

The Game Breaker

Politics is a Deadly Sport

Football and the Presidency – a Lethal Combination

by

Kurt Bryan

The Game Breaker

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Comments – The Game Breaker

“Simply put, the best first book author I have ever read. *The Game Breaker* is full of unusual surprises as it mixes sports, mayhem, sex and intriguing politics to tell a remarkable story.”

Sam Smith

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“One of the most intricate and provoking plots ever associated with sports. Game Breaker lacks nothing. Sports, politics, sex, murder, sorrow, mystery, it’s an amazing scope of thrill and emotion.”

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1985 Chicago Bears

Super Bowl Champion

Other Books by Kurt Bryan

The Double Move

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Dedication

For George and Julie Caig, the best parents a man could ever have...

Acknowledgments

The Author wishes to express his eternal gratitude to the men and women throughout American history who have sacrificed their own well-being in order to keep the United States prosperous and free.

Without your foresight, planning and valiant efforts during the most difficult of times, our great country would have never made it this far.

Thank you.

PROLOGUE

BERMUDA TRIANGLE

APRIL - 1985

Rapidly, and like a diving falcon, the white and gold Sky Blazer-88 private jet zoomed towards the choppy waters of the southwestern Atlantic Ocean.

Ferguson Marshall sat comfortably in his expensive black leather chair and bitterly stared at his lovely blonde wife with his brown eyes. He gazed at her crystal blue eyes and then at her tan legs that were shaking beneath her yellow sundress. More importantly, Ferguson then focused his attention on the innocent face of his three-month-old son, Jason, and noticed that his wife was desperately holding onto their boy.

He lounged with his athletic legs crossed at the ankles and kept a steady grip on the chrome-plated pistol in his left hand. Impatiently, Ferguson ran his fingers through his perfectly groomed black hair before rubbing the skin around his brown eyes. He fiddled with his seatbelt and shook his head with disgust.

Using his left hand, Ferguson aimed the gun back and forth between Cassandra and their red-headed nanny to his right.

Ferguson then glared at his wife and said, "Cassandra, it's time to say goodbye to Jason. Tell our son that Mommy will see him in heaven."

He watched intently as Cassandra shot a panicked look at the nanny.

Then Cassandra exclaimed, "I'm so sorry about this, Peggy! So sorry..."

Ferguson asked, "Did you honestly believe that I wouldn't care about what you did behind my back? Did you think that I would let you get away with it, Cassandra?"

His rhetorical question hung in the air like a bad smell.

Eventually, the screaming jet airplane flattened out its frightening nosedive before cruising at an altitude of 500 feet above sea level. Cassandra tried to ignore him and then Jason began to cry.

Ferguson noticed a cracker crumb on his own dark gray shirt. He pinched it between his right forefinger and thumb and flicked it at the nanny. He looked at the creamy-skinned nanny and

asked, “Peggy, how does it feel to know that I was born in Cuba, and not in the United States of America?”

Before the nanny could reply, Cassandra pointed at him and said, “Ferguson Marshall, you are a paranoid man because Peggy doesn’t give a hoot about what country you were born in! It doesn’t matter to her, and it makes absolutely no difference to me!”

“Yeah right,” he said, “but it matters to me.” Ferguson harrumphed at his reply.

He watched Cassandra glance out of the oval window to her right.

Sadly, she asked him, “Why didn’t you tell me about it, Ferguson? You should have told me about your secret from the beginning.”

Ferguson unhooked his seatbelt and stood up in the confining pebble-colored fuselage. Using his manicured olive-skinned right hand, he smoothed out some wrinkles on his beige slacks. Cassandra gawked at him with terror in her beautiful blue eyes.

Ferguson then looked over at Peggy and returned her nasty glare. The young nanny was putting up a brave front, but he knew that she was scared to death because her unpainted fingernails were digging into her leather seat.

To both, he asked, “If you had known that I was actually born in Cuba and that my family history is a complete sham, what would you have done?”

Cassandra held onto Jason and replied, “But you told me your mother was Italian, and that your father was from England. You’ve always said that you were so proud to be the first natural-born American citizen in your family.”

“Of course, my dear,” he scoffed. “I had to devise a foolproof background for myself because I was an orphan, and I fled Cuba when I was eight years old. Cuba is a goddamn nightmare! It’s a living hell!”

He paused, scanned the cabin, inhaled and went on. “I came to America with two older girls on a makeshift raft. We floated in the water for ninety-miles and the sun cooked our skin all day. It was unbelievably difficult, and I thought I was going to die before we hit the beach. Both girls died from sunstroke before we made it.” Ferguson saw that Cassandra was stunned by his revelation because her eyelids widened incredulously, but she listened as he continued. “In Florida, I hooked up with a large group of teenage crooks. I made thousands of dollars transporting cocaine on the railways and bus lines from Miami to California. I became very close with an unsuspecting older couple that had the bad luck of not being able to create any children of their own. When I

was eleven years old, they had my name illegally changed and I moved to California. They adopted me and obliterated the links to my past. They sent me to the best schools' money could buy and treated me to a good life. They were loners, without relatives of any kind, and I was better off for it because they showered me with attention. They wanted somebody to love, and fortunately, my number came up."

He rubbed at his nose and said, "Cassandra, when you and I met at UCLA, my American parents had already died in a car crash. Otherwise, my master plan for the life that I want would have never worked."

Cassandra gave him a perplexed look and snuggled Jason to her defensively.

She asked, "What are you talking about? What kind of 'master plan?' We don't need anything, Ferguson. We own a massive computer company and the second largest Biotech firm in the world. We've got more than a billion dollars in the bank!"

Ferguson blurted. "Money! Ha! I'm not talking about money ... I want to control the world's destiny ... I want more power!" Ferguson could feel the airplane beginning to slow down. He walked over to the hatch and placed his right hand on the cherry-colored, U-shaped door handle. He tilted his chin towards the narrow hallway leading to the cockpit and yelled, "Okay, Saxon, it's now or never!"

Cassandra barked at him, "How could you possibly have more power than you already have, Ferguson?"

Vigorously, Ferguson pushed down on the door handle and tugged it to the left. A bright orange warning beacon flashed above the partially open hatch and a rush of cool salty air filled the cabin like a ghost.

Ferguson steadied himself and glanced at his wife. "Cassandra, you still don't understand why you should not have told Peggy about what you discovered in Cuba last night! Do you?" He watched Cassandra turn to Peggy and then swing her head back to him.

She finally answered him with anger in her voice. "No, Ferguson, I don't understand. Why does it matter to you so much? We have a wonderful home in San Francisco, and two glorious estates on the beach and in the mountains."

Ferguson was getting more upset by the millisecond and he could feel his face getting hotter and hotter. He yanked the fat door open until its steel hinges rested against the wall of the restroom. A

howling, strong whoosh of tropical air entered the cabin. Cassandra's hair swirled like a band of golden snakes and Peggy's red locks tossed about wildly.

Impatiently, Ferguson yelled towards the cockpit one more time. "Saxon! Switch over to autopilot and get in here! Now!" Ferguson peered out of the gaping doorway and watched the turquoise waters speed beneath the aircraft.

Just then, his broad-shouldered, flaxen-haired pilot suddenly appeared from behind the cockpit door. Arrogantly, Saxon strode down the center aisle of the airplane, careful not to scrape the top of his head against the ceiling of the fuselage.

Obviously frightened, Cassandra asked, "Why are you doing this, Ferguson? Why? Why?" Ferguson said nothing and watched Saxon loosen the starched-cuffs of his ivory-colored shirt. Saxon reached out with his massive white hands, grinned at Cassandra and asked, "Would you like to give Jason a kiss goodbye, Cassandra?"

She clutched Jason tighter and demanded the truth from her husband. "Tell me why this is happening, Ferguson or I swear to God that I'll jump, out of this airplane with Jason in my arms—you bastard!"

Ferguson raised his eyebrows, impressed with her show of bravado. He replied by asking, "Cassandra, what is the one thing that a person can't do, if they were not born in the United States of America?"

He observed Cassandra thinking about his riddle-like retort. Eventually, her lovely mouth fell open and she glanced over to Peggy. The nanny shrugged her shoulders, and Ferguson realized that the nanny obviously didn't sense the meaning of Cassandra's telepathic message.

Cassandra looked at Ferguson's best friend and coldly said, "You're fired, Saxon, and I hope you burn in hell!" She kissed Jason on the cheeks, and then Saxon pulled the boy from her grasp. Cassandra wailed and screamed for something good to happen, but then she put her hands up to her face and sobbed like the stricken mother she had suddenly become.

Ferguson stated, "I can see that you've finally figured it out, my dear Cassandra. That's why I decided to marry you in the first place because you're beautiful and you're smart. Now that you understand what I am going to do with the rest of my life, do you have anything else to say, before Peggy commits suicide and takes you with her?"

Feeling snide, Ferguson glanced at the flabbergasted nanny and her eyeballs seemed to bulge out of her skull. His shocking statement got her attention and she finally spoke up. "I'm not jumping out of that doorway, Mister Marshall! So, you can kiss my ass!"

He smirked at the nanny, twitched his eyebrows and quipped, "I've often thought about doing just that, my sweet little nanny, and I agree with you. That's why my loyal friend, Saxon, is going to assist in your unfortunate demise. Furthermore, the hungry sharks in the ocean below us will enjoy the taste of your young, voluptuous, raw body as it sinks to the bottom."

Peggy went berserk and shot from her seat like an angry tigress. Effortlessly, Saxon shifted the infant boy to his left arm and quickly sidestepped her. Delirious with rage,, Peggy leaped at Ferguson and lunged towards him with hatred bursting from her hazel eyes. Like an experienced lion-tamer, Ferguson brought the hefty gun down upon the back of her head three times and Peggy collapsed onto the gray-carpeted flooring with a thud. Ferguson stepped back from the vacant doorway and fiercely kicked at the unconscious woman. Soon, her limp body tumbled out of the whistling hatch like a mannequin.

Cassandra rose to her feet and screamed. "Oh my God, not Peggy! No!" She reached out for Jason one final time. Saxon rebuked her motherly advances and shoved her towards Ferguson. Ferguson raised the gun at her face and said, "Go ahead and try it, my dear, but I'll blow you away, and then put the gun to Jason's head just to spite you!"

Cassandra moved to within six feet of him and hatefully spat, "You're insane."

Ferguson crossed his eyeballs and mockingly replied, "So what? All great men are a tad bit crazy. Remember what I have always told you, Cassandra. Successful people are not normal." Ferguson moved away from the menacing doorway and motioned with the pistol for Cassandra to step forward. She stretched out her arms and latched onto the metal framework of the white doorway. Her straw-colored mane danced about her head in the turbulent wind.

She turned to him and said, "Ferguson, you are wrong, because you will never, ever become President of the United States of America. Never!"

Calmly, Ferguson debated her words and replied, "How incorrect you are, my sweet Cassandra, because I am about to become a sympathetic widower for the rest of my life, and nothing could be more appealing to the American public than that."

Ferguson rolled his neck, listened to his vertebrae cracking and said, “As you know, Cassandra, your given name comes from the fables of Greek mythology, but the prophetic words of the goddess Cassandra never actually came true. So ... be my guest and say whatever you wish, but your powerless babble means nothing to me.”

She shook her head and spitefully replied, “After I’m dead, my spirit will follow you forever and haunt your soul!”

Ferguson drew back his head and grinned. “Thanks for letting me know.”

He saw Cassandra glance back towards Jason, and she said, “I love you, Jason, and Mommy will always watch over you.”

Ferguson looked at her, but right before Cassandra stepped out of the doorway she said, “When God catches up with you, Ferguson, He will not have mercy on your nasty soul.”

He frowned and replied, “I don’t believe in God ... I lied about that, too. But it looks good to the American people if I seem to be a religious man. Well, that just about does it, so have a nice trip, Cassandra—and thanks for the beautiful child.”

Ferguson glared at her and then pointed the gun at Jason’s infant head.

Cassandra shook her head, closed her eyelids and edged forward. Then, like a cautious high-diver, she stood on her toes and teetered out of the hatchway. With teardrops rolling down her pretty face, Cassandra launched herself from the airplane.

Ferguson’s mouth fell open because he was stunned that she had done it. He peered out of the windy doorway and watched Cassandra do the best swan dive he had ever seen.

CHAPTER 1

THE SELENGE RIVER

RUSSIAN/MONGOLIAN BORDER

JANUARY - 2004

As the milky hue of the morning sun crept over the eastern horizon, a fluffy white fox scurried about the chilly ground in search of an easy snack. North of central China and located beneath the hulking mass of southern-Russia, the Selenge River is a formidable swath of water leading to the deepest natural reservoir in the world—Lake Baykal, from its inception near the city of Uliastay, in mid-western Mongolia.

The meandering river curves through the valley like a slithering snake, slicing through canyons of bedrock, limestone, mineral deposits, conifer forests, and multi-colored sediments.

Just before six o'clock in the morning, thirty-year-old Kenway Alan Brown crawled out of his tent, listened to the flowing river, and stretched his limbs. He glanced to his left and smiled at his group's expert fishing guide, X'iang Cho-Chi, otherwise known as "Cho" to his clients. The petite, four and a half-foot tall, cheerful but odd-looking brunette Mongolian man picked at his stained teeth with a Russian pine needle and swallowed it whole.

Cho smiled back at him and Kenny said, "Good morning, Cho. It looks like our last two days of fishing are going to be excellent!"

Cho replied, "Yes—it should be better than our first three days."

Kenny realized that Cho was happy because the gods of nature had served up the mildest winter ever documented in Asian history. Normally, at this time of year, the pebbly riverbank would be smothered by ten-feet of packed snow and Cho would be stuck at his clay and a pine-buttressed small home overlooking the Gobi Desert, while awaiting the first significant thaw of the late-spring season.

Fifteen minutes later, Cho had a nice-sized campfire blazing in front of their collapsible huts. A large stainless-steel griddle was heating up a container of spicy-purple tea, fifteen llama sausages, a thick filet of pink trout meat and a dozen Mandarin goose eggs.

The veteran fishing guide looked at him and Kenny realized that Cho was evaluating his appearance again. From the very first time they had met, Cho had made it clear to him that he was awestruck by his uncanny resemblance to a younger version of the movie stars Bruce Willis and Kevin Costner. Cho had fished with both famous actors several years ago. Even though Kenny had a fuller head of sandy hair, green eyes and a larger nose, people often asked him if he was related to either of the box office stars

Kenny was warm in his neon-red thermals and weathered moccasins. He hustled over to a broad pine tree and began to relieve himself behind the towering sapling.

Cho smirked at him and went back to his business.

While Kenny was urinating against the bark of the tree, another tent flap opened, and Kenny's fraternal twin brother presented himself. He looked at Trevor Denton Brown, and then his brother joined him at the base of the tree. Trevor had his banana-colored long johns unbuttoned to his navel and he was wearing his hiking boots without socks.

"Happy New Year, 2004 ... and good morning, Kenny," Trevor said to him.

Kenny watched his brother's frosty breath exit his mouth and nose. Playfully, Trevor aimed a yellow stream of urine at his left shin.

Kenny chuckled and shifted to the other side of the tree. "Happy New Year, Trevor. How did you sleep?"

Trevor scratched his scalp with his big right hand and replied, "I'm ready to roll." "Good. Same here." Kenny said. He finished his business and knelt to clean his hands in the two-foot deep snow. He liked the feeling of the fresh ice on his hands.

Kenny glanced at his brother. His brother, the professional quarterback was two inches taller than he was and at least twenty pounds heavier. Trevor had a thicker build and wavy hair, like the sweeping fur of an otter. His eyes were ice blue, and he had three nasty looking scars on his muscular right shoulder.

Kenny caught Trevor's eye and said, "It will be great to see you on the football field once again."

Trevor winked at him but said nothing. Kenny knew that the horrible-looking scar tissue on his brother's right shoulder couldn't compete with the ever-present distrust of human nature that was lodged in his brother's soul because of the emotional trauma he had experienced a few years ago.

Cho motioned to Kenny, pointed at the griddle and asked, “Want some tea?”

Kenny blinked and said, “We should roust Athena and Marla from their sleeping bags.”

Minutes later, the warmly-dressed quartet of guests were seated around the campfire on a bed of pine needles and watching the morning sky come alive with creamy blue colors and gray clouds. They sipped at their stone mugs containing delicious tea and huddled amongst themselves in their winter clothing.

Earlier on the trip, Kenny had learned that Cho admired most of the American women he had met during the past two decades. He watched Cho serve a platter of food to both women. Cho handed the first dish to his girlfriend, twenty-eight-year-old, Athena Miller.

She thanked him and said, “It smells heavenly.”

Kenny gazed at Athena. She was a foot taller than Cho, with a thick mane of auburn hair, medium-toned skin, and blue-green eyes. She was healthy and in phenomenal shape because of her daily regimens as a fitness instructor when she wasn’t working as one of the youngest vice-presidents for San Francisco Savings and Loan. She had been raised predominantly in Louisiana and attended LSU before moving to California.

Kenny watched Cho pass the second plate to Trevor’s wife, Marla Brown. She thanked him and put down her cup of tea. Marla was an ex-ballet dancer from Atlanta, Georgia, where she had met Trevor while attending the University of Georgia some years ago. She was slightly taller than Athena, with blonde hair, clear skin, and powder-blue eyes. Marla was a devoted mother of one, and she smiled at a picture of their toddler son, Charlie, every morning.

Kenny and his crew munched on their meals. Kenny used a chunk of his plump wheat bun to wipe at the tasty remnants from his plate.

Cho gestured towards the river to Kenny’s left and pointed at the sloping mountains across the way.

Cho offered some information. “Six years ago, I found something strange on the other side of the Selenge River.”

Kenny focused on the black-haired man and waited for him to continue.

Cho said, “It was an old winter coat and the outer rim of the hood was made from Walrus-skin and seal pup fur.”

“Where do you think it came from?” Athena asked.

Cho shook his head and replied, “It puzzles me.”

Trevor looked at Kenny and said, “Hey bro, you’re the ex-World History professor. Got any good ideas?”

Kenny chewed on a piece of his tasty llama sausage and nodded. “One possibility comes to mind. About 115 years ago, Sweden’s most prolific explorer, Sven Anders Hedin trekked through the mountains and deserts of Tibet, Northwest China, and Asia. He journeyed for seventeen years and might have ventured into parts of Russia and Mongolia.”

Kenny drank the rest of his tea and finished his explanation. “Hedin traced the Silk Road to China, and he was also responsible for mapping the routes of many rivers.”

Everybody in the group nodded.

Kenny glanced at Cho, and the kind guide asked him a question. “Kenny, your name—what does it mean?”

Before he could answer, Trevor replied on his behalf and said, “Kenway stands for ‘courageous in battle.’ My brother is the bravest son-of-a-bitch I’ve ever known. He’s grown up without a biological father, and ditto for me on that issue. He’s beaten his cancer into remission, at least for the time being, and he supported me during that crap I had to deal with a few years ago when my agent and doctor tried to screw me over.” Trevor stood up and said, “To top it off, last year he was trapped in the most wicked scandal in the history of McMillan College, but he stuck to his guns and never wavered.”

Kenny smiled at Trevor and said, “Thanks, but you have your own life to worry about because Team LA is going to need you this season.”

Marla leaned to her left and kissed Trevor on the cheek, then asked, “What about you, Kenny—how goes the progress of the McMillan College Patriots football program?”

He looked at each of them and replied, “Decent, but we need a better quarterback and we don’t have enough team speed to compete with the top teams in Division IAA yet. However, this is only our second year of competition and it’s going to take a while for us to reach our potential.”

Athena said, “Everybody at the college seems to be thrilled that Ferguson Marshall’s son will be attending school there in the fall. The college is going to get lots of free publicity, and it should help Kenny and his coaching staff recruit better athletes.”

“Is Ferguson Marshall’s son a good football player?” Trevor asked him.

“Jason? Yes, he’s above average,” Kenny said, “but he’s not a superstar. However, his dad, Ferguson Marshall, thinks that our college is the most prestigious and patriotic campus in the NCAA, and that’s the main reason he’s interested in our school.”

Marla spoke to all of them and asked, “Do you think Ferguson Marshall will become the next President of the United States?” There was a pause in the conversation. Kenny chewed on some of his food and waited because he already had formed his opinion on the matter.

Finally, Athena answered. “I’m not sure? President Bush has been doing a good job. He has guided us through the terrorist crisis during the last few years and helped solve the dilemma between India and Pakistan. The American people seem proud again, instead of having to apologize for being so successful compared to the rest of the world. Racial strife amongst us has become less of an issue because President Bush has done a great job of blending everybody into the mix. Obviously, after the attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon three years ago, most people realized it was time to shut up and get along with your fellow American.”

Marla nodded, and then added, “It will be very tough to unseat President Bush, but I’m leaning towards voting for Ferguson Marshall ...if he wins the Democratic nomination.”

“Jeez,” Trevor groaned. “I love you so much, Marla, but why do you always have to vote for a Democrat?”

Marla smiled, then rolled her eyes and glanced at him. She asked, “Kenny, did you register as a Republican this time?”

He shook his head. “No, Independent. I vote for the person and not the party. I switched to the Republican Party and voted for President Bush in the 2000 election. But if Ferguson Marshall is more qualified to lead this country, then I’ll cast my vote for him in November.”

Cho queried Kenny. “Is Ferguson Marshall a nice man?” Kenny turned his palms towards the sky and said, “He’s okay, and he seems to be concerned about all Americans. Even though I’ve only met him once when I visited with his son, Jason, at their mansion in San Francisco, he appears to be genuine. Ferguson told me that he’s going to attend all of our home games this season, and that should be good for the school’s image and boost the attendance.”

Everybody stood up and thanked Cho for the fantastic meal. Kenny looked at his brother. Trevor was grinning at him and Kenny asked, “Why are you looking at me with that funny expression on your face?”

Gently, Trevor punched him in the chest and said, “I can’t believe we’re actually going to meet President Bush on the first day of June. I’m so excited—aren’t you?”

Kenny rubbed his eyes and said, “Of course, but I’ve got a lot of work to do between now and then, including a very important recruiting trip before I can even think about taking that birthday cruise on Percy McMillan’s yacht. In my opinion, Percy is the best boss in the world, but if we don’t win enough football games this year, then I’ll be looking for a new job.”

By eight-thirty in the morning, Cho was leading Kenny and his three companions on their most dangerous hike of the trip. They moved downstream for twenty minutes and it was time for them to cross the broad waterway. Their cautious fishing guide had a walking stick in his left hand, a wicker cage strapped to his back, and a pair of dark sunglasses secured to his face.

Kenny stopped next to some fallen pine trees and Cho twitched his head towards the river. Cho took an orange nylon rope out of his daypack and looped it around his petite torso. After Cho finished securing the cord to his body, he proceeded to construct a human-chain by wrapping the rope around Kenny, Marla, Athena, and Trevor.

Kenny glanced at his navy-blue wardrobe and backpack before observing the chosen colors of his three companions dressed in lime-green, gold, and jet-black.

He kissed Marla on the cheek, grinned and said, “Pass that back.” Kenny watched Cho climb onto the massive tree trunks stretching across the rumbling river. In a fascinating display of incredible balance and guile, Cho proceeded to walk backward across the dangerous bridge while keeping a watchful eye on them. Kenny glanced at the crystalline river surging below his feet and whistled in awe.

A few moments later, Kenny and his crew were on the far bank of the Selenge and laughing with relief. They marched for another hour before drinking some water from a cold rivulet trickling down the mountain and ate a few handfuls of trail mix.

Kenny followed Cho again when the expert guide stopped dead in his tracks. Kenny was alarmed and reflexively tensed his fingers. He watched Cho bend down and pick up a piece of fresh-looking fecal matter. Cho sniffed it three times.

“What is it?” Kenny asked warily.

Cho stood up and replied, “Chinese tiger, maybe two of them.” “Never heard of it,” Trevor huffed, but Kenny saw his brother’s eyelids expand with fear.

Athena and Marla offered a few comments and then Cho made a statement. “We can return to the campsite if you want to.” Kenny looked at Athena, and she asked, “What happens if we cross paths with a Chinese tiger?”

With a straight face, Cho answered, “You will meet your God, I promise.”

“Forget that!” Trevor exclaimed. He slithered out of his backpack and dug out his silver .357 Magnum that was sheathed in its leather holster. He strapped on the heavy gun then practiced withdrawing it a few times and shooting at imaginary tigers.

Marla patted him on the head and gave him a kiss. “Relax, Trevor, and please don’t pull the trigger unless you actually see a tiger coming after us.”

Chuckles by the group ensued, but Kenny’s nerves tingled as they moved on.

By ten o’clock in the morning, they reached a bending curve in the tributary. Kenny gazed all around. The scenery was magnificent and breathtaking. Popping up through the snow was an army of flaming red and hot pink dragon blossoms.

Kenny heard Cho instructing them to take a few photographs and assemble their fishing rods.

Cho hustled off, and he said, “I’ll be back in a bit... going to check the bait traps.”

Several minutes elapsed before Kenny heard a noise on his left. He looked up and saw Cho returning with a huge smile on his bronzed face.

Marla remarked, “I think we’re in luck.”

Cho clapped his gloved-hands and nodded. Kenny watched Cho remove the wicker cage from his back and he gawked at the fresh bait Cho had collected. Chirping and squawking in the cage were two prairie dogs, a white rabbit, and a frantic mongoose.

Trevor slapped Kenny on the back and said, “Now that takes the cake!” Shortly thereafter, Cho tied a long piece of wire to the end of each person’s fishing line. From his pack, Cho extracted four very large steel hooks larger than one of his hands. Cho threaded the thin cables through the eyes of each hook and then tied unbreakable knots.

When Cho was finished, Kenny peered at him and asked, “What’s the biggest Mongolian trout you’ve ever caught?”

Cho put his gloves back on, went over to the cage and reached into it without flinching. With a squirming prairie dog wriggling in his left hand, Cho replied, “Seven feet long.”

“Yowza!” Kenny remarked.

Cho said a thankful prayer and then asked Kenny to grab his fishing pole. Cho led him towards the river, and everybody followed. Expertly, Cho dealt with the crazed live bait going berserk in his left hand while holding onto the giant fishhook with his right. When they reached the Selenge River, Cho crouched down and motioned for Kenny to get ready. Cho pointed at a set of flat rocks near the middle of the stream.

Without displaying any remorse, Cho wrapped the skinny cable around the little varmint's neck and seamed it with a hangman's noose. When the stunned critter was properly secured to the fishing line, Cho grabbed the prairie dog by the nape of its neck and skewered it onto the razor-sharp hook.

The astonished, overgrown field mouse went into a frenzy of panic and squealed like nothing Kenny had ever heard before.

Like a dutiful soldier, Cho aimed his left arm downstream. He gave Kenny a simple but very loud order. "Cast it, now!"

As the flailing prairie dog sailed through the cool air like an out of control stuntman, Kenny felt a rush of adrenaline speed through his body. The two-pound mud rat hit the water with a loud splash. It sank, then resurfaced and swam for its life.

Kenny saw a huge silver flash in the water, and he uttered. "Holy luncker!"

Seconds later, a gigantic trout consumed the prairie dog in one gnarly bite.

Kenny's fishing rod bent forward like an obedient servant greeting Cleopatra. He was stunned by the impressive strength of the huge fish.

"Jesus of Mongolia!" Kenny struggled against the big fish while everybody else cheered him on. After a lengthy fight, he landed the freakish and massive rainbow trout on the cold gravel bar next to the river.

After posing for a few photos with Cho, his companions, and the fish, Kenny helped Cho revive and release the magnificent fish into the river. Feeling great and still sweating from the incredible experience, Kenny followed everybody else down the riverbank. Kenny looked to his left at the flowing river and scanned the scene. He realized that his eyeballs were beginning to moisten, as his emotions roiled from the melancholy quaking in his soul. Ever since he could remember from his days of childhood and up to this very moment, he had always wished for one thing and one thing only—the opportunity to meet his biological father and spend just one day with him. However, the crushing weight of reality squashed his hopes every time he wished for it

to happen because his father had died from brain cancer a few months before he and Trevor were born in 1973.

Kenny turned his gaze upward towards the partly cloudy sky and whispered, “I know that you are up there, Dad, watching over both of us and smiling at what you see.”

Kenny smeared a teardrop away from his right cheek and said, “Thanks for giving us a chance at life, Dad, and I will always make you proud.”

He grinned and sauntered down the riverbank to enjoy the opportunity of a lifetime.

CHAPTER 2

CALIFORNIA

At noon in San Francisco on the first Friday afternoon in January, the golden sun made its most dramatic appearance of the New Year and warmed the 15,000 people jammed into the seats of Kezar Stadium in Golden Gate Park. The excited crowd wanted to show their support for Democratic Presidential Candidate, Ferguson Marshall.

A massive stage was positioned on the green field at the eastern end of the stadium and its sturdy platform loomed twenty feet above the patrons on the lawn below. Glorious, curling ribbons of red, white, and blue trimmed the perimeter of the stage and an impressive banner was draped above it. The huge sign carried the presidential candidate's famous slogan:

“America needs me because I'm scandal free!”

Anxious media hounds and their television camera crews lined the stage and aggressively jockeyed for a better location in the journalists' pit near the front.

An immense pair of gorgeous American flag curtains hung on either side of the stage, suspended above a hardwood walkway leading to the center platform. In the political star's backstage dressing room behind the left curtain, Ferguson Marshall zipped up his expensive brown slacks and grinned at the phenomenal blonde woman sitting on his table. He watched the high-priced lady put on her red shoes, white panties, and lace bra. She used her delicate hands to scoop her firm breasts into a more comfortable position and flashed him a seductive grin. She slithered into her black dress and a full-length mink coat.

When she had finished ambling into her clothes, Ferguson walked over to her and said, “You were great, Bobbie—thanks.”

She kissed him on the lips and replied, “Good luck today, and let's do this again, same time next week.”

Bobbie walked out of his dressing room and vanished into one of his limousines with his bodyguard, Saxon. After she was gone Ferguson heard somebody else knocking on his door. Ferguson loudly said, “I'll be on stage in one minute!”

Just then, the familiar sound of Bruce Springsteen's amazing voice dominated the stadium ambiance and the powerful vibrations rocked his dressing room with surprising force.

Ferguson listened and winced. He felt a twinge of sadness and desperately wished that the patriotic lyrics of the song had been written about him.

Ferguson heard the Boss sing, “Bom in the USA! I was born in the USA!”

Ferguson looked at himself in the well-lit mirror and grinned at the devilishly handsome image of his forty-nine-year-old self. He admired the flecks of gray in his thick hair and his face was lean, mean and in control of the scene. He tucked in the dangling tails of his \$600 creme-colored, Monaco-Desire shirt and blew a parting kiss at his non-judgmental reflection. He started for the door, grabbed a navy-blue parka from the hook behind it and walked outside.

It was loud and he felt as if he were a famous musician walking towards a frenzied throng of admirers packed into the stadium seats to his right. A myriad of eager people shook his hand and wished him, “Good luck!”

Ferguson saw his son, Jason, standing near the entrance to the stage. Over the past couple of years as Jason matured, Ferguson recognized his late wife’s good-looking features meshing with the boy’s tawny, handsome look. Jason had bright blue-gray eyes and his chestnut hair was lush and wavy. His son was six feet tall, with an athletic build and perfect teeth.

Jason shook his hand and said, “Knock ‘em dead, and good luck, Dad.”

“Thanks, but luck has nothing to do with it, Jason.” Ferguson brushed his fingertips across the huge curtain and walked onto the stage like a proud king about to greet the people of his court. The place went nuts and Ferguson felt the power of their jubilant energy speeding through him. He felt grand, lordly, and unstoppable.

Ferguson mused, I am going to be the next President of the United States.

Ferguson raised his arms and made the #1 sign with both of his index fingers pointing towards the sky. He could feel the crowd’s positive response coming back to him as the wood floor of the stage vibrated beneath his feet. He looked from left to right and smiled at the blended faces of the happy crowd. He saw a few women sitting on the shoulders of some men. He smiled at a pretty gal and she immediately yanked up her blouse to show him her naked breasts. He waved at everybody and took his customary position behind the microphone at center stage.

Ferguson waited for them to calm down and a hush finally settled in. He spoke to them humbly and coyly asked, “Can I stay for a little while?”

As expected, his fans exploded with adulation for him and he grinned at the crowd sheepishly.

Finally, it was time to drive his message home. “During the last few years, many Republicans and some Democrats have said that Bill and Hillary Clinton will go down as the worst couple to ever occupy the White House. But I disagree with those extreme right-wing kooks because I feel that Bill and Hillary Clinton were the greatest presidential couple of all time!”

His swooning fans ate it up and he continued with his speech. “Nearly 4,000 years ago, The Fabulous Age, helped the citizens of Greece prosper after the Trojan War. Poverty was virtually eliminated by the creative thinkers of their government. Their streets were safe and clean, terrorism was non-existent, and their world was almost perfect.”

They cheered for him and Ferguson went on. “Together, we can make our country fabulous once again! I feel that every American should be treated equally.” He inhaled and then transformed his facial expressions to simulate sadness and said, “As you know, my late wife, Cassandra, was killed many years ago and I have tried to be a good father to my son. I understand the hardships that we must endure, but together we can create a new era of opportunity for each person in America! I was not born with a silver spoon in my mouth, but I learned how to dig for that silver, how to mine for that silver, how to hone that silver and how to polish that silver into something beautiful. Follow me and I will help you build a better America!”

A technician in the control booth cranked up the sound system and the thumping beat of AC/DC’s timeless hard-rock music filled the stadium. Ferguson took his cue like an experienced professional. He shook his fists in a victorious gesture of unbridled premeditation and deception. He pranced around the stage like a poor imitation of Mick Jagger, before returning to the microphone as the music died out.

Ferguson said, “Most of you need to get back to work, so I will be brief. It’s public knowledge that I am funding my own Presidential campaign, and I’m proud of it. However, since millions of you want to help my campaign, I’ve developed something so unique that is going to shock my political opponents and send them running for cover!”

He paused and continued when he had their undivided attention. “My staff and I have developed a fantastic program that will allow the unfortunate people of this country to get back on track. As of today, when you make a financial contribution to my political campaign, we will no longer send it back to you. Instead, your donations will go directly to the Cassandra Marshall Memorial Fund. This charity will finance the needs of battered women across America, put extra

food into the mouths of starving children, beef up the computer programs in our public schools, and help the wayward males in our society become better men!”

Ferguson tilted his head towards the blue sky and listened to the deafening roar of the crowd’s glee.

He motioned for them to quiet down and said, “During my campaign, I will match every dollar that’s donated with five dollars of my own money!” He paused and let the crowd’s tension build into a frenzy and then he said, “Remember, America needs me because I’m scandal-free!” They went ballistic and Ferguson knew he had them hooked. Ferguson leaned closer to the microphone, glanced up at the sky and shouted, “Thank you, Cassandra! I love you, honey, and I will see you in heaven one day!”

He peered at the brainwashed crowd and they seemed to blend into a gigantic consciousness right before his eyes. Ferguson waved goodbye to each section of the arena. He walked off the stage feeling gratified and strode towards his devoted son.

CHAPTER 3

One week later, Kenny Brown walked through the terminal leading away from his Delta Airlines flight that had commenced in San Francisco and ended the first leg of his trip in Winnipeg, Canada. His skin was oily from the long journey and he needed a shower, but that luxury would have to wait. He could feel the frigid pre-dawn air flowing across his skin and realized it was extremely cold outside.

With his charcoal duffel bag strapped across his body, Kenny marched through the sparsely crowded airport and entered the first restroom he found. He relieved himself in one of the urinals and went over to the full-length mirror next to the washing area. He dropped his bag on the bone-colored tile and got things going. Quickly, he stripped off his shirt, tennis shoes, tube socks, tan slacks, and boxers. He had to wash up, get clean, and do it fast.

As Kenny was dabbing at his underarms with a wet paper towel, an older gentleman using a bamboo cane and his small, chattering grandson walked into the restroom. Kenny blushed when the kid made eye contact with him, but he smiled at the two strangers, put on some deodorant and quickly got dressed.

Minutes later, Kenny exited the men's room in some comfortable black jeans, an emerald-colored sweater and his favorite pair of all-terrain, elk-skin boots. Using his right hand, he strode towards the Calm Air flight terminal and punched in the private code for his boss' McMillan Enterprises videophone number overseas. He marveled at the handheld chrome and blue automated device resting in his hand.

Seconds later, a nice looking, teal-eyed brunette woman's attractive face appeared on the 4x4 inch-square video screen.

She stared back at him and said, "Good evening, McMillan Enterprises. Oh, hello, Kenny."

He smiled at her and asked, "How's the weather in Paris, Roxanne?"

She rolled her eyes and said. "Harsh, but just looking at your yummy face makes it seem much better."

Kenny smiled and Roxanne asked him, "Would you like to speak with Percy?"

He nodded. "Yes, but is he busy?"

Roxanne dismissed his question with a shrug and responded in a whisper, “Always, and he just fired 250 people at the London branch so he’s a bit salty at the moment!” She winked at him and said, “Hold on for a minute and have a good day, you hunk of a man, you!”

While he was waiting to speak with Percy, Kenny arrived at the departure gate for his flight to Churchill, Canada. He stood in line behind a few people and watched a commercial for Percy McMillan’s multi-billion-dollar real estate and communications empire flash across the small video screen in his hand.

Suddenly, Percy’s slim and angular face appeared on the color screen and he said, “Hello, Kenway. I assume you’re in Winnipeg right now, is that correct?”

“Right on time.” He looked at Percy’s silver hair and pale blue eyes while imagining his boss’ unusually tall six-foot-seven-inch body standing before him.

Percy said, “Unfortunately I don’t have a lot of time, Kenway, because I’m about to leave for London.” His boss sipped at a glass of red wine and said, “McMillan Enterprises internal security force has nabbed more than 200 of my English employees in a money-pilfering scam. I’m flying to England tonight. When I get there, I’m definitely going to lop off some heads.”

Kenny was curious and he asked, “How much money did they steal from you?”

Percy finished downing his ruby-colored liquid and coolly replied, “Millions, Kenway, and they might have snookered some of our top-secret technology.”

Kenny grimaced and said, “Ouch! Sorry to hear that, Boss.” Percy nodded and then Kenny changed the subject by saying, “Thanks for approving the additional cost of this recruiting trip, Percy. We need a top-notch quarterback to separate our team from the rest of the pack, and this young man is very special.” Percy seemed to be distracted and Kenny understood why. Finally, Percy said to him, “Every single college and university in the nation is recruiting athletes from around the globe. Be aggressive and remember the broad scope of the ultimate plans for my school. Close the deal, Kenway, because that’s why I hired you. Call me if you need me, but it had better be vital.”

“Thanks, Percy, and good luck in London,” Kenny replied, as he moved to the front spot of the ticket line.

Bemused, Percy said, “I need a few hundred guillotines—but I don’t need luck!”

Kenny smiled at his boss’ wicked sense of humor and turned off the videophone.

About thirty minutes later Kenny was in the cozy cabin of a Saab 350-C, Swedish-built jet propeller airplane, 22,000 feet above sea level. He took a deep breath, sat back and anticipated his journey to the vast, remote regions of Hudson Bay.

CHAPTER 4

When Kenny stepped out of the warm Saab aircraft and onto the frozen tarmac of the quaint Churchill Airport, a wickedly cold breeze invaded his senses before he could put on his gray Patagonia jacket.

He shivered, then quickly donned his coat and gushed, “Whew! It’s cold!”

Five other passengers jogged across the pavement and hustled into the small gray building to his right. He followed them and noticed a group of petite Beaver airplanes on his left and six helicopters behind them. He entered the commercial dwelling and looked for the specific contact that he was supposed to meet. Kenny heard a man’s voice ask, “Coach Brown—is that you?” He pivoted and watched a stocky man with golden hair bustle towards him. The grinning fellow was not tall, maybe five-foot-seven, with broad shoulders and riveting hazel eyes. The man was wearing a white jumpsuit and fur-lined boots. A weathered turquoise-colored baseball cap was poised on his round head.

Kenny shook the man’s strong right hand and said, “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mike Woods.”

With a warm voice, he replied, “Please, call me, Mike, and the pleasure is all mine, Kenny. I haven’t had a real celebrity in my chopper for six months.”

Kenny looked at the helicopter pilot and felt a rush of re-occurring embarrassment bubble through his body. He had never coveted fame, but it had found him and stayed by his side for the past several years.

He replied, “I’m not a celebrity, just a football coach and an ex-teacher.”

Mike began moving towards the rear of the building and said, “My younger brother, Peter thinks that your twin brother is the best quarterback in the world. Pete’s got huge posters of Trevor in his room, and he can’t wait to meet him someday.”

“That’s good,” Kenny responded.

He trailed Mike out of the building and into the relentless, biting air. He walked towards the turquoise helicopter in front of him and observed the bold wording plastered across its flanks, Polar Lodge Expeditions. Kenny tossed his luggage into the sturdy chopper, got inside and closed the door.

Mike fastened his seat belt and so did Kenny.

Mike glanced at him and asked, “Kenny, have you ever been in a helicopter before?”

Kenny shook his head. “Nope.”

Mike handed him a set of padded headphones and a pair of tinted goggles, then he exclaimed, “Today’s your lucky day, Coach Brown because my mother asked me to give you a grand tour of Hudson Bay before we fly back to the lodge.”

Kenny raised his eyebrows and eagerly replied, “Sounds great. Let’s do it.”

Moments later the chopper lifted off and soon they were communicating with each other through the crackling channels of the headphones while zooming over the snowy tundra along the bleak and beautiful Western peninsula of Hudson Bay. Kenny scanned the area from above and recalled some of the facts he had learned about the brave, British explorer, Henry Hudson. In 1610-1611, Hudson’s fleet of ships sailed across the Atlantic Ocean in search of a viable Northwest Passage. Hudson and his crew failed, but they stumbled across the glorious sub-Arctic waters that now carried his name.

Mike pointed to his right and then banked the helicopter in that direction. Kenny looked down and saw a massive herd of caribou galloping across the spacious plains. They sailed over the clan of jogging beasts and Kenny felt like he was on a magic carpet, gliding and weaving above the frosty desert as if he were riding along with a peaceful genie.

They cruised past the caribou and Mike said, “Kenny when I read about what you did last year, you became one of my all-time favorite heroes. You’ve got a lot of guts, and you’re not just an ordinary football coach!”

Kenny patted him on the shoulder and replied, “Thanks Mike, but you would have done the same thing.”

Mike shook his head and exclaimed, “I don’t know about that; because if one of my coaches was having an affair with a murderous priest, I might have run for the hills with my head spinning!” Kenny chuckled and held onto the safety handle next to his seat.

Mike grinned at him and lowered the helicopter towards a congregation of icebergs looming in their flight path.

Mike stated, “Kenny, we have a few things in common. My older brother died of cancer ten years ago, so I can empathize with the status of your health, and my dad is also dead. I admire

you and your brother for keeping a copy of your father's journal with you most of the time—that's very cool."

Kenny inclined his head to show his appreciation and then Mike asked him, "Wasn't he a park ranger, or something like that?"

"Yes," Kenny said firmly, "a very good one."

Mike nodded and asked, "How's your health, Kenny?" "Better than yesterday. Thanks, Mike."

Mike gave him a thumbs-up signal and quit talking. He veered the light blue helicopter between a pair of intimidating ice formations shaped like a miniature white version of the Rocky Mountains. In his periphery, Kenny noticed massive walls of chunky whiteness streaked by the chopper and he uttered, "This is intense!"

Mike responded, "It gets better."

They soared above a large block of ice and descended towards the glacial plateau of its hind flanks. Mike guided the helicopter through a sweeping U-turn. They hovered momentarily and the whirring blades of the helicopter churned at blinding speeds. A billowing plume of frost danced into the air, shrouding the chopper in an icy froth of alabaster dust. Mike set the helicopter down on the slick surface of the ice pad. He turned off the rotors and they drifted on the floating heliport like a huge mechanical dragonfly resting on a leaf in the middle of a lake.

Mike tilted his chin to the left and said, "Here they come; take a look."

Kenny gazed at the freezing cold water and witnessed a bunch of ivory-colored humps undulating towards them. Up, down, up, down—the fluid creatures moved through the cold bay in perfect harmony with each other.

"They're beluga whales," Mike explained. "They don't have any dorsal fins on their backs, which makes it easier for them to swim underneath the ice formations. Gorgeous, huh?"

"Yes, indeed," Kenny said. "But what does beluga mean?" "It's Russian for white one." Mike replied. "But some people call them sea canaries, because of their amazing aquatic songs in the fathoms below."

"Awesome," Kenny responded as the pod of porpoise-like Belugas swam by their inclement flotilla without skipping a beat.

Mike started up the rotors again and then guided the helicopter into the air. He said, "I'll show you some polar bears, a few seals and a ton of sea birds as we fly to our compound."

Twenty minutes elapsed before Mike steered the chopper to within eyesight of his family's sprawling range in the province of Manitoba. Kenny viewed the staggering, winterized ponderosa and tried to see it all at once. On his right was a green, barn-like structure of surprising dimension. There were six yellow tractors stationed beneath a steel trellis and a couple of splendid homes to his left.

Mike guided the chopper towards the landing spot and asked, "Do you see those long fields of snow by the water on your right?" "Yes," Kenny answered.

"In the summertime, they become the most amazing flower beds in the world, packed with the most intense colors of purple, red, violet and pink. "

"It must be beautiful," Kenny replied wistfully.

Mike landed and shut down the helicopter. Kenny thanked him for the amazing trip, and they stepped out. Kenny carried his duffel bag over his left shoulder and noticed a middle-aged woman with silver hair striding towards him. Gently she waved at her son and then she tugged at the folds of her long, cherry-colored coat.

"Hi, Mom," Mike said before he kissed her on the cheek and introduced Kenny.

Kimberly Woods firmly gripped Kenny's right hand with her fifty-nine-year-old fleshy mittens.

She smiled and said, "I'm so glad that you made it, Coach Brown. Come inside, please." With his steaming breath pouring from his nostrils and mouth, Kenny followed her towards the tri-level, A-frame housing complex to the right. Mike said goodbye and walked towards a dog kennel teeming with Huskies and Malamutes, and a shaggy looking breed of dog that he did not recognize. Kenny climbed the steps of the front porch, stomped the snow from his boots and Kimberly Woods held the door open for him. Kenny entered The Polar Lodge and viewed the most rugged-looking and attractive kitchen he had ever seen. Woody tall cupboards were everywhere, with at least thirty pots and pans dangling on copper hooks from above. In the breakfast nook stood a pair of fat oak tables, with enough seating to hold twenty people.

Kenny looked up and noticed a series of interconnected lofts blending high above his head.

He remarked, "Mrs. Woods, your home is stunning!"

A twinkle of satisfaction glimmered in her eyes and she said, "Thank you, Kenny, and please call me Kim."

Kenny placed his duffel bag on the carpet and followed the polite woman into the living room. She sat down on a tan sofa and Kenny chose to rest himself on a pine-green chair. A blazing fire was raging in the huge stone hearth and its radiating heat instantly soothed his body.

She asked, "Coach Brown, would you like something to eat or drink?"

"I'm okay for now," he said, "but maybe later, thank you." She nodded and said, "My son, Peter, is in the gymnasium, either working out with his older brother, Jeff, or playing basketball with TJ. We can take a walk over there in a few minutes." "That would be nice." Kenny looked at the delicate lines of her Nordic face and gazed at her soft blue eyes. Kenny was curious about something and he asked, "Kim, in the 1960s you were an amazing track and field athlete in Norway. Exactly what happened to you back then?"

He could tell that she was flattered because she smiled, looked away and replied, "I broke my left leg two days before the opening ceremonies of the Olympic Games. I tried to sprint on it, but it was hopeless. I was devastated, but life goes on. Thank you for acknowledging my past achievements, Kenny, and I appreciate your grace."

"You're welcome," he replied. "It's an honor to sit down with the woman who used to be the fastest female athlete in the world." Kenny watched her smile at the memory of her youth and then she said to him, "Thank you, but that was four boys, a girl, and one late husband ago. Many years have passed since then."

Kenny changed the subject and decided to go for it. "I'm prepared to offer your son, Peter, a full scholarship to McMillan College. I've watched most of his game tapes from two seasons ago. He's a very good athlete and an excellent quarterback. We need him."

That got her attention and she said, "Thank you, and he's very excited about the opportunity. Peter's had a few offers from larger colleges and universities, but he wants to attend college in California, and he doesn't want to sit on the bench. He wants to play football right away. That's why he sat out last year instead of going to school. Peter didn't know what to do, so he did nothing. He's happy that your school only has about 21,000 students because that's big enough." Kenny flashed a winning smile and said, "That's what I wanted to hear."

She laughed and stood up. "Would you like to meet Peter and the rest of my family?"

"Absolutely," Kenny replied, and soon he marched out of the front door with her.

Kenny moved down the front steps and a husky man with a shaved head, who looked to be in his mid-thirties, came around the corner and greeted them. "Hi, Mom, and you must be Coach Brown."

Kenny shook hands with the slightly taller fellow and looked into his brown eyes. The man said, “I’m Jeff Woods, and it’s good to meet you, coach.”

Kenny walked through the snow and learned that Jeff was the family’s veteran Arctic guide and a longtime naturalist. They strode across the landscape and arrived at the green entry doors of the gigantic barn-like structure. Jeff grabbed the steel handles of the door and pulled it open.

Before Kim stepped inside, she looked at Kenny and said, “This building was my husband’s pride and joy, and I think you’ll like it.”

Kenny heard the familiar sounds of the famous rock band Color Blind, as the groups’ hit tune “Infinity” filled the ambiance of the huge room. He also detected the faint sounds of a basketball being dribbled on the parquet floor. He was briefly surprised because Peter was playing a very competitive game of one-on-one basketball with an extremely athletic-looking woman. The woman was very nimble, and she was a younger-looking version of Kimberly Woods.

Kenny was impressed by the layout of the private facility. The full-length basketball court was the centerpiece, but at the far end of the indoor complex was an artificial turf field. A pair of yellow refrigerators hummed in a corner and a big box filled with sporting goods sat between them.

Jeff shouted at the competitors, “Hey, Peter, is TJ beating you again?”

Kenny glanced at Kim.

She grinned back at him and said, “TJ is the best athlete in our family. She’s twenty-five years old, and she’s been home-schooled all her life, so nobody is aware of her exceptional athletic abilities. In less than two years she’ll have her degree from the University of Toronto, thanks to her online education via the Internet and your boss’ Virtual-Net.”

Kenny fell silent and he watched the blonde-haired TJ outfox her brother and break towards the rust-colored rim on the basketball backboard. She picked up her dribble, took two quick strides, and then jumped into the air. She glided through the humid atmosphere like a world-class athlete and dunked the basketball with her right hand. She landed on her feet like a cat and pivoted quickly.

“Whoa!” Kenny exclaimed. “She moves incredibly well! Amazing!”

Jeff and Kim nodded and then Kenny heard TJ exalt, “Game’s over, Pete!”

Kenny focused on the confident young woman. She was dressed in a pair of gold spandex tights and a thin black shirt. With an experienced eye, Kenny evaluated her athletic build. TJ was put together like a track star, with slim ankles, tapered calves, muscular thighs, and a narrow waist.

She had well-rounded shoulders and a strong neckline. Kenny sized her up and knew that he was looking at a phenomenal athlete.

As a very sweaty TJ and Peter walked towards them, Kim said to him, “Someday soon TJ wants to run this lodge with me and take over my duties. However, I’ve told her to explore the world, live a little, and experience other things, but she doesn’t want to leave me up here without any other women around.”

Kenny nodded and asked, “What does TJ stand for?”

Jeff replied, “Tina Joe; she has the same middle name as our father did.”

TJ walked up to him and stuck out her right hand. Kenny looked slightly down at her, nearly eye to eye, and stared into her hazel-brown orbs. She was attractive, bold, strong, and incredibly athletic.

They chatted briefly and Kenny shifted his attention to the young man he had come to recruit.

Kenny said, “Hello, Peter.” He examined the young man’s jet-black hair, brown eyes, and six-foot-three-inch frame. He was built exceptionally well, and Kenny was desperately hoping that he could persuade him to attend McMillan College.

For nearly ten minutes Kenny enjoyed their positive feedback and polite conversation. Eventually, Peter grew restless and bounded towards the big box of sports equipment between the refrigerators. He grabbed a leather football and returned.

Peter asked Kenny, “Coach Brown, would you like to see me throw the ball?”

“It would be an NCAA violation for me to comment on that and I don’t want to break the rules, but it’s up to you,” Kenny replied.

As a group, they walked over to the artificial surface at the other end of the complex. Casually, Peter tossed the football to his sister a few times and then he said, “TJ, go deep!” Kenny watched TJ line up to the right of Peter. When he was ready, Peter said, “Set, go!” TJ exploded out of her stance like a track star and blazed across the green surface like a comet. She had excellent running technique, like that of a world-class sprinter, and Kenny realized that TJ’s mother had probably trained her from an early age. Peter launched a perfect spiral high into the air.

For a moment, Kenny thought the football was overthrown beyond the reach of the galloping young woman. However, much to Kenny’s surprise, TJ accelerated and drew even with

the long pass. She reached out and latched onto the football with her hands. She tucked the football underneath her left arm and rolled across the green turf like an experienced acrobat. She popped up, wiped at her bloody left elbow, and took a deep bow.

“That was a nice throw, Peter and TJ are amazing!” Kenny was flabbergasted.

Kimberly Woods smiled and remarked, “TJ is a speedster, and she’s been blessed with outstanding athletic ability. She’s much more agile than I ever was, and she runs the 40-yard dash in 4.38 seconds. She can run it in 4.4 seconds—no problem at all. For the past two-years, I’ve timed her in the 40-yard dash against Peter, and she has beaten him every time. She’s a very special athlete, Kenny, very special.”

He nodded and said, “Wow! That’s serious speed!”

“I know,” Kim replied. “TJ is the most amazing female athlete I’ve ever seen, either in person or on television.”

Kenny gave her a firm look and stated, “She could be a real game breaker.”

Jeff stepped into the conversation with a comment of his own. “That’s right; she’s incredible. If a football coach had some guts, he would offer scholarships to both Peter and TJ. Be a visionary and make it a package deal.”

Kenny’s mind had been calculating that possibility and its ramifications while Jeff made his truthful statement. Kenny understood that TJ was a dynamic, fluid, swift and aggressive athlete. But he wasn’t sure how the current and incoming McMillan College football players would react if he offered her a scholarship. He was also concerned about the unpredictable response from his coaching staff, the student body, the administration and the intelligent brain trust governing the entire NCAA. Kimberly Woods turned to him and said, “A few other coaches have been up here to visit with Peter, but they didn’t get a chance to see TJ because she was out in the field with Jeff, helping him track the migratory habits of seals and walruses.”

Kenny acknowledged her but said nothing. He was trying to figure out the best way to approach the subject of offering TJ a full-scholarship with his boss, in addition to the school’s athletic director, John McDough, the college’s president, Rebecca Jones, and his entire coaching staff.

Kimberly asked him, “Are you ready for dinner, Coach Brown? Because Mike prepares a delicious elk steak, with a spicy blubber-gravy, mashed potatoes, and greens.”

Kenny was pulled out of his trance by her words and he replied, “Yes.”

Kimberly turned to Jeff and said, “Honey, please tell Peter and TJ that dinner will be ready in an hour.”

Jeff nodded and Kenny followed Kimberly outside into the dusk.

Kenny zipped up his coat while keeping pace with the sprightly lady to his left. Kimberly gave him a knowing glance and said, “If you’re seriously thinking about taking a chance on TJ ... then I’m all for it. She needs to live in a different part of the world to mature and grow as a woman, at least for a little while.”

Kenny flipped on his warm hood and said, “I agree with you, Kim. But I’ll need to meet with my boss, Percy McMillan, face to face. I haven’t seen him in person for a while, and he would never, ever make this type of decision over the videophone. In fact, Percy would terminate my contract if I discussed this type of situation using unprotected airwaves. He always believes in maintaining privacy and will not sacrifice it for anything. He prefers sitting down with people in the flesh, so he can gauge their level of conviction. In his mind, if somebody is not willing to meet with him face to face, then it’s not important.”

She nodded and replied. “I’ve heard that your boss is a very eccentric man.”

Kimberly Woods placed her right hand on his left shoulder and they high-stepped through the snow towards the dimming white fields. An army of glittering stars twinkled above them like thousands of bright angels dancing in the sky.

Kenny gazed at her and asked, “Kim, when did you realize that TJ was a special athlete?”

She paused and thoughtfully replied, “When TJ was fifteen years old we were on the outskirts of the glacial peninsula gathering dead seal skins because we like to use them as a liner for the dog kennels.”

Kenny nodded and then she continued speaking. “I was attempting to restart the engine in our small boat when I looked up and noticed a massive polar bear slip out of the water and onto the same sheet of ice that TJ was kneeling on. I screamed like a crazy woman, ‘Run TJ! Run, and don’t look back!’ Then I watched in horror as the giant bear chased her.”

Kenny listened as the sensitive woman became slightly flustered. She regrouped her emotions and continued her reply. “TJ tossed her stack of seal skins onto the ice and ran towards me without looking back. My daughter knew that she was running for her life, and I could see the absolute fear of being eaten alive in her eyes. At that moment, I realized that TJ had been blessed

with amazing speed. I watched her sprint away from the bear before she dove onto her belly and slid into our fiberglass skiff as I pulled away.”

“Incredible!” Kenny said, and he followed her gaze towards the night sky.

She grinned, tilted her head and said, “Look up there, Kenny.”

Kenny looked up and saw the most mesmerizing sky he had ever witnessed.

He asked, “Is that the Aurora Borealis?”

“Yes,” she replied. “Those are the Northern Lights.”

Kenny looked at the neon-green and powder blue colored bands of interwoven light amongst the black atmosphere. The glowing spectrum of brilliant light was vivid and fantastically bright, mind-blowing and unreal.

“It’s gorgeous!” Kenny exclaimed.

“I’m pleased that you appreciate the beauty of nature, Kenny,” she replied with a smile.

In silence, Kenny stood next to the middle-aged woman and gazed at the magnificent Northern Lights. He pondered the future of his football team and how it might be affected by the sheer athleticism of TJ Woods and her younger brother, Peter.

CHAPTER 5

Late Saturday afternoon, unbeknownst to the wealthy man sitting on a plump chair in his breathtaking sunroom overlooking the Pacific Ocean, the head football coach of McMillan College was boarding a Concorde jet airplane, on route to London, via New York City, courtesy of the benefactor of McMillan College, multibillionaire Percy McMillan.

Poised 177 feet above the rocky quartet of islands near China Beach on the northwest coast of San Francisco, Ferguson Marshall lounged in the basking light of a glorious magenta sunset and sipped at his vintage white wine appreciatively. From behind the glass walls surrounding him, he peered down the cliff and noticed three people strolling along the beach beneath him. He turned his head to the right and looked at the rust-colored, western profile of the Golden Gate Bridge. He finished drinking his wine and glided over to the fancy bar to pour another round.

He adjusted the floppy belt dangling from his thick silver bathrobe and heard his son plodding down the terra cotta steps from the kitchen upstairs. He refilled his bulbous glass and shifted his body again.

Ferguson looked up when Jason entered his quiet room. He looked at the handsome traits of his son and approved of Jason's faded blue jeans, maroon sweatshirt, and light brown loafers. Jason looked casual and slightly preppie, an appearance that he favored for his blooming son. However, Ferguson was upset because his son was late and he asked, "Why did you keep me waiting, Jason?"

Jason fidgeted for a moment and replied, "Sorry, Dad. I was having some fun with my buddies and I lost track of time."

Ferguson bowed his head and accepted Jason's excuse reluctantly. He offered him a beer, but Jason declined and opted for a can of soda. They walked over to a heavy glass table on the far-right side of the room and sat down across from each other.

Ferguson set his drink on the table and leaned forward. Jason held onto his own beverage and reclined slightly in his chair.

Instantly, Ferguson became peeved and he angrily quipped, "As I've told you a million times before, sit up straight when I'm dealing with you, son."

He saw Jason twitch from his unexpected verbal attack, and it pleased him that he had taken charge of the meeting. He felt a surge of adrenaline skip through his veins and it aroused his most primitive senses.

Jason obeyed his command and sat forward, and then Ferguson barked, “We have some things to discuss.”

“Like what, Dad?” Jason replied impatiently.

“Don’t get snide with me. Understand?”

Jason bowed his head and replied, “Sorry, Dad. What do you want?”

“That’s better,” Ferguson said. “We need to review the agenda for your press conference regarding the signing date for when you officially accept a football scholarship to McMillan College in February.”

“What for? What kind of press conference are you talking about?” Jason asked.

Ferguson sipped at his white wine and coolly replied, “It’s a surprise, and I have been working on it for some time now. And, as I had hoped, we’ve received special clearance from the governing body of the NCAA, which means that you will be allowed to actually sign your letter of intent on the premises of the McMillan College campus in Orinda.” Ferguson examined his son’s face and said, “The people in charge of my Presidential campaign have told me that this type of media coverage will be the ideal opportunity for us to generate huge amounts of political momentum. It’s a great opportunity for you, and it’s also going to be a showcase event for my political career because it gives me an opportunity to connect with the younger generation.”

Jason cocked his right eyebrow at him and replied, “But I don’t want to sign it there! I was going to do it at my school, with all of my friends at the gym.”

Ferguson shook his head and glared at his son. “No, because my campaign managers and I think it should be a big deal, with lots of media coverage and hoopla.”

Jason stood up and hotly said, “I can’t believe this crap! What about me, Dad?” Jason slammed his fists onto the table and said, “I don’t even want to attend McMillan College anyway! I would much rather go to the University of Virginia, with Allison!” Ferguson rose from his chair, pressed his left hand against the cool surface of the glass table and challenged his son. “We’ve already made that decision, Jason. You have a short memory, my son, and since you’ve failed to be accepted into the Ivy League, then McMillan College is the next best thing for you!” Ferguson

leaned closer to him and hissed. “You are going to be a star, Jason, both in the classroom and on the football field. That’s the way I see it—case closed!”

Jason shook his head and marched towards the glass French doors leading to the house. Jason waved a dismissive left hand at him and yelled, “I love you, Dad, but you’re an egomaniac! I need to get out of here for a while. I’m going to Mark’s house because I need a serious dose of middle-class reality!”

Ferguson lunged at him and gripped Jason’s right arm.

Jason spun around and asked, “What are you going to do, Dad, hit me again?”

Ferguson looked at Jason and realized that his own temper was about to spin out of control. He released Jason’s arm and calmly said, “Your mother and I always wanted you to attend the best schools possible. Relax, Jason, and try to honor her wishes and make everybody happy.” He watched Jason relent after his soothing words had hit home once again, just as his son had always done when his mother was mentioned. Jason relaxed and Ferguson patted him on the right shoulder.

Trying to comfort his son, Ferguson said, “I’m not going to hit you, Jason. I haven’t smacked you since you were a little kid.” Jason stepped away and replied, “I know ... I remember. But can I leave now?”

“Yes,” Ferguson said. “However, are we in agreement about your press conference at McMillan College?”

“It’s up to you, Dad, and I’ll do whatever you think is best,” Jason said.

Ferguson frowned, gulped his golden-colored wine and said, “I want you to be happy, Jason. You deserve a good life because it’s been tough enough for you to grow up without your mother.” Jason nodded, slowly pivoted away from him, and walked upstairs.

Ferguson paced in the warm enclave and watched the powerful rays of the sun change from maroon to hot pink and burnt orange. Eventually, he placed his empty wineglass on the table and marched upstairs to the second level of his four-story home. When he arrived at the tall white doors concealing his massive bedroom, he saw Bobbie’s naked and curvy tan physique sprawled across his king-sized bed. She had a silky pink sash draped over her backside, provocatively laced between her taut buttocks and firm thighs. Ferguson stepped into the bedroom, closed the doors, and removed his own robe.

While leering at her toned body, Ferguson raked his toes across the dove-colored carpet. He relished the cushy feeling on the soles of his feet.

Bobbie woke up and slowly arched her back, stretching like a beautiful gymnast. Seductively, Bobbie smiled at him and asked, “Hi, baby—how was your meeting with Jason?” Ferguson slithered onto the mattress and replied, “Perfect. Now let’s have some fun!”

CHAPTER 6

Late Sunday morning, Kenny emerged from London's Heathrow Airport with a sense of vigor about his upcoming meeting with Percy McMillan. The moist air nibbled at his face and he licked his lips to taste the dew. He stood on the outer walkway and watched several old-fashioned cars drive by him in the opposite direction he was accustomed to. In the lane nearest to him, several antique taxicabs and other vehicles zoomed from his right to left, instead of the more usual way of left to right.

Kenny glanced at the white and red sign to his left, and instantly memorized its well-intended message: Look Right!

He repeated that two-word mantra several times to remind himself not to get run over by an automobile and thought about the stark political differences between his own country and England. He pondered England's anti-gun laws and then mumbled Athena's intelligent slogan that he loved so much "It's better to have it and not need it than to need it and not have it." As usual, his astute girlfriend was correct. Kenny knew that the irrefutable facts of any situation did not lie to an honest evaluator looking for clues about gun safety and crime prevention. Kenny understood that his fellow patrons living abroad in his homeland thwarted a few million violent crimes each year. Each day, trustworthy Americans used legally purchased firearms to protect and defend their lives honorably. Millions of women and men steadfastly used their handguns and rifles to deter would-be rapists, kidnappers, thieves, muggers, and burglars.

Kenny raised his left arm and hailed an onyx-colored taxi. The car stopped. A portly black man in a deerskin raincoat jumped out and greeted him with a stained-tooth smile. "Welcome to London, good chap."

Kenny shook the man's hand and learned that the driver's name was Roger. Roger opened the rear passenger door, politely took his duffel bag and tossed it into the backseat. Kenny shimmied into the refurbished crimson leather interior of the automobile. It smelled good, like a brand-new baseball glove.

Roger got into the car and positioned himself on the right side of the vehicle. As the automobile started moving, Kenny sat back and Roger asked him, "Will that be cash, credit, or debit, sir?"

"What do you prefer?" Kenny asked.

“Cash please—I’ll take anything but the Euro,” Roger stated.

He grinned and replied, “Sounds good, and my name’s Kenny. Thanks.”

Roger eyeballed him in the rearview mirror and stated, “I hope you realize that we look down upon the Euro in this country. The Euro is an overvalued currency, built on straw legs and a wishful roll of the dice. The Euro is absolute rubbish compared to the strength of the English Pound and your American dollar.”

“Don’t worry,” Kenny said, “because I’ll pay you with English notes.”

Roger nodded and then made a few amazing turns and deft maneuvers. Like a seasoned veteran, he steered the automobile out of the airport’s main traffic jam.

Roger glanced in the rearview mirror at him, twitched his eyebrows and asked, “Where to, Kenny?”

“Cheyne Walk, in Chelsea, if you please.”

Roger nodded and sang a snappy lyric. “It’s a lovely day when it’s rainy in Cheyne! Off we go, Kenny!”

Kenny grinned and Roger asked, “Is this your first time in London?”

“Yes, I’m here on business, probably for just one day and gone tomorrow.”

Roger guided the car along the streets of London like Mario Andretti and casually avoided two major collisions with a green car and a red double-decker bus. They skirted by a group of startled jaywalkers. Kenny twisted around in his seat and looked back at the angry coeds that Roger had almost killed. Kenny grinned with relief because they were flipping him off and angrily pumping their fists at him as the taxi sped away.

After the brief melee, Roger peppered him with questions. “Business, you say. Well, then, you must be important. What kind of business are you in?”

“American football,” Kenny said, “but I’m not that important; just a football coach for McMillan College in the San Francisco Bay area.”

Roger met his gaze in the rearview mirror and asked, “McMillan College in the states. As in Percy McMillan ... of the McMillan family?”

“Yes, he’s my boss, and he’s a good man,” Kenny replied. Kenny looked to the left and saw an impressive block of antiquated buildings. The car stopped at a traffic light and Kenny read a dark blue and banana-colored awning above a large wooden door, Oldest Pub in the World.

Kenny mumbled. “A beer sounds good right now.”

Roger remarked, "There's always enough time to have a pint." He paused and said, "I watched the local news on TV last night and Percy McMillan seems to have a large problem on his hands." Roger craned his neck and asked, "Are you involved with that money laundering hullabaloo that's got your boss in a tiff?"

Kenny shook his head and uttered, "Nope, thank God."

It started to rain, and Roger flicked on the windshield wipers. He veered the taxi onto the tree-lined, Chelsea embankment bordering the River Thames. Kenny was surprised by the famous river's broad girth and expansive proportion. It was an industrial-looking dark tributary, with a few cargo ships and barges drifting on it, and some large vessels resting near the shoreline. He was impressed by the city of London's imposing size and by the ornate design of its brawny, sturdy structures. He looked closely at the striding pedestrians and thought that they seemed to have a more reserved aura about them. Mostly the people he saw marched with their heads pointed towards the ground and their chins tucked into their collars. Occasionally he noticed that almost everybody looked up to avoid a collision with another pedestrian or vehicle.

Roger drove along the quiet road and they cruised by a tall row of green ivy plants on the left. They turned right onto Cheyne and Roger stopped the car across the street from the address Kenny had given him. Kenny paid Roger with a wad of English Pounds he had changed at the airport and gave the courteous man a generous tip. Kenny said goodbye, grabbed his duffel bag and stepped out of the car.

A steady dose of rain dropped upon his unprotected head. Kenny evaluated the row of three-story brick buildings across the street. The white molding around the narrow sash windows and front door seemed to have been freshly painted.

He looked to the right and then to the left, before scooting across the asphalt and he grumbled to himself. "Glad I remembered to do that." He grinned and shook his head. Kenny approached the colonial-style building and bounded up the front steps to the doorway. He lifted the gleaming lion's head that served as the brass knocker and banged it against the door three times. Kang! Kang! Kang! The forceful sound echoed down the quiet street.

Kenny heard some footsteps and the door was soon opened for him. A drop-dead beautiful, curvaceous East Indian-looking woman greeted him with a shining smile. She was wearing a violet gown that flowed to the crest of her black slippers.

She said to him, "You must be Kenway. Charmed. I'm Miranda."

Kenny introduced himself and Miranda stepped to the side. She said, “Percy has just finished bathing. Please come in and follow me.”

Kenny entered one of the many elegant homes that Percy McMillan owned around the world and heard some excellent jazz circulating throughout the house. He trailed Miranda and observed the visual flavor of his boss’ English flat. The ivory tile beneath his feet looked freshly polished and the walls were sparkling white. Miranda guided him to a cozy sitting area, kindly took his coat, then disappeared to another part of the house. He strolled through the billionaire’s home and looked at its splendid furnishings. In the living room hung several oil paintings in swirling solid gold frames that depicted England’s famous battle of Hastings in 1066. He gazed at the medieval images of England’s King Harold II leading his armor-plated troops against the invading legions of William, the Duke of Normandy. He walked over to the fireplace and looked at the brutally graphic yet fabulous image of a dying archer who had been gutted by his enemy’s sword and trampled by the knight’s terrified black stallion.

While he was observing another great painting, Kenny heard Percy say, “World travel befits you, Kenway. How was your flight on the new and improved Concorde?”

Kenny turned around and looked at his exceptionally tall boss. Percy was dressed in a pair of pepper-colored slacks, dark socks, no shoes, and a black shirt. His predominantly silver hair was still damp, and his saltwater-blue eyes looked tired.

He walked over to Percy, looked up at his thin face, shook his hand and said, “Exhilarating, thank you, Boss. But the cab driver thinks you’re the talk of the town.”

Percy smirked and replied, “Gossip makes the world go around, Kenway. Please accept my apologies for making you take a taxi, but my deceptive chauffeur was one of the scoundrels involved in this despicable mess that I’m dealing with. However— and fortunately for me—my ex-chauffeur is behind bars, undoubtedly contemplating the true meaning of his woeful existence.”

Kenny frowned and said, “No apologies necessary, and I enjoyed the ride.”

They sat down on some heavily cushioned white sofas and Percy said, “Sounds like your trip to Canada was profitable. Tell me, Kenway—does Peter Woods have the tools to be our team’s next starting quarterback?”

“Yes, he has the ability to start right away,” Kenny said. “But there’s a catch.”

Percy nodded and replied, “Obviously, Kenway or you wouldn’t be here right now. I’m intrigued, so, please ... feed me the details.”

Kenny sat forward on the couch. Miranda reappeared and set down a heavy silver dish of hot tea and raspberry scones on the iron coffee table. She poured the beverages and departed without saying a word. Kenny sampled the tea and it was perfect. He bit into the flaky scone and savored its excellent taste.

Finally, Kenny stated, "Peter Woods will come to our school under one condition." Percy leaned back, sipped at his tea and asked, "Yes; what is it?" "He wants his sister, TJ, to be part of the deal."

Percy shrugged and replied, "That shouldn't be a problem, Kenway. Is she an academically sound student?"

Kenny tilted his head and said, "Yes, but that's not it. She's already been earning her degree online, from the University of Toronto."

Percy said, "Indulge me, Kenway."

"She's an amazing athlete and she wants to compete in the NCAA."

"Fine," Percy replied. "What sport?"

Kenny inhaled and said, "Football, Percy. She wants to play wide receiver on our team." He saw Percy's eyelids expand and his lips curl, but his boss said nothing.

Kenny realized that Percy was contemplating everything he had just said with the brilliance and infinite vision of his fantastic mind. He watched the wealthy man finish his tea and hold the warm cup in his hands.

Finally, Percy asked the only question that really mattered. "Kenway, does this woman have the athletic potential to be a good wide receiver, or could this be some kind of stunt?"

Kenny shook his head replied, "It's not a hoax. She can run as fast or faster than anybody on our team. She's got very quick feet and she catches the football really well."

Percy sat forward and asked, "How big is she? Does she look durable?"

Kenny answered, "She's about an inch shorter than me with a solid build, and she weighs 147 pounds."

Percy stood up and motioned for Kenny to follow him. They marched past the kitchen and strode upstairs to Percy's private office. Kenny walked onto the hardwood floors of the room and looked to his right. He saw Percy moving towards a large wood console. Percy grabbed a remote control and pressed a few buttons. The grainy birch doors of the media center split apart, and a movie screen appeared.

Percy sat down on a zebra-patterned chair and Kenny did likewise.

Percy looked at him and asked, “Kenway, do you remember the gist of our conversation when you and I met in Amsterdam last year?”

“Yes, but what are you referring to, exactly?” Kenny was unclear as to what topic his boss was referring to.

He watched Percy aim the remote at the screen and a full-color, flat picture of the Earth appeared before them. A bevy of small, twinkling red lights blinked in unison and Percy said, “Next year, my dream of creating the world’s first International Intercollegiate Athletic Association will come true. As of today, the ICAA has signed contracts with forty-two colleges and universities from around the globe.” Percy crossed his legs and continued proudly, “By the fall season of 2005, our football team will be competing against opponents from, Greenland, Tokyo, Frankfurt, Paris, New York, Sydney, Chicago, Cairo, Hong Kong, Mexico City, Nigeria, and many others.”

Kenny looked at the miniature glowing beacons flashing on the screen and whistled. He said, “I know, Boss, and that’s exciting. But what does it have to do with TJ Woods becoming a member of our football team this year?”

Percy glanced at him. “Everything, Kenway—absolutely everything.” Kenny waited patiently and Percy went on. “I’ve anticipated a large groundswell of public skepticism regarding my plans for the ICAA because the cynical factions of society are going to view our organization as rebellious or dismiss it as a flash in the pan. But in fact, it’s just the opposite. The ICAA is on the cutting edge of men’s and women’s intercollegiate athletics, and this type of publicity will skyrocket our global visibility.”

“How so?” Kenny asked cautiously.

Percy inhaled and continued speaking. “International intercollegiate women’s athletics will benefit from this because McMillan College will be the first school to promote athletic equality in tackle football—regardless of gender.”

Kenny remained silent and Percy moved ahead with his oration. “It’s an indisputable fact that football games draw more fans and higher broadcast ratings than any other type of athletic competition ... except for soccer in some countries. But in terms of amateur athletics, football dwarfs everything else, hands down.” “That’s true,” Kenny mused. “But how will TJ Woods affect intercollegiate athletics for female athletes around the world?” Percy leaned forward and his long

face was covered with a confident stare. “It’s beautiful, Kenway because this is our final year of competition in the NCAA. Even though we already have an excellent program that’s ready to be implemented, the Board of Directors for the ICAA has anticipated a two-year incubation period to generate the proper amount of good publicity needed for growth.”

Kenny rubbed the tops of his thighs and stated, “I’m a fan of women’s athletics. But don’t you think that most of the world will embrace the ICAA since the organization has made it mandatory for the schools to have the same number of sports teams for both men and women?” “Regardless of the sincere merits of our plan, everything in this world has at least one enemy. You should understand that by now, Kenway.” Percy gazed at him, nodded and kept talking. “I have thoroughly enjoyed my experience with the NCAA. It’s a fine organization, but I want to build something from scratch and expand the athletic horizons for everybody who shares those dreams with us.”

“It’s a grand idea, Percy, and you should be proud of it,” Kenny responded.

“Thank you, but I need to be practical. The ICAA will forge ahead and develop quickly. Otherwise, somebody else will beat us to the punch.”

Kenny shook his head and said, “Don’t worry, Boss, because the ICAA is going to revolutionize amateur athletics for both sexes. As usual, you have correctly anticipated the future, and remember, it’s the bravest pioneers who have the arrows of change stuck in their backs.”

“Exactly, Kenway,” Percy concurred. “However, the timing of your discovery in Canada is perfect. In fact, it couldn’t have been better!”

Kenny pursed his lips and said, “Last year in Amsterdam, you were still negotiating the broadcast rights for the ICAA; have you completed that yet?”

Percy sneezed twice, then scratched the top of his head and replied, “I’ve decided to handle it with my own satellite communications company. My MCTV network will distribute all athletic events on television, radio, the Internet and on our Virtual-Net. Plenty of advertisers have already committed to us and everything else should be finalized by the middle the year.”

Kenny nodded. “That’s good news. But what’s your gut feeling about TJ Woods, Percy? Do you think we should go for it?”

Percy eyeballed him and said, “Of course, Kenway. If you honestly believe that TJ can compete evenly with men on the football field, then bring her onboard and let’s see what happens. Even though there is that under-funded football league for women, the pace of their game is slower

because the athletes are generally not as fast or as powerful as their male counterparts. Also, the style of their game is scaled down. For example, they use a smaller sized football, etcetera. Those things are facts, Kenway, but I like this idea much better because it gives this young woman a chance to compete against the best.”

Kenny nodded and was about to speak but Percy gave him a challenging look and said, “However, if you’re totally wrong and she flops like a dying fish, you will suffer the consequences of your blunder. Everybody is responsible for their own actions, Kenway.” “I agree,” Kenny replied, as his ego registered the meaning of Percy’s message.

Percy said, “I only have one demand, Kenway. I do not want TJ’s name revealed to anybody. Do not release her information to any of your assistant coaches either. TJ should be thrilled about the opportunity to play college football, but I don’t want this young woman to get overwhelmed by the media frenzy that’s going to consume this case. Let her arrive in the summertime with everybody else. Understood?”

“Yes,” Kenny replied.

Percy pressed another button on the remote control and said, “At the end of our press conference in February, we’ll announce the details of our plans for TJ Woods this coming fall, but we won’t divulge her name or current geographic location. Fair enough?” Kenny agreed, and then Percy asked him, “Does anybody else know about TJ Woods?”

He shook his head and replied, “No, not yet.”

Percy fiddled with the remote and said, “Good, and if anybody finds out, make sure that the Woods’ family denies it until July. I’d like to build the suspense in the media for as long as possible.” Kenny replied, “Okay.”

Percy shifted his attention away from him and back to the screen. “Take a look at this picture.”

Kenny observed the mind-blowing images on the screen and listened to Percy speak. “This computer-enhanced image details the main project of the newest high-tech company that I just purchased. About ten years from now, I’ll have fifty or sixty lunar observatories permanently stationed on the dark side of the Moon.”

Kenny was impressed. He scooted towards the edge of his seat and Percy continued. “Those huge, nuclear-powered telescopes that you see can inspect distant solar systems and

galaxies far beyond anything we can imagine. If all goes well, by the end of this decade my company will locate and verify signs of intelligent life in mother part of the universe.”

Kenny looked at the changing images on the screen and said, “I love this kind of stuff. Thanks for showing it to me.”

Kenny wanted to know something, and he asked his boss another question. “Percy, how did you get involved with purchasing real estate on the Moon?”

“Good question, Kenway,” Percy replied. “Thanks to an international treaty signed in Monaco last year, 123 countries own the property rights to the dark side of the Moon. As usual, when I stepped into the fray there was a fair amount of governmental chaos and bedlam. After evaluating the situation, I offered each country one hundred million dollars a year—for the next fifty years, in exchange for the lunar-lease rights. Two days later they accepted my bid, and I have dibs on every communications or research contract involving the Moon until the year 2053.”

Kenny was bewildered. He shook his head and uttered, “You bought the Moon.”

Percy grinned and replied. “Only half of the Moon, Kenway— not all of it.”

Kenny watched intently as the billionaire flipped through a dozen images of vibrantly colored supernovas and galaxies located millions of light years away from Earth.

Percy turned off the digital projector, then stood up and said, “Are you ready for supper, Kenway?”

“I’m starved.”

“Excellent,” Percy said. “But we’ll need to get you a new suit, a silk necktie, a fresh shirt, some diamond cufflinks, good socks, and a pair of handmade leather shoes.”

Kenny gave him a confused look and asked, “Why?”

Percy winked at him and said, “We’re having dinner with the Queen of England and the Royal Family tonight. You’ll need to shave and look sharp.”

Kenny was stunned by Percy’s reply, but he realized that his boss was serious, and he asked, “Where are we having dinner?” Percy smiled and replied, “Buckingham Palace, of course.” Minutes later, Kenny was being bombarded by a torrent of hot water from the nickel-plated showerhead in one of Percy’s immaculate upstairs guest bathrooms. As the rising clouds of steam relaxed his body and eased his mind, Kenny opened his eyelids and the water cascaded down his face. He reached over, grabbed the bar of soap from the dish and began rubbing it all over his body and thought, I’m a very lucky man, and I really hope that TJ Woods is a good football player ...or I’m going to be the laughingstock of my profession, and my ass will be grass.

CHAPTER 7

On Friday night Kenny parked his blue truck in the driveway of his two-story home in Walnut Creek, California and hopped out. He walked through the front door, dropped his travel bag in the entry hall and flung his jacket onto the small tan ottoman in the hall. He picked up the portable telephone in his stained hickory and granite kitchen, turned left, and walked by the piano in his living room. He moved through the family room and opened the ranch-style double doors leading to his backyard.

A cold gust of winter rushed into his house and he called out, “Touchdown, come here, girl!”

Like a bandit fleeing the scene of a bank robbery, his loyal Golden Retriever barked three times and zoomed around the corner of his house with a red Frisbee clenched in her mouth. Kenny watched his dog hurdle a fallen oak tree branch and dash underneath some pines. He sat down on the patio and hugged his dog. After their reunion, Kenny tossed the disc into the air and she retrieved it.

Kenny walked to the other side of his house and located his brick-colored, Weber barbecue resting beneath his roofline. He pulled the Weber onto his patio and hustled into his garage for a bag of coals and some matches. He came back, dumped some into the Weber and lit it on fire. A frantic wall of orange flames came alive in the pit of the barbecue and he went back into the family room.

He left the doors open, grabbed the telephone and dialed. A few seconds later he said, “Hi, Mom. I’m back in town. How are you?”

“Hello, Kenny. My goodness, you’ve been gone a long time,” his mother replied.

“I know. After I called you from London on Monday night, I flew to Los Angeles and spent the next four days recruiting and drumming up support for our fundraising event on Valentine’s Day. Thanks for taking care of Touchdown for me, and please thank Gregory too.”

“I will,” she said. “Have you spoken with Athena yet?”

“Yes, I called her at the bank from my hotel this morning. She’s coming over tomorrow so we can spend the weekend together.”

“Good,” his mom replied. “What about your brother; have you talked with Trevor lately?”

“No, but I’ll give him a call this weekend. He wasn’t in Malibu last week because they took Charlie to Georgia to see Marla’s folks.”

Kenny walked upstairs and listened to his mother.

“I know,” she said, “but please call your brother because he just received some good news about his shoulder. Okay?”

“I will,” he said.

His mother said something that he didn’t expect. “I was at the supermarket about an hour ago and I saw a picture of you and Percy McMillan on the cover of The Globe. ”

Surprised, Kenny looked at the telephone in his left hand and stammered, “What did you just say?”

“Yes, it’s true,” she confirmed. “They had a picture of you stepping out of a taxi in front of Buckingham Palace. I almost had a stroke when I saw your face on the front page of that tabloid. I was so proud of you, but the headline was absolutely scandalous!” Kenny laughed and then asked her, “Really? What did it say, Mom?”

“In large, bold type it said, Has Percy McMillan Lost His Appetite for Success?”

Kenny chuckled and replied, “Don’t worry—nothing could be further from the truth.”

“I know, I know, but I bought ten copies anyways. After all, you did have dinner with the Queen of England.”

“That’s true. Thanks, Mom. I’ve got to go because John McDough, Rebecca Jones, and my staff will be here at eight o’clock tonight. I love you; bye.”

“Say hello for me. Love you, too. Bye-bye,” she said.

Kenny tossed the telephone onto his bed, strode from his room, and opened the doors leading to his guest bedrooms to air them out.

He shook his head and mumbled, “Gossip.”

He stripped to his blue jeans, hustled downstairs and snatched a feather duster from the cabinet beneath the kitchen sink. Quickly, he moved through the house and cleaned the framed wildlife photographs adorning the walls of his home. He stopped at one of his favorites and gazed at it. He looked at the terrorized facial expressions of a lanky giraffe, as an aggressive pride of fifteen hungry lions attacked its flesh mercilessly while yanking the dying beast onto the dusty grounds of Africa. For some innate reason that he couldn’t really define, viewing brutal wildlife photos fascinated the restless part of his soul. For him, the laws of nature between predator and

prey were so pure, streamlined and clear-cut. Every creature was born with a purpose—eat or be eaten, chase or be chased, forage or hunt, and fight for survived or die.

When he finished dusting, he hurried upstairs, got naked, and slipped into the shower. With five minutes to go, he was dressed in his red, white and blue colored McMillan College Patriots sweat suit and pacing through the kitchen. He picked up the telephone and ordered two-dozen New York steaks and three cases of Samuel Adams cold beer from the delivery joint down the road. He went out to his patio, checked the charcoals and realized he had another twenty minutes to go.

Kenny sat down on the bench in front of his piano. He allowed his fingertips to dance across the keys, and he began playing some mellow rhythm and blues. He glanced upward and spoke quietly, “Hey, Dad. Can you hear me up there? I believe you can. In the past, I know that I’ve asked my coaching staff to support me during some controversial times. But tonight, I hope that nobody calls for my head when I tell them about TJ Woods. Thanks for listening, Dad, and I love you.”

Kenny heard the doorbell ring several times. Touchdown barked and bolted towards the hallway. Kenny got up, strode through the kitchen and opened the front door.

Standing before him, was his entire coaching staff. All his assistants were holding up copies of *The Globe*, cooing and giggling at him playfully.

Kenny smiled and sarcastically said, “Sorry, no solicitors, thank you.”

They laughed and then began filing into his house and playing with his dog. He looked at every man who entered his home and greeted them affectionately.

His childhood friend, the black-skinned Lou Macaw gave him a quick hug and said, “It’s a pleasure to meet you, your Royal Highness.”

Kenny rubbed his right hand across the top of Lou’s shaved head and then he slapped the golden-haired Brody Dunn on the back. Next, was Percy McMillan’s nephew, Jeff, who was a younger and shorter chestnut-haired version of his boss.

Jeff McMillan said, “My Uncle Percy thinks you’re his good luck charm, but I would too, especially if you had saved my life last year as you did with his.”

Kenny grinned and the tall, ebony-skinned Craig Jackson marched through his doorway, chuckled, and asked, “How was your meal at Buckingham Palace? I heard the food in England sucks.”

“Not bad,” Kenny shrugged, and he gave Craig a high-five.

Next up, was the Adonis-like former pro football star, Keith Greene. The massive man loomed in his doorway like a misplaced superhero. Kenny watched with amusement as Keith flexed his Herculean biceps and tauntingly said, “Get a load of these pipes, baby. I’ll bet that you didn’t see canons like these at the Tower of London!”

Kenny smacked him in the chest and replied, “Get in here, Keith.”

As the big man moved through his doorway, the red-headed Duke Foster and the black-skinned, curly-haired Larry Johns shook his hand. Kenny stared at the last man to enter his house, the blonde Paul Jorgensson. He patted the former Pac-10 Sprinter on the shoulder and closed the front door behind him.

Kenny was about to walk into the kitchen when the doorbell rang again. He opened the door and greeted the deliveryman from Rocco’s Grill standing on his front porch with a pair of large plastic bags in his hands.

More than an hour later, Kenny and most of his staff were lounging in the family room, picking at the delicious leftovers strewn about his place. The pungent aroma of deliciously cooked food dominated the air. Bemused, Kenny watched Lou toss some fatty scraps of steak to Touchdown and she chomped them down.

Kenny listened to one of his all-time favorite singer’s dreamy voice ooze from his stereo system. He was fond of the vocals of Natalie Merchant, and he mouthed the words as she sang the lyrics to Carnival. “Hypnotized, mesmerized, by what my eyes can see.” After the song was over, Kenny turned off the stereo and gathered his coaching staff in the family room. He stood before them, made sure that each one of them had a beer in his hand, and then made a toast. “Gentlemen, here’s to signing the best athletes that we can find!”

Phil Jorgensson said, “Hallelujah!” They saluted and drank. When Kenny had their attention again, he grinned at them and mysteriously said, “Have I got some news for you guys!”

He looked at the expressions on their expectant faces and took another sip of his beer. After swallowing, Kenny tossed the empty bottle to Brody Dunn and his assistant coach dropped it into the recycle bin on his patio.

Duke Foster looked at him and prodded, “We’re waiting for the news, Coach.”

Kenny nodded and queried, “Gentlemen, what’s the one thing that our team desperately needs?”

He watched them ponder his question and Lou Macaw replied, “Speed.”

“Bingo,” Kenny said, “and I’ve found an answer!”

CHAPTER 8

On the first Wednesday afternoon in February, Ferguson Marshall stepped out of his white limousine and onto the lush grounds of the McMillan College campus in Orinda, California. He basked in the wintry sunshine, waved to the bustling throng of journalists there to greet him and smiled at the television cameras recording his every move. After acknowledging everybody with a dazzling smile, he adjusted his blue and red patriotic-looking necktie and smoothed out the wrinkles on his dark gray suit. He stood confidently with his shoes resting upon the moist lawn and gazed at the outstanding college that his son would soon be calling home.

Ferguson leaned back into the car and impatiently said, “Come on, Jason—they’re waiting for you to emerge.”

He watched Jason slide out of the limo and tentatively greet the people surrounding them. Ferguson had personally selected Jason’s navy-blue suit, white shirt, and crimson necktie, and his son looked more handsome than ever.

Ferguson put his left arm around Jason’s shoulders and proudly said, “Ladies and gentlemen, today is the happiest day of my life! My late wife Cassandra and I dreamt that our son would someday attend one of the best colleges in the country.” He squeezed Jason and said, “Jason has decided to attend McMillan College, and that makes us proud!”

After finishing his speech, two big white bodyguards escorted them through the tall entrance of Election Arena. Ferguson noticed that Saxon exited the limo before it drove away and trailed behind them, watching the crowd for any dubious signs of trouble.

When Ferguson walked into the main foyer of the massive complex he received a pleasant surprise. The lights of the gymnasium had been dimmed, but when they moved onto the hardwood flooring the lights came on and a big brass band began playing, “God Bless America.”

The eager and impressive crowd of college students gave them a standing ovation. Ferguson glanced at his son. Jason seemed to be awestruck by the amazing reception while gawking at the packed arena with wonderment in his youthful eyes.

Ferguson tapped him on the arm and asked, “How do you feel, son?”

Jason shook his head. Then he smiled and replied, “Overwhelmed, because I’m just a football player who happens to have a famous dad.”

Ferguson chuckled and said, “Nonsense! They’ll love you for who you are and revere you because your father is going to be the next President of the United States.”

Jason was about to reply, but then he turned to the left and said, “Look, Dad. Here comes Coach Brown.”

A few minutes later, Ferguson Marshall was sitting next to his son behind a long white table at one end of the arena. Five people were positioned behind the table with them. Kenny Brown was to his left, as was the school’s shorthaired brunette President Rebecca Jones. To his right sat Percy McMillan and the college’s Director of Athletics, the dark-haired blue-eyed John McDough. Beyond McDough was the courteous bald lawyer from the NCAA who had greeted them earlier. Standing at attention on the left side of the stage were the assistant coaches on Kenny Brown’s staff. Ferguson glanced at the skyline-like row of athletic-looking men, smiled at each of them, and returned his attention back to the front.

As the crowd eventually fell silent, Ferguson looked at the large group of reporters sitting on the chairs in front of them. He gazed at an outrageously beautiful raven-haired woman sitting with her legs crossed in the middle of the front row. She was wearing a royal blue skirt and matching jacket, and her shiny dark hair fell past her neckline. He examined the woman’s bronze-colored heels and the sexy curve of her tan calves. Ferguson made direct eye contact with her and froze the woman with his most masculine, hard-edged stare. After a few seconds, the pretty lady smiled and looked away from him. He kept looking at the sultry woman and made a mental note to order Saxon to discover her place of employment.

Percy McMillan began speaking and Ferguson listened while gazing around the arena. Hordes of people were taking pictures from all vantage points around the complex and the incessant battery of popping flashbulbs peppered his eyeballs. After Percy finished talking, everybody else at the table said a few nice words about Jason and lauded the future of the McMillan College football program. Finally, the bald lawyer from the NCAA politely put the National Letter of Intent in front of Jason. Ferguson handed him a pen and the photographers snapped away. Jason signed his name and then shook hands with everyone at the table.

After getting up and posing for a few more pictures while listening to the crowd’s applause, Ferguson was ready to leave when Percy McMillan leaned over to him and quietly said, “Ferguson, please have your people contact me because I have a few business ideas to review with you.” Ferguson looked up at Percy, nodded and asked, “How about next week?”

“Excellent,” the fellow billionaire replied. “If we’re going to do business together, then I’d like to have our agreement wrapped up before my birthday, so we can celebrate our new alliance on the Mexican Riviera with President Bush and my family and friends.”

“Sounds interesting,” Ferguson replied. Then he asked, “Is there anything else?”

Percy looked at him and replied, “Yes, I’m going to make a groundbreaking announcement right now. Stay put, because it’s going to shock everyone.”

Ferguson stepped aside and asked Jason to move out of the way. He watched Percy look at Coach Brown. The football coach smiled at Percy and stepped away from the microphone perched at the center table.

Percy picked up the mike and held it in front of his face. Percy motioned at the crowd and said, “Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for coming. I’ve got one more exciting bit of news for you.” Ferguson watched the intrigued journalists scurry back towards their chairs and then a hush fell over the crowd.

Finally, Percy said, “As you know, McMillan College prides itself on being a leader in academic and athletic excellence.” Ferguson watched Percy pause as the crowd erupted in a roar of agreement.

Percy continued. “Today will be remembered as one of the greatest moments in our school’s history because we have joined forces with Jason Marshall, and I am also thrilled to announce that Coach Brown has made a monumental discovery that will change the face of intercollegiate athletics!”

Curious, Ferguson looked at the football coach. Coach Brown was dressed in a black pinstripe suit, peach shirt and matching two-toned necktie. Ferguson mused, Coach Brown, has anybody ever told you that you look like a younger, rougher version of Bruce Willis? Except, you have more hair, a bigger nose, and intense green eyes.

Ferguson realized he was daydreaming and whispered to himself under his breath, “What have you discovered that’s so important, Coach Brown?”

Percy spoke to the audience. “I am pleased to announce that we have offered a full scholarship to one of the most amazing young athletes in the world. This fall, our football program will have the honor of teaming up with the first world-class female athlete to compete in football as a full-ride scholarship athlete!” Percy’s unexpected words toyed with Ferguson’s mind. For a moment, Ferguson thought Percy had uttered the word “female,” but then he reasoned that he must

have misheard the billionaire's statement. Ferguson staggered slightly but regained his composure without drawing any attention to himself.

Jason looked at him, raised his eyebrows and asked, "Dad, did you hear that?"

Ferguson was speechless. He nodded curtly and listened to Percy while glaring at Kenny Brown.

The handsome football coach was unaware of his menacing look, and then Percy said, "That's right ladies and gentlemen ... we have offered an athletic scholarship to a phenomenal athlete who happens to be female. We look forward to this amazing woman joining our football team and we will release further information soon. Thank you very much, and God bless America!" As Percy's final words reverberated throughout the arena, a rising mumble came forth from the crowd. The humming increased and then the pretty journalist in the blue outfit asked Percy a question. "Mister McMillan, can you please tell us this young woman's name, and where does she live?"

Percy waved his long right index finger at her and said, "Nice try, Veronica."

Ferguson could feel his temper building up in his body and he began to perspire on his upper lip. He clenched his fists by his sides and listened to the attractive woman fire another question at the billionaire. "Percy, please give us something to go on. What position does she play?"

Ferguson watched Percy look over to Kenny Brown.

After a brief pause, Coach Brown said, "Wide Receiver. She's a speed-burner."

Shortly thereafter, Ferguson was in the back of the limousine as Saxon guided the car towards his exquisite home across the bay. Feeling angry, he ignored Jason's innocent questions and sipped at a glass of champagne. He gazed at the rolling hills of the East Bay as the car entered the darkened hollows of the Caldecott Tunnel heading due west.

When the limo emerged from the westbound bore, Ferguson examined the blue waters of the San Francisco Bay and saw hundreds of boats cruising and sailing about. He looked at the rugged and somewhat commercially developed Treasure Island located midway between Oakland and the city. He flinched as a bubbling current of spite arose in his body, causing his nerve endings to feel as if they were ablaze.

As the long white car approached the Bay Bridge, Ferguson stared out of the window and thought, Why did that have to happen to me today? Why couldn't I have had the lion's share of attention? Today's event was supposed to elevate my campaign to new heights. Damn it! Ferguson got lost in the dark forest of his own thoughts for a while. Finally, after emerging from the catacombs of his mind, he quietly said, "Nobody steals my thunder and gets away with it!"

CHAPTER 9

Forty-five minutes before nine o'clock in the morning on Valentine's Day, Kenny and Trevor emerged from the canary-colored Victorian split-level clubhouse of the Fox River Canyon Country Club laughing profusely.

Kenny looked at the immaculately landscaped East Bay golf course nestled beneath a damp blanket of thick fog, wedged between the deciduous hills of Lafayette and located about four miles northeast of the McMillan College campus.

Patiently, Kenny walked towards the docking trellis for the golf carts and Trevor strode beside him like a shadow. Kenny glanced at the horde of electric golf carts lined up like a battalion of fiberglass units poised for their next expedition.

"I'm really looking forward to our Valentine's dinner tonight with you and Marla, and Athena is excited about it too. It's nice when we get together, since you live so far away in Malibu," Kenny stated.

Trevor agreed, tugged at his navy-blue cardigan sweater, and looked at him.

Trevor whistled and exclaimed, "Wow, Kenny, it seems like all of your school's big-time donors showed up today because there were a lot of people in that lounge this morning."

Kenny gazed at Trevor, grinned and replied, "Yep—all seventy-two of the registered participants are present and accounted for. In fact, it went perfectly."

Trevor nodded and remarked, "I'm proud of you because you were as cool a cucumber in there, bro. After that sloppy drunk CEO from World-Vision-Net ripped your ass to shreds for offering a scholarship to a woman, I was ready to punch his lights out."

Kenny frowned and said, "Thanks, and yes, Mister Heckeldorf had too many Bloody Mary's this morning." He smiled at Trevor and finished speaking. "But you know what? I don't worry about those things because I would never tell him how to run his business. In fact, I wouldn't even consider it."

Trevor stared at him and Kenny kept talking. "Trevor, I know you understand how this business works, and I am employed by one of the most successful people in the world. My boss believes in taking chances to maximize untapped potential. He's paying me to build a world

champion intercollegiate football program, so I can't concern myself with other people's opinions on certain issues."

Trevor wrapped his muscular left arm around his shoulders, then kissed him on the right cheek and said, "My dear brother, you've been forced to walk on some hot coals during the past week. But step back for a moment and look at it from a different angle: when TIME, Newsweek, Sports Illustrated and ESPN interview you in the same week, it's got to be good for business." Trevor squeezed him tighter and gushed, "I love you, bro."

"That's what Percy thinks, and I agree with both of you. I know that this young woman can become a valuable weapon for us on the football field, and I would rather have her playing/or my team than against my team." Kenny replied.

Trevor changed the subject. "I'm sure that having Ferguson Marshall on this year's promotional ticket for your annual golf tournament helped your Athletic Director sell out the tickets for today's event."

Kenny nodded. "Obviously, but last year we raised a lot of money without a presidential candidate. Heck, last year, you were the most recognizable celebrity on our promotional card." They laughed and Kenny continued. "However, this year we surpassed our highest fundraising totals of all time and John McDough deserves the credit. He's the best."

"How much money?"

"Half-a-million bucks," Kenny replied. "From only fifty contributors."

Trevor shook his head in amazement. "That's \$10,000 a pop! Wow! Thank God the economy has been on the upswing since early last year."

Kenny fidgeted with the left sleeve of his McMillan College windbreaker and then spotted the number 17 embossed on a silver tag that was perched on the backside of their golf cart. He motioned to Trevor and they examined the contents of their golf bags to make sure their equipment had been placed into the correct vehicle.

Bemused, Kenny watched Trevor aggressively withdraw a titanium-alloy Marksmen 3-Wood golf club from his dark blue bag. Like an angry savage, his brother gripped the club and whipped it back and forth several times; slicing through the moist, gray air. Whoosh, whoosh, whoosh.

Finally, Trevor relaxed for a moment and asked him, "Kenny, do you want to take a few practice swings at the driving range before we tee-off?"

Kenny nodded and selected his least favorite club—the 7-iron, along with his trusty adder-headed metallic driver from his maroon golf bag. Together, they marched across the damp grass towards the driving range near the picturesque lake to their right. A pair of tan gophers presented themselves before bolting for safety down their muddy tunnels beneath the roots of an oak tree. A pristine four-foot tall sparkling yellow fence separated the alcove of the driving range from the golf course.

As they neared the range, Trevor asked him, “Hey Kenny, who do you think we’re going to be paired with today—anybody special?”

Kenny reached down and opened the yellow wooden gate for his brother. They slipped through it and Kenny could hear the smacking sounds of the golfers’ clubs as their weapons cracked against the never-ending supply of range balls. He glanced both ways and saw about forty people taking their warm-up strokes before the predetermined shotgun starting time of nine o’clock.

Kenny replied, “I’m not sure who we’re going to be matched up with today, but that’s part of the fun because it’s a surprise every year. Thanks to Percy’s eccentric lifestyle, our fundraising event has developed a life of its own. But the best part of it is that there are no media allowed, so it’s an exclusive event.”

“That’s the truth,” Trevor replied, “and it’s too bad that your boss isn’t here today because he’s missing out.”

Kenny grabbed two complimentary buckets of abused range balls that had been beaten like a pack of scurvy dogs.

He handed a container to Trevor and uttered, “Based on the terrible situation that Percy’s dealing with in England, I can’t blame him for being absent today.”

Kenny unzipped his jacket, limbered up his body and watched Trevor blast his first shot of the day. The tiny, defenseless golf ball went screaming through the dull sky like a miniature planet freed from its orbit. Eventually, the ball landed in the serene lake, a whopping 325 yards away. A gaggle of startled and annoyed geese honked their displeasure and flapped away to another part of the lake.

Trevor puffed out his chest and proudly exclaimed, “I blasted that—it’s going to be a great day to play eighteen holes!” Kenny chuckled and replied, “I’m glad that you’re on my team.”

Fifteen minutes before the official tee-time, every person enrolled in the Valentine's Day event was gathered on the ground level veranda of the Liberty Clubhouse. Kenny looked at his charcoal and ivory golf shoes and clicked his steel spikes on the firm granite beneath his feet. Trevor was chatting with a group of people and signing a few autographs for the sponsors to take back to their children.

Kenny glanced around and felt honored to be associated with such a fine crowd of successful people. Every person sponsoring the event was a classy, wealthy, and seemingly aboveboard individual. As he had noticed earlier that morning, he saw that Ferguson Marshall was once again discussing something that appeared to be of great relevance with two attentive white men, a black man, an elderly woman, and a famous actress from Hollywood. A single thought sped through Kenny's mind as he observed Ferguson interacting with the crowd. I wonder if you are going to be the next President of our great country?

Soon John McDough found his way to the small platform near the middle of the crowd and waved his arms for everybody to be quiet. "Okay people, it's time to find out who the real golfers are!" The jubilant congregation laughed.

John McDough adjusted his dove-colored jacket, turned on the charm and said, "Indies and gentlemen, earlier this morning some of you were assigned a specific number for the front nine holes of our golf tournament. At this time—would you please come forward and stand up here with me?"

Politely, thirty-six people walked to the front. Kenny was impressed. He examined the large semi-circle of participants soon gathered around McDough.

Kenny heard McDough say, "Ladies and gentlemen—which one of our remaining three-dozen guests would like to draw the first lucky number from this golden bowl in my arms?"

As if the crowd had been hypnotized by Ferguson Marshall's charisma, every member of the unattached group looked at the politician and clapped their hands.

Looking as if he were a humbled king, Ferguson accepted their cheers and bent forward in a playful bow of gratitude.

Kenny watched Ferguson stride towards McDough. The presidential candidate was perfectly attired in a pair of beige slacks and a jet-black sweater. He had a gold Rolex watch on his left wrist that sparkled brilliantly as he walked by.

Ferguson arrived at McDough's location and paused momentarily. He whispered a prayer, but it was certainly loud enough for almost everyone to hear. "Today is for you, Cassandra—God bless your lovely soul."

Kenny watched Ferguson open his eyelids and then dip his brown hand into the large bowl that McDough was holding. He observed Ferguson fishing around for a moment, but then he saw Ferguson extract a single white golf ball from the bowl. He watched Ferguson rotate the pockmarked-sphere until he had located the stamped number on it.

Kenny listened, as Ferguson Marshall loudly announced, "Seventeen! Who has the number seventeen?"

The audience fell silent and everybody looked around for the lucky winner. Kenny met his brother's gaze and realized that Trevor was waiting for him to speak up. But for some unexplained reason, Kenny wasn't happy about playing the first nine holes of the tournament with Ferguson Marshall.

Soon, an inexplicable energy transpired between Kenny and Ferguson Marshall. Ferguson examined the crowd and then the famous Democrat met his stare with his intense hazel eyes. Ferguson peered at him, and for a moment Kenny felt as if Ferguson was reading his mind.

Finally, Kenny faked an enthusiastic reply. "It's us! We have the number seventeen!" The relieved group hollered and celebrated Kenny and Trevor's incredibly good fortune. Even though Trevor and a few other people were patting him on the back in a congratulatory fashion, Kenny had a nauseous feeling ebbing in his guts and he didn't understand why.

Within five minutes, all the other couplings for the tournament had been matched accordingly.

Before everybody departed for the course, McDough said, "After you have played nine holes, remember to meet back here in the dining room at one o'clock sharp. Lunch and drinks are on us, and then we'll choose new teams for the last nine holes of the day. Good luck!"

Quite soon thereafter, Kenny was poised in his assigned golf cart and steering it westward with Trevor sitting beside him, bouncing along the cement path and on their way to the tee-box for Hole #17.

Kenny noticed that Trevor was craning his neck to the left and glancing behind their moving golf cart.

Trevor said, “Wow! Did we have some great luck today or what? We got teamed up with Ferguson Marshall and Amanda Deete. What a terrific way to start the day! Who knows ... maybe someday we’ll get to say that we played golf with the President of the United States and a world-famous gorgeous actress.”

“We’ll see,” Kenny replied.

Kenny drove onward, not really looking at anything specific, just peering at the lush green hills, receding fog, sprawling fairways and the bevy of trees laced throughout the course. Eventually, he stopped the golf cart next to their starting point and hopped out with inexplicable melancholy surging through his veins. With every step he took towards the tee-box, he attempted to rid himself of the uneasy sensation burgeoning within him.

CHAPTER 10

The booming shotgun blast echoed throughout the serene canyon to signal the beginning of the tournament as the mid-February sunshine cut through the fog like billions of luminescent needles racing towards the earth.

Ferguson Marshall tilted his head and glanced at the delicious-looking woman standing next to him. He flashed her a generous smile and realized that she was melting with desire. He knew it and his loins raged with lust for the famous actress.

Ferguson watched Trevor Brown take his first official swing of the tournament and the golf ball shot into the atmosphere before vanishing in an impressive display of coordination and power. “Good one,” Ferguson said, and he gave Trevor a muffled golf clap. He winked at the blonde goddess to his right and whispered, “I’m sure that you’re going to beat all of us in this tournament, Amanda.”

Coyly, she smiled at him and quietly replied, “I get paid to act, but my golf game isn’t too bad. In fact, you might be surprised by how adroit I am with a long club in my hands, Ferguson.”

“I hope so,” he responded while sneaking a glimpse of her firm bust and the sparkling diamond necklace suspended between her sumptuous cleavage.

Ferguson saw Kenny smash his golf ball a respectable distance from the tee. Amanda aimed her left hand towards the tee-box and said, “It’s your turn, Ferguson. It’s 326 yards to the cup and it’s a par 4. Be smart, because it doglegs to the right, just past those pine trees.” With the fleeting thought of having Kenny Brown terminated speeding through him, Ferguson removed a big driver from his handmade leather bag. He tightened the Velcro straps on his golf-gloves and sauntered towards the tee-box. He could sense that Kenny didn’t want to talk to him, but he wasn’t sure why. He pondered, do you know that I want to kill you, Coach Brown? Is that why you don’t want to talk to me? Why did you have to upstage my appearance at Jason’s signing date for a stupid bitch that wants to play college football with men? You’d be wise to change your mind, Coach Brown, or somebody is going to die.

With a great deal of hidden anger lurking beneath his flesh, Ferguson smacked his golf ball like a seasoned professional competing in the U.S Open. He watched the ball sail away and then spun around to face Amanda.

“It’s your turn, my sweet Amanda,” Ferguson stated. Moments later the foursome cruised next to the fairway, seemingly pleased about their initial golfing shots from the tee.

Amanda’s third shot of the morning was a beautiful example of finesse and poise rolled into one. Her golf ball landed on the smooth green of Hole #17. She then tapped her ball into the cup for a one-stroke lead and was tied for the lead with Trevor at the end of the hole.

Ferguson looked at the modern oasis-like cabanas resurrected at the end of each hole. Each distillery throughout the course had an attractive young man and woman tending to the bar. Ferguson ordered a Mimosa for himself and one for Amanda. He noticed that Kenny and Trevor opted for a couple of spicy Bloody Mary’s.

Ferguson gathered his small group and offered a toast. “Here’s to Coach Brown, the finest young football coach on the West Coast!”

Ferguson noticed that Kenny accepted the compliment reluctantly and he said, “Coach Brown, let’s ride together for a while.” Amanda edged closer to Trevor and said, “Musical carts sounds great!”

Ferguson nodded and replied, “It’s settled.”

“Sounds fine,” Kenny responded.

With drinks in hand, they climbed into their reassigned golf carts and departed for Hole #18. Ferguson sat in the passenger seat and stared at Kenny while the football coach drove along the skinny cement pathway towards the next tee-box.

Ferguson looked straight ahead and examined the rolling greenery and he said, “My compliments on the excellent security precautions arranged by your boss. Percy settles for nothing but the best.”

“I agree,” Kenny replied. Then he glanced back and asked, “Did you happen to notice that private security agent hidden in that huge oak tree at our last hole?”

“Yes.” Ferguson replied, “In fact, I recognized him because that poor fellow accused me of having an affair with his wife last year. But we settled the dispute out of court, and he has since recanted his story.”

Kenny shook his head but did not reply.

Finally, Ferguson asked him, “Coach Brown, have I managed to offend you in some way?” Without looking over to him, Kenny replied, “Not at all, but I’m in a quiet mood today, and I apologize for any uncomfortable feelings I might have caused you.”

Quiet mood! Ferguson thought sarcastically. You're sitting a couple of feet away from the man who will be the next President of the United State of America, you idiot! But instead of issuing his animalistic thoughts aloud, Ferguson lied like a circus-worker. "Would you like to talk about it? I'm a good listener."

Kenny slowed down the golf cart and glanced at him. "No, thanks. But I appreciate your offer."

Ferguson was tired of beating around the bush. "Mind if I take a guess at what's bothering you?"

Kenny shrugged his shoulders and Ferguson forged ahead. "In the clubhouse this morning, I listened to that verbal lashing you took from Lance Heckeldorf. I've known that sorry piece of crap for twenty years, and he can be a real bastard."

Ferguson watched Kenny nod and realized he had hit a nerve. Ferguson kept talking. "I'll be honest with you, Coach Brown. Your controversial decision to offer a football scholarship to an anonymous woman has really angered a lot of the McMillan College Alumni. First, she's a woman, and, secondly, you won't release her name to the public, yet."

"That's how we've chosen to handle it. What about you?" Kenny asked, "Haven't you ever wanted to keep your identity a secret? And how do you feel about my decision?"

A pair of blackbirds zoomed by their golf cart. Ferguson's sharp mind reflected upon the irony of Kenny's reply, then he said, "As you know, I want Jason to be a successful student-athlete at your school. So regardless of what I think, I want him to be happy ... that's all."

He saw Kenny shake his head and respond, "Spoken like a man of the people."

After hearing the football coach's sarcastic retort, Ferguson understood that Kenny wasn't going to change his mind.

Ferguson sat back in his seat and said, "God made us the way we are Coach Brown, and we can't change that."

Shortly thereafter, they finished playing Hole #18 and Trevor assumed the lead by one stroke over everybody in the group. Their quartet passed by the clubhouse and eventually arrived at the clifflike, tee-box of Hole #1.

Trevor announced the facts of the link to them. "It's exactly 412 yards to the pin and it's a par 5. It's going to take a tremendous shot to clear that duck pond in the middle of the fairway."

Amanda said, "Thank heavens for this tiny bluff, otherwise it would be impossible for any of us

to hit the ball over the water.” Once again, Trevor went first. He swung hard and crushed the ball. It flew over the pond and landed nearly 300 yards away.

Trevor pivoted and said, “You’re next, Ferguson, and I’m going to run back to the clubhouse to use the men’s room.” Trevor slid his golf club into his bag and jogged towards the latrine.

Ferguson was busy talking to Amanda and he motioned for Kenny to go next.

As Ferguson waited, Kenny teed up his golf ball and proceeded to take a horrible swing. The disobedient ball trickled across the lawn and dropped over the lip of the small ledge.

“I’ll get it,” Kenny said, before shuffling down the slope and disappearing.

At that moment, something nasty and sinister sprouted within Ferguson’s soul. It was a familiar feeling and one that he had missed interacting with. Without saying a word, he walked over to the tee-box, bent forward and pushed his wooden tee-and-golf-ball combination into the thick grass.

He heard Amanda say, “You should probably wait until Kenny gets back. It’s not a good idea to tee-off when you can’t see where he is. It’s not safe.”

Ferguson’s brilliant mind was way ahead of her, and he said, “It’s fine. Besides, I don’t want to slow down the other golfers waiting behind us. I hate it when they do that to me, don’t you?”

Ferguson shut out Amanda’s reply because he was in a zone—the killing zone.

In his periphery to the left, Ferguson saw the sandy-haired crown of Kenny’s head rise above the flat mesa. Without an ounce of hesitation creeping through his reflexes, Ferguson took aim and swung the golf club with all his strength and vigor.

As the fat head of his golf club connected with the little white ball, Amanda screamed louder than he had ever heard her yell in the movies. The shrill sound of her piercing, soprano-like voice streaked ahead of the launching ball with heroic speed.

For Ferguson, the unstoppable elements of time seemed to be stitched together piece by piece, and he watched Kenny snap his endangered skull backward in the blink of an eyelid. The hurtling golf ball impacted with Kenny’s forehead like a rock skipping across a lake.

Ferguson looked up, gripped his club tightly and desperately hoped that Kenny was dead, or at least in the process of going into a coma.

Amanda shouted, “Oh, my God!” Then she jumped out of her golf cart and dashed towards the fallen football coach.

Time to play Mr. Nice Guy, Ferguson’s brain demanded. He dropped his golf club and scurried over to Kenny, who was being tended to by Amanda.

Ferguson donned his most surprised facial expression and said, “Oh, dear Lord! What have I done? I should have listened to you, Amanda. Sometimes I’m so impatient that it gets the better of me!” Disappointed that Kenny wasn’t out cold or in the throes of a massive convulsion, Ferguson waited while Kenny tried to get his bearings back. He watched Kenny sit up slowly and shake his head to clear his thoughts.

Ferguson feigned sincerity and asked, “Are you okay, Coach Brown?” Amanda angrily replied. “No, Ferguson, he’s not okay! Look at that huge, ugly lump blooming on his forehead!”

People were noticing their situation and Trevor came sprinting back to the scene.

As Trevor neared them, he shouted, “What in the hell is going on? Kenny ... Kenny—are you okay? What happened?”

Ferguson frowned at Trevor, then squatted down next to Kenny and gently touched the dazed football coach on the back of his head.

Ferguson gave Trevor the saddest look and said, “We had an accident.”

CHAPTER 11

A luminous quarter-moon rose into the night sky while Ferguson Marshall paced in his study and flipped through the glossy pages of TIME. He looked at the color photos of Kenny Brown and slapped the tabloid against his desk. He was fuming mad, perspiring, and he wanted to beat something until it begged for mercy.

He spat, "I should be on the cover of this God damn magazine, and not him!"

Disgusted, he focused on the headline beneath Kenny's name and read it several times: Has This Man Changed Collegiate Athletics Forever?

Ferguson felt his blood moving through his arteries and veins at a quicker rate, and he tried to relax by taking deep breaths. Calmer, he opened the magazine and looked at the caption below the artistic silhouette depicting the world's greatest female athletes—all of them morphed into one imaginary athletic-looking woman: Who Is She?

Ferguson dropped the magazine on a chair and strode to the window overlooking his curved driveway and palatial gated estate. He saw a ruby-colored car pass through his automated security system and stop in front of his house. Comforted, he noticed Saxon trotting down the front steps with his alert German Shepard scouting the terrain ahead of him. Saxon was in a pair of charcoal slacks and a gray shirt, with a handgun strapped beneath his left armpit. The driver of the car waited patiently while Saxon and his watchdog inspected the vehicle.

Ferguson looked on with interest as Saxon and the dog halted next to the elderly looking, bearded driver of the car. Saxon stepped back, and the dog placed its large front paws on the windowsill of the door. The well-trained dog sniffed the air several times but did not bark to signal a warning.

Ferguson watched a black-suited rabbi step out of the car and kneel to the ground with his hands atop his head covering his matching yarmulke. The protective canine sniffed every crevasse of the rabbi's body. After completing its chores, the dog retreated and heeled next to Saxon.

Moments later, Saxon advanced into his library and announced the arrival of Ferguson's appointment. "Rabbi Felix is here, sir."

Ferguson looked at the rabbi standing beneath the arching doorway and nodded. He stared at the rabbi, as the holy-looking man walked past a wall of dark walnut bookcases and matching furniture.

Ferguson replied, "Efficient work, Saxon; good job. There's a red envelope with an extra 10,000 bucks in the kitchen pantry. Take the money, spend the night at our penthouse suite above the Embarcadero, and rent yourself a few bisexual hookers for the evening. Have a good time, and I'll see you in the morning."

Saxon nodded, then departed without saying a word and closed the doors.

The rabbi moved towards him and waited. Ferguson gazed at the rabbi but revealed nothing. He was testing the rabbi's resolve because he didn't like to deal with people who blabbered when silence was required.

Ferguson glanced at his own olive brown slacks and forest green polo shirt. Eventually, Ferguson stated, "Saxon speaks highly of you, but failure is not an option in this type of situation."

The rabbi began removing his disguise and replied, "I agree."

In a few seconds, the aged rabbi had been transformed from an old-looking man into a handsome brown-haired fellow with deep tawny eyes and a crew cut. He had a terrible fishhook-like scar from the corner of his left eye to his ear. Ferguson reasoned that the killer was battle-tested and suitable for the job. Saxon's longtime associate looked fit for the role he had in mind. Ferguson was pleased that he had followed his friend's recommendation. Ferguson was amused by the man's retort and he said, "Glad we agree, Oscar, but I have two jobs for you ... not just one." Oscar gave him a surprised look and asked, "Who is the other person that you want me to kill?"

Ferguson walked over to his walnut and ivory desk. He sifted through a stack of manila folders and extracted a pair of black-and-white photographs. Ferguson came back and offered both pictures to the assassin. Oscar accepted the photographs.

Oscar glanced up and said, "Amanda Deete is one of my all-time favorite actresses. She's gorgeous and talented. Why do you want me to eliminate her?"

Ferguson walked over to the brass bar on the right side of the room. He poured two tumblers of scotch and replied, "Amanda called me yesterday morning and informed me that she has some concerns because of that golfing incident with Coach Brown." Oscar nodded and replied, "Too bad you missed your mark because it would have saved you a great deal of money." Ferguson smirked and said, "I spend at least a thousand dollars every time I take somebody out to dinner—so money is not an issue with me."

Ferguson returned and handed Oscar a drink. They made a toast and Ferguson continued his explanation. “Anyway, Amanda Deete has decided to withdraw her support from my presidential campaign, and I can’t afford to lose my Hollywood connections. Understand?”

“Yes,” Oscar replied. Then he asked, “When do you want Amanda executed?”

“ASAP,” Ferguson responded.

“Fair enough,” Oscar agreed. The serious-looking mercenary shook his glass gently and Ferguson listened to the ice clinking around in the killer’s drink.

Oscar asked him another question. “What about the football coach?”

“That’s a different story,” Ferguson replied.

Ferguson treaded away and motioned for Oscar to follow. Oscar trailed him into the alcove adjacent to his study. Ferguson pointed to a huge, shiny globe that was skewered on a golden axis. The surreal-looking sphere had been built from a multitude of hand-cut polished jewels and rare ores. Ferguson reached out with his left hand and gave the glimmering orb a twirl. The impressive sparkling version of the Earth spun at a dizzying rate. Eventually, Ferguson dragged his manicured fingertips across the spinning globe until it stopped moving.

Ferguson placed his right index on a certain spot and said, “June first, in Acapulco, Mexico. Have you ever been there?” “Yes, ten years ago, on vacation,” Oscar replied.

Ferguson asked, “How many languages do you speak?”

Oscar paused, then replied, “Six, including Spanish.” Ferguson said, “Good.” Then he asked, “Do you know who Cadmus was?”

Oscar shook his head. “Sounds familiar, but I can’t remember why.”

Ferguson said, “In 1490 BC—Cadmus brought the fifteen letters of the Phoenician alphabet to Greece and we still use those symbols today. Cadmus had the wisdom and vision to change the world, and that’s what I am going to do as the next President of the United States.”

“How so?” Oscar asked.

Ferguson looked him in the eyes and said, “As President, I will mold and create the future of the civilized world. It will boggle your mind ... you’ll see.”

Oscar didn’t say anything, so Ferguson said, “On the first day of June, I’ll be on Percy McMillan’s yacht with President Bush, Kenny Brown, and many others. I want you to assassinate Coach Brown while we are cruising on the Pacific Ocean.”

Oscar turned his head, sipped at his drink and said, “That seems rather strange, and far too risky. Why don’t I simply murder the football coach at his residence?”

Ferguson scoffed and replied, “There’s a catch.”

Oscar asked, “What is it?”

“Three things,” Ferguson said. “Number one, I want it to appear like I am the hero. I want the world to see that Ferguson Marshall was the man who saved the President’s life when the bullets were flying.”

Oscar grinned. “Nice touch. And the second item?”

“At noon I will make sure that President Bush, Coach Brown and I are easily visible and clearly positioned on the deck of the yacht.”

“That might be tricky. But what is your last item?” Oscar asked. Ferguson flashed him an evil grin and said, “After you have killed Coach Brown, I want you to shoot me in the leg. Wound me and don’t miss. If I’m going to be a hero to the world, then I’ll need to spill my own blood. Got it?”

Oscar looked at him, shook his head and slowly replied, “You’re a strange man because one of my bullets could cut your leg in half.”

Ferguson waved his left hand in the air and asked, “Do we have a deal?”

Oscar paused and responded with a demand. “Five million dollars, each.”

Ferguson gave him a sidelong glance and asked, “Where do you want the money deposited?”

Oscar answered, “I’ll contact Saxon next week.”

“Fine,” Ferguson replied. “You’ll get two million dollars up front, and the balance when the job is done.”

“Agreed. It will take me a month to plan it. I’ll be in Mexico by May first, and we won’t communicate after next week.”

They finished their drinks and Ferguson guided him back to the foyer. Oscar used the vanity mirror to reassemble his deceitful appearance into an innocent-looking rabbi.

Ferguson waited for him at the door, watching the diligent man retool his overall look. He was impressed by the killer’s patience and skill, and every lock of hair was gently guided into a natural-looking position.

Finally, Ferguson said, “I look forward to reading about Amanda Deete’s death on the Internet.”

“You won’t be disappointed,” Oscar promised.

“I know because you get what you pay for,” Ferguson replied with a grin.

CHAPTER 12

On a cool and overcast Thursday morning in late April, Kenny bounded down the stairs from his football office at the McMillan College athletic facility and hustled outside. He unlocked his mountain bike in the aluminum racks behind the complex, maneuvered onto his bicycle and got comfortable. He secured his backpack and donned a pair of chrome-plated sunglasses. He grabbed a piece of mint-flavored chewing gum from his khaki shorts and tucked in his lime-colored shirt. The rising sun was winning its battle against the morning fog as splintered rays of light crashed onto the grounds of the only perfectly circular collegiate campus in the entire NCAA.

Kenny glanced down at the stainless-steel Swiss Army watch on his left wrist and said, "I've got a few minutes to get some exercise."

He began peddling and veered to his right. He zoomed by the ivy-covered wall concealing the baseball diamond. He glided for a moment and shifted his bicycle into tenth gear. College students were everywhere and a few waved to him as he raced across the smoothly paved road of Democrat Way. He grinned and kept up the intense pace. A thin film of sweat was forming on his skin and it felt great. He coasted by the track and field complex, inhaling deeply as he passed by his favorite place on campus, The Spot.

With less than fifteen minutes to go before his scheduled meeting was to begin, Kenny pushed himself harder. Quickly, he rolled across the southernmost footbridge of the Jake McMillan River and zipped by the swim center and Centennial Dorm #3. Like a motorcycle driver competing at the Sears Point Raceway, he made a sharp left-turn and jumped his bicycle onto the asphalt of Republican Road.

A quartet of bicycling coeds moved to his right and two of them called out, "Hi, Coach Brown."

Kenny smiled and wiped at the perspiration on his upper lip. Kenny increased his peddling and his strong thighs felt like they were on fire. In his peripheral vision, he noticed the gothic structure of the church on his right. He attempted to block out the horrific memories of that awful day in the church from more than a year ago, but it was futile. A gut-wrenching bloody slideshow of his dead assistant coaches and the deceptive priest responsible for their deaths flashed through his mind as if it had happened yesterday.

Kenny shook his head and leaned forward with his chest above the handlebars. He banked to the left while brisk wind danced through his hair and tickled his nostrils. He observed a horde of college students hustling towards Jefferson Hall. He peddled down the homestretch and looked both ways before crossing the intersection of Voter's Lane. With five minutes to go, once again he crossed the Jake McMillan River and finally stopped near the southwest corner of the library. He stepped away from his bike and stretched his legs for a moment. After completing a brief cool-down stretch he grabbed his water bottle and quenched his thirst. Feeling good, he locked his bicycle in the racks and entered the three-story library. He moved through the quiet building, hearing nothing except the lining of his shorts rubbing together as he walked. With a minute to spare, Kenny tapped on the maroon door of room #317 and walked in.

He saw John McDough positioned at the end of a conference table and Rebecca Jones was standing next to a dry erase board on the right. Rebecca smiled at him, said hello, and shook his hand.

McDough grinned, stood up and said, "As usual, you're right on time, Kenny."

Kenny shook hands with the Director of Athletics and said, "Hi, John."

McDough gave him a cursory glance and replied, "Looks like you've just run a 5K"
"I rode my bike because I needed the exercise."

Kenny removed his backpack and placed it on the conference table. He slid his sunglasses on top of his head and sat down in a soft gray chair. He looked at Rebecca Jones. The President of McMillan College was dressed in a cinnamon-colored suit that complimented her short hair and hazel eyes. Using a blue felt pen, Rebecca was writing on the board.

Kenny looked at McDough and noticed that his dark-haired, blue-eyed and energetic friend was in his usual attire ... a red, white and blue sweat suit, with the college's patriotic logo embroidered on the left breast.

Rebecca stepped away from the board and Kenny read what she had written.

Rebecca began the meeting, "Let's start with the first item— the media."

Kenny took out his notepad and pen. McDough sat up and executed the customary rapid snapping of his fingers.

Rebecca said, "The mainstream media has descended upon this campus like a swarm of ants. As we get closer to the beginning of football practice in August, it's going to be a communications frenzy."

McDough looked to him and asked, “Kenny, is TJ Woods still planning to arrive here in late July?”

Kenny made a note and said, “Yes.”

“Well, then,” McDough said, “we’ve got two months to get ready.”

“That’s correct,” Rebecca responded. She wrote the word Access underneath the Media header.

Rebecca asked, “Gentlemen, where should TJ Woods live, which dormitory?”

Kenny was silent and McDough spoke up. “Centennial Dorm number three gets my vote, because it’s coed, and there’s an excellent balance between athletes and non-athletes.”

Kenny replied to the President of the college. “It’s the perfect location for TJ because she wants to live like a normal college student. She only has one year of eligibility remaining, and she wants to enjoy it.”

“Good,” Rebecca said, then remarked, “But my policy will be to not allow any type of media personnel into the dorms next fall. Am I clear on that, gentlemen?”

“Makes sense,” McDough said, and he snapped his fingers as if hailing a waiter.

Kenny gazed into Rebecca’s intelligent eyes and finally, she asked him, “Kenny, how would you rate the current morale of our football team?”

Kenny thought for a second and said, “Pretty good, but that doesn’t surprise me. I didn’t expect anybody to quit yet, because TJ Woods hasn’t officially joined our team. In fact, I believe that our team’s curiosity has been piqued. They’re looking forward to having a great year and hopefully making the playoffs.”

Rebecca made some notes on the board and McDough asked Kenny, “What about the wide receivers and defensive backs, how do they feel about having to compete against a woman?”

“Nervous as hell,” Kenny replied, “and they should be because TJ Woods is a phenomenal athlete. She is going to blow people’s minds! I’m not talking about some ordinary athlete—TJ Woods is an amazing athletic specimen. If she wanted to do it, TJ could run the 100 Meter Dash in the Olympics. She’s been blessed with that kind of superior speed and agility. She can catch the football and run like a gazelle, but we must discover if she can handle the physical pounding of training camp and the rigors of a daily practice schedule. TJ is going to take a serious beating on the football field and it’s no secret that some of the guys will be gunning for her from the first day of practice.”

“That’s for sure,” Rebecca concurred as she scribbled on the board. McDough excused himself to use the restroom. After he was gone, Rebecca asked him, “Kenny, could you please give me a summation regarding the talent level of our current and incoming wide receivers?”

Kenny cracked a smile and said, “Rebecca, is that a diplomatic way of asking me if we actually need TJ Woods on our football team?”

Rebecca smirked and replied, “Obviously.”

Kenny flipped through his pad and glanced at his notes. “During my last meeting with the coaches, we concluded that we have three guys who are good enough to compete for both of the starting wide receiver positions. The other wide receivers don’t have the potential to crack the lineup this season.”

“And what else?” Rebecca asked him.

“In August,” Kenny continued, “we’re going to add two more wide receivers to our roster, including Jason Marshall.”

“That’s five players battling for those two positions,” Rebecca stated.

“Yes,” Kenny replied, “but we often use more than two wide receivers at a time, sometimes we use three or four of them for several plays in a row.”

Rebecca nodded and wrote the number 5 on the board and asked, “How good is Ferguson Marshall’s son—can he compete for playing time as a true freshman?”

McDough reentered the room and sat down, waiting for Kenny to reply.

Kenny said, “Jason Marshall will be a reliable wide receiver for us ... someday. But now, he’s just an above-average athlete with a famous father.”

Rebecca commented, “Kenny, are you sure that you’re not harboring any ill feelings about what happened on the golf course between yourself and Ferguson Marshall? I don’t want Jason Marshall to suffer the consequences because you’re still holding a grudge against his father.”

Kenny shook his head. He clenched his teeth, took a deep breath, and replied, “Everything’s fine in that department, but I understand why you had to ask me that.”

McDough spoke up. “I’ve watched two of Jason Marshall’s high school games on videotape. He’s good, but he will never be a big-time player for us because he doesn’t have that killer speed or wiggle.”

Rebecca asked, “How fast is TJ Woods?”

Kenny placed his notepad on the desk and confidently replied, “Without a doubt, TJ Woods will be the fastest person on our team.”

McDough shook his head in bewilderment and remarked, “It’s going to be one hell of a football season!”

Rebecca said, “Yes it is, so let’s review the last item on the board: Incidentals.”

Kenny itched the top of his scalp and said, “It will be interesting to see if any of our football players quit the team in protest. I hope that it doesn’t happen, but I’ll be surprised if we don’t lose a player or two, but that happens every year when guys get discouraged about their lack of playing time.”

“Me too,” McDough said, “because we’ve got some guys on our football team with massive egos, and if they’re getting cooked on the football field by a woman, then they might blow a gasket.” Rebecca said, “Let’s prepare ourselves to confront these types of sensitive issues when TJ Woods arrives in July. Hopefully, everything will run smoothly.”

Kenny agreed and they began reviewing the football program’s annual budget and other miscellaneous items. The meeting adjourned about forty-five minutes later and Kenny emerged from the library before lunchtime.

It was warm and sunny, and he rode his bike over to The Place. The early-bird lunch crowd was milling about the café. He bought a tuna sandwich with extra cheese, a bag of com chips, two kinds of milk and some fresh fruit.

Kenny spotted three of his favorite student-athletes sitting at a snow-colored table, eating their lunch and laughing vociferously. A tingle of happiness went through his body because it thrilled him to see his players smiling and feeling good. Even though he had thoroughly enjoyed nearly all his own five-year collegiate experience at Chico State University in Northern California, he also realized that he wouldn’t change a thing if he had to do it all over again. Part of his spirit always registered a tinge of melancholy when he allowed himself the opportunity to step back for a moment and observe the college students currently moving through the system. For most of them, life seemed to be relatively simple: study, take a few tests, write some term papers, work at a part-time job, go to parties, fall in love, and enjoy the long vacations between semesters.

Kenny walked over to them, smiled and asked, “Good afternoon, gentlemen. Mind if I join you?”

The dark-skinned, Parker Blum squinted at him and pulled out a white plastic chair. “That would be great, Coach Brown. Have a seat.”

CHAPTER 13

On the final evening of April at three o'clock in the morning, a puffy blanket of ominous clouds loomed above the cliffs of Malibu, California like freshly picked cotton. The content residents of the luxurious beachside community slept peacefully in their beds as the tepid surf of the Pacific Ocean crashed against the deserted sands.

Dressed in a midnight blue-colored bodysuit, polypropylene gloves, traction boots, a skintight hood, and matching facemask, Oscar arrived at his destination beneath the hulking cliffs of the beach. He paused for a moment and relished the pungent salty air. He glanced up at the sky and noticed that the moonlight had punched a hole in the thunderheads. A cylindrical tube of light shone on the beachfront near the water's edge as if a supreme being was aiming a flashlight at the Earth.

For a moment, Oscar surmised that God was beckoning him to step into the spotlight and bare his soul to repent the many murders he had committed.

Oscar shrugged his shoulders and steadied the repelling material and hazardous-situation climbing pack strapped to his back. Like a giant sloth, he began scaling the intimidating rock face towards his potential victim's residence. Several minutes later he was halfway up the tall facade of the precipice. He took a break and sipped at some water through a straw and liquid pack attached to his breastplate.

"I feel like Spiderman!" he said triumphantly before he began moving again.

At three-thirty in the morning, Oscar was standing on top of an incredible mesa overlooking Malibu Beach. He was drenched in sweat but savored the heavenly view before snapping out of his trance. Like an experienced killer, Oscar resumed his duties. He shimmied out of his climbing pack, extracted a coil of ropes for his descent and quickly secured the twin lines to the iron fence surrounding the isolated estate of Amanda Deete's Italian Villa. He double-checked the straps and buckles of his repelling harness and then vaulted over the fence effortlessly.

Oscar bounded across the plush lawn of Amanda Deete's backyard like an evil sentry on a mission for the devil. His legs felt springy and nimble, and he realized that he was past the point of no return. He pranced across the terra cotta tile and barely made a sound. He skirted around the perimeter of the Olympic-sized swimming pool, sprang into the dark air and skipped across the gritty surface of the diving board.

Soon he was poised against the cool surface of the creme-colored wall of Amanda's home. Quickly, he located the alarm box and pried it open. Using a pair of magnetic tweezers, he desensitized a yellow wire and snipped in half the red-wired warning system.

Oscar slithered over to the Mediterranean doors of the family room and inserted a razor-thin metal probe between the brass latches. He popped the lock and the lovely doors swung inward without a sound.

Oscar stepped into Amanda's home and detected the sweet aroma of freshly cut flowers. He hesitated for a split second when he noticed several white cats darting about. A few of them let out a small cry but it was nothing serious. He gathered his wits and moved through Amanda's house.

It was a magnificent dwelling, with an ivory and gold chess set on the coffee table and an immense wide-screen flat television mounted on the wall. He scuttled through the house, turned left, and peeked down the hallway leading to Amanda's bedroom. He could see the glowing, subtle residue of a night-light emanating from her bedroom and reflecting shadows across the hardwood floor.

Something brushed against his leg and his heart stopped momentarily. Oscar looked down and realized one of the felines had followed him. He bent down and picked up the fluffy white cat. He scurried back to the family room and gently tossed the surprised kitty onto the sofa. Very soon he was creeping down the hallway, preparing to murder one of the most beloved and famous actresses of the early 21st Century. He reached into the front pocket of his dark pants and extracted a syringe and needle that were sealed in a protective casing.

As he approached the door to Amanda's bedroom he heard a faint rumbling sound and a shadowy image appeared on the opposite side of the hallway. Oscar sucked in his breath and placed his back against the right wall. He listened intently and heard Amanda shuffling from her bedside to the master bathroom.

Oscar remained frozen in place until he thought that Amanda had finished her duties and returned to her bed. He began moving with panic and anxiety coursing through his system. Cautiously, Oscar glanced around the edge of the doorway and gazed into her bedroom.

Oscar was shocked by what he saw, and he sucked in a quick breath.

Amanda had not gone back to sleep. Instead, the actress was sitting on the lip of her bed, holding a small mirror in her left hand while brushing the tangles from her hair. She was physically

gorgeous, and for a millisecond Oscar wondered how anybody on Earth could be so perfect. Amanda was wearing a powder blue half-shirt and matching panties. Her thick mane of blonde hair was unruly and wild looking, and her impressive body was incredibly toned and tanned. The sheer magnificence of her beauty hypnotized Oscar, and for a moment he forgot his horrendous assignment. However, Oscar was abruptly yanked out of his altered-state when Amanda gasped at the realization that he was lurking in her bedroom.

“Oh, dear God!” Amanda shrieked like a terrified parrot and bolted towards the telephone on the opposite side of her bed.

Time to kill! Oscar’s demented brain ordered his body into action.

As he hurried towards her, Oscar watched Amanda hop onto the mattress. Unexpectedly, she jumped into the air and flew directly at him.

Like a crazy woman, Amanda kicked out with both of her feet. The surprising impact of her two-footed maneuver sent him reeling backward. He crashed into the dresser and the innards of a stuffed jewelry box went flying in all directions; clattering, scratchy type sounds filled the air. Oscar attempted to regain his balance with the deadly syringe still clenched in his right hand. Amanda attacked him like a maniac. She threw everything at him in a barrage of self-defense: arms, legs, knees, and feet.

Oscar weathered her assault for a few seconds and was about to strike back, but then a fiercely hot pain emanated from his groin to his stomach. Oscar coughed and wheezed, and almost let go of the syringe. He looked into the angry eyes of Amanda as she tried to crush his testicles with both of her hands.

Oscar steeled himself and punched her in the throat with a fierce left-jab. Amanda gagged and brought her left hand up to her throat. Oscar followed it up with a chopping blow to the right side of her neck, he felt the ridge of his hand immerse into the deep tissue of her throat. Amanda started choking for air. She flailed her arms as if flagging down a taxi. She stumbled backward and lurched for some air through her crushed windpipe. She landed on the bed, clutching feverishly at her tenderized neck.

Oscar stepped forward, looked down and placed his left hand on her thigh. Sincerely, Oscar gazed into her eyes and said, “I’m a big fan of yours, Amanda.” Amanda’s frightened eyelids expanded when she saw the hypodermic needle. Oscar jammed the skinny needle into the flank of her right buttocks and injected the lethal poison into her body. Like

a pediatrician giving an inoculation to a frightened child, Oscar rapidly withdrew the needle and then patted her on the rump.

Oscar stepped away and watched the dying actress twitch and shake violently. She began foaming at the mouth like a rabid dog, jerking back and forth as if possessed by a demon. The soft green quilt on her bed was taking a severe beating from Amanda's spasmodic reflexes, and the putrid scent in the air caused Oscar to realize that she had defecated in her panties.

Finally, Amanda stopped moving.

Oscar bent forward and examined her dead carcass. He put the spent syringe into its casing and tucked it into his pants pocket. He took one last look at the Hollywood starlet. She was a goner. Satisfied, Oscar jogged through his victim's house and hustled across the cool tile and plush lawn of her backyard. He arrived at the iron fence and navigated it with ease.

Oscar secured himself to the repelling apparatus and then paused on the edge of the cliff. The salty atmosphere and delightful evening air felt so wonderful on his exposed lips. The adrenaline-enhanced thrill of victory sent goose bumps across his skin.

He looked down at the ocean and said, "One down... and one to go!"

CHAPTER 14

A few miles south of downtown Acapulco, Mexico and early in the morning on June first, a blazing orange sunrise greeted thousands of slumbering tourists in the Princess Hotel.

The posh and kingly modern Aztec superstructure on 480 acres of beachfront property along the Pacific Ocean and the Sierra Madre mountains juts from the tropical landscape and through the humid air like a long-lost temple of the gods. A continuous series of interconnected blue lagoons, weaving canals, and waterfalls cover the hotel grounds carrying fresh water. Hundreds of exotic birds and pink flamingos were beginning to exchange mating calls and overt gestures of dominance.

The warm glow of the sun penetrated the 15th-floor open-air penthouse. Kenny shielded his eyes with his left forearm and then rolled away from the light.

Kenny tugged at the turquoise bed sheet until his legs were free. He draped his body over Athena's lean physique. Her womanly form felt fantastic against his skin; she was warm, taut and familiar. Kenny glanced to the right and looked at the electric-blue numbers of the digital clock on the bedside table. It was almost seven o'clock in the morning. Athena was playing possum and he knew it, so he bent forward and nibbled on the back of her neck.

Kenny whispered into her left ear. "Get up, Athena. Rise and shine—it's time to go yachting with my boss and meet the President of the United States."

Kenny growled playfully and she laughed. Athena reached down with her hands and caressed his body. Her smooth hands felt wonderful gliding across his skin.

"Good morning," Kenny said. "It's been a fantastic four days, hasn't it?"

Athena kissed him on the lips and hungrily said, "Yes it has, and we've got three more hours until the limousine arrives. What do you think we should do?"

Kenny pressed his body against hers and replied, "You feel wonderful!"

She winked at him and said, "So do you!"

"Yep." Totally naked, Kenny stood up on the massive bed and hoisted her into the air. Athena inhaled and exhaled deeply with rising passion. Soon they were matching each other breath for breath and stroke for stroke, like a lovely passionate machine.

About nine-thirty in the morning, their soft-yellow limousine coasted by the American Express Office and the manicured greens of Papagayo Park near Acapulco Bay. The long car

cruised towards Percy McMillan's private yacht at the harbor and Kenny gazed at the scenery through the rear window. It was hot but he realized the temperature was also going to rise above 100 degrees by noon.

Lost in the wilderness of his own daydreams, Kenny thought about his late father, Alan Brown. He wondered if his dad knew that his sons were about to spend the day with the President of the United States and other famous people. Guess what, Dad? I hope you're proud of me and happy about the way I have conducted my life. Every day I think about you and thank you for bringing me into this world. I wish that I could have met you! Someday I hope to become half of the man that Mom says you were.

The limousine stopped near the entrance of the yacht harbor. Athena tapped his left wrist and asked, "Kenny, what are you thinking about?"

He turned to her and quietly said, "My father."

Athena squeezed his hand and pecked him on the cheek. "I understand."

Feeling ready to move ahead with their plans for the day, Kenny looked at Athena and said, "I love the way you look in that summer dress, it's beautiful. Especially those colorful prints of the leopards running through the jungle."

She thanked him and Kenny stepped out of the limo. He helped Athena from the backseat and smoothed out his light green shirt, tan shorts, and dark leather sandals.

The limo was about to pull away. Kenny opened the door, reached into the backseat and said, "Oops! I almost forgot my hat!" He grabbed the brim of his big sombrero and plopped it onto his head.

He grinned at Athena and teased, "Hola, senorita!"

She rolled her eyes at him and they walked towards the harbor chuckling.

After undergoing two security checks at the harbor gate gangplank leading up to the port side of the yacht, Kenny marveled at the splendor of Percy's massive ship.

"Jesus of Mexico," Kenny exclaimed. "It's amazing!"

Athena gripped his arm and replied, "Staggering."

Kenny said the name of the 200-foot long, multi-decked yacht, "Titus."

Athena nudged him and asked, "Please refresh my memory, Kenny. What does 'Titus' mean?"

Kenny replied, "It's a Greek word and it stands for, Giant." "That's very fitting," she responded.

Kenny guided her up the broad gangplank and observed the progressive design and structure of the four-level ship. Most of the yacht's hand railing had been laced with red, white, and blue helium-filled balloons and spiraling ribbons. To his left, the bow of the ship funneled into a pair of huge hand-carved fists on the front. The gargantuan size and vivid detail of the manmade hands impressed him. The lower two-thirds of the yacht had been painted in a cobalt blue, but the upper portion was laminated in sheer white. All the windows on the boat were tinted with an amber hue, and he could see at least 300 people mingling near the tables and chairs on the aft of the ship's sundeck.

A gust of wind kicked up and Kenny latched onto his sombrero with his left hand. He kept moving and noticed his brother and Marla near the aft flanks of the yacht.

"Look," he said to Athena, "there are Trevor and Marla."

"How wonderful," Athena replied. "I hope they spot us soon." They edged forward at an upward angle, closer to the ship. Kenny looked to his right and examined the tomato-colored jet boat serving as the yacht's dinghy. The sleek speedboat was tethered about fifty-yards behind the yacht and secured by a thick steel cable attached to its mooring ring.

On the conning tower amidships, a large satellite dish was perched above everything else and rotating in action.

When they reached the boarding steps of the yacht, Kenny could hear some excellent rhythm and blues emanating from the top deck of the ship.

"That sounds like the band Colorblind," Athena said to him. Kenny nodded and replied, "It is because Percy hired them for today."

Athena squeezed his arm twice and said, "You've got to be kidding me, Kenny! I'm so excited ... I'm going to be on the same ship as Mitch Nelson and his band!"

Before he stepped onto the ship, Kenny removed his sombrero and shook hands with both security guards on either side of him. "Nice day."

"Yes, sir," the white man replied, and then the security guard ushered Athena onto the yacht.

A pretty, Latina woman in a raspberry-colored, lightweight outfit greeted Kenny. She handed him a fruity-looking drink and said, "Welcome aboard, Mister Brown."

Kenny said, “Thank you very much.” He looked to the left and noticed Athena receiving a warm welcome from an olive-skinned, handsome Spaniard gentleman.

Kenny and Athena soon weaved through the pulsating throng of people. They shook hands with people and searched for the birthday boy and other familiar faces. Kenny stopped walking and pressed his face against the bronze windows to his left. He shielded his eyes and peered into the expensive innards of the yacht. On the mid-deck of the ship was a formal dining room ready to serve at least 400 people. A white-coated army of diligent servants and waiters attended to their duties, and the red heat lamps of the buffet tables shone above the stainless-steel food basins.

While examining the contents of the dining room, Kenny heard a familiar voice exclaim, “Kenway, Athena—how good of you to come!”

Kenny leaned away from the glass and pivoted. He looked at the exceptionally tall, silver-haired billionaire walking towards him. Percy was wearing a vivid iridescent shirt with a pair of oyster-colored shorts and white topsiders.

Merrily, Kenny replied, “Happy Birthday, Percy, and don’t be silly, because we wouldn’t have missed this for anything!”

Athena echoed his words and Percy arrived in front of them. Kenny watched his boss bend forward and kiss Athena on the cheek.

Percy said to her, “You look incredible, Athena—just darling.” She thanked him.

Kenny extended his right hand, and Percy shook it vigorously.

Percy eyeballed his sombrero and said, “That is an authentic hat, Kenway and perfect for this occasion. Thought you would like to know that your brother and his lovely wife, Marla, have already boarded the ship.”

“Thank you, Boss. We spotted them a few minutes ago.”

Kenny watched Athena reach into her purse and remove the tiny birthday present for Percy. She offered the gift to Percy and said, “Happy Birthday. We hope you like it.”

Percy glanced at both and asked, “Can I open it now?”

“Of course,” Kenny replied.

As he watched Percy unwrap the small red gift, Kenny realized he had never seen his boss so happy. The normally reserved but charming and slightly aloof wealthy man was bubbling with excitement and energy.

When Percy retrieved the contents of his gift, he bellowed joyfully. “It’s marvelous!” Percy looked at them and asked, “Where on Earth did you find this little treasure?”

He watched Percy examine the solid-platinum and golden eyed, a miniature statuette of a heroic Minuteman soldier aiming his musket at an imaginary British Redcoat.

Finally, Kenny replied with a question to his boss. “Do you remember when you took me shopping in London before we had dinner with the Queen of England?”

Percy nodded and his thin face was ripe with intrigue. “Yes, Kenway.”

Kenny looked up at him and finished his answer. “If you’ll recall, I disappeared for an hour and I did some window shopping. I bought that little soldier at a store in Kensington and had it shipped home. Athena split the cost with me when I got back to the states.”

Percy grinned and admiringly replied, “Machiavellian, Kenway, absolutely Machiavellian!”

Percy tucked the small gift into its box and said, “Please excuse me, but I need to greet a few more guests before we depart.” Kenny waved goodbye, sipped at his drink and said, “No problem. But what time is President Bush scheduled to arrive?” Percy paused and replied, “We’re shoving-off in less than ten minutes, and President Bush will join us about thirty minutes after that.”

He gave Percy a perplexed glance and his boss pointed at the top of the yacht and said, “Helicopter, Kenway. President Bush and his aides will join us after we have cleared the bay and found deeper waters.”

Athena asked Percy, “Has everybody else arrived as expected?”

Percy thought for a moment and said, “Yes, I think so. We have 400 people scheduled for dinner this evening at six o’clock. Let me think ... all three of the Sheppard’s are onboard—Clancy, Virginia and your twin brother’s best friend, Shawn.”

“Good,” Kenny replied, and Percy continued. “Rebecca Jones and her husband are here, as are John McDough and his wife, Karen. We have several Ambassadors from Mexico and Latin America on deck. Ferguson Marshall and his voluptuous date boarded the ship about twenty minutes before you arrived.” Percy paused and finished. “Plus, we’ve got thirty-five Secret Service Agents patrolling the yacht and six more of them protecting the coastline.”

“Hmm,” Kenny hummed, impressed.

Percy stepped to the right and said, “Time is of the essence, and I must be off. Thank you very much and I will chat with you soon.”

Minutes later the yacht pulled away from the harbor with the aid of a fat tugboat and drifted towards the mouth of the bay. Kenny and Athena celebrated the launching with Trevor and Marla. Kenny enjoyed the live music of Colorblind and knew that Percy must have paid a fortune to rent their services for the day. The famous band was performing hit after hit on a tall stage, with a posse of colorfully dressed dancers gyrating to their unique, bluesy groove. Trevor was dressed in a canary-yellow shirt, white shorts, and soft leather shoes. His dark hair was short and neat, and a pair of jet-black Odyssey sunglasses concealed his blue-gray eyes.

Marla extracted a digital camera from her leather bag and fiddled with the thin pink straps of her sundress.

Marla pointed at them and said, “It’s photo time. Trevor and Kenny, please stand over there so I can get a picture of you guys with those palm trees in the background as we float away.”

Kenny placed his right arm around Trevor’s broad shoulders and said, “This is like a dream.”

Trevor replied, “It’s too good to be true.”

“Smile!” Marla said. She looked at him and said, “Kenny, please remove your sombrero for this photograph.”

Marla clicked two sets of pictures and they toured the perimeter of the ship. Kenny chatted with his brother along the stem as they passed the western portion of the bay known as Old Acapulco.

Kenny traced his fingers along the railing of the ship and asked, “Trevor, your training camp starts in six weeks, but how does your shoulder feel?”

Confidently, Trevor replied, “Perfect, and I’m ready to have a great season.”

“Glad to hear it.”

Trevor paused and added, “I’ve had some rough times dining the past two years, but when Amanda Deete gets murdered just two blocks from our home in Malibu, then it makes me feel lucky. Damn, Kenny, it could have been me or Marla, or even little Charlie. Death never sleeps.”

Kenny nodded, then looked at Marla and mused, I feel so grateful to you, Marla, because you’ve changed Trevor’s life from the day you met him when you were a ballet dancer in Atlanta,

and he was the star quarterback for the University of Georgia. Your delicate Nordic beauty hides your steely will and unwavering discipline. My brother knows that you value hard work and a steady approach to life, and you contrast well with his lovable but periodic raucous lifestyle that he sometimes likes to lead.

Trevor asked him, "What time is it?"

Kenny blinked a few times and dislodged from his musings. He glanced at his watch and said, "Eleven o'clock. Why?"

Trevor grinned and replied, "Because I'm anxious to meet President Bush."

"Likewise."

They approached the bow of the yacht and posed for some pictures next to the huge, rugged, god-like hands. As the ship emerged from the opening of Acapulco Bay and veered north, Kenny looked at Trevor and said, "Dad would be proud of us." Trevor fiddled with his sunglasses and replied, "He is proud of us, every day."

Kenny rested his elbows on the railing and said, "I know." Kenny and Trevor fell silent. Marla and Athena sauntered by. Via the loudspeaker, Kenny heard that Colorblind was going to take a break, in preparation for the arrival of President Bush.

Upon hearing those words, Trevor turned to him and said, "Showtime."

CHAPTER 15

“Look! Here he comes!”

An excited woman pointed at the sly and shouted within earshot of Kenny. Using her binoculars, the woman’s gaze remained focused on the airborne transport unit of President Bush. The searing fury of the tropical sunshine was making Kenny sweat. He raised the brim of his sombrero to get a better view of the helicopter in the distance. He squinted at the blue sky but couldn’t see anything definitive except a tiny black dot moving in their direction. Nonchalantly, he spun to the right and looked at the surging crowd behind him. People were shuffling towards the bow of the ship, scuttling ahead with their drinks and appetizers in hand.

Athena, Trevor, and Marla edged closer to him, and suddenly Kenny found himself leaning against the rails of the yacht, forced to accept the best seat in the house.

Athena looked down at the blue waters of the Pacific Ocean, then pointed at the ocean and asked, “Kenny, do you see those shark fins down there?”

He followed the direction of her aim and observed at least a dozen menacing dorsal fins protruding from the surface of the ocean. The visibility of the water was so clear that he could easily discern the broad, T-shaped head of the sharks.

“Yep,” he replied, “Hammerheads, and there are a lot of them.”

Marla overheard their brief conversation and she remarked, “Thank God we’re on a big boat, because I don’t feel like swimming with those things.”

Soon the thundering noise of the President’s helicopter suppressed their conversation. Kenny fell silent, and so did everybody else, as the heavily armed chopper approached the landing pad on the top of Percy’s yacht.

The gigantic chopper moved towards the red circle of the heliport. Kenny looked up and read the comforting words encircling the Presidential Seal on each side of the helicopter. A torrent of warm wind from the rotors thrust a tornado-like current of air as the chopper descended. Kenny grabbed onto his sombrero until the gust from the helicopter blades subsided.

Anticipatory conversations began and Kenny found himself dealing with a case of the butterflies looping in his stomach.

Athena wrapped her left hand around his right arm and whispered, “This is awesome, Kenny!”

He said, "I agree," and returned his gaze to the heliport. Both doors of the chopper slid back. The crowd waited patiently before a pair of serious-looking men emerged from each flank of the helicopter. Quickly, four bodyguards in beige suits scouted the vicinity before communicating with each other via mouthpieces and earphones.

To the right of the helicopter, Percy and Ferguson Marshall appeared after hiking up the curling staircase from his private chambers. Instantly, everybody began clapping and whistling in appreciation of Percy's efforts.

Kenny glanced at Ferguson Marshall and had the notion that Ferguson was annoyed because most of the applause was not directed his way. Ferguson had a lost look on his dark-skinned face. But after a brief deliberation, Kenny shook those negative thoughts out of his mind. Humbly, Percy acknowledged the goodwill of his friends and then motioned for the crowd to settle down.

Percy said, "After the President has been formally introduced, please follow our plan and form a line on both sides of the main cabin. As promised, after all of us have lunch, each of you will have the opportunity to meet the President."

Kenny turned to Trevor and said, "Follow my lead."

Trevor nodded.

Loudly, Kenny said, "Okay, people. It's time to sing Happy Birthday to Percy! Ready, here we go ..."

Athena smiled and Kenny started gesticulating with his arms. On cue, the entire crowd began to sing with gusto. "Happy Birthday to you, happy birthday to you, happy birthday, dear Percy, happy birthday to you!"

The joyous crowd erupted in celebration and Percy was speechless.

Eventually, Percy replied, "Thank you very much and now it's my turn to do the honors." Percy stepped closer to the helicopter and announced, "Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome the most distinguished leader in the world, President George W. Bush!" Kenny watched President Bush exit the helicopter. President Bush had selected his wardrobe wisely. He was wearing a blue and white checked shirt, tan slacks and nice leather shoes. The President took a few steps away from the chopper and walked over to the heliport railing. He leaned forward and waved to each section of the happy crowd.

Finally, President Bush shouted above the din, “I look forward to meeting all of you soon, and thanks for coming!”

Kenny felt a rush of adrenaline whisk through his body. Thousands of gooseflesh pimples arose from his skin and the hair on the back of his neck stood up.

Briskly, after shaking hands with Percy and Ferguson Marshall, President Bush was escorted downstairs to the main cabin. Fifty yards away and near the aft of the ship, Colorblind came back onto the stage and began performing their second set of music. The very intense band hit their mark once again, expertly banging out their southern-fried version of Van Halen’s hit tune, Panama! Hundreds of people moved to the beat and edged towards the other end of the yacht.

Athena hugged him and asked, “Kenny, do you feel like dancing?”

He returned Athena’s passionate embrace and replied, “I love you so much. Let’s go.”

As the thumping beat of the music lured them towards the band’s domain, Kenny held onto Athena’s hand and guided her through the streaming crowd. Kenny strode down the portside causeway and focused straight ahead. Suddenly, a trio of large men appeared in front of him and blacked out his view.

Kenny stopped and waited for one of the big fellows to speak up.

A thin black man demanded, “Mister Brown and Miss Miller, please follow us.”

Kenny glanced at Athena and asked, “Where’s Trevor and Marla?”

Athena swung her head to the right and said, “Back there ... somewhere.”

Feeling nervous, Kenny followed the gentlemen along the slim walkway until they arrived at the sliding door entrance of the dining room. The largest Secret Service Agent frowned at Kenny’s sombrero and he removed it without hesitating. “Sorry, I forgot about my hat.”

Leading the way, Kenny stepped into the massive dining room and he looked around. Matching items of fancy silverware and crystalline wine glasses adorned each table. Ten glittering chandeliers hung from the ceiling and a small group of people was conversing near one of the bars to his right.

Kenny saw eight people chatting with the President. He noticed Ferguson Marshall and his attractive brunette companion. Kenny recognized the pretty woman but couldn’t recall where he had seen her before. Clancy and Virginia Sheppard were also there, along with three other people that he didn’t know, including an attractive black couple and a solitary Hispanic man.

Percy acknowledged him and walked over.

Percy handed a glass of champagne to both and said, “Kenway, Athena—please join us for a drink.”

Athena gripped his hand and quietly said, “This is great!”

With his sombrero in his left hand and his ideal woman on the right, Kenny marched forward until he was standing about six feet away from the President of the United States.

Kenny cleared his throat, smiled and said, “It’s a pleasure to meet you Mister President. My name is Kenway Alan Brown, and this wonderful woman is the love of my life, Athena Miller.” With a warm smile, President Bush greeted Athena. Then he stepped forward and shook Kenny’s hand. “I admire what you have done, Kenny, and I’m a big fan of your brother’s as well.” Flattered and humbled, Kenny looked at the President and replied, “Thank you. The feeling is mutual.”

Percy spoke up and directed his orders to the bodyguards. “Get cracking gentlemen, and please locate Trevor Brown and Marla. Find them, pronto!”

Two men hustled from the dining room without skipping a beat.

Kenny watched as the President spoke with Athena, “The two of you make a charming couple, Athena.”

Kenny looked away from the President and then greeted the brown-haired owner of Trevor’s professional football team, Clancy Sheppard, and he also glanced at his strawberry-blonde wife, Virginia.

Kenny said, “Hello—it’s good to see both of you again.” After chatting for a moment, Kenny exchanged some pleasantries around the group and then shook hands with Ferguson Marshall. He gripped Ferguson’s right hand and glanced at his black shorts, bright pink shirt, and black deck shoes.

Ferguson looked deep into his eyes and said, “My son says hello, Coach Brown, and I’m pleased that you made it.” Ferguson draped his arm around his date’s waist and introduced the exotic-looking brunette woman in the tight white dress.

Ferguson asked, “Kenny, do you remember Veronica Mills? She’s a journalist for TIME Magazine.”

Kenny remembered her from the press conference on the same day that Percy had announced his stunning news about signing a world-class female athlete to a football scholarship. Kenny noticed the glittering diamond bracelet on her tanned wrist.

Veronica said, “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Kenny. I apologize for not introducing myself to you in February, but I was pressed for time.”

“No problem.” He examined the smoky features of her face. She was attractive.

Athena was speaking with the Sheppard’s and soon Kenny realized that he had to restrain himself from screaming ‘Objection’ to the sugarcoated dialogue flowing from the mouth of Ferguson Marshall.

Kenny looked into Ferguson’s dark eyes and replied, “I’m looking forward to working with Jason. Your son is a good athlete and a fine young man.”

Ferguson moved closer to him and sarcastically replied, “I hope so. But is he a better football player than your secret female star?”

Before Kenny could reply, President Bush asked, “Excuse me, gentlemen, but may I have the pleasure of joining your discussion?”

Kenny shut his mouth, but Ferguson replied, “Of course, Mister President. I was asking Coach Brown about the female superstar who’s going to join our team this fall.”

President Bush shifted his attention to Kenny and his keen eyes revealed his curiosity. “I’ve read about your decision, Kenny, and I admire you because you’ve stuck to your guns.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” Ferguson quickly replied.

Kenny glanced at Ferguson, but the Democratic Nominee didn’t notice because he was looking at his watch. Even though he had only been with Ferguson a few times, Kenny thought that he seemed to be more pressed for time than usual, skittish, and slightly distracted.

Kenny retrained his attention on the President and replied, “Thank you, and I think she’ll do just fine.”

President Bush’s eyes twinkled, and he said, “Times change. Good luck, Kenny.”
“Thank you, sir.”

Percy got the group’s attention and said, “For several reasons—this is the happiest day of my life! My family and my best friends are here to celebrate my birthday with me, and even President Bush has been kind enough to drop by.”

People raised their glasses and Percy continued speaking. “I have an announcement to make. As of yesterday afternoon, Ferguson Marshall and I have begun to align some of our considerable resources to pave the way in genetic engineering and sky-car manufacturing.”

Kenny was shocked and he almost dropped his glass. He looked at Athena, but she didn't notice his glare because she was staring at Percy. Normally, Percy only conducted business with Republicans or moderate-conservatives. From what he understood, usually, his boss did not associate with liberal Democrats because of their vast political differences and conflicting opinions about how to improve the country.

Appearing to be confident, Ferguson said, "Together, our new company, which will be called Infinite Minds will lead the way into the future. With our advanced computer technology and futuristic approach in the biotech industry, we'll expand the life expectancy of human beings and improve the safety standards for vehicular air travel."

Everybody in the group applauded and Percy said, "Now that we've scratched the surface, let's have a celebratory toast before lunch."

Ferguson Marshall offered his opinion. "What a tremendous idea! It's a perfect day to have a drink on the veranda!"

"That would be splendid," President Bush replied.

The group was about to head for the veranda, but then President Bush surprised everybody with his unexpected question. The President looked at Ferguson and asked, "Who's going to be your running mate this fall?"

Ferguson pivoted and grinned at the President.

Kenny looked at both as they sized each other up. He was enthralled and curious to hear Ferguson's answer.

Ferguson said, "With all due respect Mister President, I'm going to announce my Vice-Presidential Candidate on the Fourth of July."

The President smiled and nodded once.

Percy broke into their conversation and said, "Kenway, Athena, please join us outside."

As Percy and Ferguson guided President Bush towards the rear of the yacht, Kenny spun around and noticed that his brother and Marla had entered the dining room.

Trevor looked at him for a reasonable answer and called out, "Kenny, where are you going?"

Athena urged him along and Kenny replied, "To the aft of the ship for a toast. I'll be right back—promise."

Kenny whirled and began moving behind the group. They walked outside and were soundly greeted by a rollicking ovation from their peers. An alert troop of Secret Service Agents kept everybody else at bay while Ferguson and Percy increased the pace.

Kenny glanced around and saw John McDough and Rebecca Jones. He winked at each of them and shrugged his shoulders.

Kenny shifted his gaze to the right and looked at the jagged coastline and rugged cliffs of Acapulco. Even though the uneven rocks were at least 500 yards away, Kenny noticed flocks of seabirds swirling about. The yacht floated on the ocean, buoyed by the spread of its girth and supreme design. Nearby, he saw some brown pelicans dive-bombing into the blue water for lunch. One of the awkward birds crashed into the sea headfirst and came up empty, but the other pelican shook its head and swallowed its struggling victims.

The blazing sunshine was cooking his scalp, so Kenny put on his sombrero.

The group stopped at the rear-right portion of the ship and Ferguson said, “Ladies and gentlemen, today will never be forgotten!” Ferguson glanced at his watch and exclaimed, “It’s almost noon, and we deserve to remember this moment for the rest of our lives! God bless you all!”

Kenny and Athena raised their glasses of champagne.

Although Kenny didn’t understand Percy’s decision to team up with Ferguson Marshall, he said, “Here-here!”

CHAPTER 16

With hundreds of onlookers gathered nearby, Kenny sipped at his glass of champagne and savored its wonderful flavor. He watched President Bush drink some of his cranberry juice and then Kenny looked to his left, smiling at the middle-aged woman who still had a pair of binoculars dangling around her neck.

The energetic woman dipped her head and returned his pleasantry with a sensitive grin, but then her ill-fated skull and most of her neck disappeared in a thumping explosion of pulpy red matter. Flecks of magenta fluid and countless pieces of gruesome fragmented bone scattered into the crowd like bits of hot shrapnel from a fleshy hand-grenade.

For Kenny, everything seemed to be happening in slow motion. He dropped his champagne glass and it shattered into several glassy daggers by his feet. The powerful force of a deadly bullet's thermal wake ripped through his sombrero and caused it to levitate into the air. His big hat tumbled away with its tattered peak torn apart because it had been shot away. For a moment, his sandal-covered feet seemed to be super-glued to the sundeck and raging currents of nasty bile ebbed in his throat. Time flickered and manipulated his spinning mind. Surprised by his body's intensified reaction, Kenny realized he had been rendered deaf from the overwhelming situation. For a moment, he felt like he was dying.

Another wicked bullet raced across the sky and the aftereffect of its crackling noise broke the sound barrier with a zing, and Kenny's hearing suddenly returned with a loud clap. The leaden slug punctured the chest of a doomed Secret Service Agent valiantly sprinting towards President Bush. The unlucky bodyguard was thrown backward as if he had been kicked in the torso by a mule. His assaulted body pirouetted in midair and tumbled into the Pacific Ocean sixty feet below, providing an instant meal for the trailing sharks.

Kenny listened to the shrilling cries of his peers, while mayhem and terror evolved around him. His hands went numb and then he saw every member Colorblind jump from the stage and run for their lives. The stunned party-guests' horrified shrieks of panic increased to a feverish pitch. Kenny lunged for Athena, gripped her arm and pulled her to the sundeck. Athena's eyelids were expanded to the hilt. She looked at him with fear, anger, and bewilderment seeping from her eyes.

Athena screamed at him, "Kenny, what's happening?"

"Death!" Kenny shouted. He fixed her with a rigid glare and said. "Don't move!"

Athena yelled, “Stay here, Kenny!”

A thundering stampede of terrified people bolted for the main cabin of the yacht, but Kenny had other things on his mind. Athena was safe, but he needed to locate his brother and Marla, and he realized that Percy, John McDough, and Rebecca Jones could still be in harm’s way.

Kenny could feel that his heart was beating faster than ever before, and his mouth was dry. He scrambled to his hands and knees and then saw the most bizarre scene he had ever witnessed. As another brave Secret Service Agent was about to wedge his thick body between President Bush and another potential bullet, Ferguson Marshall staggered towards the President like a zombie. In a determined but stiff and robotic fashion, Ferguson lurched forward and covered President Bush with his own quaking self.

Veronica Mills let go of her purse, hunched over, and then ran towards the other side of the ship before skirting into the dining room.

Kenny looked at Ferguson’s injured right leg and saw that Ferguson had taken a direct hit in the unprotected meat of his hamstring. A large disgusting crater was spewing dark red blood and Ferguson looked as if he was ready to pass out. Hurriedly, Kenny bear-crawled towards Ferguson but then a few government agents suddenly intercepted him.

Kenny glanced up to the left and noticed the rotor blades of the President’s helicopter churning. He understood that President Bush was about to receive an emergency evacuation escort from his cavalry of bodyguards.

Frantically, Kenny ripped off his shirt and shimmied over to Ferguson Marshall. Ferguson was hissing between his clenched teeth, attempting to breathe normally but hyperventilating instead. The normally dark skin on Ferguson’s face had taken on a much lighter shade of bronze, his complexion was growing paler and his eyes were glossy.

Another deadly bullet sailed over his head and crackled in the air.

Kenny flinched, then uttered, “They’re trying to kill you. Stay down, Ferguson! Stay down!”

He looked at the injured man and tried to gauge his level of awareness. Kenny shouted at the fallen man and asked him, “Ferguson, can you hear me?”

Ferguson inclined his head, then scowled at him and coldly replied, “Just wrap my leg and shut up!”

Using his resolves - Kenny ignored Ferguson’s harsh reply and worked on his abused leg. Kenny removed his own wallet, flipped it open, wrapped his shirt around it and used it as a winch

for the tourniquet. Less than a minute later, Kenny had Ferguson's upper-leg secured in the twisting vice of the bloody tourniquet. Kenny looked at Ferguson for some feedback about the pressure of the tourniquet, but Ferguson said nothing.

With Ferguson's blood covering his hands and arms, Kenny listened to the alarmed cries and terrified shouts around him while gazing into the fierce eyes of Ferguson Marshall. For a millisecond, Kenny thought that he recognized the face of evil emanating from the man's dark eyes. It jolted him beyond anything he had known since his dealings with the murderous priest on the McMillan College campus two years ago. Suddenly, Kenny wanted to ask Ferguson a simple question.

Regaining his composure, Kenny purged those ridiculous thoughts from his mind and scanned the deck of the yacht.

Seconds later a grim-faced government agent arrived on the scene and relieved Kenny of his duties.

The government agent said, "There's an assassin on the coastline. Get down!"

The President's helicopter lifted into the sky and sped away towards a much safer location. Kenny surveyed the lily-white horizon of the sundeck and noticed that Percy McMillan had either made it to the main cabin or found a safe place to hide. He observed at least twenty government agents herding many shocked people into the dining room. Several other agents had taken-up aggressive firing positions around the port side of the yacht. A few of the agents had their pistols drawn but most of them were using handheld communication devices and interacting with their coworkers stationed on the vast mesa above the rugged coastline in the distance. Cautiously, Kenny raised his head to check out the scene and another bullet whizzed by him. He hit the deck and tried to figure out his next move.

Kenny heard Athena's blood-chilling scream echoing around him and he froze for a split second. Like a nervous animal, Kenny whipped around when Athena's howl of agony penetrated the depths of his soul. He gawked at her but realized that Athena was unnerved because something terrible had happened to a different person.

Unblinking, Kenny followed Athena's gaze until he saw it for himself.

On the other side of the yacht, Trevor was on his knees, straddling Marla's body and furiously performing CPR on his bloody and victimized wife.

Although Kenny was more than twenty yards away from them, he instantly concluded that Marla was in serious trouble. Gleaming rivers of crimson flowed down her legs and a puddle of fresh blood had formed beneath Trevor's shins and ankles. Even though he couldn't see Trevor's face, his brother's frantic actions and over-attentive duties told him everything that he needed to know.

Grief-stricken, Kenny screamed, "No, Marla! Oh my God!"

He looked at one of the Secret Service Agents and yelled, "Call the Coast Guard and request an airlift to the nearest hospital. Now! Now! Now!"

The stem agent nodded and hastily replied, "Two choppers are on the way, sir!"

Kenny's nerves felt like they were on fire, but his innermost fears had inexplicably vanished. Anger, revenge, and vigilance raced through his veins. A few more bullets zoomed by his head and struck the fiberglass yacht. Splinters of white epoxy and bits of resin scattered into the air like man-made snowflakes. He sprinted across the veranda and came to a sliding stop next to the binocular-woman's decapitated body. Kenny grabbed the dead woman's bloodstained binoculars and scurried towards the aft of the ship. Slowly, he raised his head above the fiberglass wall of the yacht and focused his binoculars on the uneven cliffs of the Mexican coastline. Breathing deeply and in rapid succession, he scouted the jagged terrain but failed to locate any signs of the ruthless killer shooting at them. Using the exceptional vision of the binoculars, he watched five Secret Service Agents moving back and forth on the plateau above the rocky cliffs, desperately searching for the assassin.

In unison, the panicked group of government agents on the plateau pointed towards the Pacific Ocean when they had spotted something vital. Kenny watched them gallop up the coast in pursuit of their felonious quarry. He dropped the aim of the binoculars to the level of the water and shifted his vision to the left. Finally, he located the petite and mobile item that had attracted the attention of the agents. He zeroed in on the fleeing target and watched the pumpkin-colored, Zodiac boat skip across the ocean with surprising speed. Kenny looked at the stoic figure guiding the small craft and realized the person in the boat wasn't moving at all.

Kenny stood up and perched his elbows on the yacht's railing. Trying to remain still, he looked through the lenses and carefully watched the enigmatic figure in the boat, hoping to see the person flinch, sneeze, or twitch.

Finally, he withdrew the binoculars from his face and shouted at the Secret Service Agents on the yacht. "It's a decoy! It's a fake, it's a fake!"

Kenny looked around but realized that nobody on the ship was taking him seriously. Quickly, he brought the binoculars back up to his face and searched the rocky coastline for other clues while the lifeless figure in the Zodiac boat continued its Pied-Piper mission of drawing attention to itself.

As if God had answered his urgent prayers, Kenny spotted a man in a black wetsuit jumping from the ledge of a frowning cave. The malicious man fell through the air towards the water. Kenny saw the villain reach up with his hands to protect his scuba facemask in preparation for his collision with the ocean. The man splashed into the lapping surf below. The horrible stranger disappeared for a moment, before popping up and swimming in the opposite direction of the Zodiac boat.

With his eyes riveted to the binoculars, Kenny scouted the terrain to the right and looked ahead of the swimming assassin. He noticed a small beach about 125 yards away from the murderer and guessed that the tiny strip of land was going to be the man's exit point or pit stop, in order to slip into some hidden scuba gear.

With urgency in his voice, Kenny yelled. "There he is! He's over there ... to the right!" Kenny stepped back and then a large hand touched upon his bare right shoulder. He spun around and looked into the devastated blue-gray eyes of Trevor.

Trevor had massive amounts of blood covering his body, but Kenny guessed that he wasn't physically injured. Time seemed to lose all meaning, and Kenny felt as if he could see into the agonizing depths of his brother's spirit.

Trevor's bloodshot eyes had teardrops of agony in them, and his eyelids were puffy and swollen. Death had obviously taken Marla away from him forever.

Kenny was speechless, but Trevor angrily said, "I'm going to kill that man!"

Kenny began to cry because he didn't want to believe that Marla was dead. He didn't know what to do, and he could only utter, "I'm so sorry, Trevor! Oh my God!"

Firmly, Trevor replied, "That man is getting away. Are you coming with me?"

Kenny looked at his brother, stupefied and asked, "How?"

With a fierce grimace shadowing his face, Trevor used his left arm to point at the red jet boat tethered behind the yacht.

Kenny understood his intent, but he said, “Trevor, that’s nuts! We’re covered in blood, and there are sharks in the water!”

“So, what!” Trevor shoved him and moved away.

Trevor began marching backward, silently retracing his steps while lining up his runway towards the end of the ship. Kenny lowered his head upon realizing that Trevor was going to leap into the ocean, with or without him.

Athena ran over to Kenny and gripped him by the shoulders. She looked at him and screamed, “Don’t do it, Kenny, because it won’t bring Marla back to life!”

Trevor kept marching backward.

Kenny looked at Athena and said, “I love you, but I’m going with him,” he twisted away from her, and strode towards Trevor.

A few seconds later, Kenny was sprinting next to Trevor, racing across the ship’s veranda towards the most dangerous leap of their lives.

Kenny ran with his brother and thought, Dear God, Trevor and I are covered with blood and we’re jumping into an ocean that’s filled with Hammerheads! I don’t understand why Marla is dead, but please take care of her, and let Trevor and I make it to that jet boat alive!

They launched themselves into the humid tropical air and Kenny desperately hoped for the best. Using his right hand, he grabbed onto Trevor’s left forearm and clenched it tight. They careened through the light blue sky and fell towards the ocean.

CHAPTER 17

Midway through his rapid freefall from the yacht, Kenny released his brother's arm and plummeted towards the sea. As he continued his quickening descent, he glanced at the red jet boat and wondered if he was going to make it to the waiting speedster after plunging into the water.

Kenny saw the triangular-shaped dorsal fins of the Hammerheads darting about, but there was nothing he could do about it.

Like a speeding cannonball, Kenny hit the water and rocketed into the darkening fathoms below. He didn't know where Trevor was, but he stroked his arms and kicked his legs to regenerate his body towards the surface. Kenny opened his eyelids and the bitter sting of the saltwater attacked his eyeballs. He squinted and realized that a hazy copper-colored cloud of blood had rinsed away from their bodies after mixing with the ocean.

Kenny pumped his way towards the top and his head broke through the surface of the water. He thought about his brother's beautiful son, Charlie, who would now grow up without his mother.

Kenny ripped through the surface of the water and gasped for air. "Ugh! Ugh!" He sucked in a few deep breaths and anxiously searched for Trevor.

Kenny shouted, "Trevor! Where are you?"

A few seconds elapsed before his brother's panicked face appeared to his left.

Trevor looked at him and grunted, "Swim! Damn it! Swim!"

Without looking back, Kenny swam towards the jet boat using a freestyle stroke and his most powerful kicks. After traveling about two-thirds of the way to the boat, Kenny looked back for Trevor. His brother was about ten yards behind him, with a pair of Hammerheads trailing in his wake.

Scared to death, Kenny spat saltwater and shouted. "Faster, Trevor! Swim faster!"

As Trevor drew even with him, Kenny ducked beneath the water and peered at the menacing duo of spread-eyed sea monsters swimming their way. With startling speed, Kenny removed his sandals. He came up for air and gripped both pieces of his footwear in his right hand. Summoning all his strength and accuracy, he fired both of his waterlogged weapons at the oncoming dorsal fins of the Hammerheads. One of his leather shoes hit the mark, and then both sharks peeled away for a moment.

Trevor sped past him without looking back. Kenny spun around and swam like a convict escaping from Alcatraz Island.

When he arrived at the jet boat, Trevor was holding onto the steel cable attached to the bow of the boat and he helped Kenny up. Trevor was huffing and puffing from his frightening swim.

“That was insane!” Kenny said.

Soaking wet, Trevor glanced at him and replied, “Unhook the cable and let’s go!” Trevor slid into the cockpit of the jet boat and said, “Kenny, you drive, and I’ll navigate.”

After Trevor had unclipped the cable, Kenny scrambled into the driver’s seat. Kenny pushed the ignition button and the powerful engines of the jet boat rumbled like a dragster. Kenny glanced up at the yacht and noticed a lot of people watching them with fascination showing on their faces.

With needles of anger and vengeance piercing his heart, Kenny drove the boat while Trevor held onto the windshield. Kenny veered the boat to the left before jamming down on the throttle full-speed ahead. The mighty engines responded and roared like a giant beast. The angular nose of the boat tilted upwards and they skimmed across the water like a serpent. To stabilize his body, Kenny grabbed onto a safety handle and focused on the cliffs in the distance.

The thunderous noise of the engines made conversation with his brother impossible, and the wind blew through his hair and across his face. The sleek boat zoomed across the turquoise water and bumped through the ocean like a flying fish skipping from swell to swell.

As they approached the craggy Mexican coastline, Kenny saw a pair of orange, white, and green helicopters in the sky. The Mexican Coast Guard was coming in fast.

When they finally arrived at the bubbling white surf, Kenny steered the jet boat cautiously and decreased its speed. Impatiently, Trevor vaulted over the sloping windshield and crawled onto the ribbed-beak of the bow. He leaned forward like an alert hunting dog.

As the strong engines of the boat purred, Kenny asked, “Do you see him?”

Trevor latched onto the mooring ring jutting from the prow. He shook his head and yelled, “Nothing!”

The boat undulated on the water and Kenny scouted the rocky terrain near the crescent-shaped beach. Kenny searched the water for the killer but saw nothing valuable and grew angry. He pounded on the windshield and cursed several times.

Kenny heard a loud and demanding male voice speak to them through the intimidating boom of a megaphone. “This is the National Coast Guard of Mexico. Shut down your engines and drop your anchor!”

Kenny spun around and looked at the well-armed helicopter hovering in the sky behind them. It loomed about forty-yards away, with its machine guns poised and waiting.

Kenny swung back to his brother and gazed at him.

With pleading eyes, Trevor shook his head and said, “It’s up to you, Kenny. I don’t care if they shoot us full of holes or not— because I want to kill that bastard!”

Kenny looked into his brother’s eyes and watched Trevor steal a glance at the helicopter behind them.

Calmly, Kenny replied, “If they cut us to pieces, then Charlie will be an orphan.”

Kenny’s reply seemed to dig into Trevor’s saddened heart like a javelin.

The dominating voice from the helicopter exploded at them again. “Shut down your engines and drop your anchor, or we will fire on you!”

Resignedly, Trevor lowered his head in defeat.

Kenny watched his brother wail uncontrollably as the pain of Marla’s sudden death overtook him. The immeasurable weight of a harsher reality seemed to be crashing down upon Trevor right before his eyes.

Using his trembling right hand, Kenny pushed down on the ignition button and turned off the engines. He ambled over to the tail section of the jet boat, flipped a lock, and released the anchor. With teardrops streaking down his face, Kenny went back to Trevor and hugged him with all his might.

CHAPTER 18

The next morning, Ferguson Marshall sat upright in his adjustable bed on the 12th floor of Saint Christopher's Hospital and looked into the amber eyes of Veronica Mills. To his right, he saw a glorious sunrise of red and orange welcoming him.

He fiddled with the intravenous tubes beneath his pea-green hospital gown and asked, "Veronica, could you please do me a favor?"

She smiled and quietly replied, "Of course. What do you need, Ferguson?"

Ferguson looked at her and traced the outline of her tan face and lush red lips. Her eyelashes seemed to be a foot long and she was naturally built like a centerfold model. He relished having rough and tumble sex with her and had forgotten about his longtime arrangement with Bobbie the very moment he had kissed Veronica.

He said, "Saxon is going to be here any minute and I need to speak with him privately." Veronica nodded and he continued, "At noon Percy McMillan and the rest of his entourage are going to stop by and pay me a get-well visit."

"You've become more popular than ever," Veronica replied.

Ferguson grinned but felt a throbbing pain in his leg and quit smiling. "Could you please return to our hotel and pack' our things? I would like to switch to a new hotel by tomorrow morning."

"Yes," Veronica responded before she unbuttoned a few clasps of her purple blouse to cool off.

Ferguson eyeballed her voluptuous womanhood and said, "Thanks. Please check out three or four possible hotels by dinnertime tonight."

Veronica kissed him for a long time and then walked out of the room. That's what he liked about her; she was all business. Ferguson glanced at the square clock hanging on the wall across from his bed above the mounted television.

"It's almost seven o'clock," he quipped. "Time for the news." He pressed the remote control and turned on the television. The Spanish speaking news was about to start. Fortunately, he was fluent in Spanish.

Saxon knocked on the door and walked in with a big grin stretched across his face. He was wearing a pair of bone-colored slacks, sienna shoes, and a dark blue shirt. “Glad to see you alive, sir.”

“As usual, the pleasure is all mine,” Ferguson replied sarcastically. “How was your flight last night? Any problems with the new jet?”

Saxon said, “Everything went well.”

He shook Saxon’s hand and watched him drag over a chair to sit closer to his bed.

Saxon got comfortable and said, “You’re a hero, Ferguson! The world loves you, and President Bush has been calling you a saint for the last fifteen hours.”

Ferguson could feel his ego swelling to monumental proportions. He closed his eyelids and imagined himself as the next President of the United States. After daydreaming about his future, he asked Saxon a question. “Anything negative to report?” Saxon paused and replied, “No, except that Oscar missed the target several times and four innocent people got killed.”

Ferguson grimaced at the thought of Oscar’s deadly mishap and said, “Nobody on this planet is innocent, Saxon, and it was obviously time for those people to die.”

“Agreed,” Saxon replied. “But there might be a fly in the ointment.”

Ferguson didn’t like the sound of that, and he asked, “What kind of fly?”

Saxon ran his hands across the top of his head and said, “Marla Brown, the wife of Trevor, was one of the victims yesterday. She died instantly.”

In a matter of seconds, Ferguson’s intelligent mind calculated what could possibly transpire because of Marla Brown’s demise: the good, the bad, and the terrible.

Ferguson shrugged, then asked, “Is there anything else to report?”

Saxon picked at his nostrils and replied, “Unfortunately, Marla Brown was one of our own because she was a registered Democrat voter.”

Ferguson smacked his bed and said, “Damn it! I can’t afford to lose any votes!”

He asked Saxon, “What about Kenny Brown?”

Saxon took out three sticks of bubble gum and inserted them into his mouth. “He has declined all interview requests and so did his brother because their family is in mourning.”

Ferguson absorbed his reply and asked Saxon another question. “What about Oscar? Have the local authorities found anything that might backfire on us?”

“Nope. Just the sniper rifle and a few other miscellaneous items that Oscar wanted them to find. As far as I can tell, Oscar dove to the bottom of the ocean and put on his scuba gear—just like he had planned,” Saxon explained.

“Good,” Ferguson said. “But he should be tortured for a few days for messing things up.”

Saxon shook his head and replied, “With all due respect, I disagree with you, sir. Because of Oscar, your popularity has been catapulted into the clouds, even though Kenny Brown is still alive.”

Ferguson nodded and said, “I want him dead! That football coach hates me, and I have no respect for him because he’s planning to put some unknown super-bitch ahead of my son—I can feel it in my bones. Do you realize how embarrassing that will be for me? I will not sleep until Coach Brown is dead. The world will never know the difference when he is gone. He’s a nobody—do you understand what I’m saying?”

“Yes,” Saxon said. “But you should let things cool down for a while and ride this wave of free publicity. Let the football coach relax for a bit because Kenny Brown and his brother are going to be hell-bent on finding Marla’s killer.”

“Excellent point,” Ferguson remarked. “But this publicity hasn’t been free, because it has cost me two million bucks and a chunk of my right leg.”

Saxon smirked and said, “That’s true, but everything has a price.”

Ferguson rolled his eyes and noticed the television news was about to start. He asked Saxon, “When are you supposed to communicate with Oscar again?”

Saxon hesitated and answered. “After the Fourth of July. Oscar told me to be patient if anything went wrong.”

Ferguson scoffed. “I want Coach Brown eliminated before the football season begins. Do I make myself clear?”

“Clear as a diamond,” Saxon replied obediently.

Ferguson began watching the Spanish-speaking news anchor. He heard the female commentator say, “Ever since the failed assassination attempt on President Bush yesterday afternoon, rumors have been flying that he will ask Democratic nominee Ferguson Marshall to be his new Vice-Presidential running-mate by late July because current VP Dick Cheney will soon retire as previously planned. President Bush might reach across the aisle once again and unite

America during their times of stress.” Saxon read the English translation speeding across the bottom of the screen. He raised his eyebrows and glanced at Ferguson.

Ferguson was surprised and he increased the volume on the television. The woman said, “For the past six months, the world has known that current VP Dick Cheney will retire soon.” “True,” Saxon remarked before Ferguson told him to zip it. Saxon was about to speak but Ferguson snapped his fingers to silence him. The news anchorwoman said, “If President Bush chooses the popular Democrat Ferguson Marshall as his running mate, it could turn out to be one of the most brilliant administrative moves of all time or a monumental blunder.”

Triumphantly, Ferguson pressed a button on the remote and turned off the television. He beamed at Saxon and was momentarily satisfied with the progress of his master plan.

“I’m one step closer to the top of the mountain,” Ferguson said.

CHAPTER 19

Twenty minutes before the setting sun vanished behind the horizon of the Pacific Ocean in a rich atmospheric fondue of violet, dusty rose, and silver, Kenny glanced from sea to sky while thoughts of his late sister-in-law flashed through his fatigued brain.

With a heavy heart for the departed Marla, and for Trevor and Charlie, Kenny looked at the emotionally wrecked people gathered for Marla's wake in the massive backyard of his brother's home in Malibu. Athena was standing to his left, cloaked in a black dress and quietly crying while holding his hand. On his right stood his grieving mother and stepfather, Gregory Cage. His mother was holding his nephew, Charlie, and Charlie appeared content because he didn't understand what was happening.

Kenny's folks were dressed in black and so was everybody else.

Across from the beautiful, large, black-and-white portrait of Marla that was the centerpiece of her funeral, Marla's bereaved parents trembled with shock. Her silver-haired father stared blankly at the pretty image of his dead daughter, while his angry wife tilted her chin towards the clouds and whispered questions to the Lord.

All three of the members of the Sheppard family were standing behind the rest of Kenny's extended family, and they were grim and watery-eyed.

Kenny felt a single teardrop tumble down his face before it plopped onto the grass beneath him. He didn't know if he could produce any more tears because he had barely stopped crying since Marla's death one week ago. He was deeply concerned about the emotional state of Trevor, and he was also wary of the upcoming challenges that would certainly befall Charlie.

Athena turned to him and said, "I love you, Kenny."

He looked at her and replied, "Me too."

A hypnotic feeling lured his eyesight to the right and he met the hazel eyes of his mother. She looked at him with volumes of love and decades of despair pouring from her soul. He wondered how his mother had managed to survive their own father's death before they had been born.

Reminiscing about his own childhood, Kenny realized that he and Trevor had been a pair of rambunctious hellions growing up, but their mother had single-handedly orchestrated their upbringing until Gregory ventured into their lives when they were teenagers.

Kenny grinned at his mother and heard Trevor's finishing words of the ceremony. "My sweet Marla, now that you're in heaven, I want you to remember that you made my life heaven on Earth. I loved you from the first day we met at the University of Georgia, to the moment you died in my arms."

Trevor's voice wavered and he paused. He walked over to then-mother and gently lifted Charlie from her. Charlie smiled at his dad and Trevor kissed him on the nose. Patiently, Trevor walked over to the photograph of his dead wife and said, "Marla, we will always be with you, and you will always be with us."

Trevor squatted to the ground like a baseball catcher and picked up a solid brass burial urn.

Kenny watched his brother step away and speak to the small crowd. "Marla loved all of you and I would be honored if you would stay with us while I release her ashes into the wind from the cliffs behind our home. That's what she wanted."

Overwhelmed, Marla's bereaved mother wailed, "Oh, dear Jesus! I can't believe she's gone!"

Several people consoled her, and Kenny watched Trevor focus his attention on Charlie. Trevor was weeping but he said to Charlie, "Come on, son, it's time to say goodbye to your mama." That did it. Kenny cried into his hands. After a few seconds, he raised his head and observed Trevor striding towards the edge of the jagged plateau. The small crowd followed Trevor and Charlie towards the lofty point bordering his estate.

Kenny looked at his brother and a gust of wind blew across his face. Trevor stopped walking near the edge of the cliff and the group halted, forming a semi-circle behind Trevor and Charlie.

Trevor looked at Charlie and quietly said, "Wave goodbye to your mama."

Naively, Charlie looked around and searched the pretty sky for his mother's face. Charlie uttered, "Bye-bye, Mama."

Kenny was shaking with despair, but he watched Trevor remove the brass lid of the burial urn. In a sweeping motion with his right arm, Trevor dispensed Marla's ashes into the wind. Her dusty remnants lifted into the air in a gray cloud before disseminating into the eternal reaches of the unknown.

Kenny focused on his brother's handsome profile and thought about the course of Trevor's life. His well-known brother had been a wild man in college, but Marla had tamed him and helped

Trevor fulfill his potential. Before Marla's death, Trevor had been an excellent professional quarterback on the verge of having another great season. Now, everything was in jeopardy and Kenny wanted nothing more than for his brother to succeed. He was worried because he understood that Trevor might delve back into the unpredictable ways that lurked in his personality, and that possibility terrified him more than anything.

CHAPTER 20

On the last Sunday morning of June, Kenny rolled out of bed and sauntered downstairs to his kitchen. He turned on the coffee maker and rubbed his face. Satisfied, he walked over to the door leading to the garage and let Touchdown into the house. She wagged her tail and licked his hands. Kenny filled her bowl with hard and soft dog food and replenished her water.

He poured himself a large mug of coffee with cream and walked over to the piano between his family room and the kitchen. He sat down on the bench and sipped at his hot beverage. Warmed up Kenny placed his cup on top of the piano and then he feathered the keys with his fingertips. He wasn't sure about what song to play, so he ran his hands across the notes until he found something befitting his mood.

Athena had taught him well and he played a choppy but respectable version of The Phantom of the Opera. Feeling despondent, he pounded on the keys until his fingers ached. He quit playing and then finished his coffee in the kitchen while eating, two muffins. Feeling a tad bit better, he bounded upstairs and showered for thirty minutes until the hot water had been used up. Five minutes before eight o'clock in the morning, Kenny was in his truck heading south on highway 680 and maneuvering through the morning summer fog. The five-lane road was nearly deserted, and he drifted from lane to lane relishing the freedom. In a daze, he merged to the right and guided his vehicle onto the rising slope of Highway 580 West. Twenty minutes later, he was driving on the crest of the San Mateo Bridge before reaching the peninsula on the other side of the bay. He drove on highway 92 westbound and ventured down the most beautiful freeway in the San Francisco Bay area, highway 280 South, towards Percy McMillan's ranch in Woodside.

At nine-thirty he drove underneath the arching gateway of Percy's sprawling, west coast ranch. He looked at the branded symbol serving as the gate's keystone, PMc.

He mumbled the words, "Percy McMillan," and looked around.

To his left, at least a dozen horses were middling about the farm and a trio of nervous ostriches eyeballed him suspiciously. A portly blonde woman in a pair of faded blue jeans and a red sweater was dealing with a couple of fat pigs, and Kenny saw a flock of sheared sheep pattering on the right. He could see an apple orchard beyond the pigpen and three people were tending to the chardonnay vineyard on the hill behind Percy's home.

Kenny drove up to the light almond-colored house and parked his truck. He left the keys dangling in the ignition and slid out of the vehicle. The front door of the house opened, and his boss walked out to greet him. “Kenway, how are you on this fine day in June?”

He looked at Percy and replied, “Glad to be alive.”

Percy walked onto the front porch and Kenny thought that his boss might bump the top of his head against the rafters. Percy was wearing black and orange lizard skin cowboy boots that contrasted well with his dark jeans and white shirt. Kenny guessed that Percy must have stood 6'10" because of the additional three-inch heels of his boots.

Kenny strode up to Percy and shook his hand. His boss meandered into the house and Kenny followed. Percy led him through a western-styled entry containing wagon wheels and authentic masterpieces of flamboyant Indian headdresses. They moved through the house and Kenny noticed hundreds of rifles and antiquated handguns mounted on the walls. Fascinated, he stopped walking to investigate a collection of dainty pistols that were labeled and poised on a red velvet wall.

He read a few of the inscriptions beneath some of the old guns. Colt .22, Jones & Brickman .35 Caliber Twin-shooter.

Every time Kenny had the opportunity to visit one of Percy's offices or homes around the world, he was stunned by the man's collection of priceless artifacts.

“Nice guns,” Kenny said to his boss. “Impressive.”

“Thank you, Kenway.” Percy paused near the entrance to the kitchen and remarked. “All of them are loaded ... with one bullet each.”

That got Kenny's attention and he replied with a questionable tone in his voice. “Just one bullet per gun—that's interesting.” He glanced at a few more guns and asked, “What about trigger locks?”

Percy waived his right hand and guffawed. “Please, Kenway!” Kenny tailed Percy into the kitchen and was greeted by an extensive cooking center that beckoned memories of the Ponderosa. The countertops were made of polished black granite, with twisting veins of pure gold weaving through them. He looked at the cabinets and noticed that each doorknob was a miniaturized, solid gold horseshoe with diamond studs embedded in them.

Percy walked over to the black refrigerator and extracted two bottles of cold water. He opened both and offered one to Kenny.

They drank and Percy asked, “How’s your brother, Kenway?” Kenny sipped his water and said, “I thought he was doing okay, but when he got into that horrible brawl last week at a bar in New York, well, I’m not so sure. He starts training camp in a few weeks, and I hope he settles down before then.”

Percy looked down at him and replied, “My heart goes out to your brother and to his son. I will keep them in my prayers.” Kenny was touched and he thanked Percy. Percy led him towards the family room. His boss spoke to an automated control system and said, “Stereo on, please. Play Garth Brooks and Bonnie Rivers.”

Kenny heard some country & western music seep from the speakers of the voice-activated system. He looked at the array of unique animal heads mounted on the walls in the room. Moose, elk, grizzly bear, bighorn sheep and other representatives from the animal kingdom loomed from above.

He said to Percy, “I didn’t know that you were a hunter.” Percy sat down in a big leather chair and explained, “I’m not. The National Geographic Society gave these trophies to me. My family has always been an avid supporter of their cause.”

Kenny nodded and sipped at his carbonated water. Silence endured, and Kenny asked, “What’s the news, Boss?”

Percy propped his boots onto a wooden chest. He was quiet for a few seconds and then he replied. “Kenway, it’s been a month since my birthday party on the yacht.”

Kenny nodded and Percy continued speaking. “To the best of my knowledge, every person on that ship has been interrogated at least three times by the Mexican authorities and our own FBI.”

“Four times for me, and also for Trevor,” Kenny huffed. “Precisely,” Percy said, and he changed the subject. “We’ve been over this before, but in your opinion, who do you think the assassin was trying to kill?”

He gazed at Percy’s angular face and riveting, blue eyes. Unable to figure out the answer to his question, Kenny said, “The President.”

His boss looked at him, and Kenny had the feeling that Percy was staring into his soul.

“Wrong answer, Kenway.”

Taken aback, Kenny rethought his options and said, “Ferguson Marshall.”

Percy shook his head. “No.”

Kenny was getting uncomfortable. He shifted his weight and stood beneath a huge Bison head that had hooking, foot-long horns.

Uneasily, Kenny said, "You."

His boss said, "Try again; the wrong target."

Wearily, Kenny scanned the walls and gazed into the lifeless eyes of a black jaguar and the golden orbs of a sea eagle with a broad wingspan. Unable to come up with the answer, Kenny guessed. "My brother."

He saw Percy's eyebrows twitch. "You're getting warmer."

At first, the telling reply from his boss zoomed by him and he failed to notice the implied link before Percy's words crashed into the back of his head like a speeding comet.

"Me?" Kenny asked, not wanting to hear the truth.

Percy folded his hands beneath his chin and said, "In my opinion, yes."

Saddened with the potential guilt of Marla's death that would be attached to his existence for the rest of time, Kenny closed his eyelids and shook his head. "Please, God, don't let this be true." Firmly, Kenny gritted his teeth, looked at Percy again and said. "You're wrong, Boss! This time, you are wrong!"

"I hope so, Kenway," Percy responded. "But the evidence suggests otherwise."

Kenny snapped his head in Percy's direction and asked, "What evidence?"

His boss remained cool, but Kenny realized he had offended Percy with his bitter response.

"Sorry," Kenny stated.

"I understand your denial, Kenway," Percy replied. "But take a look at this."

Percy pivoted and gave another order to the automated communications system. "Monitors on, and please activate video number four from my birthday party on the yacht."

An oak panel slid apart and a massive television appeared from behind its wooden console. The television flickered and Kenny saw the familiar layout of Percy's yacht detailed in black and white. He recognized several of the happy people on the sundeck of the yacht.

Percy took a laser pointer out of his shirt pocket and said, "Lights off."

The family room became darker. Percy aimed the thin beam of his red pointer at the grainy image on the television and moved the red pinpoint back and forth.

Kenny looked at the people on the ship that fateful day. Sadly, he located the unlucky woman who had been using her binoculars on the yacht, and he remembered the terrible ending of her life when she had been decapitated by the assassin's deadly bullet.

Finally, Percy said, "Kenway, you and I are the only two people that have ever seen this videotape."

Kenny took a few steps forward and asked. "Why?"

"It's private property," Percy stated. "I've already given the authorities each videotape from the other three cameras on the ship, but I kept this one for myself, in case somebody was trying to kill me. I needed to find out if the government wanted me dead."

Kenny shifted his feet and asked, "Does Uncle Sam want you out of the picture?"

Percy chuckled. "One never knows, even though my family contributes enormous amounts of money to the military. But it's best to be safe, rather than foolish."

"I agree," then Kenny asked, "What makes this tape so special?"

Percy said, "Angles, Kenway. This camera is positioned at an extremely high angle and it provides an excellent view of the sundeck. Watch this videotape and I think you'll agree with my conclusions."

Kenny looked at the television and Percy aimed his laser pointer at the image of Kenny's sombrero.

Percy said, "Here it comes, Kenway. Please pay attention."

Kenny looked at his Mexican hat and watched the top-portion of his sombrero blow its top like an erupting volcano. Feeling queasy, Kenny wanted to look away as the woman with the binoculars was decapitated repeatedly because Percy replayed the tape several times.

Percy said, "That's bullet number one. Keep track of this, Kenway."

Kenny watched another bullet chip away at the fiberglass walls of the yacht and Percy said, "There goes the second bullet, Kenway. It raced past the left side of your head and you didn't even know it."

"It took me a moment to realize what was going on," Kenny replied defensively.

"Relax, Kenway—I understand," Percy said, and he continued talking. "The fourth bullet hit Special Agent Sims in the chest, and he fell into the ocean. The fifth and sixth bullets were fired in the direction of President Bush and Ferguson Marshall. However, only one of those shots

hit their intended victims. The other bullet accidentally killed Mister Tom Watson, who was a close friend of our family.”

Angrily, Kenny said, “Percy, I don’t want to watch this crap anymore!”

His boss looked at him and replied, “Thirty seconds, Kenway. Then we’re done.”

Reluctantly, Kenny watched himself on the television screen as he attended to the wounds of Ferguson Marshall. He saw Marla appear behind the right corner of a bulky white cargo hold, clearly pictured on the television screen. He watched Marla take a few tentative steps towards Trevor, but then the front portion of her pretty outfit collapsed into her abdomen and chunks of her flesh spewed from her lower back. Marla fell into Trevor’s arms and died instantly.

Kenny couldn’t control himself any longer and he shouted. “Turn it off, Boss! Turn that God damn thing off!” He was livid and hot, and he scowled at Percy.

Like a mentor tutoring his apprentice, Percy rewound ten seconds of the videotape and sternly replied, “No, Kenway! Look at this again! It’s important!”

Fuming mad, Kenny glanced up, ready to brawl.

Percy raised his voice and said, “The bullet that killed Marla zipped over your head, Kenway. That shot was intended for you, not her. Every single shot except two of them went near your head. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

Percy used the laser pointer to emphasize his concerns on the screen and then he finally said, “All systems off and lights on, please.”

Kenny leaned against the wall and reached for a gun. Mindlessly, he fiddled with an old Winchester rifle that was suspended on the knotty-pine boards by a set of hooks. He took the rifle out of its rack and examined the musket’s polished wooden features. The slender gun felt surprisingly heavy in his hands.

Percy stood up, ambled over to him and reassuringly said, “Be careful. Take it easy, Kenway.”

Kenny looked up and replied, “I know because each gun has one bullet in it.”

Percy looked down at him and quietly said, “I understand how difficult this has been for you and Trevor. But you need to ask yourself something, Kenway. Who would benefit from your death?”

He thought about Percy's question, but didn't know the answer and replied, "I'm not sure. It could be somebody that used to be friends of either—Traci Moore, Charles Canter, or Father Rudy."

Percy nodded and said, "Maybe, and those are the names of some evil people from your past. But be honest with yourself, Kenway, because hiding from the truth might get you killed. Even though it's difficult to admit that other people might want you dead, it's sometimes necessary to swim through that process in order to stay alive." Percy gazed at him and said, "I know, because I live with it every day of my life, and I always will."

Kenny inhaled and asked, "What about that videotape? Are you going to hand it over to the authorities?"

His boss gave him a surprised look and said, "Of course not." "Good," Kenny said. "Give it to me, because I've been studying game films for several years. So, if your theory is true—then I'm going to dissect every frame of this videotape and find out who wants me dead."

CHAPTER 21

Late Sunday night Kenny slipped out of bed quietly and tried not to wake Athena. He put on a pair of boxer shorts and padded downstairs to the kitchen. He opened the refrigerator door and foraged for a snack to ease his restlessness. He came up with two leftover grilled lamb chops and a French roll. He grabbed a Beck's beer and glanced at the digital clock on his microwave oven.

Harshly, he whispered to himself, "It's almost three o'clock in the morning—get a grip on yourself, dude! Try and get some sleep before you have a stroke."

Kenny walked into the family room and put his plate of food on the couch. He grabbed Percy's videotape from on top of the television and picked up the remote. Less than a minute later, Kenny was on the sofa and watching the videotape for at least the twentieth time that day. He chewed on some meat and swilled his beer while staring at the glowing screen inside the darkness of his home. During his career as an athlete and a coach, he had watched thousands of videotapes. But now, as he closely examined every person on the yacht, he kept arriving at the same conclusion; there seemed to be something peculiar about Ferguson Marshall's behavior that day.

Kenny rewound the videotape and recalled Ferguson Marshall's fidgety mannerisms on the yacht. He remembered that Ferguson had been constantly checking his watch as if he were running behind schedule.

Kenny ate some of the bread and fast-forwarded the videotape to the point where Ferguson was about to catch a bullet in his leg. President Bush ducked out of harm's way, but Ferguson stood there stoically, apparently unafraid of dying. Kenny wondered if the Democratic Nominee was mentally deranged enough to arrange his own suicide in a public forum to go down in the annals of history as a heroic figure or martyr. Other people had done it, so why not him? While sitting on the couch with his legs crossed, Kenny asked, "Did you want that man to shoot you, Ferguson? Are you really that sick in the head?"

Kenny watched Ferguson get shot in the leg and then he pushed the pause button on the remote. The tape froze and the image on the screen showed Ferguson reaching for his injured right leg. Kenny looked at Ferguson's face and noticed that Ferguson never stopped looking at President Bush—even after he had been shot! Kenny hit the slow-motion button and the tape played frame-by-frame while the images slowly clicked across the screen.

Kenny watched Ferguson attempting to save the President's life, but his actions seemed to be choreographed, or even premeditated. No matter how many times Kenny watched the videotape, he noticed the same thing. When the shooting started on the yacht, Ferguson did not seem to be surprised and he did not panic. Understanding those two things, Kenny arrived at a pair of conclusions: either Ferguson Marshall had orchestrated the whole thing, or Ferguson had nerves of steel and he was going to make a fantastic President.

While finishing his lamb chops Kenny realized that Athena was coming downstairs. He saw Athena shuffling towards him in the shadows. She walked by the piano and bumped her leg against the bench.

Athena made a noise, came over to the couch and sleepily asked him, "What are you doing, Kenny?"

Kenny turned off the television and decided not to answer honestly. He fibbed. "Watching some game films from last season. Sorry if I woke you up, Athena. I know that you've got to be at the bank by eight o'clock this morning." Kenny placed his dishes on the coffee table and asked, "Do you want to lay down with me?"

She stood before him in a white t-shirt covering the tops of her athletic thighs and replied, "Thanks, Kenny."

Athena snuggled next to him on the couch and whispered, "Are we still on for breakfast this morning after we go jogging?" Kenny kissed her and replied, "Yes, and I'll drop you off at the BART station so you can go to work after that."

Kenny squeezed her tightly, wanting to savor each moment with the woman he loved. The internal conflict in his body about finding Marla's killer was raging war between his heart and mind. He wanted to share his thoughts and hunches with Athena, but for now, he kept it to himself, hoping and praying that he was dead wrong.

CHAPTER 22

On the blistering hot late Thursday morning of July 4th, Ferguson Marshall gazed at the expanding crowd gathered below his hotel suite in Philadelphia and said, “Look at those nimrods waiting for me on the street down there. It’s a hundred degrees outside but they will follow me anywhere. Damn, I love those idiots!”

“They worship you,” Saxon murmured from the opposite side of the luxurious room.

Using his left hand, Ferguson eased the golden curtain out of his way and peered down Arch Street. Some of the small shops were adorned with patriotic balloons and ribbons, but everything else seemed inexplicably dull. The bounty of news trucks and media personnel had been lined up and ready to cover his announcement since five o’clock in the morning. He had originally scheduled the press conference for eight, but his Vice-presidential running mate needed a few more hours to tie up some loose ends. Ferguson looked down from his red-carpeted suite of the Grand Prix Hotel and stared at the famous home of Betsy Ross.

He glanced up and saw the Ben Franklin Bridge spanning from left to right as it passed above Christopher Columbus Avenue. “Philadelphia used to be a wonderful city,” Ferguson lamented while straightening the cuffs of his white shirt and primping his blue and red necktie.

Saxon poured himself a martini with two olives and said, “That was a long time ago, sir.” Ferguson released the thick curtain and pivoted to face Saxon. He was annoyed by his bodyguard’s choice of black pants and a dark blue shirt because it was too hot and humid to be wearing those colors. Ferguson was about to scold him for his tacky and ill-chosen wardrobe, but he decided against it and remained silent for a moment.

After clearing his mind, impatiently, Ferguson looked at Saxon and asked, “Saxon, what time will Hulda be here? Our press conference should have started four hours ago.”

Saxon replied, “Noon—in about two more minutes, sir.” Ferguson frowned and sauntered over to a fat yellow chair. He sat down, placed his light brown shoes on the table and looked blankly at his beige slacks. He was about to ask Saxon to make him a drink when somebody knocked on the door.

Awaiting approval, Saxon looked at him and Ferguson nodded.

Saxon gulped his martini and set his glass on the counter of the wooden bar. He watched Saxon unsnap the steel button of his shoulder holster and march towards the door.

Saxon squinted through the peephole and demanded, "Password?"

Ferguson heard a woman's voice reply, "Nixon and Clinton." Saxon opened the door and Ferguson saw Hulda Law walk into the room. As she strode towards him with two black bodyguards behind her, Ferguson examined her outfit approvingly. Hulda's blondish hair was short and bobbed above her neckline. Her off-white blouse was shiny but not sexy, and she had a tiny American flag pinned to her left lapel. Hulda's navy blue skirt did not reveal much of her pasty white flesh and thick ankles wedged into her beige heels.

Hulda walked up and hugged him. She drew back and said, "The deal is done. Nobody can stop us now!"

Ferguson grinned and replied, "Excellent work, Hulda." He looked to Saxon and at her two bodyguards and waved them off. The three men walked over to the bar and took a seat on the stools beside it.

Ferguson led Hulda to a floor-to-ceiling window overlooking the city of Brotherly Love. He turned to his left and asked, "Hulda, how much did it cost you?"

Hulda looked him in the eyes and replied, "Nothing. Because being an East Coast Senator has its advantages and disposing of my enemies is merely one of them."

Ferguson returned her intense look. He stared into her dreary, faded green eyes and glanced at her slightly ruddy skin. She had unnaturally high cheekbones that were too wide for her face, and her ivory teeth were imposing and beaver-like.

Ferguson coughed three times and asked, "Is your enemy gone forever?"

Hulda Law gave him a nasty grin and said, "My people took care of him last night and he will never bother us again." She touched Ferguson's left arm and remarked, "Unless, of course, dead people suddenly learn how to speak."

Ferguson fired a point-blank question at her. "Was he the only person that you had an affair with?"

Hulda's eyes darted back and forth like a nervous bird. "He was the only man I had an affair with. Other than that, it doesn't matter because my husband could care less if I sleep with somebody else, as long as it's another woman and he's in the room with us."

Ferguson chuckled and said, "Hulda, when I decided to have you as my running mate a few weeks ago, I couldn't have selected anyone better." He smiled and said, "The meaning of your name amuses me, Hulda because it fits you so well."

Hulda shook her head and said, “I hate it because it translates into weasel or mole, but there’s nothing I can do about it.” Then she asked him. “Ferguson—how’s your right leg? The last time we met you were limping badly.”

Ferguson backed away and spun around slowly. He pointed at his injured hamstring and replied, “I will always have a limp, but that’s a small price to pay for saving the President’s life.”

She rubbed her nose and asked, “Are you ready to go? There’s a mob of people waiting for us three blocks away at Independence Park.” Hulda licked her teeth and said, “By the way, I love the idea of announcing our partnership in front of the Liberty Bell... nice touch today.”

He nodded and motioned to the bodyguards with a slight twitch of his head. Ferguson placed his right arm around Hulda’s chunky waist and said, “Think big, Hulda, and remember that the world needs people like us. Never forget that and everything will be fine.”

She glanced up at him and said, “You’re right. It’s going to be a glorious presidential campaign for both of us.”

Ferguson ushered her out of the room and into the hallway. He looked at the trio of bodyguards positioned by the waiting elevator and said, “Hulda, please tell me something. Don’t you just absolutely love the moniker of our political ticket?”

Hulda flicked her head back and cackled towards the ceiling like a witch.

Ferguson felt Hulda’s fleshy grip tighten around his waist, and she said, “Marshall/Law ... it has a very nice ring to it!”

CHAPTER 23

At noon, three weeks later Thursday, July 25th, Kenny entered the football office and flicked on the lights. He looked at the navy-blue carpet and red trim bordering the walls before striding into his office and dropping his keys onto his desk. He was about to pull the blinds open when he noticed a huge metallic balloon hovering in the left corner. He read the inscription on it and grinned:

Happy 31st Birthday!

We love you, Kenny!

The silver and the purple balloon had a yellow streamer attached to a white box that was resting on the floor. He walked over, picked up the gift and tore it open. He extracted a white envelope and read its contents. It was a \$250 gift certificate to the best French restaurant in the East Bay, La Coquette, in Clayton. The reservations on the card informed Kenny that he was going to a fancy dinner with Athena tonight, compliments of his family.

Feeling better, Kenny put the gift certificate in his wallet, smiled and walked over to the telephone on his desk.

He dialed Trevor's cell phone number and his brother answered his call after two rings. "Hello, Trevor speaking." "Happy birthday, Trevor! How's training camp going?" Trevor replied, "Happy birthday, Kenny. I miss you, and football has been tough because I keep thinking about Marla."

Kenny hesitated and replied, "I understand, but I'm looking forward to seeing you on the first Sunday in August, and it's going to be great!"

"It's on my calendar," Trevor concurred. "I'll spend the night at your house on Saturday after our preseason game against San Francisco. I've already cleared it with my coach." Trevor paused, then said, "Because of everything that's happened lately, I was worried that we wouldn't get to do our annual adventure for our birthday."

Kenny felt a pang of sadness vibrate in his heart because he felt sorry for Trevor. He said, "Trevor, I wouldn't miss it for the world. I've got two mountain bikes for us, so bring some rugged clothes and get ready for some fun."

"I will," Trevor replied, and he asked, "Is Peter Woods still coming along?" Kenny said, "Yes, and he is very excited to meet you."

Trevor asked, “Kenny, are you sure it’s legal for Peter to come with us? After all, you’re his football coach and he is a scholarship athlete in the NCAA?”

“Yes,” Kenny said, “I’ve called the NCCA and he can come with us, as long as he takes his own car and mountain bike, and we don’t buy him anything or do him any special favors.”

“You’re the boss,” Trevor said. He cleared his throat and asked, “Kenny, what’s going on with your blood tests—is your cancer still in remission?”

“I received my latest results yesterday and everything seems fine. But you know how that goes—I’ve still got five years to go until my doctor can declare me healthy.” Kenny picked up a pen and doodled. Then he asked, “How’s little Charlie doing?”

Trevor replied, “Well, it’s been a while since Charlie has seen his mama, and he keeps crawling around the house calling for her. It’s brutal, and it breaks my heart. But I’m going to spoil that boy with love until the day I die.”

Kenny felt as if he had a lump in his throat. He steadied himself and said, “Hang in there and give Charlie a kiss for me. Good luck in your game tomorrow night and I’ll talk to you next week.”

About two hours later, Kenny ventured down to the first floor of the athletic facility and walked into the training annex. He looked at the sparkling white tiles beneath his feet and glanced at the half-dozen physical therapy tables nearby. He saw a young woman soaking her bare feet in one of the stainless-steel whirlpool tubs and she waved to him.

“Hello, Coach,” she said.

Kenny said hello and walked towards the Head Trainer’s office at the back of the room. He arrived at a blue door and read Mitch Caldwell’s nameplate. He knocked once and nudged the door open. “Hello—is anybody home?”

From behind the door, he heard Mitch answer, “Kenny, I’m in the back. Give me a hand.” Kenny entered the trainer’s office and immediately felt inadequate about his comprehensive knowledge of the human body and its workings. Even though he had a basic understanding of the body and its functions, Mitch Caldwell was a genius at diagnosing an athlete’s injury and immediately prescribing an effective treatment.

Kenny weaved through the hallways while glancing at the various bottles of pills, gauzes, and ointments. He looked at a few anatomy charts before finally locating the Head Trainer. Kenny stared at his light-skinned black friend and asked, “Hi, Mitch. What do you need?”

Mitch was wearing a white shirt with the school's patriotic mascot embroidered on the left breast. He wore blue shorts and flip-flop sandals. Mitch was doubled over and attempting to lift something heavy out of a big cardboard box. Mitch stood up, smiled and said, "Hello, Kenny. I was hoping to be done with this before our meeting. Can you please give me a hand? This thing is heavy."

Kenny nodded and reached into the box. He peered through the thick plastic wrapping and realized he was helping Mitch lift some sort of mannequin. Together, they set the life-like dummy on top of a metal table and Mitch pulled off the plastic covering concealing the dummy.

Kenny stared at the thing and instantly felt uneasy because it looked so real.

Mitch looked at him with his dancing hazel eyes and said, "It's perfect!"

Kenny looked at the dummy's humanoid eyes and limbs. He flared his lips and asked, "What is it?"

Like a mad scientist, Mitch rubbed his hands together and explained, "Technology at its finest. This little wonder is called The Patient, and it's the most advanced teaching tool for athletic trainers today."

"Why?" Kenny asked as he touched "The Patient's" cool features.

With his left hand, Mitch raised the mannequin's asexual-looking chin. He took a small flashlight out of his pants pocket and said, "Watch this, Kenny." Mitch held the flashlight in his right hand and shone it into the eyes of the dummy. The black pupils of The Patient's eyes contracted as if they were real. Mitch turned off the flashlight and its dark pupils expanded back to their normal dilation.

"Jesus of Androids!" Kenny exclaimed.

Mitch grinned and replied, "This dummy is the most life-like synthetic mechanism on the planet. By using this dummy as a teaching tool, my assistants will learn advanced techniques at a startling rate. This synthetic human has a circulatory system, a heartbeat, all its organs, carbon-fiber bones, a simulated central nervous system, complete muscle structure, and ligaments and tendons. Basically, just flip the switch with this remote-control device, and it becomes a human being without a personality." Kenny shook his head and replied, "Amazing."

Mitch agreed and walked over to a refrigerator. He came back with two Coca-Colas and offered one to Kenny.

After taking a few swigs, Mitch asked him, “Well, Coach, are you ready to ask me about the physiological complexities of a superstar female athlete?”

Kenny nodded and replied, “Yes, as you know she arrives tomorrow night with her brother and the rest of her family. We’ve got a nice reception planned for Peter and TJ, and it should make them feel comfortable. I hope you can make it, Mitch, because John McDough and Rebecca Jones will be there, and so will my coaching staff.”

Mitch finished his Coke and said, “I’ll be there because I can’t wait to meet this incredibly gifted young woman. In fact, I’ve made arrangements for a pair of female doctors to conduct her physical exam. However, I would like to be involved, if TJ doesn’t mind.” “I spoke with her last week and mentioned your plans. She didn’t mind at all.” Kenny took a sip of his drink and continued, “TJ is more concerned about getting along with her new teammates. She wants to make some new friends, play football, go to school, and tour California.”

Mitch said, “Of course.” Then he asked, “Based on the information you forwarded to me last night, what would you like to know?”

Kenny looked at Mitch and replied, “Mitch, I want to know if she’s going to be labeled as a freak of nature because she is so gifted?”

Mitch tossed his empty can into the trash and wiggled his fingers at Kenny. “Some people will think that she’s abnormal because of her exceptional athletic ability. But during the past seventy-five years, this planet has seen some very gifted female athletes like Flo-Jo, Bettie Duncan, Kristy Jones, and Wilma Rudolph. But none of those women ever played tackle football at the major college level.” Mitch wiped his mouth and said, “Come over here and take a look at this.” Kenny took a few steps and stopped next to the dummy. Mitch picked up the tiny remote and pressed two orange buttons. “The Patient” reclined like it was going to take a nap. Mitch pressed on a thin seam near its hip and removed the outer fold of skin covering the dummy’s right thigh. Kenny gazed at the dummy’s intricate structure and was astounded by its design. He could see the femoral artery pumping away, and hordes of red muscle fiber crisscrossed back and forth. Mitch took a slim metal probe out of his shirt pocket and poked at the weaving Quadriceps muscle of the dummy. Kenny felt queasy watching it, but he was fascinated.

Mitch lifted some of the artificial tissue and asked, “Kenny, do you see those muscle groupings of the quadriceps?”

Kenny nodded and Mitch continued. “From what you have already told me about TJ Woods, she’s built like her mother was: sleek but even more powerful. Is that correct?”

“Absolutely,” Kenny replied.

“Okay,” Mitch responded. “If she’s six feet tall and about 150 pounds, she must have incredible muscle structure compared to most women. She doesn’t have to look like a superhero to be a great athlete; in fact, most great athletes have three things in common.”

Kenny waited and Mitch said, “Stellar athletes have great reflexes, an abundance of fast-twitch muscle fiber, and an uncanny ability to focus on their tasks during times of stress.”

Kenny replied, “I’m positive that TJ has the first two, but we’ll have to wait and see about her ability to excel during practices and games because she’s never done it before.”

“That’s true,” Mitch replied, “but if she has the first two qualities, then it’s going to be easier for her to develop the third one.” Mitch prodded “The Patient’s” fibrous reddish tissue and explained, “If TJ has great muscle structure and fast reflexes, then she’ll have a significant head start on her teammates that have average speed. For the inferior athletes on your team, chasing TJ will be like driving a Yugo at the Indy 500. When TJ turns on the speed she’ll blow right past them. But it remains to be seen if her presumably genetically lighter bone structure can handle the pounding of tackle football at this level.”

“You’re right,” Kenny replied while looking into the creepy eyes of the dummy.

CHAPTER 24

On August first, at six-thirty on Thursday morning, and six days after the arrival of TJ and Peter Woods, Kenny's alarm clock went off. He yawned and turned off the music. Kenny made his bed, used the bathroom, and put on a pair of Jockey underwear, black shorts, a navy-blue t-shirt, white socks and running shoes. He went downstairs and let Touchdown out of the house through the family room doors to his backyard. He watched his dog run after a light brown squirrel and then he meandered to the kitchen.

Minutes later, Kenny poured himself a cup of coffee and swallowed two multi-vitamins. He ate a piece of toast, some cheese, and a red apple.

He went back upstairs, brushed his teeth and grabbed his red duffel bag and cordovan briefcase. By seven o'clock in the morning, Kenny was in his blue truck and headed westbound on Highway 24 towards the McMillan College campus. Twenty minutes later he parked the truck in his reserved spot at Bunker Hill Stadium. He hustled across the wet grass and quickly entered the staff locker room on the first floor of the facility. Kenny placed his garment bag and briefcase into his white locker and exited the building at seven-thirty.

Kenny jogged by the bleachers behind the baseball diamond and heard the automatic sprinklers watering the field. Kenny relished the smell of wet grass as he moved across Democrat Way.

He scooted towards the Track and Field Complex at the southern end of the campus and marveled at the beautifully designed structure that Percy had commissioned five years ago. The oval-shaped coliseum was unlike any other track complex in the United States. Ringing the perimeter of the stadium were thick columns of stone-shaded beveled granite blending into the brim of the arena. On a platform halfway up between each pillar stood a magnificent statue of a gladiator or Olympic athlete in action. He knew that Percy had enlisted the services of fifty eager artists who had learned their craft at Rodin's sculpturing school in France.

Kenny slowed to a walk and entered the track stadium. He strode onto the lava red all-weather track and looked to the right. Sitting in the bleachers was his best friend since his days of childhood, the black-skinned Lou Macaw.

Lou waved at him and quietly said, "Look over there, it looks like TJ has made some new friends."

Kenny felt his nerves tingling. He pivoted and gazed at the far end of the green lawn in the track stadium. He noticed six people warming up and stretching their bodies near the pole-vault pit. Kenny looked at them and raised his eyebrows approvingly. He saw the Blum Triplets: Parker, Chris, and Eric finish stretching before they began playing catch with a football. Jason Marshall was leaning on one of TJ Woods' long legs and helping her with a buddy-hamstring stretch. Peter Woods completed his warm-up routine and was about to join the Blum Triplets for some throw and catch.

From behind him, Kenny heard Lou say, "They seem to like her, Coach." Kenny nodded, "So far, it's gone well. The press conference and the reception went smoothly." Lou agreed. Kenny looked at Jason Marshall and TJ. He glanced at all six of the young athletes and was pleased to see each of them dressed in their McMillan College blue shorts and white t-shirts.

Parker Blum looked at Kenny and each of them waved to him.

Kenny cupped his hands around his mouth and called out, "I like what I see! Keep up the good work!"

They acknowledged his echoing statement with some positive hand gestures and Kenny walked into the bleachers to join Lou. He shook Lou's hand and looked at his friend's smoothly shaved black head, yellow t-shirt, and white shorts.

Lou tilted his head towards the football players, stared at him and asked, "Do you want to watch them for a minute or two?" "Sure," Kenny said, and he sat down next to his friend. Kenny observed Peter throwing the football to Jason, who was loping down the center of the field.

Kenny commented to Lou, "Peter throws a nice ball. He has excellent touch."

Lou replied, "Yes, he's got a sweet delivery."

Kenny watched the Blum brothers jog down the field one at a time while Peter tossed them the football. As TJ's new friends waited near the center of the field, she began striding towards them and Peter threw her a perfect pass. Peter's throw was on the money, but TJ dropped the ball and it tumbled to the ground. TJ slapped her hands in disgust and the guys chided her playfully. She retrieved the football and chucked it to Jason.

Several minutes elapsed as Kenny and Lou watched the athletes run routes and move through some agility drills. All of them were gifted in their own special way, regardless of height, weight, or speed.

Kenny turned to Lou and asked, “Are you ready to jog yet?” Lou stood up and followed Kenny down the steps onto the rubberized track.

Kenny walked next to Lou and his friend pointed towards the field. Lou said, “Hold on a minute because I want to see this.” Kenny turned around and noticed the athletes lining up in the center of the field. They were getting ready to run their first set of wind sprints.

Kenny heard Peter shout. “Down, set—go!”

Like six sprinters racing for a gold medal, Kenny watched the inspired athletes run as fast as they could go. Initially, Jason took the lead with Parker Blum right behind him. But like a dark horse in the Kentucky Derby, TJ Woods lengthened her stride and overtook all five of her competitors in their fifty-yard dash.

Lou shook Kenny’s hand and eagerly remarked, “Incredible!” Kenny smiled and said, “You’re the guy who’s going to be coaching her in two weeks, and you had better develop that super athlete into a great wide receiver.”

Lou grinned and replied, “Don’t worry—I got it handled, Kenny.”

TJ Woods won another two races. Kenny was pleased with the group’s work ethic, and he began jogging around the reddish track with Lou.

After completing their third lap, Lou huffed and asked, “Kenny, how’s Trevor doing?” Sweating, Kenny took a few strides and replied, “Not good, not good at all. But who can blame him? If my wife was murdered and the killer was still on the loose, then I’d be a wreck.”

Lou grunted and asked, “What about Charlie?”

Kenny wiped at his brow and said, “Trevor said that Charlie is really confused.”

Lou shook his head and they jogged in silence for another two laps. During their sixth lap, Lou pointed at the field and said, “Look—they’re finished.”

Kenny glanced at Peter Woods and the Blum Triplets while they walked out of the arching entrance of the complex. Kenny looked back towards the pole-vault pit and noticed Jason Marshall holding hands with TJ Woods.

Jason kissed TJ on the lips, and then Kenny’s mouth gaped with surprise.

CHAPTER 25

At sunset on Friday night August 2nd, at the most expensive restaurant on the waterfront in San Francisco, Ferguson Marshall raised his left hand and signaled the tuxedoed waiter to service him immediately.

The skinny and balding obedient servant shuffled over to his table, bent forward, and quietly asked, “What can I do for you, Mister Marshall?”

Ferguson was inebriated and midway through his third glass of red wine. He felt like being cocky, so he replied, “Vote for me in November, and bring us another two bottles of wine.”

The waiter smiled, backed up and said, “Very good, sir!” Ferguson looked across the table. He gazed at Hulda Law, and then to her beaten down husband. Hulda was beaming at him with a grin stretched across her broad face.

Hulda smirked and said, “That was amusing, Ferguson!” Ferguson smiled and placed his hand on Veronica’s firm leg as she sat next to him in the red leather booth of the fine restaurant. He squeezed her leg and Veronica kissed him on the cheek. Ferguson evaluated Hulda’s wardrobe of a peach-colored suit and a white blouse, with pearl earrings shimmering on her earlobes. She looked conservative but was politically just the opposite and he admired her for it. Her weathered and beleaguered husband, Matthew Law, sat directly in front of him and to the left of Hulda. Matthew had an impressive mop of wavy, near white hair combed back over his head above his chubby face. He had a bulbous nose like the late W.C Fields and beady blue eyes. Ferguson looked at Matthew and thought, she has you whipped—game over!

He turned his attention to Veronica and stared at her lovely face and long dark hair that tumbled beyond the shoulders of her coral-colored dress. Ferguson looked at the sparkling ruby necklace he had given to her earlier that day.

Veronica touched the necklace with her fingers and said to him, “It’s heavenly.” Ferguson replied, “So are you.”

“Okay lovebirds settle down—it’s time for business,” Hulda said, and she drank the rest of her wine as the waiter returned with another two bottles.

Ferguson peeled away from Veronica, turned to the right, and looked at the waiter. The waiter presented both bottles of wine and Ferguson nodded appreciatively.

While the waiter was uncorking the first bottle he asked, “Excuse me, Mister Marshall, but is the rest of your party going to join you for dinner this evening?”

Ferguson glanced at the two unoccupied place settings on his left. He looked back to Matthew and then spoke to the waiter without taking his eyes away from Hulda’s fatigued husband. “My son and his mystery date will be here shortly. But thank you for asking.” The waiter opened the second bottle of red wine and said, “Please let me know if you need anything at all, sir.” Ferguson quickly nodded and then ignored the waiter.

After refilling their wine glasses, the waiter departed for a moment and returned with two platters of marinated shrimps and hot rolls encrusted in a garlic glaze.

The waiter soon vanished and Hulda’s meek husband asked Ferguson, “Do you have any idea who your son is bringing with him tonight? Might they be lost?” Ferguson was miffed because the attention of his guests had been inadvertently shifted from himself to Jason and his date. He replied, “No, because Jason wanted to surprise me, and I doubt they got lost because he’s been here before.”

Ferguson looked to Hulda and gave her a cold stare. His VP running mate got the message and she changed the subject. Hulda asked, “Veronica, what kind of story are you currently working on? Any good news out there for TIME to cover?”

Veronica finished sipping at her wine and replied, “Oh, yes. Early tomorrow morning I’m off to Honolulu for the annual dolphin festival. The locals are hoping to raise two million dollars to help prevent the accidental deaths of dolphins from deep-sea fishing mishaps. I’m looking forward to it and thank you for asking.” Hulda looked at him and stated, “We’re only ninety days away from the first Tuesday in November. Any thoughts, Ferguson?” Ferguson paused and glanced at a busty blonde woman walking down the aisle in his direction. He watched the shapely woman in the black dress sway towards him. Demurely, she winked at him, banked to her left and walked back to her table on the other side of the room.

Veronica tweaked the upper part of his left knee and Ferguson said, “Pardon me, uh, yes. We’re neck and neck with President Bush, and it’s going to be close.”

Ferguson wiped his mouth with a linen napkin and said, “Please excuse me, because I need to visit the men’s room.” Ferguson rose up and marched down the rust-colored, carpeted aisle. He made a right turn and a quick left before moving past a gigantic painting of Italy hanging on the wall beside him. He double-checked to make sure that nobody from his table could see him.

Feeling bold, Ferguson tracked down his waiter. He pulled out a wad of ten one-hundred-dollar bills and gave the man an order. "See that great-looking blonde woman in the black dress? Tell her to meet me in the men's room! Now!"

The waiter curled the cash into his right hand and said, "Excellent choice, sir!" Ferguson walked into the men's room, glanced at the blood-colored tile and locked the door. Less than a minute later somebody rapped on the door. He pulled the door open and met the bright green eyes of the gorgeous blonde woman in the black dress.

She bent her hips, then smiled at him and said, "Tell me I'm dreaming!"

"You are, and so am I." Ferguson yanked her inside and locked the door. He lifted the blonde woman into the air and set her on the cool porcelain counter of the sink. He attacked her juicy bosom with groping hands and nibbled her neck. The curvy woman unzipped his brown slacks and breathlessly said, "Hurry, hurry, because my brother is waiting for me at our table!"

About ten minutes later, Ferguson emerged from the men's room feeling weak in the knees but looking refreshed and neatly groomed. As he turned the corner, Ferguson noticed the back of Jason's head and he felt relieved that his son had finally made it. "It's about time, Jason," Ferguson mumbled.

Sitting to Jason's right was his son's shorthaired and shiny blonde date. Ferguson quickened his step because he wanted to get a glimpse of Jason's unknown companion. His son's date had obviously scored points with Veronica, Hulda, and Matthew because they didn't even take notice of him as he approached the table.

Ferguson was less than six feet away when Veronica looked up at him and happily exclaimed, "Ferguson, your son is here, and guess who's with him! "

Ferguson straightened his posture and smiled. He rotated to the right and shook hands with his tardy son. "Glad you finally made it, Jason."

"Thank you, Dad," Jason replied, and he began to introduce his pretty date.

Ferguson didn't hear the words coming out of his Jason's mouth, because he was in a state of shock while looking into the light brown eyes of TJ Woods.

TJ Woods smiled at him and said, "It's a pleasure to meet you, Mister Marshall."

Ferguson took the woman's hands into his own. He gave each one a delicate kiss. While smooching the top of her hands, Ferguson imagined that he was biting into her flesh, ripping it to the bone, until she was screaming in agony, begging for him to relent.

Ferguson stood up and said, "You have turned the sports world on its ear, Miss Woods. The pleasure is all mine."

Ferguson sensed that everybody was looking at him. He patted the rear pocket of his slacks, then he lied, "I must have dropped my wallet in the men's room. Please excuse me for a moment." Unexpectedly, Matthew Law said, "I also need to use the restroom, so I might as well go with you."

Matthew began to rise from the booth, but Ferguson pushed him back down and said, "It's only a one-person bathroom. Sit tight and I'll be right back." Jason gave him a stunned look and Ferguson spun around before striding down the aisle once again.

Upon reaching the restroom and locking the door, Ferguson took out his cell phone and dialed some numbers.

A familiar deep voice said, "Saxon here."

Ferguson gripped the phone and madly whispered into it. "Saxon, do you know what just happened to me? Do you?"

"No, sir, because as you know, I'm in Costa Rica on vacation. So how would I know what just happened to you, sir?"

Ferguson was feeling hot and he hissed, "Don't give me that crap! I know you're on vacation, but your plans have just been changed. We're running out of time!"

Saxon asked, "Time for what, sir?"

Ferguson walked over to the bathroom mirror and gazed at himself. He had the feeling that he looked rather unstable and manic, but, fortunately, that was not the case. He still looked fit, trim, and handsome.

Ferguson said, "Saxon, my son just brought TJ Woods to dinner!"

"What?" Saxon's voice bled his surprise.

Ferguson stated. "Get this situation handled, or you're finished! Understand me?"

There was a pause and Saxon answered, "Yes, sir. I'll fly home first thing in the morning and make contact with Oscar tonight." "Good!" Ferguson jammed the cell phone into his shirt pocket and walked to the sink. He turned on the faucet, splashed some cold water onto his face and said, "Women!"

CHAPTER 26

Less than an hour after a bluish dawn brightened the sky, Ferguson Marshall marched across the shimmering ivory tile in his home and the hollow sound of his footsteps echoed around him. He entered the kitchen, mixed himself a cold mimosa, and chugged it down to calm his nerves. Hastily, he drank another mix of orange juice and champagne before tossing his crystal glass into the sink and hearing it shatter. Still upset, Ferguson stomped over to the black table in his kitchen, sat down in front of the computer and impatiently perused the online versions of newspapers around the globe.

Restless, Ferguson walked over to the stainless-steel sink and gazed out of the massive garden window overlooking his seaside estate bordering the Pacific Ocean. He leaned over the sink, glanced down at the shards of broken glass in it and then lifted each sash on both ends of the garden window. A saltwater breeze invaded his home and for a moment he felt almost carefree. He listened to the birds chirping as they flitted nervously about his property.

While Ferguson was inhaling another fresh breath, Jason entered the kitchen behind him and said, “Morning, Dad. How did you sleep?”

Ferguson refused to face him until he had calmed himself down. He clutched at the metal sink and replied, “I didn’t sleep a wink. How about you?”

Jason said, “Great, thanks.”

Upon hearing Jason’s reply, Ferguson realized that his son was oblivious to the irreversible damage happening due to each moment he spent with TJ Woods. Ferguson gripped the edge of the sink as if he were trying to kill it.

Bitterly, Ferguson spun around, glared at Jason and asked, “Son, have you lost your mind?”

Ferguson looked at Jason’s fire engine red bathrobe and tan bare feet. Jason’s face contorted into a disbelieving mask, and he defensively replied, “What are you talking about, Dad?”

Ferguson stormed over to Jason as he was opening the refrigerator door and slammed it shut. With fire in his eyes, Ferguson stared at Jason and asked, “Don’t you see what’s happening, son? TJ Woods is making a fool of us! She’s using you to gain instant popularity, and it’s going to kill my chances of becoming the President because it makes you look weak!”

Jason’s eyelids narrowed and he said, “I love TJ, and she feels the same way about me! How on earth is that going to kill your chances of becoming President?”

“Love!” Ferguson shouted sarcastically. “You’ve only known that woman for less than two weeks! Infatuation maybe, lust, yes, but not love—never!”

Jason attempted to pry open the refrigerator, but Ferguson held it closed with his left hand and braced against it. Ferguson could see the muscles of his own arm straining beneath the sleeve of his maroon polo shirt.

Shockingly, Jason pushed him out of the way. Ferguson stumbled across the tile as if he had slipped on a banana peel. He careened towards the sink completely out of control. Painfully, he slammed into the countertop and his spine absorbed most of the blow. The broken glass in the sink rattled and he recoiled from it.

Ferguson reached for his lower spine and bellowed. “My back! I’m hurt! I’m hurt bad!” Jason jumped towards him and pleaded, “I didn’t mean to do that, Dad! I’m sorry. I’m sorry!” Ferguson lost control and went after his son, blind with fury. He grabbed Jason by the throat and squeezed. Jason’s riveting eyes bulged from their sockets.

Ferguson shoved him backward and yelled. “Jason, if you ever raise your hand to me again, I will throw you into the ocean, and watch you drift to Cuba! Got it, son?”

Jason coughed and gagged, but Ferguson applied steady pressure to his son’s throat and emphasized his point. Like a bully, Ferguson rammed Jason into the computer desk and everything sailed from the table. The computer landed on the floor with a clatter and multicolored sparks spewed from it.

Jason’s olive-skinned face became redder by the second. Unexpectedly, Jason grabbed his right elbow and twisted his arm. Jason rotated his appendage clockwise until Ferguson felt as if his shoulder was going to break.

Ferguson screamed, “Stop!”

Jason let go of his arm and Ferguson knelt to the ground, relieved and stunned. After catching his breath, Ferguson looked up at his son and asked, “Do you see what I mean? TJ Woods is killing us, son, and we’re suffering because of her.”

The telephone rang but they ignored it. Ferguson stood up and gazed at his strong son while the phone continued to ring.

Jason leered at him and said, “TJ is not the problem—you’re the problem, Dad!”

Ferguson was beside himself because Jason had become stubborn and defiant since graduating from high school.

Ferguson replied, "Let me tell you something, Jason. I love you because you're my son. But the feelings that you have for TJ Woods are nothing compared to the bond between us." Jason shook his head, then tightened his robe and walked out of the kitchen. Ferguson watched Jason vanish down the long corridor towards the other side of the house.

Surprised and feeling desperate, Ferguson rubbed his right elbow and shouted, "Don't turn your back on me, boy!"

Ferguson could hear Jason moving away from him, so he took off and bolted after him. Ferguson exited the kitchen, turned left and saw Jason striding down the center of the hallway, bracketed by two rows of marble and granite statues on either side of him.

Ferguson dashed after him and screamed, "Don't walk away from me, Jason!"

His son kept moving. Ferguson ran faster and then leapt onto Jason's back like a hungry tiger assaulting its prey. They fell to the floor, rolled across the tile, and crashed into a beautiful hand-carved figurine of ivory lovers embracing. The smooth statue teetered back and forth before timbering onto the tile and cracking from head to base.

Ferguson wrapped his arms around Jason's neck and struggled against his son's impressive strength and maneuverability. Before Ferguson realized what had happened, Jason was sitting on top of him and straddling his chest.

Jason drew back his right arm but stopped midway through his punch and angrily said, "You will never have the opportunity to watch my dead body float back to your homeland! Never!" Stunned, and not believing what he had just heard, Ferguson gawked at his son's sweaty face and asked, "What did you say?" Jason grabbed his collar and leaned closer to him. Ferguson could smell his son's hostile breath and Jason growled at him. "I know your secret, Dad! So, don't even try to fool me, because it won't work!"

Ferguson touched his son's wrists tugging at his shirt and lied, "I don't know what you're talking about, Jason."

Jason sneered and asked, "Yeah, right! Dad, do you remember my eighth birthday party?"

Ferguson paused and finally answered, "Yes, we had lots of clowns here, and you absolutely loved it." Ferguson searched his son's face and asked, "Right?"

Jason let go of his collar and stood up before taking a few steps and stopping. His son pivoted and said, "Wrong! In fact, it was the worst birthday party of my life!"

Gingerly, Ferguson rolled onto his side and asked, “But why?” Jason pointed at him and said, “If you’ll remember, my friend Scotty was frightened by the fat clown with the wild blue hair. So, we came into the house and I tried to calm him down.”

Ferguson shook his head and replied, “Sorry, but it doesn’t ring a bell.”

Jason stepped forward and explained, “Anyway, while Scotty was pouting in the hall closet, I heard you talking to Saxon in the library, and I listened to every word you said about being born in Cuba.”

Ferguson got to his feet and decided to lie once again. “Oh, my poor son! I was talking with Saxon about his predicament, not mine!” Ferguson edged closer to him and asked, “My dear Jason, have you been living with this terrible misunderstanding for the past eleven years?”

Jason raised his hands and said, “Don’t come near me, Dad, because I don’t think that I can trust you anymore!”

Ferguson could see that Jason was mired in confusion about what he had heard a long time ago.

Sensing that he still had a slim chance at victory, Ferguson approached Jason and cautiously replied, “We have a nice little family, and a rich Italian heritage to be proud of.”

Jason shuffled away from him and said, “Back off, Dad!” Ferguson halted and then Jason added, “You want to know something? I’ve never even seen one picture of your parents, and I don’t believe you!”

Ferguson tensed and replied, “I’ve told you many times before. My parents died when I was very young, and an elderly couple raised me after that. Don’t you believe me?”

Jason backed away and took a few steps up the spiraling staircase towards his bedroom. Poised on the fourth step, Jason looked back at him and replied, “Saxon was not born in Cuba; he was born and raised in Connecticut. I know, because he used to tell me stories about it all the time.” Jason ascended a few more steps, then pivoted, and said, “For years, Dad, I have struggled with the possibility that you are not who you pretend to be. But, you’re my Dad, and because of that—I will always love you, no matter how putrid your soul is.” Ferguson felt as if a gigantic boot had crushed his head. Dreading his next breath, he watched Jason bound up the staircase, slip into his bedroom, and slam the door shut.

CHAPTER 27

At five o'clock on Sunday morning, Kenny walked into one of the guest bedrooms in his house and turned on the light. He looked at the thick band of ivy wallpaper bordering the ceiling, glanced at his sleeping brother and said, "Rise and shine, Trevor, because it's time to go biking."

Trevor squinted and replied, "Gotcha." He kicked off the bed sheets and stretched while scratching his bare chest and pulling at his light blue boxers.

Kenny looked at his brother and noticed the purplish bruises on his legs. Kenny understood how physically demanding the game of football was, but when he gazed at Trevor's battered body he winced and asked, "Are you feeling sore from the game last night?"

Trevor yawned, arched his back and said, "A little bit, but I only played one quarter, and so it's not too bad." He sat up, draped his legs over the edge and said, "When Nate Washington blindsided me last night I thought I would never walk again. That son-of-bitch must weigh 400 pounds."

Kenny smirked and nodded. "That was a ferocious hit. He's a big boy."

Trevor stood up and walked towards him. Kenny slapped him a high-five and asked, "How about some coffee and a bagel?" "Perfect."

Trevor walked out of the room behind him and asked, "Kenny, when do you want to put your bikes onto the truck?"

Kenny hustled down the stairs and replied, "Don't worry about it because I've been up since four o'clock this morning, and everything is ready to go."

One hour later, beneath a light gray sky and a few streaming clouds, Kenny drove his blue truck towards the McMillan College campus and the mountain bikes vibrated in the roof racks. The freeway wasn't crowded, and Kenny had a fleeting notion that they were being followed. He glanced at all three of his mirrors and switched lanes twice, but a suspicious car lagged from a distance.

Ashamed of his own paranoia, Kenny thought, Relax!

He turned to Trevor and asked, "Do you want to call Mom's house right now and talk to Charlie?"

Trevor looked at the sports wristwatch on his left arm and replied, "I'll call him after we meet up with Peter Woods."

Kenny nodded and wiped the corner of his mouth on his purple t-shirt. He turned up the volume on the radio and listened to one of the Rolling Stones' hit tunes from long ago. "Heartbreaker ... heartbreaker!"

A few minutes later, Kenny pulled his vehicle into the nearly deserted parking lot of Centennial Dorm #3 and stopped next to Peters' dirty white flatbed. Kenny saw his quarterback's green mountain bike in the back of the truck. Peter hopped out of the driver's seat, straightened his white t-shirt, bounded over to them, and eagerly shook Trevor's hand.

Kenny watched contentedly as Peter got the chance to fulfill one of his lifelong dreams of meeting Trevor.

Peter gushed with joy while shaking Trevor's hand and said, "This is such an honor for me, Trevor! You are my idol, and I think you're the best quarterback in the world!"

Kenny smiled and stepped out his truck to check on the mountain bikes while Trevor talked with Peter. After making sure everything was secure, Kenny got back into the truck, looked at them and said, "Okay, gentlemen—let's roll."

Peter turned to him and replied. "I've got the directions to Dragon's Teeth in the glove box of my truck. But if you lose me, pull over until I find you because I don't want to get lost on the way to Livermore."

Kenny started the engine and said, "Of course, and we should be at the Altamont Pass in less than an hour. Take the North Flynn Road exit off Highway 580, then pull over to the right, beneath the windmills."

A few minutes after seven o'clock in the morning, Kenny guided his truck over the 1,009-foot tall hilly summit of the Altamont Pass and peered at the amazing yellow sunrise in front of them. He adjusted his sunglasses sneezed once and wiped his nose.

Trevor asked, "Kenny, how many of those huge windmills are scattered throughout these hills? Any idea?"

Kenny scanned the endless brown knolls surrounding them. He saw hundreds of the tall, skinny, dove-colored triple-prop windmills spinning their blades and replied, "I'm not sure, but between here and Modesto, there must be at least 2,500 of them." He looked at Trevor and commented, "It's kind of weird, huh?" Trevor grunted and said, "Yes, and every time I come here I get the feeling that one of those propellers is going to bust loose and chop me into pieces like deli meat. It's spooky."

Kenny smirked and glanced in the rearview mirror. He was pleased to see Peter's truck tailing him and several cars passed them on the five-lane highway. Kenny exited the freeway and followed the curving road to the right. They wound deep into the ancient brown hills of the tri-valley area. Eventually, Kenny located the bumpy dirt road he'd been searching for and switched his truck into the four-wheel drive mode.

From the right corner of his mouth, Kenny said to Trevor, "Hold on."

Kenny gripped the steering wheel and they cascaded down the steep face of the mound as thick clouds of dust billowed around them. Thousands of tiny pebbles clanked against the underbelly of his truck, but Kenny drove forward without slowing down because he needed more speed. They came to the bottom of the ravine and zoomed through a shallow snaking creek. Bits of mud and droplets of brown water splattered against the windshield and Trevor exclaimed, "Excellent ride!"

Kenny checked to make sure that Peter was still behind them and they arrived at their destination in tandem. He parked the truck and got out with Trevor. Kenny took a few deep breaths and enjoyed the scent of the tall brown grass, as the morning dew evaporated in the sunshine.

He walked over to Trevor and Peter, then looked up into the brown eyes of his strapping young quarterback, and asked, "Well, Peter—what do you think?"

Peter beamed at him and said, "Coach Brown, I've never seen anything like this place. It's the perfect spot to ride a mountain bike."

Trevor put his sunglasses on and said, "It's windy as hell out here—that's why it's the ultimate location for those windmills." Kenny nodded and looked at the sea of miniaturized packed dirt peaks that also contained a half-dozen grazing cattle. The ten to fifteen-foot-tall, ridge-like formations sprouting from the earth were linked together like the smallest mountain range in the world. A trickling gulch of brackish water meandered between the peaks and languidly cut a valley through them.

Kenny looked at the whirring blades of the giant, fan-like windmills humming all around them. To Kenny, the rotating action of the windmill blades sounded like the eerie, ghost-like sounds of Darth Vader's light-saber cutting through the air. Vroom, vroom.

Trevor hoisted both bikes from the truck and Peter lifted his own bicycle from the flatbed. Shortly thereafter, Kenny sat on his silver mountain bike while Trevor and Peter finished sipping at their water bottles.

Kenny said, “Okay guys, it’s seven-thirty. If we get separated, then let’s meet back here at ten o’clock. Okay?”

Peter agreed. Trevor removed his t-shirt and stuffed it into his black fanny pack. Kenny noticed that his brother was already sweating because his upper-body glistened in the sunshine. Trevor said, “I needed to have a day like today.”

“Me too,” replied Kenny. “Let’s go.”

Just as Trevor had always done since their days of childhood when they used to race their bikes together, he took off without warning. Kenny watched his brother ride down the big hill towards the small mountain range known as Dragon’s Teeth. Peter followed, but Kenny waited to see if either of them was going to wipe out. After they had gone halfway down the hill, Kenny coasted to the crest of the knoll, then stood up on his pedals and darted down the mound towards the gulch. Kenny clutched the rubbery grips of the handlebars and felt his hands vibrating like he was working a jackhammer.

Kenny dashed through the muddy creek and raced to the other side. He looked up and saw Trevor fearlessly attacking the first peak of the tiny range. His brother shot up the incline and soared into the air over a clueless brown cow snacking in the ravine between two peaks. Trevor held onto the bike and floated through the sky, but his feet came off the pedals and he landed awkwardly before crashing at the base of the next mound. Another calico-colored cow trotted out of the way and Trevor rolled to a stop. Kenny peered at his brother to see if he was seriously hurt. Peter rode his bike, raised his left fist into the air and shouted, “Awesome!”

Kenny saw Trevor stand up and brush at the fresh cuts and scrapes on his naked torso. Kenny cruised towards a different set of peaks about sixty yards away and Trevor signaled that he was doing fine. Feeling relieved, Kenny wove up, over and between several jutting peaks and splashed through the gulch a few times. After taking a wicked fall on his mountain bike, Kenny dusted himself off and took a water break.

He squirted some cold water into his mouth and examined the amphitheater of rolling hills around him. An investigative red-tailed hawk spied him from above, before dipping away and drifting between a pair of churning windmills. Kenny followed the gliding bird of prey until it disappeared behind a set of lumpy hills off in the distance.

He watched a strange man’s head duck below the crest of another beige mound.

A jarring, innate reaction of fear swelled in Kenny's gut like a geyser when he realized they had been followed. With trembling hands, Kenny attempted to jam his water bottle into its holder, but it popped out like a champagne cork and fell to the grass. Kenny glanced to his left and saw Peter and his brother racing up and down the peaks about 400 yards away. He snapped his head back to the right and searched for the dark-haired man that had been observing them. Seconds later, the mysterious fellow peeked over the ridge—but this time he had a rifle in his grasp.

Kenny felt a bolt of panic zing through his body and he exclaimed, "Oh, God—we've been followed!"

The first hot bullet from the killer's rifle skipped across the bridge of his handlebars and ricocheted away. Kenny flinched and almost crashed his bike. He heard the loud crack of the rifle shot echoing in the valley and he frantically peddled towards his companions.

He saw Trevor and Peter hit their brakes and skid to a stop. They spun around and scouted the valley to see what was happening.

Kenny screamed, "Sniper!" and he hammered on the peddles like a maniac.

Kenny raced towards his truck that was resting on a large hill behind Trevor and Peter. He shouted to them, "Go! Go! Go!"

He saw Trevor take notice of the sniper, and Trevor snatched Peter by the t-shirt. They took off without looking back.

While Kenny went bouncing over a small dirt mound, another bullet whizzed by his face. Reflexively, he jerked his head and another booming rifle shot thundered in the valley. He was scared to death and his heart felt like it was going to burst. He held his breath and zigzagged to throw off the deadly aim of the shooter.

Kenny saw something shocking that almost caused him to come unglued and heard the most depressing sound imaginable. The killer had started up the engine of a small yellow dirt bike, and its high-pitched roar wailed throughout the area.

Kenny tried to peddle faster, and he said, "We are not going to die today!"

From far away, the sniper on the banana-colored motorcycle glanced at him before driving over a hill and disappearing behind the apex of another. Terrified, Kenny looked at the army of peaks and valleys between himself and his truck in the distance. Trevor and Peter were peddling like mad, but they began to wobble inexplicably, and Kenny wondered why.

The wheat-colored grassy mounds began to sway and undulate in front of him, and then he experienced a bizarre, almost fluid-like sensation as if he was riding on a wave. He tightened his grip on the handlebars and tried to steady his course, but it was useless. The Earth began to gyrate beneath him at an alarming rate and his eyesight became discombobulated and out of focus.

“Earthquake!” Kenny shouted as he was thrown from his mountain bike. He lurched and then tumbled into the tall dry grass, impacting with a sharp rock hidden in the parched soil. He grabbed at his bloody left elbow and tried to scramble to his feet. He felt sluggish, uncoordinated, and drunk. He saw a couple of cows move away from him, and he was surprised at how easily they sauntered off.

The ground ceased shaking. Kenny looked up and saw Trevor and Peter racing in his direction. Kenny tried to wave them off to get them to turn around, but it didn’t work. Peter broke off to his right, towards the spot where Kenny had last seen the sniper, and Trevor veered left.

Kenny was about to yell at them, but the earth began to move again, and this time it was worse than before. Behind him and on the hill to his left, Kenny heard the grotesque and unnatural sound of thick metal twisting free of its bolted mount. Stunned, Kenny picked up his bike and ran beside it before hopping onto it. He turned his head and saw the spinning blades of the massive windmill falling towards the earth. The gigantic triple-edged rotor collided with the ground face-first and the dying windmill cut through the grass like a massive weed-eater.

Kenny swung his head to the right and noticed the sniper kneeling on top of a light brown knoll. The man was aiming his rifle at Peter, but the young quarterback didn’t notice what was happening.

As the ground shook, Kenny peddled towards Peter and motioned for him to hit the dirt. Peter was still unaware of the sniper’s aim. Peter shook his head and moved towards Kenny in an uneven manner, but clearly determined to offer his help.

Wobbling, but with a look of heroism on his young face, Peter yelled, “Hold on, Coach Brown! I’m coming!”

Realizing that Peter was finally within earshot, Kenny screamed, “Get down, Peter! Get down!”

The deafening crack of the rifle shot smashed at Kenny’s eardrums like an explosion. He saw Peter’s youthful body get picked up by the force of the speeding bullet and tossed aside like

an old rag. Peter's driverless mountain bike continued rolling onward before it fell over and expired its momentum.

"No!" Kenny blurted and his entire body went numb. He looked at Peter's bloody body heaped on the dry grass less than fifty yards away. "Peter ... Peter!"

Kenny peddled towards him with teardrops in his eyes and desperately begged, "Please, God, don't let him die!"

As if bowing to the heavens during the second earthquake, many of the windmills began to topple over, unable to withstand the vigorous tremors any longer. Kenny looked everywhere and searched for Trevor. He didn't see his brother, but the assassin materialized on a different mound near Peter's ravaged body. Kenny heard several loud crashing sounds as some of the windmills fell upon the ground.

As he peddled on his bike, Kenny saw Trevor appear behind the assassin, after having effectively and secretly circled behind the evil man. The assassin raised his rifle at him, but Trevor leaped from his bike and rammed into the killer with a savage yell. They flew into the air, over the backside of the hill and were gone. With less than forty yards to go, Kenny hurried towards them as a pair of massive windmill blades dislodged from their hubs and floated towards the earth.

Trevor popped up from behind the hill and punched the assassin in the face three times in a row. The assassin's head and neck snapped backward. Trevor picked up the punch-drunk assassin and body-slammed him to the quaking ground.

While the killer was lying on the ground, Trevor glanced at Kenny with murder in his eyes. To the right, Kenny saw both free-falling windmill blades drift through the air and touch their pointy tips upon the ground. One of the huge blades skipped twice, but then both blades cartwheeled down the hill with startling speed.

The assassin regained his senses and knocked Trevor to the ground. The killer stood up and hunted for his rifle. Kenny watched the horrible man dive at something in the tall, dry grass. The assassin picked up his gun and whirled at Trevor.

Searing flashes of heat cooked Kenny's skin and his nerves went wild with hate.

The first, gigantic tumbling windmill blade whisked between the assassin and Trevor before cascading into a bed of rugged peaks. But the second windmill blade avalanched down the hill and easily split the assassin in half from head to crotch, before it rolled onward with bloody remnants of the man's entrails dangling from it.

Kenny witnessed both halves of the filleted assassin fall to the ground as the earthquake subsided. Eventually, Trevor stood up and Kenny realized that his brother had been splattered with the assassin's fresh blood. Trevor's bare torso was covered in tiny red dots, like the measles. Kenny ran over to Peter's limp body but realized that the young man was already dead. Kenny bowed his head and sobbed, disgusted with the sudden and awful death of the wonderful young man.

Trevor came over to him and knelt next to Peter's corpse. Trevor shook his head with disgust, then hugged Kenny and asked, "Kenny, are you hurt?"

Kenny looked into his brother's eyes and replied, "Not really, but Peter Woods and his family put their trust in me, and I failed them miserably." Peter's death and the ripe odor of the killer's split corpse caused Kenny to vomit again and again. Finally, he wiped at his mouth, then stood up and screamed at the morning sky.

CHAPTER 28

On an unexpectedly rainy first Monday morning in August, Kenny drove his truck and approached the western entrance of the McMillan College campus. His mobile phone started ringing. He answered the call and listened for somebody's voice to come through the speakerphone.

Athena greeted him warmly, but her voice sounded tinny because he was driving in the densely foliated Orinda canyon. Athena said, "Good morning, Kenny. I called to tell you that I love you."

He steered the truck absentmindedly. Gazing through his wet windshield he replied, "Thanks, Athena. I love you too. I'm glad you came over last night because it would have been worse without you. I'm still in shock about Peter's death yesterday morning."

Athena responded, "I know, it's awful, but please remember to watch your back and be careful. Okay?"

"I will," Kenny said. "But I'm not going to crawl into a hole and become a hermit for the rest of my life." He turned off the windshield wipers and cracked the windows because it had stopped raining.

"I agree with you, Kenny," she replied. "But be careful." Kenny concurred and said goodbye. He entered the campus and drove towards his parking space in the lot of Bunker Hill Stadium. As he approached the western portion of the stadium, he looked at the multitude of media trucks and overzealous reporters waiting for him to arrive.

Kenny shook his head and pounded his fist against the steering wheel. "Not today! Not now!"

He gazed at the group of journalists standing in front of his parking spot and stopped his truck just inches from their feet. They did not move. Kenny parked his truck right there and angrily stepped out.

He pointed at each of them and ordered, "Move your ass, or I'll run you over!"

A few journalists bickered but Kenny ignored them. He got into his truck and drove forward. Five of the journalists hopped out of the way but one of them walked slowly backward and dared Kenny to hit him with the bumper. Kenny recognized the sickly-looking geek as the man who had successfully sued him for \$33,000 last year because he had pushed the obnoxious reporter off his front porch during the middle of a heated interview. Kenny parked his truck and

glared at the emaciated man. After opening the door and stepping from the truck, a swarm of desperate reporters descended upon him like insects flocking to a piece of steaming feces. He recognized many of the people that he had interacted with during the past two years. One fellow he particularly liked was the pudgy and red-haired Harold Owens.

Crushed by his peers and being jostled about, Harold pushed his bulbous microphone in front of Kenny's face and asked, "Coach Brown, do you think Peter Woods' unfortunate death has anything to do with the fact that his sister has joined your football team? Was this retaliation against you or the Woods family because of your commitment to TJ Woods?"

Kenny looked at the various cameramen and photographers doing their jobs and thought about Harold's questions.

Finally, because he liked Harold, Kenny replied, "Before I give you an answer, I want to say something that's very important." He waited until everybody had shut up and then he said, "Last year when our football team completed its first official season in almost thirty years, where were you people then? I recall seeing only three or four of you at the press conference after our last game."

Kenny ground his teeth and paused, then he continued. "Or how about last Christmas, when every member of our football team and coaching staff went to the Children's Hospital in Oakland to spend the whole day with terminally ill kids?"

A few of the reporters mumbled but Kenny disregarded them and rhetorically asked, "What is wrong with you people? Is it you, or is there something wrong with the men and women who sign your paychecks? Please, tell me, because if it's not you, then I would love to have a chat with your bosses!"

Some of the reporters laughed and a guy in the back yelled, "Hey Coach Brown, tell my boss to give me a raise because I need it!"

A chatter of nervous laughter rang out, but Kenny wasn't in the mood to field the man's sarcastic reply. He pushed a few people out of the way and stormed through a puddle before cornering a husky Asian man in a brown buttoned-down shirt and jeans.

Kenny read the man's name tag and said, "Listen up, Yamiro, and then tell me something."

The surprised reporter backed up and asked, "What?"

With a bevy of journalists behind him, Kenny edged closer to Yamiro and asked, "Do you have any kids?"

Yamiro glanced at his handheld tape recorder, looked at Kenny and replied, “This thing is turned on, Coach Brown. I thought you should know that.”

Kenny scoffed and said, “Thank God, and you’re a fool, Yamiro, because each one of those people behind me has their recorders rolling. You idiot!” Kenny got into his face and said, “Answer my question, Yamiro, so I can take care of business!” Yamiro stammered and replied, “Uh ... no. I do not have any children.”

“That’s what I thought,” Kenny said, “because there isn’t one self-respecting parent in this whole world that would have cracked a joke like that, at a time like this. You’re an ass!”

Kenny was about to turn around, but he stopped and glared at Yamiro. “You can tell your boss not to send you anywhere near me again! If you ever say another word to me, then I’m going to pound your face into hamburger!”

Kenny clenched his fists by his sides and strode back to his truck. He looked at the shocked group of reporters and said, “In response to Harold’s questions, I do not believe that Peter Woods’ death is at all related to his sister, TJ. Peter’s horrible death makes me sick to my stomach and you can quote me on this one—I will kill the people responsible for his murder when they are found!” Kenny held up his hand and stated, “I’ve only got time to answer two more questions because my staff is waiting for me at the facility.”

A pleasant-looking black woman in apricot-colored blazer and slacks asked, “Coach Brown, with only two weeks left before your football team begins practice, do you know if TJ Woods is going to quit the team or not?”

Kenny frowned and shrugged his shoulders. “I’m not sure.” The final question came from the ugly white man who had filed a lawsuit against him last season. Kenny thought that the ungainly fellow looked like the legendary character from *Sleepy Hollow*, Ichabod Crane.

Ichabod focused his rat-like eyes on him and said, “It’s been a long time, Coach.”

Kenny did not reply, and then Ichabod said, “No offense intended, Coach Brown, but a lot of people seem to die when you’re around. Just by looking at your controversial experiences during the past five years, it seems that more than a dozen people have been killed when you’re somehow involved.”

Kenny fought the urge to beat the man senseless and asked, “What’s your point?”

Ichabod stood taller and said, “I’m not questioning your honor or your integrity, Coach Brown. But there comes a time when a man needs to examine his priorities and reevaluate his

outspoken positions on politically correct issues. So, I'd like to know if you're going to resign immediately? It seems clear that your presence is hurting the fine students of this college. Not to mention the fact that two of your assistant coaches were murdered last year."

The reporters buzzed with anticipation, but Kenny remained silent. He looked at Ichabod's mocking face and his shabby green shirt.

After a lengthy pause, Kenny said, "No." He walked around the tailgate of his truck and marched towards the facility.

Minutes later, Kenny arrived at his blue-carpeted office and met the despondent faces of his assistant coaches, plus Athletic Director John McDough and the school's President, Rebecca Jones.

Rebecca and McDough were both dressed in matching navy-blue attire. Kenny's staff had been called together at the last minute. They looked irritated, angry, haggard, and confused. Most of his coaches were wearing shorts and a t-shirt, except for Percy's nephew, Jeff McMillan, who was dressed in a royal blue nylon sweat suit.

Before Kenny could say a word, Rebecca stared at him and said, "Kimberly Woods called me earlier this morning. Her plane arrives in San Francisco late tonight, and she wants TJ to return to Canada, along with her brother's casket... permanently." Saddened beyond words, Kenny stuck his hands into the front pockets of his tan slacks and looked down at his golden polo shirt.

Breaking the silence, the smallish Brody Dunn spoke up and implored, "What are we going to do, Kenny?"

Kenny glanced up and slowly looked at each of their faces. He saw the same reaction in all their eyes: grief, shock, and disbelief. He was about to respond to Brody when Jeff McMillan said, "My uncle Percy is meeting with Ferguson Marshall right now, and they're going to hold a press conference at five o'clock tonight." That was news to Kenny. He gazed at Jeff and asked, "About what, exactly?"

Jeff replied, "I don't know. He wouldn't tell me."

John McDough stepped forward, snapped his fingers a few times and said, "I know—they are formulating a plan to catch the killer."

CHAPTER 29

Minutes before noon and beneath a partly cloudy sky, Kenny walked to the middle of campus and bounded up the steps to the entrance of Centennial Dorm #3. A burgeoning throng of impatient journalists pursued Kenny as he neared the glass doors.

One lady shouted at him. “Coach Brown, are you going upstairs to meet with TJ Woods in her dorm room?”

Kenny glanced at the adept woman but said nothing. Seconds later, as a few college students stared at him with questioning eyes, Kenny stepped into the elevator and was whisked to the top floor. He exited the elevator, turned right, and walked through another doorway. He strode down the darkened hallway while listening to some students laughing uncontrollably and stomping to the beat of loud music.

Kenny arrived at room 506 and knocked on the eggshell-colored door. TJ opened the door. Kenny looked at the distraught young woman and saw that her normally free spirit was filled with pain. The bronze skin around her eyes was puffy, red and swollen. Her short blonde hair was matted with sweat, and she was barefoot, dressed only in a pair of pink shorts and a gray t-shirt. TJ stepped aside and said, “Hello, Coach Brown. Please come in.”

Kenny entered her room for the first time and scanned the scene. TJ had plastered several posters of famous male and female athletes all over the walls and ceiling of her room. He saw big pictures of Jason Giambi, Randy Moss, Joey Harrington, Venus Williams, and others. Near the tall window in front of him, Kenny noticed two baskets of fresh flowers with sympathetic cards lying nearby. TJ’s room was the lair of a sports fan, but it also smelled fresh and the sweet aroma reminded Kenny of a vanilla scent that Athena was fond of wearing.

TJ shut the door and said, “It’s not your fault, Coach Brown. You didn’t murder my brother, but somebody else had him killed because of me.” She began to cry, and Kenny embraced her while trying to find the right words to say.

Standing in the center of the room, they rocked back and forth until TJ dabbed at her eyes, stepped back and said, “I’ve always wanted to be a big-time college football player, but I never expected for my brother to get killed because of my ambition!” Gently, Kenny gripped her by the shoulders and said, “TJ, when I visited with you and your family for the first-time last January, I instantly realized how special you and Peter were. At that point, I made the decision to offer you

a scholarship if I could get it approved by my boss.” Kenny paused and found her hazel eyes with his own. “There are lots of people in this country who want you to fail because you’re a woman. But we’ve talked about this before. Think of yourself as a pioneer.” Kenny tried to lift her spirits by telling her a true story. “TJ, back in the late 1700s when humans first began testing parachutes—do you know what they used as the experimental jumpers?”

TJ shook her head and said, “No.”

Kenny answered, “Animals, TJ. We sacrificed thousands of animals by testing parachutes until we finally felt comfortable enough to strap our own species into a chute.” Kenny stayed focused on her light brown eyes and explained, “You’re a modern pioneer, TJ. It’s going to be difficult and football practice hasn’t even started yet.”

TJ shook her head lightly, but then Kenny said, “If it’s any comfort to you at all, I don’t believe the assassin was trying to kill your brother.” He made sure that TJ was paying attention to him and he said, “I think the assassin was hired to kill me, but when things got crazy yesterday, the killer went nuts because he was worried about Peter and my brother getting away.”

TJ’s eyes widened. She gawked at him and asked, “Who would want to kill you, Coach Brown? You’re one of the sincerest men I’ve ever met.”

Kenny grinned at her and said, “Thank you, but life is odd, TJ. Everybody on this planet has enemies. Nobody is perfect, especially me.”

TJ blew her nose into a tissue and asked, “Why, Coach Brown?”

Kenny cleared his throat and said, “That’s what I’m going to find out.”

TJ rubbed her eyes and stated, “I’m not going to let some lunatic frighten me away from here. I want to stay here and play this season in memory of my brother.”

“Okay,” Kenny replied. “But your mother might have a different opinion about that.”

“I know,” TJ said. “But there’s something I haven’t told her yet.”

“What?” Kenny asked.

TJ looked at him with a straight face. She stepped away and slowly paced to the other side of the room. Kenny watched intently as TJ looked out of the window.

TJ eventually faced him again and said, “I’m in love with Jason Marshall, and I think that I want to spend the rest of my life with him.”

CHAPTER 30

At a quarter to five on Monday evening, Ferguson Marshall looked into the pale blue eyes of Percy McMillan and wondered what he was thinking. Ferguson lounged in a burgundy chair in the fancy bar of the Palace Hotel in downtown San Francisco and guessed that Percy was feeling the heat. Percy's slender face had deep cracks at the folds of his eyes and his lips were chapped. Ferguson mused that he didn't care for Percy's choice of a sandy tweed jacket and slacks because it seemed a bit understated for their upcoming press conference.

Ferguson stared at his associate and asked, "Percy, are you going to wear that jacket to the press conference, or do you have a change of clothes in your limo?"

Percy looked at him and replied, "Yes, because this press conference isn't about me—it's about doing the right thing. I want to appear down to earth, not overstated."

Ferguson nodded and said, "Good point." He glanced at his own outfit and was still happy with his blue blazer, red tie, and gray slacks. He looked to the right and nodded at Saxon who was keeping a watchful lookout in the bar.

Percy finished his scotch on the rocks and asked, "Ferguson, would you like to review our agenda one last time?"

Ferguson sipped at his glass of champagne and said, "Sure." Percy said, "Kimberly Woods has given me permission to post a one-million-dollar reward for any information that leads to the capture and conviction of the killer's boss."

Ferguson said, "As I mentioned earlier, my son was very fond of Peter Woods and I would also like to contribute something to the reward. After all, Jason and TJ have been seeing a lot of each other lately."

Percy put down his drink and said, "You have my permission to combine your reward with mine."

"Thank you," Ferguson replied. Then he asked, "Percy, what are you going to do about your unpredictable football coach, Kenny Brown?"

Percy gazed at him and asked, "What do you mean?" Ferguson toyed with his champagne flute and said, "I feel like he deserves to be reprimanded ... or fired. I'll tell you this; if my son had been murdered, then I would have called for his head. Don't you agree?"

Percy sat back and Ferguson watched his tired-looking eyes dart about. Finally, Percy replied, "I haven't had the chance to meet with Kenway yet, but I've talked to him over the telephone regarding the basic aspects of this case. As far as I can tell, everything was above board, in terms of Kenway's recreational activities with Peter Woods." Percy scratched the top of his left hand and said, "We'll see what happens."

Ferguson nodded but he had something else on his mind, so he asked Percy another question to change the subject. "I don't want to seem anxious, Percy, but are there some snags delaying the commencement of our business arrangement? It was my understanding that this was going to be resolved before our ninety-day rescission period was up. August twelfth is right around the corner, and I don't want our deal to fall apart."

Ferguson leaned back and tried to ease the tension thumping in his head by thinking about Veronica's breasts.

A few seconds later, Percy replied, "I apologize for the delay, but my attorneys have found it impossible to check out every aspect of your background because it's so unique. Give me another week and then we'll probably meet at my ranch to wrap it up. Fair enough?"

Ferguson replied, "Good," but then he lied. "My personal background is all there in black and white for everybody to see. But please let me know if you need anything else."

Later, as the chiming clock in the hotel's main ballroom struck upon five o'clock, Ferguson entered the glamorous room and waved at the buzzing crowd. He flashed them his, "everything is going to be all right" smile and shook hands with many people. Proudly, and with his pre-election poll numbers needing a boost, Ferguson strode towards the stage that was majestically positioned on the other end of the glittering ballroom. He saw at least two hundred familiar faces and his quickening pace left Percy trailing behind him.

Ferguson looked at his VP running mate standing beneath the large banner hanging above the stage. He loved the dominating sound of their combined last names plastered on posters, buttons, pins and bumper stickers. Marshall/Law.

As they had originally planned, Hulda had arrived at the press conference early to blend with the crowd and tug on their pliable emotions. Hulda was dressed in a pair of white cotton pants and an off-white silk blouse. She looked just like any other middle-class woman in America, and that's what Ferguson wanted.

With Percy right behind him, Ferguson climbed the steps to the left of the stage and shook hands with Hulda. She leaned closer to him and whispered into his left ear. "It's been easy, and they're going to love you for this sympathetic gesture."

"That's why I'm here," Ferguson replied, and he walked towards the twin podiums at center stage.

Hulda grinned and then shook hands with Percy McMillan.

Soon Percy was standing near the podium to Ferguson's right. The audience fell silent and Ferguson listened to Percy speak. "Ladies and gentlemen, this is a sad day for the Woods family because an awful tragedy has taken the life of Peter Woods."

Ferguson's mind began to wander, and he scouted the audience for his lovely Veronica. Eventually, he located her in the right corner of the big room. She waved at him and Ferguson gave her a slight nod of his head.

Moments later, the crowd erupted in thunderous applause as Percy turned to face him. Ferguson was caught off guard, but he rallied by leaning towards his microphone and he said, "Sorry about that, but I was thinking about how fortunate I am because that could have been my only son, Jason, that was murdered yesterday." For emphasis, he hesitated and said, "My heart goes out to Kimberly and TJ Woods, and their entire family."

Relieved because he had recovered nicely, Ferguson paused and said, "During the past twenty-four hours I've heard some nasty rumors about why Peter Woods was killed. As most of you know, my son Jason is enrolled at McMillan College. He's a solid student and a good football player. And since Jason had recently become friend's with Peter Woods, I have decided to match the reward that Percy McMillan has so generously offered."

Ferguson looked at the surprised faces in the crowd and said, "As of today, a two-million-dollar cash reward is on the table. I am extending an open invitation to the American people: please help us find the people responsible for the death of Peter Woods!" Ferguson bowed his head and waited until the applause subsided. He could hear the crowd growing restless. He lifted his head and passionately bellowed, "The wonderful people of America must unite against this type of rampant criminal element destroying our society! Join me in the battle for justice and freedom. We will not falter, and we will not fail!"

CHAPTER 31

The next morning, a couple of screeching blue jays woke up Kenny from a deep sleep. He stirred and was surprised to find himself curled up in the confines of his office chair behind his desk at the facility. He blinked, rubbed his face and glanced at the clock on his desk. It was almost eight o'clock.

“Oh crap!” Kenny sat upright, pushed away from his desk and sprang out of his chair in a hurry. “I can’t believe I fell asleep!”

Worried and with his neck muscles cramped and tight, Kenny scooted out of the office and hustled downstairs to the staff locker room.

About fifteen minutes later Kenny was clean and dressed in a fresh pair of khaki slacks, a copper-colored shirt, and brown leather shoes. He walked back upstairs to the coaches’ office and entered the room. He was straightening up the conference table when he heard the door open.

Kenny turned and looked into the disappointed and bitter eyes of Kimberly Woods. He glanced at her short silver hair and back to her watery blue eyes. She had dark gray patches on the flesh beneath her eyes and the wrinkled skin around her mouth seemed much older than the last time he had seen her. Kenny noticed her lightweight black pants and an ivory blouse. Gone from her usually cheery face was the pleasant smile, having been replaced by a look of despair, revenge, and anger. Kenny looked past Kimberly Woods and noticed both of her two remaining sons behind her.

Kenny stood up and moved towards Kimberly Woods with his right hand extended. He wanted to comfort her and demonstrate how sorry he was about Peter’s horrific death. Kenny strode towards her while glancing at the stocky, golden-haired helicopter pilot, Mike Woods, and the bald but taller arctic naturalist, Jeff Woods.

Kimberly advanced towards him, but she ignored his offer of a handshake and slapped him across the face two times. The piercing sting of her unexpected blows stunned Kenny and he felt a molten-like sensation burning in his left cheek. After absorbing her second peppering strike, Kenny righted himself and gazed at her, ready to take a few more blows to his face. In his heart, Kenny knew she had every right to release her hostility on him, but he wanted to prove to her that he cared deeply for Peter. He was willing to withstand her assault because he realized any other response would have been useless.

Both of her sons were standing beside her like a pair of bodyguards. Mike was to his left and Jeff was standing on the other side. They glared at him with their sad and distrusting hazel and brown eyes.

He looked at Kimberly and noticed that her lips and jaw were quivering, and she had teardrops rolling down her cheeks. After a very uncomfortable silence, Kimberly said, "I was wrong in Canada, because TJ belongs at home, with me."

Kenny was about to reply when TJ walked through the office door. She was dressed in a pair of cardinal-colored shorts, a white tank top, and matching sandals.

Kenny glanced at each of them and then TJ said, "I've tried to talk to her, Coach Brown, but my mother won't budge. We argued all night long, and I'm exhausted."

Kenny wasn't sure what to say, so he walked over to the door and closed it. He held onto the doorknob and prayed for the right answer to reach him.

Finally, he pivoted and said, "I am deeply sorry about what happened to Peter, and I wish I could turn back the clock and reverse everything." He began walking towards them and said, "Please take a seat at the table, so we can talk and hopefully work this out."

Kimberly placed her bone-colored purse on the table and glowered at him. Mike glanced at him, then shuffled over to his mother and guided her towards one of the blue swivel chairs. Eventually, all of them were seated at the conference table and Kenny looked from his right to left. The bald Jeff was poised with his large hands resting on the table. Next to Jeff sat the depressed TJ, followed by Kimberly and, finally, the barrel-chested Mike on his left.

Kimberly looked at him and asked, "What are you going to do, Coach Brown? How are you going to find the people responsible for my son's death?"

During the silence, Kenny heard the blue jays squawking at each other outside of his office window. He returned Kimberly's stare with sincerity and replied, "I'm not sure, but I am convinced that the assassin was supposed to murder me. I believe that Peter was a victim of circumstance."

Kimberly leaned forward and spat, "Should that make me feel better?"

Jeff Woods raised his hands, looked at his mother and said, "Take it easy, Mom, and let's hear what Coach Brown has to say." TJ and Mike nodded. Kimberly Woods relaxed for a moment and sat back in her chair.

Feeling nervous, Kenny cracked his knuckles and said, "I believe that somebody is trying to kill me because I want TJ to be on this football team."

Mike looked around the table and asked him, “Who?” Kenny shook his head and replied, “I can’t comment on that because I’m not exactly sure. Besides, there’s a good chance that I could be way off base.”

Kimberly pressed forward and gripped her purse with both hands. She squeezed it and angrily replied, “My son’s body is lying in the morgue, and you have the gall to sit there and not divulge a suspect’s name to me! Are you crazy? Do you have a heart, Coach Brown? Is it missing, or made of stone?”

TJ cut in and screamed, “Stop it, Mother! Just stop it!” Kenny wanted to stand up and shout, I think Ferguson Marshall wants me dead!

Instead, Kenny waited for a moment and said, “I have no proof, so therefore I have nothing.”

Kimberly picked up her purse and she flung it at him. Mike jumped up from his seat and deflected the sailing object as it sped towards Kenny’s face. The errant handbag careened his right and crashed against the carpet, spilling its contents onto the floor.

Kenny attempted to gather his composure. He backed away from the table and reached down to pick up the scattered belongings of her purse.

Jeff leaned down next to him and said, “Hang in there, Coach Brown, because she’s ... she’s still in shock.”

“It’s okay, your mother has the right to be pissed off,” Kenny replied.

As TJ tried to calm her mother, Mike Woods came over to Kenny and offered his first words of the meeting. “All of us want some answers, Kenny, especially our mother. I appreciate your position, but you need to give us something to go on.”

Kenny nodded and they finished retrieving the contents of her purse. Eventually, they were seated again, and Kenny said, “Kim, I understand why you want TJ to come home with you.”

Kimberly tilted her head and retorted, “Oh, really?” Then she sarcastically asked him, “How many of your own children have you buried, Coach Brown?”

Her razor-sharp reply cut through Kenny’s soul like a laser beam. He couldn’t muster an answer and then Kimberly said, “I refuse to sit by and lose another one of my children because of you! I will not allow TJ to stay here and get killed!”

TJ grabbed her mother’s left arm and loudly said, “Coach Brown did not kill Peter! I want to stay here because it’s the right thing to do for me, and for Peter.” TJ’s voice went up higher and

she said, "I love Jason Marshall and I want to be with him!" Kenny watched Kimberly turn to TJ and gaze at her with a look of astonishment on her aged face. The proud but hurting elderly woman brushed at a few strands of her silver hair and asked TJ, "What?"

"That's right," TJ replied softly. "I am going to fulfill my commitment, and honor Peter. And I know what's in my heart— I am in love with Jason. I want to be with him."

Kimberly bowed her head and sighed several times. She looked up, glanced around the table and settled her gaze upon Kenny. Kenny braced himself and she said to him, "Last night, your boss and Ferguson Marshall offered a sizable bounty to the American people." She shook her head and asked, "What are you going to do, Coach Brown? Because I need to know."

Kenny ran the palms of his hands across the surface of the table and replied, "Everything I can to resolve this mess."

Kimberly Woods stood up and gave him a cross look. She glanced at her children, got ready to leave and swung back to him. Firmly, she stated, "You have one week to handle this, Coach Brown. Otherwise, I am going to file a wrongful death lawsuit against you, this college, and the entire NCAA." She stepped away from the table and her children stood up to leave. She held onto the arms of her two sons and glanced at Kenny while saying, "I trusted you, Coach Brown, and my youngest son is dead. However, if you fail to locate the people responsible for Peter's death, then TJ will be coming home with me, and I will make your life a living hell."

CHAPTER 32

As a cloudless pink and violet dusk appeared Sunday evening, Ferguson Marshall stormed through the immaculate grounds of his seaside, property in San Francisco and clenched his fists repeatedly. Briskly, he walked across the tiles of his veranda overlooking the beach below his home and bellowed for Saxon. “Where is my son, Saxon? Because I haven’t seen him in three days!” Full of rage and ready for violence, Ferguson pounded his fist into the palm of his hand and yelled. “Saxon, where is Jason? I’ve got the most important meeting of my life tomorrow with Percy McMillan, and I can’t afford to be distracted!”

A warm breeze lifted the feathers of his dark hair and Ferguson marched by the sunroom on his left. He glanced inside the glass-walled alcove but neither saw nor heard anything of consequence. He continued moving at a steady clip and strode across the thick lawn in his backyard. He bounded over the stage of the pearly-white gazebo, caught the tip of his left shoe on its base, and stumbled forward onto the grass. He rolled over the grass and then popped to his feet more perturbed than before. He looked at his light-yellow shirt and soft brown slacks, realizing they had been tagged with fresh grass stains. He cursed several times and stomped ahead while calling out for Saxon.

Ferguson walked towards the bronze and stainless-steel twin-dolphin waterfall sculpture in his backyard and then he heard Jason’s voice emanate from behind him. “Saxon is not here, Dad. He left twenty-minutes ago, I saw him leave but he didn’t see me because I was hiding in your bedroom.”

Ferguson spun around and glared at his disobedient son. He was shocked to discover that Jason was dressed only in a pair of white jockey underwear. Ferguson stammered but then he said, “Put on some clothes boy, or you will regret it!”

Jason shook his head and pointed towards the darkening sky. “I don’t need any clothes where I’m going, Dad.”

Ferguson stopped about fifty feet away from him and stared at the lean, muscular body of his son. Puzzled, Ferguson asked, “What are you talking about, Jason?”

Jason’s voice cracked and wavered as he said, “I’m tired, Dad. Very, very tired.”

Ferguson threw up his arms and asked, “Tired of what, son?” Jason placed his hands over his heart and replied, “When I was growing up, I used to idolize you, Dad. And even when I found out that you were born in Cuba, it didn’t matter to me because I thought you were a good man.” Sensing something strange in Jason’s demeanor, Ferguson moved closer to him and gently asked, “What’s your point, son?” Jason snapped out of his trance and harshly demanded, “Stay away from me, Dad, and don’t come near me!”

Ferguson stopped moving and watched Jason edge slowly towards the ominous ledge of the cliff behind him. Becoming more concerned, Ferguson extended his right hand and said, “I didn’t mean to hurt you, son, but I’ve been under a lot of pressure lately and I’m sorry. Please forgive me.”

Slowly, Jason shuffled backward across the gray tile and replied, “I don’t believe you, Dad, because you’ve always taught me that the true test of a man’s character is how he handles the pressure-packed situations in life.”

Understanding that he had been bitten in the back by one of his own mottos, Ferguson closed his eyelids for a moment and thought about his next move. Soon he looked at his son and asked, “Jason, what do you want me to do?”

Jason rubbed his arms and halted in mid-step. He looked at him and replied, “Quit the election, then turn yourself in for the murder of Peter Woods, and take the responsibility for the people that died on Percy McMillan’s yacht.”

Using all of his restraint, Ferguson withheld his sarcastic reply and said, “You’re confused, and I don’t know what you’re talking about. Please let me help you because it was wrong of me to force you to attend McMillan College. If you will let me arrange for some emotional counseling for you, then you can transfer to another school.”

Jason started backing up again, shaking his head and looking at the ground. Ferguson watched Jason move onto the red dirt beyond the tile as he approached the jagged and deadly boundary of his property.

Unable to control himself any longer, Ferguson stepped forward and loudly said, “Don’t do it, son! Don’t throw your life away!”

Obviously startled, Jason froze and looked up at him. Ferguson gazed at the saddened but handsome face of his only child and images of his son’s carefree childhood flashed through his

mind. Carnivals, baseball games, cotton candy and a host of other fond memories skipped across his memory while he looked into the eyes of Jason.

Ferguson observed him as he moved his naked heels over the lip of the cliff and spread out his arms to balance his body like a high-diver poised on a platform.

Slightly off-kilter, but seemingly unafraid, Jason looked at him and said, "I need to ask you something, Dad, and if you tell me the truth, then I won't jump."

Feeling desperate and with a sweaty lacquer covering his body, Ferguson nodded and replied, "I promise to tell you the truth, Jason. No matter what."

Jason wobbled, then steadied himself and asked, "Promise?" "Yes," Ferguson agreed.

Jason teetered on the cliff hundreds of feet above the rocky beach and Ferguson heard a stunning and totally unexpected question come from the mouth of his son. Absolutely sure that he had completely misunderstood Jason's devastating query, Ferguson shook his head and asked, "Jason, could you repeat that?" Jason raised his chin and replied, "I said, 'did you kill my mother?'"

The impact of his son's question caused Ferguson to recall that fateful day long ago when he had forced Cassandra out of the jet. Ferguson's breathing became heavy and his heart pounded with the force of a thousand wild horses stampeding across the plains.

Unsure of exactly how much time had elapsed since hearing that question, Ferguson looked at Jason but couldn't generate any words from his mouth.

Jason stared at him with wise and knowing eyes, and said, "That's what I thought, Dad." He scooted back and stated, "I'm looking forward to meeting my mother for the first time. Don't worry, Dad, because you'll get what's coming to you."

Like a graceful diver, Jason launched himself into the air. He did a back flip before beginning his terminal descent.

Ferguson screamed. "No, my son! Jason! Oh, Jason!" Ferguson ran to the edge of the cliff, slid onto his knees and peered over the ledge. He watched Jason's out-of-control body tumble through the twilight at a frightening speed. He saw a couple of people strolling on the beach. They glanced up and pointed at his spiraling son plummeting towards the sand. Before Jason's body crashed onto the beach, Ferguson bid him farewell and a single teardrop rolled down his left cheek. After his brief mourning period had subsided, his cunning mind tried to calculate exactly how this macabre event was going to affect the fate of his presidential campaign.

CHAPTER 33

Bang! Bang! Bang! Somebody was pounding on the front door of Kenny's home and his dog was going nuts in the backyard because of it.

Groggy, Kenny sat up and looked at the alarm clock next to his bed. It was two minutes before six o'clock on Monday morning and he had no idea who was waiting for him downstairs. Concerned, Kenny put on a pair of teal boxer shorts and bounded down the stairs. He made a right turn at the base of the stairwell and walked towards the front door. The soles of his bare feet pulled against the hardwood flooring and he saw the filmy image of an unidentifiable person waiting beyond the obscure glass of the front door.

He leaned forward to open the door and mumbled. "Who in the...?" Kenny pulled the door open and stared into the mortified hazel eyes of TJ. Silence ensued and he listened to the sound of his neighbor's sprinkler system ticking away.

TJ returned his surprised gaze with a pitiful and pensive look that told him something terrible had happened. Her short blonde hair was unkempt, and she was wearing a dark green t-shirt, cutoff blue jeans, and tennis shoes without socks. She had an avocado-colored backpack slung over her shoulder and looked like she was on the run from somebody.

Taken aback, Kenny asked, "TJ, what are you doing here?"

She dropped her backpack onto his front porch and began to cry. She fell to one knee and Kenny bent down with her. He asked, "What's wrong, TJ?"

TJ cried for a while, then wiped her eyes, glanced at him and said, "Jason is dead!"

"What?" Kenny was dumbfounded. His nerves tingled with a fear of the unknown and he said, "He's been missing for several days and his father called me twice yesterday. When did this happen? Are you sure?"

TJ rose to her feet and so did Kenny.

Hiccupping and crying from the emotional duress, TJ said, "Yes, Jason flew back to Canada with me and my family for Peter's funeral. He didn't want anybody to know because he wanted to spend some time with us. We arrived back here yesterday at noon and spent a couple of hours picnicking at Paradise Park in San Rafael."

Kenny nodded and said, "Keep going."

TJ continued, "Before Jason went home, he gave me a package and instructed me to open it at midnight by myself." With trepidation, Kenny asked, "What was in the package?" TJ picked up her backpack and unzipped the main compartment. She extracted a large manila envelope, then reached into it and pulled out a videotape.

As if not believing her words, TJ said, "Jason committed suicide last night."

Kenny shook his head and asked, "How do you know that?" "Because," TJ explained, "I called his house this morning and Saxon told me that there had been a terrible accident involving Jason, and he was dead."

Feeling like he had been kicked in the guts, Kenny reeled for a moment, then stepped aside and guided TJ into his home.

He shut the front door, then looked at her and asked, "What's on the tape, TJ?"

TJ shook her head and wearily replied, "It's frightening, and if it's true, then I'm scared to death."

Moments later, Kenny was dressed in a light blue shirt and khaki shorts, sitting rigidly on his sofa while TJ stood beside him. Together, they looked at the image of an emotionally shaken Jason Marshall on his television screen. Jason was sitting in the exact same puffy white chair that he had been in when Kenny had first visited with Jason and his father during their initial recruiting meeting many months ago.

Kenny examined the worried look in Jason's eyes and the way Jason kept fidgeting with his hands as he sat in front of the camera speechless. Jason had dressed in a black sweatshirt with white lettering that read: I love you, TJ!

Kenny was about to ask TJ a question when Jason sat up in his chair and said, "My name is Jason Marshall, and my father, Ferguson Marshall. My father is currently the Democratic Presidential Nominee for the upcoming election this November. However, my father is the most deceitful man I have ever known. He is power hungry and will stop at nothing to get what he wants." Jason's eyes began to well up with teardrops and he paused for a moment. Kenny turned to ask TJ a question, but she waved him off and pointed at the television.

Kenny looked back to the set and Jason said, "When I was eight years old, I accidentally learned that my father was born in Cuba. For clarity, let me repeat that. My father, Ferguson Marshall was actually born in Cuba, and not in America."

"Oh, God!" Kenny looked at TJ and asked, "Do you know what that means?"

TJ nodded and said, “Wait, because it gets much worse.” Kenny stood up and braced his legs against the sofa.

Jason kept talking. “My father has lied to me about our family history. He has always told me that I had dark skin because I was part Italian. However, the only blood relatives I’ve ever met have been from my mother’s side of the family. Which brings me to my next point.”

Jason paused, seemed to collect his thoughts and peered into the camera with a determined stare. He said, “I also believe that my mother, Cassandra, discovered that my father was born in Cuba. I don’t have any proof, but it’s my gut feeling that my father killed her because she died after plunging from his jet airplane ... which was flying from Cuba to the United States.”

Kenny stomped across his family room and slammed his fists onto the piano. He walked back to the couch, glanced at TJ and looked at the image of Jason Marshall.

Finally, Jason said, “My father is a psychotic man capable of horrific deeds, physical abuse, and murder. A few days ago, my father and I got into a fist fight and I have the bruises on my body to prove it.” Jason lifted his sweatshirt and displayed a pair of dark blemishes beneath his right armpit.

Kenny shook his head and TJ whispered, “How could anybody beat their children? It’s madness!”

Kenny nodded and then Jason said, “During the past few months, I’ve had the unfortunate opportunity of overhearing a few of my father’s conversations with his best friend, Saxon. I am convinced that Saxon knows everything and will also help my father at all costs. If elected as the next President of the United States, my father will try to implement a sinister plan equal to the atrocities committed by Hitler, Stalin, and Lenin rolled into one.”

TJ gasped, obviously not looking forward to once again hearing the rest of Jason’s statement. Kenny walked over to her and held her left hand.

Jason said, “From what I understand, as President, my father would implement a pair of Executive Orders outlawing freedom of speech that is deemed harmful to the government and revoke the rights of all U.S. citizens to own firearms. My father wants to become the supreme ruler of the world, and he understands that it’s possible to enslave Americans if they can’t own guns. As a little boy, my father lived under Fidel Castro’s terrible regime. My father believes women should be subservient to men, and that all men can be pounded into submission if they are unable to defend themselves against a governmental military attack.” Jason took a break, wiped at the

teardrops streaming down his cheeks, and then continued. “As most of you know, my father owns one of the largest biotech companies in the world called ‘The Human Race.’ A few months ago, I worked there as an intern. I was curious, so I accessed several confidential files and learned some frightening things. For the past two years, humans have been entrenched in the biochip implant tracking device business with several top-secret military leaders from around the world. Earlier this year, my father’s company began injecting newborn babies with a miniaturized tracking device called The Digital God. This tiny computerized tracking device is 1/200th the size of a grain of rice and it can never be removed from the carrier’s body once it has been implanted. Via satellite this tracking device allows the God—in this case, my father—the ability to track the whereabouts of each person carrying that biochip implant in their body. Furthermore, The Digital God can be programmed to alter or shut down the carrier’s natural release of certain hormones or adrenaline, thereby making each person a slave to my father’s whims. Two weeks ago, I overheard my father discussing how happy he was with the latest testing results of The Digital God. A dozen infants had been poked with pins on the soles of their feet until they were crying, upon which their implant devices were activated to boost the level of their endorphins. In less than a minute, their crying had ceased. He also has plans to further develop The Digital God that will enable him to manufacture armies of loyal subjects. Ten years ago, these types of scientific nightmares were impossible to comprehend, but now, we can’t overlook them any longer because they are here.”

“Jesus of freedom!” Kenny remarked, shocked and becoming nauseous.

TJ said, “Here comes the whammy, Coach Brown.”

Jason stated, “Last but not least, I believe my father was humiliated by the undeniable fact that my girlfriend, TJ Woods, is a better athlete than I am. He told me that it’s unthinkable for me to be in love with TJ, and he hates the fact that she is a bright and happy young woman on the verge of great success. I also believe my father is behind the assassination attempts on Coach Brown, and I have a hunch that he is responsible for the death of Peter Woods.” Jason coughed a few times. Then he looked at the camera and said, “In short, if somebody ever strongly disagrees with my father or gets in his way, then they end up ruined or dead.”

Kenny let go of TJ’s hand and walked over to the doors at the far end of his family room. He was irate and disappointed with himself because he had not acted upon his instincts after reviewing the videotape from Percy’s yacht. He felt ill and weak in the knees, knowing he had helped Ferguson Marshall that day, the man most likely responsible for Marla’s death.

Kenny pulled the wooden doors open. He felt overwhelmed by the evilness of Ferguson Marshall and he gripped the slender brass handles of the doors to stabilize himself.

Kenny looked at the bright sky and screamed. "I'm going to kill you, Ferguson!"

TJ came over to him and said, "Coach Brown, you need to hear this. Hurry!"

Kenny returned to the television set, and Jason said, "As I have slowly put the pieces together, I have suffered from a tremendous amount of guilt. However, I can no longer stomach the undeniable fact that my father is a crazed monster, blinded by his vision of the world and how he wants to control it. Yes, my father came from Cuba, but instead of becoming a respectable and patriotic person like most of the good Cuban refugees who are thankful for our great country, he became a rich man who respects nothing, not even his own flesh and blood. My father currently represents the Democratic Party, but I urge the wonderful people of this great country to look back in time and see what a real Democrat was all about. In the 1960s, President Kennedy understood that Fidel Castro's Cuba was a nightmarish hell, and JFK was prepared to die to keep our country free of Communism and socialism!"

Jason glanced down at his black sweatshirt and said, "I am tired of protecting my father with my silence. I can't stand living in this world any longer, and TJ deserves to spend her life with a better man than me. I'm going to commit suicide by leaping from the cliffs behind our home. I want my death to wake up the world because there's no other way to do it. Even though my father touts the Lord's name in most of his speeches, he does not believe in God. However, my father believes that he is a god. I do believe in the greatness of God and I will finally get the chance to be with my mother. Please hear me, America, because my father, Ferguson Marshall must be stopped, or he will destroy this great country of ours! God bless you!"

Kenny watched Jason rise from the chair and turn off the recorder.

The screen went blank and TJ asked him, "Now what do we do, Coach Brown?"

Kenny picked up the remote control and he fired it at the television screen. The speeding remote crashed into the glass and punched a jagged hole in the center of it. Hot sparks exploded from the television and Kenny kicked it with his right foot.

"Damn it! Damn it! Damn it!" Kenny yelled.

Seething mad and with his blood pumping wildly through his veins, Kenny pivoted towards TJ and said, "We need to locate Percy and show him this videotape. Now!"

TJ stepped towards him and said, “Yesterday morning Jason told me that his father was going to meet Percy McMillan at his ranch to finalize their business arrangement.”

“What time?” Kenny asked.

“I don’t know.” She looked at him, obviously concerned and asked, “Coach Brown, have you thought about Percy McMillan’s role in all of this?”

“How so?” Kenny stopped moving and stared at her expectantly.

TJ replied, “What if your boss is mixed up in all of this? I mean, what if he already knows about Ferguson Marshall’s master plan?”

TJ’s questioning words hit him hard and he suddenly thought about the correlating circumstances possibly connecting his boss with Ferguson Marshall. Not wanting to believe it, Kenny thought, Is Percy trying to kill me? Does he want me dead? Has Percy been playing me for a fool?

Kenny spun around and ran towards the staircase. He rotated into a quickening backpedal and called out to her, “TJ, get into my truck—and bring that videotape!”

CHAPTER 34

At precisely eight o'clock that morning, Ferguson Marshall sat impatiently in the backseat of his white limousine and Saxon drove the car along the private dusty road leading to Percy McMillan's ranch in Woodside. Ferguson fiddled with the top button of his soft pink polo shirt and ran his dark fingers along the seams of his light brown slacks.

He pressed a lever and the dividing window between himself and Saxon slid down.

Ferguson asked, "Did anybody follow us here?"

He watched Saxon shake his head and respond, "No cops and no reporters. We're clean."

Ferguson leaned back, gazed at the backside of his friend's head and said, "Saxon, thanks for covering for me last night and this morning. If you hadn't told the police that you also saw Jason leap from the cliffs, then I would have been sitting in jail. I'm exhausted from having to repeat our story a million times during the past twelve hours. I appreciate your loyalty, and after Percy and I take care of business this morning, then I'll reward you a thousand times over."

Saxon guided the car underneath the arching gate of Percy's ranch and replied, "That's why I did it, sir."

Ferguson reclined for a moment and looked at the wildlife roaming about Percy's sprawling ranch. He saw five black horses nibbling at some hay. He noticed a bunch of fat hogs rollicking in a muddy pit and then a pair of impressive ostriches pranced into view. He watched the odd-looking creatures eyeball him for a moment and trot away.

Saxon stopped the car, then hopped out and opened Ferguson's door.

Ferguson looked at him and asked, "Do you see anybody yet?"

Ferguson slid out from the right side of the car.

Saxon twitched his head and replied, "Yes, there're two people on the hill behind the house. It looks like they're tending to the vineyard."

Saxon closed the car door and Ferguson stood up while inhaling the pungent scent of the barnyard air. He took a few breaths, then looked at Saxon and asked, "Do you think that my son's suicide will help me or hurt me?"

Saxon stepped to his left and replied, "Help you, sir, the media always roots for the victim."

"That's true," Ferguson said as he strode towards Percy's home.

Ferguson walked onto the front steps and a plump blonde woman emerged from the front door and smiled at both. Ferguson approved of her pudgy but shapely build concealed in a pair of dirty blue jeans, cowboy boots, and a black t-shirt.

She shook his hand and said, “My name is Jennifer, and it’s a pleasure to meet you, Mister Marshall.” Jennifer glanced down for a moment then stared at him with her green eyes. She said, “I am sorry to hear about your son—that was a tragedy last night.” Ferguson released her calloused hand and said, “I appreciate your kind thoughts, but hopefully this morning’s meeting will make things easier. Is Percy home?”

Jennifer glanced at Saxon then replied, “Yes. He’s been checking the fruit in the vineyard since dawn and he’s waiting for you on the patio in the backyard.”

She moved aside and Ferguson replied, “That’s good news because I was worried when he didn’t return my telephone calls this morning.”

Jennifer shook her head and her long blonde hair swung back and forth. “He’s rerouted all incoming calls to his voice mail system and dismissed the ranch crew for the day.” Jennifer pointed her left thumb behind her and said, “Steve and Mike are still working in the vineyard, but they should be finished in less than five minutes. I’m done for the day, but I might come back later to check on birds and exercise the horses.”

They said goodbye and Ferguson walked into Percy’s western home. Saxon walked behind him, and Ferguson scanned the familiar layout he had seen during his first visit to the ranch. He detected the faint sounds of some pre-recorded piano music, walked by the stationary wagon wheels and moved between the countless racks and hooks containing guns and rifles. He moved towards the kitchen and turned right before striding into the family room. He glanced at the multitude of mounted beast heads looming above with their furry heads and lifeless glassy eyes. Ferguson looked to the left when he heard the gorgeous wooden Andersen patio door slide open. He met the unreadable stare of Percy McMillan and said, “It’s good to see you, Percy.” He watched the exceptionally tall billionaire step through the doorway. Percy had elected to wear a loose-fitting beige cotton shirt, with denim shorts and tanbark-colored hiking boots.

Percy bit into a piece of cantaloupe and replied, “My deepest condolences regarding your son’s death. Jason was a fine young man and his sudden passing must have broken your heart.”

Ferguson nodded, then shook Percy’s hand and said, “If it wasn’t for our important meeting this morning, then I would have been stuck in my house with painful memories of Jason

surrounding me. I must remember to always recall the happy things about my son, but it was horrible last night and this morning, and I sincerely appreciate your prayers.”

Percy shook hands with Saxon, then leaned towards Ferguson and said, “I would be happy to reschedule our meeting for next month if that will make things easier for you.”

Ferguson shook his head once and replied, “On the contrary, Percy, because I want to make sure that Jason’s death was not in vain.” He gazed up at Percy’s lean hawkish face and stated, “I have a favor to ask of you, Percy.”

Percy guided him outside to the shaded patio and asked, “What do you need?”

Ferguson placed his hands on the cool surface of the white iron chair in front of him and said, “The last time I was here, you offered to name the first release of your vintage red wine after our joint business venture. Do you remember that?”

Percy nodded slowly and replied, “Of course, ‘Infinite Wines’, sounds good.”

Ferguson replied, “Yes, it does. But I like the sound of ‘Jason’s Vineyard’ much better.”

Percy lifted a piece of bacon from atop the matching white table. He inserted the bacon into his mouth, chewed it thoughtfully and said, “It has a nice ring to it.”

Ferguson sat down next to Percy’s, but Saxon remained standing near the patio door. When both were seated, Ferguson said, “Thank you, Percy, because it means the world to me and to Jason’s mother, Cassandra.”

Percy nodded and poured each of them a glass of fresh apple juice.

Ferguson placed a white linen napkin in his lap and viewed the sloping hills of the newly named Jason’s Vineyard behind Percy’s estate. He looked at the thousands of wooden stakes stuck in the soil at various angles and observed the twisting vines of the grapes as they wrapped their leafy tentacles around them.

They ate in silence and when Ferguson thought he had waited long enough, he put down his fork and asked, “Well, Percy, today is the deadline. Do we have a deal?”

Ferguson waited nervously and tugged at the thick napkin in his lap with his restless hands. He looked at Percy for a telling sign, but the fellow billionaire merely glanced at him for a few seconds and looked back at Saxon before returning his gaze to the rolling vineyard.

Eventually, Percy met his stare and replied, “Yes, we have a deal this morning.”

Ferguson clapped his hands and tossed his napkin into the air. “Fantastic! That’s great news, Percy! We’re going to rule the world!”

Percy tilted his head, gave him a serious look and commented, "Excuse me, Ferguson."

Ferguson sat back and tried to reign in his zealous reaction. He lied and said, "I meant to say, change the world, Percy ... not rule the world."

Percy rubbed at his long chin and Ferguson shot a glance towards Saxon.

Saxon gave Ferguson a reassuring look and Ferguson switched back to Percy.

Percy said, "I was referring to the naming my vineyard after your deceased son. Please forgive me if I misled you, but it would be an honor to label my vineyard after Jason."

Ferguson felt as if the ranch was spinning all around him. He sucked in a short breath and replied, "What?" He looked to Saxon, but his friend was just as stunned as he was.

"Our business deal is off," Percy stated. "But I thought it would be a good idea for us to have a nice meal together. After all, we gave it a hell of a try, but it didn't work out."

Ferguson wrapped his fingers around the chilly metal arms of his chair and choked them. He squeezed harder and harder, and he asked, "Why not?"

Percy dabbed at his mouth with his napkin, finished his juice, then stood up and said, "It doesn't feel right to me, Ferguson, and every time I've gone against my gut instincts, I've regretted it."

Ferguson rose up quickly and his heavy chair went skidding across the patio. Hastily, he said, "Let's renegotiate, Percy. Right now!"

Percy backed up and replied, "That's out of the question, Ferguson because my attorneys have already signed the cancellation agreement. I called them at seven o'clock this morning and told them to kill the deal."

Ferguson wobbled and placed his left hand on the table. He tried to speak, but his mouth and lips felt numb. He blabbered incoherently, "But...but. This can't be; I need this to happen. This must happen! Why? Why?"

Percy walked towards the patio door and Saxon moved out of the way. Ferguson watched Percy turn back to him and say, "There's a number of reasons, Ferguson, but let me sum it up for you. It's been hard for me to trust anybody since my birthday party, especially you because you've been so insistent about putting this deal together, even though we've never ironed out the details."

Ferguson bounded towards him and hurriedly replied, "That's the way I am, Percy. I don't wait for things to happen because I want to get them done!"

Percy stopped walking and paused within the stained-oak framework of the wide doorway. Percy gave him a frigid stare and said, "I know, and when you failed to cancel our meeting this morning, even after your own son's death last night, well... that was the last straw. You can show yourself out, Ferguson, and please never contact me again. Thank you."

Ferguson stood there frozen in time with his mouth wide open. He watched Percy walk into the house and move towards the den. Ferguson glanced at Saxon and nodded twice. Then, they chased after Percy.

CHAPTER 35

At eight-thirty that morning, Kenny glanced at TJ riding next to him in the passenger seat of his truck and then he smashed his cell phone against the dashboard and angrily said, “Percy is not answering the telephone, and I hope that he’s home.”

“Me too,” TJ replied meekly.

A few minutes later, Kenny steered his truck onto the winding dirt road leading towards Percy’s ranch and gripped the wheel. He stepped on the gas pedal and the vehicle surged forward much faster than expected. He made a right turn into Percy’s gravel driveway, but the speeding truck did not respond at all and it fishtailed out of control towards a white limousine parked in front of Percy’s home.

Kenny slammed both of his feet onto the brake pedal to guide them out of danger. He heard the rocks and debris spew from his spinning tires and a plume of grayish brown dust arose around them.

TJ screamed, “Slow down, Coach Brown! Watch out for that limousine!”

Kenny held his breath, clamped onto the steering wheel and battled against the swerving bulk of his SUV.

Unable to avoid the impending collision with the long white limousine resting in front of Percy’s home, Kenny yelled, “Hold on, TJ!”

The heavy-duty steel bumper of his truck smashed into the limousine with a thunderous growl of crunching metal and grinding gears. Kenny’s truck jackknifed and vaulted into the air, sailing through the sky like an inexperienced water skier lifting off from a ramp. Time seemed to move slowly, and Kenny could feel his body relenting to the force of inertia as his truck corkscrewed to the right.

TJ howled with fear while his truck spun in the air.

Vivid images of Kenny’s life skipped through his brain and he thought about, being four years old when Trevor used his God-given strength to push him into the crook of a small tree that he couldn’t climb by himself. He recalled getting his first hit in Little League baseball and kissing his high school sweetheart for the first time. He heard the gut-busting laughter of his lifelong friends echoing in his mind. His soul felt the warmth of his mother’s love, and he visualized the kind face of his stepfather, Gregory Cage. He reminisced about the black and white photographs

of his biological father and wondered if he was about to meet him for the first time. Athena's lovely face flashed in his mind's eye, and then he saw Marla and his little nephew, Charlie. He reflected upon his relatively brief but successful coaching career and was disappointed because it looked as if it was about to come to an end.

Just before his truck bit the dust on Percy's front porch, Kenny gritted his teeth and hissed, "If we crash and bum, then nobody will stop Ferguson Marshall!"

Reflexively, Kenny crossed his arms in front of his face and urgently prayed for God to save them. The nose of his truck rammed into the brick porch with a deafening clatter. Both airbags inflated and Kenny's head snapped forward violently into the tough cushion. The windshield blew apart in a cascade of glassy beads and his truck burrowed into Percy's home like a missile. Huge pieces of splintered wood fragments, chunks of red brick, ribbons of maroon wallpaper and a few handguns showered into the cab, ripping the airbags to pieces.

Kenny felt something sharp lacerate his forehead. His truck finally came to a halt, with the front portion of his vehicle jammed into the crumbling living room of Percy's home. Dazed, and with his inner ears ringing like church bells, Kenny looked over at TJ. She was breathing deeply and had a long piece of jagged wood protruding from her right shoulder. Obviously, in shock, TJ looked at him with stunned hazel eyes.

Kenny grimaced. He reached across her body, clutched the big piece of wood with both of his hands and yanked the gigantic splinter free.

TJ let out an anguished cry and Kenny watched some blood trickle from her wound.

He looked at her and asked, "TJ, can you get out of the truck by yourself?"

TJ nodded and turned away from him to jostle with her door. Kenny unhooked his seatbelt and forced his own door open.

Kenny was halfway out of the cab when Percy shouted at him. "Kenway, what in God's name is happening?"

Kenny stepped from the truck but held onto the bent doorframe with his right hand. The sun-splashed surreal rays of light into the gaping hole of Percy's home and bits of dust and floating debris settled to the ground.

Even though he was too dizzy to respond, Kenny opened his mouth, but nothing came out. As the ringing in his ears subsided he regained his bearings once again.

Suddenly, Kenny heard TJ say, “Mister McMillan, you need to see what’s on this videotape! It’s important!”

As if in a bizarre dream, Kenny watched Percy look at her and ask, “What are you talking about, TJ?”

From behind a severely cracked wall laden with antique rifles dangling from their hooks, Ferguson Marshall stepped into the clearing. Kenny tried to focus on him, but he was still seeing little gold flecks in his vision.

Ferguson flashed an eerie grin at each of them and asked, “Is that one of your homemade movies, TJ?”

Kenny shook his head, trying to clear his mind and droplets of his own blood fell in front of his face like red rain. He wiped at his forehead and his fingertips felt the depths of the gash on his head.

Kenny pointed at Ferguson, and then he angrily asked Percy, “Are you going to do business with that man?”

Percy glanced at Ferguson and shied away from him while responding, “Not in a million years, Kenway. You should know me better than that.”

Kenny leaned against the hood of his truck and huffed, “Thank God, because I’ve been trying to get a hold of you all morning!”

Percy edged closer to him and warily asked, “What’s on the tape, Kenway?”

Kenny noticed Saxon emerging on the opposite side of the room from Ferguson.

Kenny shouted at Percy. “Ferguson Marshall is a maniac! He killed Marla, and he also killed Peter Woods. He’s the man who wants me dead!”

Quickly, Percy looked at Ferguson and then shuffled towards Kenny.

TJ held up the videotape and exclaimed, “Jason recorded this tape before he died.” Kenny watched her glare at Ferguson, and she spat, “You’re finished, Ferguson, and you’re going to bum in hell!”

Kenny touched his swollen and tender ribs. Then, from the corner of his left eye, he noticed Saxon withdrawing a pistol from beneath one of his pant legs.

Kenny scrambled towards the door of his truck and yelled, “Get down!”

The first couple of bullets crackled by Kenny’s head as he dove into the battered cab of his vehicle. However, one of Saxon’s bullets struck Kenny in his left thigh. He bellowed in agony and

curled his body into the cab. He sucked in some quick breaths and looked at the bloody, shredded hem of his khaki shorts. Fresh blood oozed onto his light blue t-shirt. A small chunk of his flesh had been blown away, but fortunately, the bullet had missed his femoral artery.

Kenny lurched towards the floorboard and grabbed one of the three small pistols strewn about the cab from the truck's impact with Percy's home. He wrapped his fingers around a petite silver gun that reminded him of a weapon he had seen on the television show *The Wild, Wild, West*. He crawled over to the other side of the cab, poked his head above the mined dashboard and aimed the small gun at Saxon. Kenny pulled the trigger. Click, click, click
Kenny cursed and slammed the gun against the cushion of the seat. He shook his head and wet ropes of saliva flew from his mouth.

Saxon fired another shot at him, and the bullet raced above his scalp before shattering the rear window behind him. Tiny pieces of tempered glass descended upon him like hail and he brushed some pieces from his hair and face.

Kenny heard Ferguson call out to him, "Drop the gun, Coach Brown, and come out with your hands up, or I'll shoot Percy and TJ in the face. Do it, and do it now!"

Terrified, and bleeding from his left leg and forehead, Kenny tossed the useless pistol through the vanquished windshield and it landed on the hood with a heavy double-thud. He heard some tentative footsteps crunching across the gravel walkway and saw a blonde woman in a black shirt and blue jeans creeping towards the house. The sturdy-looking woman was holding a large pistol in her right hand and she motioned for him to remain in the cab.

Kenny stayed low but then Ferguson shouted, "You have five seconds, Coach Brown, or Percy McMillan will die!"

Rapidly, Kenny picked up the other two handguns lying in his truck. He rolled onto his back, then yanked out his wallet and dropped it onto the seat. He shoved a pistol into each one of his back pockets and turned over onto his stomach.

He saw the blonde woman jump out from behind the torn apart wall. She trained her handgun in the direction of Ferguson Marshall and yelled, "Drop your weapons, or I'll blow you away!" Kenny scooted out of the truck and took cover behind the passenger side door. He squatted down and looked at the flabbergasted face of Ferguson Marshall.

Percy glanced at the blonde woman and ordered, "Jennifer, be careful!"

Kenny looked at Ferguson, who was aiming a long rifle at the back of TJ's head. Kenny glanced to the left and observed Saxon pointing his gun at Percy's neck. Percy and TJ had their arms raised in a submissive gesture of surrender.

Sternly, Jennifer replied, "Don't worry, Mister McMillan, they're not going to shoot you because Ferguson Marshall only has one bullet in his rifle!"

Kenny wanted to bolt out from behind the door and rescue his boss and TJ, but an inner voice told him to be patient. His heart was thumping in his chest and he wondered if he was going to have a heart attack.

He watched Ferguson lower his rifle towards the ground and reply, "Okay, okay. I don't want to die." Cautiously, Ferguson knelt and set the butt of his rifle on the tattered magenta carpet of Percy's obliterated living room.

Kenny watched Jennifer turn towards Saxon and demand, "Put your weapon on the ground!"

A roaring boom echoed throughout the demolished living room and a wispy curl of smoke rose from the muzzle of Ferguson's rifle. Horrified, Kenny watched the back portion of Jennifer's blonde head scatter like bits of red paint onto the ivory pillars of Percy's front porch. Jennifer fell backward with her arms spread-eagle as if she had been touched on the forehead by a southern preacher. Her dead body fell onto the porch and Kenny heard TJ scream.

Kenny broke to his right and saw TJ sprinting away from Ferguson Marshall towards the kitchen. Ferguson ran over to a wall containing antique firearms that had been purchased in Montana and Idaho.

Kenny reached into his back pockets and pulled out both pistols. As if in slow motion, he looked to his left and shouted at Percy, "Move, Boss!"

Kenny saw Saxon retrain his gun at him and he felt a hot bullet scrape across his left shoulder. As he fell towards the ground, Kenny pointed the gun in his right hand at Saxon and he squeezed the trigger. Kenny hit the floor and landed on his right side while watching Saxon double over and stumble about. Percy ambled to his feet, grabbed Saxon's gun and then shot him in the back of the head two times.

Percy whirled towards him but then a blooming dark red stain suddenly appeared on the right side of Percy's beige shirt. His boss tumbled backward and collapsed onto a curving paisley loveseat that looked like a stage prop salvaged from an old Clint Eastwood western movie.

Panicked, Kenny scurried on his hands and knees until he reached the other side of the living room. He pulled himself up behind the protective alcove of the hallway and stood stiffly behind it with a pistol in his left hand.

Hoping to be heard, Kenny shouted as loud as he could. "TJ call the police! TJ call the police!"

Another deadly bullet zoomed by him, taking pieces of the hallway with it. Breathing deeply, Kenny glanced over at Percy lying on the sofa and realized that his boss was still alive.

He whispered at Percy, "Play dead, Boss. Be still."

Kenny heard Ferguson say, "You're the one who deserves to die, Coach Brown because the world doesn't need people like you. You're just a simpleton with grandiose ideas!" There was a pause and Ferguson bellowed, "But this planet needs me because I can make it better and lead it to greatness. I have earned the right to rule the world and nothing is going to stop me! Someday soon there will be fantastic monuments, vast libraries and magnificent statues erected in my honor!"

Kenny closed his eyelids and prayed for some divine help from God. After he was done, he turned to the right and stared into the kitchen. He saw TJ pick up the telephone and dial 911. She placed the receiver on the counter and crept towards the family room. TJ vanished from his view and Kenny knew if he called out to her then it would jeopardize her position.

To distract Ferguson, Kenny bitterly yelled, "I'd be happy to build your tomb!"

Ferguson cackled and fired another shot at him. Kenny heard Ferguson discarding yet another gun as it fell to the floor with a thump.

Ferguson tried to bait him by asking. "Do you honestly think the police will believe you—or me? Get real, Coach Brown, because your time is up!"

With the smell of burnt gunpowder filling his nostrils and sensing that TJ was probably safe, Kenny shouted his reply and got ready to make his move. "Wrong, Ferguson! You will never become President of this great country because that job is reserved for people of integrity! You're a scumbag, Ferguson, and it's time for you to die!"

Before Ferguson could respond, Kenny darted out from behind the wall and fired his pistol wildly. He flung his spent gun at Ferguson and ran towards the wall that held a bevy of six-shooters. As he crossed in front of Ferguson, Kenny felt the breeze of a bullet whiz by him. He glanced to the left and saw Ferguson reach for another pistol on the wall.

Kenny arrived at the bank of six-shooters and plucked one of the heavy guns from its hook. He pivoted quickly and realized that Ferguson was sprinting towards him with a gleaming pistol in each one of his hands. The demented man had a fiery look in his dark eyes and a menacing scowl had stretched his face into a warped mask of death.

Kenny raised his gun, but Ferguson's first shot ricocheted near his right ear and he flinched. Kenny watched Ferguson gallop towards him and take aim with the gun in his left hand. With less than ten yards between himself and the dueling Ferguson Marshall, Kenny pointed his gun at the maniac and pulled the trigger ... click.

Ferguson stopped about five yards away from him and laughed like a jackal. "Ha, ha, ha!"

Kenny felt as if he was about to urinate into his underwear and he squeezed the trigger again and again. Click, click, click, click.

Ferguson chuckled and arrogantly said, "Give my regards to Jason and Cassandra, and have a nice trip, Coach Brown!"

Sweating profusely, Kenny prayed for a miracle and then pulled the trigger one last time. Kaboom!

Ferguson Marshall's pink-shirted body back-flipped into the gloomy air and tumbled head over heels like a gymnast performing a freestyle routine on the mats. After completing several amazing maneuvers, Ferguson's relaxed corpse came to a rumpled stop on the other side of the living room.

Dazed, Kenny looked at the wisp of smoke oozing from the tip of his gun. Just before Kenny passed out from losing so much blood, TJ entered the room. She stood there, gazing at the dead man with a faraway look in her eyes and holding a smoking single-barreled shotgun in her hands.

CHAPTER 36

On a sunny Saturday afternoon during Labor Day weekend in September, Kenny paced along the sideline and glanced at the scoreboard at the University of Montana's, Washington Grizzly Stadium. It was late in the 4th quarter, and his team was losing the football game, 24-19.

While the other team had control of the football, Kenny adjusted his wireless headset and spoke to his best friend in the coaching booth upstairs. "We need some help down here, Lou! Talk to me, because we've got to score some points ... soon!"

Kenny strode parallel with the white sideline and stepped behind an official dressed in the standard zebra print uniform.

From up in the booth, Lou replied, "Kenny, here's what we need to do."

In the open-air stadium, the University of Montana's capacity crowd of more than 19,000 roared as Kenny watched the opposing team's outstanding quarterback complete yet another pass to one of his reliable receivers.

Kenny admired his team for giving it their all on the football field and he willed for them to hang in there and not fold. Their silver game pants, white jerseys with blue and red trim, and matching silver helmets with an American flag laminated on both sides were dirty from the game, and he loved it that way.

When the crowd's echoing cheers ceased momentarily, Lou spoke to him again. "Kenny—we need to throw the bomb, Kenny. We need to get the ball downfield to TJ. Let's cut her loose and see what she can do!"

Kenny shook his head and marched back and forth. He replied, "I'm not sure about that, old buddy, because I think they're expecting us to do that."

Calmly, Lou said, "Kenny, we've only thrown the ball to her three times today, and she's caught two of them for a total of nine yards."

"That's true," Kenny replied, "because they've been playing her soft and respecting her speed."

The raucous crowd cheering for the University of Montana let out a collective sigh when their trusty quarterback threw an interception. Kenny jumped into the air when he realized that his team had just caught a break. His team went bananas and all around him his coaches and players were celebrating vigorously.

Kenny hustled towards his black-skinned quarterback moving towards him on the sideline.

Lou spoke into his earpiece and urged him to go for it. “Come on, Kenny—let it fly on first down!”

Before he met up with Anthony Mills in order to tell him what play to use, TJ caught up with him and said, “Coach Brown, I can beat my man deep! Give me a shot!”

Kenny stopped and looked into the confident hazel eyes of TJ. Her face was covered with sweat and grime. His mind replayed the incredible events that had led them up to this very moment in time. He peered into her eyes and thought about the first time he had seen her sprint gracefully to catch a football in Canada. His heart pinged with sadness because he knew that TJ would never play football with Peter again.

TJ snapped Kenny out of his brief daydream by telling him, “Come on, Coach Brown, my whole family is in the stands. Please let me go deep!”

Kenny was about to reply, when Lou cut in from above and said, “Do it, Kenny!”

TJ jogged out to join the rest of her teammates in the huddle at midfield and Kenny told his good young quarterback what play to run.

He watched the offensive team break the huddle and move towards the line of scrimmage from his left to right. TJ hustled out to her alignment on his side of the football field and she winked at him.

Kenny grinned and commented to Lou upstairs, “I hope you’re right, Lou.”

Lou replied, “Me too.”

Anthony Mills put his hands under the center and barked out his cadence. Kenny watched the other team’s defensive players shift around a bit, and then Anthony took the snap and dropped back to pass.

Kenny looked on and TJ gave a subtle head-fake to the inside shoulder of the defensive player attempting to cover her. She breezed down the right sideline like a cheetah. The surprised football player couldn’t match her speed and fell behind TJ as she lengthened her stride towards the goal line.

Anthony Mills let go of the football and his long pass soared through the air perfectly. With great anticipation, Kenny watched TJ race away from her defender as the curious crowd recognized that history was in the making. The crowd’s all-encompassing voice swelled in a collective, “Ohhhhh!”

Like she had done it a million times before, TJ accelerated and hauled in the football without breaking stride. The amazed people in the stadium went crazy and TJ sprinted into the end zone for the go-ahead touchdown.

Two hours after the game, Kenny picked up his overnight bag and adjusted a brass button on his navy-blue blazer. He smoothed out the wrinkles in his gray slacks and fiddled with his white shirt and McMillan College Patriots necktie.

With his travel bag slung over his left shoulder, Kenny walked out of the visitor's locker room and was met by the happy faces of Athena, and Trevor, and his son Charlie. Charlie was sitting on top of Trevor's broad shoulders and holding onto his hair with his chubby little hands. Kenny moved towards them and his footsteps echoed in the enclosed cement corridor. He gazed at them and a refreshing bath of dusky sunlight filled the tunnel behind them.

Kenny went up to Athena and gave her a long kiss.

She said, "Great game, Kenny!"

He thanked her and soon arrived in front of his brother. He smiled at Trevor and Charlie before asking, "Well, Trevor, what did you think?"

Trevor hoisted Charlie into the air and set him on the ground. Trevor looked at him and said, "Kenny, that was one of the greatest games I've ever seen! I thought your team was going to lose. But when you called that bomb to TJ ... well, that was awesome!"

Kenny gave him a hug and said, "Thanks, bro, and I'm glad you made it." Kenny bent down and picked up Charlie. He smooched his nephew on the cheeks and held him in his arms. Kenny smiled at Athena before he turned to Trevor and asked, "What time does your plane leave tonight?"

They sauntered down the cool hallway and Trevor replied, "I've got to be back on the East Coast by midnight because our game against New York starts at noon tomorrow."

"Good," Kenny said. Then he jokingly stated, "At least you won't have to worry about bumping into Hulda Law back east."

"That's true because that evil woman is going to spend the rest of her life in prison," Trevor replied.

Athena wrapped her arms around them and said, "Let's celebrate the win today with a great dinner tonight!" "Sounds good," said Kenny, "and the staff would probably like to join us."

At peace, Kenny emerged from the long cement tunnel and he inhaled the cool Montana air. He smiled, then looked at the darkening skies and wondered about the upcoming adventures awaiting him.

Other Books by Kurt Bryan

The Double Move

Fate Came Calling

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