the others and began making out. It was a bit uncomfortable, both from a clothes standpoint and the logistics of being all together. As Casey tried to roll Jennifer on top of him her gown got stuck underneath him, and Steve's left arm cracked him across the bridge of his nose.

The two couples finally decided it was foolish to get too intimate on the blanket instead opting to take advantage of the privacy in the limousine to snort the rest of the coke. They had just cleaned up the last of the residue when the first couple made their way back inside. Within an hour, they were heading back into town soon having dropped everyone off, leaving the foursome alone once again. They had the driver pull into a deserted parking lot where they could have some privacy to finish their party.

The driver, knowing what was up, offered to walk up ahead and have a smoke. Once he had walked far enough away, Steve and Sally went at it on the left side bench seat while Casey and Jennifer made out in the back seat. Casey and Jennifer were intimately kissing and even as their action became more frenetic, Casey kept one eye on Sally as she reached up inside her gown, pulled down her panties and mounted Steve. Seeing his friend in such reverie distracted him such that he didn't notice Jennifer slipping out of her gown altogether and loosening his own belt. It didn't take long for Casey's attention to get back on point, quickly getting back to business with the fabulous Jennifer. The evening was a complete success!

A few weeks later things were winding down at school for the seniors. Final exams were being taken, baseball season had ended, and Casey was beginning to set his sights on college when the unthinkable happened. He came home from school one afternoon to find an ambulance parked outside his house with the lights flashing. Running inside, he found two EMT's working feverishly on his father. His mother, in tears, ran to diving into his arms, her body wracking with sobs. Moments later the EMT's stopped working and shook their heads. Just like that Casey's father was gone.

First responders milled around the house for what seemed like hours as Casey and his mother sat holding each other on the couch, both drowning in their own tears. Casey had known his father was sick, but he never considered that he was in danger of dying. They were both attended to by EMT's who made sure both were okay...physically, at least.

Even before things died down, many of their neighbors began to show up to offer help. One woman made some coffee while another brought cookies. Slowly, Casey and his mother began to respond to the attention and pull out of their own sorrow, but the distractions left them both exhausted and worn raw. Casey couldn't stay in his cocoon any longer, finally starting to talk with the well-wishers. The recovery was derailed when a very emotional Steve came running into the house to embrace Casey and then did the same with his mother.

Slowly over the next few hours the EMT's, ministers, police and forensics people left and then the neighbors filed out. Eventually, the house was empty except for Casey, his mother and Steve who spent time reminiscing about Casey's father with a few smiles and a few more tears. That night, they all fell asleep in the living room.

The next few days were a blur; there were so many things to do and plan for and Casey needed to be there to help his mother. The wake was well attended; the line went right out of the funeral home down the street. It wasn't really a tribute to Casey's father as much as it reflected his own popularity. Steve stayed with him every step of the way and was instrumental in working out a lot of the details. He may have been a toady, but he was also Casey's best friend, and he knew how best to assist his friend in a time of need.

While standing by the casket for hours receiving condolences and well wishes of everyone living within twenty miles of Seaver City, one man coming through the line stood out. Casey noticed him as he made his way through the members of his extended family and then stopped by to talk to Casey's mother for a few moments. What stood out was the way the man carried himself. He was tall and well-groomed, his hair short with a touch of gray at the corners and dressed in an expensive black suit with a blue tie. He stood out against the backdrop of the other locals who were mostly blue-collar workers that looked uncomfortable when they tried to dress formally.

Casey turned to face the man as he finished talking to his mother. "Hi Casey. My name is Bill Treadway; I'm a licensed sports agent. I'm deeply sorry for your loss. I know this is a tough time for you and your family, but I think considering what has just happened it might be good for us to talk soon. Here's my card."

The man shook Casey's hand again, did the same for Steve before kneeling by the body for a few moments Then just like that he walked out of the room. Casey watched him walk out then glanced at Steve, who was likewise staring out at the man.

Unfortunately, over the next few weeks things went from bad to worse. Casey's mother took some time off from work to clean out and go through all her husband's belongings while Casey managed the finances. His mother had asked him to look over the bills and the bank accounts and it was obvious that his mother didn't have the money to pay for everything.

Steve also helped Casey sort through the piles. He had a better business mind, and Casey welcomed his help and advice. "This sucks, man. Your mother's never going to be able to pay all these bills and you're going to lose the house if she doesn't. Did you know your father's medical bills had gotten this high?"

"No. She and Dad kept all this to themselves. They were trying to protect me so I could go off to college. But I can't go to college with our finances like this. I need to do something now. Maybe I could get a good job for the summer."

"Dude. You'd need to do something illegal to solve this problem," Steve lamented.

"Remember that guy who came by the funeral parlor during the wake? Maybe I should call him? I mean what have I got to lose?"

"You've been approached by a lot of guys offering to be your agent. Why this guy?"

"I did some research, and this guy seems legit. His client list reads like a who's who in baseball and other sports too."

Steve didn't say anything but nodded- and smiled. A few minutes later Casey went into his wallet found the card and dialed the number.

Within a few hours, Bill Treadway pulled into Casey's driveway. He opened the door and got out of the late model black Cadillac - still dressed in a suit, but this time it was a gray pinstripe with a powerful red tie. Steve and Casey walked out to meet him before he got to the house. "Hi Casey. I'm glad you called. Is there a good place to talk?" Treadway asked.

"Let's take a ride," Casey said, shaking his head. Treadway nodded and they all headed towards the Cadillac.

"Uh, I don't know who your friend is, but I think this should be a private conversation," Treadway voiced in an unsure way.

"No dice. Anything you want to say to me can be said to both of us," Casey replied.

Treadway nodded again and climbed back into the car to head to a coffee shop in town. Being that it was mid-afternoon the place was very sparsely populated. They all grabbed a coffee and sat down in a corner, far from the counter.

"You asked me to call you, and I did. So, what are you selling?" Casey asked straight out. He wasn't in any mood to beat around the bush.

"First, let me introduce you to what I do. I am a player's representative, and I specialize in baseball. I'm based out of Pittsburgh and represent a lot of local athletes like you."

"I've been approached by agents before," Casey interrupted. And he had run into more than his share of people approaching him after games.

"I'm sure you have. But a lot of those guys are leeches, and they don't have your best interests at heart. And they don't know how to manage a top-flight athlete like you. Not only can I bring you top dollar from representation, but I can get you endorsements that will make your baseball contract look like chump change."

"I've heard it all before. And besides, I have scholarship offers at a lot of colleges."

"You and I both know that you don't have the luxury of waiting to make money. You would have to attend college for two years before you could turn pro. And what if you get hurt? Look. I know what happened to your father was tragic and I know I took the liberty of contacting you then. But I did a lot of research, and I know what you need more than anything else. And that's an agent that will put you first and work hard to make sure you can concentrate on playing ball."

Casey nodded while Steve watched the whole conversation quietly. Casey wanted him at the meeting to mentally take notes and offer him advice afterwards.

"Here's my plan. If we move fast, I can get you into the amateur draft next month. I think you're a shoo-in to be picked in the first round. I can get you a signing bonus that will solve your mother's financial problems and the opportunity to earn a lot of money right away.

Additionally, I can get you some endorsements now even before you become a household name."

"How much money do you think you can get me in a signing bonus?" Casey asked.

"A lot of that depends on where you get drafted, but I'm almost certain I can get you better than a million dollars to sign. The trick is to make the teams believe they'll have to overpay to keep you from pursuing college."

The next twenty minutes were spent discussing the pros and cons of the two choices Casey had in front of him. However, from the moment Treadway said one million dollars Casey had made up his mind.

Despite some feeble protests from his mother, Casey signed a contract with Treadway Enterprises prior to the baseball draft. On

draft day Casey and Steve drove the family car down to Treadway's office at PPG Place in Pittsburgh to follow the draft. Treadway had a couple of other local star ball players in the office as well who Casey knew by reputation and had competed against one of them. Luckily for him, the wait to find out what would happen was short. With the sixth pick in the entire draft the Colorado Rockies selected Casey. Jubilation broke out with some of Treadway's co-workers as well as with Casey and Steve.

The two were brought into a conference room where they were greeted by a video call from the Rockies management to prepare for interviews with the media. The rest of the day was a blur for Casey as he talked to so many people between video and audio calls. Several times he was brought into Treadway's private office for strategy discussions. Before the end of the day plans were set for Casey to head to the spring training home of the Rockies for some evaluation and instruction before being assigned to a minor-league team.

Five days later Casey got a phone call from Treadway letting him know that he had finalized negotiations on a five-year contract worth over three million dollars. Additionally, he secured a one million dollar signing bonus that immediately put to rest any financial concerns at home.

Casey drove into Pittsburgh and signed the contract that day, preparing to head out to Arizona the next.

That night, Casey had a quiet dinner with his mother who welled up with tears at the thought of her baby living so far away from home. "Mom. Why don't you come out with me? There's nothing for you here."

Casey's mother, who appeared to have been aged years in the past month, just shook her head. "I have a job here and all my friends are here. No, this is where I'll always live."

"You don't need to work anymore. I'll take care of you," Casey insisted.

"That's not natural. You've already done more than I could have ever asked. I will follow your career and maybe I'll come to your first major league game."

Casey smiled at that. "I'm going to hold you to that. And you better be ready because I plan to make it to the show this season."

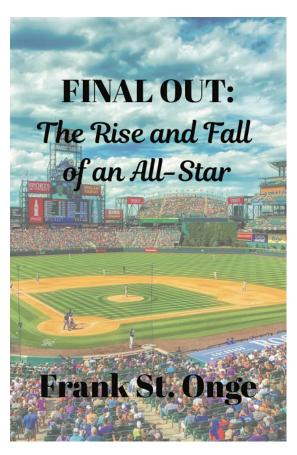
Later that evening, as hard as it had been to say goodbye to his mother, saying goodbye to Steve was all the harder. He had depended on his buddy for everything growing up, the pair were inseparable. They hung out in Steve's driveway shooting hoops as they planned their future. Casey swished a twenty-footer and as the ball bounced away, he let it roll onto the lawn. "Why don't you come with me? I'm sure there are things I'll need help with, and I can pay your room and board."

"Why don't you get settled for a few weeks and then we can decide. Maybe once you know where you'll be playing, I can come out for a visit and we can go from there," Steve sensibly suggested.

Casey could only nod and chase down the ball. "It's a deal. I'm sure I'll only be in Arizona for a week or so and then I'll call you."

"Deal. After all, you're going to need my help if you're going to be successful."

"You got that right," Casey answered, then swished his last shot, hugged his best friend and headed home.



This is a fictional story of Casey Miller, a gifted baseball prodigy from western Pennsylvania. He has it all, looks and talent. He is on track to stardom until an injury leads him to take steroids and he sends his life into complete chaos.

Final Out: The Rise and Fall of an All-Star
By Frank St. Onge

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