

PLAYING THE GAME:

COMPETITIVE EDGE

BY

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Synopsis

Playing The Game (Book 1)

The year is 1980, and Sean Porter is a 15-year-old boy who has become nearly obsessed with a sport that is just gaining in popularity in Middle America, the game of soccer. He discovers that he is well suited to the game, and he ends up joining a couple of teams. He also signs up with the local soccer organization as a referee for games for younger players.

One day, Sean stops by Jake Lehigh's house. Jake, his best friend, isn't home, but his younger sister, Kayla, is playing around in the back yard with her next-door neighbors, Jaimie and Tara Jacks, trying to juggle a soccer ball without using her hands. Kayla calls out to Sean to ask him to help them, and a game of two-on-two keep-away starts up. Kayla steps in a hole and twists her knee, and Sean, having taken first-aid courses as part of his referee's training, tries to help. Kayla is able to lean on Sean as he helps her into her house, and gets her settled on the couch in the family room. Kayla asks Sean to massage her injured leg for her, and Sean gets a little carried away with his massages, ending up copping a little feel as he administers his attentions.

To his surprise, Kayla seems to enjoy it, and invites him back the next day to continue with her "therapy." Their experimentation with each other progresses, and Sean and Kayla end up naked on her bed, masturbating each other to orgasm. They vow to keep their actions a secret.

That afternoon Sean and Jake take a hike into the woods behind Jake's house, and Jake shows Sean a particular tree. They climb the tree, and Jake points out that they are able to look in through the bedroom and bathroom windows of the O'Toole house, the home of their mutual friend, Josh O'Toole, and his twin sister, Molly. There doesn't seem to be anybody home, though, so they climb back down. As they are walking back across the field, Jake confesses that he likes Jaimie Jacks, his next-door neighbor, after spying her through her bedroom window. Jake is afraid of rejection, however, and won't ask her out, or hardly even talk to her.

A few days later, Jake and Sean are playing a game in Jake's basement on a rainy afternoon. Jaimie and Kayla come running in from the rain, and they come down to the basement. The four of them end up playing a card game they call Truth or Dare Hearts. Jake and Jaimie discover their mutual attraction, and Sean and Kayla spend a few minutes in each other's arms.

The next day, Sean gets another job, teaching soccer to Davey and Kip Wilkinson. He meets the boys and their mother, Lori, and he gives them their first lesson. He finds that the boys, ages 7 and 8, are enthusiastic and energetic, and he likes them immediately. Later, he finds out that Lori is a widow, and Molly O'Toole often baby-sits for the boys.

Later that afternoon, Jaimie invites Jake over to watch television, and Kayla invites Sean to her house. In the basement, Sean and Kayla resume their experimentation, until Sean rolls on top of Kayla. Kayla stops him from entering her, afraid to take that final step, and Sean acquiesces. They end up bringing each other off orally instead. They get dressed just in time, as Jake comes home with his shoes untied and his tee shirt inside out, an indication that he and Jaimie were also fooling around.

A few days later Josh O'Toole meets Sean on the street, and talks him into accompanying him to Lehigh Drug Store to buy some condoms. Sean decides he will pick up a package also, but they both get nervous when Mr. Lehigh, Jake and Kayla's father, comes over to help them decide on a purchase. As they are leaving, Sean wonders how helpful Mr. Lehigh would have been if he had known the condoms were probably going to be used with his young daughter.

In one of those caprices that make life interesting, Sean turns out to be wrong about his guess that Kayla will be the girl he uses the condoms with. The boys go to Josh's house, and Josh hides his condoms in a rolled-up sock in his drawer. As he and Sean talk, his twin sister, Molly, stops by. She discovers Sean's condoms and deduces that Josh, too, has bought some. She finds his hiding spot but promises to keep it secret. As Josh talks on the telephone with his girlfriend, Molly invites Sean to come over to the Wilkinson house while she's babysitting, and he agrees.

At Lori's house that evening, Molly and Sean watch a movie with Davey and Kip. After the boys are put to bed, Molly and Sean sit back down to watch an old black-and-white movie, and they kiss. Just then Lori comes home, surprised to find Sean there with Molly. Sean and Molly opt to walk home together, and when they get to Molly's house, Molly invites Sean in, and they go up to Molly's room. They end up making love on Molly's bed, using a condom she had stolen from her brother. They fall asleep, only to wake up when they hear Molly's family in the house. They wait until everybody else has gone to bed, and Molly sneaks Sean out of the house so he can go home.

The next day Sean has another lesson with Davey and Kip. After the lesson, he learns the story about how Lori's husband had been killed on a motorcycle. Sean begins to understand the dynamics of her household.

Later that afternoon Sean meets Molly at her friend Tessa's house for a barbeque dinner. Another friend of Tessa's, Kristina Mendoza, is also there. After dinner Molly and Sean walk back to Molly's house, and Molly grabs some blankets out of the garage and leads Sean to a clearing in the woods. They spread out the blankets and make love in the woods. Molly asks if Sean would be her boyfriend, and Sean confesses his ignorance about relationships. Molly tells him that she, too, is new at it, and they agree to try to figure it out together.

A few days later Jake Lehigh finds Sean, and starts to fight him. He had seen Sean and Molly in the woods, and he was upset because of the way Sean had seemed to lead Kayla on. They work it out, and Jake coerces a supply of condoms from Sean after telling Sean that he and Jaimie had gone all the way. Sean asks Jake not to let anybody know where he got them from, and Jake assures him that he will keep his mouth shut. Jake also lets Sean know about the big end of summer picnic being held behind his house the next day, and invites Sean to it.

At the picnic, a scavenger hunt is organized by Jake's mother, and all the neighborhood kids divide up into teams. Kayla takes Sean's hand and sneaks into her basement with him at the start of the scavenger hunt. She sits him down on the old couch with the lights off and undresses in the dark. She cracks open a door so that just a little light spills into the room, and she goes to Sean. They pleasure each other until it is time to rejoin the scavenger hunt. Kayla has collected many of the items beforehand, having found her mother's list, and planned their time together. Sean guiltily tries to tell Kayla that he and Molly have started to go out together, and she tells him that she already knew about it. Wise beyond her years, she tells Sean that it was only fair that he date someone his own age, since she herself was still in middle school. She warns him, however, that when she gets to high school, she would compete with Molly for Sean's affection. Kayla's tears as she talks to him affect Sean, and he thinks to himself that he will never ever understand girls.

Sean tries out for the school soccer team and makes the varsity team. He and a friend, Eric Johnson, are the only sophomores on the team. There is one freshman on the varsity team, a backup goalkeeper by the name of Jorge Mendoza, Kristina's younger brother. Sean is taken under the wing of the team's star, an All-State selection at right defender, Skip Horvath. Skip invites Sean and the rest of the team to his house for a pool party, and Sean brings Molly along. Jorge is there with his sister, and Eric brings his girlfriend, Keisha Wallace. After the party, Sean and Molly head out to the woods, to their favorite clearing.

In the meantime, Davey and Kip's recreational team has begun their season. Davey and Kip invite Sean and Molly to their game, and they introduce Sean to their coach, Bill Blaisdell. Coach Bill tells Sean he can see improvement in Davey

and Kip from the previous season. Sean is gratified to see that the skills he has tried to impart to the boys are beginning to gel.

At about the same time, the school's season begins. The first game for the varsity team results in a 6-0 win, and Sean and the other benchwarmers are able to play the last few minutes of the game. It is a treat they don't expect to enjoy very often.

After school one day the next week, Sean, Jake, and Josh walk around the corner of the school and see a group of greasers known as the Bulls surrounding a couple of kids. In the center of the ring of greasers is the leader of the Bulls, Richie Del Toro, who is hassling Kristina and Jorge Mendoza. Sean, Jake, and Josh break in to try to help, but they are still outnumbered until Skip Horvath, along with teammates Theo Jameson, Eric Johnson, and Kevin Soranno, step in. Richie backs down, but threatens to return to collect his "el blowjob" from Kristina sometime in the near future. Kristina, very upset, agrees to stick around while the soccer team and the football team practice. After practice, players agree to see her safely home.

A couple of days later, Sean happens to see Jorge and Kristina walking down the hall between classes, approaching Richie Del Toro, who was coming toward them with a couple of his cohorts. Richie's hands were in his pockets, so he was caught defenseless as Jorge drops down and sweeps Richie's legs out from beneath him. Richie lands hard on his back, his head banging against the tile. Jorge sits on Richie's chest after Richie landed hard, and angrily tells Richie that his eyes are brown because he is so full of bullshit. He then gives him a new nickname, Del Toro Poo-Poo, which is almost immediately shortened to just Poo-Poo. The other kids who are witnesses to the assault break into applause, and Richie's days of terror seem to be over.

A few weeks later Sean returns home late one Saturday night, after spending another evening with Molly, Davey and Kip. His parents are up, and give him a telephone number, with instructions to call right away, regardless of the time. Sean makes the call and gets the bad news that Skip and Theo had been involved in a terrible car accident.

Skip Horvath, Sean's mentor, was killed in the crash, and Theo Jameson was in a coma. They were run off the road and into a tree by Richie Del Toro and his gang. The team, and the entire school, is in shock and turmoil.

Before school on the next Monday, the soccer team has a meeting, and it is decided that the season will be dedicated to Skip and Theo. Coach Neville asks Sean and Eric to stay behind as he dismisses the team, and Coach informs Sean

that he will have to start in place of Skip. He offers Eric a starting position also, but only if Eric agrees to extra practices to increase his ball handling skills. Eric agrees, and becomes the new starting left midfielder for the team.

The day after Skip's funeral Molly sneaks in to Sean's room after school, and teases him as his mother is calling him down for dinner. After dinner, Sean returns to his room, ostensibly to do his homework, and Molly, getting increasingly bolder, seduces him while his family is downstairs.

Sean just manages to sneak Molly out his back door later that evening when the front doorbell rings. Jake and his parents are at the door, looking displeased. Jake was caught with his girlfriend, Jaimie, and he had confessed that he had gotten his condoms from Sean, despite his promise to keep quiet about it all. Sean, caught, is grounded. He is dropped off at school by his dad, and picked up after soccer practice by his mother every day.

Practices and the next couple of soccer games are emotionally exhausting for the team, and especially for Sean, as he tries to fill some large shoes on the field. Sean, because of his position and the circumstances that put him in the starting lineup, starts to get mentioned in the local press coverage of their games, but the stress is taking its toll. Finally, after a particularly wrenching loss, Sean is near collapse. His parents relent and grant him a partial reprieve from his sentence.

Meanwhile, Molly is chafing under Sean's punishment, as well. She complains to him that she's getting "itchy," and teases him in the lunchroom. She and her friend Tessa come up with the idea of hosting a Halloween costume party, and Sean's parents, after making sure adults would be at the party at all times, reluctantly let him attend.

At the party, after the adults had abandoned them for a time, the kids come up with a version of spin-the-bottle. Two couples would meet in the darkened furnace room for the duration of one song on the record player. On Sean's first trip to the furnace room he passes Kayla Lehigh, heading toward the other end. Kayla is dressed like Jeannie from "I Dream of Jeannie" and she flashes him as they pass. Later on, they end up in the furnace room together, and they get wrapped up in kissing each other until Molly walks by and sees them.

Molly is upset and Sean tries to mend fences, claiming that he was just giving his best friend's sister something to tell her friends about. Sean tries to tell Molly that it was probably Kayla's first time kissing a boy, but Molly doesn't buy it.

The soccer season ends and the playoffs begin. The team has only had one loss during the season and they are seeded first in the conference playoffs. They win

the conference title, and Sean is chosen for the All-Conference team. The team goes on to win the sectional tournament, and travels downstate for the state tournament. Their first game is against the Planey Warriors, who have the state's only soccer All-American playing for them, a forward named Jesse Wilhoit. Sean and the defensive unit get burned by Jesse during the first half, but find a way to neutralize him during the second half, and they end up winning the game, 4-3.

The next day, tired from the emotions of their first state tournament game, the team gets trounced, losing by a score of 7-2. Their season is suddenly over.

Along the way, Sean is selected as a second-team All-State player, only the second from his school to be honored as an All-Stater in soccer.

Even while Sean's soccer career soars, his personal life suffers. Molly is unhappy, seemingly avoiding him as life settles back into a routine again. Finally, Molly breaks up with Sean, citing the costume party as the beginning of the end, when she saw Sean kissing Kayla. Later that same week, Sean finds out from friends that Molly had actually gone out with another boy while he was downstate for the tournament. Sean is devastated Molly has already resumed dating, and on the night of her first date after their breakup, Sean finds himself climbing the tree in the woods behind Molly's house. He watches as Molly and Scott, her date, have sex in her bed, until the scene is just too much for him. He stumbles down out of the tree and down the path in the woods, not even seeing another set of smaller footprints in the snow beside his.

A few weeks later Sean and his family attend a banquet honoring the All-State players, and Sean once again meets Jesse Wilhoit, the All-American player from Planey, along with Jesse's family, including his sister, Anna. Jesse will be attending the University of Florida on a soccer scholarship, and he and Sean strike up a good friendship over the weekend. Sean spends most of the Saturday evening dinner-dance with Anna and, to his surprise, has a good time with a girl who isn't Molly. Sean also meets the only other sophomore chosen as an All-Stater, Spencer Goldman from South High School in the city.

Back at school, Sean attends a Turnabout Dance with a group of his friends. He spends the evening dancing with quite a few girls, including Skip Horvath's sister Ashley, Becky Steinman, and especially Kristina Mendoza. Sean and Kristina develop an attraction to each other, which is strengthened as Sean watches Kristina and her brother, Jorge, dancing a steamy samba together. Kristina is dancing with Jorge, but seems to be focusing on Sean.

As the evening ends, Kristina quietly asks Sean to call her, swallowing her pride to make the request. The next day Sean does call her, and they make a date.

When Sean arrives at the Mendoza house to pick Kristina up for their first date, Kristina's father tells Sean, using Jorge as his interpreter, that he expects Sean to give his daughter all the respect she is due. Sean formally agrees. Sean thinks Mr. Mendoza is not the sort of man he would want to make angry. Besides, he intends to treat Kristina very carefully, since she is Jorge's sister.

Their first date is a success, and another date follows, until Sean and Kristina are considered an item. Kristina is very inexperienced, and is shy even around Sean. She asks him to have patience with her, and he agrees. Their relationship progresses in slow, small steps, until one afternoon, at Sean's house, it seems like Kristina might allow her last barriers to fall. She and Sean are fooling around on the floor, but are interrupted by a call from Kristina's mother, telling her she is coming to pick her up. Sean is left frustrated and a little angry as Kristina apologizes and leaves.

Sean is now the assistant coach for Davey and Kip's team and their first game is that same afternoon. Sean hurries over to the game after his session with Kristina. The team wins, and to celebrate, the team's parents decide to take everyone out for pizza. Lori has other plans and asks Coach Bill and Sean if they will make sure the boys get back to her house after the pizza party, where a babysitter will be waiting.

Sean takes the boys home after the pizza party, and they fall asleep in the back seat of his car. He carries them, one at a time, into the house, where Molly is babysitting. He waits for Molly to come back downstairs after getting them into bed, looking at an art project she has been working on. Molly seduces Sean, and they end up having unprotected sex on the floor of the family room. Molly seems vindictive after they finish. Sean, feeling dirty and ashamed, flees from Molly, and ends up curled up in his shower stall at home, trying in vain to wash away the memory of his betrayal to Kristina.

Playing To Win: Playing The Game (Book 2)

In an attempt to salvage his relationship with Kristina, Sean turns to his friend, her brother Jorge. Jorge agrees to try to help, but he makes no promises.

Partly as self-inflicted penance, partly as therapy, Sean takes to running. He uses his soccer ball as an outlet for his frustration, but quickly tires of chasing after it after kicking it as hard as he can. He changes tactics and practices his dribbling techniques. He also takes on additional refereeing assignments in an attempt to tire himself out so much he won't dwell on his personal problems.

At the same time, he still is helping Coach Bill with the boys' team. Lori Wilkinson asks Sean if he can resume teaching Davey and Kip. In addition, Wendy Marcus, the mother of another boy on the team, asks if her son Justin can join them, so Sean goes to work on a new set of lessons for the boys.

At the Dairy Queen, a hangout for many of his friends, Sean learns that a professional soccer player from Europe, Duane Olchick, will be coming to town to give a weeklong clinic. Jorge is there, and he calls his sister and convinces her to come to the Dairy Queen and talk with Sean, but it does not go well. Kristina tells Sean that she can't see him anymore, until the truth about the latest rumor going around school is revealed: Molly may be pregnant.

After a week of beating himself up, Sean takes the bull by the horns and calls Molly to find out the truth. In a short and painful telephone call Molly lets Sean know she is not pregnant. Elated, Sean tries to call Kristina, but her father answers the phone instead. In no uncertain terms he tells Sean he must stay away from Kristina. Sean's good mood is destroyed.

Coach Bill and Sean decide to enter the Warriors into a recreational tournament in a nearby town. Sean also agrees to referee some games, so he ends up running from game to game, trying to be everywhere at once. The boys win all three of their games on Saturday and qualify for the semifinals in their division on Sunday. A combination of good play and a fortunate draw allows the Warriors to win the tournament. The Marcuses invite the team and the parents over for a cookout and swim in their backyard pool after the tournament. Wendy Marcus, seeing that Sean is tired and sweaty, offers the use of a shower, which Sean gratefully accepts.

As Sean is relaxing in the shower Wendy steps in, naked and ready. She takes him there, in the shower, while her husband is cooking burgers and hot dogs for his son's team in the back yard.

A few days later Sean tries to talk to Wendy about how uncomfortable he is with what happened at her house, but she doesn't want to hear about it. All she cares about is the casual sex with a younger, energetic partner. Sean is rattled when she suggests an encore.

Later that same afternoon Sean is rattled again when he finds out Jake's little sister Kayla has a new boyfriend, and Molly also seems to have found another boyfriend, in the person of Joey Amonte, one of the Bulls.

By the middle of the summer Sean is used to hanging out with groups of his friends, and not dating anyone. Over the Fourth of July weekend he and a bunch

of his friends spend their days at the beach. Sean and Becky Steinman start to gravitate toward each other, and they spend most of the weekend together.

The night of the fireworks, however, Sean gets a surprise as he settles down with a big group of kids. As they are watching the night sky, Becky takes his left hand. On his other side, Kristina, unseen by anybody else, takes his right hand, and leans up against his arm, giving him encouragement that she might be forgiving him. There is still the problem of her father, however.

As the summer progresses, Sean attends the Duane Olchick clinic. Also enrolled in the clinic are a couple of acquaintances from the All-State banquet. Jesse Wilhoit and his sister, Anna, are there, as is Spencer Goldman. By the end of the week Sean feels like he has played more quality soccer than he did the entire previous year. As a bonus, at the end of the week Duane asks Sean if he would like to work with him during the next week's clinic, for younger players. Sean gratefully accepts the invitation, and he and the rest of Duane's crew get to know each other's games much better.

Sean also starts to work out with Jake in the weight room. Jake is on the football team, and he takes Sean through the weight machines, working on upper body strength. In return, Sean takes Jake running to help his wind on the field. Each finds the other's workout to be tough.

On one occasion, Jake and Sean meet Josh O'Toole in the parking lot of the YMCA, where they have just finished their workout. Josh tells them he is worried about Molly. Her new boyfriend seems to be a controlling type, and Josh is afraid his sister might be led into some unfortunate decisions, hanging out with a gang like the Bulls. Sean is surprised to hear the Bulls are still a functional group, since their leader, Richie "Poo-Poo" Del Toro, was still behind bars from the accident that took Skip's life.

Sean is still teaching the three boys, Davey, Kip, and Justin. One afternoon Wendy Marcus shows up to pick up the boys after practice, and she invites Sean over that evening, since her husband would not be home. Sean tries to duck out with a lame excuse, but Wendy wants a definite answer: does Sean want to come over and fuck? Sean declines. Wendy, not expecting a rejection, walks back to her car angry.

Sean invites Becky to the annual picnic thrown by the Lehighs and the Jacks. During the softball game, a friend of Jake's, a fellow member of the football team named Stanford Harrison (also known as Tiny to his friends), hits the softball so hard the cover splits and the stuffing leaks out. Tiny makes sure he finishes

running the bases before he comes over to see the ball. He accepts the ruined softball with good humor.

For the annual scavenger hunt, Sean leads Becky to Jake's front door and they sneak down into the basement, just like he and Kayla had done the year before. They settle down against a wall and start making out. After awhile they hear a bell go off, and they look up in time to see Kayla and her boyfriend sneaking back up the stairs, having been in the basement the whole time. A light goes on, and Jake and Jaimie stand up, surprising Sean and Becky. It turns out it was more crowded in the basement than anybody realized.

During tryouts for the school soccer team, a talented freshman makes the varsity team. His name is Adam Prince, but his behavior is so irritating to the other players he quickly acquires the nickname "Weasel." Weasel tries challenging for a starting position and is consistently beaten, until nobody on the team is willing to play with him on a challenge. He even has plans on challenging Sean's position, even though Coach Neville, the head coach of the varsity team, has made it clear that Sean's position, as well as Jorge's as starting goalkeeper, was protected. Finally, though, Sean can take no more, so he agrees to the challenge. Sean and Eric beat Weasel and his partner, and Eric convinces Weasel not to challenge any of their positions again, under threat of considerable administered pain.

Sean makes a date with Becky to the first home football game of the season. They meet up with Eric and Keisha and some other friends, and make plans to get together that evening for pizza. On the way out of the stadium, the group sees Molly and Joey standing with some of the other Bulls. They had acquired a new leader, Poo-Poo's younger brother Angelo, known as Jilly.

Sean drops Becky off at her house and promises her he will call her with details about dinner. When he gets home, he jumps into the shower. When he's done, there is a message for him to call Lori Wilkinson.

Lori's regular babysitter hadn't shown up, and Wendy suggested that Lori call Sean. It's girl's night out, with Wendy and Lori's sister planning on taking her out to help Lori forget it is the second anniversary of her husband's death. Sean agrees, for Lori's sake, and he calls Becky, an hour before he is supposed to pick her up, and breaks their date. Becky reluctantly says she understands, and Sean heads over to Lori's, knowing he owes Becky big time.

Sean plays games with Davey and Kip, and reads them a story before putting them to bed. He relaxes in the family room, finally falling asleep with an old movie playing on the television. Interwoven with his dreaming he hears Lori and

Wendy talking softly. Wendy leaves, and Sean feels the soft touch of female lips against his, so softly the touch melds into his dream. He slowly awakens to find Lori embracing him, and they slowly, tenderly make love. Afterwards, both of them feeling a little guilty, they promise each other they were both comforting a friend in need, and they each sort of believe it.

Sean's bigger mistake, however, is that he never called Becky. Becky is not the forgiving type, and their relationship fizzles before it can get going.

Meanwhile, Stephen, Sean's younger brother, asks Sean for some advice. Stephen, along with some friends of his, has been involved with Tara Jacks, Jaimie's younger sister. Tara has even hinted at offering to give Stephen a blowjob. Sean warns him about getting involved with girls who are that young and already into experimenting. Sean also lets his little brother know that he hasn't had a lot of success with keeping girls happy, either, so he was a little uncomfortable trying to hand out advice.

For Homecoming, each class is building a float in a secret location. Sean and Jake drive out to help work on the Junior Class float at a secluded barn in the country. There are a lot of other kids there, including Kristina. They end up working together most of the evening, and after most of the other kids had left, they cuddle together in Sean's car. Tessa and her boyfriend Austin are in Tessa's car, also making out. As Sean and Kristina are kissing, two strange cars drive up. Sean and Kristina duck down and hide until they hear somebody breaking into the barn. They creep up to a dirty window and look inside, where they see Jilly and the Bulls. Two girls are being held by leashes attached to collars around their necks, and one of them is Molly O'Toole.

Sean and his friends watch as the gang sets fire to the float, dousing it with lighter fluid. The Bulls watch it burn, and then head out. Sean and Austin grab fire extinguishers and put the fire out before the barn catches, but their bigger concern is Molly's safety. They could see she looked very unhappy and beaten down, and they know they need to do something to help her out of her situation.

Sean, along with Josh, Tessa, and some other friends, try to come up with a plan to get Molly out. With Molly's cooperation, they keep somebody around her at all times in an attempt to keep Joey and Jilly away from her. Sean agrees to be her date for the Homecoming dance, and they organize a big group for the evening's activities.

At the dance Molly and Sean mostly watch the other kids dancing. Molly's energy level is low and she is content to sit and watch, only occasionally getting

up to dance. Sean watches Kristina with her date, and Kayla with her boyfriend, as well as keeping a sharp eye out for trouble.

At one point Sean goes to the washroom, and he finds Joey Amonte doing a line of cocaine. Joey doesn't notice Sean, but it spooks Sean anyway. He rushes out to warn the others that Joey is around. They ramp up their diligence, but nothing develops.

Finally, Molly is exhausted. Josh and his girlfriend, Andrea, accompany Sean and Molly out the door. Josh and Andrea get into the back seat and Sean helps Molly into the front seat. As he steps around to the driver's side, Joey appears out of nowhere and accosts him. Jilly and some other members of the Bulls surround the car, but Josh and Andrea quickly lock the doors. Sean is stuck out of the car with the gang while the others are temporarily safe inside.

Jilly starts working over Sean, angry over Molly having been taken away from him. Sean tries to escape but ends up down on the ground. Jilly kicks Sean in the ribs and steps on his chest as he brandishes a knife, threatening Sean.

Molly, heedless of the danger, steps out of the car to intervene. Jilly lets Sean up and grabs Molly, who tries to steal Jilly's switchblade. Jilly stops her, but flies into a murderous rage. He starts flicking the knife toward Molly's face, and Sean leaps in to protect her. The knife blade slices through his suit and shirt and cuts his arm to the bone. As Jilly is rearing back for a final thrust, his arm is pinned by somebody behind him. Jilly turns and finds Tiny holding him back. Jilly tries to escape and ends up separating his shoulder. The pain and humiliation enrages him even further, and he spits in Tiny's face. Tiny launches Jilly with a hard kick in the crotch, and Jilly falls to the ground, clutching his ruined testicles.

Sean, meanwhile, is bleeding profusely and going into shock. His friends get him into Eric's car to get him to the hospital. The last thing Sean sees before zoning out is Kayla, handing a belt to Eric to use as a tourniquet, concern written on her pale face.

At the hospital, Sean goes into surgery to get his arm repaired. The police show up and start interviewing everybody who has shown up there. Joey and Vinnie bring Jilly in to the emergency room, and some of the adults have to protect them from Sean's friends.

Finally, Sean's parents are able to take him home to recover. Friends stop by the next day, and the O'Tooles come over for dinner to thank Sean for stepping up on Molly's behalf. Sean is uncomfortable with everybody praising him, since from his perspective all he did was screw things up even worse.

Jake and Kayla offer to bring Sean's homework assignments over each afternoon, and they stay with him in the evenings and do their homework with him. One afternoon, Sean receives a telephone call from Pickett Cropper, the head soccer coach for the University of Florida, where Jesse Wilhoit is playing. He tells Sean he wants to send a scout up to watch him play. Sean has to tell Pick about his injuries, and that he won't be playing for at least a couple of weeks. Pick leaves his number and asks Sean to call him when he's back on the field.

Sean mulls over this phone call, and makes a decision. It's time for him to own up to his responsibilities, and to take his punishment when he's done wrong. He thinks Pick will withdraw his offer once he finds out Sean was fighting on school property, and will probably be suspended from school, but he doesn't want Pick to learn of it from somebody else. He calls Pick back to tell him the truth about how he got hurt.

Pick tells Sean he already knew about the fight, as well as the circumstances surrounding it. He praises Sean for standing up for Molly, and for calling back to let Pick know about it. He tells Sean that he will come up personally to watch him play, just as soon as Sean is able to get back to the game.

Once Sean returns to school, he meets with the principal, and finds out he wasn't suspended at all. He returns to class and returns to practice with the team, bandaged up but much happier.

Sean and Kayla spend more time together and, as part of the healing process, Kayla accompanies Sean when he starts running again. Eventually he feels well enough to try to play soccer for the team. He challenges Weasel for his old spot and wins his position back.

The press takes notice, and Sean's popularity grows again as he leads his team to the playoffs. They win the conference title, win the sectionals, and go downstate once again for the state championships. This time, with three All-State players on the team, they prevail, beating Spencer Goldman's team for the championship.

At the same time, Sean and Kayla are getting closer to consummating their relationship. Kayla tells Sean she has been waiting for him to notice that she has been there for him all along. The boy she had been seeing, she claims, was only a diversion, and he knew it. She confesses her love and tells Sean that her footprints were the ones in the snow the night he watched Molly. Sean tells Kayla he loves her, also, and he silently vows to try his hardest to not let his Luscious get away.

By springtime Sean has fielded many offers of full scholarships. He has decided to accept Pickett Cropper's offer, though, because he was the first to stand by Sean, the first to contact him, and he had Jesse Wilhoit playing for him. Sean's parents are so pleased about the scholarship, they allow Sean to spend some of his college education funds on a car, which almost immediately he dubs the Rolling Lovemobile. He and Kayla enjoy exploring each other, but Kayla is adamant about not wanting to lose her virginity in the back seat of a car, so that final act has not yet been fulfilled.

Jaimie's younger sister, Tara, is also becoming a topic of conversation among Sean and his closest friends. Tara is known as the Blowjob Queen of Central Junior High, and Sean is very concerned about the possibility that Stephen is involved with her. Jake thinks the junior high kids are using oral sex as a method of birth control. Jaimie tells them that her sister doesn't consider oral sex to be real sex, but rather a casual and fun activity among friends, not much different from a hug or a kiss. Already Sean and his friends are feeling a little bit of a generation gap, as they can't understand why kids in junior high school think the way they do.

Later, Kayla confesses the conversation made her uncomfortable, since she had been using Brandon, her former boyfriend, in a similar fashion, knowing it was only casual right from the start.

In June, Kayla and Sean attend Lori's wedding to David McMasters. Molly is also there with her new boyfriend, Alex Baumgartner. At the reception, David's brother announces he has keys to rooms at the hotel for anybody who feels they shouldn't be driving. The four friends make plans to call their parents and stay downtown for the night. They make the calls, implying that all four would be sharing a room, and their parents all approve. Sean and Alex each take a separate key, and at the end of the evening, each couple goes to their own hotel room.

And finally, Kayla gives him her most precious gift. She surrenders her virginity as they make love, fall asleep, and make love again in the morning. They shower together, pleasuring each other once more, and then they go down to the restaurant and meet Molly and Alex for breakfast. Molly breaks the ice by informing Sean and Kayla that Alex is a good learner, making Alex blush furiously.

The summer between his junior and senior years, Sean comes up with an idea to run his own summer soccer camps. He enlists Eric, Jorge, Tessa, and Trent to help out, and Kayla's father contributes with helpful business advice. It works out well for Sean, but it turns out to be a huge workload for him, as the only person doing the organizing and planning. He keeps good notes, however, and

when he holds a year-end awards program for the parents, he is rewarded with extra tips. Kids and parents both are enthusiastic about the quality of the camp.

At the annual Lehigh-Jacks picnic at the end of summer, Jaimie informs Jake that they won't be able to participate in the scavenger hunt, because she is supposed to watch Tara, who has been grounded. Sean and Kayla offer to keep them company, so after the sun goes down, the five of them go into Jaimie and Tara's house to watch television.

After a couple of hours of boredom, Tara announces she is going to go take a shower. The other kids don't think anything of it, until they hear a noise from upstairs. They run up and break into Tara's room when she doesn't open the door to their knocks.

Tara is naked on her bed, semen splashed across her body and dribbling from her pussy, and her bedroom window is wide open. Jake rushes to the window, where he finds an old ladder propped up. He thinks he sees somebody in the dark and cries out. He and Sean run down the stairs to try to catch them, but they can't find anybody. Jake confides in Sean, telling him quietly that he thinks Stephen might have been one of the boys.

Sean finds Stephen at home and gets the story from him. Stephen and his friend Tommy were, indeed, the two boys who were in Tara's room. Stephen is very upset about what happened, and seems willing to take his punishment. Sean consoles him, and tells him he will help him all he can.

Sean now is about to start his senior year of high school. During the first day of tryouts for the soccer teams, Eric challenges Weasel to a one-on-one contest. If Eric wins, Weasel must promise not to challenge anyone for a starting position. If Weasel wins, Eric promises to put in a good word to Coach Neville about Adam, recommending him for one of only four open positions. They play the one-on-one after a full day of running timed sprints, and Eric takes advantage of Adam's weariness, winning 3-1. Adam seems to have conquered his anger, however, and matured since the previous year, and Eric, Jorge, and Sean recognize it. Without letting Weasel know about it, they still give a good report to Coach Neville, saying they can work with him if he starts. When Coach announces the starting lineups, Weasel is named to the sweeper position, taking him completely by surprise. He promises to listen to his keeper and his defensive mates, grateful for the support.

A month into the school year, the team is undefeated and ranked first in the state. Just before the team is supposed to get on a bus for an away game, a school assembly is called. The starters for the varsity team are introduced, and Coach

Neville surprises everybody with the announcement that Sean has been chosen as a first-team All-American selection in soccer.

As the team prepares for the playoffs and their defense of their state title, another freshman at school is getting some unwanted attention, and her problems are going to affect many of Sean's closest friends: Tara is pregnant, and she doesn't know who the father is.

The varsity soccer team cruises through the playoffs, and they make the trip downstate once again. Weasel has proven to be a valuable asset to the team, and he receives an honorable mention when the All-Conference selections are announced. The team wins their semi-final game, and their opponent for the state championship is once again the team from South, with Spencer Goldman.

In the championship game Sean's team falls behind for the first time all season. Sean devises a plan to use Weasel to harry Spencer, and the plan works beautifully. Spencer's offensive effectiveness is neutralized and South's entire offense is thrown into disarray. Eric, Sean, and the team are able to take advantage, and they squeak out a 2-1 win, for their second state championship in a row. For his tenacious play, Coach Neville presents Adam Prince, the Weasel, with the game ball from the championship game.

After the game Spencer accuses Sean of coming up with the tactic. He also lets Sean know he, too, will be attending Florida, and playing for Pickett Cropper, which pleases Sean.

By Christmastime Tara's pregnancy is beginning to show. She has lost most of her friends, but one person in particular has stayed by her side throughout her ordeal: Stephen Porter. Even though Tara had told him he probably wasn't the father, Stephen takes it upon himself to accept at least his share of responsibility. He helps Tara with her homework, eats lunch with her, and even helps Tara's parents fix up a room for the baby.

Tara is eight months pregnant by Spring Break, and she doesn't return to school after the break. Stephen wants to be home schooled with her, but both his parents and Tara's parents veto the idea, and he reluctantly returns to classes. He still comes over to her house after school to help her, however.

For Prom, Sean and Kayla make plans to go out to dinner with a big group of friends. Jake and Jaimie are supposed to meet them at the restaurant, but they never show up. They finally come to the dance later, delivering the news that Tara has had her baby, a boy she names Kyle. Stephen had been at the hospital with her, and had attended the birth. Sean and Jake toast each other as quasi-

uncles, and Jaimie suddenly realizes her younger sister is now a mother, and she is an aunt.

At the end of the school year, graduation means the end of their high school careers for Sean, Eric, Keisha, Jake, Josh, Molly, and many of their friends. Sean's summer camp has expanded to be a full-time job for ten instructors and an office manager. Sean finds he has more spare time than he had thought he would, thanks to the good organization he has set up, and he starts thinking about expanding even more in the future.

As the summer progresses, Sean becomes more and more uneasy about leaving Kayla behind. He devises a plan to let her know she can go out with others while he is away, without worrying about him. Her reaction is unexpected, as she thinks he might be trying to break up with her. He desperately tries to reassure her, but he doesn't do a very good job of it. Kayla warns him never to scare her like that again, to which Sean fervently agrees.

On his last night at home, Sean's mother makes a point of removing the rest of his family from the house, telling him they won't be home until midnight. Sean and Kayla share a poignant lovemaking session, and he watches her drive home at 11:45 PM, feeling lonely already.

The next day, in the car on the way to Florida with his mother, his father, and his younger brother, Sean is preoccupied with contemplating the future. He holds a soccer ball in his lap, a symbol for him of the future, the southern point of his internal compass. The northern point, his frame of reference, is the girl he is leaving behind, Kayla Lehigh.

ON TO BOOK III!

Chapter 1 - My Parents Gain a Bedroom

You wonder, sometimes, how you get into these situations. Looking back, I have to believe that, somewhere along the timeline of my life, I was led to this point, that I would be here no matter how I led my life. But I digress...

Sometime during the summer after my senior year of high school, I stopped thinking of myself as a high school kid. Maybe it was the business I had set up, and maybe it was the anticipation of playing soccer at the college level. Or it could have been that I was getting more mature, the third and least likely possibility. One thing was certain, though, and that was my girlfriend, the luscious Kayla Lehigh, was somehow directly responsible.

And just when I needed her, she was not with me. I was in my parent's car, headed down to the University of Florida. My dad was driving, and my mother was calmly knitting in the shotgun seat. My brother Stephen was zoned out with his headphones on, listening to something obnoxious, and I was sitting next to him, holding my soccer ball in my lap and missing my girl. My older brother, Michael, was still at home. He was working full-time and couldn't take time off to come with us. Actually, he was probably just as glad that he couldn't come along. It would have been a tight squeeze with one more person in the car anyway.

It was a two day trip to Florida for us, which seemed to make it even more painful, as I had nothing better to do than to think about stuff. I missed Kayla so much there was an ache in my solar plexus that felt like it would never be healed, and yet the thought of playing soccer for Pickett Cropper and the Florida Gators left me with a mild case of vertigo. How had I, a middling defensive player, managed to win a scholarship to one of the elite soccer programs in the country? It was still a mystery to me. I had a lot of hours in the back seat of the car, watching the flat farm fields of Illinois and Indiana slowly turn into the lush green pastures of Kentucky and the worn hills of Tennessee and North Carolina. By the time we reached Georgia, I had tired of so much introspection, and had taken to alternating between reading and gazing out the window as the landscapes and small towns rolled by.

My family and I made it to Gainesville without incident, other than a little lingering depression on my part over what I was leaving behind. My parents had two rooms at a Holiday Inn near the campus reserved for two nights. My parents took the room with the queen-sized bed, and my younger brother Stephen and I

would share the second room, one with two twin beds. We checked in after dark and found a small restaurant within walking distance, where we could grab some dinner. None of us felt much like getting back in the car to drive to get something to eat, so we made do with what we could find nearby.

Moving day, when we would set up my new living quarters, was the next day.

We got up the next morning and walked down to the same diner we had eaten at the night before. Dad ordered pancakes, Mom had a bagel and some fruit, and Stephen and I ordered French toast, a real treat for us. We didn't often go out for breakfast.

There were only a couple of dorms where the athletes were going to live, and the streets around them were busy with kids and families shuffling for the prime parking spots for unloading vans, trailers, and cars. We decided we would wait until after lunch before we would join the fray, so Stephen and I got to be lazy in the morning. We took advantage of the pool at the hotel, and then we piled into the car once again for the short trip over toward the center of the university grounds. We wandered around campus during the late morning, admired Lake Alice, and stopped for lunch at Reitz Student Union, just soaking up the university culture.

Right after lunch we pulled our U-Haul into a designated spot on the street, and the four of us started carting my stuff up to my third-floor dorm room.

I knew my roommate's name was Weston Bridges, and I knew that he was from the Atlanta area, and he was on the swimming team, but that was about all I knew. Since swimming was a winter sport, he didn't have to be on campus early like I did, so he wasn't moving in for another few days. I took the opportunity to get my stuff put away without having to worry yet about sharing space. It was a small room for one person, much less for two, but I hoped we would be able to work it out okay.

My mom organized my closet for me while my dad and I put together the framework to loft our beds. Stephen was in charge of hanging my posters and pictures on the walls. By dinnertime we were pretty much finished, and I clambered up onto my bed, now six feet up in the air, and carefully pasted a photo of Luscious on the ceiling, right above me. I wanted Kayla to be the first thing I saw every morning, and the last thing I saw every night.

Jesse Wilhoit came up to my room as we were finishing up, and he came to dinner with us that night. He brought along his roommate, another soccer player by the name of Bryan Watkins. Jesse and Bryan eased my transition from home

to college life that evening with their stories about their freshman year at school. It kept my parents, and especially my mother, from getting too emotional about packing off their middle son.

The next morning my family headed back home. Dad shook my hand, Stephen pretty much ignored me, and my mother hugged me fiercely, tears running down her face.

"Aw, Mom," I said, as embarrassed as only a new college freshman can be. "Don't cry. Don't think of it as losing a son, think of it as gaining a bedroom."

Well, that didn't seem to help much but, finally, she let me go and reluctantly got in the car.

Dad slipped me fifty dollars when Mom was turned away, as he shook my hand once more.

"Don't forget to write your mother often, son," he reminded me. "Make my life easier, would you please?" He grinned ruefully and opened his car door.

Stephen apparently had been hanging back for a reason, looking around as if he didn't have a care in the world. When Dad got in and closed the door, he turned to me and awkwardly hugged me.

"I'm proud of you, Sean," he whispered roughly. "I'm never going to be able to go to college, so you're gonna have to have fun enough for both of us."

I hugged him back, surprised and gratified at his gesture. "What do you mean, you won't be able to go to college? Get your grades up and you'll be fine."

"Nah," he said as he let me go. "I've got my own family to take care of, as soon as I'm out of high school. Tara and the baby."

"You can take care of them best by being the best you can be. If that means going to college, then that's what you have to do, Stephen."

He shrugged. "We'll see," he answered. He hopped into the back seat and adjusted his earphones for the long ride home. Just before he closed the door, he gave me a quick grin and a thumbs-up. It gave me some encouragement that he was going to be okay.

My parents finally pulled out, and I was on my own. With luck and some diligence, I hoped I would make the most of this opportunity, and not fuck up too much.

Soccer tryouts and team meetings began that afternoon. We all met at the fieldhouse, and Coach Pick put us through his paces with laps, dribbling and passing drills, and free kick shots on net from different distances out on the field. I got the feeling that he and his staff had already decided on their starting lineups, and all that was left to do was evaluate some of the walk-ons who were trying out for the team.

After about three hours of working in the Florida heat and humidity, I was wiped out. As I looked around, I could see that I wasn't really in any worse shape than anybody else, which made me feel a little better. About the only ones who looked like they could keep going were Jesse Wilhoit and Martin Flauget, a junior defenseman from France. Both Jesse and Martin had been playing with the Under-20 National Team, and had spent the summer in North Carolina at the USSF training facilities. Because of their experiences over the summer, they were both in exceptional shape, having honed their skills in the heat and humidity that North Carolina provided during June and July.

At the end of that first practice day, the coaches led us off the practice fields and into the fieldhouse. We all filed into a meeting room next to our locker room. There were backless benches around the walls, and the middle of the room was empty. We all either sat on a bench or flopped to the floor as Pick and his assistants conferred.

Finally, Pick called for our attention. "Listen up here, fellas, I've got a few announcements."

He waited a moment for us to settle down. "You boys who have been a part of this here program have heard this speech before, but that don't mean I want you to not pay attention again. Okay?" He didn't bother waiting for any answers. "You freshmen and transfers, here's the bottom line on what you're committing to here. Your priorities are as follows: classes and grades first. Got that? I'll repeat it for you, just in case you thought you didn't hear me right. Classes and grades come first. If you ain't passing your classes, you ain't playing soccer, so classes and grades have got to come first. Right behind them is the team. Okay? With me so far?"

He looked around the room. His attitude was one of not expecting any questions, and he got none from us.

"If'n you have any spare time after that, you come see me. I'll see to it you keep busy." There was a scattering of groans from around the room, mostly from older

guys. Pick continued, "During our season, you should be so busy you won't have time to get into any mischief. Come springtime, maybe then you can cut loose just a little, but until then you belong to the University and to me, in that order, and between the two of us, we will demand about ten percent more than you have to give, so plan now on going home dead tired every damn night."

Jesse was sitting on my right, and Spencer Goldman was on my left. Jesse nudged me and nodded. "He's not kidding," he murmured.

As Pick was talking, one of his assistants was passing out schedules. There were three pages stapled together. I was expecting to get a one-page summary, listing our games and times, but what we got was a game schedule, a weekly schedule for the first four weeks, and daily schedules, individually set according to our class schedules. We had full team practices, defensive and offensive units had their own practices, and there was individual instruction for each of us. Our individual instruction page included scheduled weight room times, and there were some one-on-one and two-on-two drills set up for us.

As I was reading my sheet, there was an rhythmic and annoying bumping of the bench going on. I glanced around Jesse, and saw Martin stretched out on his back on the bench, his arm holding his head up so he could read, and his foot tapping the bench. Jesse glanced over at him also, and, with an exasperated look on his face, swept Martin's feet off the bench. Martin nearly lost his balance and fell to the floor, but managed to catch himself in time. He glared at Jesse but didn't say a word.

"Prima Donna asshole," muttered Jesse. It was the first negative thing I had ever heard him say about anybody, and it took me by surprise.

Pick dismissed us after going over what he expected of us over the next couple of weeks, and Spencer and I headed toward our dorm. He was on the sixth floor, so he accompanied me up the stairs. We had made a promise to each other that we would avoid the elevator as much as we could, but I had the feeling Spencer would break that particular vow long before I did.

I unlocked my door and let it stay open as I flopped down on my bed. I intended to write a letter to Luscious, but I wanted to read over my soccer schedule once more.

It was brutal. Eunice, Pick's office assistant, had typed in my work schedule, meshing it with my class schedule and my workout and practice schedules. I had zero spare time during the week, and very little on the weekends. I had Sunday mornings free, and Sunday evenings generally were open, but that was about it. I

flipped through the pages, and saw that it would probably continue right through Thanksgiving break, into December. At least three months before I would even have a day off, and there was no way I was going home before Christmas. Even Thanksgiving dinner was going to be a dorm meal. That was depressing, but even worse was the realization that I would not see my family or friends for months. My picture hanging over my bed would be the closest I would come to seeing Kayla for at least seventeen weeks. I was going to have to keep my nose to the grindstone and not think about it. It was the only way I would be able to make it.

I hoped my Kayla would understand.

September 12, 2003 - 12:28:26 AM

Chapter 2 - Weston, West, Westy

Classes didn't start for another week, and already I was tired. Because we didn't have any distractions from schoolwork, Pick took up the slack, working us nearly to the point of collapse in the Florida heat.

Since Gatorade had been formulated and tested here in Gatorland (hence the name, see?) I learned to like the taste, and I drank as much of it as I could pound down, on the theory it would help me out. Maybe it did, but I was too exhausted to tell. Between sprints, agility drills, and long-distance miles running both on the track and on the streets, we started melding together as a team. We discovered who among us was faster, stronger, fitter. The distance runners were identified, as were the sprinters. I didn't know which category I fit into. I knew I wasn't a sprinter. There were guys on our team who would leave Eric Johnson in the dust, and there was no way I could stay with them in a race. On the other hand, my stamina for pounding out miles was decent enough, but the real long-distance runners on our team also left me far behind. On ten-kilometer runs, the good ones would already be jogging back, cooling down, while I was still chugging along, two kilometers to go to the end. I wasn't breathing any harder than they were across the finish line, but if I tried to carry their pace across the full course, I would have collapsed into a quivering mass of exhaustion. I just hoped my ball-handling skills were better than theirs, so I would have an edge somewhere along the line.

We ran without soccer balls most of the time. By this point in our soccer careers, it was assumed we all knew how to handle a ball sufficiently, so less emphasis was placed on dribbling and passing than I had ever experienced before, and more was placed on conditioning. The running was boring, but necessary. At least I had plenty of company, even if I didn't have the breath to talk to them very often.

After practices were over, Jesse and Bryan showed me the ropes and took me around to the dorm rooms and apartments of their friends. I soon discovered that no amount of exercise would keep a healthy college kid away from a party for long, and I was surprised to learn that my name and my awards were well known among the crowd I was introduced to. Even a relatively little-known sport as soccer had its fans, and I discovered they were a very knowledgeable group. At first it was very flattering, and I attributed it to Jesse's overenthusiastic praise. Later it became obvious, even to me, that even minor celebrity was celebrated.

I also discovered that every sport has its groupies, and having an All-American designation after my name made me a lot more popular than I would otherwise have been, which I found most uncomfortable. I really wanted people to like me or dislike me for who I was, warts and all, rather than for any awards or achievements that had been attributed to me. For some people, asking this was impossible. All they could see was the award. I tried to steer clear of these people, but at times they could be persistent. I accepted the attention with as much grace as I could muster. Sometimes it wasn't much.

It was a good thing I didn't have classes, because I was already overrun with paperwork, anyway. My mailbox was overflowing. Luscious Kayla wrote to me every day, six or seven lovely, handwritten pages each letter. They were full of the everyday around the neighborhood and within the Lehigh family, interspersed with confessions and thoughts so searing they took my breath away. I ached to hold her, to talk to her, and I went to bed every night frustrated beyond imagining.

Toward the end of the week I started getting letters from my mom. They were typical Mom Advice letters, admonishing me to make sure I did my laundry every week, eat right, don't stay out too late, study hard, and wash my hands after going to the bathroom. God forbid I should get hit by a truck and not be wearing clean underwear when they got me to the hospital!

I got a bit of a surprise when I opened my mailbox one day and found a long letter from Stephen and Tara, along with a new picture of Kyle. Every other paragraph was in Stephen's primitive handwriting, alternating with a paragraph in Tara's only slightly more feminine cursive. It was so juvenile and cutesy it was hard to believe they were the parents of a baby boy. Well, I had to remind myself, Tara was a parent. Stephen, even though he was trying to act like a dad to baby Kyle, was probably not the real father. They were enjoying their time together before they had to put Kyle into day care so they could both return to high school for their sophomore years.

I also got a short letter from Jake, getting ready to leave for the University of Iowa. He wrote that he was thinking of walking on and trying out for the football team, but he had his doubts about if he would make it. If nothing else, he wrote, he would sign up for intramural football. As much as he loved football, I knew Jake had other plans. His primary goal was to go to pharmacy school so he could work at his father's drug store, and make a good life for himself and Jaimie.

Another surprise in my mailbox was a note from Eric Johnson. He and Keisha were at Maryland, and he wrote to let me know about some of the drills his coaches were using. He thought some of them could be revised for use by my summer clinics, especially for the advanced groups. It sounded like his workouts were just as tough as mine. I almost felt sorry for him. Almost. He sent along a hug and a kiss from Keisha, and promised to get together with Kayla and me over Christmas break.

The biggest surprise, though, was a letter I got on Friday. It was from Molly, a fat envelope that smelled faintly of the perfume she favored. For some reason, I was almost afraid to open it.

Molly was heading for the University of Illinois, but her boyfriend Alex was going to Stanford. I didn't have much hope for that particular long-distance relationship to survive, and Molly's letter was full of similar doubts and worries. She wasn't concerned for herself, but she was afraid Alex, stuck out in California until Christmas, would drift away from her.

As I read her letter, I worried for her enough for both of us, right up until a particular passage on the fourth page.

"Baumgartner can give a first impression that he is such a dweeb," she wrote. "I don't worry about losing him to another girl. He's MY dweeb, and I love him for it. I just have to hope some brainy California chick doesn't figure out he uses his dweebiness as a defense mechanism. He can be a little too trusting sometimes, my Baumgartner, and I hope it doesn't lead him into temptation.

"As for me, he knows he doesn't have to worry. I may have had my wild side once, but Amonte and Del Toro probably did me a favor by beating it out of me. It's a hard cure, but once it takes, there ain't no breaking it!

"That's a joke, Porter. You can laugh now!"

I didn't laugh, but I did breathe a big sigh of relief. Molly O'Toole was probably going to be just fine. Alex would be doing himself a huge disservice if he let this one go. I mentally promised myself to write to him and remind him of what was waiting for him back at home.

I settled down to return every letter I received that first week. I wrote to my parents, telling them about soccer practices. I didn't mention anything about parties or apartments to them, sticking instead to safer subjects, such as the tortures Pick and his assistants were inflicting upon us. I also promised my

mother that I would change my underwear every day, eat my vegetables, and look twice before crossing the street.

I wrote back to Eric and tried to describe some of the things our team had been working on. I described most of the other members of our team, and I made sure I sent along greetings from both Jesse and Spencer. Between soccer, school and Keisha, I knew Eric wouldn't have much time to himself. I didn't expect another letter from him to arrive, but that was okay. We would catch up over Christmas break.

I addressed a short letter to Jake, and mailed it to Iowa City. With luck it would be waiting for him by the time he got there. If I had sent it to his house, I knew I would miss him. I reminded him not to be too disappointed if he didn't make the Iowa football team. As long as he could play and have fun, I knew Jake would be fine. It really didn't matter to him if he played on a Division 1 team or on a campus recreational league. As long as he could tackle somebody and get dirty, he would be happy. I did remind him to call me or write to me if he was lonely. After all, he was in the same spot with his girlfriend as I was, even if he was about twenty hours closer to home than I.

I wrote a longer letter to Molly in answer to hers, trying to put a positive spin on her separation from Alex. We were best of friends, and I knew we could both use a good shoulder to cry on occasionally. I would provide one for her, and I knew she would be available to me anytime.

And I tried to write to Kayla every day. The first four or five letters came pretty easily, as there was a lot to tell her about. By the end of the week, though, I was running out of things to say, afraid I would start repeating myself. It was real work to fill three or four pages of stuff, but I slogged through it the best I could.

Once classes started, and once our games began, I hoped to acquire more stories to relate to her. Otherwise, I might have to cut down on the frequency of my letters. Maybe every other day would give me a chance to come up with something to tell her about.

My roommate moved in on the Saturday before classes started. His parents, indulging their only child, helped him fill our room to overflowing with a refrigerator, a television, a huge stereo, boxes of records and tapes, and more clothes than they could fit into his half of our tiny closet.

I was at practice in the morning, and I was scheduled to work one of the gift concession stands that were set up outside Reitz Student Union for about three hours that afternoon. By the time I got back to the dorm, they were just taking the last few things out of their van and carting them upstairs. I followed them down the hall, not realizing it was Weston and his parents until they walked into my dorm room. I turned and entered what looked like a war zone. I stopped in the doorway, just looking at the sheer volume of stuff my roomie had brought, wondering where he was going to be able to store it all. In the middle of the floor, underneath our beds, was an old couch with big, stuffed arms and a damask coverlet.

Weston turned in surprise, and stepped up to me.

"Are you Sean? I'm Westy," he said by way of introduction.

"Westy? That's an odd name," I said as I shook his hand.

He looked a little embarrassed, glancing over toward his father. "Actually, I'm Weston Bridges III. My grandfather was Weston, my dad is known as West, and I got stuck with Westy. I have no idea what I'm going to call my son, if I ever have one."

Westy's father stepped over. "Glad to meet you, Sean," he said, sticking his hand out and giving me a bone-crushing handshake. "This is my wife, Westy's mother, Gail."

Gail was spectacular. She appeared to spend most of her time in the gym and in the tanning salon. She was tall and lithe, and moved with a dancer's grace. I couldn't help staring as she came over to shake my hand.

"Hello, Sean. I'm so glad to finally meet you. I've heard so much about you," she said softly. She allowed me to cradle her hand gently in mine for just a moment.

"You have?" I stammered. I was feeling a little dumb, a little tongue-tied.

"Of course," she said with a laugh. "We get soccer news in Atlanta, too, you know."

I blushed a deep red. "I didn't mean..."

She laughed delightedly. "Oh, I'm sorry, Sean, I didn't mean to tease you..."

"Gail, look what you've done," interjected Mr. Bridges. "You've put Sean on the spot, now." He slapped my back hard, nearly knocking me off my feet. "She loves

to tease the boys," he said to me in a stage whisper. He winked elaborately at me as Gail protested.

"I most certainly do not tease," she said with a theatrical little pout. She leaned in toward my ear. "I promise," she said softly.

I was startled, until I looked over at Westy's father. Obviously, he was meant to hear, because Gail and West were smiling and making google-eyes at each other. Westy just stood there, looking as uncomfortable around them as I felt. Look at that, I thought to myself. We have something in common already.

I backpedaled out of the room. "I'm just going to... uh... go get..."

Mr. Bridges interrupted me. "You go ahead and do what you need to do, Sean, and we'll be out of here in just a little bit." He and Gail exchanged a silent look, and then he continued, "We're going to take Westy out for dinner. His last good meal before digging into the cafeteria food and all. Can you join us?"

Westy looked at me a little imploringly. "Yeah, Sean. Come along to dinner."

I shrugged. "Well, if you really don't mind..."

"Excellent!" cried Mr. Bridges. "We'll be done here in, what, about an hour?" He glanced around, and then nodded satisfactorily. "Yes, I think about an hour will do it. Care to meet us back here?" He turned back and concentrated on untangling a rat's nest of speaker cords without waiting for an answer.

"Sure, okay," I said lamely.

"See you then, Sean," purred Mrs. Bridges. "It was nice talking with you."

Westy just shook his head and shrugged his shoulders. "See you in an hour," he said.

I looked around the room once more. No way would they be done in just an hour, I thought as I wandered down the hall. I headed up to Spencer's room to kill an hour before dinner.

September 19, 2003 - 1:33:18 PM

Chapter 3 - A Faster Game

Westy Bridges turned out to be an asshole.

He disguised it pretty well, but inside that great-looking swimmer's body, beyond the sharp eyes and the long, wavy hair and the puckish charm, lurked an arrogant, supercilious and disdainful male slut.

He readily admitted to me he had a girlfriend back home in Atlanta, a very nice girl his parents adored. A rich girl whose father liked him. A girl who, according to Westy, was a sweet Georgia peach to everybody, a pleasant and demure girl who dressed right, led instead of followed, belonged to all the right groups, volunteered at the local hospital, and carried herself with dignity and confidence. Everybody thought of her as the epitome of the modern Southern belle.

"Everybody except me," he confided. "With me, she's the dirtiest little trailer trash tramp you could ever hope for. Ain't nothin' she won't do for me when we're alone in the bedroom, Sean," he leered. "And there ain't nothin' I haven't done to her. In the bedroom, in the back seat of her father's car, in the park in the fuckin' grass. She ain't a virgin anywhere, man." Westy oozed of confidence as he talked big.

In fact, his parents were barely out onto Interstate 75, on their way home, when Westy began trolling. He paced around the women's dorms, he cruised the lake and the Student Union, and he checked out the areas around the sorority houses.

By Sunday night he had bagged his first conquest, a hapless freshman girl who was probably away from home for the first time, and was unfortunate enough to have bumped into my roommate. Westy came stumbling into our room with his arm around her, and tried to introduce her to me. He had an opened beer in his other hand, which he waved around as he talked.

"Hey, Sean ol' buddy, meet..." He turned to the girl, a mousy little thing with thick glasses and a downturned, thin mouth. "What'd you say your name was, sweetie?"

"Eleanor," she said, gazing at Westy's imposingly broad shoulders, and dropping her eyes to take in his swimmer's chest, down to his impossibly narrow waist.

"Yeah. Meet Eleanor. Elly, this is my roomie, Sean. Say goodbye to Sean, Elly, he was just leaving." He gave me a significant look.

"Sure," I said. "I was just leaving." I stared back at Westy, trying to let him know I was not happy about this situation. "But I'm planning on coming back in about an hour," I said.

"An hour's plenty of time for us," said Westy, holding on to poor Eleanor. She probably thought he was being protective. I thought he was being possessive. I picked up the letter I was trying to write and left them alone, heading up to Spencer's room.

When I got to the sixth floor, the music pumping out of rooms up and down the hall was nearly painful. Country was competing with blue-eyed soul, Southern rock was prominent, and there was a smattering of a new sound, a primarily spoken type of music called rap. I got to Spencer's door and heard good old Led Zeppelin pounding out the speakers. I poked my head in and saw Spencer at his desk, and his roommate, a soft-spoken baseball player named Arlen Jones, on his back on his lofted bed, his hands propping up his head and his feet moving in time with the music.

"Hey," I shouted, trying to be heard over the music, "mind if I camp out here for awhile?"

Spencer glanced up. "Come on in," he said. "What's up?"

"Westy's got a chippie," I said.

"So?" asked Spencer.

"So, he wanted a little alone time with her, so I got kicked out for an hour."

"Ahhh," he said knowingly. He gestured toward Arlen's desk chair and reached for a deck of cards. "How about some gin?" he asked, a glint in his eye. "Penny a point?"

Just looking at him, I knew I was in trouble. What the hell, I thought, how much can I lose in just an hour? I nodded.

About ninety minutes later, I stumbled from Goldman's room in a little bit of a shock. I was already down over six bucks. Spencer was magnanimous about it.

"We'll just keep track here in this," he said, pulling a notebook from his bookshelf. He smirked just a little as he carefully wrote down the date and the amount I owed him.

I trotted down the three flights of stairs to the third floor, and back to my own room.

Westy was there, alone. He was sitting on the couch, desultorily rubbing at a stain on the coverlet.

"Fuckin' bitch was a cherry," he muttered when he saw me. "She fuckin' bled all over my couch. My mom's gonna have a kitten when she sees this."

I looked at him, thoroughly disgusted. "Don't worry about it," I said facetiously. "That stain will probably be buried by plenty of others before the year ends."

He brightened. "Hey, you're right, roomie," he said. He actually took me seriously, which bothered me even more. "Hell, between you and me, we'll probably bust the springs right out of this bastard, won't we?"

I didn't even bother to grace his comment with a reply. I took the letter to Kayla I was working on and climbed up into my bed to try to write.

On Monday, Coach Pick finally put us into teams and had us scrimmage. Jesse and Spencer were on Team Alpha, and Martin, Bryan and I were on Team Omega. Martin was a leftie, so he was a natural to play the left defensive side. I was defending on the right, and Bryan was the forward on my side. Our keeper was Rick Rogers, who was a senior and the team's starting keeper. We had Brad Rickman as our stopper, another senior and a starter for the team.

We played a full 90-minute scrimmage. I knew we would be pressed hard by having to defend against both Jesse and Spencer, and that was proven less than ten minutes into the scrimmage. Jesse, in the center, and Spencer, playing on the left, kept on challenging us, pressing us through the middle and on our right, into my territory. I ran hard and concentrated on getting the ball out of the way. With Brad's help and Rick's direction, we managed to deflect all but a few thrusts into our area before the coaches restarted.

I thought I was prepared to fight for my position as right defender. I was determined to battle for the starting position. What I didn't really realize until that first scrimmage was how fast the college game was, compared to the high school level. Everybody on the field was a high school star, and the pace of the play increased dramatically over what I had been used to seeing. I had to scramble to keep up at first, until I got more used to the speed of the players and the velocity of the passes.

The other aspect of the game that was surprising to me was how much of the game was played in the air. In high school, lofted passes were common, but we played the game on the ground for the most part. In college play, the ball stayed in the air longer, and headers, juggling, and using vertical spaces also provided advantages and strategies I had rarely seen before. In fact, I watched in amazement as Martin Flauget, in a defensive maneuver, used his head, shoulders, and chest to keep the ball in the air, all while he was moving upfield at a healthy trot. Up until that moment, it had never occurred to me to even try to do that. It kept his opponents sufficiently off the ball, however, and he was able to move the ball out of our red zone. He finally let the ball drop down to his feet, powered it off his shin guard and off the Alpha midfielder's leg and out of bounds, giving us time to reset on the throw-in.

Flauget wasn't the only one, either, to carry the game up into the air. Midfielders on both sides tended to use their heads on the ball much more often than I had seen before. It was something of a revelation.

After practice, I mentioned it to Spencer.

"Yeah, I was surprised, too," he admitted. As a midfielder, he had been burned by our Omega challenger a couple of times, who elevated and took the ball out of the air as Spencer was waiting for it to drop. He learned quickly, though, and adjusted. By the second half, he, too, was leaping up, challenging for the ball.

Jesse, sitting across from me in the locker room, interjected, "I probably should have told you about that. It took me a little while to get used to the speed and the trajectory of the ball at this level. Everybody plays a little faster, kicks a little harder, pushes it as much as they can to try to build an edge. You'll do the same in a little while."

"It is a faster game here," I said.

"Everybody was a hero back home," Jesse reminded me. "Here, you've got to step it up if you want to be noticed."

"I'll say." I hoped I had something in my repertoire to step up to. Otherwise, I would find myself sitting on the bench a lot more than I wanted to do.

Bryan Watkins, Jesse Wilhoit's roommate, was a member of the Phi Kappa Phi fraternity. His girlfriend, Melanie Forsythe, was a walking dream. She was on the Florida cheerleading squad, she was a member of the Hellenic Council, and she had been a finalist the previous year for Homecoming Queen. She was also the

princess of the Phi Kap fraternity, and unofficial leader of the Phi Kappa Phi Auxiliary, a loose-knit organization of girlfriends of Phi Kaps whose purpose was to help the Phi Kaps with their school-sanctioned parties and receptions. They also provided help organizing the house for Greek Rush Week, along with providing attractive decoration during the recruitment phase.

Bryan had asked me if I was interested in rushing. He was willing to stand for me with the Phi Kaps, nearly ensuring that I would be invited to join their pledge class. I didn't feel like I was the fraternity type, however, so I declined as politely as I could.

"Hey, it's no problem at all," Bryan assured me. "Hell, I couldn't even get Jesse to join up. It's not like nobody will talk to you if you aren't Greek."

"Well, thanks anyway," I said.

"Just do me a favor, will you, Porter? Come to the fraternity house the first night of Rush. I'll introduce you around, you get to scarf up a lot of free food, the guys will see I'm out there trying to recruit. You decline when they send out the invitations to come back, everybody's happy. Okay?"

"Do I have to sign up for Rush? I really don't want to put on a glad face at all those fraternity houses," I said.

"Nah, don't sign up," he said. "Just show up at the Phi Kap house the first night of Rush. I'll have it all set for you."

"Sure," I said. "I can do that."

"And," he added as an incentive, "Melanie wants to meet you. I think she's got something cooking you might like."

"You know I've got a girlfriend at home, right?" I asked, a little worried. "I hope this doesn't have anything to do with fixing me up or anything."

"I told her about it," he replied. "Trust me, she's got a head on her shoulders. Beauty and brains."

"In that case, okay. I'll be there," I told him.

And, just like that, I made a seemingly simple decision that would end up having a tremendous impact on my life for the next several months.

September 26, 2003 - 12:44:37 AM

Chapter 4 - A Very Good Defenseman

Our first game was a non-conference away game at the University of South Florida. I was preparing for a very long bus ride, thinking USF was located around Miami or Fort Lauderdale, until Jesse corrected me.

"Sorry to disappoint you, freshman," he said with a chuckle, "but the University of South Florida is in Tampa. It's not even three hours away, man."

"Tampa? I don't think anybody would consider Tampa to be in southern Florida. What's up with that? It must be a really old school, then. I'm assuming the name was picked because Tampa was considered to be way south, what, maybe a hundred years ago?"

Jesse laughed out loud. "You'd think," he said. "The school's not even thirty years old, Porter. The state legislature, in the infinite wisdom that political bodies all over the world consistently demonstrate, decided that the University of South Florida was a perfectly appropriate name for an institute of higher learning located smack dab in the central part of the state."

I must have looked very confused, because Jesse just shook his head and chuckled as we loaded our gear bags into the baggage compartment of the bus.

We filed onto the bus and settled in for the ride to Tampa. I took along a backpack filled with books and homework assignments. I was already falling behind on my schoolwork, and I owed Kayla about four letters. In her last couple of letters, she mentioned how she had grudgingly accepted not getting a letter every day. She also pointedly wrote about how she felt when she went two or three days without hearing from me. Even that guilt trip couldn't manufacture things to tell her, however, and my letter-writing frequency was dropping again.

Schoolwork first, I reminded myself. I sighed as I reached into my backpack for my English assignments.

I had worked very hard during practices, both on the field and in the weight room, trying to increase my chance of earning a starting position. Right from the beginning, Pick had been very encouraging, urging me to try my best and not be afraid of failure.

Just that little statement alone put the fear of God into me, and spurred me on to work even harder. I did not want to fail. What would my parents say? What would Kayla say? What would I tell myself?

So I pushed. I ran further, tried to run faster, did more reps on the machines, and lifted free weights in an attempt to strengthen my legs, my traps, and my pecs. These were the areas I felt needed the most attention, especially for playing at the college level. I needed more support from my upper body if I was going to be heading the ball with any force or direction.

I took Coach Pick's admonishments to mean he still hadn't decided on his starting lineup, particularly at the right defensive position. There was a junior named Dan Ortega on the team who was pretty good, and I knew he was my main competition for the starting job. Dan was bigger and stronger than me, but he was slower on his feet. He handled the distance runs pretty well, though he tended to lag toward the back of the field. Additionally, his sprint work was terrible.

I had heard about some research that was being done on the leg muscles of men and women who ran track events, and preliminary results indicated that there were two types of muscle fibers. Slow-twitch fibers suited long-distance runners, and fast-twitch fibers were predominant in sprinters. Dan's legs had to have been made up of nearly one hundred percent slow-twitch, because he ran sprints like he was carrying fifty-pound weights in his hands. His best time at the 100-yard dash was something over 15 seconds, and his 220 and 440 times were even worse.

He was a strong defender, however, and experienced. It was nearly impossible to push him off the ball, and he could power the ball downfield on throw-ins much further than I could. It was his third year playing on the team, and even though he was a role player and not one of the stars, he functioned efficiently on the field.

Dan was as easygoing a guy as I had ever met, though, and he took my eagerness to compete completely in stride. In fact, he often met me at the gym and partnered up on working with the weights. He encouraged me, and even gave me a fair amount of advice on the Florida system of playing.

One day, as we were resting between battles with the lat machine, Dan said, "Here's kind of what's going through Pick's mind, Sean. You know how football is divided up into the NFC and the AFC?"

"Sure," I said. I took a gulp of water and stretched out my upper arms. *I might have overdone it working my triceps*, I thought.

"Okay, the NFC has always relied on the running game and defense, right? And the AFC likes to run and gun."

"Right," I said. "Joe Montana loves the running game."

"Okay, there are always exceptions, smart-ass," he retorted. "But listen up for a second. Pick's teams are like the NFC. He believes defense wins games. And he's been pretty successful so far operating on that premise. But, just like the Forty-Niners, he's not going to object too much if he happens to have a little firepower in his offense, too. Know what I mean?"

"And that's where Jesse fits in," I said.

"Yep," he agreed. "And maybe your buddy Goldman, too."

I glanced over at him, and then stood up to attack the lats again. "Dan, you know I'm going to try to win the starting spot on the right."

"Of course, freshman," he said with a small smile. "I'd expect nothing less from an All-American. But you'll have to go through me to get onto the field."

I was puzzled. "So why are you helping me so much, then?"

He slapped me on the back, and then gently pushed me toward the Nautilus machine. "I'd like that starting job, too," he said as I settled myself into position. "But soccer isn't my be-all and end-all. If you make the team stronger by being on the field, then you should have the starting spot. Go," he said, pointing to the weights.

I started working my reps again. "I'm not going to lay down for you, freshman," he continued. "But if you win it fair and square, I'll be your biggest supporter. Because it will mean we're fielding the best team we can."

Dan played on Team Alpha in practices, and he played hard. He lumbered around and got in anybody's way who dared attempt an incursion into his little kingdom. He rebuffed every offensive set in his direction, clearing the ball out of bounds or moving it over to Rick in the net. He was easy to run around, but he always seemed to have the angle on any penetration, and his center support was always there to lend a hand.

In short, he played like a man who deserved to start on a Division 1 team. His game was stifling, if not very flashy.

It was a bit of a surprise to me, then, when Coach Pick named me as the starter for the first game.

We got to the USF campus and found our way to the soccer complex. The USF team was already on the field warming up. It was a hot day, into the nineties and pretty humid. I hoped the team managers had put plenty of Gatorade on ice for us. We would need it on this day.

Spencer and Jesse were anchoring the offense, and Martin, Rick, Brad, and I were holding down our end of the field. Nobody on either team wanted to run full out during the opening minutes, preferring to save something in reserve for the second half, so the ball never got much beyond midfield in either direction. Occasionally there would be an incursion by an offensive unit, but there was never a much of a threat mounted against either goal.

It became kind of obvious, however, that Martin Flauget really was the Prima Donna that Jesse considered him to be. Every time he got the ball, instead of passing it or moving it up, he would hold his position with the ball, waiting for an opponent to challenge him. He would then use his tricks and skills to move around the opponent. Then, once he was finished dazzling the onlookers, he would pass the ball off. Occasionally the USF forward or midfielder would attempt a slide tackle, and a couple of times they were able to knock the ball away from Martin, usually out of bounds. It didn't bother Flauget, though, since it almost always resulted in a throw-in for us. He would trot over to the sidelines, grab a ball, and toss it. Even his throw-ins were tinged with an insouciance, and perhaps even nonchalance, that was grating to his teammates, and must have been infuriating to those assigned to guarding him.

He was a very good defenseman, despite all that. He followed the direction of his keeper, kept himself well positioned between the ball and the goal, and in general disrupted the flow of USF's offense. His passing was acute, and he could move the ball in one fluid kick halfway up the field and hit his target with startling accuracy. I couldn't help but be grudgingly impressed with his play, despite the grandstanding.

On the bus back to Gainesville after our 3-1 win, I found an excuse to wander up to the front of the bus, where Pick and his assistants were spread out. I slipped into the seat next to Coach.

"Can I ask you something, Coach?"

He glanced over at me. The intelligent look in his eye made me think he already knew what I was going to ask.

"Why, shore, son, fire away," he said.

"What's the deal with Flauget, sir? I would think his showboating would make you angry."

He glanced quickly over to one of his assistants, a tall and gangly graduate student named Eddie Whitehead, and just as quickly looked back at me.

He lowered his voice as he explained, "Well, it doesn't please me, I don't mind telling you, Sean. Eddie, here," and he nodded his head in the direction of his assistant, sitting across the aisle from us, "found him playing club ball out of New York City. Graduated from high school a year early, and was havin' a good time just playin' soccer in Central Park. His daddy's a bigwig at some Frenchy company with an office in Manhattan, his mommy fancies herself as a jet-setter, so he was just kinda left on his own a lot. His social skills was just plain awful, I tell you." He chuckled softly at the memory.

"So Eddie found him?" I prompted.

"Oh, yeah. Eddie's got contacts up in the New York area, and he heard about this here Frenchy fella who could play. Brung him down, gave him the tour, done the whole dog-and-pony show for him and his papa. Momma was too busy to join 'em, I guess." He grunted as he reached down and shoved the newspaper he had been holding in his lap into his overstuffed briefcase. As he was bent down, he looked over at me shrewdly.

"Tell me what you saw out there, Sean," he said, smiling enigmatically.

"I saw a guy who needs somebody to sit down on him and give him a large dose of humility," I said.

Pick's smile grew wider. "Yup," he agreed. "What else?"

"The guy's a hell of a ballhandler."

"Yup, that he is. And he's always happy to show you all about it," Pick said.

"And he plays the position as well as anybody I've ever seen," I admitted grudgingly.

Now Pick was smiling broadly. "Yup," he said. "'Member when I told you about certain projects I was willing to take on occasionally?"

I nodded.

He jerked his thumb toward the back of the bus. "That's one of my bigger ones. And he's improved quite a bit. You shoulda seen him a couple a years ago, son. You would have really hated him then."

"Jeez, no thanks," I said. He was worse? It was hard to imagine.

Pick Cropper was giving me the eye. I knew him well enough by now not to be fooled by that Southern cracker exterior he enjoyed exhibiting. Behind the buffoonish act was a sharp, no-nonsense mind intent on producing the best soccer players and the best graduates for the University of Florida that he could.

"What are you thinking?" I asked, almost afraid of the answer.

"Oh, nothin', son. I'm just ruminatin' on some idears. Don't mind me." He stretched back into the cushions of his seat and closed his eyes, signaling the end of our conversation. I got up and made my way back to my backpack and my latest letter home to Kay.

When the team got back on campus after the game and our long bus ride, I wanted nothing more than to take another shower and crawl into bed. Spencer and I walked back from the fieldhouse to our dorm together, and made plans to meet up for breakfast the next morning, Sunday, before we had to report for our team meeting.

I unlocked my dorm room door and opened it. Westy glanced up at me from the couch in surprise, clearly not expecting me back as yet. Neither did the plump and pimply girl who had her legs wrapped around him.

Westy barely missed a stroke. "Hey, Sean," he said with a wink, and he bent back and continued pounding into the girl.

"Ah, fer chrissakes," I muttered. I grabbed my towel and my shower kit out of my closet and slammed the door on my way down the hall. Seeing Westy's naked ass sticking up was certainly not the most pleasant of sights upon opening my door. I was going to have to have a long talk with the boy.

I took a long time in the shower, just letting the hot water stream down on my shoulders and rinse away the tension that had appeared there. Once I finished, I dried off and slipped a set of sweats on. I gathered up my stuff, tossed my damp towel over my shoulder, and shuffled back down to my room, hoping against hope I would find the room empty.

No such luck. At least they were done, and I only had to put up with the smell of sex that permeated the room. My roomie was sitting on the couch in his underwear, his arm casually around the shoulder of his latest conquest. She was a homely girl, going to fat and with splotches of acne on her chin, her forehead, and her chest. She had put her bra and panties on, and was tolerating Westy's arm around her.

"Look, Westy..." I began.

"Sean, this is Doreen," interrupted Westy.

"Maureen," the girl corrected. "Are you really Sean Porter?" Her eyes tracked my every move as she sat there next to Westy.

"Uh, yeah," I said.

"I've heard of you," she said. "You're the soccer player."

"I'm just a soccer player. Not the soccer player."

She twisted to get away from Westy's arm, and then stood up. The tops of her heavy breasts quivered in their encasing bra as she moved.

I don't think I've ever seen an industrial-strength bra before, I thought to myself.

"I'm Maureen Saunders," she said as she sidled up to me. I backed off hurriedly and turned to my closet to hang up my towel. I was very uncomfortable, and she made me even more jittery when she grabbed my arm.

"I know all about you," she said. "I've read about you."

"Really?" I said. She was making it tough to be polite, hanging on me the way she was, but I was determined to do my best.

"Sure. My... friend back home played soccer. He played forward, though. He even played against you." She giggled and turned shyly away. I thought she was going for a coquettish look, but it didn't work. "He hated you, I think. But I thought you were wonderful."

"I played against him? Where are you from?"

"I graduated from Lincoln Valley," she said.

"Lincoln Valley? Really? Home of the Bozo Brothers?" I asked.

"The Bozo Brothers? I don't know them," she said, an odd look on her face. "But my... friend's name is Bruce Willits, and he played on the varsity team."

"Bruce..." It couldn't be. Could it? "Did your boyfriend have a teammate named Jack something?"

Her eyes lit up. "Sure," she said brightly. "Jack Adamski. That's Bruce's best friend."

"Ah," I said. Jack and Bruce were Bozo One and Bozo Two, the two inept Lincoln Valley players I had the misfortune to play against through most of my high school career. *Great, I thought. And now I have the bad luck to meet up with Bozo One's girlfriend.* "So, where are the Bozo... I mean, where are Jack and Bruce going to school?"

She still hadn't let go of me, and Westy, sitting alone on the couch, was looking a little steamed about it. "Bruce is going to community college, and Jack is in the Army."

"No kidding. Well, the Army will probably do him some good," I said. Maybe the Army could knock a little discipline into him, even if his soccer coach couldn't.

Westy finally got tired of sitting by himself. "Hey, Maureen, come over here," he said, patting the cushion beside him. "Papa's getting lonely."

She glanced at him, but made no move to join him.

"I went to all their games," she said, pointedly ignoring Westy. "I watched you play, too. Even though you played against us, against Jack. I thought you were really good."

"Thanks," I said. I tried disentangling myself, but Maureen wasn't going to let go so easily.

"Hey! Maureen!" Westy was getting irritated. "How 'bout a blowjob before you leave? And one for my man Sean, too?" He gestured toward her, and then pointed to his crotch hopefully.

"Go fuck yourself," she said with some venom. "You got what you wanted, and I got what I wanted. So fuck off."

Westy was genuinely hurt. "Aw, that's not fair," he pouted. All of a sudden, he realized what she had said. "Hey, what did you mean, you got what you wanted?"

Maureen finally let go of my arm and turned to face Westy. She had her fists propped on her meaty hips as she stared balefully at him. "You got your rocks off, didn't you? And I got to meet your roommate. It's a fair trade, I'd say."

Westy looked puzzled. "A trade?" Recognition dawned in his eyes. "You mean you came up here with me because you wanted to meet Porter?"

Maureen favored him with a tight smile.

"You are a cold bitch, ain't you?" he said heatedly.

"Yeah, like you're one of the great saviors of mankind," she spat.

Westy hopped up angrily. I hurriedly stepped between them.

"Grab your clothes," I said to her. "You'd better leave." I turned to Westy. "And you," I continued, pointing directly at him, "you need to sit back down and shut the fuck up."

Westy had about two inches in height on me, and his shoulders were muscled and bunched. He probably outweighed me by thirty pounds, but I was not about to be intimidated by this asshole. I stood my ground and stared him down. Finally, he dropped back to the couch and looked away, slouching against the back and the armrest.

Maureen slipped around me, slid along the dresser on the opposite wall from Westy, and gathered up her clothes. She clutched them to her stomach as she came back over by me to get dressed. As she pulled her jeans on, she gave me a look I couldn't read. I didn't say anything, or even acknowledge her, until she was dressed again and slipping into her sandals.

"I'll walk you out," I said, and I opened the door. As we left, I turned back. "Leave this open," I said to Westy. "I don't have my keys."

"Yeah, whatever," he grumbled.

Maureen and I walked in silence to the stairwell. We went down the flights of stairs until we reached the outside door.

I opened the door and stood aside to let her pass through. She took the opportunity to throw her arms around my neck and try to kiss me. I turned my head away in disgust.

"Thanks anyway, Sean," she said as she let me go.

"You probably don't want to get involved with him," I said.

She snorted derisively. "Westy? No way. It was a one-time thing. You heard me, I wanted to meet you, and he was the quickest way."

"Well, I don't know why you wanted to meet me. I think you got the worst of that bargain."

She laughed out loud. "Nope," she said. "I got laid, and I got to meet the All-American. I'd say it was a pretty successful afternoon."

I just shrugged and turned to go back upstairs.

"Sean?"

I turned back and caught at the door before it closed. "What?"

"I'm in Thomas Hall. Will you call me sometime?"

Now it was my turn to snort derisively. "I don't think so," I said, and I let the door close as I headed back upstairs.

October 3, 2003 - 12:29:00 PM

Chapter 5 - The Conversation on a Swing

Greek Rush started the next Monday evening. I had promised Bryan I would go to the open house at the Phi Kappa Phi house, so after a long day in class, and a long day on the practice field, I put on some actual dress-up clothes.

I was standing in front of the tiny mirror in my dorm room, trying to remember how to tie a Windsor knot, when Westy came in from taking a shower.

"How come you're all duded up?" he asked as he toweled off his hair.

"Rush," I answered. "I'm going over to the Phi Kap house to meet a friend."

"Hey, no kidding. Wait up for me, would you?" He dropped his towel onto the arm of the couch. "I'm going to rush, too. I'll walk over there with you."

I glanced at him through the mirror. "Are you rushing, too?"

"Yeah," he replied as he began digging through one of his dresser drawers. "I thought it would be a hoot. Meet some guys to party with, maybe find some chicks who want to ball a frat guy."

Oh, great," I muttered. "Just what you need is more opportunity to trash your couch."

"That's the spirit, Porter," he said exuberantly. He began rummaging through his closet. "So, I take it this is kind of a formal party? I mean, I shouldn't wear cut-offs or anything, right?"

"I would assume so," I replied. I finally got the knot of my tie, and I propped myself against my desk to wait for him.

"Do me a favor," he said as he bent down to put on his socks. "Go across the hall and knock on Jason's door, would you? Him and me were going to go together. Make sure he's ready, okay?"

I levered myself up and opened our door. I walked over to the room diagonal from ours, where Jason Emerson and Craig Nevers lived. Jason and Craig were part of the general freshman population of non-athletes who were scattered around our dorm. Jason, from New Jersey, was majoring in business, and Craig, a native Floridian, was in pre-med. I rarely saw Craig without his head buried in

a textbook, and already, hardly started into his college career, he looked harried and fretful. I was glad I wasn't in such a tough area of study. With my schedule, I was having a hard enough time keeping up as it was.

I knocked on their door, and Jason opened it up. He was dressed in torn and ratty jeans and a Black Sabbath t-shirt.

"Dude, tell me you aren't going to go to Greek Rush dressed like that," I said.

"Why? What's wrong?" He looked genuinely perplexed.

"You look like a fugitive from a bad 70's flashback," I said. I pushed him back into his room. As I expected, Craig was at his desk studying. He looked up distractedly as I guided Jason over to his closet.

"Look, the whole purpose for these parties is so you can make a good impression on the members of the fraternity," I said. I started going through his clothes hanging in his closet, looking for something appropriate for him. "Wear the ugly shirt after you get in, not when you're trying to get in."

I pulled out a button-down oxford shirt and a pair of pressed slacks I found in the back of his closet and tossed them to him.

"Change," I commanded.

He complied, but he obviously wasn't happy about it.

"Sean, these just aren't comfortable, man," he complained. "Are you sure I gotta wear this shit?"

"Yes, he's sure," answered Craig for me. He didn't look like he was very happy with the interruption.

"I've got even worse news for you, dude," I said. I tossed a pair of wing tips onto the floor beside him. "You've got to wear these, too."

"Oh, man," he whined. He tossed his old clothes up onto his bed and reluctantly put on the shirt and the slacks I had found for him. He opened one of his dresser drawers and pulled out a pair of dark socks.

Once he was dressed, we headed out to the hall.

"You sure you don't want to come with us, Craig?" I asked one last time.

"I'm sure," he answered distractedly. He waved in our direction without taking his eyes off the page he was studying.

Westy was just coming out of our room. He cleaned up pretty good, I thought to myself as we walked toward the stairway. Now if only I could get him to clean up the rest of his act.

It wasn't a long walk from our dorm over to Greek Row, where many of the fraternity houses were located. Both Westy and Jason were scheduled to go to Lambda Mu first. Westy was visiting the Phi Kaps second, and Jason was going to be there during the third session. They walked up to the Lambda house together, and I continued on to the Phi Kap house, further down the block.

I got there just as the first party was getting going. They had some of their Little Sisters greeting everybody at the door. They had been supplied with the names of the freshmen who were scheduled to be at each of the parties beforehand, and they checked them off and directed them to various rooms to talk to the fraternity members. I walked up to the table set up on the porch, where two very attractive girls were stationed.

"Hi, I'm Sean Porter," I said. A brunette with long hair and piercing blue eyes smiled at me. She raised one shapely eyebrow enticingly.

"Hello, Sean Porter," she said with a slight southern drawl. *I could really get to like living here*, I thought.

The other girl was a sleek redhead. She had starbursts of freckles on her high cheeks that were muted but not extinguished by her makeup. She checked her manifest, and looked up at me quizzically.

"I'm sorry. Did you say Sean Porter? I don't have you on my list," she said. She actually looked and sounded sorry. *Man, these girls are good*, I thought.

Another girl, a tiny little thing with short black hair, turned from the doorway when she heard the redhead's comment.

"Did you say your name was Sean Porter?" she asked.

"Yes," I replied, nearly dazzled by the hundred-kilowatt smile that lit up her face.

"Bryan's been expecting you," she said. She leaned over to the girls at the table. "Special case," she said to them. "I'll take him in."

The two girls at the table turned to the guy standing behind me and turned on the charm for him. I was quickly forgotten by them as they continued with their duties. I mentally shrugged. Easy come, easy go.

"Hi, I'm Alexandra Wallace," she said, holding out her hand for me to shake. "My friends call me Alex, though."

"It's nice to meet you, Alex," I said. I tried not to fumble with her hand too much, but she really was very small, and my hand seemed to envelop hers. I hoped I didn't squeeze it too hard.

"Bryan's been expecting you," she said, turning toward the open front door. There was electronic music coming out of the big speakers in the front room, Kraftwerk or some offshoot. I thought it was kind of an odd choice of music for a big function like this, but it soon slipped into the background as the crowded rooms broke down into smaller groups of conversation.

Alex threaded her way through, and I was happy to follow her. We made our way through the front parlor, a large television room, and into the dining room. Bryan was standing by the table, talking to a couple of other guys, when he saw Alex bringing me in.

"Porter! Over here!"

I thanked Alex and walked over to Bryan.

"Sean, I'd like you to meet the president of our fraternity, John Huff."

John was tall and stood nearly at attention. He had a strong chin, a steely gaze, and a firm handshake. He looked like he should be president of a bank or something.

"I've heard a lot about you, Sean. Good to meet you." His voice matched the face, deep and resonant.

"Thank you," I said. I was unsure just what he could have heard about me, but I was willing to go with the flow for Bryan's sake.

"What do you know about Phi Kappa Phi fraternity?" asked John.

"Well, uh..."

Before I could embarrass myself, Bryan jumped in. "Sean's just doing some preliminary skirmishing, Captain. Will you excuse us? I see Melanie over there, and I think she's looking for us."

He hustled me away. John looked indulgently pleased as Bryan steered me out of the room.

"Captain?" I asked as we stepped back into the television room.

Bryan had a sour look as we took up a spot against the wall. "Jack's an idiot, but he's a good face man."

"Now I'm completely lost," I said. "Jack? And what's a face man?"

Bryan chuckled. "He hates to be called Jack. He insists we call him Captain Huff. He's in ROTC, and thinks he's going to be an Army general someday. Truth is, he's captain of the ROTC drum and bugle corps. The only fighting he's likely to see are the battles at the front lines during the VFW Happy Hour."

"Okay, that explains the 'Captain' part. Why does he hate to be called Jack?" I asked.

Bryan looked at me kind of funny. "Would you want to be called Jack if your last name was Huff?"

Suddenly I got it. No, I thought, I guess I wouldn't.

Bryan was watching me, smiling the whole time. He could see when I finally got the joke. We both laughed.

"Gotcha," I said. "So, what's a 'face man'?"

"Jack gives a great first impression, doesn't he?" Bryan asked. I nodded. "But there's not much beyond that rugged face or that puffed-out chest. He looks great, acts like he knows what he's doing, but in reality he's a dipshit. He could fuck up a one-car funeral. So we make sure there are a few good people standing behind him, doing the real work, while Jack acts as our public face. Keeps the University regents happy, seeing such an upstanding citizen as our president, and they stay out of our back yard that way."

"He's really that bad?" I asked.

"To know him is to despise him," said Bryan. "Come on, let me take you around and introduce you to some of the Phi Kaps who really know what's going on."

He led me around the room and introduced me to a dizzying number of his fraternity brothers. After the first couple, I couldn't keep names straight any longer. It was a good thing everybody was wearing nametags.

One name I didn't forget was Alex's. She appeared next to me too often to be coincidence, usually carrying a tray of snacks or soft drinks. She made sure she offered me whatever she happened to be serving, smiling and chatting with ease.

"Who does Alex belong to?" I asked Bryan at one point. "I'm assuming she's the girlfriend of one of your fraternity brothers."

Bryan smiled. "She's cute, isn't she? And available, I hear. She used to go out with Marshall Elliott-see the tall guy over there in the tan sport coat? They broke up the end of last year. Anyway, Alex has been a member of the Little Sisters for the past two years, so she came over to help out, even though she's not dating anybody right now." He wagged his eyebrows at me. "Interested?"

"Nope," I said. "If I weren't seeing somebody at home, I might not mind giving her a call, though. She's... perky."

Bryan leaned in so he could almost whisper, "Perky and, from what I understand, she's very... *bendable*, if you know what I mean."

Bendable? There was a concept I hadn't considered before. I watched Alex for a few minutes more, until I found myself thinking about what she might look like naked and... bendable.

I shivered. Clean thoughts, I reminded myself. Got to keep clean thoughts.

Bryan seemed to shake himself out of his own little reverie, too. "Come on," he said. "Let's go find Melanie."

We found her in the kitchen, helping organize drinks and hors d'oeuvres that were being carried around the house by other girls.

"Hey, sweetie, this is Sean," said Bryan, putting his arm around her waist and drawing her to him.

Melanie held out her hand. She was so beautiful, I was completely tongue-tied. She reminded me a little of Molly or her sister Heather, only even prettier, something that, until that moment, I would have considered to be nearly impossible. She was tall, nearly six feet even in her leather straps with short heels, slender and graceful. She had reddish highlights in her blonde hair, and

her legs seemed to go from here to there and back again, enhanced by the short flared skirt she was wearing so well.

"Hi, Sean. Bryan has told me so much about you," she said.

I opened my mouth, but nothing came out. I felt like I was standing there like a small-town buffoon, my eyes bugged out and my throat too dry to function properly. It took me two tries to clear my throat and stumble through a reply.

Melanie chose not to notice my discomfort. She turned the considerable weight of her gaze onto her boyfriend. "He seems a little shy," she said to him with a laugh. I wondered why he didn't melt into a puddle just from that smile. *Maybe he used to, and now he's developed an immunity to its power*, I thought.

"Sean? Earth to Sean!" He poked at me, and I jumped and blinked. Had I been staring?

"Sorry," I mumbled. "Hi, I'm Sean Porter. You must be Melanie."

"I must be," she replied as she favored me with one of those smiles.

Finally, I was able to remember my manners. "Oh, I'm sorry. I seem to have made a mess of this, and I apologize," I said. "Bryan told me about you, but the reality still took me by surprise. He said you were beautiful, but he was wrong by half. You are exquisite, and Bryan is the luckiest man I have ever known."

"Oh, my," she said. Her cheeks flushed slightly, no doubt a little embarrassed by my effusiveness. "I must say, Sean, you really know how to compliment a girl. Thank you so much!" I was still holding her hand, and she put her left hand out and clasped my right hand with both of hers. "You are so sweet!"

All the preparations in the kitchen had come to a stop, and all the sorority girls were watching our exchange. I glanced around, as if seeing them for the first time, and they returned to their chores, whispering to each other. I was afraid they were laughing at my clumsiness, but there was nothing to be done about it. With any luck, I wouldn't ever meet any of them again.

Bryan and Melanie exchanged glances, and it seemed like an entire conversation took place silently between them.

Bryan took a step back. "I've got to get back to the front lines," he said. "I'll catch up with you in a little bit, Sean." He gave me a thumbs-up and turned to go back out to the party.

Melanie looked quickly around to make sure everything was operating smoothly.

"I'd like to talk to you for a moment, Sean, if I may," she said. She took my arm, and then turned her head to speak to the others in the kitchen. "I'll be on the front porch if you need me. Is that all right?"

One of the girls answered quickly, "Of course, Melanie. We'll be fine here. You go on, now."

Melanie steered me toward the front of the house. It may have been my imagination, but the noise levels seemed to hush as we passed through each room as conversations were halted in mid-sentence. I knew those eyes were not focused on me, and Melanie seemed to take it in stride. Maybe it really was my imagination.

There was a wooden swing suspended from oaken timbers on the side of the house on the porch, and Melanie led me over to it. She sat gracefully, crossed her legs, and waited for me to get comfortable next to her. I sat and gently pushed the swing into motion with my feet.

"Bryan tells me you've been a great addition to the team," she said.

"I don't know how much I've been able to contribute as yet," I said. "It's still early in the season."

"Well, you're starting as a freshman. Not many players can do that here."

I shrugged. I didn't have any way of knowing how true that statement was. Jesse Wilhoit started as a freshman, and Spencer Goldman was also in the starting lineup with me this year.

"Jesse couldn't stop talking about you last year, when you were still considering coming down here," she prompted.

"Jesse's a great player," I said, "and he's a very loyal friend. I think that colored his perception quite a bit."

It was her turn to shrug, which she did elegantly, with a tiny twitch of one eyebrow. "Bryan also tells me Coach Cropper thinks very highly of you."

"Coach is a softy from way back."

She laughed delightedly. "And he had better not ever hear you say such a thing," she said. "From what I understand, he's got a razor tongue that will leave you striped if he thinks you need it."

"That may be, but I've never heard it," I said.

Melanie leaned toward me, her eyes sharp, and gently placed her hand on my knee for emphasis. "Pickett Cropper may give people the impression that he is just a good ol' boy from down home, but make no mistake, Sean. He's one of the best coaches around, and he knows how to get the best out of his players."

"That's one of the reasons why I came here," I replied.

She settled back into the swing and adjusted her skirt. I took the opportunity to admire her legs again while she smoothed the material across her thighs.

"Jesse told me about you and your girlfriend back home, Sean. Is her name Kayla?"

I nodded.

"It's a lovely name, and I hear she's a lovely girl." She paused and switched gears on me. "Sean, I have a proposition for you."

"What does this have to do with Kayla?" I asked.

"Oh, nothing, really, but Bryan suggested something to me, and I asked Jesse about you and Kayla, about your relationship with her. Bryan and Jesse both had a lot to say about you, and I was impressed, to say the least. I couldn't wait to meet you, so I could talk to you face to face, and see for myself the makeup of this guy who had made such an impression on my boyfriend and on somebody as accomplished as Jesse Wilhoit." She paused again, and seemed to draw herself together. "Understand, Sean, that what I am going to propose may sound odd, but you would be doing me a great favor by considering it."

I was puzzled now. "Go ahead," I said.

"I belong to the Omega Sigma Theta sorority," she explained. "We have a girl, a freshman, who will be pledging us. She's a legacy, her mother was an Omega here at Florida, and she's the younger sister of one of my best friends."

"Okay," I said, wondering where this was going.

"I've agreed to be her pledge sister, which means I will kind of be her guide and mentor while she's a pledge. She's also a friend, and I want to watch out for her. She's a sweet girl, very attractive, Sean."

"I'm not sure where this is going, but I've got a girl..."

"Yes, Kayla, I know. You see, Reggie-her name is Regina Coverdale, but everybody calls her Reggie-Reggie has a boyfriend at home, somebody she's been with since tenth grade. I just want to find her a good companion while she's here, somebody safe, somebody who isn't on the make. There are a lot of activities the sorority pledges have to attend, and a lot of them require dates. She doesn't want to go out with anybody who thinks they might have a chance with her."

"Okay," I said slowly.

"I'm just saying, you're in love with your girl back home, Reggie's in love with her guy back home. Bryan thinks you'd be a good companion for Reggie, and Jesse thinks the world of you." She paused a moment. "I wanted to meet you, have a chance to talk to you, before I said anything. You're a charmer, Sean, but you also strike me as very sincere."

I was a charmer? Since when?

Melanie continued. "I think it would work to both your advantages. You both get nice people to hang out with, and there's no pressure."

She nodded as if I had already agreed. "I'd like you to meet her, Sean, if that's all right with you. You'd be doing Reggie-and me-a tremendous favor." She gave me one of her smiles, a real selling point. If I went out with Reggie, I would be able to spend a lot of time around Melanie, too. It was tempting.

"Sure, I guess," I said. Way to go, Porter, I thought. Be decisive. "I mean, sure, of course. I'd be glad to meet her."

"Wonderful!" She clapped her hands together, and then leaned over and gave me a kiss on the cheek. "You won't regret it for a single moment," she said.

She stopped the swing and stood. She reached back for my hand. "Let's go find Bryan," she said, and she led me back in to the fraternity house, holding my hand the whole way. I was finding it hard to breathe.

A female companion and no pressure. Before that moment, the concept would have been completely foreign to me. I wondered if it was truly possible.

It didn't occur to me until much, much later that I didn't quite know how to tell Kayla about this arrangement, or what she would think of it. But that was a problem for another day.

October 10, 2003 - 12:46:35 AM

Chapter 6 - Two Letters

Dearest Sean,

I can't believe it's already the middle of September! Junior year is going by so fast for me! On the other hand, it seems like a year since I was able to see you, to feel your presence next to me. I miss you so much! Christmas is an eternity away!

Homecoming is in about three weeks. Jaimie and I are going to babysit Kyle so that Stephen and Tara can go to the dance. And before you even say anything, NO!!! I WON'T go if you're not there with me. And Jaimie feels the same way, too. Even though Jake is a lot closer, he still can't come home very often. He's got a game nearly every weekend, too, so it's hard for him to leave.

Oh, I didn't tell you! Jake is playing rugby instead of football. He says it's kind of like football, only without pads. He says it's an English game, or Australian, or something. It sounds too rough to be English to me. Don't they play, like, cricket, or badminton, or something? Anyway, rugby sounds kind of rough, but he really likes it. He can tackle and block like in football. He says it's especially fun when the field is muddy. Yuck!

My recreational soccer team is doing pretty well. We won our last two games, and our coach is going to sign us up for that tournament you took the Warriors to the last couple of years. I hope we do well! Wish us luck!

I got a fun call yesterday! Since Molly is away at school, and she knows I'm just sitting at home moping about you being away (just kidding!) Lori Wilkinson - oops, I mean Lori McMasters! - anyway, Lori called and asked if I would be their main babysitter. I said I would, and my first babysitting job for them is this Friday night. Those boys are so much fun! I'll bet they miss you almost as much as I do, lover.

Can I confess something to you? God, I hope my mother doesn't find this before I can mail it. Sometimes, at night, I lie awake and remember how you touch me. I just can't help it, because I know my memories are all I have until you come home. Some nights I just can't sleep, and I run my fingers slowly up and down my thighs, across my tummy, and around my boobs, trying to tease myself the same way you like to tease me. My boobs especially are so tender and achy from wanting to feel your lips on them, I have to pinch my nipples to give myself some temporary relief. It just isn't the same as when you do it though, Sean my

love. Just the thought of your fingers and your tongue teasing me, caressing me in the most sensitive of spots, makes me light-headed.

And the rest of me - oh, Sean, I get so wet just thinking of you as I lie in my bed, in the dark, with nothing but my pictures of you and my thoughts of your hands and your kisses. The way you touch me so lovingly, and yet you can be so hard and forceful when you need to be, it just makes me weak in the knees even thinking about it now, here in study hall! What would old Miss Epstein say if she could read this??

Please don't think I'm evil, Sean, just because I have these funny thoughts. I knew I would miss you terribly, but I never thought I would have these physical cravings for you! It's like I have a rash, and only feeling your naked body on top of mine will cure me. Help, I think I need a hot injection of Porter Love! *giggle*

Oh my God, I can't believe I actually wrote that! But I won't scratch it out. No secrets between us, Sean, ever. That's my promise to you. One of my promises to you.

Write back soon, Sean my love. I miss you, and all that keeps me going day by day is anticipating getting a letter from you, until I can hold you in my arms once again, three long months from now!

All my love, forever and forever,

Your Luscious, Kayla

Dearest Kayla,

I've been so busy, you wouldn't believe it. College is way different from high school. There's a lot more reading to do, and writing papers, too. And you have to buy your own books, but I told you that already. Do you know my books for just my first semester cost over two hundred dollars? It's a good thing my scholarship covers my books, too. Anyway, here we are, only about three weeks into the semester, and I'm already falling behind in my reading.

I went to that Greek Rush party at Bryan's fraternity the other night. It was kind of interesting. Their fraternity house is really big, they have a huge room on the first floor with a big-screen television in it, they have a giant meeting room in the basement, and they have a horseshoe pit in the back yard. Bryan introduced me to the president of the fraternity. His name is John Huff, but everybody calls him Jack behind his back! (It's a joke. Ask Jake to explain it if you don't get it, ha ha)

I'm pretty sure I'm not going to join, though. I just don't have time for a fraternity. I barely have time now to do all the stuff I'm supposed to do (such as write to my girlfriend! ha ha).

My roommate wants to pledge a certain fraternity. From what I understand, the process is something like this. You go to the introductory parties and meet the members. That was Monday night. Then, the fraternity members vote on who they want to invite back. You choose which fraternities you want to visit a second time from the list of those who invite you to return, maybe three or four of them, and you go to a second night of parties.

Don't get me wrong, these aren't wild college parties. They are kind of formal and fake, like adult cocktail parties. Everybody gets kind of dressed up, and they stand around with these cheesy smiles on their faces, and pretend they are really having fun. It's actually kind of gross, when you think about it. Anyway, you go to the second night of parties, and then the fraternities meet again, and whittle down their list again. You can then decide to go to a third round, and usually you're choosing between two fraternities at this point. Or sometimes, it's just one that you like that invited you back, so you just go to that one a third time. After that, the fraternities vote on whether to invite you to join or not. By the third party, you should pretty much know if you fit in with the other members or not. Or you're supposed to, anyway.

Whatever. Anyway, Westy wants to pledge this fraternity. He got invited back for a second party, and he's really looking forward to going and talking with the members. He's putting it all on the line with just this one frat, though. Either he declined the others, or they declined him, so he's already down to only one choice. I hope he's not disappointed.

I'm sorry this letter isn't longer, Kay, but I've got to get busy and hit the books. If I get bad grades, they're going to yank me from the team, and I can't afford that!

I miss you every day. I'll see you soon!

Love,

Your boyfriend,

Sean

October 11, 2003 - 11:27:40 AM

Chapter 7 - Girls With Boys' Names

I was nervous as hell.

It was Friday night, and I was going back to the Phi Kap house. They were having another party, this one much more informal. It was kind of an end-of-Rush party for the members and their guests. They would find out how big their pledge class would be sometime during the evening, so the members and their guests were hanging out together while they waited for the paperwork to arrive from the Hellenic Council.

Bryan and Melanie had decided this would be a good opportunity for Reggie and me to meet. Maybe they thought, with a crowd around us, things might be easier for everybody. I hoped they were right.

As I was getting ready, I kept glancing over at Westy. He was a bundle of nervous energy, too. He had accepted an invitation to join the Sigma Tau Rho fraternity, and he was wired.

"Parties, dude," was all he could say when I asked why he wanted to pledge a fraternity. "Doobies, beer and broads."

"What about your training? When are you supposed to start swim practices?" I asked. I thought a subtle reminder of his scholarship and its source would be enough to temper his enthusiasm.

"Yeah, well, that begins pretty soon," he admitted. "I'm gonna have to store up some good partying, because the good times will definitely slow down once the season begins."

"Okay, whatever you say," I told him. He was determined to burn his candle from both ends while he could, and nothing I said to him was going to alter his course. I mentally wished him the best of luck, and didn't give it another thought. It was no skin off my nose if he bit off more than he could chew.

It was still blisteringly hot out, and the dress for the party was very casual, but I wanted to make a good impression on Reggie-and on Melanie-so I opted to wear some tan pressed slacks instead of shorts, and topped it off with a plain blue crew-neck shirt. I really didn't want to put on socks and shoes, so I slipped on some leather sandals. I checked myself in the mirror again, making sure my hair was okay and I didn't have any food stuck between my front teeth. I paced the

three or four steps between the door and the couch, back and forth, glancing nervously at the clock each time I passed by my desk. Westy was perched on the arm of the couch, his hands slapping his thighs and his feet tapping alternately on the floor, as he listened to his own internal soundtrack.

Finally I couldn't stand it anymore, so I left and wandered around down by the lake, until it was time to go over to the Phi Kap house. There were a bunch of joggers out, using the path around the lake as their track, and there was a large group of kids playing at Ultimate Frisbee. It looked like a lot of fun.

The walk did me good. I was sweating, but it was from the heat instead of nervousness. I turned my feet in the direction of Greek Row.

All the houses were having parties. Music throbbed from every window of each of the fraternity and sorority houses, and there were kids moving across the lawns between the houses, visiting back and forth.

The Phi Kap house was no exception. The big wraparound porch was packed with people, and 38 Special's "Wild-Eyed Southern Boys" was pumping from the giant speakers in the television room, loud enough to be heard out on the sidewalk.

I skipped up the stairs, but was stopped by a couple of guys sitting on the concrete pillars at the top.

"Sorry, man, private party," one of them said as he stood up to block my way.

"I'm here to see Bryan Watkins," I said. "He invited me."

The other guy spoke up. "Are you Porter?"

"Yeah," I confirmed.

He looked over at his companion. "Bryan told me he was expecting this guy." He motioned me in. "Him and Mel are over on the side," he said, pointing toward the corner of the house where the porch wrapped around.

"Okay, thanks," I said. I wove my way through the mass of bodies in the direction indicated. I had only gone maybe a half-dozen sliding steps when somebody thrust a plastic cup of foamy beer into my hand.

"You look thirsty," somebody said. I never did see who my benefactor was. I wasn't much of a beer drinker, but it was hot and the liquid was cold. It went down easily.

I finally made my way around the porch and saw Bryan perched on the railing. Melanie was sitting in a big wicker chair across from him. She had on very tight shorts, and her bronzed, thin legs were elegantly crossed. A gold ankle bracelet winked in the sun. She was wearing a fancy white tee shirt, also mouth-wateringly tight, with "Angel" arched across the top of her breasts in rhinestones. I almost had to agree, if I hadn't known a real angel back home, one with white-blond hair. Melanie held a cup of beer in her hand, and she set it down on the small wicker table next to her chair when she saw me. She smiled at me, stood gracefully, and stepped over to take my arm.

"I'm glad you came, Sean," she said as she guided me over to her group. Bryan was watching her, an indulgent smile on his face. I felt a little flustered and flattered, just by being the object of her attention.

There was a very attractive, young girl sitting in a wicker chair next to Melanie's. Her hair was long and dark, nearly black, with bangs that just reached her eyebrows. Her eyes were large and brown, and she was watching Melanie and me carefully. She was dressed conservatively, wearing a loose-fitting buttoned sleeveless blouse and a pleated skirt that nearly reached her knees. She looked nearly as nervous as I felt.

Melanie led me over.

"Reggie, this is Sean," she said. She gave me a little push forward.

Reggie licked her lips nervously, and then put out her hand.

"Hi," she said, so softly I barely heard her.

I shook her hand as gently as I knew how. I didn't want to scare her any more than she already seemed to be, and I certainly didn't want to bruise her. She looked far too delicate for a klutz like me to be around.

"Hi," I mumbled, suddenly unable to come up with anything cleverer to say.

Bryan laughed out loud at me. "Jesus, Porter, she's not going to break," he cried. "You probably don't have to be quite that careful."

I glanced over at him, feeling a little panicky, but seeing him laughing at us pretty much broke the ice. I could see the humor of the situation all too well, and I smiled, a little chagrined. I looked back at Reggie, and she evidently thought the same thing, because she was smiling too, and didn't look nearly as nervous anymore.

"Um, can I have my hand back now?" she asked, her eyes twinkling now with amusement.

I dropped her hand as if it was a hot iron. I hadn't realized I was still holding it.

"Oops, sorry," I said. I moved over to stand next to her chair, so I was facing everybody. She watched me as I moved, keeping track of my whereabouts. Melanie sat back in her own chair, a smug look on her beautiful face.

There was a pretty raucous party going on around us. The Phi Kaps had a couple of kegs of beer on ice in the back yard, and it flowed freely. Even the four of us perched against the back rail of the deck were eventually sucked into the party spirit, as plastic pitchers of beer were passed around. I refilled Reggie's glass when a pitcher made its way over to me, and then refilled Melanie's glass. There was just enough left for one more glass, so Bryan grabbed the pitcher away from me, poured the last of the beer into my glass, and headed out into the masses to find his way into the back yard for to replenish our supply.

Reggie and I bobbed and weaved our way around conversations, never really addressing each other very directly. My mind was on Kayla and how she would react to this development, and I was sure Reggie was thinking about her boyfriend back home in the same manner. How to explain? How to justify?

Finally, though, the beer, the heat, and the crowd around us broke through, and both of us found ourselves relaxing with each other. We were both still holding the other pretty much at arm's length, but at least it wasn't as uncomfortable as it started.

Melanie, Bryan, and the rest of the Phi Kaps helped, too. At one point, after the sun had gone down, I heard a squeal, and turned around in time to see Alex jumping up and down and waving. I looked around, wondering who she was waving to, and she laughed, pointed directly at me, and waved even harder. I stared at her and pointed to myself, raising my eyebrows quizzically, and she laughed and nodded vigorously. By this time, Reggie was standing next to me, and she took this all in with an enigmatic smile, glancing back and forth from Alex to me like she was watching a tennis match.

Alex weaved her way over and gave me a big hug. I was surprised, and not a little flattered, but I assumed her affectionate greeting was fueled by the alcohol. Alex let me go, and then turned to Reggie. Alex and Reggie both started talking at once.

"Oops," said Alex. "Hey, I'm sorry, it's just that Sean was here on Monday, and I met him then, and..."

Reggie shook her hand at Alex. "It's fine, really. Sean and I just met tonight..."

They both stopped, and then broke down giggling together. Reggie grasped Alex by the upper arms, and they kind of collapsed together as if something was incredibly amusing. I just didn't get it.

Alex was several inches shorter than Reggie, but they both were dark-haired, fair, and pretty. They seemed to become instant friends.

"By the way, I'm Alexandra Wallace. Everybody just calls me Alex."

Reggie was still holding Alex's arm. "I'm Regina Coverdale, but my friends call me Reggie," she said.

"Two perfectly gorgeous females who want to go by boys' names," I said. "Maybe I should call myself Sally."

"You'd better not," said Alex. She slapped at my arm as if I was the silliest thing she had ever seen.

Reggie, in the boldest move I had yet seen her make, looked me up and down. "Definitely not a Sally," she said, smiling. She gave Alex a quick grin. "More like a Mary," she said, and they were off again into a fit of giggles.

Alex was definitely the party animal among us, and she took Reggie and me under her wing, introducing us around to nearly everybody. There was hardly a person at the party she didn't know, and she was obviously well liked by just about everybody. It wasn't long before Reggie and I both felt like we were accepted, if not as members of Phi Kap and their Little Sisters, then as friends of the fraternity.

Much later, as the party was beginning to wind down a little, Melanie and Bryan came looking for us.

"Hey, Porter," called Bryan, once he spotted me. "Mel and I are taking off. Don't forget we've got to catch a bus in the morning."

I groaned. I'd forgotten about that. Our bus was leaving about 7:00 AM to go to Tuscaloosa to play Alabama in a conference game.

Reggie stood. "Melanie, can you drop me at my dorm?" she asked.

"Of course, dear. Sean, would you like a ride, too?" replied Melanie.

I was about to tell her I would prefer to walk off the influence of the beer, but the look on both Bryan's and Melanie's faces convinced me I should accept their offer.

"That would be great," I said.

It took awhile to make our way out of the party. Bryan and Melanie had to stop often to say goodbye to friends, and, of course, Reggie and Alex had to have a last whispered conversation together. They both glanced at me a couple of times during their secret conversation, making me sweat just a little more. I waited around a little awkwardly as the goodbyes swirled around me.

Finally, we were walking down the concrete steps, heading toward Bryan's car in the parking lot. I held the door open for Reggie, and slid into the back seat beside her. We sat there, not touching, uncomfortably silent as Melanie and Bryan got into the car. The animation and easy companionability of the couple in the front contrasted sharply with the quiet couple in the back.

Bryan started the car, and turned to look through the rear window so he could back up. Reggie was looking out the side window, and Bryan jerked his head in her direction and stared at me, willing me to say something to Reggie.

As he drove down the street, he turned the radio on to provide a distraction. I steeled myself for the rejection I knew was coming, and slid over to sit next to Reggie. She looked at me, a bit startled.

"Reggie," I began, "I know this whole thing is kind of strange..."

She smiled. At least she smiled, I thought.

"Here," she said. She handed me a slip of paper. I opened it up. It had her name, her dorm room number, and her telephone number on it.

I was suddenly very nervous again. "We're... uh... I won't be back until Sunday..."

"You want to get together for coffee or something Sunday night?" she asked. Now her smile was warm. Maybe I hadn't blown it, after all.

"I'd love to," I replied. "I'll call you when we get back from Alabama."

"Okay," she said. She slipped her arm through mine for the rest of the short ride to her dorm.

I walked her to the front lobby of her building. She turned to me at last.

"Thanks for being a nice guy," she said quietly. "Mel has good taste in friends."

I think I blushed. "I'll talk to you Sunday," I said. We didn't hug, we didn't kiss, but I still felt like the evening went very well.

I got the feeling Reggie thought so, too.

October 17, 2003 - 12:00:52 AM

Chapter 8 - A Platonic Hug

We smoked Alabama in our game that weekend. Dan got a lot of playing time, substituting for both starting defenders, me on the right and Martin on the left. Martin and I ended up playing about three-quarters of the game, and Dan was on the field for about 40 minutes, too.

On the long trip back from Tuscaloosa, Coach Pick told the team about a tournament we were going to.

"Second week of October, boys," said Pick as our bus rolled through northern Florida. "Let your professors know you'll be out of town for the entire week."

"That's not mid-semester break, is it?" asked Spencer.

"Nope, it's the week before," said Coach. "Y'all will be missin' about a week's worth of classes. We'll be back home for the break, but we've got North Carolina comin' in for a game on Wednesday, followed by Tennessee on the weekend."

"So we don't get a break," interjected Dan.

"Nope," confirmed Pick. "Now listen up here, boys. Like I said, we're headin' up to Warshington D.C. for the Georgetown Invitational Tournament. There'll be sixteen teams there. They're using Georgetown, Maryland, and George Mason University soccer fields, and the semifinals and finals will be held at RFK Stadium."

"How many games?" asked Bryan.

"Four games," said Pick. "Here's the deal. There's two halves of the draw, let's call 'em the top half and the bottom half. The eight teams seeded odd numbers, one through 15, play the top half, and the even seeds play the bottom half. Winners advance, losers play in the consolation draws, so everybody plays four games during the tournament."

"Who all will be there, Coach? Same as last year?" That was Rick Rogers, our starting keeper.

"Yup, pretty much," said Pick. "Georgetown, obviously, and Maryland, and George Mason, Kentucky, Purdue, UConn, South Carolina, Ohio State, a few others."

"Did they announce the seedings yet, Coach?" called out Jesse from the back of the bus.

"As a matter of fact, I've got them right here," said Coach, waving a sheet of paper. "Let's see now," he continued, looking over his glasses at the paper in his hand. He smiled a little, enjoying dragging it out. "It says here... let's see... Ah, here it is. Yep." He looked up and grinned, obviously pleased with himself. "University of Florida. Seeded number one."

A cheer went up in the bus, and the driver, caught up in the celebration, honked the air horns.

"Now, don't get no idears that you're the king shit soccer team of the world," admonished Pick as the cheering died down. "Remember this is a sixteen team invitational, and teams ain't traveling three days to come play there."

Pick walked down the main aisle of the bus, hanging on to the tops of the seats as he strode. He looked each of us over, making sure we were paying attention to what he was saying.

"There are a lot of good teams out there, boys. West Coast teams from UCLA, Stanford, San Diego, Oregon. Hell, New Mexico has a top-ten team, and we won't never see them unless we both get well into the NCAA tournament." He turned and started back.

"Hey, we're the team in the East to beat, though, Coach," said Brad.

"You think so?" asked Pick. "Well, maybe we are. How 'bout the University of Texas? They're not exactly a West Coast team, but they'll give us a run for our money most any day."

"And don't forget South Carolina," called out Eddie Whitehead.

Pick whirled around and pointed, first at Eddie, and then at me. "That's right, the Gamecocks." As he pointed my way, he said, "Ain't that where that friend of yours plays, Sean? Trent What's-His-Name?"

"Abbott," I said. "Trent Abbott."

"Right, Abbott. Damn boy's got the tricks. He can score from damn near anywhere on the field." Pick shook his head as he recalled watching Trent.

"One player does not make a team," noted Jesse.

"Well, that's by-Christ true, son," said Pick. "Abbott's got a team surroundin' him, you can bet on it. They're seeded in the two spot. If all goes according to plan, we just might see them at RFK."

He was back at the front of the bus again, and he turned to face us all. "But the road to the Georgetown Tournament title goes through Gator country, boys, and the rest of them teams had best remember that."

His pronouncement set up another round of whooping and hollering, and I was happy to join in as we celebrated.

I didn't relish the thought of collecting a week's worth of homework from my professors, but it would be great to be able to go to the Georgetown Invitational Tournament. I was thinking it would be a great reunion for me. After all, Eric Johnson played for Maryland, and Trent would be there with his team. Maybe I would even get to see Keisha Prescott, Eric's girlfriend, while we were there. I doubted that Trent's girlfriend, Danielle Nickerson, would be there, but I would take a visit from the friends I could, and not be an ingrate. I settled back in my seat, and suddenly realized I was happy, maybe the happiest I had been since coming to Florida.

Reggie and I had arranged to meet at a little coffeehouse left over from the hippie days, a dive called The Glass Onion. It was located in a rundown old building that looked like it should have been demolished years before, but inside it was fairly clean. The proprietors went by the names of Stone and Skye Parker, and they looked like they had been time-warped straight from about 1968. They both had long, straight hair, leather headbands, and beaded and fringed vests. The walls were covered with concert posters for The Doors, The Grateful Dead, The Who, Sly and the Family Stone, Janis Joplin, and Jefferson Airplane, many of them apparently local appearances at different venues around the Southeast. The coffees and teas were fresh, however, and their homemade muffins and cookies were outstanding. They also had quite a collection of leatherworks, pottery, framed and unframed art, and crafts from students and local artists, there on consignment. Stone and Skye did what they could to support the local arts community, it seemed.

Still, it was funny to watch Stone and Skye working together. Their conversations were sprinkled with leftover "Groovys" and "Far Outs" and "Right Ons," anachronisms that, outside the coffeehouse, would have been jarring. Inside their little enclave, though, it sounded just about right.

I got there a few minutes early and ordered coffee and a brownie. The brownie worried me just a little, but it was all because of the ambiance of the place. There wasn't anything... funny... in the brownie. I was sure of it. No, really.

Reggie walked in a few minutes later. I almost didn't recognize her, since she was now wearing standard student garb instead of party clothes. I would have thought she wouldn't look comfortable in t-shirts and shorts, but here she was, dressed casually in a scoop-necked pink shirt, tight shorts, and pink sandals. Her dark hair was pulled back and clipped with a plastic comb sort of thing, and she was sporting dark sunglasses that she perched on top of her head as she walked in out of the bright sunshine into the dim coffeehouse. I was struck again by how very pretty she was. If she was in love with a guy back home, having somebody to hang around with here at school would be an asset to a girl as attractive as Reggie, if for no other reason than to keep the wolves at bay. I could just imagine somebody as slimy as Westy hitting on her as soon as they spotted her.

She glanced around, saw me sitting at a table, and came over. She slipped gracefully into the chair opposite me.

"Hi," she said. She looked around, but I couldn't tell if she approved of the place or not by her noncommittal expression.

"Would you like something?" I asked.

She smiled at me, a good sign. "Iced tea would be nice," she said. Her very slight accent reminded me somehow of the East Coast, but I couldn't really say why.

I got up and ordered an iced tea from Skye, and Stone wordlessly put an orange-banana muffin on a paper plate for me.

"She looks more like a muffin girl than the brownie kind," said Skye.

"I'm a brownie kind?" I asked her.

She smiled at me, a bright and happy look on her open and unreserved face. "Of course you are, Sean. Through and through."

I just shook my head at her in amazement, and carried the muffin and the glass of tea back to our table.

"You've been here before?" asked Reggie.

"Nope," I replied.

"Oh. She seemed like she knows you," she said.

"I just met them a little bit ago," I said. "They're pretty easy-going and friendly, though. Before you can order anything from them, they insist on knowing your name."

She tore off a miniscule portion of muffin and examined it before putting it in her mouth. She bit down tentatively, looked up at me in surprise, and pinched off a larger piece. "This is really good," she said.

I looked up at Skye and gave her a thumbs-up. She clasped her hands together and gave them a shake, a victory sign. "Right on," she said.

Reggie leaned in toward me, her eyes dancing. "Right on?" she whispered to me, a laugh in her voice.

"Yup," I agreed, happy to have seen her smile. "Right on."

She leaned back and concentrated on her muffin. "So, Mel and Bryan say you're going to be the star," she said, not looking at me.

That startled me a little. "Me? Why would they say that?"

She glanced up at me with an unreadable expression. "That's what they say."

"Nah. Jesse, Bryan's roommate, he's the star. He's the one up front, scoring all the goals. I'm just a defenseman, trying to keep the other team from scoring. Jesse's the one getting all the action."

Now she smiled, her face softening. "And you don't want all the action?"

"No, not me," I said. "I'm just a boring guy, and I like it that way."

"Somehow I don't think you're very boring," she said. She glanced at my left arm. "How did you get that scar?"

I looked at the white line snaking down my forearm. I was so used to it I really didn't even see it anymore, so it took me by surprise when she asked about it. "Uh... it was a... a problem... that escalated a little..." I hesitated. This was the last thing I expected to talk about with Reggie.

"Escalated into something that opened up your arm?" She wasn't going to let it go.

"Well... yeah, I guess it did." I gave her the short, sanitized version of the story, concluding with the surgery that repaired the damage. By the time I finished, her eyes were wide.

"And this Molly... she's your girlfriend? The one back home?"

"Oh, no," I said. "Molly's a really good friend. I mean, we used to go out, but that was a long time ago, and..." I stopped and took a deep breath. I was feeling a little anxious, and needed to calm down a little. Talking about some of my more spectacular disasters did that to me. "My girlfriend's name is Kayla. She's still in high school... Molly's at Illinois, she graduated with me..."

"Kayla," she murmured. "That's a beautiful name. Tell me about her."

"She's an angel," I blurted out. *Oops. Nice going, Porter, I thought. Call a girl an angel while you're sitting there, talking to a different girl. Smooth.*

Reggie took it all in stride, though, and smiled at me. "She's a lucky girl," she said. "You were going to tell me about her?"

"Uh... she's my best friend's younger sister," I explained. "She's back home, still in school. She's really great, stood by me during everything that's happened..." I wound down, thinking about Luscious. I suddenly felt a little guilty.

"She sounds wonderful. Do you have a picture of her?"

"Not with me, but I've got some back in my dorm room," I said.

"Will you show them to me sometime?" she asked gently.

"Well... Sure, I guess." Why did she want to see pictures of Kayla? Or was she just being polite? Here I was, trying to navigate the labyrinth of relationships again, and me with no map.

She smiled at me. Her eyes were shining. "I know," she said softly. "It's private, isn't it?"

I nodded.

"I kind of feel the same way," she admitted. "My boyfriend... It's between him and me, and talking about it when we're apart seems kind of like..." She paused, searching for the right phrase.

"Like a breach of confidence?" I suggested.

"Yes!" she cried, speaking much louder than she intended. She looked around, a little embarrassedly, but nobody, least of all Stone or Skye, was paying any attention to our conversation. "I was going to say... kind of like... treason, but that's way too strong. A breach of confidence is about right."

She took a deep breath. "I didn't think anybody else would understand," she said, almost to herself. She looked at me again. I could see her coming to a decision.

"Let's make a deal," she said. "You've got somebody waiting for you back home, and so do I. Still, everybody needs a friend, especially when they're far from home."

"I agree," I said.

"Okay, here's what I'm thinking. You're a great guy, Sean, and I trust you. Besides, Mel likes you, and she's very picky about who she sees as trustworthy. I hope you can find it in your heart to trust me, too."

I nodded, wondering where this was going.

"Let's stop dancing around each other, and just let it all out, okay?" She leaned in, serious now. She concentrated on me, holding my attention. I subconsciously leaned in closer to her, too. "Let's prove 'em all wrong, Sean. Let's show them there can be a platonic relationship, good friends who just happen to be boy and girl. No pressure between us. Okay? You don't have to wonder if you should try to kiss me, I won't have to worry if I'm leading you on. If we've got something to say, we'll say it. If you need a convenient date, I'll be there, and if I need a companion for an evening, I'll know I can call on you. But you know I'm committed to my boyfriend, and I know you're committed to... Kayla? Right, Kayla. Okay with you?"

She leaned back, reasonably satisfied she had explained herself. To my mind, she had, very well. I liked this girl.

"I think it's great," I said. "I really do. Thank you."

She smiled, and I smiled back. Time to put her to the test.

"So," I said, "tell me about your boyfriend."

Reggie looked a little startled, and then she got a chagrined expression on her pretty face. "Touché," she said. She picked up her glass of iced tea, and she smiled at me just before she took a sip. "Would you believe his name is Elvis? But I love him, anyway."

I sat back. "Elvis? For real?"

"Yep. Elvis Aaron Hravney. Can you believe his parents saddled him with that name?"

"I'll bet he grew up strong."

She laughed. "He's a hockey player," she said, shaking her head.

"I would believe it," I said. "He any good?"

"At hockey? Yes, pretty good. Not good enough to win a scholarship or anything, but he's knocked shoulders with the best in our area."

That brought up another question. "You know, I don't even know where you're from," I said.

"Pennsylvania," she said. "Near Harrisburg."

"Oh. I've never been to Pennsylvania. How come you came to Florida?"

"I hate winters," she said.

"But you're dating a hockey player," I said. "That doesn't make any sense."

She shrugged. "They play hockey indoors. It doesn't have to be a cold-weather sport."

"Good point," I admitted.

Reggie and I fell into an easy friendship that evening. In the blink of an eye three hours passed, and Skye was trying to make eye contact with me. I was startled to realize it was nearly an hour past closing.

"Oh, gosh, I'm sorry, Skye," I said, jumping up. "We just sort of lost track of time."

"Oh, don't worry about it, Sean," she said expansively. "I was just doing my chores back here, grooving on the very cool vibes you two were sending out."

"Us? Sending out vibes?" I wasn't even sure what vibes were, much less how we were sending them out.

"Oh, yeah, you and Reggie are an outa-sight couple. It's always good to be friends first, and you two have got it going on."

That took me aback. "No, Skye, I just met Reggie the other day. We're just getting to be friends, nothing more."

"Okay, that's cool," she said. She flipped her head, sending a cascade of long brown hair over her shoulder, and gave me a look that said she didn't believe a word I said about it.

She unlocked the front door for us, and opened it so we could leave.

"Thanks for everything, Skye," said Reggie.

Skye gave her a big, open smile. "Welcome back anytime, Reggie. We love company."

It was nearly a mile back to the dorms, but it was a warm, breezy night, good for taking a walk. Reggie and I casually strolled along, keeping up our conversation the whole time, comfortable walking side by side without any pressure or expectations getting in the way. It was refreshing, and at the same time it was extraordinarily strange.

I walked her to her dorm. It was dark, and there were a few couples hanging out on the porch and sitting on the grass, enjoying the evening.

"Good night, Sean. Thanks for the muffin." Reggie was smiling at me.

I held out my hand to shake, and she laughed, her eyes sparkling.

"Come on, pal, give me a hug," she said, and she stepped into me and put her arms out.

I took her up on her suggestion, and we shared a brief, friendly hug. We both let go, and she smiled up at me before turning and going inside.

I told myself it was a brief, friendly hug. A hug between good friends, who happened to be boy and girl. Platonic.

Then how come I couldn't help but notice the hard bumps of her breasts as they pressed against my chest?

October 24, 2003 - 3:05:28 PM

Chapter 9 - A Self-Inflicted Promotion

They're killing me.

That was the only thought I had left by Friday. It was a conspiracy among my professors to fry my brain, work my poor fingertips to the bone, and make sure I had absolutely no energy left for anything even resembling fun.

I had so many papers to write that week I thought I was going to burn out my typewriter. I probably went through most of a bottle of White-Out, making corrections. Of course, each correction added to the time it took me to get everything typed out correctly, adding to my frustration.

Westy wasn't helping. He didn't bring a typewriter, and he kept on wanting to use mine.

"You can use it when I'm in class or at practice," I said. "Don't bother asking me for it when I'm here, because I'm going to need it."

"Shit, man, I've got classes too, you know," he pouted.

I gave him a sour look. "Maybe you should stop prowling the Quad and concentrate on getting some of your work done early," I suggested.

"Hey, just because you ain't gettin' any doesn't mean I should go without," he retorted.

"Yeah, thanks for reminding me," I grumbled.

"Hey, if you want, I can fix you up..."

"With somebody like Maureen?" I replied, disgusted. "Thanks, but no thanks."

"Maureen the Blowjob Queen? Nah. Did her once, that was enough. She's got a talented mouth, though, I will say that for her."

"I thought you just screwed her the one time here," I said.

"Well," he said, looking at me a little sheepishly, "I just screwed her once. But I did run into her again last week."

"Really? Where?"

"Why, Porter? You interested?"

"Christ, no!" I shuddered at the thought.

"I know she'd be over here in about two seconds flat if you were. She's really jonesing on you, dude."

"Yuck," I replied.

"I think she's hanging around our dorm every now and then, because I saw her last week. She was just wandering around, like she was lost or something, so I took her back to the Union and bought her a Coke."

"Jesus, Westy, you actually went on a date with her."

He turned a little pale when he heard that. "Don't even say that, Porter, Christ! You're gonna make me lose my lunch!"

"Hey, you're the one who bought her the Coke," I reminded him.

"Well, yeah, but she repaid me. Big time. I took her into one of the men's johns, and she gave me a blowjob in a stall."

"No shit?" Now it was me who felt like losing his lunch. "That's as disgusting a thing as I think I've ever heard."

Westy laughed. "Stick around, my naive friend. I can get way more disgusting than that."

I grimaced. "Ugh. Maybe I don't want to know about it," I said.

"Hey, Maureen's pretty good with that mouth. You just need to make sure she keeps her clothes on, and maybe you want to carry around a paper bag to slap over her head. One with a cutout for her lips. That way you can imagine it's that Melanie bitch from the Phi Kappa house who's blowing you, instead of having to look at Maureen while she's doin' it."

"Hey!" Now he was pissing me off, and I felt like reaching for his throat. "Leave off with that shit about Melanie, okay?"

He took a step backward and held up his hands. "Easy there, Sean, I was just joking," he said by way of apology.

"Not funny, shithead," I said.

"Okay, okay, I'm sorry," he said. "No harm meant." He made sure he was out of my reach when he continued, "I think she's way out of your league anyway, pal. But don't give up on your dreams."

He was still chuckling as I slammed the door on my way out.

We had a home game on Sunday, so at least I didn't have to face any long bus rides on the coming weekend. Reggie and I were going to a sorority get-together on Friday night after I was done with soccer practice. On Saturday, we had soccer practice in the morning, and then I was scheduled to work in one of the gift shops during halftime of the football game. After the game I was supposed to meet Dan in the weight room. I hoped to have enough energy to get some homework done after that, and maybe even get another letter off to Luscious. I was falling behind in my letter productivity again, having only written to her once that week.

At practice on Friday afternoon, Coach once again broke us down into our Alpha and Omega scrimmage teams.

"I got a change here," he announced, just before we were going to take up our positions for the scrimmage. "Dan Ortega and Sean Porter, switch teams."

That didn't matter much; Dan had been on the Alpha Team, and I was on the Omega Team. We switched our practice jerseys, but Coach wasn't finished yet.

"Stuart Early and Sean Porter, I want you two to switch positions," he said.

Stuart, the right midfielder for Alpha Team, looked at me in surprise, as if I was supposed to know what Coach was thinking. I shrugged to let him know I was as confused as he was, and we headed out onto the practice field.

I had Bryan opposing me for a change, in the middle, and I was startled to realize I had Martin Flauget defending against me, on my side. I knew I wasn't much of an offensive threat, but I was looking forward to locking horns with the Frenchman.

There's a story about a basketball player by the name of Jerry Sloan, who was an expansion pick by the Chicago Bulls when they were created in 1966. Sloan was a workingman's player, a defensive specialist who had little tolerance for showboating on the court. In fact, he was known to occasionally punch an opponent in the stomach if they had the audacity to attempt to dribble between their legs against him. Sloan would gladly take the penalty in exchange for

inflicting his own brand of court justice on what he considered to be poor sportsmanship and a lack of respect in opposing players. My dad and my older brother were both big fans of Jerry Sloan's. As I trotted out onto the field, I thought I just might try a little bit of Jerry Sloan's defensive tactics on my Frenchy friend, if he started running his tricks on us.

And, to almost no one's surprise, Flauget did. The first time he showed off I let it pass. He gave me just a quick glance as he made his way back into his defensive territory after passing the ball off before I could move on him, just to let me know he had no respect for my game. The second time he did it I also gave him a bye. I wanted him comfortable, confident, and unwary. He was haughty, insolent, and completely unaware of the Sloaning he was about to receive.

The third time he started with his showboating was the one. On a high, looping serve downfield into open space by Alpha, Flauget picked up the ball. Instead of moving it upfield, he lofted it, balanced the ball on his foot, and flipped it up to his shoulder. He let the ball ride on his shoulder for a few strides as he started upfield, and then he hunched and jumped, pushing the ball into the air.

My forward, Luke Severin, was a sophomore reserve, and he was flummoxed by Martin's antics. He practically stepped out of the way while Flauget diddled with the ball. I engaged, running up to intercept, and Martin saw me coming. With an insolent smirk, he headed the ball up and over my head. What he didn't understand, until it was too late, was that I didn't give a damn about the ball. I lowered my shoulder and drove it, at nearly full speed, into Martin's unprotected midsection. I heard the air *whoof* out of his lungs, and he dropped like a sack of stones. I leapt over him, skidded to a stop, and turned back to retrieve the ball.

As I trotted over to where the ball was bouncing to a stop, I became aware of the resounding silence around me. Play had stopped, and all my teammates were standing, watching in amazement. Even the coaches stood as if mesmerized.

I mentally shrugged and dribbled the ball back over to Martin, who was just struggling to his knees. I held out my hand to help him up, and he batted it away and came at me, murderous fury in his eyes. His knees were still a little unhinged, however, and I stepped away from his lunge. He went past me and slid on the turf, nearly tumbling back down, and was about to charge me again when both his arms were grabbed. Spencer was holding his right arm, and Bryan his left.

"Hold up there, cowboy," said Bryan to Flauget.

Martin struggled against the two holding him. "Did you see what he did?" he growled.

By then, most of the team had gathered around, and the coaches were all coming over.

"Sure, I saw," said Bryan. "He took you off the ball and took you out of the play."

"Le bâtard a essayé de me tuer!" spat Flauget.

"What? In English," said Bryan.

"The mother-fucker tried to kill me," he shouted.

"Oh, that might be a bit of an exaggeration," said Pick as he pushed his way through the crowd.

"Did you not see what he did?" asked Flauget, his eyes practically bugging out.

"I shore 'nuff did, and if'n I was a referee, I would've slapped a card on him right quick," said Pick, giving me the eye. "Why'd you do it, son?" he asked me.

It was my turn to give him the eye. He knew full well why I did it, and he probably planned on me doing it in the first place. Otherwise, why move me up to play in the midfield?

"I just thought it was time to Jerry Sloan him, coach," I said.

Spencer guffawed, and Jesse burst out laughing. They knew what I was referring to, it seemed.

"What the hell is that?" asked Eddie Whitehead, one of Pick's assistants.

Pick, barely able to hold back his own laughter, turned to Eddie. "You don't follow basketball, do you, Eddie?" he said. He clapped his assistant on the back.

"It's all right, you're a soccer nut. That's why I like you." Pick turned to me.

"You'd better explain to these unenlightened, Sean," he said expansively, indicating most of the team. Nearly everybody was looking at me strangely, except for Jesse, Spencer, Bryan, and a few others who understood the reference.

"I just decided that Frenchy here had shown me enough," I explained. "So I thought I'd show him a little bit of a defensive maneuver of my own, something I kind of improvised from watching Jerry Sloan play basketball."

Spencer and Bryan had let go of Martin, but he wasn't in a threatening mood anymore. I thought that, with the adrenaline wearing off, he might have been stiffening up. He was certainly moving carefully.

"Porter, I'm not saying he might not have deserved it, but in a game situation you'd have drawn a card, for sure," said Rick Rogers, our defensive captain.

"True," I admitted. "And it might not have just been a yellow. But if an opponent is desperate enough, sometimes they might think it's a chance worth taking. If our opponent is in a position where they have to resort to extreme measures to get back into a game, they just might target somebody like Frenchy." I turned to Flauget. "Tell me true, Frenchy. How likely are you to work your tricks on me again?"

He lowered his head, staring at me under his brows. If there hadn't been witnesses, I might have been in trouble, but he finally shook his head.

"I don't think I could, after a shot like that," he reluctantly admitted.

Nearly everybody laughed at that.

"Okay, that's it for today," called out Pick, dismissing us. He looked back at me and Martin. "You two, Flauget and Porter, come with me. Rogers, you might as well join us." Pick strode off the field, heading toward the fieldhouse. Martin and I followed along, keeping a wary distance between each other, and Rick stepped in beside us, filling the gap. Rick looked questioningly at me, but I didn't have an answer for his unspoken question. Martin just trudged along, still a little bent over, but he had finally managed to catch his breath. When your heart rate is elevated and somebody comes along and hits you hard enough to knock the breath out of you, it takes awhile to recover.

We got to Pick's office, and he ushered us in before closing the door. He sat down at his desk and rubbed his eyes as the three of us stood around uncomfortably.

Pick looked up at me. "Mr. Porter, you are about the last person I expected that sort of behavior from." His southern accent was substantially diminished. I took that to be a bad sign. "An attack on one of your teammates, even in the guise of a scrimmage, will not be tolerated. In fact, I've half a mind to throw the fuckin' book at you for this. Another incident like this and you will be out of this program so fast, your shoes will be smoking. Do I make myself clear, Mr. Porter?"

I tried to swallow into a suddenly very dry throat. Finally I was able to croak out, "Yes, sir."

Flauget was just beginning to smile and relax a little, obviously pleased that I was the one being dressed down. His smile was erased from his face when Pick turned to him.

"And you, Mr. Flauget."

"Me? I was the one who was attacked..."

"I don't believe I was finished speaking, Flauget!" shouted Pick, standing suddenly as he drowned out Martin's protests. Once he was satisfied he had Martin's full attention, Pick sat back down again. "I have tried to help you for two years here, Mr. Flauget," he continued in a calm voice. "I thought we was makin' some progress here. This year, however, there seems to be some backslidin' goin' on."

I noted distractedly that Pick's accent was creeping back into his speech. What did it mean? I had no idea.

"Frankly, Mr. Flauget, I'm gettin' almighty tired of all your showboatin', and I just won't put up with it for one second more. Do you understand what I'm tellin' you, boy?"

"*Oui*, yes I do, but..." Martin didn't have a prayer of finishing that sentence, as Pick stood again and leaned over his desk. Without saying a thing, he managed to shut Martin off in mid-sentence. Martin looked like he had swallowed a fish, but he nodded and stammered, "Yes, sir, Coach Cropper. I understand."

Pick sat again, and looked back and forth between the two of us. "You are both damned fine players, and I would hate to lose either one of you. But I will not tolerate dissention of this sort on this team. Now, I ain't expecting you two to be bosom buddies or nothin', but while you are playing for me, you will get along. Let me emphasize that for you. You *will* get along."

He waited to see our reactions. I shuffled around, trying to figure this whole scene out, because something didn't feel right. I decided to take the conciliatory path Pick had opened for me, and I turned to Flauget.

"I'm sorry, Martin," I said. I held out my hand. He just looked at it for a moment, and then, rather reluctantly, he shook it. "I guess I kind of lost my temper out there, and I apologize," I said.

"Apology accepted," he said, but his demeanor was still angry and stiff. He tried to pull his hand back, but I held on.

I stepped up close to him. "But don't do it again, Frenchy," I said quietly. Something flared in his eyes when I called him Frenchy. He glanced over at Pick, perhaps looking to see if Coach was going to berate me for elevating the problem again, but Pick sat at his desk, watching us impassively.

"You don't scare me, Porter," he gritted.

"No, I don't suppose I do," I said, maintaining my grip on his hand. "But if we're lined up opposite each other again sometime, you remember what happened today. And you play your game accordingly."

I stepped back and let go of his hand. He stood there, absorbing what I had said, and then turned back to Pick.

"Did you hear him, Coach?" Martin was almost beside himself with anger.

Pick had chosen to hear what he wanted to hear, though, and he let Flauget know. "Shore," he said, before Martin could go off any further on his tirade. "I heard him apologize, and I heard you accept his apology. Ain't that right?"

Martin's mouth opened and closed, but nothing came out.

"I said, ain't that right, Mr. Flauget?" Pick said softly.

Martin reluctantly nodded. "Yes, sir, that's right," he said with clenched teeth.

"Hit the showers, Frenchy," said Pick. "I've got a few more things to say to Mr. Porter, here."

Martin turned and opened the door. He flashed a small, triumphant, and malicious smile at me just before he closed it behind him.

I glanced at Rick, and turned to face Pick's wrath.

Pick, however, didn't seem to be angry.

"Mr. Rogers, do you think these two can play together as a defensive unit?" he asked.

Rick smiled. "They'll probably play better together now," he said.

Pick nodded, and then he, too, grinned. "That was a helluva hit you put on poor Frenchy," he said, beginning to chuckle. "Damnedest thing I ever did see."

Now I was totally confused. Why was Pick laughing? He had been angry enough with me to consider kicking me off the team-or so he led me to believe.

Pick got up and walked over to the door. Opening it, he hollered out toward the locker rooms. "Eddie! You out there, Eddie Whitehead?"

I heard the echo of Eddie's voice wafting back through the hall. "Coming, Pick!"

A few minutes later Eddie appeared at the door.

"Come in and close it," said Pick.

Eddie closed the door and sat in the chair neither Rick nor I dared to sit in without an invitation.

"What do you think, Eddie?" asked Pick.

Eddie glanced at me, at Rick, and at Pick. He knew what Pick was referring to, especially seeing Flauget absent.

Eddie smiled. "It was a beautiful hit, worthy of the name of football," he said.

"Yeah, well, maybe American football. It didn't resemble no European football play I've ever been witness to," Pick reminded him.

"True," said Eddie. "What you really want to know is if it'll give us a handle to work with on Martin."

I looked at Eddie with new respect. Not much got by him, obviously.

"And?" Pick was patient.

"And we'll have to see," said Eddie. "One thing, though. Players can do stuff to get under his skin a lot easier than coaches and advisers can. Maybe what Sean has started here will work to our advantage."

I was getting very confused, and a little impatient with it all. "What are you guys talking about? Coach, maybe I've gotten the wrong idea, but when you moved me to Alpha and up to midfield, I assumed you were looking for somebody to try to find a way to neutralize Flauget. Am I wrong here?"

Pick favored me with another of his enigmatic smiles. "Well, kinda," he finally admitted. "What I was doin' was testin' the waters for a little slippery business comin' up in the Georgetown Invite. I wanted to see how you extemporized,

playin' up for awhile. Eddie Whitehead and Stan Harvard and me, well, we came up with a screwy little plan, and we was anxious to see how crazy our plan really was. That's why we moved you around some."

"Uh..." I felt like it was my turn to apologize for leaping to false conclusions again, but Pick didn't give me an opportunity.

"Your scheme of whackin' Frenchy was an extra added bonus," Pick continued. "Frankly, it never occurred to me you'd take something so extreme onto your own self, consequences be damned." He smiled at me indulgently. "You surprised me today, Sean Porter, and by Christ I thank you for it. I think you done this team a huge turn out there."

"But Coach, I thought you were mad at me for..."

"Oh, that was just the official line, son," said Pick. He brushed imaginary dust off his desktop, as if he was whisking away bothersome "official lines." He looked back up at me. "I had to dress you down, because it was a foolish, dangerous ploy you concocted. Between you, me and the fencepost..." He paused, looked around at the people in his office, and continued, "And Rick and Eddie, too... I got to thank you for takin' Mr. Frenchy down a notch."

I wisely kept my mouth shut. I was learning.

Pick turned back to Rick. "Now, as co-captain, I'm counting on you to keep the peace from here on out." Rick nodded. "Porter apologized, and Frenchy accepted it. You might have to remind him of that upon occasion," continued Pick. "Let the team know about what transpired in here earlier, and you can let your co-captains and our key players know what the real score is."

"Can do, Coach," said Rick.

"Now, I know Jesse and Bryan and you carry the weight on this here team, Rick, so I'm counting on you three especially to keep this team unified. And that includes our Frenchy friend. Can you do that?"

"Yes, sir," said Rick. "Jesse and Bryan are on Sean's side in this already, and I know most of the rest of the team will see it that way, too. A little propagandizing, a little posturing, and some cooperation from Porter here, will be what we need."

"Sean?" Pick turned back to me. "Can you follow Rick's lead on this?"

"Yes, sir, I can do that. I'll be as humble as you need me to be," I said, wanting them to know I would be on my best behavior.

"No, no, don't be humble," corrected Pick. "Frenchy won't respect humble. You be as arrogant to him as he's been to everybody else. You might have to feint on him a time or two, just to remind him. When he sees the rest of the team falling in line behind the leadership, he'll have no choice but to follow. It's him we want humbleized, son, not you."

"I don't do arrogant very well," I said, "but I'll try."

"Atta boy," said Pick with a smile.

Almost immediately the campaign within the soccer team began to roll, and it quickly acquired considerable momentum, even before everybody dispersed from the locker room after practice. By then, Flauget found himself nearly ostracized as he posed and postured and tried to paint himself as a victim of an unprovoked attack. Nobody was buying it.

Bryan and I were double-dating that night. We were accompanying Melanie and Reggie to one of the Omega Sigma Theta's semi-formal parties for their pledge class. Bryan picked me up at my dorm, and as we drove the few blocks to Reggie's dorm, he started to fill me in.

"Jesse and Spencer have been double-teaming guys, but it sounds like everybody understands what's going on," he said.

"Well, explain it to me then, because I'm confused as hell," I complained.

He looked at me, a little surprised. "What's going on is that Pick is always looking to the future. It's part of what makes head coaching in Division One such a tough job. As a head coach, you can only spend a certain amount of your time enjoying the fruits of your labors in recruitment during any given season. Instead, you've got to constantly be looking two, three, four years ahead, recruiting, grooming, training for the transition to the next team."

"Okay," I said. "I can see that. What's that got to do with what happened this afternoon?"

Bryan chuckled. "In a nutshell, what's going on is that you are being stepped up to represent Pick's future team," he said. "You're now one of the big guns. A team leader, and as a freshman, too." Bryan just shook his head, as if he could hardly

believe it. He could hardly believe it? I was having trouble figuring out all the nuances of what should have been seen as just a physical play against Frenchy. Where did all these undercurrents come from? I didn't want to get embroiled in politics; I just wanted to play soccer.

"What? Because of today?" I was having trouble taking Bryan at his word on this. It was all just too flabbergasting.

"Today was just the capper," he said. "Pick's been chewing on this for a long time, trying to come up with a way to make it happen. And here you come and create a nearly perfect situation for us, solving two problems with one timely hit." We were stopped in front of Reggie's dorm. "Go get her, and we'll pick this up later," he said. I opened the door and walked up to the lobby of the dorm, in a kind of state of shock. My head was buzzing from all Bryan had told me.

I used one of their house telephones to call Reggie's room. Her roommate answered, and said Reggie would be right down, so I sat in one of the overstuffed chairs scattered throughout the room to wait, trying not to think about soccer. Reggie didn't need to hear about all this melodrama.

Reggie came through the door, and nearly took my breath away. She had on a little black dress that only came to about mid-thigh, with spaghetti straps and a slightly daring neckline. Her hair was pulled back into a ponytail, with wisps of curled strands artfully undone, framing her lovely face.

I stood, and she came over and took my arm.

"Hi, Sean," she said with a smile. "Thank you for accompanying me."

"I'm the one who should be thanking you, and thanking Melanie. Having you by my side will make even me look good," I said.

Reggie favored me with an even bigger smile. I suddenly wasn't so tired anymore.

I walked her to Bryan's car, and we took off to pick up Melanie at her apartment, and then headed over to the banquet hall, where dinner would be served.

The purpose of the party was so the sisters of Omega Sigma Theta could get to know all of their new pledges better, in a social setting. Everybody was all smiles and handshakes, until the smiles began resembling grimaces. My own smile, plastered on my face, felt like it had been painted on, and I was looking forward to being able to get back in Bryan's car and massage feeling back into my facial muscles.

As we were sitting at our table with glasses of wine after dessert, Melanie said to me, "You look like you're in pain, Sean. You can stop smiling anytime now."

"I don't think I can," I said. "I think my face has finally frozen, just like my mom warned me."

"At least it didn't freeze with your tongue sticking out and your eyes crossed, like my mother warned me," said Reggie. I couldn't even imagine Regina Coverdale like that. *That pretty girl, so lovely and yet so sensible, sticking her tongue out? I don't think so.*

Sensing my thoughts, Reggie said, "Oh, yes, I did make horrible faces. You might not believe it now, Sean, but I was an awful tomboy when I was younger."

"A tomboy? You?"

"Sure," she said with a smile. "When I was eleven years old, I was convinced I was going to be over six feet tall. I was nuts about basketball, and I just knew I was going to be a big college basketball star."

"Really? What happened?" I asked.

She shrugged. "I stopped growing," she said. "I never stopped loving basketball, though."

"Then you probably are familiar with... what was his name, Sean? Jerry Sloan?" asked Bryan.

"Jerry Sloan! God, I loved watching him play," exclaimed Reggie. "He played defense like nobody I ever saw." She glanced around the table. "Did you know he's now an assistant coach for the Utah Jazz?" I was impressed that she would know that, and I thought it pleased her to know she could impress me. "What made you mention him, Bryan?" she continued.

And off Bryan went, telling the tale of practice that afternoon. He made it sound much more interesting and amusing than I remembered it, so I was kind of drawn in to the entertainment, right up until both Melanie and Reggie turned to look at me, astonishment in their eyes.

"You really did that, Sean?" asked Reggie.

I turned away. I didn't want to see the disappointment in her eyes that I was sure was there.

Melanie said, "That was this afternoon?"

"Yep," confirmed Bryan.

I could feel Melanie looking at me. The force of her personality made me look up at her, but it still took me by surprise to see her smiling.

"Congratulations on your promotion, Sean," she said.

"Huh? What promotion?" I asked. Had she heard something I hadn't?

"If what Bryan says is true, and I have no doubt it is," she said, glancing at her boyfriend for just a moment and touching his cheek, "you have just managed to leapfrog over almost everybody else to become one of the top two or three players on Pickett Cropper's nationally ranked soccer team."

"What?" She was saying words, sentences, but they made no sense at all to me. I glanced over at Reggie, and noted she was following Melanie's comments with shining eyes. Not at all sad or disappointed, her expression seemed eager and happy, not upset at all.

"You really don't see it, do you?" Melanie shook her head in disbelief. "You have just vaulted into the role very few people can choose for their own, and fewer still can fulfill. You are now the one of the leaders of this team, the role model for your teammates, and the example Pick is going to use as one of his prime recruiting tools, Sean. And as a freshman." She shook her head again, this time in wonder. "And you really didn't see that coming, did you? It may be self-inflicted, but it's still a great promotion into a leadership role. Like I said, congratulations, Sean. You are unique."

"Yeah, I'm unique," I grumbled. "Just like about four billion other people on this planet."

Melanie laughed, and Bryan and Reggie followed suit. I looked at them in surprise, and then realized what I had said. I couldn't help but join in with them. Hey, if you can't laugh at yourself, who can you laugh at?

Melanie surprised me that night, however. Later on, reflecting on that conversation, I came to the realization that Melanie was either the sharpest, most intuitive person I had ever met, or the most delusional. Only time would tell which one was correct.

Chapter 10 - Black and Gold

Posted: October 31, 2003 - 01:52:28 am

Saturday: work, work, work.

We started out with practice again, and we were again scrimmaged Alpha against Omega. Pick made a few more changes in the lineups of the two practice squads, including moving Spencer Goldman over to Omega, but he opted to leave me playing the right midfield position for Alpha.

I hope he doesn't think he can make a striker out of me, I kept on thinking. I just didn't have an offensive mindset.

What I gained by playing up like this, though, was a better perspective of what was going on almost everywhere on the field. When you're playing defense, it can sometimes be kind of hard to see what's happening with your offensive sets, particularly in the far corner. Playing across the centerline made it easier to see patterns, especially tricks and habits headed toward our goal. I thought I knew the games of my teammates pretty well, but I discovered I could study them better when I was playing up. It was easier to spot who was weak with their off foot, who had a tendency to turn a particular way when receiving a through ball, who tended to trap a ball instead of playing the roll. I learned to anticipate which way another player would turn on a fake, and I could tell much more readily who had the strongest and most accurate long feeds.

Conversely, on my side of the field, I could scope out the tendencies and strengths of my mates, and feed the ball to their strong side more often. I also got a lot more touches on the ball than I did playing back, since I tended to be involved in the movement of the ball both directions. It all was a real eye-opener.

On one of his first possessions, Martin forgot himself and started in on stunting. My grandfather, an avid hunter who trained his own dogs to move on his audible commands, had taught me how to belt out an ear-shattering whistle, and I used it. Frenchy looked over at me, and all I did was point at him. He scowled at me, but he got the message, passing the ball off and resuming his defensive duties within his territory.

My center midfielder, a scoring position if ever there was one, was Max Ehrlinger, a sophomore who came in often off the bench to give us a boost with some fresh legs. He had been on Omega Team with me, but was part of Pick's switch when he moved Spencer to Omega. Max was a very good player, able to anticipate crossing and through passes very well. He also passed well, but he

suffered from indecision when he had the ball, and that was enough to keep him out of the starting lineup. He was a great role player, though, and I found that if I led him by a few steps, his tendency to hold the ball until somebody came over and took it away from him eased. Once he was in motion, he tended to stay that way, and he could do some interesting things with the ball.

A couple of times, I even called for him to switch with me so I could roam through the middle, especially as we were falling back on defense. I either wanted to see what was going on over on the other side of the field, or I wanted to follow the path of the ball through the middle. Max was amenable to switching coverages, and once I ventured into the middle of the field, I was able to watch even more of the play. I always made sure I switched back with him as soon as I saw what I was interested in observing, and I tried to let him know about what I was seeing. I was hoping his game would benefit, too.

After about an hour of scrimmage, I had a very good picture of our team in my head. I categorized my teammates according to position and relative ability, kept tabs on the soft parts of their games, and formulated plans on how I might be able to exploit their strong suits. I also made a mental note to question Spencer, Jesse, Bryan, and Rick about my game. I wanted them to tell me about my weaknesses as a player, so I could do something about them.

I loved defense, but I was learning to appreciate playing in the middle of the field. I discovered that I enjoyed the freedom of patrolling up, and I quickly realized that midfielders really were the first line of defense.

After showering, a bunch of us walked over from the fieldhouse to the stadium for the football game. Jesse, Bryan and I had planned on going together, and most of the rest of the starters came along with us. Spencer Goldman jogged up to walk with me.

"Yo, Porter. You switching positions?" he asked. "Gonna finally work for a living instead of being a lazy defender?"

"Work for a living?" I exclaimed. "It seems to me it's the midfielders who are the lazy ones. 'Oh, it's a through ball. Oh, well, I'll just let Porter or Rickman clean up the mess.' You guys in the middle have it way too easy."

Spencer laughed out loud. "Nice dream, pal. It's more like, 'Oh, it's a through ball. I'd better hustle back so our weak-legged defenders won't strain something

trying to get the ball back all the way up to the middle.' Hey, you've been playing up for awhile in scrimmage. You can't deny the truth."

Jesse, on my other side, just chuckled. "You both got it wrong," he said. "Up front, we're thinking, 'Why don't they just move the ball up so we can attack? Can't they do anything with that damn pill?' Forwards are the workhorses of the team, boys."

"Forwards?" sputtered Spencer.

"Sure," continued Jesse with a smile. "If you guys weren't freshmen, you'd probably realize it." He turned to his roommate, walking on his other side. "Ain't that right, Bryan?"

"Truth," said Bryan.

Spencer laughed. "The only work forwards do is hustle to hog the glory after a win. But guess who gives you all those assists?"

Jesse looked at him in mock solemnity. "Ummm... the keepers, for shutting out our opponents," he said.

Well, there was really no arguing with that.

I was able to watch most of the first half of the football game with my friends. About five minutes before the half ended I hotfooted it over to the gift shop. I punched in and got ready to be overrun with students, parents, and visitors looking for souvenirs. For the next half hour it was a mad scramble to keep up with the demand for Gator gear.

The crowds disappeared almost as fast as they appeared, once the second half started. My coworkers and I spent the next hour getting the stock back into shape, refolding sweatshirts, hanging the windbreakers back up on their hangers, restocking the banners and bumper stickers and UF decals, refacing the shelves full of coffee mugs, shot glasses, address books, and sleeves of UF logo golf balls. We just finished with these tasks when it started all over again. Crowds streamed in after the end of the game, and decimated our poor little space, wiping us out of several styles of t-shirts, key chains, and logo pens. It amazed me what they could put the University's mascot onto, and it amazed me what people would actually pay good money for. Ninety percent of it was crap, in my opinion, but there was a customer for every product in the store. P.T. Barnum was right.

By the time my shift was over, I was wiped out, and I still had a session in the weight room to face. I trudged back to my dorm room to change, and found Westy there, huddled up with Jason, from across the hall.

"Hey, what's up, guys?" I asked.

"Party tonight, dude," exclaimed Jason. He, too, had pledged Sig Tau. He and Westy were in the same pledge class. "You should come along."

"What, it's not a frat party?" I asked.

"Well, not a sanctioned party," said Westy. "A bunch of brothers live in this old house in the Student Ghetto behind Chaucer's. They're throwing the party, and it's kind of an open invitation."

"Naw, I don't think so," I said. "I'm supposed to meet a guy over in the weight room."

"We're not going until late, Sean," said Jason. "We'll talk about it when you get back."

I grabbed my gym bag and headed out to meet Dan. I didn't give Westy and Jason's invitation a second thought. Westy in particular was not ever going to be my first choice for somebody to party with.

I met up with Dan in the weight room, and we started on our first circuit. Spencer and Luke were also there, spotting for each other, and the four of us worked out together for the next hour.

We were in the locker room, packing up our bags after showering, when Spencer turned to me.

"Hey, Sean, you want to go get something to eat later tonight?"

"Sure," I said. It was that or homework, and I had used flimsier excuses than going out with a pal.

Spencer turned to the others. "Luke? Dan? You guys want to grab a bite later?"

"Can't, man," said Dan. "Got a date tonight."

"Hey, yeah, I'll come along," said Luke. "I've got nothing planned."

"Okay," said Spencer. "I'll get something set up."

We all walked out of the gym together, and Luke and Dan headed off to the right. Spencer and I went straight, walking toward one of the side entrances to our dorm.

"Where you want to go tonight?" I asked Spencer.

"Copper Monkey? Wings and burgers?"

"Sure," I replied.

"Come on up to my room whenever you want," he said. "I'll give you a chance to win some of your money back at gin." I thought I detected just the hint of a smirk as he loped up the stairs after leaving me at the third floor landing.

Westy was gone, and Jason's door was closed, so I figured his roommate, Craig, was probably gone too. No doubt studying at the library, I thought. The kid was going to burn himself out with studying.

I flopped down on the couch, snapped open a can of Coke, stuck "Eat A Peach" (I was really getting into this Southern lifestyle, it seemed) into the cassette player, and grabbed pen and paper to write to Luscious. I wanted to let her know what was going on with the team. I thought she would get a kick out of hearing about my experiences playing midfield instead of defense.

I was feeling frustrated and guilty after being at school without Kayla for several weeks. I was tired of jacking off while I stared at her picture. It was only a temporary release, and did nothing to ease the ache of not having her near me. It also forced me to adjust my own internal version of what I considered myself to be. After all, here I was, a healthy teenaged athlete at a major university, independent and fancy-free. What did I need with female companionship?

Who was I kidding?

Certainly not myself anymore. Any illusions I may have brought with me that I was immune to the strain of maintaining a long-distance relationship had been burned out of me early on in my college career. Hanging out with the guys was a lot of fun, but I knew I was not alone in needing more sometimes. Even the limited involvement I was enjoying with Reggie was reminding me in an almost painful way of what I was missing without Kayla around.

Was I having fun at college? Sure. But was I happy?

I was a long way away from happy, even if I was reluctant to admit it to myself. I just hoped I was keeping my true feelings from seeping into my letters home. It

would drive Kayla crazy if she knew how miserable I really was here, with nothing to do about it.

Buck up, Porter, and stop feeling sorry for yourself, I thought harshly. Freakin' crybaby. I found an envelope and addressed it, shoved my letter into it and sealed it. I found a stamp and licked it, and I trudged downstairs to the lobby mailbox to send it off. There was a late pickup on Saturdays, so with luck Kay would receive it by Tuesday or Wednesday. By then, I hoped to have another letter to her started.

I went back up to my room and opened up my history book to study for another hour before I headed up to Spencer's for my weekly lesson in humility, courtesy of Goldman's gin expertise.

Spencer and I walked up 13th Street and met up with Luke before we got to University Ave. The three of us cut across and jaywalked across University to the Copper Monkey.

It was already crowded, much of the crowd still there from after the game. It was rowdy and loud, but we managed to find three chairs, and we squeezed in at a big table with a bunch of other people. There were four pitchers of beer on the table, each about half full. Luke pushed his way up to the bar and ordered three Cokes and a couple of orders of wings. He brought the Cokes back to the table, and we each guzzled the sodas down and refilled our glasses with beer from the pitchers. Free beer, college bar. What could be better? I almost forgot about missing my girl.

A couple of hours later, we were well buzzed. We had consumed hamburgers, wings, popcorn, and fries, and our table companions kept the beer flowing. Luke, Spencer and I each contributed some money to the table in exchange, and our newfound friends around us were only too happy to help us out.

I got up and sidestepped my way through the crowd toward the johns, needing to tap a kidney. The floor was getting sticky with spilled beer and soda, and I slipped and nearly fell on my ass as I reached the door. A big, meaty hand reached out and grabbed my upper arm in a steel grip, keeping me upright.

"Steady there, little fella," rumbled a big, deep voice.

"Thanks," I said once I got my feet back underneath me. I glanced at the big, round, black face of probably the biggest person I had ever met, bigger even than Tiny Harrison, my friend from home.

"Funny how this damn tile can be sticky and slippery all at once, ain't it?" he said.

"Physics," I replied. "You just can't trust physics to be sane when you're under the influence."

The big man laughed, and I turned back to the door to the restroom.

When I came out, the big guy was still there, leaning up against the wall with his friends.

"Sean Porter," I said.

He looked at me a little quizzically. "Nope," he said. "Not me."

"No, I'm Sean Porter," I said. "Thanks for the hand before."

"Oh, I thought you was accusing me of being Sean Porter," he said, laughing. He held out his hand. "Lamarr Elliott, pleased ta meetcha."

I shook his hand, and he held on, looking at me as if he was trying to place me.

"I know that name," he said, not letting go. "Just a minute, and I'll have it." Lamarr turned to one of his companions, a smaller, very muscular guy with wide shoulders and slim hips. "Hey, Dantrell, does the name Sean Porter sound familiar to you?"

Dantrell and Lamarr. Suddenly I knew who these guys were. Lamarr Elliott was a starting offensive lineman on the UF football team, and Dantrell Sinclair was one of a tandem of halfbacks the team used very effectively in their running attack.

Dantrell looked me over. I still couldn't move, because of Lamarr's grip. Dantrell's eyes showed nothing, neither friendliness nor animosity, and his expression was completely neutral. I didn't matter at all to him, from the look on his face.

"Soccer dude. All-American from up North, freshman. I hear he got a game," said Dantrell. I would discover later that evening that Dantrell was just a quiet, reserved person, and his expressionless face was simply a defense mechanism, acquired when he was a sought-after high school All-American running back from Mississippi.

"Thass right!" shouted Lamarr. "Goddammit, I knew that name was familiar! Good to meet ya, Sean Porter." He gave my arm a vigorous pump, nearly

shaking me out of my shoes. "This here is Dantrell Sinclair, Sean Porter." Dantrell lifted his chin in greeting, and I nodded. Lamarr finally let go of my hand.

"How come you know about the soccer team?" I asked.

"Ah, hell, it ain't the soccer team we know about," said Lamarr. "But we find out about all the good athletes coming in. We're like our own fraternity, you know? A lot of us like to meet the good ones, though this time of year is a little busy for us. I usually try to make the rounds after winter break, introduce myself to folks."

"I'm kind of surprised," I admitted. "I would have thought football players would just kind of hang out with other players from the team, and basketball players would hang out together, that kind of thing."

"Oh, that's somewhat true," said Lamarr. "Don't mean we ain't friendly with other guys, though."

"Good to know," I said.

"Buy you a beer?" asked Lamarr.

"Well... sure," I said. Dantrell slipped over a little, making room for me in their group. It turned out Lamarr and Dantrell were there with a bunch of other teammates and their friends. Spencer and Luke came over to see what was going on, and introductions were made all around. Once again I lost track of which face went with which name, except for Dantrell and Lamarr, but it really didn't matter. Everybody was there just to have a good time.

The music was loud, the crowd was louder, and the beer kept on flowing. Sometime during the festivities, Spencer and Luke came over to tell me they were going to split.

"Where are you guys going?" I asked.

"I'm tired of the noise," complained Luke. "I just think I'm going to head back to the dorm."

"I'm going to meet my roomie over at Reitz," added Spencer. "They're showing Bananas late tonight."

"Bananas? What's to show about bananas?" I asked. Something wasn't making sense here, and I was afraid it might be me.

Spencer, proving me right, laughed. "Not the fruit, you idiot. The Woody Allen movie from a dozen years ago. You've never seen it? It's hilarious."

"I'll take your word for it, dude. I'll see you tomorrow, then." I waved as he turned to go.

A little later, Lamarr came lumbering across the floor to me. "Hey, Sean Porter, Dantrell and me and a few others are going over into the Ghetto to a friend's place. You want to come along?"

"A course," I slurred. Was I picking up a bit of a Southern accent? I shook my head at my own foolishness. I followed them out the door, and we headed off down the street in a pack. Just me and my football pals, led by a six foot six inch, 340-pound behemoth, I blearily thought to myself as I let myself be carried in Lamont's wake.

We got to the apartment, and it was already crowded, with the heavy bass of street rap booming out of speakers in the main room. It was about a 50-50 mix of black and white kids, mostly football players and their girlfriends, with a few team groupies thrown into the mix. The dress ranged from typical college gear to colorful and strange tribal adornment, with substantial amounts of bare skin showing in tiny skirts, shorts, and sheer or very skimpy tops, all, no doubt, due to the Florida climate. Lamont introduced me to another dizzying number of his friends, and I shook a lot of hands, and endured some trash talk about how skinny soccer players seemed to be. I found myself drinking a surprising amount of cheap red wine, courtesy of Lamarr, Dantrell, and their friends.

LaShonda Merriweather and Amari Al-Sharif, the girls who gave up their apartment for the party, seemed to be near me most of the time when I looked around. Of course, one or the other seemed to be everywhere, acting as hostesses and protecting their furniture the best they could. Amari was a thin, exotic looking girl in a colorful, patterned black and gold caftan, with a matching headband. She wore rose-colored glasses in an octagon shape, perched on the end of her thin nose so she could look over them.

LaShonda was a substantial girl, a senior majoring in political science. She was nearly six feet tall herself, with big shoulders, big breasts, big frizzy hair, big hips, and big smile. Lamarr introduced her to me when we first arrived.

"Sean Porter, meet the best damn cook east of the Mississippi," he said, giving LaShonda a big slap on her ass.

LaShonda jumped as if she had been hit with a paddle, and gave Lamarr a slug on his slab of an arm that would have knocked me down. It hardly fazed Lamarr.

"Don't you go slappin' at my butt, Lamarr Elliott," she warned him. She winked at me to let me know she was having fun with the big man. "Don't you know it's attached to the rest of me?"

"I surely do," answered Lamarr with a big grin. "And I like what it's attached to, just fine."

"Oh, you," said LaShonda affectionately. "Don't you go givin' this new friend of your'n the wrong idea, now."

"Ah, hell, Sean Porter. You got the wrong idea here?" asked Lamarr as he put his arm around LaShonda's substantial shoulder.

"No, buddy, I don't think so," I replied. "I think I've got the right idea."

I wandered around the apartment, drawn to groups where I knew somebody. Dantrell introduced me to his buddies out on the porch at one point, and he was much more animated and friendly, now that he was in his own element. I also squeezed in at times to corners where LaShonda or Amari were stopping, letting myself drift with the eddies and swirls of the conversational drifts. Amari, in particular, had a sharp tongue and a sharper wit, and she was completely unafraid to say anything to anybody. She obviously was well respected, even so, and even the recipients of her barbs could only laugh when she hit her target. I found myself tending to drift toward wherever she was holding court. The entertainment value was too great to pass up, and she always welcomed me with a smile.

Much later on, I met up with Lamarr in the hallway leading to the bathroom. He took up most of the space in the hallway, coming out as I was going in.

"Hey, Lamarr, what's up with you and LaShonda?" I asked.

He grinned. "She's a lot of woman, ain't she?"

I nodded.

"She's my best girl," he said. "We're probably gonna get married when we're done here. I stay healthy, I'll probably get taken in the first or early second round of the NFL draft. LaShonda, she's got good grades, a great work ethic, she'll go to grad school wherever I end up playing next year. Gonna be a lawyer,

International Law. Eventually wants to be ambassador to Kenya or Tanzania. Helluva girl."

"So how come she wasn't at the Monkey with you?" I asked.

He shook his head. "Aw, she and Amari and their girlfriends, they like to do these parties," he said. "She spends most of the afternoon gettin' everything ready, and she sho' 'nuff don't want me stumblin' around, gettin' in her way. So she shoo me off to spend some time with my boys while she and her friends get the place fortified for the party. I show up too early, she get nervous, so me and Dantrell and the others hang out over there until things get goin' here. Once the place gets hoppin', she starts to relax, and it's okay for me to show my face."

He laughed, whether at LaShonda's idiosyncrasies or at his own behavior on her behalf I didn't know. Lamarr probably didn't know, either, nor did he seem to care.

"She's a very self-possessed woman," I said.

Lamarr got a real kick out of that. "She can be possessed sometimes, Sean Porter," he said. "But, yes, she is self-possessed. LaShonda Merriweather ain't no shrinking violet."

I could only agree. Lamarr pounded me on the back in good fellowship, nearly knocking me over in my inebriated state, and squeezed by me to wade back into the party.

I stopped in the john and relieved myself. I was feeling pretty woozy, and very tired.

"Got to get home," I said to my bleary-eyed reflection in the bathroom mirror. "Got a game tomorrow."

I opened the door and stepped out into the dim hallway, and almost immediately bumped into somebody.

"Oops, sorry," I mumbled.

I grabbed for an arm to steady myself, and felt a silky material beneath my palms as a feminine voice said, "You feeling okay, Sean?"

I looked up into the girl's face, but shadows blocked her from my recognition. "I'm not sure," I said. I sounded drunk, even to my ears. Must be true, then, I thought.

She chuckled. "Come with me, little boy," she said, not unkindly, and she led me down the hall to a closed door. She opened the door and guided me over to a waterbed in the middle of the small room. "Maybe you should lie down here for a minute," she said.

"Okay," I agreed, and I pretty much fell onto the bed, dragging her with me. She landed on top of me, and my arms quite naturally went around her. She started to lift up off me, until she felt me holding her. She let me pull her back down, and she pressed her lips to mine. I kissed her, a little sloppily due to my condition, but she didn't seem to mind at all. In fact, she opened her mouth and let her tongue slip between my teeth to explore.

My unknown benefactor tasted like cinnamon, and her breath was hot on my cheek as we kissed. She sucked in, pulling my tongue into her mouth, and I thought I heard her growl as our temperatures rose higher. We moved into each other's arms a little more, and our movement set up a rocking motion in the mattress that, had I not been otherwise involved, would have really done a number on my equilibrium.

As it was, I was having difficulty controlling the heat we were generating. I was sweating, and I could feel her skin through her shift warming my palms as I pressed them to her back. I could feel her sharp nipples boring into my skin through two layers of clothes, and I dragged my hands up her back, feeling for a bra strap that wasn't there.

As my hands were exploring the expanse of her back, her own hand was doing some exploring of its own, working its way up my leg, inside my thigh. I was still wearing shorts, and she tried to get her hand up the leg, but they were too tight. She brushed lightly against my hard cock, standing proud and erect in my shorts, and fumbled at the snap and zipper. I was tempted to help her, but she managed to open them before I could formulate the proper command from my addled brain to my reluctant hand, and she reached inside my shorts, inside my underwear, and grasped my stalk. She instinctively pumped it, gripping me fiercely, nearly painfully.

My own hands couldn't figure out her clothing, so they gave up, and I submitted myself to her ministrations. She obliged by breaking our kiss and leaning over me, her head sliding down my body toward the prize she held in her fist. She pushed my shorts and my briefs down until they were around my knees, and she cupped my balls as I felt her tongue glide up the underside of my throbbing cock.

I groaned, knowing I was not going to last long at all. Hers were the first hands to touch my cock and balls, other than my own, in what seemed a very long time, and I could do nothing but surrender to the sensations that were flooding through me, pinning me to the mattress. The motion of the water contributed to a desire in me not to move very much. As it was, it was soothing, but I knew if I tried to contribute, a very disquieting motion in the bed would be set up, and I didn't think my stomach would accept that much movement. And so, I lay there and let my blood sizzle and crackle as it raced through my veins, heated by the presence of the moist and warm tongue and lips of my unknown friend.

I felt her lips at the crown as she held my cock upright with her left hand. Her right hand continued to play with my scrotum. As she pressed my cock against her closed lips, forcing the head into her mouth, I also felt one of her fingers tickling and exploring around my asshole. As she took more of my cock into her mouth, I could feel her tongue laving back and forth across the hot skin, moistening and teasing. She continued to take more of me, never pausing at all, until I felt her nose bump against my crotch, and the head of my cock was nestled at the back of her throat. She paused there, letting the actions of her throat as it accommodated my girth play against my sensitive tissues, and then she backed off slowly, sucking on me hard, until just the head was still encased in her hot mouth.

At that moment, her hand returned to the base of my cock, and she began jacking me. At the same time, her head bobbed up and down on me, as she worked hard to get me off. Her finger against my backside became a little more insistent, now poking at my puckered opening, and, suddenly I was tossed over the edge. My hips bucked up, and I drove my cock deeper into her mouth. I thought I heard her squeak, and then the switches and pumps activated, and I filled her with the first huge spurt of my seed.

She swallowed instinctively what she could to keep up with me, and my body continued down its path by flexing and pumping another burst, followed by a third. A weaker fourth spurt followed, and each successive pumping action diminished until I was completely drained, and I collapsed back onto the waterbed, exhausted.

I felt her swallow the last of my semen, and as my cock began to shrink she used her tongue and lips to clean me off, still caressing my balls gently. I put my hand down to touch her head, meaning to thank her, whoever she was, but I must have dozed off before I could form the words. When next I gathered myself together enough to realize where I was, the girl was gone, and I was alone on the cool bed.

I stumbled to my feet and yanked my underwear and my shorts back up, feeling panicked and dazed. I needed to get away from there. I ran my hands through my hair, feeling thickheaded and confused, and I found the door.

The party was still going on, but the crowd was substantially diminished. The only person I saw that I knew was Dantrell, sitting out on the porch with a couple of buddies, and he waved as I came out the door.

"Takin' off, Porter?" he asked as I paused at the top of the steps.

"Yeah," I mumbled. "Got a game in the afternoon. Got to get some rest."

"Okay, man. You know your way back from here?"

I looked around the neighborhood. Brighter lights told me University Street was to my left. "Yeah, the walk will do me good," I said.

Dantrell just nodded. I trudged down the stairs and followed the sidewalk toward campus. I was still pretty well dusted, but not so far gone I couldn't feel pretty disgusted with myself over what had occurred. How could I have let that happen? It felt so good at the time, but by the time I got to my dorm I felt like a complete degenerate. I was no better than Westy.

The flights of stairs up to the third floor seemed unending. I was stumbling with exhaustion by the time I got to my room. I shoved my hand into my pocket, searching for my keys. Along with my key, I pulled out of my pocket a silken, gold and black headband.

Chapter 11 - Furry Bunnies

Posted: November 10, 2003 - 02:27:51 pm

It was a good thing we were playing an afternoon game, because I was not in any shape to get up any time before noon.

Westy was already home and asleep by the time I crawled in. I had a hard time figuring out how to get up into my bed, and once I was there I couldn't get the room to stop spinning. I ended up climbing back down, stumbling down the hall, and barfing into a toilet to get rid of the poisons that were fucking up my system. I rinsed my mouth out, found my way back to my room, and collapsed down onto Westy's couch, where I pretty much passed out for the rest of the night.

Sometime around eight in the morning I woke up, needing to piss like a racehorse. I drank about a half gallon of water in an attempt to wash the tumbleweeds out of my mouth, and fell back into a troubled sleep again on the couch.

Westy tried rousing me for breakfast, but I batted his arm away and rolled over. I heard him grumbling, something about luses not able to hold their liquor, and then he left the room, and blissful silence fell again. I managed to go back to sleep for a few more hours, unconscious to the guilts that were waiting for me, just out of sight.

By just around noon the noise in the hallway had reached a level that made it impossible to keep sleeping. I crawled up out of the couch. My eyes were nearly pasted shut by stuff caked in the corners and across my eyelids, and it felt like about a thousand nice, furry little bunnies had crapped all over my tongue, and then died in my mouth. It was a good thing Westy was gone, because I didn't think I could utter a word. I fumbled for my shower kit and felt my way down the hall to the johns.

The shower made me feel somewhat more human, but I had a long way to go before I would feel ready to play soccer. I went downstairs to the cafeteria and filled my tray to capacity, but I was only able to choke down a little overcooked and mealy spaghetti. I washed it down with three glasses of orange juice, another UF specialty, on the theory the vitamin C would help me out. I was beginning to worry that something had better help me out, or my so-called rise to the lofty

heights of team leadership would be overshadowed by my even more spectacular fall from grace.

I decided the only way I was going to be able to purge myself was through sweat. I had two hours before I had to be in the locker room, so I grabbed my gear bag and headed over to the gymnasium to work out my demons.

For the next ninety minutes I did a rotation of Lifecycle, Nautilus, treadmill, and free weights. I forced myself to move from one station to the next, with only a three-minute break between. It was tough discipline, but I did it. At the end, I sat on a bench, my forearms holding me up as they braced against my knees, feeling pleasantly tired. I just hoped I hadn't worn myself out so much I couldn't run for the duration of our game.

I hopped in the shower and let the stinging water from the jets pound on my shoulders and back. By the time I was done, I felt like I just might survive the day. I grabbed a Gatorade from the front desk and jogged over to the soccer complex, my gear bag bouncing and banging against my leg the whole way.

Coach put us in his standard 3-4-3 lineup with Rick in goal. Frenchy, Brad and I lined up on the defensive side from left to right. Offensively, we had Bryan on the left, Jesse in the middle, and Juan Maria Sandoval on the right. Jeremy Peters was our left midfielder, Spencer played up in the middle, Stuart Early was on the right, and Tad Artichenkoff, a senior from the Ukraine, played sweeper, or defensive mid. We were lined up against the University of Tennessee, a conference opponent. Tennessee, a team with a long history of good teams in many NCAA sports, this year was fielding what our scouts reported as one of the weaker teams in the SEC. Because it was a conference game, however, we played them with our strong defensive formation. We had enough firepower up front, but we didn't want anything unexpected to happen on our side of the field.

All I wanted to do was concentrate on the game and get out unscathed. I was feeling pretty good at game time, but I didn't know how long that would last. Fortunately, the recuperative powers of an 18-year-old athletic and fit body were very good, but I still didn't have a lot of confidence that I would have an abundance of energy to spare. I told my teammates I would take the throw-ins and corner kicks on the right side, figuring I could catch my breath and rest my legs a fraction more that way. I would let my teammates battle it out in front of the goal on the corners, and I could avoid a lot of the pushing and jockeying for position on the throw-ins, too.

The Volunteers didn't come to fight. They did a proper job of playing the best they could, but it really was no contest. In fact, Pick enjoyed an early, nearly insurmountable lead, and was able to play everybody on the bench for some significant minutes. Many of the starters, including me, got to ease down. I was happy to turn my spot over to Dan Ortega and watch the end of the game from underneath my damp towel.

By the time we had finished with our showers and team meeting, I was ready to collapse. I still had two papers to write, but I decided I would get up early, instead of trying to slog through the evening on sheer willpower. I ate dinner with Spencer and Jesse, managing to deflect Spencer's questions about my evening by asking him about the movie. He launched into a rehash of the funniest bits of Woody Allenry, almost making me wish I had gone with him to see it.

By the time we finally said goodnight, it was after seven, and I was dog-tired and barely able to keep my eyes open. I gave it up very soon, and crawled into my raised bed. I found I was a little reluctant to look at the picture of Luscious taped to the ceiling above me. I rolled over and closed my eyes against the light coming from Westy's desk lamp. I knew I could use the sleep.

The only other benefit to ending my day early was that I was able to put off the onset of a crushing case of the guilts until Monday.

And, right on schedule, the guilts did invade. I had set my alarm for six in the morning so I could work on my papers. The insistent rasping of the buzzer finally roused me from my bed, and I clambered down and slapped the damn clock to shut it up.

From his side of the room, I heard Westy complain, "What are you doing, Porter? Can't a guy sleep around here?"

"Sorry, dude," I said. "I'll try to keep it down."

"Yeah, whatever," he mumbled as he slid back down into sleep. *Lucky bastard*, I thought as I opened my notebook from my World History class to begin transcribing notes into something resembling order.

Even that early in the day, and with a good night's sleep, I had trouble concentrating. My mind kept on sliding back, trying to remember details of Saturday night, but everything seemed dreamlike and unreal. I could, however, vividly recall, with startling clarity, the moment of my climax. Something like

that just isn't dismissed lightly. Besides, all I had to do was look on my bookshelf, where Amari's headband lay bunched up, laying right where I had tossed it when I got home that night. Just gazing at it made the entire evening coalesce into something more substantial than the alcohol-induced smoke and mirrors the beer had relegated it all to in my mind.

Jesus H. Christ in a bucket, I thought to myself. How was I going to justify what I had done? It all felt like a betrayal toward nearly everybody I knew. My teammates, especially Spencer and Luke, who were starting to look to me for leadership; Bryan and Melanie, for their obviously misplaced trust; Reggie, even though we were merely friendly companions.

Kayla.

Hoo, boy, my head reminded me. That famous Porter streak of self-destruction shows itself again.

I handed in some pretty poorly constructed work later that day. I just couldn't get it together enough to give a rat's ass about why Attila the Hun withdrew his armies from Italy after meeting with Pope Leo in the fifth century. I also had to write a three-page paper for English, and only managed to expand a weak idea into just over two typewritten pages. Try as I might, I just couldn't work up enough in the way of enthusiasm or concentration to do any better on that day.

It was a good thing we didn't have practice the day after a game, given my levels of energy. As a result, I had kind of an easy day, just the kind of day I normally would use to write to my girl. But, on this day, my heart just wasn't in it. I couldn't sound cheery when I was so busy beating myself up over my indiscretion, so I just gave it up.

I decided I needed company to keep my head from dwelling on my fuck-ups, so I jogged over to Jesse and Bryan's apartment later, after classes were done. Bryan wasn't home, but Jesse was, so we ordered a pizza and sat around watching the tube for most of the evening. He didn't bring up Saturday night, and I didn't see any reason to mention it.

It was good to have friends, I concluded.

By Tuesday I was seeing a little clearer. I had pretty much decided that what had happened Saturday night was the result of alcohol and opportunity. Besides, I

hadn't heard anything from Amari or from LaShonda, so I had to assume it was all fun and games from her perspective, too.

The only concern I really had over the incident was to make sure Dantrell Sinclair wasn't pissed off at me. I didn't know if Amari was his girlfriend or not, but I didn't want to make a serious mistake, just in case, by calling Amari. No use riling still waters, I thought. And I really didn't want somebody like Dantrell or Lamarr, who could probably break every bone in my body and still have plenty of strength left to tie my jellied legs into square knots, mad at me.

During my Biology lecture I began a new letter to Kayla. I threw away the first draft because it sounded relentlessly cheerful and forced, and I began again, trying to relax. I told her about meeting Lamarr and Dantrell and the other football players at the Monkey, and I described the game against Tennessee. I told her we were taking a long bus ride the coming weekend, traveling to Baton Rouge to play Louisiana State. We were leaving Friday morning for a Saturday game, and wouldn't be back until late Sunday. The letter was only a modest success, but I was willing to take any personal wins at that point.

At practice on Tuesday, Pick set up Alpha v. Omega scrimmages again, and assigned me the midfield spot once more. I was starting to feel pretty comfortable up there, though I was beginning to wish I was playing sweeper instead. I would have a better vision of the field, roaming in the middle, but our sweeper position, taken up by starter Tad Artichenkoff, was well established.

At least I can keep an eye on my Frenchy friend, I said to myself as we took the field for practice.

Eddie Whitehead, acting as referee, put the ball in play, and the game was on. Play zigzagged back and forth, with first Alpha controlling the ball, and then Omega taking over, but there were no serious attacks by either side during the first several minutes of play. A couple of times I signaled to Max Ehrlinger that I wanted to switch coverages with him, and I was able to go into the middle and affect play a little more. Once I accomplished what I had intended, or observed what had caught my attention, I always made sure I turned the position back over to Max. I didn't want him thinking I was usurping his territory; I always told him what I was looking for whenever I asked him to switch, and he cooperated every time.

At one point during the scrimmage, I had just switched back with Max, so I was in my position on the right, when I saw Brad Rickman, our senior stopper who was playing for Omega, take the ball.

"Hey, Max," I called. He glanced in my direction, perhaps wondering if I wanted to switch again. I saw a look of annoyance pass across his face.

"Get ready to move to your left about ten meters," I said. "Brad's going to try to pass the ball up into that open space to Jeremy." I pointed toward Jeremy Peters, trolling behind Max.

Max moved over to cover Jeremy a little closer, and just as Brad passed the ball through, Max anticipated beautifully, intercepting the pass and moving it over to Luke, on the side. Frenchy, caught moving forward instead of back when Brad passed off, had to slide tackle the ball out of bounds, and I ran over to take the throw-in. I moved Luke toward the near post of the goal, and I heaved the ball across the field, almost as if it was a short corner kick. Rick, the keeper for Omega Team, ended up coming out of the net to make a good save, shouldering a couple of my Alpha teammates off the ball to get to it.

As we were resetting for Rick's punt, Max gestured to get my attention.

"Smart play, Porter. Thanks for the heads-up." He pointed his fist at me in salutation, and I nodded to acknowledge it.

A little while later, Luke and Frenchy got tangled up again, and the ball squirted out from between them and rolled out of bounds. They both ran after it, each thinking it was their team's throw-in, and they ended up in a tug-of-war over the ball. I could see Eddie trotting over, raising the whistle to his mouth, so I ran to the sidelines, where they were struggling with each other.

"Hey, guys, it's a scrimmage," I said. "Give me the ball."

Luke let go, but Martin was unwilling to relinquish his hold. I reached for it and took it in my hands, but didn't try to yank it away from him.

"Let it be, Martin," I said. He looked at me, and decided this wasn't the battle he wanted to engage in, so he grimaced, shoved the ball out of my hands to the ground, and walked back onto the field.

Eddie had stopped to watch, and he stayed where he was once he saw Flauget moving back into position, shoulders hunched in aggravation. I picked up the ball and prepared for my throw-in, but instead of tossing it toward the middle or over to one of my open teammates, I tossed it lightly toward Frenchy's feet.

"Your ball," I said, and I stepped inbounds. He put his foot on top of the ball for a second, looking at me, and, with his trademark smirk, he passed it gently back over to me.

"I believe it's your ball," he replied.

I shrugged. "Okay," I said, and I passed it back to Stuart, so we could start with a new offensive set.

I didn't know if it was a turning point in my relationship with Frenchy, but I was happy to see him voluntarily defuse a situation that could easily have been escalated instead. He deferred, received an advantage, and deferred again. Maybe we were making a team player out of him after all.

Most of the team had watched our interaction, and I could almost feel the shift in attitude among my teammates. The focus on the field changed, and our game changed with it. Only time would tell if that change was positive or not.

By the time we were done with practice and out of the showers, it was apparent, even to someone as dense as me, that I had assumed the leadership role on the team that Melanie and Bryan had predicted. I wasn't very happy about it, being only a freshman, and because I knew my own track record. Somewhere along the line, it was all probably going to blow up in my face. But I had played out the part that had been offered to me by the assembled cast of conspirators. Pickett Cropper, Jesse Wilhoit, Bryan Watkins, Rick Rogers, Eddie Whitehead, and, unwittingly, Martin Flauget, had all contributed to this chance, but only I could accept the blame if it didn't work out well.

Even when nobody else was pressuring me, I managed to find a way to pile a little more onto myself, it seemed.

Chapter 12 - Homecoming Weekend

Posted: November 20, 2003 - 09:35:31 pm

For the next few weeks, things stayed in a routine. An overworked, stressful, pressure-cooker of a routine, but a routine nonetheless. We played our games, and our practices also progressed very well. My professors kept on piling on the work, but we still found a little time to goof off and relieve the pressure, if only temporarily.

We lost a non-conference game to the University of Miami Hurricanes by an embarrassingly lopsided score, but we had an excuse. More than half the team was struck by the flu that week, and a few guys, including Bryan and Rick, were so sick they didn't even make the bus trip down to Coral Gables. Even with every one of our available bench players starting, we still had to field a team that included three very ill players. Pick tried to keep the sickest players out of harm's way, but he had no choice but to put one of them in midfield. He tried to work out a substitution rotation that would spell the ill players often, but with only one half-healthy substitute, it just couldn't be done.

Martin and I were also down with the flu, though we did manage to make the bus trip. I would have been a lot more comfortable dying in my own dorm room bed instead of trying to find a comfortable position that didn't make my stomach do flip-flops on a swaying bus, but it wasn't an option for a lowly freshman like me. Even being a freshman, though, Pick and Eddie could see I was way too sick to even try to take the field. What little food I was able to force down didn't stay down, and even water was squirting out my backside like floodwaters on the muddy Mississippi. I was so miserable, I felt like I would have to feel better just to be able to die.

Our backup keeper had also been stricken, and Pick was forced to start Dan Ortega in goal. Dan was a little unnerved, having not played keeper since before high school, but he did his best. With no help from his defensive line, what with all three of us down, it was a lesson in humility for him, and for us as a team. Our small consolation was that, looking at the film the next week, we all saw where we could have exploited their weaknesses, if only we had been at full strength. As it was, losing 6-1 was about as good as we could have expected.

Homecoming for the University of Florida was scheduled for an early weekend of October. Homecoming week in Gainesville was crazy. The entire campus, students and faculty alike, were going crazy all week, and the town joined in on the celebration. Local businesses put up signs and banners, the bars were

practically giving away beer, and the streets around campus, and even into the downtown area, were all decorated with flags and streamers in orange and blue.

Very little in the way of constructive schoolwork got in the way of the festivities. Naturally, we practiced every day, but classes were pretty slipshod, there was very little work assigned, and everybody seemed to look forward to the weekend. Many of the professors looked down their noses at what they probably considered to be undergraduate foolishness, but behind the scowls and the gruff tones some of them took during lectures, a tiny bit of indulgent amusement could be detected. This was underscored by the easing of the workload during the week, even by the most cynical of instructors. By the time the end of the week was approaching, the entire area around campus was overflowing with clumps of students, alumni, staff, and faculty, all gearing up for the festivities of the weekend.

And what a weekend it was. Classes had been cancelled for Friday, so everybody could either march in the parade down University Avenue, or watch the parade from a porch, curb, or lawn chair. Bryan, Melanie, Reggie and I watched from a table outside The Glass Onion, courtesy of Skye and Stone. Joining us was Jesse and his homecoming date, Brittany Erickson, another sorority sister of Melanie's. Just before the first float slowly rumbled down the street, Skye came out with two bottles of wine and six glasses.

"It's from our personal stash," Skye said with a sly wink. "It's homemade by some friends. I think you'll like it."

Homemade hooch sounded a little dangerous, but I reached for the bottle anyway. *What the hell, it's Homecoming*, I said to myself. I filled each glass about halfway, and the six of us raised them in a toast to a glorious weekend.

"Cheers!" "Halleluiah!" "Down the hatch!"

And I brought the glass to my lips.

It was very tasty, a sweet and fruity berry wine of some sort. We all made murmurs of appreciation, and I lifted my glass and saluted Skye, inside her store, minding the counter. She smiled and waved, and Stone flashed us a peace sign from his window in the kitchen.

We cheered as the Phi Kap/Omega float went by. Captain Jack was, of course, in the pilot's seat of the nautically themed float, taking it all way too seriously. He waved down at us, looking imperial in his Horatio Hornblower getup. I got the feeling he really didn't recognize us sitting there saluting him. He turned and

waved to people on the other side of the street, never changing expression at all as he swiveled back and forth in front of his big spoked wheel. We laughed a lot at Jack's expense after the float passed us by, fueled perhaps by the berry wine. We sat back and enjoyed the rest of the parade, watching the other floats rumble by, interspersed with local high school marching bands putting on their displays. We jumped up and cheered when the UF marching band came strutting down the street, blasting out the UF fight song, "Orange and Blue." As the last float rolled by, we joined the thousands of others who filled the street, following the parade until it rolled into the stadium.

Later that night, the six of us crammed into Florida Field for the giant Homecoming pep rally, called the Gator Growl. We were joined by 72,000 of our closest friends in the newly renovated and expanded stadium. The festivities went on for hours, led by Albert and Alberta, the Gator mascots. The school always managed to bring in a big name from the entertainment world for Gator Growl, and the headliner for the evening was Bob Hope. I was thinking he was kind of old-fashioned for a college crowd like us, but he worked the stadium like the old pro he was. By about the fourth or fifth joke in his routine, he had us on our feet, stomping and clapping and laughing.

I should have expected it, actually. It should have been obvious to me that Hope loved college football. Why else would he host the College Football All-American show every year on television? And that observation was confirmed that night as he welcomed each starter on the team up to the stage, and had a joke prepared for each one.

When Dantrell Sinclair was introduced, for instance, Hope said, "Dantrell Sinclair, a junior halfback. That's not to say he's a junior, as in lightweight. Look at those arms!" Hope gave one of his classic pauses, and then continued. "Dantrell is fast, too. In fact, when I asked him how fast he ran, he told me he was so fast, he had already played in tomorrow's game!"

As Lamarr Elliott stepped up to stand next to him, Hope gave him one of his patented stares, looking up at Lamarr as he towered over the comedian. "The University of Florida has 30,000 full-time students," Hope said into the microphone. "Lamarr is one of the reasons they buy enough food for 34,000."

At the end of his show, the football team took the stage once again, lining up behind the comedian, and off behind the stadium, fireworks were set off across Lake Alice in a display to rival the Fourth of July.

By the time the show ended, I was hoarse, deaf, and half-blinded by the fireworks. Reggie and I held hands as we shuffled out, flowing with the tide of

students out of the stadium, so that we wouldn't lose each other in the crush. Once we got out onto the street, we stepped aside and waited for Jesse, Brittany, Bryan, and Melanie.

Once we all found each other again, I said, "Where to now?" I was too pumped up to want to just go back to my dorm room.

"Party at Jeremy's place?" suggested Bryan. Jeremy Peters, one of our midfielders, lived in an apartment with three of his fraternity brothers.

"Sure," said Jesse. "Sounds good. That work for you, Seanster?"

I looked at Reggie, and saw agreement in her shining eyes. "It works," I said.

It was already kind of late, but we were all pretty wired from the rally. I wanted to stay out late and have a good time with my friends. The Homecoming game was in the afternoon, and I had to work the gift shop the first half, but that was okay. We were playing at home on Sunday, so there wasn't any real pressure to get to bed early on this night.

Reggie and I held hands and skipped down the sidewalk, feeling silly and free. Jesse and Bryan were laughing at us, and I could hear Brittany giggling. Melanie looked amused, but there was something else in her expression I couldn't put my finger on. I really didn't care, though, and I wasn't going to let her spoil our exuberant mood. Reggie and I outpaced them by about a block, and then waited for them at the next corner. The two of us were practically hopping around as we waited, and as soon as the group caught up to us, we skipped off again, leaving them behind to wallow in the echoes of our laughter.

On the last street corner, Reggie and I waited for the group, and we all walked the last half-block together to Jeremy's apartment building. Jeremy and his roommates lived on the second floor, and we climbed the wooden staircase that had been tacked onto the outside of the yellow frame house, to the plain wooden door. I had to look twice to make sure the heavy bass beat pounding from inside the apartment wasn't rattling the door in its frame, and I opened it and was almost forced backwards by the wall of sound. I held Reggie's hand and forced my way into the apartment, and into the crowd already there.

It was very warm in the apartment from all the hot, sweaty student bodies crammed into the place. There were a couple of window air conditioners struggling to cool the air, but with the door constantly opening and closing, and with all the people moving about, the poor little units just couldn't keep up. The door opened into the main living room area. Through the crowd I could see

bright light spilling from another room, and there was a second dim room ahead of us, which I assumed was a dining room or, more likely, a television room for the guys who lived there.

Our group kind of split up and found friends and acquaintances to greet. Many of the guys were teammates of ours, there with their dates, and it was kind of cool to see everybody on a social basis, and on their good behavior. As Reggie and I made our way deeper into the apartment, I was surprised to see Westy there, along with Jason Emerson, the kid who lived across the hall from us in the dorm. They both had girls standing with them. Westy saw me at the same time I spied him, and before I could turn away, he was waving us over to where he and Jason were standing.

"Yo, dude, what are you doing here?" shouted Westy over the music.

"Jeremy's a teammate," I said.

"No shit? I didn't even know he was on the team."

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"All the guys who live here are Sig Taus," he replied.

Well, there you go, I thought. I didn't even know Jeremy belonged to a fraternity, much less the same one my roomie had pledged. *Small fucking world.*

Westy suddenly remembered his manners, and he turned to his date, a short and busty brunette with big, thick glasses. "Yo, Sean, this is my date, Angelina Turner. Angelina, this is Sean Porter, my roommate."

"Pleased ta meetcha," said Angelina, thrusting out her hand. She had a twangy New Jersey accent that immediately grated on me. I silently asked myself, *Why am I surprised Westy found somebody irritating? It really shouldn't come as much of a shock.*

I introduced Reggie to the group, and Jason introduced his date, who was apparently Angelina's roommate. She was a very large girl with the unlikely name of Kitten Springerdale. She was hanging on to Jason's arm as if it was a turkey leg and she hadn't eaten in three days. The poor guy was hopelessly lost. She had to outweigh him by a good thirty pounds, and she wasn't about to let go of her prize for the evening. I could see the amusement on Reggie's face as she watched the two of them, but she was much too polite to say anything. I, on the other hand, had no such qualms.

"So, Kitten, are you and Jason enjoying yourselves?" I asked.

Kitten squeezed Jason's arm even tighter to her bosom, and Jason's face got even redder from the pressure.

"Oh, it's so wonderful," she gushed. "The... what do they call it, Jason?" She turned her flushed face to him, but just as he was about to answer, she turned back to us. "Gator Growl? That's right, Gator Growl, it was just so exciting, wasn't it? Wasn't Bob Hope just the most fun?" The inflection of her voice rose with each syllable, until it screeched almost into the ultrasonic. It was nearly enough to set my teeth to itching.

"We'll catch up to you later," I hurriedly said, backing away from Kitten's screech and Westy's leers that were directed at Reggie. "We're off to find where the bar is set up."

Jason tried to turn and point in the direction of the kitchen, where the brighter light was spilling through a doorway, but his movement was limited by what Kitten would allow. We got the idea anyway, and beat a hasty retreat in that direction.

We found Jeremy in the kitchen with Spencer and his date, Cynthia Yamamoto, a girl from Sacramento he had been seeing since the beginning of the school year. Cyn had been an exceptional gymnast all her life, but she got too burned out on it to continue beyond high school. She was trim and incredibly strong for such a small girl, with long, silky black hair that nearly reached her waist, and she had a perpetual smile. Just being around her tended to cheer me up, no matter what my mood, because of her upbeat nature.

Jeremy was acting as bartender, and he was really into his duties. He even was wearing a bowler hat and a long-sleeved shirt with garters on his upper arms. He must have been dying, though, in long sleeves, as there was a high sheen of perspiration on his flushed face as he moved around, filling plastic cups with ice and sodas, or beer.

He paused just long enough to recognize me. He gave Reggie an appreciative once-over. "What'll ya have, there, pardner?" he asked with a smile, turning his attention back to me.

I looked around, pretending confusion. "Did we suddenly get transported to the University of the Old West?" I asked.

Jeremy leaned over the long folding table that made up his makeshift bar, saying to Reggie, "This young man seems to be a mite... tetched, if you pardon me saying so. Is he a suitor of yours, ma'am?"

Reggie laughed and blushed. She held her hand to her cheek as she answered, "Why no, sir. He's just been following me around like a little lost pup."

Jeremy waggled his eyebrows at her. "Well, maybe I should jest he'p you find a home for this little lost pup, and then you and I could go spoonin'. What d'you say, there, cutie?"

"Spoonin'?" I asked. "Do you really know what spooning is?"

Jeremy, not taking his eyes off Reggie, said, "I know what it means today, champ."

Reggie blushed even more furiously and took a step back. Apparently she, too, knew its current meaning.

"Hey!" I said. "That's my date you're making suggestive remarks to, barkeep."

It was enough to break the spell. Jeremy looked embarrassed as he stood up and resumed his duties. "Oh, yeah," he mumbled by way of apology. "Sorry. I just got a little carried away there for a moment." He glanced back over at Reggie. "It's just that she's way too cute for a homely, skinny soccer dude like you, Porter."

"Oh, I don't think he's too skinny," said Reggie with a smile. "He's really kind of hunky, if you ask me."

"Well, if you're back on duty, how about drawing us a couple of beers?" I said. Reggie stepped closer to me and took my arm and swung it over her head to rest on her shoulder. She held onto my hand as it draped over her while we waited for Jeremy to put heads on our plastic glasses of beer from the iced keg on the floor behind him. He handed them to us with a flourish and a bow, and turned to help the next people beginning to crowd the table.

Reggie and I turned and joined Cyn and Spence, who had watched the entire interaction from the corner of the kitchen.

"I think he likes you," Cyn said to Reggie.

Reggie glanced back at Jeremy, now completely involved in handing out drinks to the crowd. "I just think he likes flirting," she said. She leaned in toward Cyn and said in a stage whisper, "Jocks. They're all the same."

"Hey!" said Spencer. "I resemble that remark!"

We all laughed at that, and the four of us headed out to brave the maelstrom of the party.

Reggie and I circulated, greeting friends, teammates, and acquaintances. Reggie knew a few people, mostly friends of Bryan and Melanie, and I introduced her to the rest of my teammates who were there. It was interesting to see so many of the guys I only knew on the soccer field in a more relaxed setting. Most of them had dates, but a few of them came to the party in a group. There were a lot of Sig Taus there, too, that I didn't know. Jeremy or Westy introduced us to a bunch, but, as usual, most of the names just slid off me. There were too many new faces, too many new names, for me to ever hope to recall. I suspected Reggie felt the same way, though she seemed to be a lot better at putting names to faces than I was.

We made small circles around the apartment, always with the kitchen bar as our focal point so we could refill often. I didn't want to get shitfaced like I had at LaShonda and Amari's party, but I wasn't averse to trying to maintain a happy comportment. Reggie, too, was willing to imbibe, and was feeling little pain. As we refilled, she would hold onto my arm in a friendly manner, and as the night progressed she kept on either holding my arm or holding my hand, always keeping track of me. I enjoyed the attention, even if I did feel a little guilty about it.

I also found myself gauging many of the girls at the party, in typical college boy fashion, until it occurred to me that I had a bona fide, one hundred percent female hottie at my side. I then began a more critical study of the girls, and discovered, almost to my astonishment, that most of them paled in comparison to my own date. Melanie, one of the most beautiful girls I had ever seen, was certainly the most attractive at the party; an argument could be made that she was the most beautiful on campus, and maybe even in the state of Florida, for that matter. And, to be honest, there were a couple of other girls who were very easy to look at, here at Jeremy's party, but Regina Coverdale could compare favorably with nearly any of them.

And here she was, holding my hand. I could feel myself puffing up with beer-soaked pride. Jesus, get a grip, Porter, I reminded myself. Remember Elvis? Remember Kayla? And don't forget that Reggie certainly remembers both of them, so keep it platonic, you untrustworthy and lecherous fool.

It wasn't much help, however. Elvis wasn't in the house, and Kayla was a thousand miles away, and the quite delectable Regina was by my side. It was all very ego-inflating, even if it was all innocence.

We had been there for quite awhile, and I was in the television room, perched on a windowsill talking with Dan Ortega and Brad Rickman. Reggie, Melanie and a couple of other girls were on a bathroom break, holding spots in line for each other in a back hallway. Jason sidled up to me, and he was alone, one of the few times all night I had seen him Kitten-less.

He leaned close to me and whispered, "Dude, we got a thing going on. C'mere, take a look."

He motioned for me to follow him, and he led me out the door and down the stairs.

"Where are we going?" I asked, but he just shushed me. He led me up the driveway to the back of the house, into the dark back yard. I could just make out a few people standing around on the grass.

Jason took me by the arm and said quietly, "Got a chick over there on a blanket, pulling a train. She's taking on anybody who wants a ride."

"What? What are you talking about?" I thought I knew, but I couldn't believe it.

"Cunt's giving it away, dude. Get in line, hop on, get your rocks off. I've already done her, and Westy's banging her right now." He was a shadow standing next to me. "Get over there before she gets too sloppy, Sean."

"Ugh. I don't think so," I said. I pulled away and headed back toward the side of the house.

"Okay, your loss, dude," I heard him say. "Me, I'm going back to rip off another piece."

What kind of girl would allow something like that to happen? I asked myself. I couldn't even imagine what would be going through her mind. Alcohol does funny things to some people. *Or maybe it was drugs.* It was a college party, after all. Anything was possible. I shivered, despite the warm night. Even thinking about the scene gave me the creeps.

I got upstairs and saw Kitten and Angelina walking together, looking around for their dates. I was tempted to go over to them and let them know where the boys

were, but I thought better of it. *Leave well enough alone, Porter. It's not your place to try to fix the world.*

I found Reggie, along with Melanie and Brittany, in the kitchen, getting refills. I walked up and put my arm around Reggie. She hadn't seen me coming up to her, and I caught her by surprise, but she looked up at me, smiled, and relaxed a little against me, comfortable with my arm around her. Her presence comforted me, too, after seeing what was going on in the back yard.

Maybe an hour later, I saw Kitten and Jason leaving the party. Kitten was in tears, and Jason looked like he was in pain. I didn't see Westy or Angelina anywhere around.

By about three in the morning, I was getting tired, and the crowd at the party was beginning to thin out. Spencer and Cyn had already left for parts unknown, and Jesse and Brittany were saying their goodbyes. I looked at Reggie, and she just nodded, instinctively knowing what I was asking. We made one last trip to the kitchen to say goodnight to Jeremy, but he had long since abandoned his post, and we never did find him. We caught up with Jesse and Brit as they were leaving, and we walked down the flight of stairs with them, out into the warm Florida night. I couldn't help but glance back toward the garage, but I didn't see anybody there. That particular party must have concluded.

The four of us walked comfortably down the sidewalk, each couple holding hands. Reggie and I were swinging our arms in big, loopy arcs as we walked, just happy to be with each other. Even though I had to work the first half of the football game, we had made plans to meet up and sit together with our friends during the second half, and I found myself looking forward to spending another afternoon with her.

We split off when we got to University Avenue. With the girls promising to find each other at the student entrance to the stadium before the game, Jesse and Brit turned and walked off in the direction of Jesse's apartment, and Reggie and I crossed over to campus, toward our dorms.

We got to the front door of Reggie's dorm, and I suddenly found I didn't want the night to end. I was enjoying myself with her, and I got the feeling she, too, was having a good time. We stood close together, whispering to each other, keeping to the shadows by the hedges that lined the front of her dorm building. There were other couples around us, sitting on the lawn or standing beneath a tree, and a few other kids were lounging around the doorways of the big brick building.

Finally, we ran out of things to say. We were standing there, still close together, but I was suddenly a little uncomfortable about how to end the night. *A handshake?* Too insulting. *A hug?* Maybe, if I pretended I was hugging my sister. Disconnected thoughts kept on jittering and bouncing within my typically empty skull. I realized Reggie was shifting around, too. Perhaps she was thinking the same thoughts. My hands were sweaty, and I was getting nervous.

From out of the gloom nearby, I heard a male voice. "Fer Chrissake, just kiss the lady, would ya?"

There was a tittering of laughter from all around us as I swiveled my head around, too aware of all the people nearby, now watching us. I put my arms around Reggie to draw her to me, and she lifted her arms and put them around my neck, lifting herself up to me. We kissed goodnight softly, tenderly. I felt her lips moving against mine as we made our tiny adjustments, aligning ourselves against each other, and the kiss became a lot less platonic. By the time we broke apart, we were both a little out of breath. Reggie's eyes were wide and surprised, and I was positive her expression was a mirror of my own.

Her eyes dropped, and she let go of me. She seemed flustered, and I certainly felt that way. What had happened to us tonight?

"I'd better go in," she whispered. She glanced up at me, smiled, and stood up on her toes and gave me a much more sisterly and quick kiss on my lips. She practically skipped off, turning just once more before she disappeared into the doorway to give me a quick wave.

I walked slowly back toward my own dorm, my head swirling with thoughts and memories of the evening. I knew it would be a long, long time before I would be able to find sleep that night.

Chapter 13 - Cause and Effect

Posted: December 04, 2003 - 11:39:36 pm

The shit really hit the fan on Wednesday after Homecoming. Fortunately, it was blowing in a different direction than at me.

Westy and Jason, along with everybody else from their pledge class, got summoned to their fraternity house that evening after dinner. They left the dorm thinking it was just another pledge hazing, joking a little and complaining about the short notice.

They returned to their rooms three hours later pale, very quiet, and still sweating.

I watched Westy rummaging around his desk, but he wasn't really looking for anything. He was just fidgeting.

"Westy, what's up?" I asked.

He glanced over his shoulder at me. "Nothing, dude. Just forget about it, okay?"

"Well, it's obvious something's fucked up your head, man. Don't forget I've got to live in this room, too, so why don't you tell me what's happening?" I persisted.

He sighed and shuffled over to the couch and tumbled down into it, throwing his knee over the arm and leaning back to rest his head on the back cushion.

"I fucked up, Sean," he said quietly. "You know that party last weekend? Friday?"

I nodded. "Where I saw you and Jason with your dates," I said. I was straddled across my desk chair, and I rested my chin on my hands on the back of the chair, ready to listen to his story.

He snorted. "Yeah. What a hairball that date turned out to be." He shook his head at the memory.

"What's the matter? Didn't get lucky?" I probably shouldn't have said it, but he deserved anything that was coming down the tube at him.

He gave a short, humorless bray of derisive laughter. "Not with what's-her-face."

"Angelina," I reminded him.

"Yeah. Angelina. Big tits, high morals, dried-up cunt." He shook his head as he remembered that night. "What a fuckin' waste of time and money she turned out to be. Couldn't even get a fucking handjob out of her. What a cunt."

"So, she's your problem here?"

"What? Angelina? No, man, what gave you that idea? She just wouldn't give it up, is all."

"So what's got you all fucked up tonight, then?" This conversation was getting irritating. I was fast losing what little sympathy I had started with toward Westy.

"Ah, it was that other shit from that night," he said, now a little hesitant.

"At the party?" I prompted.

"Yeah, that night at the party. Anyway, I saw a girl there I'd been out with before, you know?"

"A girl you'd been out with before? Or one of your one-night boinks?"

He smiled, a flash of the old arrogant Westy again. "It's all the same thing, Porter."

"Maybe to you," I said disgustedly. "Okay, so you saw her at the party."

"Her name was Amy. Shit, when I did her a couple of weeks ago I thought she was a fucking tramp, but I didn't think I would ever run into her again." He looked a little puzzled for a moment. "What do they call it when something odd happens to you, like something appears out of your past?"

"Serendipity? Or do you mean deja vu?"

"Yeah, serendipity, I think that's it." Westy settled in and continued. "I thought it was, like, serendipity, when I saw her at that party. I was a little buzzed, you know? And my fuckin' date was getting more and more uptight as the night went on, and I had the feeling I was gonna be shut out on nooky." He gave me another glimpse of that Westy grin I had come to despise. "Can't have a Friday night without a little action, you know."

"Yeah, right. My heart's bleedin' for you. So you ran into one of your old squeezes." I tried to get him back on track. I was really regretting offering a sympathetic ear.

"Man, where do you come up with this shit? An old squeeze. Is this all part of those sappy Midwestern values you've been saddled with?"

I stood up. "Fuck you, Westy. I'm here trying to give you a hand, and all you've got for me are insults?"

He sat up straighter, and actually managed to look apologetic. "Ah, shit, Porter, I'm sorry. You're right, I'm an asshole."

I sat back down, albeit reluctantly. "Get back to the party, then. I'm assuming this is all leading somewhere?"

His look turned sour and introspective again. "Yeah, sorry. It'll all come around in a minute, you'll see. Anyway, Amy was at the party, hanging all over Arthur Burns - he's one of the Sig Tau brothers who live in that apartment, you know?"

One of Jeremy Peters' roommates. "Okay," I said. I motioned for him to go on.

"Okay, okay, don't get your panties in a knot," he said, a little roughly. He slumped back down on the couch and squirmed around to get comfortable. "Amy was there, I think she was stoned to the max, and I was buzzed and horny, like I said, so I got this crazy idea. I cornered her one time when Angelina and Kitten were in line for the can, and I sweet-talked her into a quickie. We couldn't use the bedrooms, because we'd have had to pass by the line waiting to use the john, and Angelina would have spotted me, so we snuck downstairs and found a blanket in the back yard."

I knew where this was heading. It was like watching a car wreck in slow motion, fascinating and morbid, but still irresistible.

"She peeled off her panties in about record time, Sean, it was really something." He smiled again at the recollection, and then remembered the consequences, and he sobered up quickly. "Anyway, she was laying there spread wide, so I dropped my own shorts, hopped on, and rammed home. When I climbed off her, Jason was there, watching, so I asked him if he wanted a ride. Amy wasn't particular, so he just pulled his dick out and hopped into the saddle for sloppy seconds."

"Yuck," I said.

"What's the matter, Porter? Never had sloppy seconds?" His lip curled. "Wait'll you try sloppy sixths or sevenths, dude."

"Ain't never gonna happen, Bridges. Skip the gory details, okay? Then what happened?"

"Got a weak stomach, Porter?" He saw the look on my face, and his own expression was hard. "Yeah, I know, I'm a degenerate. So what?"

"Hey, what you do on your own time is your own business," I said. "You want to be an asshole, go right ahead."

"I may be an asshole sometimes, but at least I'm not crying every night because I'm young, dumb and full of cum," he said with a knowing smirk.

"Nope, you're not," I said tightly. "You're just hanging on at the frat house by your fingertips. What happened with the girl in the back yard?"

He sat up a little straighter. "Okay, anyway, so while Jason's taking his turn with her, getting his rocks off, I run back upstairs and let a few of my pledge buddies know what's going down, and there's a line forming to the right. I figure I'd better get back in there before Amy gets too loose and squishy to be any good, so I do her a second time, and Jason hops back on, and by the time she had done everybody in line, that bitch had taken about twenty loads, and she was still on her back, squirming around and moaning for more."

"Jesus Christ, that's disgusting," I muttered.

"Yeah, it is," Westy said, almost happily. "Best damn night in this rathole of a college yet."

"For Chrissakes, Westy," I said.

He waved me off. "Anyway, the upshot of it all is that Kitten caught Jason with his fly open, put two and two together, and flew off the handle. She told Angelina about it, and that was all she wrote. Angelina took off, Kitten grabbed Jason and dragged him off to look for her, so I had no choice but to tag along."

The memory of that part of the night wasn't very pleasant, apparently, because his expression was dour again.

"So, I found out later somebody found Amy wandering around dripping cum all over the floor, and then Arthur and Jeremy and some of the other brothers started asking her about what had happened, and they found out about my involvement in it all..." He paused, clearly uncomfortable about telling this part of the story. *It figures, I thought. Consequences just aren't something an asshole like Westy would consider before jumping in on something.*

"And?" I, on the other hand, was looking forward to listening to him confess about the aftermath.

"And so tonight the brothers called the entire pledge class over to the house, and they really reamed us out. Me and Jason really got hammered, not only by the brothers, but by the other guys in our pledge class, too. Shit!" Westy pounded his fist on the arm of the couch. "It's not like they weren't willing to take their turn at her, and yet it's like they're blaming me for getting them in trouble!"

"The thankless bastards," I said facetiously.

Westy glanced at me, wondering if I was serious. The look on my face must have told him I wasn't.

"All right, so maybe it was kind of my fault," he grudgingly admitted. "Even so..."

"So how much trouble are you in with the fraternity?"

"On probation," he spat. "Jason, too. We ain't got no freedom at all. Starting tonight, the two of us have to spend every spare minute either at the fraternity house, or in the company of a designated brother. Homework gets done there, and they're going to check it to make sure it's done right. If I gotta go to the library, somebody will go with me. I can't hardly go to the can by myself, for Chrissake."

"So you're not going to be around here very much," I said. Inwardly I was smiling, though I was careful to not let it show on my face. *Things were looking up.*

"Just to sleep," he said. "From now until the end of the semester."

"Well," I observed, "it ought to keep you from finding mischief."

"It'll do that," he agreed. "Besides that, training for the swim team began this week. I ain't gonna have energy to go sniffing poontang during the week, anyway."

"You really have a way with words," I said sourly. I felt like I needed to take a shower, and that was just from talking to Westy. He got up and started rummaging around again. *If he was looking for a conscience, he wasn't going to find it in his dresser drawers,* I thought to myself. I did manage to keep my mouth shut, though, even when he turned to me a little expectantly. *Was he looking for absolution? Understanding?* He wouldn't find it with me. No way was I going to shake his hand. I almost looked around the room to see if there was a ten-foot pole handy, just so I could say I wouldn't touch him with it.

I suddenly felt the urge to call Reggie to see if she wanted to meet me for coffee or something. I needed to talk to somebody sane, so I could rinse the Westy taint from my psyche. I waited, watching as Westy packed up his backpack with books so he could study at the fraternity house. He left a few minutes later, still grumbling under his breath. He left our door open and stepped across the hall to pound on Jason's door. Music was floating down the hall from several rooms, so I didn't hear them leave, but I was sure they had plenty to talk to each other about as they walked over to the Sig Tau house to begin their probation.

Despite my feeling at that moment to call her, I resisted. I tried to concentrate on my own homework that evening, and for the next couple of weeks after Homecoming I tried to cool down my association with Reggie just a little. Beer is a wonderful relaxing beverage, but I had learned that both she and I were prone to being more... attentive when under its influence, and in this instance, attentiveness was not what we needed. We still went out on the weekends together, but we were both trying to fit back into the molds we had originally made for ourselves. Guilt, even implied guilt of the soul, can sometimes be a blessing in disguise.

Even so, on our Saturday all-day bus ride up to the tournament in Washington, D.C., I found myself thinking about Reggie. It was a little dismaying when I finally recognized the truth I had been avoiding for a long time: I already missed her, and I had only been away from her for about eight hours, having spent most of Friday night with her at another party, this one at Jesse and Bryan's apartment.

Christ, Porter, Reggie isn't the girl you're supposed to be missing. What is wrong with you?

Which brought me to another naked truth: I had been away from Kayla for so long, I barely missed her anymore. This truth, instead of setting me free, only made me sadder. That was not what I wanted, and I knew it was not what Reggie wanted, either. It was just another tangled knot my clumsy fingers would never be able to untie.

I wandered up and down the aisle of the bus, stopping to talk to friends, hoping to find a conversation that was involved enough to yank me out of my melancholy, but all I could achieve was a temporary salve to my nagging conscience. I decided the only way to purge myself was to write a long letter to Kayla, so I propped myself up against a window toward the back of the bus and pulled a notebook of lined paper out of my pack. I rummaged around until I found a pen, propped my biology textbook on my knees, and began to

laboriously put together some coherent sentences. As I began writing about the mundane events of my college life, I deliberately left out any mention of Reggie, describing instead the recent hard life of my roommate, tales of Jesse and Brittany, and moaning about my continued bad luck playing gin against Spencer Goldman.

A couple of hours later, I discovered I was in a much better mood. The combination of concentrating on my task and knowing I was writing to my girl back home created a surprisingly welcome ache. I wanted to see her, to touch her, to talk to her so badly it was nearly a physical feeling. When I realized what it was, though, I embraced the wanting and the emptiness. *It was Kayla, just as it had nearly always been Kayla.* I was almost happy in my misery, having rediscovered that which had been missing.

I signed off on my letter, folded it carefully, and put it back in my pack. I settled back, crossed my arms, and let my head fall back, ready for a nap. *With luck I would dream of my white-haired angel,* I thought lazily as I drifted off.

I wasn't quite that lucky. No dreams of Kayla, or of any girl, for that matter. I did manage to sleep for a couple hundred boring miles, but then I was up again, and faced with another choice: study or try to win back some of my money from Goldman. I opted to play cards, and we acquired an audience of equally bored teammates as we battled for four-suited supremacy.

For once, I walked away a winner, if only by a slim margin. Spencer was happy to mark down the fact that I outpointed him in this particular contest. He was undeterred, and with good reason, knowing as well as I that he would recoup this loss another time.

The bus pulled in to the Capitol Hotel, our home away from home for the next week, after dark. We were all anxious to get off the bus and put our feet back on solid ground again, and we piled off the bus and stood around as Eddie and our driver crawled into the storage space beneath the coach and started sliding our individual gear bags and suitcases out.

I grabbed my stuff and lugged it into the hotel lobby, where Pick was stationed. He doled out room keys to the designated holders as we checked in. Pick had decided on who was staying with whom, and he elected to spread everybody out. Instead of rooming with Spencer, Bryan, or Jesse, the teammates I was closest friends with, I was in a double with Luke Severin. Luke and I had hung

around together on occasion, and neither of us had a problem with it. We could live together for a week without getting on each other's nerves, I knew.

We all stowed our gear in our rooms, and then met in a reserved room in the restaurant for a late dinner. By the time the soup arrived, I was ready to nod off, thinking longingly of stretching out between nice, cool sheets. Everybody else looked as wiped out as I felt. We finished up our meal and called it a night.

We had our first practice scheduled for the next morning. Our bus was waiting for us after we finished a light breakfast, and we rode over to one of the practice fields at Georgetown University. We started slowly, walking three laps around the field, and then broke into an easy jog for three more laps. We stopped and stretched while Pick, Eddie, Stan Harvard, and Marv Allison, our equipment manager, got our practice balls and jerseys out and ready.

We broke out into our Alpha and Omega practice teams and took the field. Pick gave us some final instructions, and we spent the next hour working.

By this time I was just as comfortable in midfield as I had ever been in my typical defensive position. Pick still started me every game in my right back spot, but during every scrimmage I played up. I moved over to the center, switching with Max, so often that we hardly had to communicate about the switch anymore. He would see me start to move, and he would angle over to cover my territory, practically on instinct.

Sometimes we would switch because of the movement of the ball or the positioning of an opposing player, and sometimes we would switch simply because of a gut feeling I might have. Either way, our switch nearly always rippled through both teams. Cause and effect: when Alpha and Omega saw Max and me move, adjustments were made all up and down the field. Perhaps an Alpha back turned and passed to a player other than his original intended target, or maybe a forward sidestepped and changed direction. It wasn't long before these changes in tactic became evident to all my teammates.

The biggest change, though, occurred early on in our practice sessions when Max and I shifted. My Omega teammates, watching what we were doing, became much more fluid in their coverages. The willingness to change up or back, as well as side to side, made our scrimmage team a lot more versatile, and we covered the ball much better. Sometimes, especially during the early learning phase, we found ourselves bunching up, but shouted instructions from the captains up and back usually corrected it. Alpha was having a much harder time creating space and moving the ball into a quality scoring position.

Alpha Team was also observant, however, and they very quickly adapted, especially when they saw Max and me shift. They, too, began to utilize speed and slippery coverages, adjusting to Omega's changes. Ehrlinger and Porter were the triggers, it seemed, and the ripple effect spread through both scrimmage teams. Once the positions taken up by Alpha became as changeable as Omega's, the complexion of the entire Gator team changed. No longer could another team concentrate on Jesse Wilhoit attacking from the middle, or Frenchy defending on the left. Anymore, Jesse could very well be handling midfield duties from the left or the right, and Frenchy could be found up and in the middle right next to Jesse. It played hell with other teams' scouting reports on us, I was sure, a fact that no doubt tickled Pick. He just stood on the sidelines with Stan, looking like he had swallowed a canary, as he watched his team transform on the field.

We finished up our practice and got back on the bus. We had another short practice scheduled for the afternoon, and our first game, against George Mason University, was the next afternoon. Our practice in the afternoon consisted mainly of shooting and passing drills, enough to put the ball on our feet but not enough to feel like we were working ourselves to death. We finished up with a two-mile run around the practice fields and the stadium. Just for kicks we took practice balls with us and played passing games among us, working on keeping the ball in the air as we ran. It was good practice, and it made running miles more fun as we did our laps.

After we got back to the hotel and had showered, I called the hotel where the South Carolina team was staying and talked to my old buddy from home, Trent Abbott. He had called me a few days before to let me know where they were staying during the tournament, and we wanted to get together with Eric Johnson, who was staying in his dorm on campus at the University of Maryland. I got permission from Pick for Jesse and me to leave the hotel for the evening, and we took a cab over to Trent's hotel. From there we all took the cab out to College Park, so we could meet Eric at a pizza joint just off campus.

When we arrived at the restaurant, a local dive called Charlie's, the three of us tumbled out of the cab and raced each other into the dim interior. I spotted Eric sitting in a booth against the wall. He saw me at about the same time, and stood up as we approached.

"Porter, Goddamn, it's good to see you," he said, holding out his hand.

I didn't bother shaking it, but instead I stepped in to him and wrapped him up in a big bear hug.

"You're even uglier than I remember you," I said, my voice a little husky.

"You always did have poor eyesight," he retorted. He patted my back as we hugged.

We finally broke apart, and Eric shook Jesse's hand. "You keepin' this young one in line?" he asked.

"You have no idea what a pain in the ass he can be sometimes," said Jesse. "Just ask his good friend Frenchy when you meet him."

Jesse and I had a good laugh over that one, and ended up explaining a little about my history with Frenchy to Eric and Trent.

"Sounds like he could out-weasel Weasel," said Trent.

"Weasel had redeeming qualities," I said. "Frenchy hasn't really shown any as yet."

"He's a helluva player, though, you've got to admit," Jesse reminded me.

"Yes, he is, and he'll be glad to show you when you run into him, pal." I pointed to Eric, who would no doubt be faced up against him if we played each other later in the tournament.

"Sounds like fun," he said. "Coach has been working on my takeoffs and my sprinting speed. Sounds like the kind of matchup I can test myself against."

"Jesus, you mean you're even faster than you were last year?" I asked.

Eric just smiled, which was confirmation enough for me.

"Well, I hope it isn't us who lights the fire on you," said Jesse.

"Oh, I wouldn't worry too much about it," offered Trent. "Once he's got a ball to worry about, it slows him up something considerable."

Even Eric had to laugh at that.

The four of us spent most of that evening in a sausage-and-cheese pizza extravaganza, catching up on college life for each of us. We bragged about our teams, laughed over some of our teammates (of course, tales of Frenchy were a big hit with Trent and Eric), and brought each other up to date with news of home.

I asked Trent about his girlfriend, Danielle Nickerson, and he told us they were moving into an apartment together next year. They didn't want Danielle's parents to find out about it quite yet, so he asked us to keep the news to ourselves until they could break it to her parents over Christmas.

Eric, in turn, said that he and Keisha had been having some problems, and I probably wouldn't see her this week. Something didn't ring true, but he was so reticent to talk about it I didn't press him.

In short order, though, we were back to being the three amigos once again, goofing off and carrying on almost like high school. Jesse hung back just a little, content to let the three of us be ourselves for the evening, smiling at us and laughing with us. Perhaps he was remembering his own high school friends, also, as he watched our interplay.

Almost before we knew it, it was time for the three of us to head back to our hotels. It was nearly midnight, early for college kids, but we still had a curfew to obey. We promised to catch up with Eric during the week at the tournament. I really wanted to watch Maryland play, not only to see Eric on the field once again, but to scout out a potential opponent. I was also planning on watching Trent's team play the next day, since they were taking the field against Kentucky right after our game.

Eric stayed with us outside the restaurant until the cab came. Jesse, Trent and I tumbled into the back seat, shouting out to our friend as he turned and, with a final wave, walked off into the darkness, back toward campus.

We dropped Trent off at his hotel, and finally made it back to the Capitol, just making our curfew. Luke was already asleep in our room, so I undressed in the dark so I wouldn't disturb him. I brushed my teeth and washed my face, turned out the bathroom light and stumbled in the dark, stubbing my toe against the bed frame before finally climbing into my own bed. I sent out a silent prayer to Kayla, and then rolled over onto my side. Tomorrow was the first tournament day, and I was looking forward to the week.

Chapter 14 - Tournament Week

Posted: December 19, 2003 - 10:26:40 pm

"Okay, team, listen up," Eddie called out. "Coach has some announcements and some last-minute changes."

We all paused as we were dressing for our first game. Pick came through the door into the locker room, ubiquitous clipboard in his hand, and stood next to Eddie until he was sure he had our undivided attention.

"Now, George Mason University is seeded fifteen in this here tournament, but I don't want you boys to take them any lightly than you do a conference opponent. Y'all understand me?"

He waited until he heard us all shout out, "Yes, sir!"

"Sean Porter? Ah, there you are, son. You and Stuart Early, I've got some special instructions for the two of you, and the rest of the team needs to be aware of what you two are gonna be doing, okay?"

"Okay, Coach," I said. What did he cook up now? I wondered if Stuart was going to not like this very much.

"First of all, I want to reiterate to all of you that I am really likin' the way everybody is moving on the field. You all are playing' very fluid positions, and yet the entire playing surface is well covered. That's payin' attention to what's happenin' out there, and I want you all to know that I like it a lot. It's going to give some teams fits, I know, when they're up against it."

He looked around, making sure we were all paying attention. "That said, I'm gonna throw another little firecracker into the powder room. Porter and Early, I'm starting you in your customary positions, but I want you two to be particularly aware of each other out there today. I want Porter to follow the path of the ball and switch with Early whenever practical, and everybody else can feed off the results. Stuart, you played a lot of defense before, so I'm well aware you know your way around back there. Just keep an ear out for your keeper's instructions. Understand?"

"Yessir, Pick," replied Stuart.

"Now, that ain't quite all," Pick continued. "Porter and Spencer Goldman, I want you two to play interchangeable midfield. I want you two to be constantly thinkin' about workin' a two-man game out there. Anytime one of you happens upon the ball, the other had better be considerin' how he's gonna be receiving it. You know the drill, boys. Open spaces, give-and-go, blindside passes. You two are to be aware of each other every damn second out there. Got it?"

"Coach? You want us to provide your firepower in the middle?" I wanted to make sure I understood what he was expecting from me. "I'm not much of an offensive-minded player, which you know. What are you trying for here?"

I saw Max Ehrlinger nodding his head in agreement. Even though he was Spencer's backup, I knew he was thinking he didn't want to be the third-position player at midfield if Coach Pick suddenly decided I would make a better midfielder than defender for this particular team. With Dan Ortega pretty much locked in at defense, it was Max who was looking at moving down to third-team status, and we both knew it. He was too smart to open his mouth and say something about it, though.

"Good point, Mr. Porter," said Pick. "Here's what I'm thinking. George Mason's strongest players are in the middle, right down the centerline. Forward, midfielder, sweeper, stopper, keeper. When the Patriots are attacking our net, I want you back there in your customary position, helping to keep them out of our goal. When we're on the offensive, I want you up and ready to muddy up the middle for just the same reason. Your defensive mindset will help us plug up their field of play, and I'm hopin' you will be able to keep the ball on our feet by harryin' their quality guys."

"Okay," I said doubtfully. I glanced over at Spencer. He looked as uneasy as I felt about this experiment.

"Now, before you start raisin' objections, let me say that I'm leavin' it up to you when to call for the switch. I ain't expectin' you to dash on over there as soon as the ball crosses midfield, but if'n you see an offensive or defensive reason for you to be in the middle, that's where I want you to be."

"Why don't you just start me in the middle, then?" I asked.

His eyes crinkled as he smiled. "By gum, there's an idear I might just have to use up sometime," he said, rather too smoothly. "Nope, I want them Patriots to find you where they are expectin' you at the start of the game, Sean. But I want 'em surprised by where you might end up."

"We'll give it a try," I said. It was a lot of field movement for everybody involved in Pick's scheme. I was a little concerned about the weather and its effects. It was unseasonably warm, and with some humidity added in, I knew our legs would start to misbehave if we found ourselves in a dogfight. I turned to Dan Ortega and Max Ehrlinger. "Be ready to hop in, guys. By the end of each half I'd be willing to bet one of us will be ready to grab a breather."

"No problem, Sean. I'll be ready," said Dan. Dan was always ready. I knew it, and he knew I knew it, but I felt more comfortable communicating it, anyway.

"You got it," agreed Max. He was just as anxious to play as Dan was, and maybe more so.

Spencer's intelligent face was bright with anticipation. "I think this is going to work," he said.

Stuart shrugged. "It's a lot of movement just to maintain our coverages," he said.

"That's kind of the point, though, I think," I told him. He thought about it for a moment, and then nodded in agreement.

"Yeah, I guess it is, at that," he said.

I just happened to glance over at the coaches right then, and I saw Pick and Eddie put their heads together. Pick had a catlike grin on his face, and Eddie looked like he had just put one over on somebody. I hoped it wasn't me.

By game time it was sunny and almost hot, and there was a strong wind blowing straight down the field. Keeper punts and long, looping passes were going to be tricky to judge, and corner kicks were going to be especially dangerous in those conditions. There didn't seem to be any gusts that veered off the field. The wind was relentless, blowing from end line to end line.

We went through our warm-up drills and did our laps. Going with the wind I felt like there was a gentle hand pushing me along, but running against the wind was a struggle. Warming up wasn't too bad, but I knew that as the game progressed, I would feel like I was trying to push my way through cotton candy moving in that direction. Another niggling worry was the way the wind seemed to rob me of my breath when I was running into it. Sometimes it seemed like I couldn't fill my lungs, and I was concerned that feeling would hit me sometime during the game. I tried to shake off the feeling, concentrating instead on feeling the wind on my skin as I jogged.

The Patriots won the coin toss and elected to start with the ball. That gave us the choice of which side of the field to defend, and we chose to defend against the wind to start. The captains of the George Mason team looked a little surprised that we were giving up the advantage of the wind, but we had reasoned that it would take them several plays to judge the force of the wind on the ball, effectively reducing its advantage for several minutes. Additionally, we wanted them to feel comfortable playing with the wind at their backs during the first half, so that the struggle against the wind in the second might take an even bigger toll on them. We were gambling that the wind would continue to blow for the next two hours, but we all thought it was an acceptable risk, especially against the bottom seed in our draw.

True to our plan, the Patriots started with the ball, and almost immediately misjudged its effect on the ball's flight path. Their first pass sailed over everybody's head, and Rick came out into the front of the box and gathered it up. He held the ball for a moment until he was satisfied we could move the ball fairly unimpeded, and he rolled it over to me. I passed it up to Spencer, who advanced the ball to the midfield stripe.

Spencer sent the ball up to Jesse on our first offensive set, and almost immediately he found himself double-teamed. Jesse tried moving the ball over, but when he did, we discovered the hole in our grand design of taking advantage of the wind's velocity.

Our plan was only partially thought out, as we quickly discovered. We, too, had trouble adjusting to how the ball was moving in the wind. Our passes were almost always short, and it was pretty easy for our opponents to cut off even a vigorously struck pass. Jesse's first attempt to get rid of the ball resulted in a takeaway, and the Patriots were on the move. Their right midfielder tried a long pass through the air, and the ball sailed way over the head of his intended target. It took three big bounces and ended up out of bounds for a goal kick for us.

Rick played it smart, though, and he passed the ball over to me on the goal kick, rather than taking a chance on having the ball fly back into his face on a long kick. I took the ball and moved up with it, making sure I struck the ball a little harder than I normally would as I ran. The left forward for George Mason came up to challenge me as I controlled the ball, but his angle was bad. I faked a pass over to Brad in the middle, which made the forward stutter and hesitate as he considered changing direction. It was enough of an opening for me to be able to juke him and move past him, toward the midfield stripe.

The Patriots center-mid and the left midfielder both converged on me. I used my right instep to cross the ball over to Spencer, and I took off into the wind.

Spencer one-touched the ball back to me on a give-and-go, and then he dropped back into my coverage as I picked up the ball and took it into Patriots territory.

The Patriots players were not expecting me to advance the ball beyond the midfield stripe, apparently, because they covered my forwards and midfielders, leaving me pretty much alone. Once they saw their error, their stopper peeled off his coverage and moved up to intercept. Once more I passed the ball off on a square cross, this time to Bryan, and again I moved upfield. Bryan trapped the ball, took a couple of sliding steps as he rolled the ball with the top of his foot, changing its direction, and then he threaded a pass back to me in the middle. I was now behind the stopper, who had followed the path of the ball from me to Bryan, and I picked up the pass unobstructed. I was only able to take two or three steps with the ball before the Patriots stopper moved on me from behind and their sweeper came up on me from in front. I saw Jesse swinging out into open space, and I powered the ball hard toward him. Even with as much foot as I put on the ball, it was starting to slow to a stop by the time Jesse was able to pick it up, with the defender closing on him fast. Jesse managed to slip the defender just enough so he could put the ball in the air, aiming for the net, but the wind pushed the ball out past the eighteen-meter mark. I desperately leapt up, hoping against hope I could at least graze the ball into a different direction with my head, but I missed, and the ball sailed by me. The Patriots stopper managed to jump up and scissor-kick high enough to get his ankle on the ball, bringing it down to the ground. Before he could do anything with it, though, I ran at him and slide-tackled the ball out from under his feet. We both tumbled to the ground, with the stopper landing hard on my outthrust leg.

The Patriots stopper scrambled up, but my leg wouldn't work very well. All I could do was roll around on the ground, grimacing as I tried to bend my knee to get some feeling back into it. Brad had gathered in the ball on my tackle, and he quickly passed it over to Jesse, who kicked it out of bounds, stopping the game so Eddie could come out and see what was wrong.

By the time Eddie trotted out to where I was, I was wishing I hadn't wanted feeling to rush back into my leg quite so quickly. It hurt a lot, so much so I wasn't sure I could get up without help. Eddie crouched down, his face looking worried.

"Where's it hurt, Sean?" he asked, glancing down toward my knee clutched in both hands.

"Everywhere, man," I groaned. I had some movement in the joint by then, and I flexed the knee. Nothing seemed to be wrong there, and I was beginning to think maybe it was just a delayed reaction to the collision. It seemed like, if I let it, my

calf would start to tighten up and bruise, but if I could get up and walk it off, I might be okay.

"Give me a hand up, would you?" I asked. By then, Jesse, Tad, and Bryan were there, too, and four sets of hands reached out to help me to my feet. I tentatively put my foot down and put some weight on my leg. Miraculously, everything held together. The referee came over to ask if I needed assistance off the field, and Eddie shook him off. I had to come out for at least one play, but I could walk on my own. Eddie and I walked slowly off the field. Dan Ortega started taking off his warm-up jacket, but Pick motioned for him to sit back down. I flexed my leg, and even jogged a few steps as we moved toward our bench, and I heard a smattering of applause from the Patriots, a show of sportsmanship.

Pick opted to play a man down rather than take me out of the game until the half ended, so I walked the sidelines, loosening up my abused leg and trying to keep my muscles warm. George Mason took the throw-in to continue with the game. They passed the ball over to our side in deference to the injury stoppage, and play resumed. As soon as he could, Pick put me back into the game. By that point Stuart had moved back to the right-side middle to try to shore up our defense in the center of the field while we were playing short. When the referee waved me in, I took my customary spot defending on the right.

We played them tight the rest of the half, and even managed to sneak a goal in on a squibbed corner kick. Frenchy took the corner and tried to keep the ball low and hard, and he ended up hitting the ground with his foot before striking the ball. The ball rolled out, and Spencer moved out to gather it up. He tried to thread the needle on a pass to Bryan close in by the goalpost. Bryan was pushed from behind, but he still managed to heel the ball, perhaps intending on sending it over toward Jesse. Instead, the ball ricocheted off his instep, catching everybody by surprise, and ended up rolling into the net right by the near post. The Patriots keeper made a dive for it, but was a half-second too late. We found ourselves with a 1-0 lead at the half, and the prospect of playing with the wind in the second half.

As we huddled up before the whistle to start the second half, I looked over at Spencer. "You have any problem with me starting in your position?"

He looked at me for a moment, and then turned to Stuart. "You wanna play more D?"

Stuart looked from Goldman to me. "Okay by me," he said.

Spencer nodded, and then turned back to me and nodded again. "Let's do it," he said forcefully.

Pick, on the outside of the huddle, just watched and listened, not saying a thing. His body language spoke of complete agreement, however.

We broke our huddle and trotted out to take our positions. I looked over at the sidelines as the Patriots lined up, and I saw Pick, Stan, and Eddie standing side by side, studying the playing field and talking to each other, presumably about their observations.

The referee blew his whistle to start the clock, and the game was on. Jesse took the opening tap from Spencer, and turned to pass the ball back to me, fifteen meters behind them. At the kickoff, Juan Maria and Spencer had taken off down the right sidelines, and Bryan and Jeremy mirrored them on the left. If our plan didn't work, we were going to be caught very thin in the middle of the field, but the wind was in our favor. I launched a pass up into the breeze toward the right corner, and it sailed downfield, aided by the wind. It hit the turf in front of Juan Maria, and he had to sprint to catch it before it bounced out of bounds. His last-second effort saved it, and he managed to juggle the ball just enough to get it back under control before he was forced to pass it off to Spencer.

In the meantime, I had run right past the Patriots forward, who was advancing a few meters into our space in anticipation, and their front midfielder, who was also thinking offense. Their sweeper picked me up, but Jeremy, our left midfielder, angled in behind the sweeper to get the attention of their stopper. Bryan was being covered by the defenseman on our left, but the fast play deep into Patriots territory resulted in two of our players being left open. Jesse, positioning himself on the left for a cross, was unattended, as was Spencer, with the ball.

The defender who had forced Juan Maria to pass the ball had to make a choice. Either he had to stay with his coverage, or he had to peel off and challenge Spencer, the ball handler, at least until their midfielders could recover and fall back on defense. The defender opted to stay with Juan Maria, which meant either the sweeper or the stopper had to move on Spencer.

The sweeper, probably reasoning that his midfielders could cover me quicker than they could fall back to take over the stopper's lanes, tried to check me with a shoulder before going after Spencer. I sidestepped and moved behind him, away from the approaching midfielder, and Spencer let him commit to him before looping a pass over his head to me. Spencer aimed the ball a little behind me, letting the wind push it up to the open space in front of me. It bounced twice and

settled just as I was running up to it. It hit it in stride with the laces of my right foot, trying to keep the ball low enough so that the wind didn't pick it up but still trying to take advantage of its push. The ball launched off my foot like it was rocket propelled, on a low trajectory toward the net. It was traveling at warp speed as it passed over the ground, and it was still rising as it fit in the miniscule space between the top rail and the outstretched hand of the leaping keeper. It was my first tournament goal, a strike that felt just as sweet as it looked. I ran up to Jesse and leaped into the air, and he caught me around my waist and held me up as he carried me in celebration back toward our side of the field. In moments, we were overrun by our teammates, who piled on, until I found myself at the bottom of a mound of screaming, yelling players, all wanting to pound my back and chest in congratulations.

We finally untangled and resumed our positions for the restart. The fast goal lifted us up, and we played an inspired second half, stopping George Mason cold before they could mount any serious attack. They were able to achieve only one modest breakaway, down their right side, but Frenchy, pulling out the stops, put a quick end to it, seeming to yank the ball right out from beneath the feet of the Patriots forward who was dancing with the ball, seeking an opening. Frenchy did a little trick with his feet, and suddenly he had possession. The Patriots player looked confused as he gazed down, fully expecting to see the ball still on his shoes, but Frenchy was already five meters upfield from him with the purloined ball.

Our first tournament game was a victory, 4-0. We packed up our bags and left the sidelines just as South Carolina was arriving. I stopped and talked to Trent for just a moment, and he introduced me to some of his friends. They were a good group of guys, but I didn't want to get too friendly with them quite yet. I had the feeling I would be meeting them again, this time on the field of battle at RFK Stadium.

After our team meeting in the locker room, we just had time for a quick shower before the Wildcats of Kentucky took on the Fighting Gamecocks of South Carolina. Pick encouraged us to stay and watch the next games, and everybody wanted to relax in the stands and study the teams. We got to the grandstand just before kickoff, and sat in a section Stan and Marv were holding for us. We spent the next several hours enjoying the warm day, now that our work was done, eating outrageous amounts of hot dogs and fries, pizza and nachos. Occasionally we even watched a little soccer being played.

We had a day off before we played our second game. Jesse and I took a cab over to Georgetown to watch Eric and his Maryland team take on Ohio State. We stayed afterward and sat with the Terps while Purdue battled the University of Connecticut. I had had more than enough of stadium food the day before, so Jesse, Eric and I left at halftime and found a KFC restaurant nearby. Fried chicken was an improvement over corn dogs.

We decided to eat inside, away from the bugs and the relentless sunshine.

"Say, Sean, Trent wants to get together Thursday night," Eric said. "Danielle's driving up and wants to go out to dinner with us all."

"Sounds good," I said. "Jesse? You and Bryan want to come along?"

He shrugged. "Sure. I'll double-check with Watkins, but I doubt he's got plans. Probably would like a break from watching the tube in a hotel room."

"Free HBO is great for one night," agreed Eric. "Two or more is stretching it, though."

"You got that right," said Jesse.

"What about Keisha?" I asked. I knew it was kind of a sore subject, but I wasn't going to let him forget that she was a friend of Danielle's, and a friend of mine, too. "Think she'll join us?"

"I don't know, man," Eric said.

"You want me to call her and ask her?" I asked. "I'd like to see her."

"Nah, I'll talk to her," he said. "Don't worry about it."

"Okay," I said, though I was worried about it, despite his admonitions.

We dumped our empty boxes and cups in the garbage receptacle and went back to the stadium to watch the second half, with the question of Keisha coming along still unresolved.

Our next game was against Princeton, who had beaten Marshall University to advance. Pick started me at right defense again, but our coverages were now so fluid our starting positions were practically reduced to just naming conventions. Everybody on the field was so in tune with everybody else, it was almost like

telepathy. The only people you could pretty much count on being in their positions were Rick in the net, and Brad right in front of him. They became the anchors of our defense, giving out instructions and moving people around as needed. Sometimes it was Frenchy, Tad, and me; it could just as often have been Luke, Stuart, and Spencer. Occasionally, even Juan Maria and Bryan found themselves defending, though they were never both back at the same time.

Jesse Wilhoit, an unrepentant offensive player, could usually be found up and in the middle, his customary position, but even he took to roaming in the midfield upon occasion. He never dropped back into defensive territory, but he was our strongest offensive weapon, and he knew it. He stayed up in our opponents' territory most often, so he could use his skills to our best advantage.

It made our team unpredictable, it made opponents' scouting reports a lot less useful, and it made the Gators a much stronger team. We strolled through Princeton, tallying up an easy shutout, and awaited the winner of the UConn-North Carolina game. Two games in, and Florida and South Carolina were the only two teams to record double shutouts, no goals against. It looked more and more like we would be playing Trent's team for the title on Sunday.

Danielle Nickerson was due in on Thursday afternoon. She was planning on driving up in time to watch Trent's game against Georgetown. Thursday was an off day for us, so Coach put us through a light practice session in the afternoon. I was going to miss the South Carolina-Georgetown game, but we had already made plans to meet for dinner at a local Italian restaurant that Eric had recommended.

After practice, freshly showered and shaved and feeling clean, I let Pick and Eddie know where I was going. Jesse, Bryan, and Spencer were coming with me to dinner. Spencer knew Eric and Trent from my summer clinics, and Jesse, a soccer god back home, was known by everyone. He also knew Eric and Trent through me, having met both of them a few times before. Bryan fit right in with our group. I knew they would like him just fine, just as I knew he would enjoy spending time with my friends. I was looking forward to seeing Danielle and the rest of the gang, and spending an evening relaxing before the semi-finals the next day.

On the way out the door, we met up with players from Ohio State, who were staying in the same hotel as we were.

"Hey," I said, stopping one of the Ohio State players. They were all dressed in their team sweats in red and white. "Did you guys just come from the game?"

"Yeah," he said. "Good game, too. North Carolina won in the first overtime, 2-1. You're from Florida, right? Looks like you'll have a fight on your hands tomorrow against the Tarheels in the semis."

"Good deal," I said. I was looking forward to the game against one of the premier organizations in college athletics. We might just have a surprise for them.

And so the teams were set for the finish of the tournament. Florida was playing North Carolina, a perennial powerhouse, in the noon game, and Maryland was up against South Carolina in the second semi-final later in the afternoon. Trent Abbott's team against Eric Johnson's team. Win or lose, on Sunday I would be playing against an old high school teammate, either in the championship game or in the consolation game.

Jesse, Spencer, Bryan, and I hopped into a cab outside the hotel. It was after six, and we were supposed to meet up with everybody by seven. We got to the restaurant, a pretty nice place called Nicolai's, early enough to find a small round table in the bar area. We ordered Cokes and sat back to wait for my friends.

Trent and Danielle came in a little bit later, and I jumped up and gave Dani a big hug. She leaned down and gave Spencer a brief hug, and I introduced her to Jesse and Bryan. She and Jesse had met once before, but it seemed like a long time ago.

"Of course I remember," said Jesse graciously as he stood to shake her hand.

"Hey, let's go get our table," suggested Trent.

"Shouldn't we wait for Eric?" I asked.

"Nah. He'll find us," Trent said. He hustled us up and out of the bar. Jesse paid our tab for our Cokes as Trent and Danielle led Spencer, Bryan, and me into the dining room.

"We've got a reservation under Abbott," he said to the lady at the podium just inside the door. She was a gray-haired, proper woman who wore a pair of reading glasses on a beaded chain around her neck. She daintily picked up her glasses and perched them on the tip of her nose as she checked her reservations book.

"Ah, yes, of course," she said. She grabbed a handful of menus from behind the podium. "If you would follow me, please?" She took off her glasses, letting them fall back to her bosom, and gestured for us to accompany her into the dining room.

There was a big, round table set up off to one side, and she led us to it. She indicated that we were to take our seats. Trent, Danielle, Bryan, and Spencer moved around to sit on the far side of the table. I was about to sit next to Danielle, but she put her hand down on the seat.

"Let's save this seat for Eric, okay?" she asked with a smile.

I shrugged. "Sure, why not," I said, though the request seemed a little odd. I took the next seat over, my back to the doorway. Trent and Danielle kept on glancing up toward the entrance, seemingly watching for Eric. Jesse came in from the bar and joined us. He picked up his menu and began to casually study it.

"What looks good to you, Porter?" he asked.

Danielle giggled softly. I glanced at her, but she didn't look at me at all. She deliberately picked up her water glass and took a small sip. Something seemed just a little off, but if they wanted to play some sort of silly game, I was willing to go along with them. I picked up my menu. Chicken Parmesan or Baked Mostaccioli? Decisions, decisions.

I was studying my menu when I heard Eric come up.

"How's everybody doin'?" he drawled. I looked up at him and just saw his shit-eating grin before two hands wrapped themselves around my head and covered my eyes.

"What's going on?" I asked. "Is that Keisha?"

I heard Keisha's laugh, and it gladdened my heart. She turned my head to the side so she could lean down and gave me a soft, languid kiss on the lips.

"Hello, Sean dear," she murmured.

She didn't let go of my eyes, however, and I was startled to feel another soft cheek gently rub against mine, and another soft pair of lips also give me a slow and warm kiss on my mouth.

"That's not Keisha," I said. "And it's certainly not Eric. Who's there?"

"Aw, man, cain't you even take a little guess?" asked Eric teasingly, and everybody at the table laughed. I couldn't pick out the voice of the person keeping me blinded, however.

I just shook my head. Better to keep my mouth shut than to find a size eleven foot in it, I said to myself.

A list of possibilities ran through my head, though. I smelled a familiar smell, and I felt familiar lips kissing me, but I still was unwilling to believe. The disappointment would have hurt too much.

"Come on, Sean," implored Keisha. "Can't you even try to guess?"

"I could try, but what if I'm wrong?" I asked.

"What if you're right?" asked Kayla, a voice beside me.

I leapt up out of my chair, startling everybody. I whirled around, nearly knocking the chair over, and there she was. She was smiling, there were tears in her eyes, and she looked lovelier than she ever had before to me.

She squealed just a little as I stepped up to her, wrapped my arms around her waist, and picked her up. I kissed her hard, still disbelieving she was actually there, and she put her arms around my neck and kissed me back. I could feel my own tears trickling down my cheeks, but I didn't care at all. Everything I wanted in the world was right there, in my arms.

Chapter 15 - Angel In The Doorway

Posted: January 01, 2004 - 11:59:16 pm

We finally disentangled, but I still wouldn't let Kayla go completely. I kept my arm around her and pulled her with me back to my chair. She sat down next to me, pulling her chair close so I could keep my arm across her shoulder. She leaned in to me and put her hand on my thigh, wanting and needing the physical touch as much as I.

I looked around the table as Eric and Keisha got settled in. "Were all you guys in on this?" I asked.

Jesse smiled and nodded. "Yep. Everybody except for Bryan. I told him a little about it the other day, but Keisha and Danielle really planned it all and pulled it off."

I stared at Danielle, across the table from me and looking like the cat who ate the canary. "And you played the innocent so well," I said. It made her smile even more.

"And you," I said, pointing at my friend Eric. "That bullshit about you and Keisha was all made up, wasn't it?"

He shrugged. "Hey, she was busy. I had to keep you away from her for a few days."

"What did you tell your parents?" I asked my love.

She laughed, and my heart filled again. "I'm on a campus visit," she said, glancing fondly at Keisha. "It was all Keisha's idea, and she was the one who really convinced my mom and my dad it was okay. I'm staying with her and looking at Maryland, and then I'm going with Danielle to see South Carolina."

I was a little crestfallen. "You're staying with Keisha?"

Kayla looked at me, smiling. "No," she said, shaking her head slowly.

"No?" I was a little slow on the uptake.

"No," she repeated. "But my parents think I am."

"Then where are you..."

She pinched my thigh, and I got it. *Idiot*, I chastised myself, but Kayla was laughing, and everybody else at the table seemed to think my chronic stupidity was highly amusing.

"So how... and why... and when..." I couldn't seem to finish a sentence at all.

"For a college kid you sure don't have any answers," laughed Trent. "Actually, Dani and Keisha set the whole thing up. Jesse and Spencer were in on it, too. I think they felt sorry for you, all lonely and depressed and everything."

I glanced at Jesse and Spencer both. Visions of Reggie briefly flashed in my head, but they popped like soap bubbles into the ether.

"We had some convincing to do on your behalf," said Danielle. "I worked on Kayla's mother, and Keisha talked to her dad. Between the two of us we managed to convince them it was all on the up-and-up."

"Which reminds me," said Keisha. "Kayla, you're due to call your folks in about an hour. Don't forget."

Kayla pointed at her watch. "I'm keeping track, don't worry," she said.

"So are you really considering going to Maryland?" I asked. To be sure, I was disappointed Florida wasn't on her list to visit.

All three of the girls, Kayla and Danielle and Keisha, looked at me very strangely.

"Whatever made you think I'm considering attending school at Maryland?" asked Kayla, an amused look on her face.

"Uh... because you're visiting... and..." *Her hand on my leg must have cut off the oxygen supply to my brain*, I chastised myself. I decided I would show her I was smarter than I looked sometimes. "And you're just using the campus visit as an excuse, aren't you?"

"See? I tole you he wasn't as dumb as you thought he was," commented Eric to Keisha. He carefully kept his face neutral, his quick glance in my direction to see if his barb hit its target his only giveaway. Keisha's response was to hit him in the bicep.

"Give the poor boy a break," she said to her boyfriend. "He's been doing without for a long time."

Kayla gave her a wink. "I've been doing without for a long time, too, but it hasn't scrambled my brain," she noted.

"That's because you're not a guy," said Danielle with a critical look at me.

"No, I'm not," agreed Kayla.

"No, she's not," I confirmed. I turned her head to me so I could kiss her. I wanted to make sure I wasn't really imagining all this. Her return kiss confirmed the reality for me.

"Cripes, get a room, would you two?" said Jesse in mock disgust.

I grinned. "I'd like to," I said.

In fact, I was ready to blow off dinner and grab a cab back to the hotel with my Luscious. *Patience*, I reminded myself. *Good things come to those who wait*. Admirable sentiment, but difficult to do, I found. Still, I waited.

We all ordered, and Kayla and I spent the next hour in communion with our friends around the table. Even as anxious as I was, I found myself really enjoying the time we spent together, my friends and me.

While we were waiting for dessert, Kayla and Keisha got up from the table and walked into the lobby of the restaurant. It was time for Kayla to report in to her parents, and Keisha was sure they were going to ask to speak to her, too. They trusted their daughter, but after Jake's indiscretions of a few years ago, and Tara and Stephen's problems of about a year past, all our parents were on heightened alert, it seemed.

While they were gone, I took the opportunity to ask a few questions of Eric and Trent.

"So, how come you guys thought of this?" I asked.

Trent had the good grace to look chagrined. "Actually, we didn't," he admitted. "Keisha and Dani came up with the idea." He glanced over at Eric. "We," he continued, indicating himself and Eric, "weren't particularly in favor of it, actually."

That surprised me, and maybe disappointed me a little. I tried not to make judgments, however, and I didn't think anything showed on my face.

"Why not?" I asked, trying to sound noncommittal.

Eric laughed, and I looked at him in surprise. "Shit, Porter, we didn't want you to be happy during this tournament," he said. "A happy Sean is a tough Sean when it comes to soccer. Bringing your girlfriend here just didn't sound like it was in our best interest."

Trent chuckled with Eric. "But once the girls... reasoned... with us, we saw the error of our ways," said Trent.

"Reasoned? That what you call it?" asked Eric, smiling and grimacing at the same time. "I'd call it damn painful."

"Yeah, it was that, too," said Trent. "Anyway, after Dani and Keisha pointed out the... defects... in our logic, we decided that maybe an exhausted Sean was almost as good as a lonely Sean to us. If your girlfriend can tire you out enough, it should offset any benefits from the happiness quotient from seeing her."

"You think so, do you?" I said. "Well, maybe I won't exhaust myself wining and dining her, so I'll have enough energy to whup your asses on Sunday."

The whole table laughed out loud at that. "Yeah, right," said Trent. "Let's see how that plan works."

He was right. That plan just wasn't in the cards, and no matter how much I tried to bluff, Trent and Eric both knew it.

The girls came back about ten minutes later, all smiles. Everything had gone well, and Kayla's parents weren't expecting to talk to her again for a couple of days.

As much as I loved my friends, by the time we were done with dessert I was ready to get out of there. Jesse, Eric, and Trent, letting their perverse sense of humor show once again, insisted on ordering coffee. They sat back and enjoyed watching me squirm as they sipped.

Finally I couldn't take it anymore.

"Fuck it," I muttered, and I stood up. Kayla gave me a quick glance, and then allowed me to pull her chair out. She stood gracefully and took my hand. She looked at Jesse, Bryan, and Spencer, and that was all it took. The three of them scrambled to get up. *How does she do that?* I thought to myself. *I have to cajole and plead, and all she has to do is look at them and they jump. Probably willing to ask how high on their way up, too.* It was another of those mysteries of the universe a small mind such as mine could never unravel.

We all reached for our wallets and threw money at the table to cover the bill. Everybody else also got up, and Bryan went out to get a cab while we all said our goodbyes for the evening.

Just to get in one last dig, Eric asked, "Hey, you guys want to go out dancing or something?"

Kayla was much more gracious in declining than I would have been. Before I could swear at him she answered, "Thank you, no. You all have important games to play tomorrow, so I think we will call it an evening."

Keisha dug her elbow into Eric's side, as if to say, *She got you, didn't she?* Eric did his best to ignore her.

Keisha, not about to be ignored, grabbed his arm and pulled him to her. "Good night, Sean. Good night, Kay. Danielle will pick you up in the morning, and we'll all go to the games together."

"Great," said Kayla. "See you then." Only then did she allow me to lead her toward the door.

Jesse, Bryan, and Spencer got into the cab. Danielle and Trent took us to the parking lot, and Kayla and I crawled into the back seat of Danielle's car, a 1979 Buick Skylark she had bought at the beginning of her senior year in high school. It was a little cramped in the back seat, but I didn't care. I was with my girl. I held her tight, all the way across town and back to our hotel.

We said goodnight to Dani and Trent. It was right about then I realized I couldn't just waltz Kayla up to my room. For one thing, I had a roommate. For another, we had a curfew, and either Pick or Eddie always came around to make sure we were where we were supposed to be. Curfew was still an hour away, but how was I going to get Kayla upstairs and Luke out of our room?

Fortunately, Jesse and Spencer had already thought of that. They arrived as Kay and I were standing around, trying to figure something out. Jesse told us to go around to the side, by the restaurant entrance. He would watch out for Pick and Eddie so we could get to an elevator safely. In the meantime, Spencer ran up the stairs to move Luke into his room. Bryan, meanwhile, stationed himself in our hallway, ready to divert anybody who happened to stick their heads out at the wrong time.

It all went off like clockwork. Kayla and I made it up to my empty room unseen. Luke had most of his stuff still there, but he took what he needed for the night over to Spencer's and Brad's room. It was going to be a little crowded there, and I

knew I was accumulating some debt with some of my teammates, but it was all worth it, as long as we could keep Pick and Eddie in the dark.

Jesse and Spencer brought Luke and Brad by to meet Kayla, and we both thanked them for helping us.

"A slight bending of the rules is rarely a bad thing," said Jesse.

Luke, the one most put out by our machinations, couldn't keep his eyes off my Luscious. I couldn't blame him, nor was I about to say anything to him. After all, he was doing me a huge favor. Besides, looking didn't cost anything, as long as he understood she was my girl. He could look as much as he liked-or, to be honest, as long as Kayla didn't mind-and I thought seeing her made his shuffling around a touch more worthwhile. Or maybe I was just imagining it all. I still wanted to reach out and touch her occasionally, just to make sure she was truly there, in my room, talking with my teammates. It really seemed too good to be true.

Kayla had pulled some pictures out of her backpack and was showing them to Spencer and Jesse.

"See? And here's little Kyle, Sean's nephew," she said, passing the photo over to Spencer.

"Boy, he's grown since I saw him over the summer," he said, gazing at the picture. "How old is he now?"

"Five months old," Kayla said. "He was born in May."

Brad looked at the picture. "And this is your, what, your brother's kid?" he asked.

"Well, kind of," I said. "It's a long story."

Jesse stood up. "A story for another time," he said, pointedly looking at his watch. "Lights out in fifteen, gentlemen. Let's get back to our rooms, okay?"

Everybody got up and shuffled toward the door. Jesse opened it, looked out to make sure the hallway was empty, and ushered the others out. He turned back to us after the room had emptied.

"Just in case Eddie wants to make sure Luke's here, I'd suggest Kayla covers up in the other bed and pretends to be Luke asleep," he said.

"Good idea," I said. "Thanks."

He gave us a thumbs-up and closed the door behind him.

We were finally alone.

I was suddenly very nervous, and Kayla looked like she was feeling the same.

"I'd better get ready," she said.

"Okay," I answered. "Can I help with anything?"

She laughed, and the tension was relieved just a little. "No, silly," she said. "I'll be right back."

She slipped into the bathroom with her backpack. I turned down both beds and began to undress. *Should I take everything off? Wear my underwear? What about a tee shirt?* I was babbling inside my own head. I remembered I should at least have shorts on, for when Pick or Eddie knocked on the door, so I took my clothes off and put on a pair of running shorts I sometimes wore to bed.

I turned out all the lights except for the one by my bed, and I turned on the television. Kayla came out of the bathroom wearing sweat pants and a zipped, hooded sweatshirt. She giggled at my expression, and without a word hopped into Luke's bed and pulled the covers up over her.

She was just in time. There was a knock at my door, and the sound of it startled me. I hopped up and peered out the fisheye peephole. Eddie Whitehead was standing outside the door, looking distracted. *Good, I thought. Distracted is good.*

I opened the door and put my finger to my lips so he would be quiet. He looked in and saw a prone body in Luke's bed, and he made the assumption we wanted. He nodded and pulled the door gently shut behind him, already thinking about who was in the next room on his list to check.

I twisted the deadlock on the door and put up the security chain. Kayla had turned around and was watching me closely. I climbed into my own bed and turned out the light. The room was cast into shadow and light from the flickering images coming from the television. I lay on my side, watching Kayla watching me.

"Sean?" Her voice was soft, befitting the ambiance of the room.

"Hmmm?" I kept my own voice soft. It was the only way I could conceal the quaver of nervousness.

"It's silly, but I'm..."

"Yeah, sweetie. So am I."

"Really?"

Mmmm... hmmm," I confirmed.

She threw her covers back and stood up. "Don't go away," she said quietly.

It was enough to make me smile, washing away much of my nervousness.

"Okay, if you insist," I replied.

I kept my eye on her as she walked back over to the bathroom and once more closed the door. She was in there for just a few minutes, but when she reemerged, she had transformed herself from a mere mortal into the angel I always knew she was.

The light spilling from the doorway backlit her for just a moment, until she reached over and switched the light off. It was a long enough moment to stay with me forever. She was wearing a lacy, sheer babydoll nightie, cream-colored and diaphanous. I could see the shadowy shape of her body through the fragile material during that moment, her nose, chin, breasts, and knees lighter shades of darkness by contrast. Her fair hair, silken and nearly transparent, spilled across her shoulders, free of constraints, adding to the vision of her soft silhouette.

I could not move, faced as I was by the vision before me. The light was there, and then it wasn't, but the image of Kayla in the doorway, the current image transposing itself in my addled brain with an older memory of a younger Kayla in a different doorway, sealed my fate. Forevermore would I remember vividly my white-haired angel, coming to me from the light, coming to join with me, into the dark.

Chapter 16 - The Heat Let Loose

Posted: January 15, 2004 - 10:38:08 pm

Kayla came to me then. I shifted over on the bed and held the sheet and blanket up for her in silent invitation. She sat on the bed, her back to me, and used the remote control to switch the television off. She turned to me, and even in the darkness I could tell she was smiling.

"I don't want you distracted by the TV," she said. She giggled softly as she slipped into bed beside me.

There was no way any television show was going to take my attention away from my luscious angel, but I wasn't about to say anything. If she wanted the television off, she would have it off.

She settled against me, and I put my arms around her and held her to me. Her head rested comfortably beneath my chin as she wound her arms around me, wanting to be as close to me as I wished to be with her. My initial anxiety wicked away like amorphous vapor as our bodies adjusted to the familiar feel of each other.

We fit together as if we were made to be together, I said to myself. To Kayla, I whispered, "I love you so much."

She squeezed even closer to me. "I love you, Sean."

She lifted her face to be kissed, and I accommodated her. We kissed, soft and gentle, letting our banked fires build at their own speed. I slid down just a little in the bed so Kayla wouldn't have to stretch up to reach me, and our bodies readjusted slightly to the new orientation. I felt her breasts against my chest, and my erection, growing by the second, began to intrude itself against her hip. She threw a leg across mine, pressing herself against my hardening cock, and opened her mouth. Her tongue met mine, and as soon as they touched and began their jousting, the internal fires began to roar.

Our lips sealed against each other, and suddenly there was a greater need to press harder. Our mouths opened wider, and our tongues began searching deeper, more fully. I heard somebody moan; it might have been Kayla, but it could have been me. My brain wasn't working so well, melting as it was by the heat we were generating.

My hands slipped down her back, the lacy feel of her nightie registering subliminally, and I scrunched it up so I could feel her bare skin against my fingers. I pushed the filmy material up as I caressed her back, luxuriating in the feel of her soft and warm skin. My right hand felt along her backbone, feeling each bump and ridge of her vertebrae, and my left hand caressed the strong muscles of her shoulders and upper back, feeling the soft layer of skin overlaying the working musculature just beneath.

Kayla moaned again-this time I knew it was her-and she opened her shoulder a little in invitation. I accepted by following along her ribs with my right hand, around her body to her small breast.

As soon as I pressed her soft mound against my palm, she broke our kiss, threw her head back, and softly cried out, "Oh, God." Her eyes were closed as the sensations washed through her, and she concentrated on them completely. Her leg was rubbing up and down mine, and her hips were moving against me, trying to establish more contact with my now painfully hard cock. The barrier of our clothes kept the sensations muted just enough, and the ecstasy built, step upon step.

Her nipple was a hard and sharp point in my palm. I squeezed her breast, and her head snapped back toward me. With her eyes still closed, her mouth searched for mine. I kissed her cheek, and her lips moved to mine and sealed against me again, her tongue once again frantically searching for mine. I abandoned her breast just long enough to blindly search for the hem of her babydoll top. I touched her stomach and felt her muscles tense in anticipation as I slowly ascended, now beneath the material, to once again take possession of her soft breast. My hand hefted the small weight of her boob before covering it once again. My fingers rubbed against her swollen nipple, the friction sending needles of pleasure through her, as evidenced by the increased movement of her hips and her leg.

I tried pinching her nipple. Her hip released and bumped against me. I pinched again, and her hip bumped me once more. Action, reaction. I knew I wouldn't be able to stand up against too many of her bumps against my rampant cock, so I refrained from pinching her nipple in favor of gently running my hand slowly across her chest to her right breast. I flexed my fingers against her flesh, experiencing all over again the wondrousness of the female form.

Kayla broke our kiss and sat up. She grasped the hem of her nightie and pulled it over her head. Her lovely blonde hair was pulled up as she took off her top, only to cascade back down her face and shoulders. She swiped at her hair with her hand, moving it in a white-yellow wave across her face and behind her neck. She

settled back down beside me, putting her hands to the side of my head. She kissed me, softly and sensuously, and then silently urged my lips to go lower, down toward her body.

I kissed and licked my way from beneath her chin, to her throat, and to her boobs. My chin rubbed against her distended nipple as I licked the salt away from the upper mound of her left breast, the nub searing a path along my skin. I licked and nibbled my way around the orb of her flesh, taking care to pay attention to the soft skin on the underside of her breast. I moved close to her rosy nipple but never took possession of it with my mouth, opting instead to tease and inflame her.

Kayla kept on urging me to her breast with her hands, while my fingers were doing a little exploring of their own. The palm of my right hand was flat on her tummy as my lips were descending to her breasts. My fingers started moving beneath the elastic of her bottoms while my tongue was exploring the skin of her boob. My hand slipped under the confining elastic, and the part of my brain that controlled prehensile activity noted the lack of underwear. The knowledge kicked my internal temperature up another step and made my fingers clench a little in anticipation as my hand continued on its path down her tummy and into the soft curls of her pubic hair. My fingertips were being drawn to the source of the heat and moisture exuding from her, and they encountered its evidence. I dragged my fingers through her sparse hair, searching, and the tip of my middle finger parted her puffy nether lips just as my tongue dragged across her sensitive nipple. The combination was nearly enough to send her off, and she moaned and arched her back, pressing the tip of her flushing breast harder against my mouth. I opened my mouth a little wider and sealed my lips around her flesh, and I suckled as I gathered moisture on the tip of my finger. I dipped my finger into her heated opening as Kayla opened herself even more to me, and I was able to coat my finger to the second knuckle with her oils. I pulled my finger out and ran it back up through her folds, searching blindly for her hidden clitoris.

I found the swollen nub and I teased it, bumping it with my fingertip lightly. In a rhythm with my finger, my tongue swirled in my mouth against her turgid nipple. The combination set up patterns of waves through her over-stimulated body, and she practically undulated on the bed as she was swept to sea by the passions being transmitted to her pleasure centers from her breast and from her pussy.

Finally I abandoned her left breast and moved my mouth over to adore her right breast. At the same time my hand delved back to her hole, and I used first one finger, and then two, to stimulate her further.

Kayla's breath was coming in hitches by then, and she still clutched my head to her bosom. Her hips flexed up on each of my downstrokes within her as her body attempted to feel more depth within her than could be accomplished with just my fingers. I let my thumb rest on the nub of her swollen clit, and each time her hips hunched against my fingers, she also bumped her most sensitive place against the ball of my thumb.

The action in her middle, combined with my tongue and lips against her tender breast, was enough to give her the first orgasm of the night. She cried out softly as the movement of her hips got a little more frantic and her breathing became erratic. I couldn't see her face, but I was sure her eyes were squeezed shut as the sensations washed through her and her whole body tensed. I was nearly suffocated when she pulled me even tighter against her soft flesh, and I could have died willingly and happily in that embrace. I loved being able to impart that much pleasure to the girl I adored.

Finally the rolling pleasures eased, and she relaxed against me. Her hands loosened their grip, and she took one of her hands and gently pulled my hand out from her nightie bottoms.

"God, I love what your fingers can do to me, Sean, but that's enough for now," she whispered. I brought my hand up to my face as I scooted up to lie face to face with her. Her hand was still traveling lightly on my wrist as I brought my fingers to my mouth. I sucked her juices from my middle finger, delighting in the remembrance of her tangy taste. I could see her eyes, bright as she watched me, and I gently pressed my index finger, also coated with her lubrication, between her lips. She closed her eyes and accepted the intrusion, though it was not the tasting of herself that was making her concentrate. She sucked on my finger, taking it all in, and then she opened her eyes and watched my face as she worked her tongue around my digit. The imitation she was intentionally showing me had its desired effect as the subliminal information went right to my cock. I could feel it tensing even more, on the verge of exploding. The skin felt extraordinarily tight, my erection nearly painful.

She let her hand drop from my wrist to my stomach, and her fingers made their way beneath the elastic of my running shorts. She clasped my steely cock in her small hand and squeezed me for a moment before starting to pump on me, an unconscious action as old as humankind. The combination of watching her and feeling her sucking on my finger, along with the actions of her own hand on my sensitive pole, elevated me into a near panic.

"Uh... Kay... stop... I'm going to..." I managed to halt her actions before my crisis overwhelmed me, but it was a close thing. She stopped jacking me and rested the

palm of her hand on my cock, instead. My finger popped out from between her lips, and my hand, seemingly of its own volition, dropped back down to take possession of her soft breast once again, perhaps its favorite place to be.

It didn't stay there long, though, because Kayla slid down the bed. My hand dragged from her boob, up her chest and across her neck as she slithered away from me toward the middle of the bed. She sat up and knelt next to my knees. She reached for the waistband of my shorts, her eyes shining in anticipation of uncovering her present.

"Come out, come out, wherever you are," she sang, almost to herself, as she lifted up the elastic and pulled the front of my running shorts away from my rampant cock, twitching with the pumping of my heart. I lifted up my ass so she could pull my shorts down.

"Ah, there you are," she whispered, gazing at my erection as she unveiled it. "I've missed you so much." She pulled my shorts the rest of the way off my legs, and then she pulled her own bottoms off and tossed them to the floor. She straddled my left shin as she reached out to take my stalk in her hand once again. I felt the moisture drooling from her pussy against my leg as she settled down on me and leaned in to examine my crotch. She pulled my cock up straighter with one hand, and with the other she cupped my balls. Her eyes were shining and she was smiling just a little as she moved even closer to me, close enough to stick her tongue out and lick off the bubble of pre-cum on the tip.

I jerked a little when I felt her do that, and she squeezed me down near the base. I felt my incipient climax recede, and I relaxed just a little. I couldn't take my eyes from what she was doing, however, and I watched as she glanced up at me, saw me watching her, and she slowly, agonizingly licked my cock from her fist all the way up to the crown with just the lightest feather touch of the tip of her tongue. My cock twitched in her hand, and I knew I was close to coming once again. She put the tip of my cock against her closed lips and, still watching my eyes, slowly forced her mouth down onto my cock. Her lips sealed around the helmet and I could feel her start to suck hard, her cheeks hollowing a little as she worked me.

My entire body started to tense in anticipation of the eruption I could no longer control, and Kayla must have felt it, too. It didn't stop her, though, and she lowered her mouth on me, taking me deep, until I felt the head of my cock bump against the entrance to her throat. Her tongue expanded to press against my cock in her mouth, and that was all it took. The floodgates opened, the pumps activated, and I came.

The first blast hit the back of her throat at lightspeed, and she backed off my cock and tried to swallow. By then the second and third spurts were in her mouth, and she just couldn't keep up. She loosened the seal of her tongue around my cock, and milky white semen oozed out of her mouth, down my shaft, and across her fist. She was pumping me with both her hand and her tongue, and I felt like I was being turned inside out and emptied.

After seven or eight hard blasts the engines began to run down, and I collapsed back to the pillow. Kayla coughed twice, a delayed reaction to taking my first assault down her throat, and she let up on my slowly softening cock. She swallowed what she had in her mouth as she gave the head of my cock one last sucking squeeze, and then she started licking up the detritus that had leaked out. She stuck her fingers in her mouth to clean them off, and then she concentrated on licking up all the cum she could find on my cock and balls.

By the time she was satisfied she had gotten it all, I was hard again. As she scooted up to be beside me again she grabbed my cock, unwilling to relinquish her ownership. As she settled down next to me I leaned over and kissed her softly.

"I've missed you," I said quietly. "That was so wonderful."

She kissed me back, putting her arms around my neck. "You're not done yet, soldier," she said. She pulled me over on top of her and spread her legs apart. I moved to between her legs, and she pulled me by my cock toward her center. I felt her pussy lips part as she traced them with the head of my cock, spreading her lubrication around, and then she placed me against her heated opening.

"Now," she whispered, and she let go of my cock and put her hands in the small of my back so she could pull me into her. I slid home willingly, fitting within her as perfectly as I had remembered. I felt our pubic bones meet, and I was as deep inside my Luscious as I could get. She sighed contentedly, pulled her knees up, and lifted her legs. She crossed her ankles below my ass, tilting up her pussy for a fraction more accessibility, and she used both her hands and her legs to get me as close as she could. She was so wet I moved into her with no difficulty at all, even though her walls were tight, so tight against me.

We were one. This was where I belonged, where I always wanted to be. I ran my fingers through her soft hair to hold her behind her neck, and with my other hand I caressed her cheek. She looked at me, and I bent down and gave her a hard, open-mouthed kiss. She groaned and pulled me even tighter against her body. I could feel her hard nipples boring into the skin of my chest as we kissed, our tongues doing battle within the confines of our joined mouths.

Genetic conditioning wouldn't allow me to stay still within her for very long. My hips wanted to move, to stroke my cock in her pussy, and as occupied as I was with our kissing and caressing, I was helpless to prevent it from happening. I began a slow and steady rhythm, pausing at both the top and the bottom of my stroke. When she felt me moving inside her, Kayla's hips joined in, flexing and relaxing in time with the movement of my cock in her. She added a little side-to-side movement, and she bumped her hips against me a couple of times each time I paused on my downstroke when I was deepest in her. She must have been hitting her clit against my pubic bone because her breath huffed almost every time she did that.

We were running out of breath, and so we broke the kiss and both gasped. Kayla's eyes were tightly closed as she concentrated on the waves of pleasure crashing through her. For me, it was getting increasingly difficult to keep the pace of my strokes slow. I really wanted to pound into her to my finish, but I was determined to bring her along with me.

The friction and the heat were building to a nearly unbearable level for both of us. I was having trouble coordinating what my brain wanted and what my dick wanted, and Kayla's movements were starting to get more erratic as her breath began hitching again. My right hand followed her contours to latch onto her left breast, and my head dipped down so I could take her right nipple between my teeth.

That was the final straw for Kayla. She screeched breathlessly, her whole body tensing up, and she flew off the edge, taking me with her. I felt the switches activate, and my cock tried to swell against the constricting walls of her cunt. I felt my semen rocket out of my cock to coat her tunnel, and Kayla's orgasm contributed its own helping of hot lubricant. I gave her a couple more hard and fast strokes, my cock sliding nearly effortlessly through her, our combined fluids contributing to the hot and wet ride.

If I had thought my balls had emptied before, I had been mistaken. By the third or fourth spasm I pounded into her as deeply as I could get, and Kayla was hunching up to me, wanting to feel my presence filling her up.

By the time my spurts were weakening Kayla had climaxed, withdrawn, and was building back up again. I began to pull slowly out of her but she didn't let go, deciding instead to keep her legs around me. When she felt just the head still buried in her she flexed and pulled me back fully into her. Surprisingly, my cock responded again. Slowly, slower than before, it began to regain some of its stiffness, and the rest of my body responded in kind. If my Luscious wanted more, I wanted to give her more.

I concentrated on giving her kisses and nibbles along her throat and under her ear. There was still just the faintest trace of perfume, but mostly what I smelled was essential Kayla. Her skin smelled the way it should, and the odor of our mutual arousal was permeating the room. I thought distractedly that scientists a hundred years from now might be able to extract the evidence of our passion that was even now soaking into the walls and ceiling of the room.

I worked her slowly again, knowing I could go for a long time. I had already cum twice in succession; the third time would arrive, but not before some buildup. If I was fortunate, I would be able to give Kayla a night to remember.

I could feel our combined juices leaking out around my cock as I pistoned in and out of her. My balls were coated, and I could feel a big wet spot forming underneath us. Each time my balls slapped against her ass more lubrication was transferred back and forth; each time I pulled partway out of her, more liquid was expelled along my shaft. It was sloppy, hot sex, and I was loving it.

"Are you still with me?" asked Kayla. "Can you keep up?" She was smiling up at me.

I didn't notice until I felt a drop trickle down my nose and land with a small plop on her cheek that I was sweating.

"I'm with you," I said. "I can keep it up. The question is, can you handle it?"

"Time to switch," she said, pushing me away from her. "Then we'll see who can handle it."

I pulled out of her and knelt up. *What did she have in mind?*

Apparently she was satisfied with our lovemaking, as was now ready for something a little more recreational. She scrambled up and knelt down on her hands and knees on the bed. She looked over her shoulder at me, the unspoken request clear in her eyes.

I shuffled up behind her and held my cock out, pointed at her puffy and swollen pussy. I rubbed the head against her, and she pushed back against me as soon as she felt me in place. I rammed home, sliding easily into her, and she reached back with one hand as I paused, buried as deeply inside her as I could get, and she caressed my balls lovingly for just a moment. My cock twitched when she did that, and I heard her sigh.

"Ahhhh," she moaned. "I love feeling so filled up by you. Promise me you'll do this a lot?" She let go of me and steadied herself on the bed.

"I promise," I gritted, finding it hard to talk and fuck at the same time.
"Whenever you want, you can have it." I started working myself in and out, holding onto her hips. I tried to be kind of gentle, not wanting to pound into her hard, but she would have none of that.

"Faster," she whispered, and she turned to look back at me. I moved faster and faster, finally crashing my hips into her, making her body shake. Each time I rocked her, she huffed, her head hit the pillow, and she panted in time with my rhythm.

Every once in a while I would stretch out over her back and reach around her to grab at her dangling breasts, pinching her distended nipples, but the additional weight on her, combined with the increased stimulation racing along the nerve paths, made both of our movements ragged, so I would have to kneel up again so I could work her.

At long last, the heat was let loose. I reached up for her breasts one last time, squeezing the globes, and that was all it took. She collapsed down onto her face, surrendering to her rolling climaxes, and I landed on top of her, still hanging on to her boobs. My cock felt like it was in a very wet and hot vise as it was squeezed by her vaginal muscles as they tried to milk my semen from me. I was nearly there, but I was finding it very hard to move with any coherence. My hips felt like they had disconnected from my torso, and they started moving on their own, pulling my cock almost all the way out and then pushing it back in, working to extract every last ounce of pleasure from our coupling.

Finally, I could not go on. Kayla was up on her knees with her head on the mattress, her legs spread out for me. I pushed as hard as I could into her, at last reaching depths never before breached, and I exploded. I had no idea how much I could possibly have given her that third time, but I gave her all I had. The hydraulics struggled to ejaculate their last drops, forcing my semen up and out to splash against her cervix. I collapsed on top of her, and her knees finally gave out. We ended up with me laying on her back, still buried deeply in her, two quivering bundles of exhausted flesh.

"Oh. My. God." Kayla finally managed to groan, my first indication she was still among the living. For my part, I still wasn't sure I was alive. The sweat on my back and my legs was starting to chill, but where we touched, from my cheek to my chest to my softening cock slowly extricating itself from her sheath, was still hot and sweating.

She wriggled a little. It was my responsibility to respond, to get off her and relieve her of my dead weight. I didn't want to move, but I knew I had to, so I

struggled up, pulling my spent cock the rest of the way out of her, and I flopped down beside her, on my back.

She snuggled closer to me, throwing an arm across my chest. After a moment she whispered, "Can you move over just a little more, lover? I'm laying in the world's biggest wet spot."

I shifted all the way over to the edge of the bed, and Kayla followed. I put my arm around her shoulder so she could fit up next to me, which she did. I ran my hand lightly up and down her back, feeling her drying sweat against my fingertips.

"That was certainly aerobic," I mumbled. I could feel my heart still triphammering in my chest, and my breathing was just beginning to slow down.

Kayla giggled. "Good exercise for your heart," she replied as she pressed her palm against my chest, feeling the *kathump* of my heart rate.

"You're going to make me an eighteen-year-old invalid if you keep this up," I said.

"I'm doing my best to kill you with kindness," she said.

"What a way to go."

We stayed like that for a long time. My eyelids were drooping and I was nodding off when I felt her extricate herself from my arms. I blearily opened my eyes.

"I need to take a shower," she said, almost apologetically.

"I'd love to join you, but I think I'm dead."

"Go to sleep, my love," she said with a smile.

"I love you," I mumbled. At least I meant to say that; I may have fallen asleep before the words actually left my tongue. I might have felt Kayla return to me to snuggle up and go to sleep, but by then I was sleeping the sleep of the sated.

Chapter 17 - Why Sean is Happy

Posted: January 30, 2004 - 01:44:50 am

There was a light but insistent tapping at the door. The noise finally insinuated itself into my consciousness, and I struggled to wake up enough to not do myself bodily harm when I stood. Kayla was lying next to me, one arm thrown across my chest. I gently picked up her arm by her wrist and slipped out of bed. I carefully put her arm down on the mattress and made sure she was covered. I found my running shorts and pulled them on, and then I stumbled over to the door and looked through the security scope.

Luke was standing outside the door, shifting from foot to foot as he continued to tap at the door.

"Arrright, arrright," I mumbled as I removed the chain and opened the door for him. He slipped inside quickly, and I closed the door again and relocked it.

Luke glanced over at my bed. Kayla was awake, but was huddled under the blanket quietly.

"Dude, I can't sleep on the floor again," said Luke. "I need my bed back tonight."

"Oh, man, you gotta do this for me," I began. I stopped, though. Even to my ears it sounded like whining. *Get a grip, Porter*, I chastised myself. "Yeah, okay. I'm sorry, man. We'll work something out."

"I hardly slept a wink all night," Luke grumbled. "Fuckin' Brad snores." He glanced at Kayla apologetically. "Oops. Sorry," he said to her.

Kayla just smiled at him sweetly. It was enough to make Luke blush just a little.

"I'm just gonna... uh... grab something out of my suitcase..." Luke shuffled over to his suitcase, where it looked like there had been a small explosion of clothing, books, and shoes. He reached in and I saw him grab a pair of white briefs. He crumpled them up and tried to stuff them in the pocket of his jeans without Kayla seeing them, and then he kind of slide-shuffled back across the room to the door. "I'm going down to get something to eat," he said. "Spencer and Brad are already down there. You should probably come down, show your face around, Sean."

I glanced at the alarm clock on the nightstand between the beds. "Yeah, okay, give me about five minutes," I said.

Luke nodded, unlocked the door, and opened it just enough to squeeze out.

"I'd better get in the shower," I said, almost to myself. I glanced at Kayla, and saw she had a teasing, pouting expression. She threw back the covers so I could see the full effect. She had put her babydoll top back on, but hadn't bothered with the panties. Her legs were together, knees slightly bent and to the side, the pale hair between her legs plainly visible. Her rosy nipples were not disguised at all by the filmy material of her nightie, merely veiled and desirable. She managed to look demure and incredibly sexual at the same time. *How did she do that?*

That circuit breaker in my head clicked back on. *Shower. Go downstairs. Breakfast with the team. Don't give the coaches any reason to be suspicious.*

I somehow found my way into the bathroom. *Focus, Porter.* I turned on the water and adjusted the temperature. I shucked off my running shorts and stepped into the tub enclosure. I put my face up into the spray from the showerhead and reached for the shower curtain to pull it closed.

Instead of plastic, my hand found flesh. I looked over, water streaming down my face and obscuring my vision, but I could see well enough to recognize my Luscious, now deliciously naked, stepping into the tub with me.

"Want me to wash your back?" she asked. I could hear the pleasure in her voice. She knew she surprised me, and she was pleased with herself for being able to do so.

"You can wash my back if I can wash your front," I said, doing my best to leer at her through the water in my eyes.

"Deal," she replied. She reached around me for the soap. Her breasts sliding along my wet skin got the blood flowing, away from my brain and to my cock. I tried turning to face her, intending on taking her in my arms, but she shook her head. "Uh-uh," she said as she turned me back around. She began to rub the bar of soap across my shoulders, and she used her other hand to spread the suds around and down my back.

It would have been very soothing if I hadn't had such a hardon. Feeling my cock bouncing up with my heartbeat wasn't exactly relaxing, especially when I felt Kayla rubbing the soap across my asscheeks and down my thighs.

I could only put up with that kind of treatment so long before I had to turn around and reciprocate.

"Oh, is it time to rinse already?" she asked with a smile.

I couldn't even reply. I took her head in my hands and kissed her, and she moved in closer to me. I dropped one hand down to take possession of her breast, and I felt her cheeks tighten as she smiled through our kiss. She put her hand on mine and gently pulled it away from her soft boob.

I stopped kissing her and looked at her questioningly. She placed the bar of soap in my hand.

"There," she said. "Now you're prepared."

She guided my hand back to her breast and lifted her mouth for another kiss as she pressed my hand, still holding the soap, against her flesh.

The soap made everything a lot more slippery, and it wasn't long before we were both exploring each other freely.

Finally, she gasped. I was holding her ass with one hand, my other hand behind her neck, and she was pulling on my cock.

"Why don't you find a good place to put this thing while you finish washing my front?" she suggested.

She lifted up on her toes, and I crouched down a little so that we could connect. I felt the tip of my cock nestle between her moist pussy lips, and as I pushed up she lifted first one leg, and then the other, as I pushed her back against the wall for leverage.

All pretense of washing was thrown aside, and we concentrated on inducing pleasure to each other in this new setting for us. I thrust up hard into her, and I felt my cock slide along her hot and welcoming walls, until I was firmly seated deep inside her. Kayla reciprocated by flexing her legs in concert with my efforts, as anxious as I was to feel me encased. The water from the shower was hitting the small of my back and cascading down, its flow interrupted by Kayla's legs entwined around me. The floor of the tub was a little slippery, keeping me from gaining a good grip with my feet, but I still managed to pound into her with some force. The delicious friction we achieved moved us inexorably down the road we both wished to travel.

Before long I felt the familiar tightening in my balls, and I hunched up against Kayla even harder, trying to get as deep into her as I could. I felt my cock trying to expand against the squeezing walls of her pussy, and my semen spilled out to coat her insides in spasmodic release.

"Oh, God, oh, God, I feel it," she huffed, and the hot injection I gave to her sent her over into her own orgasm. She threw her head back, her wet hair plastered to her forehead and her cheeks, and she cried out softly as she gave herself to her climax.

She hung on to me desperately as the waves crashed through her, her arms around my neck and her legs beginning to hang a little limply from my hips. I stayed pressed inside her through my own orgasm, wanting to feel her heat on me for as long as possible, but eventually I had to withdraw. I stepped back, and she slumped down to regain her feet as she loosened her grip on me.

"That was so... nice," she said a little tiredly.

"What a way to wake up," I said by way of agreement.

She looked up at me through her eyelashes. "I've got lots of ways to wake you up, love."

With the water still pounding on me, I smiled at her. "I'll just bet you do," I said.

Thirty minutes later, freshly showered, freshly shaved, and freshly boffed, I was standing in the buffet line. I was late, but even an undertaker wouldn't have been able to iron the smile off my face. I was happier than I had been since I left to go to Florida. Kayla was lingering upstairs until Keisha and Danielle picked her up. Pick just looked at me as I gathered up a full tray and joined Jesse, Bryan, and Brad at a table.

"And why is Sean so happy this morning?" asked Jesse.

I didn't answer him. Instead I concentrated on my orange juice.

"Oh, yeah," he said with a grin. "I remember now."

Nothing more was said about why I was so happy, which was just as well. Too many people probably already knew.

I was just finishing up my breakfast when Luke grabbed a chair from the next table and pulled it up next to me. Nearly everybody else had already finished, and some of the guys had left the restaurant to get their gear.

Very quietly, Luke said, "You've got to come up with some other arrangement, Porter. I ain't sleeping on the floor again in their room."

"Yeah, okay," I said. "Just keep your voice down." I took a last forkful of scrambled egg. My tank had been empty, but I hadn't realized it until I started eating. I didn't want to overeat and feel stuffed at the start of the game, but I was having trouble stopping. *I guess I built up an appetite overnight*, I thought to myself. It made me smile to think of how that was accomplished.

I started thinking about how I was going to keep Kayla to myself all night and still let Luke use the room. I needed a plan, and I needed it soon.

The group of us took the elevator up to our floor, and Luke and I split off to go to our room. I knocked before inserting the key.

"It's me, sweetie," I said softly as I opened the door.

Kayla was dressed and sitting on my unmade bed, brushing her hair. She smiled at us as we came in. Luke went over to his pile of stuff and began packing his gear bag. We were due downstairs in about ten minutes to board the bus to Washington, D.C. and the Robert F. Kennedy Stadium for our semi-final game against North Carolina.

"When is Keisha coming?" I asked.

"She should be here in about fifteen or twenty minutes," she said.

"I'm sorry I didn't bring you anything to eat," I said. *Sometimes I could be pretty thoughtless*, I chastised myself.

Kayla smiled. "That's okay, Sean. There's lots of food at the stadium, I'm sure." She held up her purse and pulled out some paper money. "See? I'm all set."

"I still feel bad," I said. "I really don't mean to be so thoughtless."

She laughed. It wasn't quite how I wanted to make her laugh, but I still enjoyed hearing it, even if it was at my own expense. "You are incredibly silly," she said to me.

"Jeez, you guys," said Luke a little disparagingly. He was at the door, gear bag in hand. "Come on, Porter, we've got a bus to catch."

"Yeah, okay," I said. "Just give me a minute, okay?"

Luke stepped out the door. I sat down next to Kayla and put my arm around her shoulder. "I've got to go," I said.

"I know. I'll be watching. Play your best."

I kissed her softly. "I'll do what I can," I said.

I got up and, just before the door closed, I gave her a small wave. Kayla smiled and waved back at me. Just that vision was enough to carry me through my day.

Luke was in the hall, waiting for me. As we walked toward the bank of elevators, he said, "So what are you going to do?"

"I don't know, dude. But I'll come up with something," I said.

It was still two hours until game time, and as I stepped onto the bus I was glad there was so much time to prepare. I was feeling stuffed, and I was going to need that couple of hours to try to digest some of my breakfast before I had to play. I took one of the rear seats in the bus and stretched out flat on my back, feeling like I needed to try to force my stomach muscles back into their normal position. I worked my back and stomach with isometrics on the way over to Georgetown in an effort to ease the distended feeling in my gut.

It was only about a twenty-minute ride. I was feeling a little better, probably from increasing my blood flow through my stretching. *Whatever works*, I said to myself as I followed my teammates shuffling down the center aisle of the bus. We grabbed our gear bags and walked to the locker rooms below the stadium.

After a quick strategy session, we dressed for the game and walked up the ramp from the locker rooms, up under the stands, to the field. It was a very big stadium, but it didn't bother us. We had spent the previous week at home practicing in our own football field, getting used to seeing row upon row of bleachers all around us. The difference was that these bleachers were about half full, whereas the ones at home were pretty much empty.

Even so, we took our warm-ups like we did every day, and we tried not to let the stadium or the crowd get to us. North Carolina, several hundred miles closer to Washington, D.C. than Gainesville, had quite a few fans in attendance. There was a large contingent of Tarheels blue and white across the bleachers near the centerline, and only a smattering of Gator orange and blue. School was in session for us, so I doubted any students would have made the trip. Besides, soccer wasn't really much of a spectator sport; even at home our crowds were meager at best.

Pick gave us our starting positions, and I was not surprised to find myself playing midfield again. North Carolina won the coin toss, so they started with the ball. They had seen me in the middle, and they were anxious to test our right defensive side.

They might have known my game, but they obviously didn't spend enough time studying Spencer's game. He easily rebuffed their first foray into our territory with an easy takeaway from his spot at right midfield. He passed the ball over to me, and I switched fields on them, feeding the ball up on my left to Bryan. He and Jesse worked a two-man game to move the ball deep into Tarheels territory, but neither of them could manufacture a good shot at goal. North Carolina's stopper raced over to cut off a crossing pass attempt, and he snagged the ball and took it up the middle for several meters before passing it off to one of his midfielders.

North Carolina was a tough, experienced, savvy team. They showed a lot of patience and poise. They didn't let our powerful front line push them around, and they didn't panic after we scored our first goal, at about the twenty-minute mark. Instead, they put the ball back in play and began another set play with their offensive unit. They didn't force it, they just let the game unfold, and it paid off for them. In the 32nd minute they tied it up, and in the 41st minute they took the lead on a beautifully executed corner kick. The kick arced up in the air and curved from the 18-meter stripe in toward our goal. It came down within reach about five meters out from the near post. Rick, our keeper, made a play on the ball, but he got blocked out by Ted Artichenkoff, our sweeper, and a North Carolina forward as they jostled each other, each trying to gain an advantage toward the ball against the other. The ball came out of the sky right in front of Ted and his nemesis, and another North Carolina forward elevated, gained a little extra height on his jump by pushing off Frenchy in an illegal move that was unfortunately blocked from the referee's view. This second player whipped his head at the ball and made contact, and Rick had no chance of being able to alter his momentum toward the ball, now streaking just past his shoulder and into our net.

At halftime, defense and offense each met separately to brainstorm, and then we huddled together as a team to critique our first half.

Jesse, in his customary role as co-captain of the team and the spokesman for the offense, took the lead.

"So, did defense come up with a strategy to stop these guys?" he asked, looking around at all of us.

Rick, our defensive co-captain, answered. "We've got some adjustments we can make. Frenchy is going to play tighter on his man, Stuart knows he needs to patrol into the middle a little more. To be sure, that corner shouldn't have happened. Other than that, we're playing them pretty straight up."

"Yeah, we are, except for the scoreboard," said Jesse. He turned to me. "What do you have to say about it, Porter?"

"Well, two things," I said. "I could drop back into the right defender's spot again." Both Jesse and Bryan were about to protest, but I held my hand up. "Wait, there's more," I continued. "We've kind of let them talk us into playing positions again. Maybe Frenchy needs to play his guy tighter, but Jeremy isn't dropping back to assist him. For that matter, neither was I. We need to reestablish our floating assignments."

"They're a tough team to use that on," observed Bryan. "Maybe that scheme only works on more rigid teams than North Carolina."

"I don't believe that," said Spencer. "It's a veiling offense and a confusing defense when we work it right. We're just not in sync out there yet."

"That's why I want to move back to defense," I added. "That's where we started to develop our flowing positions. I'm planning on kick-starting it from back there by working the switch with Stuart, Spencer, Brad, and Ted. From there the rest of the team should just fall into the adjustments we've practiced on for the past few weeks."

Jesse gave me an appraising look. "You really think it will work that way?" he asked.

Every head in that huddle turned to me. If I was wrong, it was all on me. "Yeah, I do," I said.

Jesse just looked at me for a moment, and then nodded. "Okay. Let's clear it with Pick. Ready? Break!"

Everybody put their hands together and shouted with him, and Jesse, Rick, and I stepped over to Pick and Eddie, standing a little apart from us as they let us work out our plan. The three of us explained what we had in mind quickly.

Pick glanced at Eddie, but they didn't exchange a word. He turned back to us. "If'n you all think that's what it will take to get back on track, it's fine with me," he said. "If Eddie or I see something, though, we'll prob'ly move you guys

around from over here. So you," he said, jabbing his finger at me, "listen up for any instructions from the sidelines. Got it?"

"Yes, sir," I said.

"Then go win this here game, gentlemen," he instructed us. Jesse and I broke out into big grins, and Rick gave him a big thumbs-up and nodded at him before turning to rejoin our teammates.

"It's a go," said Jesse to the team as we neared them. Everybody gathered around one last time before we took the field. "We watch for Porter's move, then. We work off that. Everybody understand?"

A round of affirmatives came from everyone, and we broke up and took our positions on the field for the start of the second half.

North Carolina was already on the field when we trotted out to our positions, and as soon as I moved into my defensive spot I could see the Tarheels forwards huddling up and discussing the change. Obviously they were not expecting that sort of adjustment, and I hoped it confused them enough to put them back on their heels just enough at the beginning of the half to give us an opportunity to tie up the score.

They recovered quickly, too quickly for us to take advantage. In fact, they didn't really make any on-field adjustments to our changes that I could see. I settled back into my familiar routine and my familiar position, and I watched the progression of the second half.

About eight minutes into the second half I saw my chance. Bryan and Jesse were working the ball in a two-man game deep in Tarheels territory, so I called for Stuart to shift with me. Spencer saw me move and gave me a hand signal to let me know he was ready to move over for me. I didn't want to revert to our first half lineup, though, so I kept on moving up, past the midfield stripe, as Stuart dropped back to cover me. Juan Maria was hovering up just off the right post, anticipating a crossing pass by either Jesse or Bryan, and I moved up toward him. He saw me coming forward and began sidestepping back toward me, keeping an eye on the ball and our two forwards on the other side of the field. I waved to him to indicate he should move back toward the line and back me up, and he slid back into the right midfielder's position.

Meanwhile, Jesse spotted me coming up pretty much unchallenged. The Tarheels were not expecting me to move all the way up into an attacking position from way back in my corner, and so I was kind of the forgotten man on the field for

the moment. Jesse faked a pass back to Bryan, spun around, and gave the ball a swift ride into a small open area just in front of me. I was moving forward at a steady speed, and his pass led me beautifully. I took it in stride, making the defense shift toward me. The defender on my side closed on me, and Juan Maria saw the opportunity to charge. He took off, seemingly toward nothing but empty grass toward the corner, but he knew I had seen him. I settled the ball against my inseam, and then I used the inside of my left foot to blister a pass that raced past the startled defender coming up on me, and into the open space Juan Maria was just entering. Jesse crashed the goal toward the far post and I stepped around my defender and bore down on the near post as Juan Maria gathered in the ball, dribbled up to a more advantageous angle, and lofted a pass over my head toward Jesse.

The North Carolina middle defense was not drawn out of position, though, and their sweeper and their stopper double-teamed Jesse. He had no play on the net, even though he controlled Juan Maria's pass, and he was forced to move the ball back to Spencer. The defenders on him eased up, giving Jesse a little room to maneuver, and Spencer put the ball back on Jesse's feet. Again the defenders closed, and the ball went back to Spencer. By that time I had moved back to triangulate with Jesse and Spencer, opening up more options, but Spencer was happy to play straight ahead with Jesse.

Suddenly, it dawned on me what Spencer and Jesse were waiting for. I took off at a run toward the right post from the middle of Tarheels territory as Jesse was passing the ball back to Spencer. Goldman took the pass, settled the ball to make sure he had a good passing opportunity, and he rolled the ball toward my back. I was just outside the box when the ball hit my heel. It rolled up my leg, and I gave it a boost as I bent my leg back and heeled it up in the air. The ball looped up over my shoulder, and I side-stepped a little away from it, jumped up to meet it, and sidekicked the ball off my laces at about shoulder height. The ball powered off my foot, catching my defender completely by surprise as the ball whistled inches from his ear. The North Carolina keeper, watching the ball all the time, was still just a second too slow, and the ball pounded into the back of the net for the tie. It was a new game.

I was mobbed by my teammates after the goal, and it took us a few minutes to disentangle and reset for North Carolina's restart. I moved back into the defensive spot again, satisfied we were once again fluid. On the next set, I saw Frenchy moving up, and as I switched, this time with Ted into the sweeper spot, I even saw Jesse dropping back and switching with Jeremy, voluntarily moving to play left midfield.

If that doesn't confuse them, they can't be confused, I thought as I saw movement all over the field. And, in fact, it did confuse them, enough so that we were able to sneak one more goal in on them, a golden goal scored during stoppage time at the end of the game by Juan Maria Sandoval, with an assist from Spencer Goldman. The referee blew his whistle while we were resetting, and that was all we needed. We walked away with a win, and we would have to wait to see if we would meet Maryland or South Carolina for the tournament championship on Sunday.

We lined up and congratulated North Carolina. They had played ninety minutes of excellent soccer, and had come within seconds of taking us to overtime. We felt lucky to be moving on to the championship game.

After the game and after Pick's post-game analysis, we were in the shower when the solution to my problem of Luke, Kayla, and the room hit me. It put me in an even better mood.

We had to sit together as a team to watch the second semi-final, so I couldn't go off looking for my friends in the stands. We were in our warm-up suits, essentially school uniforms that immediately identified us, and I didn't want to be conspicuous drifting around the stadium. Besides, sitting with Jesse, Bryan, Brad, and the coaches would give us an opportunity to analyze the play of both Maryland and South Carolina. We brought out our bottles of Gatorade and awaited the kickoff, everybody exuberant with our win.

When the teams took the field, it was very strange to see two good friends, guys I had played high school soccer with for years, in opposing uniforms and on opposite sides of the field. I didn't like it, but I also knew I would have to suppress my feelings from that moment on. High school was over, and Eric Johnson and Trent Abbott, at least for the rest of the fall, were members of teams standing in our way if we wanted to win the Georgetown Tournament, as well as the NCAA title. No sentiment was allowed at this level. At Christmastime, and off the field, they could be my friends; at game time, friendship was abandoned at the sidelines.

"So, Porter, who do you want to win?" asked Brad.

I shrugged. "Doesn't matter to me."

"Which team do you think is the tougher team?" he persisted.

"I don't know," I said. "You probably have a better idea about that than I do. You played them both last year."

"True," he said. "Last year South Carolina was a good team. They only graduated about five or six guys, so they're stronger this year. Maryland wasn't all that great last year, but they had a good recruiting year, and they're starting a bunch of sophomores, too. They lost about half their starters to graduation from last year, which was probably a good thing for them. I hear they're pretty good this year."

"They'd have to be, to make it this far," said Jesse. "It's not an easy tournament to rack up three straight victories."

"But they've been scored on," Bryan pointed out. "South Carolina hasn't given up a goal yet."

"I think that's too much of a generalization," said Brad. "It probably says just as much about their draw as it does about their defense."

"Maybe that's true," conceded Bryan. "But you don't often see teams seeded low get this deep into a tournament, no matter what the sport is. Teams ranked eighth in a draw don't often beat teams ranked first."

"That's just the far end of the spectrum," said Jesse. "What about the middle of the draw? What makes a team get seeded third instead of fourth? Fourth instead of fifth? Those teams, especially in big tournaments like the NCAA, might be so close in ability it's the play of one guy, or even the outcome of one game in their schedule, that might be the deciding factor. The talent pool is so balanced, you can see why a five team can take out a three team, or a three team can beat a top seed."

"I'd rather be seeded first than fourth, then," said Spencer. "Might as well start out a tourney against the weakest opponent. If the fourth seed plays the fifth seed, it's too much of a coin toss to predict who goes on to the second round."

"It's always better to be the lead dog," said Bryan. "I want them all looking to climb up to our level. I'd rather not be the one doing the climbing."

"I think you mixed up your metaphors there, pal," said Jesse with a laugh. "But we understand you anyway."

"Which kind of frightens me a little," I added with a chuckle.

The South Carolina-Maryland game was about to start. The teams were on the field, and the linesmen and the referee were ready. The referee checked with the keepers, and received their signals that they were set to go, and he blew his whistle to start the clock. Maryland had won the toss, so they started with the ball. They passed back and began their opening offensive play.

The rest of my friends and I sat back and enjoyed the sunshine as we studied the game's progression. Who would we face on Sunday?

As I studied the teams, it became apparent to me that Trent was only one of their scoring potential players. They were very strong up front, and very strong around their own goal. Their middle seemed a little soft, though, prone to playing primarily on offense. They tended to move back a little slowly, relying on their strong defense to reacquire the ball and move it up to them. I pointed out what I was seeing to Brad and Jesse. Maybe, with all of us watching their play, we could turn our observations into an advantage. Their midfield just might be an exploitable weakness.

Maryland's game suffered from what I could only think of as underperforming coaching. They had a talented starting lineup, but it became obvious very early in the game that they also had some fractious divisions on their team, primarily between the upperclassmen and the younger players. Within about ten minutes I could point out the seniors and juniors on the team, because they had a tendency to play keep-away. Not only were they trying to protect the ball against South Carolina, but they also tended to pass only to each other, and not to the sophomores and freshmen on the field. Only at need did they allow an underclassman to handle the ball, including the fastest man on their team, Eric Johnson. Was it my imagination, this on-field discrimination?

I turned to Jesse and Bryan. "You notice anything odd about the way Maryland is playing?" I asked.

Jesse sat up straighter. "I wasn't paying much attention," he admitted. "I tend to watch to see how teams respond later in each half. I want to see how they react when they're tired."

"It looks a little odd," said Bryan. "What's wrong with this picture?" He, too, began studying the play a little harder.

After a few minutes, I gave them a clue. "I'll bet that, within five minutes, you'll be able to tell me which players out there are seniors, and which players are freshmen."

"Really? You're discerning that much detail?" Bryan stared at me for a minute, and then turned back to watch. He really wanted to know how I knew, but I felt he would be able to figure it out quickly.

I alternated watching the game and glancing at my friends as they studied the field. After a few minutes, I saw the recognition in Jesse's face. He smiled and looked over at me.

"I'll be damned," he said.

Bryan looked at Jesse, and then at me, and turned back to the game once again. I watched him, and I saw when he found it, too. He sat up straight, and then he bent over in his seat to peer at the field, his eyes narrowing.

Without taking his eyes off the field, he began pointing. "Okay, we start out knowing that Johnson, on the far side, is a freshman. So that means..." He collected his thoughts, and then continued. "The forward on this side, the right midfielder, the left defender, the stopper. All freshmen. Or maybe sophomores." He turned to Jesse and me. "The rest are upperclassmen."

Jesse laughed, and I nodded at him, grinning like a fool. "Seems pretty damned silly, doesn't it?"

"How the hell did they get this far into this tournament playing that way?" asked Bryan.

"Now that you see it, it looks pretty bad," I said. "But look how long it took you to recognize it. And I had to give you a hint about it first. See? It's subtle, but it's there. It's just easier to see now that you know what you're looking at."

Bryan let out a low whistle. "Jesus H. Christ, I hope we play Maryland tomorrow," he said. "How easy would that be?"

"A lot easier now that we see the hole," said Jesse.

"Easy, yes, but what's the point? Let me beat a tough opponent. Beating up on a weak team isn't all that much fun," I said.

"Oh yeah? It's fun, Porter. Any win is fun." Bryan's face was serious, but there was laughter in his eyes as he said it.

South Carolina ended up winning the game, 4-1. I would be facing Trent for the championship, but that was two days in the future. For the rest of that day, I was

planning on meeting my friends once again for dinner, this time at a seafood restaurant in Maryland that Keisha knew of.

Before that, however, I needed to straighten out my room situation. To do that, I had to make a phone call.

Chapter 18 - The Little Guy Comes Up Big

Posted: February 14, 2004 - 11:41:56 am

When we all got back to the hotel, I went upstairs with everybody. Once I was pretty sure nobody was roaming the halls, I took the stairs back down to the first floor and headed over to the cashier's station in the bar.

"Can I get some change, please?" I asked the bartender. I slapped a five-dollar bill onto the bar.

"Sure," he said. "All quarters?"

"That's good," I replied. He handed me a fistful of change, and I walked over to the bank of pay telephones in the hallway leading to the restaurant. I dropped a quarter into the slot and fumbled in my wallet for the number I needed. I was calling my older brother Michael at his work. After I dialed, the operator came on and instructed me to deposit eight more quarters for the first two minutes. I fed them into the box, and there was a series of clicks until the connection was made. The telephone at the other end rang twice, and then a gruff voice picked up.

"Yeah. Hello? Murphy's Auto."

"Michael Porter, please. Tell him his brother is calling long-distance."

"Hold on a minute," said the voice. There was a clunk as the receiver was dropped. I stood there listening to random pops and hisses, until I heard Michael fumble with the telephone.

When he got on the phone, he sounded confused. "Sean? What's up, bro?"

"I need a favor," I said hurriedly. "You got a credit card?"

"Yeah, I've got one. Why?"

"Call this number," I said. I read off the phone number of the hotel we were staying at. "Make a reservation under the name..." I hadn't really thought this through enough. *What name to put the reservation under?* Not my name. *Kayla's?* "Put it under... Lehigh. First initial K. Prepay for the room with your credit card, and I'll pay you back."

I could hear the suspicion right through the telephone lines, all the way from back home. "What the hell are you doing, Sean?"

"Look, I'm in D.C. at a tournament," I said. "A... friend of mine... needs a room for a couple of nights, that's all, and they won't take cash for the room."

"A friend, huh?" My brother knew me very well, and he was doubtful about the validity of all this. I couldn't blame him, but I didn't want to tell him the entire truth, either. I didn't need any of this to get back to Kayla's parents.

"Yes, a friend." I tried to sound innocent, persuasive. It was a tough sell. "I'm with the team here. I'm just trying to get a room for a friend, so they aren't sleeping in a doorway somewhere. That's all. Come on, Mikey. I'll pay you back when I'm home for Christmas, I promise."

"Well... All right," he reluctantly agreed. "If I find out you're scamming me, though..." He left the rest of it unsaid. He didn't have to complete the sentence. I understood perfectly.

"Thanks, dude. I owe you big time."

"Yes, you do," he said just before he hung up.

Now Kayla would be able to get her own room without having to worry about how to pay for it. She and Keisha could say they were checking in for the tournament. Two girls sharing a room wouldn't be that unusual.

I ran back up the stairs to my room. I just had time to change into street clothes before our team meeting. Pick wanted us to look at film of South Carolina so we could begin to prepare for Sunday's championship game.

Jesse and Bryan decided they wanted to go to a movie with some of the other guys, instead of going out with me and my friends. Spencer came along with me, and Danielle picked us up after going by Trent's hotel and getting him. Kayla was with Keisha, and they would be meeting us at the restaurant. I was excited about telling her my plan.

Trent got out to let Spencer and me get into the back seat. Once we were settled and on our way, I said, "Nice game today, Trent. Congratulations on the win."

"Thanks," he said. He twisted around so he could talk to us. "You guys played a tough one, too. North Carolina is no pushover."

"We were lucky to escape today," said Spencer.

Trent eyeballed both of us. "I don't know how much luck played into it," he observed. "You guys do all that movement on the field on purpose, don't you? Porter, I've never seen you play up so much before."

"Watch out, Trent," I warned. "I'm turning into a real scoring machine. I think that makes nine goals this season."

"Hey, not bad for a defensive specialist," he said.

"Yeah, but I think you had nine goals every two games in high school," I reminded him.

"Those were the days, weren't they? Goals came easy and often." We seemed a little young to be waxing nostalgic already, but he had a point. High school soccer was a lot easier than the college game.

"Did you say goals?" asked Spencer. "For a second I thought you said girls came easy and often."

Trent laughed, earning himself a dirty look from Danielle. Glancing over at her, he said, "No, I definitely said goals. I didn't know any easy girls in high school."

"Oh, you knew some," said Danielle with a knowing look. "You were just smart enough to stay away from them."

"And smart enough to get together with the toughest chick in town," he added with a smile and a wink.

Danielle kept her eyes on the road, but I thought I detected just the faintest trace of a pleased look on her face from Trent's compliment.

"So, did you study our game? Find any holes to exploit?" I was fishing, but Trent was too wily to take the bait.

"I saw your game, sure. You guys are tough. I don't think we belong on the same field with you guys. You're gonna run roughshod over us on Sunday." It was an effort for him to keep his face serious.

"You're not gonna give us anything, are you?" grumbled Spencer.

"Nope," said Trent with a tight smile. "Not unless you're going to give something back."

"Who, us?" I said in mock innocence. "We've got nothing to give."

"Yeah, right," said Trent. He turned back around, giving Danielle a significant look.

"See?" She glanced over at Trent. "I told you they wouldn't tell you anything."

"Hey, it was worth trying," he said.

When we got to the restaurant, we found our friends waiting in the lobby for our table. I was a little embarrassed about taking Kayla into my arms in public, but she had no problem with it. She put her arms around my neck and pulled my face down to hers.

"Did ya miss me?" she murmured just before she kissed me.

"Every minute of the day," I replied. I put my arms around her waist and held her. I was glad she was so open and uncomplicated in her affection toward me. I wished I were more like her.

I pulled her off to the side a little and explained my plan for getting our own room.

"The thing is, you and Keisha, or you and Danielle, have to check in and get the key. We want the hotel desk clerks to think it's you two girls staying overnight. Okay?"

"Of course, love. It'll be easy. What room will I be in?"

"I don't know yet," I said. "You'll have to call my room once you're checked in. You can let me know then."

There was a twinkle in her eye. "Maybe I'll call you," she said. "If you promise to be good."

"I'll be good," I said, "if you'll promise to be bad."

"I can be bad," she said with a grin. "I can be a very bad girl."

The hostess called for the Prescott party, and we followed her into the dining room to our table. We sat down and I opened my menu to find page after page of clams, mussels, lobster, clams, shrimp, scallops, fish, clams, crab, oysters, calamari, and more clams, with just one little section toward the back for what

they called "landlubber dishes." A couple of selections of chicken, one steak, a vegetarian pasta dish, and, almost as an afterthought, a hamburger.

Keisha was giving Spencer the eye. "Now before you go and order that burger, Midwestern Boy, keep in mind this is the Chesapeake Bay. You just can't visit here and not at least try some clams."

Spencer looked doubtful. "I don't like that fishy smell," he said.

Keisha brayed laughter. "If it smells bad, it probably is bad," she said. "Good fish don't smell ugly."

I heard Eric softly say, "If it smells like fish, and if it tastes like fish..."

Keisha swung around to her boyfriend. "And if he keeps on with this train of thought, he might not ever get a chance to test out his theory again," she warned him with mock severity.

Eric managed to hide his laugh behind a too-innocent look. "I wasn't going anywhere with that, darlin'. I ain't that stupid."

"You sure as hell ain't that smart," she retorted. "You just like walkin' the edge, don't you?"

"Loving you is walking enough of an edge," Eric replied in his best English butler voice. He leaned over to give her a peck on the cheek, which Keisha accepted willingly. She wasn't quite done with Spencer, though.

"You've had clam chowder before, haven't you?"

"Good God, no. It's got clams in it," he said with a shudder.

"Well, you're getting some tonight. Ain't no clam chowder like Chessy Bay clam chowder." Spencer opened his mouth to protest, but Keisha rolled right over him. "Uh-uh, you are at least trying it. You really don't know you don't like it if you never tried it. You can order it as an appetizer before we order our main courses. If you taste it and still don't like it, I'll shut up, I promise. Deal?"

Poor Spencer was steamrolled, and he was far too polite to just tell Keisha where she could shove it. He nodded reluctantly, and then favored Eric with a sympathetic look.

"Strong lady," he said.

Eric chuckled. "You got no idea," he said.

When his steaming cup of clam chowder arrived, Spencer wrinkled his nose and looked suspiciously at it. One glance at Keisha, though, was all it took, and he picked up his spoon and dipped it carefully into the creamy soup. He hesitantly tasted it with just the tip of his tongue. Apparently it wasn't nearly as poisonous as he had expected, because he took a spoonful, blew on the surface, and ate it.

"Okay, not bad," he said. "I can't really taste the clams."

"Stir it up a little, get some of those chunks of clams," suggested Trent.

Spencer gave him a sour look, but did as Trent suggested. Keisha watched him closely as he took a mouthful of chowder.

"A little rubbery, but it's okay," he pronounced.

Everybody had been watching and waiting for Spencer. When he said it was okay, it was like his words were the signal for everybody else to dig in. It was only as we resumed our normal chatter that the silence that surrounded our table as we watched Spencer with his chowder became noticeable. Kayla, sitting to my right, put her hand on my knee and gave it an affectionate squeeze before reaching for a plate of appetizers. We all began passing plates of fried clams, onion rings, and peel-your-own shrimp around the table, and our communion was underway.

The waitress came around to take our orders. The menu was arranged with the house specialties numbered. Kayla ordered a Number Four Special, fried clams and shrimp. I ordered a Number Two Special, which was broiled red snapper, steamed clams, and fried shrimp.

The waitress moved over between Eric and Keisha. "What'll you have, honey?" the waitress said to Keisha.

"I'll have the Number Eight," said Keisha.

"I could have predicted that," said Eric with a chuckle.

"Really?" asked Kayla innocently. She looked at the menu selections. Number Eight was a seafood gumbo.

Eric's eyes were twinkling with amusement as he glanced first at Kayla, and then at his girlfriend. "Shore," he said. "Keisha, she loves to get eight."

Keisha slapped him with her menu, and the waitress broke out laughing.

"What?" asked Kayla, a little confused. "I don't understand."

"Ain't nothin' to understand," said Eric. "All I said was Keisha loves to get ate."

I leaned over and explained Eric's little pun to Kayla. She turned a bright red, and tried to hide her blushing cheeks in her hands.

"You are just awful," she said to Eric, but we all could see she was smiling.

The waitress finished taking our orders for our entrees, and I shifted in my chair so I could look around Keisha at Eric.

"Hey, dude, how many touches did you have on the ball today?" I asked.

He shrugged. "I don't know. A couple dozen?"

Trent's ears perked up. "Not many for a quick forward," he noted. "You should be handling the ball a lot more than that."

"It's just the way our offense is set up," Eric said.

I sighed. "Look, Eric, you're one of my very best friends. Can I say something without you going off on me?"

Eric looked at me. "Of course, dude. You got something to say, let it out."

Okay," I said. "Here it is. Bullshit."

"Bullshit? That's it? That's what you thought I'd take offense at?"

"Sure. Because you know it's bullshit, even if you haven't admitted it to yourself yet."

Eric threw his head back and laughed, a sound of pure pleasure. "Yep, you're right, it's pure, unadulterated, warm and smelly bullshit. You recognized it, didn't you? Goddamn."

"We all saw it," I said. "Me and Jesse and Bryan, our coaches, we were sitting watching the game and we couldn't hardly miss it."

"What? What are you guys talking about?" asked Danielle. She turned to Trent. "Do you know what they're talking about?"

"Not really, sweetie," he admitted. "Maybe they'll let us in on the joke, too."

"You were too busy to notice. Too close to it, maybe. But sitting in the stands, we saw it," said Spencer. "Or, more accurately, Porter saw it. He gave us a clue what to look for, and before long we all saw it."

"Saw what?" asked Trent. He was sounding a little exasperated.

Eric turned toward Trent. "We got a little problem with our team over at Maryland," he said.

"They fielded two teams against you today, pal," I said.

"Two teams?" Now Trent was really confused.

"That's pretty true," said Eric, glancing at me. "We got an underclass team, and an upper-class team."

"And they don't share well," said Spencer.

"You're right. We don't play well together at recess, neither."

"What?" Trent was sounding like maybe he was starting to understand. "Is that why you didn't handle the ball very much?"

"That's about right," confirmed Eric. "It's been a team... how did they put it? Oh, yeah, a team 'concept' for a long time. Upperclassmen rule, sophs and frosh drool."

"Hell of a concept to run a program on," noted Spencer.

"Ain't real successful except against weak teams," agreed Eric. "It's tough, especially as a dumb-as-a-thumb freshman, to try to come in and make everybody see the error of their ways. We got a good group of younger players, though, and that change is gonna come. You can bet on it."

"You sound a little angry about it, Eric," said Danielle.

"It's frustrating," he said. "I mean, we've got some pretty damn good players out there on the field, and too many of them don't get the opportunity to do what they can because of the attitude of the juniors and seniors."

"It's all inherited problems, too," added Keisha. "From what we've heard, it was even worse last year."

"Jesse told us Maryland wasn't very good last year, but graduating their senior class probably helped out the team," noted Spencer.

"Yeah," agreed Eric. "I hear it's better, but it's still a bitch when you work your ass off to make yourself a better player, and then you don't get the chance to use your skills come game time."

"So, you think you'll transfer to a different program next year, then?" asked Kayla.

"No," said Eric. "Me and Keisha, we made a commitment to Maryland, and we'll honor it. This year will be the toughest, but it's always tough for a freshman player coming in. Next year will be better, because we'll graduate the most hard-core players from the old regime. The sophs on the team will be upperclassmen, and no way will they put up with what's been going on."

"That's the hope, anyway," said Keisha.

"It's more than wishful thinking," insisted Eric. "Our sophomore starters are just as frustrated as I am. They tried looking to the coaching staff to change things, but it's not happening fast enough for them. They'll change it next year with or without the coaches."

"For a team going through such divisiveness, you guys played well during the tournament," said Trent.

"Even with a divided team, we got some talent," said Eric. He nodded at Spencer and me. "Maybe not enough to take on the Florida soccer machine, but good enough so we can hold our heads up in public."

"And, by the way, what's up with the way Florida is playing their positions?" asked Keisha. "You guys start out in a classic three-four-three, but then you scramble it all up."

"Classic three-four-three? Have you become a student of the game?" I asked.

"Shit, you watch as many games and practices as I have over the past too-many years, even a dumb broad like me can pick up a little bit," she said.

"Come on, Keisha, you know what I meant," I said sadly. "I would never..."

She broke out into a big grin and put her hand behind my neck. "Gotcha, didn't I?" she said, sounding pleased with herself as she pulled me over and gave me a kiss. Her lips were soft and moist, and I just might have felt the tip of her tongue

against my lips. Certainly a friendlier kiss than I was expecting, considering both Eric and Kayla were watching. Her eyes were twinkling as she pulled back, as if to say, *Gotcha again, Porter.*

Keisha was never predictable, and never boring, I reminded myself. Two of the many reasons why I liked her so much.

"So," Keisha continued as she readjusted her napkin, "are you going to tell us about your game or not?"

I looked around the restaurant, twisting around in my seat. "Just where is that darned waitress, anyway?" I asked.

Keisha chuckled. "I'll take that as a 'no, ' then," she said.

"You know I would share all my secrets with you, sweetheart. But Mr. I-Love-to-Score Abbott over there is listening in." I nodded in Trent's direction.

Eric murmured, "Hey, he ain't the only one. I love to score, too."

Keisha guffawed, throwing her head back in real amusement. "You surely do, Eric Johnson. You surely do."

There was nothing much we could have added to that, so it was just as well our waitress showed up with a tray loaded with hot dishes for us.

As we were getting ready to leave the restaurant, the girls decided that Danielle would be the one to go in and register with Kayla. She was driving us back anyway, and that way Keisha wouldn't have to make the trip twice. Besides, it looked like she and Eric had plans for the rest of the evening, and they were a little anxious to get to them. We promised to get together with them the next day, and we waved as they drove off for their rendezvous.

When we got back to the hotel, Spencer and I walked around and made sure our teammates, scattered around the lobby and the restaurant, saw us together. We stopped and chatted with Pick, Eddie, and Stan, just finishing up a late dinner at a table located by a big window looking out into the street.

While we were chatting people up, Danielle and Kayla came in and stepped up to the registration desk. They signed the forms, and the desk clerk handed them each a key to their room. Trent had stayed in the car, parked in the lot next to the hotel. I glanced over just as the elevator doors were closing as the girls headed

up to the room. I knew Danielle would take the stairs back down again, and try to leave by a door near the parking lot unnoticed. All I had to do now was wait for Kayla's call to let me know what room she was in.

Spencer and I sauntered around until I felt satisfied we had been well noticed. We told people we were going to go up and see if anything good was on the tube.

In the elevator, Spencer said, "Mission accomplished."

"Thanks for helping out, dude," I said.

"Hey, I'm in favor of helping true love find a way," he said. "I'm just a romantic at heart."

Luke had been downstairs, so Spencer came in to my room and flopped down on the bed.

"It'll be nice to have the day off tomorrow," he said.

"What are you planning on doing tomorrow?" I asked.

"Sleeping and being lazy," he said.

I was nervous, pacing back and forth as I waited for the telephone to ring.

"Sean, sit down. You're making me tired just watching you."

"Yeah, okay," I said. I sighed as I sat on Luke's bed. I grabbed the remote and started flipping through channels.

"Wait a minute, go back," said Spencer, sitting up. He reached for the remote.

"What?" I asked as I handed it to him.

He cycled back about four channels to a taped concert in a small auditorium.

"*Soundstage*," he said. "This is the Doobie Brothers one."

"Groovy," I said. "Go ahead and listen to the music."

"All the time," he answered, staring at the screen.

The telephone rang, startling me. I reached over and picked it up.

"Hello?"

"Room 648," whispered Kayla.

"You don't have to whisper," I said with a smile. "I don't think anyone will overhear."

"You just can't be too careful," she replied.

"Luke's downstairs. As soon as he comes up, I'll be ready to meet you."

"What about curfew?" Kayla, at least, was thinking straight. I had forgotten about team curfew and bed check.

"You're right, sweetie. I'd better wait until after Eddie does his bed check."

"Call me before you come up so I can open the door, okay?"

"Okay," I answered. Now all I had to do was wait until everything was quiet in the halls. Considering I was waiting to go to my Luscious, I would do it willingly.

Luke came up about ten minutes before lights out, and Spencer headed off to his own room. *Soundstage* had ended, and we were back to flipping through the channels again.

Luke looked around after Spencer left. "Where's your girlfriend?" he asked.

"She got a different room," I said. I wrote the room number down on a pad of paper for him. "If you need to get in touch with me for any reason, here's where I'll be."

"Dude, you know you're taking a chance here," he warned me.

"I know. Just cover my back for the next couple of nights, okay?"

"I hope she's worth risking what you're risking," he said, shaking his head.

"She's worth all that, and more," I said.

I had a backpack with my overnight stuff in it waiting by the side of my bed, out of sight from the door. I had on a tee shirt and my running shorts, and I turned back the bedspread and slipped into bed. I wanted to make it look like I was ready to go to sleep, for when Eddie checked our room. I hoped he would just

poke his head in and leave. He was probably anxious to finish up his rounds so he could go to bed, too.

A few minutes later there was a knock at the door. Luke got up and answered it, stepping aside so Eddie could come in and see me.

"You're both here, good. Have a good night, men," he said. He gave us a tiny salute and stepped back out the door.

I glanced at the clock, determined to wait at least fifteen minutes before sneaking out. It was the longest fifteen minutes of my life. I tried to will the clock to move faster, but it refused, seeming, instead, to crawl along at about half speed.

Finally, after eleven minutes had passed, I gave up. I sat up and dialed Kayla's room.

"I'm on my way up," I whispered.

She giggled. "You don't have to whisper," she said. "I don't think anyone will overhear."

"Very funny," I said, though I still kept my voice low.

"Hurry," she said softly. Her voice had a little edge to it, and my body responded. I hurried.

I eased open the door and checked the hall. *All clear.* With a last thumbs-up to Luke, I tiptoed down the hall to the stairway. I opened the fire door carefully, stepped through, and closed it gently. Once it was firmly closed, I took the stairs two at a time, up to the sixth floor. I found Kayla's room and tapped lightly on the door. She opened it just enough for me to squeeze in. Her room was dark, with just the ambient light from the window highlighting the furniture. The curtains were open, and I could see the outlines of rooftops and buildings in the night, with random rectangles of windows lit up scattered around the scene.

Kayla was wearing a University of Florida tee shirt I had sent her, and her soccer shorts. Her long, pale hair was tied back in a loose ponytail, with stray strands curled around her ears and framing her lovely face. I was struck again by how beautiful she was, and by how fortunate I was to be loved by my Luscious.

She led me over to the bed nearest the window, and we sat down together and looked at the city lights. It was a clear night with a moon just past full casting its blue, stark light across the cityscape. The stars were nearly washed out by the moon's display, and the dome of light in which we resided, reaching up into the

atmosphere, contributed to the dimming of the celestial display. At that moment, I didn't care. I had my own celestial light beside me, holding my hand.

I let go of her hand so I could put my arm around her. She turned her head toward me, anticipating a kiss, and I tried not to disappoint her. I must have been doing it right, because I could detect, either through my hearing or subliminally, a contented sound, nearly a purr, emanating from her.

After a few minutes she twisted a little, so she could put her arm by my waist. She let her weight fall back onto the bed, and she pulled me down with her. We turned toward each other a little, shifting to accommodate our relative positions, with our legs still dangling over the edge of the bed.

I felt her lips part just a little, and her tongue peeked out to tease my mouth. We continued kissing, each gradually getting more adventurous in our ardor. Our mouths opened against each other, and our tongues engaged in a ritual older than either of us.

In time, I felt Kayla begin to ruck up my tee shirt and rub her palms on the bare skin of my chest. Her fingers found my nipples and teased each of them. I heard her hum into my mouth as she felt my chest and pushed up my shirt even further.

My own hand began to mirror her actions. My fingers found their way beneath her tee shirt, onto her tummy. I felt her abdominal muscles tighten just a little in response to my touch. I slowly ran my hand up her body until it encountered the slope of her left breast. I was not surprised to discover Kayla was not wearing a bra. My fingers explored her soft skin, skimming over her flesh along her sternum and just beneath her breasts, deliberately staying away from her sensitive tips.

We continued kissing, taking things slowly, almost leisurely. We had all night, after all, and we didn't really have anywhere to be the next day. Kayla had taken care of me the night before, so this time it was my turn to make sure she was well satisfied.

Our kisses got hotter and wetter as our temperature elevated, and I finally could not resist anymore. I let my hand slide up over her soft mounded flesh, and I let my fingertips brush across her swollen nipples. Kayla moaned into my mouth when she felt the stimulation my fingers were bringing to her, and she began to pinch on my nipples in response.

We teased each other with our kisses and our touching in the darkened room, alone together in the middle of the city. Finally, with a gasp, Kayla had to break free of my mouth, and she threw her head back and let herself be carried away by my fingers and my lips, which were even then nibbling at her earlobe. I found I was panting, too, but since I was paying homage to her tender neck and ear, I made sure I warmed the back of her ear with my breath as I took her earlobe between my lips. The combination made her shiver just a little, and I felt it through the palm of my hand as I pressed against her breast.

My tongue left a damp trail down her neck as I dropped toward her throat with my mouth. I kissed her just below the hinge of her jaw, down below the jut of her jawbone, below her chin, to the hollow of her lovely throat. I spent a few minutes tasting her there, all while my hand was kneading the flesh of her soft breast, alternately playing with her nipple and hefting and squeezing her boob.

I had pushed up her shirt so that it had bunched up above her breasts, so I abandoned my southern journey for just a moment. I began teasing her with my tongue and lips along the swell of her left breast. My right hand hefted her flesh, pushing the mound toward my mouth, but I wanted to wait before taking possession of her swollen nipple with my lips quite yet. Instead, I nibbled and licked my way around her breast, down the valley between her boobs, and licked the underside of first her right, and then her left breast, gathering up the salty perspiration that was leaching from her skin.

Once I had tasted her tender flesh, I couldn't be held back. I teased her as long as I could, but there came a point where I just couldn't hold back anymore. I allowed my tongue to circle around her breast, moving in a concentric circle toward its rosy and distended destination. My lips gobbled up her nipple, and I pinched her other nipple at the same time. I heard and felt Kayla's sharp intake of breath as the sudden onslaught raced through her body, and she held my head tightly, wanting more.

I worshipped her breasts, sucking on her nipples and squeezing her soft contours, and built her up. She had her head back and her eyes closed, concentrating on the electrical pulses firing along her nerves from her nipples, to her pussy, to her brain. I, too, was doing my share of concentrating as I sucked in on her, trying to get as much of her breast into my mouth as I could. She was small, and her skin was tightened because of the swelling of her nipples and her breasts, so there wasn't a lot of meat to bring into my mouth, but I did the best I could, until I felt her hard nub against the back of my tongue. I gave her as much suction as I could, and as I did, I let my hand skim down her body until I found the waistband of her satiny shorts. My fingers slipped beneath the elastic and over her tummy, drawn instinctively to the well of moisture below. I

encountered the short, sparse hair above her pussy, down to her puffy outer lips. My middle finger parted her folds, releasing the accumulation of oils, and my fingertips were immediately covered with her hot lubrication.

The release of the moisture also mixed the scent of her arousal into the air, and my nose picked it up. My cock twitched in anticipation as my finger delved between her spread legs. My steely appendage wanted to feel what my finger was experiencing as my fingertip found her flooded hole and dipped in.

Kayla's hips hunched up at the intrusion, her body demanding more, and I was anxious to accommodate. I released her breast from my sucking mouth and began my journey down to her center. I moved over so that I was between her legs, and I slipped to my knees on the floor. I reached up and gently pulled her soccer shorts down. She lifted up her butt to assist me, and I let them slide down her legs and off her feet. I dropped them to the floor, put my hands on her inner thighs to guide her legs open. Kayla lifted her legs so they could rest on my shoulders, and she crossed her ankles against my back. I leaned in and licked her.

That first taste, oh! How I loved that first, tangy and fresh taste of my Luscious. I used just the tip of my tongue to gather up her juices, and her drooling slot seemed to flower open at my touch, giving me more access to her. I laved her from the skin of her legs to her clitoris, peeking out and seeming to seek attention. I ran my tongue around the pencil-tip of nerve endings, spreading lubrication and lapping up the overflow, and used my fingers to stimulate her further along her folds.

I thrust my index finger into her as deeply as I could go, and her hips bumped up. As I used my tongue on her clit, I added a second finger, and finger-fucked her in rhythm to the trilling of my tongue against her sensitive bud.

I heard her moan, "Oh God, oh God," and I glanced up and watched her face for a moment. She looked almost like she was in pain, with her eyes squeezed shut and her mouth grimacing. She had one hand on the back of my head, and her other hand was pinching her nipple. No matter what it felt like, I knew it could feel even better if somebody else was doing it, so I reached up with one hand and grasped her other breast, squeezing the orb for her.

Just that extra amount of stimulation was all it took to send her over. She screeched breathlessly, her whole body tensed up, and she was tossed into the waves of the wonderful storm. I continued licking through her center, and I also worked my two fingers in and out of her with my right hand. My left hand pinched her nipple in time with my strokes, and I was rewarded with a

remarkably sweet and oily discharge from her pussy. She lost control of her body for just a second, and three slight puffs of gas escaped from her asshole. Kay never realized she farted, and I would never tell her about it. It surprised me, and I started giggling as I played her. An unusual side effect of her orgasm, I surmised. It was the first time I had encountered the phenomenon, but certainly not the last.

Finally, she pushed my head away from her with a groan. I settled back and sat against the wall, underneath the window, as Kayla slowly sat up. Her eyes were slitted, and her hair was tangled, but she had a determined look to her. She came down to the floor and knelt between my legs. She grabbed my shorts and pulled them off, with my assistance, and tossed them to join hers on the floor beside the bed. She lifted up my shirt, pulling it off me, and it floated down onto the growing pile of our clothes. Still without a word, she put her hands on my shoulders, lifted herself up, and straddled me. She pressed her breast to my mouth, and I opened up and nibbled on her, taking advantage of the opportunity. She let me play with her for just a moment, and then she reached down and grabbed my rampant cock. She held it upright, aimed the head toward her middle, and let herself sink down, impaling herself on me.

It was my turn to moan. She was very hot, very wet, and very tight. She settled down on me, her butt resting on my thighs and my cock buried in her, and stayed there for the moment. I could feel her body adjusting to the intrusion of my pole, and Kayla sighed with satisfaction. Her tee shirt was still around her body, so I put my hands on her breasts-because I just couldn't resist them-and then I ran my hands up under her shirt and pulled it up. She raised her arms, and I pulled it off her and tossed the shirt to the side as she put her hands on my chest to steady herself. She stared into my eyes, a tiny smile on her face, and I watched her concentrate. She contracted her pussy muscles, squeezing against my cock, and she grinned at my reaction.

Two can play that game, I thought to myself, and I concentrated on flexing my cock within her. Her eyes got a little wider when she felt that, and the battle was on. We both worked each other, sitting there quietly and connected by our fleshy bond, flexing and contracting and working each other into something of a frenzy.

Finally she had to move. In that position, we just couldn't remain still for very long, and her legs began to work. She lifted herself up, and I began that long slide as I withdrew from her body. When just the head of my cock was still encased inside her, she dropped back down on me, until I was as deep inside her as I could get. Once I was fully sheathed, she would flex her vaginal muscles against me, and start the process over again.

We established a rhythm in our lovemaking of upstroke, pause, downstroke, flex. We worked each other like this, until, finally, our bodies betrayed us, and both of our movements got a little more erratic. Kayla put her hands on my shoulders again, and she whispered, "Faster."

I was the one sitting on the floor, so I had limited control over how fast we moved, but I did what I could. Kayla did most of the work, and she began to fuck herself on me, moving up and down on my rod, her pussy contributing a continuous supply of warm lubrication and the tip of my cock bubbling with pre-cum adding to the reservoir. My heart rate was elevated, my breathing was rasping, and Kayla was panting with the effort she was providing toward our climaxes. I felt the machinery engage, the hydraulics prime, and the countdown begin. Kayla was whispering to herself, "More, more, more," over and over, willing her crisis to take her. She was readying herself for when she felt me go off, and I didn't disappoint her.

The muscles of my stomach, butt, and thighs clenched, I hunched up at her, and I blasted my first streamer of semen into her. She must have felt it, because she huffed, grimaced, and began to bounce on me, frantically arching her pelvis to try to rub her distended clit against my pubic bone. I clenched, held my breath, and pumped, hitched in a breath and clenched again, four times, and then five, giving her all I had. She took it all, and her spasming walls worked against my pumping organ for more, squeezing and gripping and rippling against my flesh buried deeply within her.

She collapsed against me, her head lolling on my shoulder, her climax having crested. I put my arms around her and held her, exhausted, and I kissed her pale, soft, and damp hair. She sat practically bonelessly on me, with my slowly softening member still encased in her, and she hummed softly. It was a happy and satisfied sound, and it made my heart glad that I could contribute to its creation.

"I take it she liked it," I said softly.

"Oh, yes, she liked it a lot," she whispered. She picked up her head and looked into my eyes happily. "And he liked it, too," she added.

"He loved it," I replied. "And he loves the girl, too."

She kissed me softly, her eyes filling. "And the girl loves the boy," she said.

My softening cock was beginning to slip out of her, bringing with it a small flood of our intermingled fluids. Kayla sat up, letting my deflated cock plop wetly

down onto my leg, and she moved over to sit against the wall next to me. I put my arm around her, and she rested her head on my chest. She put her arm around my waist, and we sat there together in companionable quiet. She was warm beside me as we cooled down from our exertions, and I could have stayed there with her forever.

It didn't take long, however, before the boy once again realized he had a naked girl next to him, and his body responded in a predictable fashion. I was willing to ignore the swelling of my cock, but Kayla saw it. She looked up into my face and smiled.

"Well, hello there, sailor," she said as her hand sneaked down to take possession of my expanding member. She scooted away from me just enough to be able to drop down and lick the head of my cock as she held me as if she was holding an ice cream cone. Her tongue lapped around the head, creating heated moisture and friction, and made me grow even faster in her hand.

As her mouth closed over me, she began jacking me with her hand, working my cock to increase its rigidity while she stimulated the sensitive flesh with her lips and tongue. She sucked on me, lowering down and taking as much of me into her mouth as she could, and she slid me between her lips, up and down, her saliva creating a slippery, hot, and moist environment for me.

After just a few minutes I could feel my blood pounding as my heart rate accelerated. Kayla's hand moved from stroking my length to caressing my balls, and, as I felt the tip of my cock hit the back of her mouth, she began to hum. The vibrations kicked me up several notches, and I could feel my cock pulsing with my heartbeat, expanding and contracting within her mouth.

Her intent was not to finish me off with her mouth, though, and after a few minutes of stimulating me, she lifted up. She kept up her suction until the tip of my cock popped out from between her lips with an audible pop. She grabbed hold of my erection with her small hand once again, and once more knelt over me. She settled herself into my lap, once again nesting me into her body, but this time she wrapped her legs around my waist. I had to scoot us away from the wall when I felt her legs go around me, shimmying up a couple of feet with her in my lap, and the bumping along across the carpet created some delicious pressure right where Tab A was fitted into Slot B. She smiled even as her breath caught as we both enjoyed the results of our movement, and she bent down just a little and kissed me hard.

We stayed like that, barely moving, for a long time, until I began to tire. I felt like I was holding her up, and my abs and sides were aching, so I moved us again,

this time so we were parallel to the bed, and I slowly lay back. Kayla contorted herself so that we didn't lose our connection as she untangled her legs from around me so I could lay flat, and she lay down on top of me, her legs outside mine, and she began to scrunch her hips against me. I reached down and grabbed the globes of her ass and squeezed them, helping her to move on my cock with my hands, and the wonderful friction worked its magic on us once again.

She pushed up with her arms so she could watch my face as she fucked me, and I was able to watch her tits jiggle and sway above me. I was tempted to grab them, but I had my hands full, so to speak, and they were quite happy where they were. I bent my neck to somewhat of an awkward angle so I could try to capture one of her nipples between my lips. Kayla giggled and swayed her upper body to keep me from claiming her prize, until she finally took pity on me and fed me her swollen tip. She sighed as I clamped down on her with my lips and my teeth, closed her eyes, and began to move her hips in earnest.

Her lower body started moving hard against me, and it was taking its toll. It took a long time to climb the mountain, but once at the top, the fall was going to be spectacular. I let go of her boob with my mouth, reached up to hold the sides of her head, and I brought her down for a hot, open-mouthed kiss. I wanted her to feel a dual connection, pussy to cock and tongue to tongue as we came. We built together, and we crashed together.

I hunched up into her, and the pumps activated. My hot gift splashed against her straining walls, and she cried out into my mouth as her own orgasm triggered. Midway through our climaxes we had to break off our kiss as each of us gasped and panted. I was giving her my last, weak spurts when she climbed up once more and climaxed again, and climbed yet again, a series of rolling climaxes that coursed unabated through her. I could feel her pussy clasp down on me with each series of convulsions, milking my cock as I was embedded in her, until, finally, her body shivered and collapsed on top of me, completely done in by our lovemaking.

At that point I was nearly incoherent, also. My entire lower body seemed to be twitching in sympathy with my heart beating, and my cock tried to let loose with one last, weak spurt before giving up. I ran my hands down her back to her ass, then back up again, and they finally came to rest in the small of her back, where I could feel the heat from her exertions radiating from her.

After resting for a few minutes, Kayla was finally able to pick up her head to look tiredly at me.

"Wow," she said. "Just... wow."

I ran my fingertips up and down her spine, still thrilling at the touch of her naked flesh. "You worked hard for that one," I said.

She nodded wearily. "It was worth it."

As a tease I tried to flex my weary and worn-out cock, still firmly seated inside her, but I got no response from it. She must have felt the effort, though, because she leaned over to the side and let my cock slip from her pussy.

"The poor little guy's got nothing left," she said.

"Sweetie," I replied, "just a word of advice. Naked guys don't like to be called 'little' after a performance like we just had."

Kayla laughed out loud, and bent down to kiss first my poor, shriveled and used cock, and then me. "He's little now, but he came up big when he needed to," she said, her lips still touching mine.

Chapter 19 - Cute Butts

Posted: March 01, 2004 - 12:48:00 pm

True to her boast, Kayla found a new way to wake me up in the morning.

We were sleeping together on one of the double beds in our hotel room, having fallen into slumber as we snuggled beneath the covers. Sometime during the night Kay had stolen the blanket, and one side of me had gotten cold enough I woke up. I moved closer to her and pulled the covers back over me and went back to sleep, with Kayla's body heat warming me. As morning approached, she must have backed into me and woken up with my morning hardon pressing against her butt. She coaxed me awake as she pulled my hard cock through her legs to rest against her bare pussy lips. She idly rubbed on the head, and it was this stimulation that finally dragged me up from the well of slumber.

I started to stretch, an unconscious reaction to waking, and as my back arched, my pelvis moved against her backside. My cock slipped through her pussy, and the contact started her glands. Moisture began gathering and transferring to my rod, hot and exciting moisture. Kayla was using just her thumb and index finger to play with my cock as I slipped my arm around her. I was fully awake by then, aware of my situation, and willing to take any advantage my Luscious was going to grant. I grasped her breast and pulled her back to me, and I began to nibble at her exposed neck.

Kayla giggled and tilted her head a little, giving me more access to the tender skin under her ear, and she grabbed my cock in her fist and began to jack me in short, hard strokes. It was almost like she was pretending to be a boy, with my cock jutting out from between her legs.

As I played with her boob and pinched her nipple, her pussy drooled more lubrication out onto the shaft of my cock. It was getting slippery down there, and I was feeling the need to bury myself in someplace dark, warm, wet, and cozy. Kayla must have been feeling the same way, because she didn't complain when I flexed my hips back and my cock slipped away from her hand. I hunched, and she helped me by doing something with her hips that allowed the head of my cock to easily find the way. She sighed as I took hold of my cock and guided it to her opening, and began to slide home.

"You are such a tease," I roughly whispered into her ear as my cock found its way.

"Me?" she replied, glancing over her shoulder at me. She clutched my hand to her breast, squeezing me hard against her sensitive flesh. "It seems to me you are the one taking advantage here."

"I wouldn't call it taking advantage," I said. This was a new phenomenon we were experiencing, and it came to me in a flash of what I thought at the time was prescience. We were actually having a conversation as we were making love, instead of grimacing and groaning and concentrating on achieving the peak in the shortest amount of time. It was less intense, but quite loving. "I would say it was more a case of accepting that which had been offered."

I bumped into her for emphasis, and I felt her tense up just a little as the sensations burst through her. In response, she tightened up her vaginal muscles against me, temporarily impeding me from stroking into her. It was my turn to tense up.

"Accepting an offer?" She was continuing the conversation, but once she started squeezing my cock with her pussy, I was having a little trouble keeping track. "There I was, sound asleep, when I was accosted... accosted, I tell you!... by an unknown appendage. I was merely investigating when you interceded."

"Mighty big words for a high school junior," I said. "Is that what I'm doing? Interceding?"

"Oh, yes," she sighed. "Interceding. And well, too." She bumped her ass back against my groin. "Do me a favor? Could you intercede a little faster?"

I had vowed to myself a long time before to never disappoint this girl, and this was a good time to prove myself, I decided. "Your desire is my command," I said, and I bent to my task. With enthusiasm.

Before too long, we had the bed sheets thrown to the foot of the bed, I was holding Kayla's leg up in the air, and I was pounding into her hard from behind her. She was grunting every time I bottomed out in her, and the bed was rocking and thumping with our efforts. I was sweating, and Kayla's skin glowed with her own sheen of perspiration. Her tight ass jiggled each time I thrust into her, my pelvis hitting against her, and my balls were swinging like they were hinged. I loved watching her ass cheeks undulate as I pounded against her. I was in a zone, seemingly calm as I worked her, waiting to feel her tumble over before I was going to allow myself to come.

It felt like we were building together to give her a massive orgasm. I was moving as fast and as hard as I could, giving her no respite. Kayla was more passive

because of the restriction of movement her position demanded of her, but she was doing what she could to contribute, squeezing and relaxing the muscles of her lower body.

I pulled out of her and rolled her over onto her back. She began moaning at the loss of sensation, the lack of the feeling of being filled.

"Oh, no, don't stop," she began.

I wordlessly grabbed her by her ankles and pushed her legs back until her knees nearly touched her shoulders. I thrust back into her roughly, my cock immediately buried fully inside her.

"Ah," she moaned, and she let her legs rest on my shoulders. She was rolled into a tight little ball, completely open to me, with her cunt tilted up for maximum depth, and I took advantage. I began to fuck her hard, and she continued her climb up. A pillow cushioned her head from the wall, an inadvertent layer of protection from a possible concussion as we continued with our frenzied coupling.

I stayed on her like that, grimacing and clenching my teeth with the effort, until I felt the subtle changes in her. Her pussy got a little wetter and a little hotter, her breath began hitching raggedly, and she was nearly there. I dropped my head down and nipped at her left nipple, pressing her legs even harder up against herself, and that was the last bit of stimulus she needed. She screeched, her voice high and breathy, and she clutched her hands to the back of my neck and tensed up, pulling my mouth harder against her breast, and she came. Spectacularly.

She could hardly move, rolled up as she was, but her pussy exuded a fresh batch of fluid, and her body began to tremble. Her eyes were squeezed shut, her mouth was stretched open in a rictus of pleasure, and her arms squeezed against me. I felt her liquids oozing down my balls and pooling beneath us, and the combination was all I needed to join her, and I jettisoned my essence to splash against her spasming walls and her cervix.

Her body accepted my offering, and it triggered another seizure within her. Her pussy muscles rippled as they worked to milk my cock of all it contained, and I felt my balls contract as they offered up the last of my sperm for her. Kayla cried out again, the sound forced from her overwhelmed body, as I collapsed down on her. Her legs slipped from my shoulders and slid down my sides until they were splayed out on the bed. Only then did her body begin to give her a respite as her muscles relaxed in the aftershocks of her rolling orgasms.

I pushed my chest up from her and looked down at her. She was flushed, bright red from her forehead down across her chest. Her nipples and areolae were bright red, swollen and tender looking. Her diaphragm was working to get oxygen into her lungs, and she was sweaty where we were still connected, my slowly softening cock still buried deep inside her.

In one of those quirky moments that help to make life even more worthwhile, our morning had turned from a tender moment of lovemaking into a sweat-filled fuck session, but there were no complaints from Kayla or me.

We were lying side by side recuperating from our aerobic wake-up when the telephone rang. Kayla picked it up, but it was for me. I took the phone from her.

"Yo," I said in my very best Rocky voice.

"Yo yourself," said Spencer. "Time to rise and shine, Soccer Boy. Breakfast with the team in fifteen."

"Thanks, man," I said. "I'll be there."

I crawled out of bed and trudged to the bathroom. Just before going in, I turned back to look at my love. She was lying on her side, her arms tucked, as she watched me.

"I've got to shower, and I've got to hurry," I said. "I've got to be downstairs in fifteen minutes. No goofing around this morning."

Kayla rolled her eyes. "As if I have any energy left to goof around," she said.

I wasn't sure I believed her. Sometimes Kayla showed me she had a nearly insatiable side. She did have more willpower than I, though.

She didn't join me in the shower. I was a little bit relieved, and a little bit disappointed. I was completely worn out, but it would have been a nice morning if we could have just stood together in the shower.

As if we would be able to do just that, I reminded myself. If she had shown up, I knew I wouldn't have been able to keep my hands to myself, good intentions or not.

The shower refreshed me. I wrapped a towel around my waist and walked back into the bedroom. Kayla was still in bed, and she had pulled the sheets back over her. Her eyes were closed, and she looked like she was asleep. I tried to be quiet as I stepped over to my duffel bag by her side of the bed. I bent over to rummage

around, looking for clothes, when I felt Kayla's hand run up my thigh, underneath the towel, and up to my ass. It surprised the hell out of me, and I jumped up and whirled around. Kayla was trying to suppress a giggle as she watched my antics.

"I thought you were asleep," I said.

"I was kind of dozing when I heard you," she said. "I opened my eyes, and you were sticking your big butt in my face, so I thought I'd cop a feel."

I shook my finger at her in mock retribution. "I want you to love me for my mind, not my butt," I said.

"Oh, I do," she said with a smile. "You can't help it if a cute butt is attached to your desirable mind, though."

That rocked me back a little. Girls had cute butts, not guys. It had never occurred to me until that moment that girls might look at a guy's body, just like guys liked looking at girls. Suddenly I was hit by a severe attack of the shys. *Jesus, Porter, you're embarrassed*, I realized with no small amount of dismay. *How could that be?*

I must have turned red, because Kayla let out with a startled laugh, and she jumped out of bed. She put her arms around my neck and pulled me down so she could kiss me.

"Oh, Seanie, it's all right," she said as she hugged me. "It's nothing to be embarrassed about. Girls can think about guys, you know. And you are a very good-looking guy. All my friends think so, too."

"I'm not sure that makes me feel any better," I said. "Guys are just... guys. I've never considered if a guy is good looking or not."

"Really?" She pulled her head away so she could look me in the eye. "Sometimes that's all the girls I know can talk about." She shook her head. "Some of them can be so shallow sometimes," she said, almost to herself.

"Who? Like, Jaimie?"

"Oh, no, not Jaimie," said Kayla. "She's only got eyes for Jake. I don't think she even realizes other boys exist."

"Jake will be happy to hear that," I said.

Kay reached up and grabbed my ears. "Don't you dare say anything to him," she said seriously. "He's in love with her, she's in love with him. He doesn't need to think she's being obsessive or anything."

"Okay, okay," I said. "Just don't hurt me." I reached up and gently pulled her hands away from my ears. It was her way of getting my attention, but having her nearly naked in my arms was attention enough, especially with me just wearing a barely closed towel.

"Oops," she said with a smile. "Sorry, Sean." She stood up on tiptoe and gave me a quick kiss on the cheek. "Now, if you'll pardon me, I need my beauty sleep." She crawled back in bed and pulled the sheet back over her.

I just stood there for a moment, gazing down at her. "No, you don't," I said. "If you were any more beautiful, you wouldn't be human."

She didn't answer, but she did look pleased. I found my clothes and hurriedly dressed before the temptation to stay with her overtook me.

I got downstairs just in time. I grabbed my food and slid into a seat at a table with Spencer, Jesse, and Bryan when Pick and Eddie walked in. Pick looked around the room, and headed for the buffet line. We had more film to watch this morning, and then a practice after that. We were having a team lunch with the press and the organizers of the tournament, and then our afternoon and evening was our own. I had just left my Luscious, and I was already looking forward to seeing her again in a few hours.

After breakfast we filed into a conference room that was set up with a projector and a portable screen. Stan Harvard was already there, threading film into the projector, as we settled into seats. Pick ambled up to stand in front of the white screen.

"We got two pieces of film to study this morning, gentlemen," he said. "I want you to take a look at our game against North Carolina first. We're going to be critiquing ourselves pretty severely, all of us. I believe we've got some holes to plug, and you can bet that the Tarheels will find 'em if we don't get rid of 'em."

Stan gave Pick a thumbs-up to let him know he was ready with the film. Pick nodded and continued, "The second film will be another South Carolina game. You all saw them play against Maryland, and today we're going to watch them in a non-conference game they played a couple of weeks ago against Indiana."

He looked around the room at his players. "Y'all pay attention, now. This ain't no kid stuff. We got some work to do between now and tomorrow noon. Okay?"

With that, Stan started up the projector. Eddie, stationed by the door, flipped the light switches, and we spent the next two hours watching the games. There was no sound with the film, but Pick stayed up by the screen and provided his own commentary.

We paid attention, and we learned.

Kayla and I spent the afternoon with Eric and Keisha poking around the Smithsonian. It was a cool and rainy day, a good day to spend indoors, and we took our time in the various halls and exhibits, wandering around pretty much aimlessly, holding hands. We ate a light supper at a place near the Georgetown campus, and we called it an early night.

We took a cab back to our hotel, and I lingered outside while Kayla went in. I watched through the revolving door until I saw her get into the elevator, and I strolled in, trying to look casual. I did the same routine as the previous night, wandered around the lobby and the restaurant looking for teammates, trying to offload any suspicions.

Luke was sitting at a table in the closed lobby bar, playing gin with Spencer. Dan Ortega was slouched in a third chair, watching the play and looking bored, and Frenchy was standing behind him with his arms crossed. I pulled another chair over and sat down opposite Dan.

"Did you just stay here all day, Dan?" I asked.

"Yeah," he replied. "Boring as hell. Nothing to do."

"Why didn't you go out with somebody?"

"Raining," he said. "Cold. Lazy. Take your choice."

Luke slapped a card down on the pile, upside-down. "Gin, you sly bastard!" he cried. "I finally got you!"

Spencer laughed. "Just don't do that victory dance like the last time," he said.

I looked inquiringly at the guys. Dan shrugged.

"Goldman's been cleaning Luke's clock," he said. "Luke won his first hand finally, and he did a jig around the table to celebrate. It was pretty freakin' funny."

"Hey, you know how it is," said Luke, not the least bit embarrassed. "You've gotta enjoy the few wins against this asshole you can manage. I never seen anybody so lucky at cards."

Spencer shrugged expressively. "Some guys are lucky in cards, some are lucky in love."

All three glanced quickly over at me. Frenchy just stood silently, watching the interaction. I expected him to launch into an explanation about how the French were the world's greatest lovers, but he stayed uncharacteristically quiet.

"What?" I tried for an innocent look. From the expressions on Luke's and Spencer's faces, I failed.

I stretched and faked a yawn. "I think I'm going to head upstairs," I said.

"Curfew is ten tonight," Luke reminded me.

I gave him a warning look, and glanced at Dan to see if he had noticed Luke's slip. "I'm heading up now," I said pointedly.

"Oh. Yeah, okay," said Luke. It was lame, but maybe it would pass right over Dan. He still was desultorily sitting there, seemingly uninterested in anything going on around him. Frenchy was watching me with a calculating look on his face. It made me nervous as I walked away, as if there was a gun aimed right between my shoulder blades.

It got worse once I got to my room. I called Kayla to tell her I would be up sometime after ten, and I could tell right away she was upset.

"What's the matter, sweetie?" I asked.

"Sean, I... I think you should stay in your own room tonight."

"What? Why?"

She was very hesitant. "Just before I got in the elevator, your coach-Coach Pick? He came out of the restaurant. He looked right at me, Sean. I think he recognized me."

"No, couldn't be," I assured her. "He only saw you, what, that one weekend? That was two years ago, Kay. He may have seen you, and he may even have thought he might have met you before, but there's no way he would remember where or when. He's way too busy, and he's met way too many other people since then."

"Still, it's just one night..."

"I don't want us to spend our last night together... not together. You know?"

"Sean..."

"It'll be okay, I promise. Just wait for my call, okay?"

She was reluctant, but she finally agreed. "Okay, Sean. I'm nervous about it, though."

"No sweat," I said magnanimously. "I'm in tight with Pick's team leaders. It will work out."

She sighed. "You're sure?"

"I'll call you when I'm on my way up to you," I said.

I took a shower and put on my running shorts and another tee shirt. I turned back my bed and switched the television to TBS. They were warming up for Halloween by showing some of the better horror or suspense movies on the weekends, and tonight's movie was *Jaws*. Richard Dreyfuss was doing his Duddy Kravitz laugh, Roy Scheider was playing the neurotic sheriff, and Robert Shaw chewed up scenery right up until he himself was chewed up by Bruce the Shark. In a dark and quiet room, it was still, even nine years later, an intense and nail-biting film. I watched avidly, and Luke settled in to watch, too, after he came upstairs. We were quietly watching as the movie built up its suspense, and the knock on the door was startling. I got up and answered.

It was Eddie, doing his room check, and I opened the door for him and got back to the movie. Eddie stepped in to see what we were watching, and he got involved in it for a few minutes, too.

At the next commercial break, he remembered his duties. "Gotta go check the other rooms," he said, almost as a reminder to himself. "See you men in the morning." He closed the door behind him, and Luke and I stayed where we were, engrossed in the movie.

As bits of the exploded shark began drifting to the bottom of the ocean, I suddenly remembered Kayla. I jumped up and called her. She sounded sleepy when she picked up the phone.

"I'm coming up," I said.

"It's so late," she said groggily.

"Open the door for me," I said, and I hung up. I grabbed my stuff and waved to Luke. I opened our door slowly, peered out, and saw the coast was clear. I hustled over to the stairway door and took the steps two at a time up to the sixth floor.

Kayla was waiting for me with the door propped against her bare foot. She smiled at me and gave me a quick, small kiss before stepping aside and letting me in.

"Sorry," she said. "I think I was asleep. I'm glad you're here."

She was wearing a long Winnie the Pooh nightshirt. Her pale hair was loosely tied back and a little disheveled from her pillow. She looked vulnerable, and completely lovely.

We climbed into the double bed and snuggled together. Considering how tired she seemed, I was willing to lie there in her arms and let her fall back asleep, and it seemed like that was what she was going to do. She relaxed against me, and her breathing steadied out. I contented myself with having her next to me, and I began to think about how nice it would be to spend the rest of our lives together like this, sleeping side by side.

Her little nap must have revitalized her, though, because before too long I felt her stirring next to me. She tightened her arms around me, and she lifted up her face to mine and kissed me. I thought it was just going to be a last good-night kiss, but it turned into something else, and before long we were turning toward each other, pressing our bodies against each other, and letting our hands wander along some of the interesting contours we encountered.

I had just run my hand under the hem of her nightshirt, and was caressing her butt cheek, when she opened her mouth against mine. Her tongue darted out to touch the tip of mine, and the contest was on.

This was not one of those heated and hurried couplings, but was evolving into a tender lovemaking session. Not the burning heat of the previous night, but more

of a steady, slow rising that would eventually build into a substantial mutual climax.

We pleased each other, each doing a little giving and a little receiving, until, toward the last, Kayla finally rolled over onto her back and pulled me on top of her. She reached down between us and guided my cock into her pussy, and as I slid into her welcoming depths, she arched her back, sighed, and held me tightly to her.

For me, it was like coming home. I was where I always wanted to be, where I felt I belonged. *We fit so well together*, I thought as we made love. *We move so well together. This can only be forever.*

No sooner had these thoughts crossed my mind, as we slowly and lovingly built each other up, when the jarring sound of the telephone on the nightstand rudely intruded itself.

Don't answer, don't answer, I silently pleaded as we stopped moving together. Kayla opened her eyes, and I saw the fear in them. With me still on top of her, buried deeply inside her, she twisted around and picked up the telephone, and everything changed.

Damn it all, but everything changed.

Chapter 20 - Siphoned Away Into Nothingness

Posted: March 17, 2004 - 12:34:21 am

Updated: March 17, 2004 - 10:01:38 am

Kayla's voice quavered a little as she answered the phone. She silently handed it to me. I slipped out of her and rolled off the bed to stand by the nightstand. With no small amount of trepidation I put the handset to my ear.

"Who is this?" I asked.

"It's me, Jesse. Get your ass back downstairs quick. I just got a call from Jose Maria. Pick's going to do another bed check."

"Okay, dude. I'm on my way. Thanks."

I threw the handset back in the general direction of the table and scrambled to find my clothes.

"I've got to get back to my room," I said to Kay. She looked frightened, but there was nothing I could do at that moment to appease her.

I pulled my shorts on and struggled into my tee shirt as I ran out the door without saying another word. I took the stairs two and three at a time, down to my floor, and I flung open the fire door without thinking.

Fortunately, the hallway was empty. I breathed a sigh of relief, slipped my key in the door of the room I shared with Luke, and stepped into the Twilight Zone.

Pick and Eddie were sitting on my bed, looking as casual as could be. Luke was standing at attention by the dresser in his underwear. Sweat was beaded on his forehead, and his eyes looked like the eyes of some sort of caged animal.

I don't know why he feels trapped, I thought raggedly. He's not the one who has just fucked up.

"Good evening, Mr. Porter," said Pick Cropper. "I don't suppose you have a good explanation for this, do you?"

My brain froze. "Uh... sir..." It was only fitting I would stammer away any possible alibi that might have convinced my coach of my innocence.

Coach shook his head sadly. I knew in that instant he had, indeed, recognized Kayla. From that moment, I had been dead meat. It just hadn't hit home until now.

Pick stood up suddenly. I reflexively took a step back. Coach took two steps, coming face-to-face with me. He stared me in the eye.

"Team meeting at eight sharp. Conference Room A. I will not tolerate anybody being even thirty seconds late."

"Yes, sir."

"You are not to leave this room from now until then," he said. There was iron in his voice. "I cannot make myself any clearer than that. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," I answered, almost whispering.

He stared at me for a time, and I got increasingly nervous. I was not enjoying thinking about what he was examining within me, but I wasn't about to tear my eyes away from his search. He would find what he would find.

Without another word, Pick finally released me from his gaze. He stepped around me, and Eddie sidled after him. The door clicked softly behind them. Only then did I dare take a breath. I shuddered, and Luke nearly collapsed.

"Man, you're fucked," he said.

Didn't I know it.

I couldn't even take the chance of calling Kayla to let her know what had happened. I lay down on top of my bed, without even turning the bedspread down. I put my hands behind my head and bleakly contemplated my future.

Sometime during the long night I finally fell into a troubled and restless slumber. It didn't last long, though, and I was awake again by six. I took a long time in the shower before waking Luke, and together we went downstairs to face Pick's wrath.

The team meeting was a disaster. I was the pariah, and deservedly so, but very few were spared.

Pick started out quiet, and never did raise his voice. It was all the more devastating hearing him speak in such normal tones.

"We seem to have acquired us a problem," he began once everybody had found seats. I was in the last chair in the back row, and nobody was sitting next to me. I couldn't blame them.

"I have always tried to treat each and every member of my team as equal and valued," Pick continued after a pause. "I put a substantial amount of trust in my players, my coaches, and my staff. I have rarely had that trust betrayed. And yet, here we all are. You all picked a hell of a time to toss this season into the shitter, I got to say."

He looked directly at me. "You got anything to say in your defense, Mr. Porter?"

I stood up. *Might as well face the firing squad on my feet.* "No, sir," I said. "But I do want to apologize to my teammates for putting them in this position. I was wrong, and I admit it."

"It's a start, but I'm afraid it ain't the finish," said Coach. "I believe I've got the gist of it, and I will be willing to listen up to anybody who thinks I might have some part of it in the wrong. Without wallowing in the details, here's what I am basing my decisions concerning this here tournament upon."

Everybody kind of shifted in their chairs, and many of my teammates craned around to look at me.

"Unbeknownst to Mr. Porter beforehand, some friends of his arranged for a reunion between him and his girl from back home. Kayla, isn't it?" He glanced in my direction, but I knew he didn't need my confirmation. "A lovely girl. Now, there was a couple of others here in the room who were witnesses to this reunion, and when they saw the direction that was being laid out, I surely do wish they had counseled their friend toward a different set of circumstances."

He looked around the room, perhaps noting the witnesses. Eddie Whitehead and Stan Harvard, stationed on either side of Pick, watched us, also.

"The upshot of this all is that Mr. Porter, here, has violated curfew repeatedly during this here tournament, broken team rules, and all in all behaved poorly indeed. While his behavior has not degraded his performance on the field, the fact that he has taken it upon himself to be the arbiter of my rules has placed him opposite me. And, when it comes to this team, I think you all know how successful somebody who stands opposite me will be. It's my way or the highway, as they say."

He gathered himself together and stood up straighter. "Sean Porter, Jesse Wilhoit, Bryan Watkins, Stuart Early, Spencer Goldman, Luke Severn, and Brad Rickman. You seven players will suit up for today's game, but you will not play. If we have an injury, we will play short. If we have two injuries, we will play two short. If we end up with a keeper and one player on the field, we will finish the game with just those two in the game. Understood?"

There was a murmur of assent. The depth of our punishment was sufficient we were, in effect, forfeiting any chance of winning the championship. It was startling to me that Pick would so easily throw that away, when he could easily salvage a run at South Carolina by merely benching me. I looked around and saw quite a few slumped shoulders. The realization set in quickly.

"Any further disciplinary measures to be taken will be decided once we get back home. In the meantime, until we are in the bus and on the interstate, we are in lockdown. You all are to stay in your rooms except during scheduled team activities." He glanced at his watch. "Our game is at noon. Breakfast will be brought in here in a moment. After our meal, you are to return to your rooms until Eddie, Stan, or I come and collect you. Am I understood?"

"Yes, sir," we all mumbled.

Pick turned his back on us and huddled with his two assistants. We were dismissed, but we had nowhere to go.

Twelve hours later, we were on the bus and on our way back to Gainesville.

The championship game was a disaster. We lost 6-1, and were never a threat to the Gamecocks at all. I spent the entire game on the end of the bench, all alone, with a towel over my head and my elbows propped on my knees. I could barely work up the energy to even watch the movement of the ball. I just didn't give a shit.

At one point, Trent Abbott trotted the sidelines and slowed as he got to me. He shrugged, as if to ask me what was up. I just shook my head once, and he continued on his way, no doubt mystified by our play and our lineup.

After the game, at the presentation of the championship and consolation trophies, the seven of us who did not play stood to one side as the rest of the team mounted the podium to accept the trophy. Pick kept his remarks short, and did not mention a word about our abbreviated team. I glanced into the stands

just once, looking for Eric and Keisha, knowing Kayla would be with them, but I didn't see them. It was probably just as well, as my feelings were in turmoil.

After we had been on the road for a couple of hours, I ventured up toward where Jesse and Bryan were sitting, across the aisle from each other. Bryan was listening to music, but Jesse was just staring out the window. He glanced up at me when he finally saw my reflection in the dark window, and he sat up and moved over. He patted the seat next to him. I sat down.

"Look, Jesse, I just want to apologize for getting you mixed up in this," I said.

He looked unhappy, and I knew it was my fault, even though he would be the last person to lay any blame on me, deserved or not. "I stepped into it with my eyes wide open, Sean. Not your fault."

"Yeah, it is," I insisted. I didn't want him letting me off the hook that easily. "I fucked up, and you're paying the cost with me, and I don't like it."

He just shrugged desultorily. "I knew about it, I knew it could blow up, and I didn't say anything to you to try to stop it. Pick's right. I should have taken responsibility, as a team leader. And I didn't."

"It wasn't your decision. It was mine. You've got a right to be pissed at me."

"I'm pissed, but I'm pissed at myself for falling into the trap. I'm not angry with you, Sean."

"Jesse..."

"Look," he said, "if it's okay with you, I'd rather not talk about it anymore. I just want to try to get some sleep. Okay?"

With that, he rolled his shoulders and tucked his head against the window and closed his eyes. Our conversation was at an end. I stood up and looked over at Bryan. I wanted to apologize to each of the guys, one at a time, but Bryan deliberately kept on looking out the window, his headphones giving him a perfect excuse for not noticing me. I knew he knew I was there, but if he didn't want to talk to me now, it was all right. I'd have my chance sooner or later.

Spencer and Luke and the others were further up the bus. I decided I would give it a little more time before I approached them. I wandered back to my own bench seat, all alone in the back of the bus.

Just before midnight, Pick came down the aisle of the bus as we hurtled into the darkness down the interstate. He stopped at my seat and looked down at me. There was nobody else around me.

"I'll see you in my office at 2:30," he said.

I nodded.

"What was that you said?" he asked, anger making his voice rumble.

Without looking up at him, I replied, "Yes, sir. Two-thirty."

"That's better," he said roughly.

I was left to myself once he walked away, with only my own thoughts and assumptions to keep me company. It was cold comfort.

Promptly at 2:30 the next afternoon, I was cooling my heels in the reception area of the Athletic Office. Pick's secretary, Eunice Adkins, glanced at me every now and then out of the corner of her eye. She wore big rhinestone glasses and a pencil stuck into her sticky-looking beehive hairdo. Every now and then she took her glasses off and let them dangle from the beaded chain attached to the bows. I thought she looked a little sympathetically at me, but that may have been wishful thinking.

Pick let me stew for over forty minutes before calling me into the inner sanctum. By then, I was pretty steamed myself. Hell, I knew I had done wrong. All I wanted was to be doled out my punishment for what I thought was a minor indiscretion, so we could all get on with the bigger picture, which was winning the SEC and going to the Big Show, the NCAA tournament.

I made the mistake of slamming Pick's door a little too hard when I finally was allowed to enter. Unfortunately, it set the tone of the meeting. Eddie was there, too, probably acting as witness to the proceedings. I wished I had brought somebody, too.

I was just crouching down to sit in the chair opposite Pick's desk when he growled, "Did anybody give you permission to set, Porter?"

I scrambled back up and stood to the side. "No, sir." I tried to sound more apologetic than I felt. I didn't think I succeeded.

Instead of having me sit, Pick stood up and leaned on his desk.

"Son, you remember a previous conversation of ours? About me taking on projects now and again?"

"Yes, sir, I do," I answered.

"I never expected you to be one of them projects, boy."

"I'm not one of those projects, Coach."

"You may not have started out as one, Mr. Porter," he said. "You are surely turnin' out to be such a one, though."

"Look, Coach, I realize I broke team rules, but it's not like it was detrimental to my play on the field," I said.

"You think not?" He looked at me sharply. "Tell me, son, did we win that there championship game?"

"Of course not," I said angrily. "Because..."

"Because you broke the damn rules!" Pick was shouting over me.

My mouth clapped shut. I had to grit my teeth to keep from arguing the point.

"You let your gawddamn gonads rule over your thick head, Porter," he said in a slightly lower tone. "It cost us that Georgetown championship, and it may cost us the conference title before we're done with it."

"I don't see how..."

"You just ain't learned to keep your damned mouth shut yet, have you?" Pick growled, cutting me off. "Maybe servin' out a three-game suspension will give you time to see the error of your ways."

Relief at not being kicked off the team warred with feelings of frustration over not being able to defend myself. "Three games? Coach, I..."

"On second thought, make that five games," Pick interrupted. "And one game each for Wilhoit, Goldman, and Watkins."

I kept my mouth shut. It was only getting worse. Pick watched me closely, and nodded with grim satisfaction when he saw I was going to keep quiet.

"Good. You're learning. You ought to be thanking me, son. Near about anybody else would have been packing up their locker and heading back home if they'd pulled something like this. I must be gettin' soft, but I think you got some redeeming qualities. I ain't one to let go easily."

He stared at me hard. I nodded and ventured a "Yes, sir," hoping even that much comment would not draw even more punishment.

It was apparently the correct response, because he nodded again and sat down at his desk.

"You will practice with the team, just like always," he instructed. "You will report to the locker room for each game wearing a coat and tie, and you will occupy a spot on the bench. You will take notes, copious notes, of each game, and give me a detailed summary of your observations by the next morning. Are we clear so far?"

"Yes, sir."

"In addition, you will quit your job with the souvenir shop. You will be Eddie Whitehead's gopher for the balance of the year. Each and every day, you are to either stop by this here office, or call in, to see if there are any duties for you to perform. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, sir."

"That's seven days a week, for the rest of the damned school year."

"I understand, sir."

"Dan Ortega is starting in your place for the balance of this season, Mr. Porter. With you missin' the next five games, I got to play the men who have the game experience going into the NCAA. We got three games left on our schedule, including South Carolina comin' in here in a couple a days, and then the SEC championship tourney will start. You'll get some game time, particularly early in the NCAA tournament, but I can't guarantee how much."

It hurt, but I had no choice. I was going to be a bench player. "Yes, sir," I said. It was no struggle for me to sound chastised.

"Now get the hell out of here," Pick finished. "Eddie Whitehead will take over. I don't want to see your sorry ass except at need. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, sir."

I beat a hasty retreat and followed Eddie to the locker rooms to begin my sentence.

Jesse, Spencer and Bryan had to sit out the South Carolina game with me. They were pretty mad at me, having thought their punishment in the whole Porter fiasco was finished. Jesse was never one to hold a grudge, and after venting at me for a few minutes he was pretty much back to normal with me.

Spencer, too, took his licks pretty much in stride. He bitched at me for a couple of hours one night in his room, got it out of his system, and did his best to overcome his anger.

Bryan stayed mad at me. He wouldn't even look at me, and refused to acknowledge my presence on the bench for the next couple of games, including the one he had to sit out. Jesse and Bryan had differing opinions about the severity of my actions, and the fairness of the punishments doled out, and it was straining their relationship.

Finally, after my second game of sitting on the bench and taking notes for my report to Pick, I managed to corner Bryan as we were leaving the athletic center.

"Bryan, I need to talk to you," I said.

"Well, I don't need to talk to you," he shot back. "I'm meeting Melanie. I don't have time."

I grabbed his arm. He jerked it away and kept on walking.

"Look, I'm just going to dog you until you talk to me for a minute," I said.

He gave me a big, theatrical sigh and stopped.

"Okay, talk," he said. "But make it quick."

I had been planning this for a long time. I had to make it convincing. "I want you to know I never wanted you to have to pay for what I did, Bryan," I began. "You were an innocent bystander, and I apologize. Hell, I've been trying to apologize for over a week now."

"I know you have, but I just didn't want to hear it," he said angrily. He folded his arms, his body language clear. "You know the damage you've done to this team? To Jesse? Hell, Porter, I really don't care about me. I'm just a team player. I can

roll with the punches. I love soccer, but it isn't going to be my bread and butter, like it was supposed to be for Jesse. He had hopes of going pro, you know? If not here, maybe in Europe, or even South America. Now what are his chances?"

"What, just because he was set down for two games? He's a junior, Bryan. He's got all next season."

"And you'll be back, too, I presume. How will you manage to fuck up the team next year?"

"That's not fair. What makes you think I'm going to fuck up again?" I asked. In spite of my best intentions, he was making me mad.

"Because I thought you were a good guy this year," he came back. "And I was wrong."

"I'm not a bad guy..."

"You screwed up our season, fucked up the team pretty royally," he retorted. "That's not being a good guy."

"I admit I messed up, but it wasn't intentional, you know." I was trying to hold back, but it was getting difficult. But then I saw Bryan's shoulders slump a little. He looked at me a little sadly.

"Melanie's been on me a little bit about you," he finally admitted. "Have you talked to Reggie since we've been back?"

"No," I said. "She was home for break, I know, but I haven't even thought about talking to her since she got back."

"Yeah, you've had other things on your mind," he said, a little unkindly. "It's really none of my business, but you might want to give her a call. Let her know what's going on."

"Yeah, I suppose," I said. "It doesn't really concern her, though."

He barked out a laugh with very little humor in it. "Not anymore, it doesn't." He turned and walked away, leaving me to wonder what he meant by his comment.

In truth, I hadn't given Reggie a thought during all of this. I probably did at least owe her a call. *Just another person I have to apologize to*, I said to myself as I let Bryan walk away from me. The list was growing longer, and I was finding it harder and harder to face them all.

The letters from Kayla were also accumulating. I had opened and read the first two or three, but the questions were all the same. She kept on asking them because she never got an answer back from me, I suppose. After the first few, I just stacked her letters on my desk unopened. They were another mute reminder of my tendency to fuck everything up. I had every intention of reading them and answering each and every one, but the longer I delayed the easier it was to put it off for yet another day. Westy took some telephone messages from her, too, but I was just too busy, and too broke, to even think about calling her back.

By the third week, I was receiving envelopes from Jaimie, Jake, and even Stephen and Tara. I started a second stack, just for those letters. I knew what would be in them; my so-called friends didn't need to be chastising me.

My trusty roommate made sure he reminded me of my transgressions just about every time he saw me. Westy had taken an inordinate amount of glee in hearing of my troubles. It gave him real pleasure to ride me, since he had very little time for going out and finding his own trouble. Ever since about the third week of school he had been calling me "All-American Asshole," but now he changed the inflection of his taunt. Before it was "All-American Asshole", and now it was "All-American *Asshole*," reflecting the pleasure he was experiencing over my suspension. It was also a graphic example of how inflection can completely change a meaning.

Westy's training schedule for the swim team had kicked in big-time, though, and fortunately I didn't see him very much. Every time I did, though, he made some snide comment about my predicament. He was still spending most of his limited spare time at the fraternity house, so I was spared his company except for late at night, when my own personal demons were at their strongest anyway, and Westy just fueled them with his presence.

Our team's chemistry siphoned away into nothingness as a result of the suspensions. We lost our second game in a row to South Carolina when they came to Gainesville the week after the tournament. We were still down most of our offense, though we regained some of our defensive strength with Brad Rickman back in front of the keeper's box. Still, it was a 4-2 loss at home.

Our next game we managed to squeak out a 2-2 tie against Vanderbilt, a team we should have beaten in my opinion. I took notes at game time as instructed, sitting by myself at the end of the bench. I wanted to do a thorough job for Pick and Eddie, so I waited to hand in my report until after I had seen the film of the game the next morning. I wanted to confirm some of my observations and give Pick as

comprehensive a report as I could. I typed it out carefully, put it in a report binder, and handed it in to Eunice that afternoon.

We won the third game of my suspension, against Mississippi State, by the meager score of 2-1, and I again painstakingly typed out my notes, put the report in a binder, and left it with Eunice. I watched the tape of that game, too, sitting with Eddie in the projection room. We talked about what we both saw, and he spoke to me as an equal, with no animosity at all. I was grateful to him for his treatment, though I had enough smarts to keep from saying anything to him. As Pick had told me before, Eddie was a student of the game, and he didn't let too much get in the way of his nearly obsessive need to learn as much about soccer and teams and players as he could.

Because of our overall record, we finished in first place in the SEC, assuring a berth in the NCAA tournament. After the final game of the season, we were surprised to learn we would be seeded second in the conference tournament. Our two losses to South Carolina, both considered to be conference games, meant the Gamecocks had a better conference record than we had, so they were seeded first for the tourney. The winner of the SEC Tournament, if different from the conference champion, would also receive an automatic spot in the Big Show.

I would miss the first two games of the SEC Tournament, to be held in Athens, Georgia, but I would be available to play for the finals, if we made it that far. I also was anxious to get some game time in so I would be ready to play once the NCAA Tournament started, a week after the SEC finals.

It was a moot point. We lost in the first round of the conference tournament, to LSU. We limped home to lick our wounds and regroup before the big tournament started.

It was frustrating to sit on the bench and watch the game, and it was even more frustrating to watch the film the next day with Eddie. We should have been able to beat LSU in a walk. Instead, what I saw was a Florida Gators team beginning the game with an attitude of defeat, and walking off the field at the end of the game having witnessed a self-fulfilling prophesy.

At the end of the LSU film, Eddie and I just sat there in the room, not saying anything.

Finally I looked over to him. He was sitting with his head bowed, either praying or thinking. I wasn't sure which.

"What can we do to turn this around?" I asked quietly.

"Damned if I know," he muttered. "Pick's stymied, too."

It made me feel even worse, something I had thought couldn't happen. Just when I thought I had hit bottom, a new well appeared underneath my feet.

"Let's rewind the film," I suggested. "We're missing something."

"Come on, Sean," he said with some heat. It set me back a little; I hadn't ever seen Eddie display even a hint of a temper before. "If there was something there, we'd have seen it."

"What will it hurt?" I persisted. "I can't play, I might as well scout."

Eddie stood up and rewound the film, and we watched it again. Hell, I knew what was wrong with the team. So did Eddie. We just didn't know how to fix it.

So I wrote my report for Pick. I wrote about how Dan Ortega, taking my left defensive spot, was a very good defender, but without imagination. I wrote about Frenchy's backsliding into showy ball-hogging, and I wrote about Jeremy's sluggishness on the field. Our movement among our positions had all but stopped. Spencer tried to get some switching going, but his teammates on the field seemed to be content to play positions again. Jesse, Bryan, Brad, and Rick, the team leaders, were not encouraging sliding coverages, and we were losing games to lesser teams because of our rigid hierarchy.

I wrote it all down, Pick and Eddie read it, and I knew they agreed. During practices we were more fluid, especially when we played Alpha against Omega, but when game time rolled around, the team fell back into their old, dying ways. It was frustrating for me, not being able to be out there, and it was frustrating for the coaching staff. They took to haranguing the players from the sidelines, which contributed to the level of frustration without adding any better execution on the field.

We entered the NCAA tournament as the fourth seed in the Southeast. Jesse and Bryan were still confident they could lead the team deep into the tournament, and they started studying film of Indiana University's soccer season. They were the defending NCAA champions, and according to the pairings, we had a chance of taking the field against them in the quarterfinals. They wanted to be ready, so they convinced team to work on plays designed to challenge the great defense of Indiana.

We traveled to Texas by bus for the first series of games, and the pressure of the tournament kicked in. We started playing better, and we made it through our first two opponents. It looked more and more to our team leaders their choice of

focusing on Indiana might have been a wise decision. In fact, we won the first two games, and we were beginning to feel like we were ready to move up to the next level, feeling more confident than we had felt since the semifinals of the Georgetown tournament.

That feeling lasted until the third game we played in the NCAA tournament, the game for the Southeast Championship. We walked onto the field on a hot and dusty afternoon and lined up against the Tigers of Clemson University. I was an activated player, and even though I was not starting, I had high hopes of getting some significant minutes in the game.

It didn't happen. I played about six minutes of the first half, and less than five minutes in the second half. By that point it was a done deal: we were hammered by Clemson, losing 4-0. The game wasn't even as close as the score. We were harried on the field, outrun and outgunned. Watching from the sidelines, I doubted we would have been able to stop them, even when we were playing our best. I thought they were damned good.

Two weeks later, watching on televisions back on campus, my opinion was verified. Clemson beat Indiana at the Seattle Kingdome in the championship game, winning the NCAA tournament.

All during this time, my frustration with my situation grew and grew, until I felt I was going to explode. I was angry at everybody. I barely spoke to my teammates. Spencer and Jesse were about the only friends I had left on the team. I had finally jumped Westy after one particularly bad day when he came into our room with another smart remark. He rang my bell pretty good, but I managed to loosen a couple of his teeth before Jason and Craig, roommates from across the hall who rushed over when they heard the fighting, managed to pull us apart. I brusquely told Reggie I was too busy to see her, using the telephone like a coward. I just didn't want the complications.

I got angrier and angrier, mad at myself and mad at the world for what I considered unfairly harsh punishment for a relatively minor crime. My state of mind spilled over into all aspects of my life, and my grades dropped along with my attitude.

I tried to figure out a way to stay in Florida for Christmas. I didn't want to face the questioning from my family and my friends. I just wanted to crawl into a cave and be left alone.

I worked myself into such a bitter, poisoned state, I ended up doing the stupidest, most Porterish thing I had ever done in my nearly nineteen years of living to that point. I took a good, hard look at my troubles over the previous weeks, and I squarely placed the blame at the source of my misery.

I blamed Kayla.

Chapter 21 - Posturing and Assaults

Posted: April 02, 2004 - 11:11:59 am

I know, I know, you don't have to remind me. I'm a dickhead, I'm an asshole, I'm about as stupid and immature as a guy can be. Heard it all before, I'll have to hear it all again before I die. It doesn't have to make sense; it just is.

After the implosion of our season, we all cleaned out our lockers. We would be back in February to prepare for spring soccer camps, but until then we had about two months to recuperate. We needed it.

After our last game, the debacle against Clemson, I dutifully wrote up my report and handed it in, just like always. I didn't hear anything from Pick about my reports, but I really didn't expect to, either. Even so, something interesting came out of that project. I discovered that my love of the game hadn't been extinguished. I found myself really studying the tapes, and I enjoyed dissecting the games with Eddie. On the days I didn't have any duties to perform for Eddie, I took a couple of my soccer balls out to the field and worked on my skills by myself. Sometimes Spencer or Jesse came with me, but I was happy to work on my own. I'd done it before, and I had found that it was good therapy for me. I wanted to continue to play the game, play to win, and regain my competitive edge. The flame was still burning. Soccer was important to me, even if I never played another game for the University of Florida.

Then, about a week after the NCAA championship game, when I called Eddie to find out what he wanted me to do that day, he told me Coach Pick wanted to see us.

"Really?" I said, a little surprised. He had pretty much ignored me at the end of our season. I was assuming I wouldn't be back the next year, even though I had yet to let my parents know what was going on. I wanted to wait to spring that little disappointment onto them for as long as I could.

"Yeah," said Eddie. "When's your last class on Wednesday?"

"It gets out at 2:45."

"Okay, I'll meet you at the fieldhouse at 3:15," he said. "I'll let Pick know we'll be in his office by 3:30."

It gave me more to worry about. *Pile it on*, I said to myself. *Let's get it all over with sooner than later*. It was strictly a defensive mechanism, though, and even I, in my muddled mental state, could recognize it. I was posturing for nobody but myself.

I met up with Eddie on Wednesday afternoon. He didn't have any more information on what Pick wanted with me than he did before, but I was ready to hear the worst. In fact, I was kind of looking forward to finally feeling the hammer descend. Anything was better than the dreadful anticipation I had been under.

Once again, Pick kept us waiting by Eunice's desk. My anxiety level was still sky-high, but being resigned to hearing the bad news made the wait easier. Eddie Whitehead was slouched in the chair next to me with his eyes closed, seemingly asleep. If it had been anybody else, I would have assumed he was listening to his own soundtrack in his head; with Eddie, I had to think he was reliving soccer plays he had observed over the past few months.

Finally, the intercom on Eunice's desk buzzed. Eddie's eyes snapped open and he stood up even before Eunice said anything.

"Go ahead," she said as she waved us toward Pick's office door.

Eddie opened the door and strode in, and I followed, closing the door gently behind me. *Nobody could accuse me of not having learned my lesson from a previous visit to that office*. I stood by the door and waited for instructions from Pick.

"Sit," he said. "Both of you, please sit." He gestured toward the two chairs opposite his desk. I took the right one, and Eddie sat down in the one on the left. The reports I had worked so hard on were stacked on the side of his desk. *Had he even read them?* I was mildly curious, even though it really didn't matter much to me at that point.

Pick waited a long time before he said anything. I was getting a little restless, and it took a real effort not to squirm in my chair. Eddie, on the other hand, sat there motionless, as if he could sit and watch the endless loops of film in his head forever.

"When I give you that assignment," Pick finally began, gesturing to the stack of reports, "I was tryin' to come up with a way to make you focus on what's important here, Mr. Porter. To tell you true, I was expectin' you to scribble somethin' up and staple it together. I was not anticipatin' an actual presentation like what you gave me."

He paused. Perhaps he was expecting me to say something, but I stayed silent. *No sense leaping in when you don't know where this is heading*, I reminded myself. It occurred to me that maybe Pick really had read my reports.

As if he could see my thoughts, Pick patted the stack by his side. "Yup," he confirmed. "I read every damn page." He looked straight at me, but I couldn't decipher his expression. "I'm assuming Eddie Whitehead helped you with this."

It was a statement, not a question. I nodded anyway.

"You two was analyzin' that film after every game, wa'ant you?"

"Yes, sir," I replied.

"Why?"

"Why?" It confused me. He had assigned the work; he of all people should have known why.

"That's right, son. Why? As in, why did you go to all this extent?" He was still staring right at me. "I asked for a report. You give me an in-depth analysis."

I got nervous. "But... Isn't it what you wanted?" I asked. *Maybe I don't want to hear the answer*, I thought disjointedly.

Pick barked a short, humorless laugh. "Well, son, it surely ain't what I asked for."

"I... I'm sorry, sir, I could..."

He waved me off, and my jaw snapped shut. *Keep quiet, idiot*, I told myself.

"No, hold on," he said. "What I asked for was just busy work, a punishment. What I got was a lesson of my own."

"Sir?"

"Eddie Whitehead, here, prob'ly helped steer you in this direction, Sean." He glanced over at Eddie, and then shifted back to me. "Hell, I'm just a simple ol' boy. I see somethin' in my way, I either move it or I get around it however I can. Eddie's much more sly than I could ever hope to be." Pick dug his fingertips into his eyes, his elbows propped up on his desk, and rubbed for a moment, and then he sat back in his chair and looked me over once again.

"Mr. Sean Porter, you continue to surprise me, son. I knew you was a helluva player - hell, anybody who knows the game can recognize that right off-and very good players seem to know, almost by instinct, what constitutes a well-played game. The best ones know which other players on the field are their peers, and they tend to focus on them. Whether they're teammates or opponents, the best ones key in on the players they think are the quality athletes."

I nodded. "Yes, sir," I ventured, though I had absolutely no idea where this conversation was going.

"Good." Pick's expression had resolved into something more intense. "Now, let's take all these here really good players as a group for a moment. Think of it like a pyramid. First, we've got all the soccer players, and the best ones are at the top layer of the pyramid. Not many of them, right? Okay, now we're takin' them top layer players, and we're setting them to the side, and they form another small pyramid."

He grabbed a blank sheet of paper from his desk drawer, and he drew a long pencil from an old coffee can on his desk that served as a holder for his pens and pencils. He quickly drew two triangles, one larger and one bigger, on the paper. He tapped his pencil on the smaller triangle. "They're all good players, but now they're separated by some other qualities. F'r instance, some of these players, but most assuredly not all of them, will have the temperament to be team leaders." He drew a line near the base of the triangle, and tapped the point of his pencil on the next layer of his pyramid.

"As we move up the pyramid, here, we might find a smaller group who have an innate feel for the game, and can express what they see so others can understand." He drew another couple of lines, each time indicating a smaller segment. "Others might be able to change the essence of their team's game, simply by their presence. That's a rare one," he said, almost to himself.

He colored in the top part of the triangle. "Now, don't get me wrong, I know there's some of all these qualities in all these players," he explained. "I'm just talking about the strongest capabilities here. There are a few players I seen who are such students of the game, they seem to be able to draw conclusions out of the air, almost like the best chess players. They can watch a game, and go back to a play ten minutes prior to a goal and explain how it was all set up that long ago."

Pick continued doodling on his triangle, drawing arrows up and down through each of the layers he had made. Gazing down, only half seeing his doodling, he said, "And then there are a few players, very damned few, who can mold a team

around them, so they have almost created a living entity. That entity moves with purpose and coordination, and it's a thing of terrible beauty."

He looked up at me. "That's another rare one," he said pointedly.

Eddie shifted in his chair, and I glanced over at him. He was nodding. What did all this have to do with me and my reports?

Pick tapped his pencil on the stack of reports. "I can read Eddie Whitehead's evaluations in these here papers, son, and they are as precise and insightful as he always is. I was impressed with the parts that obviously weren't Eddie's." He paused once again, and then he shifted gears on me. "You love this game, don't you, boy?"

Startled, I said, "Yes, sir, I do."

"It shows," he said, still tapping the pile. "It surely does show up, even in those first reports, before Eddie Whitehead began showing you the film. You got a way of describin' the plays that makes it all seem like it works all together. Offense, defense, all supposed to be workin' toward the same goals, and you saw just how and where it all seemed to break down." Pick chuckled, this time displaying some humor. "You two take the cake, by God. I leave you two alone in a room full of film canisters, and you gonna fix it, ain't you? Well, I got not a doubt in the world anymore. No, sir, I don't."

"I'm not sure I..." I stumbled on the words, wanting to reach out and grab them back, but they were out of my mouth before I could stop them.

"Hell, son, I ain't sure of much, myself," Pick said with a tight grin. "Not anymore, leastways. But this much I do know, Sean Porter. I owe my team an apology. And, despite all that's happened, I believe I owe you at least an opportunity."

"I don't know that you do, Coach," I said. I was sincerely hoping he did feel like he owed me something, but I was not expecting it. I couldn't let my guard down and be disappointed again.

"Here's the deal, son. I intended to punish you for your misdemeanor, and instead I visited a felonious assault upon my team."

Eddie was nodding again, sitting up now and paying attention to the conversation.

Pick continued, "That there Georgetown trophy wasn't important to me. Hell, I already got five of 'em out there in the case in the lobby of the fieldhouse. I was tryin' to impart a lesson, and I done got taught one, but good. I surely did not expect the entire season to go into the crapper just because I benched a couple of our starters."

Pick stood up suddenly, and I flinched. He took a couple of steps over to his chalkboard and began to draw out a chart.

"See? I bench Porter, Wilhoit, Watkins, and Goldman, and I fully expected to lose to South Carolina at the Georgetown. Okay, that's acceptable to me. The same players are benched for the next game, which unfortunately happens to be against South Carolina again, but that's the way the cookie sometimes crumbles. So we lose that one, too." He scribbled some more lines on his chart. "Now, for the next four games, it's just Porter who is sittin', and we should be back at pretty much full strength, especially up front. And what happens? A win, a tie, two losses. What the hell went wrong?"

He practically threw the chalk back into the tray. "I'll tell you what went wrong. I done my team a terrible disservice, and now I got to make amends." He sat back down at his desk. "And I start doing that right now. Eddie?"

"Yes, Pick?" It was the first time Eddie had spoken since we entered the room.

"You correct me if I get this wrong now, hear?"

"You got it," said Eddie, though I didn't think he would have to do any correcting.

"I'm puttin' it all out on the table, Sean. Frankly, I want you back here next year. I'd hate to see you transfer off just because of what happened the end of this season. So, your scholarship remains in place. You try out for your spot in the lineup next year, just like everybody else. That sit okay with you so far?"

So far? It was already beyond any expectations I had brought with me to this meeting. "Yes, sir," I managed to croak out.

"Part of the condition of your scholarship was a part-time job, and I took that away from you, which I should not have done. So now you work for me. Well, to be factual, you will be workin' for the entire Athletic Department, but in truth you will be workin' as Eddie Whitehead's assistant, and you will be workin' for me."

"Okay," I said. I was already doing that. Now, apparently, I was to be paid for it, which was all the way fine with me.

"Eunice will have a paycheck for you every two weeks, beginnin' this Friday. You just stop by and see her anytime that day. Now, I got two special jobs for you two to do for me. First off, I got a list of clinics and tournaments for this spring. I want you and Eddie Whitehead to get together with the team captains and narrow that list down. I don't want us enterin' no creampuff tourneys, though. I want you boys challenged, and I want you all to figure out how to win them challenges."

Eddie spoke up. "I've got Jesse, Bryan, and Rick coming here in about an hour to talk about it," he said.

Pick's eyes crinkled in amusement. "You done gone and anticipated me, din't cha?"

Eddie didn't reply. In fact, his face gave away nothing. *Note to self: do not play gin against this guy. Even Spencer Goldman would do well to stay away from Eddie Whitehead when he's got a deck of cards in his hand.*

"The other assignment I got is this," Pick continued, once it became obvious he wasn't going to get an answer from Eddie. "We got a couple of good players comin' in as freshmen next year. One in particular is a midfielder from out California way, a young man who desperately wants to put some yardage between himself and his family. He turned down a helluvan offer from Berkeley to accept a scholarship to Florida, and we'll be glad to have him. I got about twenty hours of film of this boy's games. I want you two to analyze that film, just like you did these others, and let me know how we're going to fit him in."

Eddie nodded, and I followed his lead.

"Okay, good. We got a team meeting set up for Saturday morning, and I want to have our practice schedules for February done by then, so get some work done on that there clinic list first. Got it?"

"Yes, sir," I said.

"Now get the hell out of here. You got work to do." Pick said it with a smile, but I didn't dawdle. Eddie and I got the hell out of there.

When the other guys arrived, we all sat in one of the classrooms with the list of tournaments Pick had given to Eddie. Rick Rogers, the defensive co-captain and a senior, was familiar with most of the tournaments, and he quickly ran them down for us. Eddie filled us in on the ones Rick didn't know about, and he also described the focus of the clinics on the list. Some of the clinic's marquee instructors were defensive specialists, some offered offensive drills, others drilled mainly on restarts such as corner kicks and throw-ins. It was a surprisingly specialized group of clinics, but since they were typically only run on the weekends, I realized they had to pinpoint areas of development. The clinics were designed for advanced players, college-level and club athletes, so they didn't have to cover the basics, concentrating instead on coordinated plays, atypical game situations, and trick plays to outwit opponents.

Of course, if all the SEC teams attended the same clinics, they would see the setups and be able to counteract them. Even so, knowing what was happening on the field was always a good thing for a soccer player, in my opinion. I was eager to attend any of the clinics Eddie and my co-captains thought might be of interest.

By the end of our discussion, we were all back on the same page. Past transgressions were in the past, and everybody was looking forward to moving ahead. It was a load off my mind.

Unfortunately, my team life was the only part of my existence that seemed to be heading in the right direction. Two weeks until finals, and I was woefully behind in my studies. If I didn't make grades, my reacceptance onto the soccer field was going to be a moot point.

My personal life also continued to suck. The letters piled up. I now had three good-sized stacks of unopened mail. I didn't want to throw them out, but I didn't have any desire to read them, either. The only ones I read were the ones from my mom, and even those were painful. She never mentioned anything directly, but her omissions were loud assaults on my psyche.

Bryan had hinted about something going on with Reggie, but she was another on my list of people I was avoiding. I was carrying a huge amount of guilt around, and quite a lot of it stemmed from my conflicted feelings about her. She was a wonderful girl, and I had no wish to hurt her in any way. At one point, before the Georgetown tournament, I had been thinking that, if Kayla hadn't been my girlfriend, I might have pursued a more romantic relationship with Reggie. Now, with my self-inflicted exile from Kayla, I couldn't imagine even talking to Reggie.

My choice was swept away from me, however, when I found Reggie waiting for me after my English class one day. I didn't even recognize her until she called my name, even though I looked right at her as I walked out of GPA, one of the general education buildings on campus. She was dressed in an old work shirt and frayed jeans, and she wasn't wearing any makeup at all.

"Sean? Can I talk to you?"

I whirled when she called my name, and I was surprised when it took me a moment to place her.

"Reggie? Are you okay?"

She nodded, but she looked uncomfortable. I didn't know if she was just reluctant to see me, or if the surroundings were making her feel that way. I stepped over to her and tried to put my arm around her shoulder, but she stepped away from me. *There's your answer*, I told myself.

"Sean, I... I want to thank you for... for..." She stumbled over the words she was trying to say. She looked like she was about to cry.

"You want to get some coffee or something?" I asked. "Maybe walk over to Reitz?"

"No, that's okay," she said. She wasn't looking directly at me. Her body language screamed of reluctance at being there. "I just wanted to... say thanks for... for being around for me."

"Why?" *Ol' Cut-to-the-Chase Porter, now on duty.*

"Why?" Now Reggie looked at me. I could see the sadness in her eyes, and it was painful to recognize it.

"Sure," I said. I was anxious to get away from this scene, too, so I decided to make it quick for her. *No sense prolonging the agony.* "Why are you thanking me?"

"B... Because..." She was having trouble getting the words out, so I helped her out even more.

"Because it's over?" I asked, perhaps a little harshly. "You're done with me?" I watched, a little heartlessly, as the tears began to roll down her pale cheeks. "Okay," I said, my voice rough. "You're welcome. See you around." And I turned, and I walked away.

She silently let me go.

It wasn't until much later I found out Reggie had been having conflicting feelings about me, just as I had been having concerning my relationship with her. She had gone home to visit Elvis for fall break, and they had a fight about it, about me. When she returned to Florida, she found out about the upheaval in the soccer team, created by none other than her so-called "safe date," the one and only Sean Porter.

My own depression and distance helped her to make up her mind, and she decided to stop going out with me so she could stop jeopardizing the relationship that was more important to her, her romance with her Pennsylvania hockey player.

She displayed more guts than I possessed, however, by confronting me in person. It hurt, but it also painfully reminded me of my own cowardice.

I struggled through the last couple of weeks of school before the Christmas break. I was dreading going home and facing Kayla, Jake, and Jaimie. I didn't think I wanted to see Eric or Trent, for that matter. Then, in meeting with Eddie and my teammates, a way out presented itself.

My parents had sent me a plane ticket home. I splurged and called long-distance to tell them my plans for the long break.

"Tell me again about what you want to do?" My mom sounded confused.

"I have to help plan out the spring clinic schedules," I repeated. "I'm going to drive down to Jesse's house for a few days so we can work on it."

"And you're planning on going there right away?"

"The day after I get back. It's important, Ma. It's for the team."

She sighed. "Well, I suppose, if your coach is asking you to do this..."

"Oh, it's a big assignment," I said hurriedly. I had her on the ropes. Now I had to seal the deal. "He needs us to finish this as soon as we can."

"I still don't see why you can't just work on it there," she said.

"Because we don't have time," I wheedled. "Not with finals and all."

"And when are you coming back home?" She sounded resigned. *Good*, I thought, though I had just enough sense to not say it out loud.

"I'll be back in plenty of time to pack up and go to Aunt Jo's," I said. We were going to my mother's sister's house in Wisconsin for Christmas, and with luck I wouldn't be back home until it was time to fly back to Florida. "I promise."

"Kayla will be so disappointed," my mother said, thrusting the needle deep into my vein.

"Yeah, I'm disappointed, too, but we've got to get this work done," I said, trying to sound as regretful as I could.

In the end, she bought it. I knew she would be able to convince my dad of the importance of my trip down to Jesse's. I knew she would be very disappointed in me if she ever found out how duplicitous I was in the way I used her. I just hoped she would never learn the truth.

It worked like a charm. I flew home on Sunday, and on Tuesday I drove down to Jesse's. I spent the next few days with Jesse and his family, farting around at the mall and working out at a new indoor soccer facility about fifteen miles away from his house. We even did some legitimate work on our spring schedule.

We also talked about getting the "flow" back into the team. We were losing four starters to graduation, including the entire middle of our defensive unit, but we had a great core from which to build. Jeremy Peters, our left midfielder, was graduating, and if this kid from California Pick had landed was as good as Pick thought he was, he might be able to slide right into that spot.

Ted Artichenkoff, Brad Rickman, and Rick Rogers were also graduating, but we had some solid players ready to take over. A new sweeper, stopper, and keeper on a team would normally be tough to integrate quickly, but Jesse, Bryan, and Eddie all were confident we would hardly miss a stride in the fall.

The Wilhoits had a guest room in their house that I used. Jesse and I shared the hall bath, and his younger sister, Anna, had her own room with a bathroom. I had been a little nervous about seeing her again, but by now she was a senior in high school, and she was dating a tennis player from her school. We had flirted at one time, back a few years before, but she hardly gave me a second glance anymore. It was okay with me. I didn't need the complication.

I drove back home the day before we were leaving for Aunt Jo's. I didn't really like my cousins very much, so I wasn't looking forward to seeing them, but it got me out of town. My cousins were quite a bit younger than me, still in middle school, and they were as obnoxious as I probably was when I was their age. Maybe I would like them when they grew up, but until then I was of the opinion they should be locked away. The oldest, Will, was twelve, and his younger brother, Troy, was eleven. It seemed like the Lindgren sisters, my mom and her sister Jo, could only produce male progeny. Jo kept on saying she wanted a girl, but so far it was all grandsons for that side of the family.

Even my brother Stephen, closer in age to Will and Troy than either Michael or me, had little patience for the tricks our cousins tried to pull. I did my best to ignore them, but Stephen actually cornered them the second day we were there. By then, Will and Troy had short-sheeted Stephen's bed, put some sort of slimy concoction in my pillowcase, and were all-around pains in the ass. Stephen used a baseball bat to contain the boys in a corner of the basement, and then he threatened them with mutilation and severe bodily harm if they even looked at us funny for the rest of the time we were residents of their house. The look on Stephen's face must have been convincing, because Will and Troy backed off and left us alone after that.

When Stephen told me about it, later that afternoon, I had to work hard to keep a straight face. I remembered all too well how Jake and I had had to threaten Stephen and his friends in much the same way, not all that long ago. It felt good to find some humor in a situation again, even if it was a little dark.

I was still pretty moody over the Christmas holidays, and I spent a lot of time thinking about Kayla. I knew she was hurting, but I just couldn't bring myself to contact her. Being out of town helped me to rationalize my behavior, and the longer I went without talking to her, or writing to her, the easier I thought my life would become.

Of course, I was wrong.

By the time we got back to our own house, though, I was itchy to get back to Florida. It was Wednesday, the second of January, and I impulsively called the airline to see if I could get on an earlier flight.

They had seats available. All I had to do then was convince my parents.

When I brought it up at dinner that night, my mom almost had a cow.

"You want to... what?" She put down her fork carefully and stared at me.

"I think I should get back," I repeated. "Coach has some film he wants us to look at, and I've got a lot to do..."

My dad said, "We'd like to spend some time with you, son. We've missed having you around."

"But you're going back to work tomorrow," I pleaded. "So is Mom. It's not like we've got a lot of plans or anything. Please? It's important."

My mother looked at me, the disappointment plain in her expression. "You have someone you have to talk to before you go back," she said. "And you know it as well as I do."

And, just like that, the subject I had worked so hard to evade had just found the light of day. *Just what I was trying to avoid, and my mother catches me up.* I sighed, and tried an end-around. "But Pick is expecting me to..."

"Your coach expects you to do the right thing," she interrupted. "On the field and off it. You are not going back to Florida without talking to her, Sean."

And so there it is, I thought to myself. *Cornered again.* I sighed once again, as dramatically as I dared. "All right," I said. "I'll call after dinner."

Suddenly, though, I just wasn't hungry at all.

After our meal, I put off calling for as long as I could. Significant looks from my mother finally guilted me into picking up the phone, though, and I reluctantly dialed.

Jake picked up the phone.

"Hello?"

"Hey," I said. "How's things at Iowa?"

"Where the hell have you been?" Jake didn't sound happy. I didn't blame him for being angry.

"We were up north for Christmas," I said by way of explanation.

"You gotta talk to her, dude."

"Yeah, I know," I said slowly. "That's why I'm calling."

"Ah, shit," he said roughly. "She's not home right now. Her and Jaimie and their moms are out shopping. You'd think they would have had enough of shopping before Christmas."

"Women never have enough of shopping," I said distractedly. *Kayla wasn't home.* That was all I could concentrate on.

"Kay was going to spend the night with Jaimie. You could call her over there later," he suggested.

"Christ, I don't think so," I muttered.

"Sean, call her soon, dude. She's done nothing but cry for the past month. You gotta straighten this out."

"Yeah, I'm working on it," I said, but both he and I knew I didn't have much of a plan.

We hung up, and I went in to report my effort. Mom looked grim, but she nodded tersely.

The next day, when we were gathered at the dinner table after my parents got home from work, Mom pointedly asked, "Did you talk to Kayla?"

Keeping my head down, I mumbled, "Yes, ma'am. It didn't go well."

I didn't dare look up at her. She was silent for a moment. "You need to keep working on it when you go back," she said.

"I will, I promise," I said. *Liar!* kept on echoing in my brain, so loudly I wouldn't have been surprised if my family couldn't hear it leaking out my ears.

I left for Florida the next day, relieved to get the hell out of there, especially before my mother found out I really hadn't called Kayla back at all.

Chapter 22 - Bought and Paid for It All

Posted: April 16, 2004 - 12:35:50 am

Second semester started out a little easier for me. My living arrangement improved with Westy training and traveling so much. It was almost like I was living by myself.

Unlike the rest of his pledge class, who were activated at the end of the first semester, Westy was still on probation with the Sig Taus. His behavior and his attitude kept him from being lifted to full brotherhood, and I knew he was pissed off about it. I didn't care. I was still hurting over my own immaturity. I didn't have the time or the energy to concern myself with Westy's.

Once everybody else got back to school, Eddie and I met again with the team co-captains to continue working on our spring schedule. Jesse brought in the worksheets he and I had worked on over break, and he spread them out for everybody to see.

Bryan looked over the proposed travel schedule, and then looked up at Jesse.

"You and the Little Head figured this out?" he asked.

We all looked at him strangely. "The Little Head?" queried Jesse.

Bryan nodded his head in my direction. "The Little Head," he confirmed. "It's what he's been using to think with."

Rick brayed out a sharp laugh. "Good one, Bryan," he said. And, just like that, I had acquired myself a new nickname. In a short amount of time it was shortened to just "Head," but it managed to spread out from the team to other acquaintances. I was not at all happy about it, but I couldn't deny its appropriateness. Before long almost everyone I knew was calling me Head.

At least it wasn't shortened from "Shithead," I reminded myself sourly. It wasn't until several weeks later that I came to realize it could just have easily come from that moniker.

Eddie and Pick put in our applications for the tournaments and clinics we had chosen. Our first event was the first weekend of March in Miami, so Pick began our practices early in February. We started right in with our Alpha-Omega scrimmages, only this time Pick mixed up the teams and the lineups on a biweekly basis.

"Ain't nobody needs to get comfortable out there," was how he explained his reasoning for changing things up so much.

In truth, it seemed to me he was working on bringing the team back together as a whole after the fall fiasco, and taking away even the dividing loyalties of Team Alpha vs. Team Omega was one of the ways he was trying to accomplish this goal.

For myself, I was enjoying my time on the field, whether I was playing back or, as I found myself occasionally, playing forward. Jesse wasn't as comfortable when he was assigned a defensive position for a few days, but I liked the change of being able to challenge the goal instead of defend it. It brought another new perspective to my appreciation of the way positions were played, and I tried to build on my newfound knowledge.

Jesse, Spencer, Bryan, and I spent quite a bit of time playing two-on-two during January. It kept us sharp, and kept us fit. Other than the time I spent with a soccer ball, or my time with Eddie, I lived a hermit's life.

I had salvaged my grades during the first semester by doing well on my finals. I didn't want to fall behind like that ever again, so I spent most of my spare time on my books. It took my mind off my troubles, and it kept me on the straight and narrow.

What it didn't do was address how I was going to repair all the personal relationships I had so spectacularly fucked up. My attitude was akin to hoping that if I ignored it all, maybe it would all go away. Wishful thinking worked like that; real life rarely did.

Spencer and Jesse both tried to get me to go out, but the most I did was grab a burger somewhere with one or the other of them. There was nobody else I wanted to talk to, nobody else for me to see. As hard as they tried, I resisted even harder. I knew it was pissing them off a little, but in my poisoned mind I didn't see any reason to change.

It all came to a head over the long President's Day weekend in February.

I got back to my room after soccer practice on that Friday night, tired after a long week. I was not looking forward to another dreary, lonely weekend, especially a long one. At least classes got me out of my dorm room.

Westy was spending another weekend at the fraternity house, so I had the room all to myself. I had about a hundred pages to read over the weekend, and I debated with myself about starting in on it or holding off on that particular task until the next day.

Around eight, I was still undecided when my room telephone rang. I picked it up, and it was Jesse.

"You want to go grab a bite?" He sounded like he wanted to let loose a little. Brittany, his girlfriend, was on a sorority weekend, and he was a bachelor for the time being.

"Nah," I said. I was a little bit hungry, but not enough to get me to drag my sorry ass back outside.

"Yeah, you are," he said, seeing right through me. "I'll be there in about twenty. Call Spencer, see if he wants to come."

Before I could protest, Jesse hung up. I stood there, looking at the dead receiver in my hand. I mentally shrugged, and dialed Spencer's room.

"Yo, dude, Jesse wants to get something to eat. You interested?"

It was almost like he had been anticipating my call. "You bet," he said without hesitation.

"Come on down here when you're ready. He'll be here in about twenty minutes."

Okay," said Spencer. He showed up at my door about ninety seconds later, his warm-up jacket slung over his shoulder. *Quick*, I thought to myself as I let him in. *He's very quick to get down here.*

We went down the stairs to wait for Jesse. When he got there, we headed over to Chaucer's, on University Avenue. Parking was sometimes a problem around there, so Jesse opted to leave his car in the lot, and we walked the few blocks to the restaurant.

We found a big table and took it over. Jesse ordered a pitcher of beer, but the waitress still asked to see our driver's licenses.

"You must be new here," grumbled Jesse as he pulled his ID out and handed it to her. In the meantime, Spencer and I both took our wallets out and shuffled through them, looking for our fake ID's. I handed her mine, with the unlikely name of Frank K. Luckie, but she only glanced at the name for a second. She was

intent on examining the birth date on it. Since it said I was twenty-two, she handed it back without a word and examined Spencer's. His passed inspection, also, though she did look at him a little suspiciously. She returned to our table with three mugs and a pitcher full of beer. Jesse poured us each a mug.

Holding his mug up, he said, "To a successful evening."

Spencer echoed, "A successful evening," but I had no idea what they were talking about, so I just clanked my mug against theirs and took a long swallow.

Just as the waitress was taking our food order, Jesse glanced up toward the door and exclaimed, "Hey, there's some friends of mine." He stood up and waved. "Over here, guys!"

I looked up and saw Trent Abbott and Eric Johnson walking up to our table.

"What the fuck?" I was shocked. "What are you guys doing here?"

They pulled up chairs and sat down on either side of me. "It's a long weekend, and we decided to take a road trip," said Trent.

"Yeah," agreed Eric. "Got a call about a friend of ours got a proctology problem he needs help with. Dude's got his head stuck good and tight up his own ass."

"Huh?" The gist of this conversation was escaping me.

Eric stared me down. "I said, dude's got his head stuck good and tight up his own ass."

"I heard you, I just don't know what you're talking about," I said defensively. It was unconvincing, even to me, and Eric didn't even give it that much credence.

"By the end of the night, baby, you gonna know," he said. He looked around. "What's a brother got to do to get a couple a mugs here? We're dry as a bone."

Our waitress scurried over with two more empty mugs and set them down. She seemed a little flustered.

"What's your name, dolly?" asked Eric.

"Juney," she said, eyes downcast.

"You a pretty thing, Juney," said Eric with a smile. He draped his arm around her waist, and she moved quite naturally closer to him to lean up against him. "Do me a favor? Bring us another pitcher? This one gonna be empty by and by."

Juney turned three shades of red at Eric's compliment, and she practically skipped off to get his beer.

"How the hell did you do that?" asked Jesse with a laugh. "She didn't even ask to see your licenses."

Eric shrugged expansively. "Sometimes you just gotta sweet-talk 'em," he said by way of explanation. I was of the opinion that Eric could get away with sweet-talking Juney, but I seriously doubted if any of the rest of us could have managed it.

Juney returned with the pitcher, and leaned down over Eric's shoulder to set it on the table. She paused there, pressed just a little against him, and she glanced back at him, as if looking for his approval. He smiled at her, and she blushed again, and stood up.

"Sweetheart, could you fetch us some menus? We been drivin' awhile, and we got some... hungers." Eric looked at Juney seriously, and she nodded quickly, and practically ran over to the bar to grab some menus. She returned and handed them to us with a smile, saving her warmest smile for my man Eric.

Juney left us for a moment to look over the menus. "Dude, you are going to get yourself in so much trouble," said Trent, but he was grinning.

"Nah," said Eric. "You just got to know when to turn it up, that's all."

"So, tell me again why you guys are here?" I asked as we were studying the menus.

Eric nodded in Spencer's direction. "Mr. G. called us up, told us you was hurtin'. We all decided you needed some... intervention."

"Intervention? I don't..."

"But first things first," Eric interrupted. "What we really need to do here is eat some of this fine food Juney is gonna bring out for us, and then we are gonna get you drunk."

Three hours later, we were still at the table. We had emptied eight pitchers of beer, and were working on a ninth. Juney had slipped us a couple of free ones, and when she was done with her shift she sat with us. Spencer had moved over to make room so she could put herself next to Eric, and we contributed greatly to the noise and the atmosphere of fun that permeated Chaucer's that night.

I was happily sloshed, and much of the evening has been lost to my memory, but nothing mattered much at that point. I was with the best friends I had in the world, and they were here with me.

Sometime late that night the three of us, Eric, Trent, and me, managed to find our way back to my dorm room. I crawled up to my bed, Eric and Trent challenged each other to Paper/Rock/Scissors to see who got Westy's bed, and the loser had to crash on the ratty couch. Eric won, and he hauled himself up and pretty much passed out on top of Westy's blankets.

Much later, after we had fallen asleep, I was awakened by the light coming on in our room.

"Oh, man, whoever that is, shut off the damn light," I moaned. It was like shards of glass being shoved directly through my eyeballs and into my brain.

"Who the fuck is in my bed?" I heard Westy say.

I sat up blearily to see Westy standing by our desks, looking angry. I could hear Trent snoring softly from the couch below us.

"What are you doing here? You're supposed to be at the fraternity house," I said.

"Fuck 'em," he said. "I want to sleep in my own bed."

Without getting up, Eric muttered, "Ain't your bed tonight."

"Oh, yeah? Says who?" challenged Westy, clearly angry.

Eric sat up and looked down at my roommate. "Go back to your frat house, frat boy. Somebody else got claim to your nest tonight."

Westy grabbed for Eric's ankle. "I don't think so, Goddammit," he said. He tried to pull Eric out of the lofted bed, but Eric simply kicked Westy's hand away. I heard Eric sigh, and then he lightly leapt down and landed on the balls of his feet right in front of Westy. Eric showed absolutely no intimidation at all, even though Westy had about two inches on him. Eric looked strong and fit, and he looked confident.

"Look, friend, you tole Porter you was gone for the weekend," Eric said quietly. "Ain't our fault you changed your mind."

Westy tried shoving Eric back, but Eric was not going to be moved that easily. His shoulder moved with the force of Westy's push, his torso twisting, but his feet never moved. What Westy's action did, however, was wake Trent up, and get me down from my bed. The four of us in that small room took up just about every available inch of space, and Westy was forced to step back away from the three of us.

Westy looked uncertainly at us. "I don't like this," he muttered.

"I don't doubt it," said Eric. "Just the same, you got a bed to go to. I suggest you go find it."

Westy grumbled darkly under his breath for a moment, and then he decided he was in no position to press the issue. He turned and opened the door. "Fuckin' soccer pricks," he muttered as he left.

I looked at Eric, who was watching Westy calmly. "I don't think he liked you very much," I said.

"Fuck him," replied Eric. "He don't like anybody very much. Except maybe himself."

"Even so, he'll have more to say about this."

Eric merely shrugged. "I'll try not to leave any skid marks on his sheets."

"Oh, okay, that will make it all better," said Trent with a laugh. "Now, if you don't mind, I have a dream featuring Christy Brinkley that I left unfinished that I would like to get back to."

"Say hi to her for me," said Eric as he climbed back up into Westy's bunk. "I know she misses me."

I shut off the light and was asleep again almost before my head hit the pillow.

I woke up sometime around noon the next day, feeling pretty bad. We had a practice at two, and Trent and Eric went over to Denny's for a late breakfast while Spencer, Jesse, and I limped over to the fieldhouse for two hours of practice.

I was really looking forward to a nap after practice, but my friends weren't about to let me off that easily. We grabbed a soccer ball and goofed off down by the Lake Alice athletic fields, playing keep-away along the sidelines of a couple of flag football games. On the way back to the dorm, we stopped and talked with some coeds who were strolling along the Plaza of the Americas, a central gathering place on campus. Eric schmoozed the girls, and he dragged Trent and me into the group and into the conversation by mentioning to them that I had been a high school All-American. It was embarrassing to have all that brought up, especially in light of my problems at the end of the season, but fortunately, soccer was not popularly followed. The girls were very impressed with the news, and apparently had no idea about how our season concluded.

Eric ended up inviting them to meet up with us at Chaucer's, and they cheerfully accepted. We left them huddled together, talking and whispering and glancing at us as we walked away.

"Dude, what are you doing?" I asked, once we were out of earshot.

"Hey, we're all single guys, just out to have us some fun," he said expansively.

Trent just snorted.

Later that night, we gathered up a bunch of my teammates and took over Chaucer's. The girls from the Plaza showed up around ten, and Juney was there, too, with a couple of girlfriends. Luke Early got lucky with one of the girls from the Plaza Eric had invited, and they split off pretty early to go make their own fun. Eric had Juney on one knee, her friend Alicia on the other, and I had another of the Plaza girls, an exotic little wisp of a thing who told me her name was Chloe, hanging on my arm.

Sometime during that night I felt somebody grab my other arm, just as I was lifting my mug up to my mouth. Beer slopped out and hit my chin, and I heard a vaguely familiar voice say, "Well, well, if it isn't the famous Sean Porter."

It took me a moment, and I was none too happy to recognize Maureen Saunders, the chubby girl with the bad complexion that Westy had brought up to our room last fall. She had an evil gleam in her eye.

She looked balefully over at Chloe. "This your girlfriend, Sean? Not much meat on her bones."

Chloe looked distastefully at Maureen. "And you are?" she asked haughtily.

"I'm his Number One Fan, and the girl he's going to marry," said Maureen. I jerked my arm away from her and stepped back.

"No fucking way," I spat. "You really are a psycho, aren't you?"

"Seanie, how can you say that?" Maureen tried batting her eyes at me. If she thought she was being alluring, she was horribly mistaken. Chloe stepped back with me, and was looking at Maureen as if she was examining an ugly stain on her shoe.

"I'll tell you what," I said. I was drunk enough I didn't care what I said to her to drive her away. "I'll just give Westy a call. Maybe you can meet him over at Reitz in one of the men's room stalls again."

Maureen stared at me. "That's not nice," she said with a frown.

"Got your kneepads packed in your purse just in case?" I asked cruelly.

"You're as much of an asshole as that asshole roommate of yours," she spat.

"Aw, gee, and I thought you were my Number One Fan," I said with a fake pout. I deliberately turned Chloe away, and we ignored Maureen. She finally got the hint and left.

"Who was that unpleasant person?" Chloe asked.

"Somebody my roommate introduced to me," I said. I glanced at her mug, and saw it was as empty as mine. "We need more beer," I said, reaching for a half-full pitcher on the table.

About an hour later I was pretty sloppily drunk. I was hanging on Chloe, or maybe she was hanging on me, when Eric and Trent pulled me up.

"Time to go, Head," said Trent. He giggled, an incongruous sound coming from my normally serious friend. "Head. What a great name."

"Why ish he calling you *Head*?" slurred Chloe.

"It's a nickname he acquired playing soccer," said Eric. *Why did he not sound inebriated? He had to be as drunk as I am,* I said to myself. "Dude thinks too much."

"Ahhh," said Chloe, her eyebrows rising up in a lubricated version of understanding.

Eric pulled on one arm and Trent on the other. I tried to cling to Chloe, unwilling to part so soon, but my friends were insistent.

"Help!" I shouted. "I just want a little more Chloe!"

As they pulled me toward the door, I heard Chloe answer, "And I want a little more Head!"

The whole place erupted in laughter, but by then we were at the door, and together the three of us stumbled out of Chaucer's, out onto the sidewalk, and across University Ave.

I don't think I can survive another night like this one, I thought.

This time Trent took Westy's bunk, and Eric flopped down on the couch. Within seconds Trent was asleep, wet and bubbling noises emanating from his mouth. I marveled at how the room spun for awhile before nearly falling out of my bed. I climbed carefully down, made my way slowly to the john, and noisily threw up in a toilet.

I think I fell asleep there for a few minutes as I prayed to my porcelain idol.

Way too early the next morning I vaguely heard Eric stirring. The next thing I knew, both Eric and Trent were pulling me by my ankle.

"Nooooo," I moaned. "It's Sunday. Day of rest. Leave me alone."

"Up, Soccer Boy. You need a little purging," said Trent.

"I think I purged last night," I groaned as I tried to roll back over and away from them.

"Nah, not that kind of purge," said Eric. "We need to leach them poisons from your system."

"Gimme a break," I said. "You're the ones who introduced those poisons into my system."

"Yup, and now it's our responsibility to remove 'em."

"It's torture, I tell you," I grumbled. I knew by then they were not going to let me go back to sleep. Maybe if I bitched enough at them they would have mercy.
"You're inflicting pain on a minor."

"Come on, Porter. We ain't done yet," said Eric.

"What's next," I asked reluctantly.

Eric grinned happily at me. "More pain," he said.

They visited an impressive amount of pain onto me. They dragged me out for a long run first, down Museum Road toward the golf course. We paralleled the golf course all the way to 34th Street, and took a breather by the 34th Street Wall, with its painted messages scrawled all over. I was hoping for a respite, and began walking back the way we had come, but Trent and Eric had other plans. They grabbed me and steered me south, down 34th Street, past U-Village South to Hull Road, over past the athletic fields, and back to campus.

By the time we stopped running and began cooling down, I was feeling a little more human. I didn't want to let my buddies know their plan was working, though; I didn't think their egos would stand it. So I kept my mouth shut, and let them lead me back.

We ran up the three flights of stairs, and we all took showers. We got dressed and headed over to The Hub to get some food.

Finally sated, I sat back and contemplated my eating partners.

"What do you guys want to do today?" I foolishly asked.

Trent and Eric looked at each other.

"Glad you asked," said Trent. He got up. "Let's go change."

"Change?" *Uh-oh*, I thought to myself. *What have I opened myself up to?*

Eric and Trent led me back to my dorm room. It was starting to accumulate a locker-room smell from our sweaty clothes that were left piled on the floor after our run in the morning. Trent and Eric both pulled their duffels out and began to change once again, this time into shorts, tee shirts, and shin guards.

I took a step back and held up my hands in front of me. "No way," I said. "Sunday's a day off. No soccer."

"Sorry, dude," said Eric. "No rest for the wicked."

Trent laughed. "Ain't nobody been wickeder than you lately, Porter, so we've got a lot of work to do."

"I don't have a clue what you are talking about," I said, but of course I did. I was just dismayed that somebody else knew it, too. Worse, he was willing to address the problem. I was in trouble.

They were not going to let it go, so I resigned myself to an afternoon of torture. I changed my clothes and put on my shin guards, socks, and soccer shoes. I got a ball out of the closet, and we all went back downstairs.

At one of the practice fields, I was surprised to see Spencer, Jesse, and Bryan waiting for us.

"All of you are in on this?" I asked suspiciously.

Jesse shrugged elaborately. "We're just here for a little three-on-three," he said.

I knew then I was in for a long afternoon. Three-on-three is probably the most strenuous scrimmage lineup. No keeper, just three lined up against three, usually on a short field. It was hard, unforgiving, relentless, brutal, and absolutely the best scrimmage scenario for tightening up your game. *Especially when you're playing with these five guys*, I thought glumly.

We lined up, Spencer and Trent and me against Jesse, Eric, and Bryan. Jesse tapped the ball over to Eric, and the game was on.

Ninety minutes later, we were all lying on the grass, exhausted and wheezing. I was a little surprised there wasn't blood mixed in with the sweat soaking my shirt. I could have sworn I had already sweated out all the water from my body, despite downing two quarts of Gatorade during our brief team switches.

"Kill me now," I said dully, my arm thrown over my eyes.

"Nope," said Trent. "We're saving that particular pleasure for somebody else."

I looked over at him from beneath my arm. "What are you talking about?" I asked.

Trent was on one side of me, and Eric was on the other. They both turned and sat facing me. "Are you sufficiently exhausted, Porter?"

"What do you mean?" I couldn't remember when I had been more tired. Even my legs, in superb shape, were shaking a little. "Yeah, I'm tired," I said.

"Tired enough not to argue when we point out what a piece of shit you've been lately?"

It seemed like maybe I was too tired to argue. I knew I should have been angry at Trent's question, but I just couldn't summon the energy.

"Dude, you got some phone calls to make," said Eric. "I think you're ready to make them."

"Who do I have to call?" I asked, even though I was afraid of the answer.

"Your parents, first off," said Eric.

That was unexpected. "Really?"

"Oh, yeah," said Eric. "As Ricky Ricardo says, 'You got some asplainin' to do.' And you might as well start there."

"Shit," I said. I struggled to sit up. "Is that what this weekend is all about?"

"Well, partly," said Spencer.

I looked at him in surprise. "All of you?" I asked accusingly. *Et tu, Brute?*

"It was also a chance to get together and have some fun," said Trent.

"So, what is it going to be? Are you going to drag me, kicking and screaming, to the nearest telephone booth?"

"Oughtn't be necessary to do that," said Eric. "You know you done her wrong, you know you got to make it up somehow."

I hung my head. "Yeah, you're right," I said desultorily. "It's tough to know where to start, though."

"That's what we're here for," said Trent quietly.

I looked up at all my friends there, and saw them a little differently than I did before. Why couldn't I see it for myself? Why did it take all of them? I didn't know. But I had some bridges to rebuild, and they were right: there was no time like the present.

The first call, to my mom, was painful. It was a disjointed, uncomfortable call, but it ended up with both of us in tears, apologizing to each other. It was cathartic, to say the least.

I sat in the phone booth at Reitz, shaking and sweating after talking with her. My friends were standing around me, giving me a silent show of support. They could easily have slipped off and continued with their own lives, but they were still there with me, still there for me. It was a lesson I would never forget.

There was no question in my mind I had to call Kayla, and I had to do it right then. Even if I was able to talk my friends out of letting me slide, I knew I would never be able to gather up the courage to come back here another time.

Eric silently handed me two dollars in quarters, and I dropped one into the slot and dialed. Kayla picked it up on the second ring.

"Hello?"

She didn't sound nearly as miserable as I felt. *No wonder*, I thought sadly. I had been blaming her for three months now.

"Hi," I said.

Silence. Then, just when I was wondering if she was even still there, she said quietly, "Hi."

I took a deep breath. "I was wrong," I began. "I'm so sorry for everything I did, and for everything I didn't do."

Silence. I ventured on, into the unknown.

"Everything went wrong for me back then, Kay. I could either blame myself, or I could blame somebody else. I took the chicken's way out, and you were the easiest target. It all hit the fan, with Coach and with the team, and my life went into the crapper for a long time, and I had to have a scapegoat, and it was very shallow of me, immature, and I can't apologize enough."

Silence.

"Kayla? Are you there?"

"I'm here, Sean." She sounded sad. "Thank you for calling, and thank you for apologizing, because you're right. You were completely unreasonable. I'm glad your friends have helped you."

She knew about my friends coming down? I looked at the group standing around me in surprise.

"Will... will you write to me again, Kay? I promise I'll answer every letter."

Silence again.

"What can I do to make it up to you? I love you, Kay."

That broke the silence, but not the way I wanted. She started crying. "I really thought you did," she whispered. "I know now you only thought you loved me."

"Kay, that's not true. You know I love you..."

"Do I?" She said it so softly, I almost didn't hear her. She took a big, hitching breath. "I don't think you're ready for a committed relationship, Sean." She sounded so serious, more serious than I had ever heard her before. It scared me. "I love you so much, but I can't stand this... treatment. This lack of respect. For me, for us, for what we had together."

"I'll do anything you say, Kayla. Anything to make it better..."

"I'll write you, Sean. But we will have to talk when you get back for the summer. I can't live like this."

My heart soared. *She said she'd write!* "That's great, Kay..."

"But, until then," she continued, "you need to live your life, and I need to live my life."

"Wh... What? What do you mean?"

"We'll talk when you get home, Sean. But right now, I'm not your girlfriend any longer."

I needed a shower. Hell, I needed a drink.

Somebody had ripped my heart out and threw it on the floor, still beating, not realizing yet it was just a piece of meat.

My friends were all as supportive as they could be, but this was a disaster of my own making. I slumped as I hung up the receiver, and the five gathered around me seemed to understand what had just occurred.

"Hey, man, I'm sorry," said Jesse.

"Nothing for you to be sorry about," I said. "I bought and paid for it all. It's mine and mine alone."

"Even so," offered Trent, "I feel bad about the outcome."

"You had no way of knowing," I said. "I know you guys were doing what you could to help me."

"It ain't how it was all supposed to turn out," said Eric sadly.

I dragged my sorry ass up out of the stool in the telephone booth and stepped out. "Come on, you guys," I said with forced gaiety. "Let's get cleaned up and find something to do. No classes tomorrow, remember?"

Bryan clapped me on the back. "Good effort, Head," he said. "You did the hard thing. Too bad you had to take it on the chin when you did it."

"Fuck it all," I said. "Live today, die tomorrow. Let's go, okay?" And I led my friends back outside, out of the walls that wanted to close in on me, and into the betraying sunshine.

"Hey, let's go back to the apartment," suggested Bryan. "We can order up a pizza, crack open a couple of beers. Maybe there'll be a dirty movie on Showtime or something."

"Sounds good to me," said Eric.

"Yeah," I agreed. "Pizza and beer and naked women. No better way to spend a Sunday night."

Spencer, Eric, Trent, and I headed back to the dorm. We all wanted to get cleaned up and changed, so we agreed to meet Jesse and Bryan at their place in about an hour. I was glad to have my friends around me. If I had tried to make those calls

on my own, I would have wanted to finish the job Jilly Del Toro's knife had started, what seemed like a lifetime ago. Even so, it was an effort to get clean clothes on and join my friends again.

The four of us walked over to the apartment. Jesse was waiting, beers on ice in a cooler on the porch, and he handed us each a can as we came up the steps. We popped the tops, silently clinked our cans together, and drank them down.

By the time the pizza guy got there, we were into the last of the case of beer. I was feeling maudlin, but the guys kept me from slipping into miserable melancholy. We demolished the two pizzas, and opened a second case of beer.

Nothing decent was on the tube that night, and after flipping through the channels several times, we decided to hit University Ave. to see if we could find anybody. We decided to walk, and we ended up at The Purple Porpoise.

We elbowed our way up to the bar and stayed there until a table opened up, off in the corner, and Spencer took off to grab it. We managed to gather up enough chairs, and we brought a couple of pitchers of beer over and sat down.

It was my third night of drinking, and I really wasn't in the mood. I just didn't drink that much normally, and this much partying was wearing thin. I was sitting against the wall, watching the crowd, thinking about just packing it in and going back to the dorm, when a familiar face slowly materialized on the periphery of the impromptu dance floor. I didn't pay much attention to it until the face, with a small pixie body attached to it, launched itself at me and landed in my lap. She had to push Spencer and Trent out of the way to get to me, but she didn't seem daunted by the challenge.

"Hello, Sean Porter," she said.

I heard Eric laugh. "You got them falling out of the sky, Porter?" he asked.

"Hiya Alex," I said.

"Who are your friends, Sean?" Alex wriggled just a little, getting more comfortable. She was acting like we saw each other every day, when, in actuality, I hadn't seen her in months.

"Alexandra Wallace, meet Trent Abbott and Eric Johnson. They're friends from home. Trent goes to South Carolina, Eric's at Maryland. Eric, Trent, this is Alex."

"And I've got somebody for you to meet, too," Alex said. She sat up straighter and waved into the crowd.

I looked over toward where Alex was indicating, and I saw a very pretty girl with ash-blond hair. The girl began making her way over to our table, and I had the opportunity to watch her. She was taller than Alex, but still a little shorter than average. She was very nicely proportioned, and she walked over with reserved confidence.

Christ, Porter, you just got done with a long-distance breakup call, and already you're drooling over a new chick, I admonished myself. My hormones didn't listen to logic, however.

When the new girl got to our table, Alex, without getting up, introduced her. "You'll have trouble remembering all the names, but here they are. This is Bryan, and Jesse, Spencer, and Trent, and Eric, and I'm holding down Sean. Everybody, this is my friend, Erin Hughes."

"Sean? I like that name," said Erin with a secret smile.

Bryan, ever the gentleman, scrambled up and offered Erin his seat. She thanked him, and he took off in search of an empty chair to bring back. He squeezed in, right between Spencer and Erin.

"Are you a Junior? I don't remember seeing you around before," asked Jesse.

Erin laughed. "No, I'm just a lowly freshman," she said.

Alex wriggled against me some more, perhaps unconsciously, and perhaps hoping to feel a reaction. I was so weary of my female troubles, I couldn't even manage a thrill out of having her on my lap. 'You really are pathetic, son,' I said to myself.

"Do any of you know Sydney Robbins?" asked Alex. She looked around, but we all shook our heads. "Anyway, she's a sophomore living on Erin's floor in the dorm, and she introduced us. We've got some... common interests," she continued.

I looked at Erin, and then at Alex, but neither of them was going to expand on what their common interests might be. Oh, well, my cynical side said. They will let us know when they want us to know.

Alex turned to me and looked at me from about six inches away. "Why so glum, chum?" she asked.

I really didn't feel the need to do a barroom confession, so I just said, "It's nothing."

She wiggled her butt against my legs. "You've got a bony lap, pal," she said. "You need some fattening up."

Now that made me laugh. "Did you ever think maybe it was your skinny butt that needed padding?" I asked.

"Hey, I can't help it if I'm petite," said Alex with a mock frown.

"Petite, sweet, and so good to eat," Eric murmured, but he didn't say it quietly enough. We all heard it, and the guys burst out laughing as the girls both turned beet red. Eric, a little embarrassed, quickly stood and made a show of looking for Juney, waving an empty pitcher in his hand.

"That was a little bit nasty, Sean's Friend," accused Alex. Then, to me, she whispered, "And I kind of liked it."

Chapter 23 - Rebuilding

Posted: May 11, 2004 - 11:31:36 am

My friends left pretty early on Monday morning. As much as I liked Trent and Eric, and as much as I enjoyed their visit, I was glad to watch them pull out of the parking lot and head back out of town. I didn't think I could take another day of intervention and intoxication. As it was, I wanted nothing more than to grab some breakfast, and then go back to my rack and bag some more sleep.

Their efforts were not in vain. They had opened my eyes to the obnoxious and irresponsible way I had been acting, and I owed everybody involved in the weekend's activities a huge debt. I vowed I would not forget it.

I climbed back into bed and slept for three more hours, feeling much better than I had any right to feel when I woke up. I was energized and ready to get to work. I called Eddie Whitehead and arranged to meet him to watch the film of the kid from California, and then I got busy with my own homework.

Later that day, Eddie and I watched the first of several films of Harlan Lightfine, the midfielder from Simi Valley, California. He had led his team into the state tournament three years in a row, and he also played on an elite club team based in West L.A. We had a lot of evidence of his skills at hand, but it was obvious, after watching some of his games, his greatest attribute was his speed with the ball. I couldn't remember seeing anyone run with the ball in control with anything approaching Harlan's quickness, not even Eric Johnson. I quickly began to think of him as *Lightspeed* instead of Harlan Lightfine. He was going to bring a whole new dimension to the Gators soccer program, and I was really looking forward to seeing what we could become.

Over the next three weeks, I adjusted to the routine. I studied hard, determined to keep my grades up. I worked with Eddie many afternoons, and I practiced with the team every day except Sundays. I did my best to keep my head down, concentrating on doing what needed to be done.

It was a hard lesson, but I hoped it was one I had learned well. The last thing I wanted to do was disappoint anybody ever again. I had lived my miserable life disappointed in myself for many months, and now that my friends had put me back on the road, I struggled against my natural inclination to bury my head in the sand. I wanted to stay the course, and I worked hard to overcome what I knew, better than anyone else, were my most serious flaws of character and judgment.

About a week after Trent and Eric left, I got my first letter from Kayla. I opened it with trepidation, but no poison gases emanated from it. I held the few pages of paper gingerly. She had apparently written to me in her spiral notebook and then torn the pages out. She trimmed the frayed paper with scissors, and the pages were covered with her feminine, lovely handwriting.

She wrote of mundane, everyday things around school and her house, and it made my heart ache with sadness. She carefully avoided mentioning anything about my past idiocy-idiocies?-and the tone of her letter was deliberately neutral.

I read it three times in a row, and put it carefully in my desk drawer for safekeeping. I pulled out a spiral notebook of my own, and I began my letter back to her. I tried to keep my tone as careful as she had been, and several times I had to scratch out sentences and phrases that reeked of the pitiable fool I had become. I kept at it, though, until I had a reasonably coherent reply. I read it over several times, making minor revisions, until I was satisfied it didn't sound too awful. I copied it onto fresh sheets, tore them out, and I trimmed the edge with scissors, just like Kayla had done. I knew she would notice I had used the same kind of paper as she had. It was something I knew she would see right away, and it felt like the right thing to do. I dropped it into the outgoing mail slot in the lobby of my dorm, less than twenty-four hours after I had gotten her letter.

Another bridge to rebuild. I had a lot of them, and each one required a lot of work. I hoped I had the stamina to bring it all off.

A couple of weeks later, we were in the showers after a long practice. We were leaving the next day to head over to a weekend tournament in Jacksonville, and Pick had been working us pretty hard all week to prepare for it.

"Hey, Porter." Jesse's voice came to me through the steam in the shower room.

"Yeah?"

"Have you got your summer clinics set up yet?"

Oh, shit. I had not done anything about them at all. *Would my clinics still be a draw?* "No," I admitted. "I'd better see if there's still interest. I'll drop a note to Danielle. She's got the lists from the last couple of years."

"You were talking last year of expanding. You still gonna do it?"

"Yeah, I guess I'd like to, if there's a demand." I looked around. "Spence? You still in here?"

"Over here," he replied. I had shampoo in my eyes, and couldn't see a thing. His voice came from my other side.

"What do you think about working the clinics again this summer?"

"I just assumed you were going to run them," he said. "I was planning on working them."

It struck me that my problems were just that: they were mine. They didn't extend too far beyond me, and didn't affect the kids I had been working with at all. It was a struggle for me to look beyond my own insecurities and shortcomings, and Spencer's simple declaration blindsided me with the realization that others didn't necessarily share my internal agonies.

"Okay, then," I said. I turned my face into the water, washing away the soap and the tears that were forming. "I guess I'm running the clinics."

Jesse's voice was closer. I glanced over, now that I had washed out my eyes and could see again, and he was standing in the middle of the floor, away from the spray from the showerheads. "You want some help?"

"Sure," I said. I was startled by his offer, though. "Aren't you going back to the U-20 National Team?"

Jesse chuckled. "I would if I could, dude," he said. "But I'm twenty-one now."

"Damn, that's right," I said. "Why don't you try out for the big one? Go for a spot on the National Team."

"Not good enough," he said. "Hell, even for the U-20 team I was only a role player. Split my time with three other guys. It was a great experience, but I know I can't take it to the next level yet."

"Shit, if you can't make it, there would be absolutely no hope for me," I said. "Not that I had even considered it."

Jesse looked at me. "You'd make the U-20 team if you worked hard and did a little campaigning," he said. "And knowing you, you'd make the most of the opportunity. But I think you're doing a lot more good running your clinics."

"It is a lot of fun," said Spencer.

I grinned. "Yeah, it is," I agreed. "There's something about watching a kid's skills improve, and watching them realize it."

I turned the shower off and reached for my towel. The three of us stepped carefully out of the showers to our lockers.

"So, your reputation precedes you," said Jesse. "You're already a popular teacher in your area. You want to expand?"

"To down by you?" I asked.

"Sure," he said. "We'll use your name and structure, I'll run the clinics just like you're doing up north, and the combined draw of Sean Porter Clinics and Jesse Wilhoit instruction ought to bring 'em in."

"Sounds good to me," I said. I began to get dressed, my mind working on the logistics of getting my organization set up for Jesse in his hometown. I had to write to Danielle right away, so we could get moving on it. Spencer would be available again, and Eric, and Trent. I had to call Posey Smith, and get in touch with Weasel, and...

So little time, so much to do.

I ended up having to burn up some of my money I earned working for Pick and Eddie on long-distance calls to Danielle, Trent, Eric, and Posey. I figured I would see Weasel and Jorge Mendoza when I got home. I would be home almost a month before they got out of high school, time enough to get my staff organized and the clinics advertised.

When I called Danielle, she surprised me.

"I got a couple of interesting letters a couple of weeks ago, Sean," she said.

That statement worried me. *Who wrote to her about me? Kayla? Mrs. Lehigh?*

"Okay, I'm ready," I said, even though I really wasn't. "Who from?"

I could almost hear her smile at my discomfort. "AYSO groups in Merrillville, Indiana, and South Bend."

"Really? What did they want?"

"They want Sean Porter clinics," she said.

"What? You're kidding."

"Nope. They've been organizing, and Merrillville already has signups for about forty kids each in three different age groups."

"Wow, that's amazing," I said. "How did they find out about us?"

"Apparently the word got around at the regional AYSO meetings," said Danielle. "The officers from our own organization really talked up the benefits."

"And you said South Bend, too?"

"Yes, can you believe it?"

"Isn't that where Notre Dame is? They've got a great team there. Why didn't they just get a couple of those players to run clinics?"

"Like I said, the word is out. The Sean Porter clinics are the hot item now, so they contacted me." Danielle paused, and then said, "Sean, are you thinking about expanding, like we talked about last summer?"

"Well, Jesse wants to run a version in his hometown, and if we're being asked to come into Indiana, I guess we might as well. Will you have time to work on it?"

She laughed. "I already am, boss."

"You anticipated me, didn't you? You are a tricky lass, Dani."

"Oh, I had a feeling you wouldn't mind taking on a few more cities," she said. "You're too ambitious to turn down opportunities that come your way."

That was the first time I could recall ever being described as ambitious. I didn't quite know what to think of it, even though I knew Danielle didn't mean it at all negatively.

"Well..." I was trying to formulate a response.

"Don't worry about it, Sean," she said with a chuckle. "I'll handle it. You just have to find your instructors."

Oh, was that all? Where was I going to find instructors in Merrillville and South Bend?

Jesse and Spencer tried to get me to go out with them most weekends, but I begged off most of the time. Jesse had Brittany, and Bryan had Melanie. Spencer was dating a couple of girls, but I just didn't want the complication. Plus, I got to feeling like the odd man out too often. I was just more comfortable sitting in my dorm room or weaving around campus with my soccer ball.

Finally, one late Friday afternoon, I got a call from Alexandra.

"We're going out tonight," she said. "Put on your dancing shoes, boy."

"I don't think so..."

But she would brook no dissent. "It's not like you have a choice, Porter," she informed me. "I'm picking you up at nine."

I tried sighing theatrically, but she was unmoved. "Where are you taking me?" I finally asked.

"You remember Sha Na Na?" she asked.

"Sure," I replied. "Doo-wop. Played at Woodstock, featured in 'Grease' if I remember right."

"That's them. Well, that's not who's playing, but it's a group like them. They do Fifties and Sixties stuff, great fun to dance to. We're gonna twist the night away, you and I."

Actually, it sounded like fun, something that was really lacking in my life. "Okay," I said, my spirits picking up. "I'll see you downstairs at nine."

True to her word, Alex was in the parking lot when I went downstairs a few minutes before nine. I got in on the passenger side, and looked at her curiously when she didn't drive off right away.

"What?" I asked.

"You've got to get the engine going," she said, smiling.

"Huh?"

She beckoned with a finger, and I leaned over to her. She pursed her lips, and I kissed her. I wanted to make it kind of a brotherly, noncommittal kiss, but Alex's

lips were much too soft and pliant for that plan to work. The kiss lingered, and I found I really didn't mind at all. Not at all.

"Rrrrowwrrr," she growled. She threw her head back and laughed. Then, with a big grin, she dropped her car into gear and punched it. I was thrown back against the seat, caught off balance, and Alex just laughed. At me, at life, I wasn't sure. She was completely involved, completely at ease. I might have envied her at that moment.

Alex drove fast, and she drove casually, her hand draped over the steering wheel at the top. When she turned a corner, she grabbed the wheel with both hands and yanked, sending the small car caroming around the bend, practically on two wheels.

After the third such turn, I muttered, "Jesus H. Christ in a bucket."

Alex glanced over at me and flashed me a happy smile. "Havin' fun, Porter?"

"Not exactly," I gritted as I hung on for dear life. "How many people have you killed with this car?"

"Oh, nobody recently," she said. "I have one simple driving rule. I watch out for what's in front of me. Nothing else is worth worrying about."

"What about people beside you?"

"They're never there long," she said with a laugh.

I didn't doubt her one bit. If I was unlucky enough to be driving alongside her, I would give her as much room as she required. In the meantime, I was hanging on and hoping I survived.

The club Alex was taking me to was a converted warehouse space on the edge of town, away from campus. There was a crowd milling around outside, and a couple of beefy guys in black tee shirts were guarding the door. Alex wheeled into a spot I would have sworn was too small, even for her little Toyota. She made it, just barely. I had to squeeze out my side, trying not to knock her door against the big pickup truck next to us. She slipped her arm through mine as we walked toward the door.

"Hey, Alex," said one of the bouncers after we had threaded our way through the people waiting to get inside.

"Hi, Chugs. How ya doin'?"

"Aces, girl. How you?"

"Top shelf. Meet my friend Sean. Porter, this here is Chugs. Do not - I repeat, do not - ever challenge this guy to a beer drinking contest."

"I wouldn't even consider it," I said. "I take it that's why you're called Chugs?"

Chugs just grunted in affirmative.

"Can we get in sometime tonight, Chugs?" asked Alex. Did I see her actually batting her eyes at him?

"Sure," he said. He stepped aside and ushered us into the doorway. "Have a good time, girl. Sean, you mind your manners around this here girl. She a friend of mine."

I looked him over. He towered over me, and his shoulders were broad and muscular. He rivaled Tiny Harrison and Lamarr Elliott in size, and I would have bet my meager life savings he was every bit as strong as they were. "I'll tread lightly," I told him, but he had already turned back toward the crowd.

I turned to Alex. "Football player?" I asked.

"Used to be," she said. "Blew out his knee his junior year, and then he popped his shoulder doing bench presses during rehab. He was lifting four hundred pounds on a bet, and that was all she wrote. Pro career down the tubes."

"Yikes," I said.

Alex laughed, glancing at me. "Yikes is right," she said. "But he's happy doing this now. Makes good money, and nobody gets into more than one fight in this place anymore. Chugs sees to that."

I looked around a little nervously. "There many fights here?"

Alex looked at me and laughed. "Don't worry about it," she said, taking my hand. "I come here a lot. It's not as nasty as it seems."

"I'll take your word for it," I said, but I kept my eyes open, just the same.

The band onstage was a Tom Petty wannabe, following in the footsteps of one of Gainesville's more famous musical successes. The band was more enthusiastic than talented, but I figured enough beer would make them sound just fine. We wandered off in search of the bar.

I bought us a pitcher of beer, and we found a tiny table still empty over against one of the cinderblock walls. There were a lot of lights flashing near the stage, but the industrial size of the warehouse, combined with the black paint that had been sprayed over the walls and the various pipes and vents high above us, made the place seem like a huge cavern. We sat for a few minutes, drank a little beer, and then Alex grabbed my hand and began pulling me out toward the band. She wanted to be right in front of the giant speakers so she could feel the pounding sound wash through her. I followed along, and I shucked and shimmied along with her, knowing I looked like a spastic lunatic and not caring.

Alex didn't care, either, as she closed her eyes and let her body move with the music. She was a tiny girl, barely five feet tall, and probably didn't weigh more than ninety-five pounds. But she could move. She twirled, she jumped, she writhed, always around me. I turned in place, trying to keep her in front of me, because that's how I learned to dance, but Alex had no such inhibitions. She pranced and danced through other couples, around me, and even moved up and leaned over the makeshift stage, her enticing butt sticking out in my direction. She looked over her shoulder at me, her eyes dancing, as if daring me to do something, but there was no way I was going to embarrass either her or myself by jumping on her, there in front of everybody, no matter how seductive she was. Besides, Chugs was at the door acting like the big brother, and I was not about to challenge his earlier threat.

The opening act's set finished up, and we wove our way back to our table. I flopped down into the chair and reached for my beer. I was sweating a little, both from the exertion and from the heat in the place. Dancing was hard work, and the warehouse was cooking without air-conditioning.

We finished our pitcher, and I carried the empty up to the bar and got a refill. That one went down easily, too, as Alex and I kicked back and watched the bands switch their gear around.

By the time the second pitcher was gone, the headline act, BeBop Devils, was set and tuning up. There were five guys and a girl on saxophone, and they started their set with a Chuck Berry medley.

The warehouse was now very crowded, and Alex and I had to push our way through the throng to get anywhere near the band. There was little dancing room, but we made do, and we hand-jived, bobby-soxed, twisted, and did the Locomotive until we were wiped out.

Between sets there was an exodus to get out of the warehouse to the relatively cooler air outside. Alex and I stepped out to cool down, and I stood around in

amazement as Alex greeted her friends and acquaintances, who seemed to number in the hundreds. The band took a long break between sets, about forty-five minutes, so we had plenty of time to cool off, talk to folks, and refill our pitcher before the next set started.

By the time the third set was finishing, we were barely standing. Me, Alex, the fans around us, and the six members of the hard-working BeBop Devils were all drenched with sweat, panting and thirsty. When the music stopped, we gave them about a ten-minute ovation, and then joined the crowd that was heading for the exit. My ears were ringing, my clothes were completely soaked, and I was ready for fresh air.

Chugs was by the door with another bouncer, watching the crowd as they left, making sure there was no trouble at the end of the night. Alex waved to him, and he lifted his head and smiled at her for just a moment. He didn't want to be distracted, though, and he went back to scanning the patrons. Alex held my hand as we walked slowly over to her car, and we stopped by the rear bumper. She stood up on tiptoe and kissed me, holding both my hands out to the side. After just that one soft kiss, she let go and unlocked her door. She reached over and unlocked the passenger side, and I sidestepped and carefully crawled in.

She drove back to campus with the same insouciance, her hand draped almost languidly over the steering wheel, but by then I was either used to her driving or merely numb due to sensory overload. Either way, we made it back to the dorm parking lot alive.

Before I could get out, she grabbed the front of my shirt and pulled me to her. She kissed me hard, letting her tongue snake out to tease me. Just as I was cooling down, she managed to heat me back up again, I thought to myself distractedly, but after that one searing kiss she let me go. I took a deep breath and looked into her laughing eyes.

"See ya around, Porter," she said.

I stumbled from her car and stood there as she drove off, completely mystified and dumbfounded. *What the hell had just happened?*

Exhaustion was setting in. I opted for the slow and creaky elevator, rather than facing the daunting challenge of four floors of stairs, and I stopped in the community bathroom before going to my room. As I was washing my face and hands, I looked myself sternly in the eye.

"You don't have time for this girl," I lectured my reflection. "Leave it alone. You don't need the complications." I stared into my own eyes. "You don't have time for this girl."

I couldn't tell if my reflection was convinced of my arguments. I just shook my head and headed for my room, and my lonely and comfortable bed.

Chapter 24 - Hard to Refuse

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The team was at a series of clinics being conducted in Athens, Georgia. Offensive units and defensive units were split and working on different fields. Specific skills were being drilled during the three-day event, both offensive and defensive, so the squad was divided along those lines. Midfielders were also split up between the two units, depending on their orientation. Pick's peculiar sense of amusement contributed to his decision to reverse us for this particular set of clinics. Frenchy, Tad, Rick, Brad, and the rest of our defensive players were pretending to be offense, showing up for all the offensive drills. Jesse, Bryan, Spencer, Jose Maria, and the other forwards and midfielders were attending the defensive drills in our place. I heard some grumbling from some of the other coaches and clinic participants, but Pick's reasoning was sound, and perfectly within the stipulations of the clinic's rules. The whole exercise broadened our experience team-wide and made each unit think about how they were impacting play across the entire field. I could see why Pick wanted to do it, and just because the other coaches either didn't understand it, or didn't consider it for their own teams, was of no concern to him.

During the Saturday afternoon session I was with my teammates on the field. I was playing up, pretending I was a forward. The clinic's instructors were working on corner kicks, and we were lined up against the Alabama defensive unit.

I stationed myself at the near point of the box in anticipation of the corner kick, and I was jostling with one of the Alabama players, a guy in a practice jersey with the name "Anders" arced across the back, for position. He knew our offensive unit was supposed to collapse down toward the net, and he was doing everything he could to get in my way. I didn't care; it was an exercise, not a game, and I thought the guy was taking it all way too seriously.

Brad was taking the kick, and just as he raised his arm to indicate his readiness to launch the corner kick, Anders hooked his arm in mine and spun me around just as I was taking my first steps around him toward the net. He used the momentum to whip me around him, and I stumbled and ended up on the ground.

"Nice move," I said sarcastically as I got up. "Sure to draw a card in a game situation."

"We ain't in a game situation," he said. The smug way he said it, along with his smirking attitude, grated on me.

I looked around quickly, feigning surprise at his statement. "Really?" I said. "I thought this was the SEC Championship game."

"No, Doofus, you already lost that one," he said. "You're not even supposed to be here. You're supposed to be working on the 'D' drills."

I laughed at him, and his face turned red. "Dude, our defensive unit doesn't need work on defense," I said. "We need work on this side of the ball."

I didn't think he understood the thought process behind such a difficult concept, but he blustered on.

"Yeah, well, if you assholes are so great, how come you got blown out in the NCAA?" Anders sneered.

"Because we had an off day," I said. "Say, tell me, sport, where was the Crimson Tide seeded in the Big Tournament?"

His face got even redder, nearly matching his jersey in color. I knew as well as he did that Alabama never even got a bid to play in the NCAA Tournament.

"Fuck you," he said angrily.

"Ah, an eloquent comeback," I retorted. By this time we were back to jostling for position again, as Brad was resetting the ball for another corner kick.

This time, as Brad took two steps to the ball, I eluded Anders' grasp easily. As I twisted away from him, he spun around, throwing his elbow up and out. He caught me right above my left eye, and I dropped like a stone, momentarily stunned by the hit. I could feel blood trickling down my face as I got up off the ground once again. I saw Rick, Frenchy, and Tad trotting over toward me, but I waved them off.

I turned to Anders and put my hands on my hips. I hadn't bothered to wipe the blood off my face. I wanted him to see it clearly, so he would understand the potential consequence better.

"Aside from the fact it was an illegal move, it was also a cheap shot," I said. I let a little of the anger I was feeling slip into my voice.

Anders, however, was unrepentant. "So what?" he countered.

"So what? That's your only statement?"

He laughed, glancing around. A few of his teammates were watching, and each was flanked by one of my own teammates. Not much of an audience to play for.

While Anders and I were having our confrontation, Luke Severin had taken Brad's place at the corner, and he was setting up. Everybody else reluctantly moved back into their positions. I knew I could escalate this situation by being as sneaky and underhanded as Anders had been, but that would only turn the whole thing into a bloody brawl. I needed to take this asshole down and keep him down.

I walked a couple of steps away from him, wanting to put just a little distance between us, shaking my head at his foolishness. He took my actions as cowardice, and he began to laugh derisively. He stepped closer to me and began hassling me again in advance of the corner kick.

I let him push me around a little. I wanted him over-confident, but I knew what he was planning. As Luke launched the ball Anders whirled, throwing his elbow toward the spot where he expected me to be, up about nose-high. But I had ducked under his arm, and I used my hands on his waist to turn him faster than he was expecting. He got tangled up with his own feet, and he began flailing as he lost his balance. Crouching down, I held him steady for just a moment, and then turned him a little more, keeping him off-balance. He began to bend at the waist, losing his center of gravity, and his arms were outstretched as he frantically tried to stay upright. I braced my chin against my chest and stood up, just as he was starting to drop. The top of my head met his chin, and I heard his teeth clack together. His head flew back, whiplashed by the collision, and he fell over backwards. He landed flat on his back, barely conscious.

I was standing over him as his eyes fluttered open. I smiled grimly at him, until I saw pain and recognition show on his face. I wanted him to remember this incident, so I knelt down next to him. By all appearances I was giving the impression I was helping him, belaying any potential suspicions from his teammates. Anders groaned and worked his jaw, trying to get it to stop throbbing.

"Shit, man, I think you knocked loose a couple of teeth," he said, his voice wavering just a little.

I put my hand on his chest. My fingers so close to his sore jaw got his attention.

"Here's the thing," I said quietly. I tapped my fingertips against his chin lightly, and Anders flinched each time he felt my fingers drum against him. By then others were beginning to move toward us, no doubt concerned that Anders had not yet gotten up. "I got your move now, sport. It only gets worse from here. I can, and I will, put you down on the ground each and every time you try to pull shit like that again. Understand?"

He nodded tersely. I could see even that small movement was painful for him, which gave me a small measure of satisfaction. I stood and held out my hand to help him up. He looked at it as if it was a viper, but then he reached up and let me pull him to his feet. His knees were a little unsteady as he walked slowly toward the sidelines, holding his jaw.

He's going to be eating soft food for a few days, I thought as I watched him go.

Frenchy trotted over to me as some of Anders' teammates huddled around him to help him off the field. "You gave him a-how do you say it?-a Sloaning, *n'est ce pas*, Porter?" Frenchy was smiling, perhaps remembering his own Sloaning.

I laughed. "Yeah, Frenchy, I guess I did."

"Good on you," he said with feeling, clapping me on the back. "I was watching, yes? He deserved his Sloaning."

I looked over at him, a little startled, but there was no deception to be seen in my teammate.

"Thanks," I said.

"No problem," said Frenchy, sounding quite happy. He trotted back off to his own assignment, leaving me just a little bewildered.

The next afternoon, in the bus on the way back to Florida, I was sporting a bandaged forehead and a black eye. Everybody seemed to be considering it an honorable badge, but I certainly didn't. It hurt like hell.

The oddest part of the whole incident was how Frenchy loved to tell the story of how I had acquired my shiner. His embellishments each time the story was retold got a little embarrassing, but my teammates certainly seemed to enjoy them, laughing and encouraging him into telling the tale over and over again.

Off the field and on campus, I tried to keep a low profile. I wanted to keep my nose clean, and I had had enough of complications in my life to last me a very long time.

Alex, of course, had other plans. She called me every few days, just being friendly, and we met occasionally for lunch or for drinks after dark.

There was considerable attraction between us, but I thought we both were more interested in being friends than exploring anything further. Alex just wasn't into anything serious, and I had no desire to go down that path, either. Even so, she had me thoroughly confused, a condition I was unfortunately very much used to.

Very often, when we got together, we were joined by one or another of her friends. Sometimes it was another guy, and sometimes it was one of her girlfriends. Her most frequent companion, however, was her friend Erin.

Erin turned out to be a lot more fun, and even sometimes downright silly, a different girl from the one Alex had introduced. They say first impressions are the ones that stick, but with Erin my opinion changed almost every time I saw her. She was self-assured and acting older at the bar the first time I met her, but she was a typical eighteen-year-old freshman the next time she came along with Alex. She was wearing an REM t-shirt with a smear of dirt across the stomach as she practically tumbled into the booth at Chaucer's, laughing at something Alex had said.

The next time, getting a Gator Tail at Joe's Deli, she was dressed all in black, with black nail polish. Only her ash-blonde hair, this time falling loosely to her shoulders, and her open and friendly smile kept her from achieving a complete Goth look for the day.

One time, while the three of us were at Chaucer's, Alex the pixie was sitting next to me. She had her legs crossed Indian-style, and she would occasionally rock up onto her knees in the booth, balancing herself casually.

"There's a Beach Boys tribute band playing at the Warehouse tomorrow night, Porter," she said. "Wanna go?"

"I shrugged. "Sure, I guess," I said.

"How about you, Hughes?"

Erin glanced at me, and then at Alex.

"I don't have a date," she said.

Alex laughed. "So what? We'll go as a threesome."

I thought I saw Erin blush just a little. *A modest girl*, I thought to myself. *Embarrassed about an oblique reference to a threesome. How cute.*

Damn it, Porter, get your head out of the gutter. It was an innocent remark, I chastised myself. *What a freak I could be sometimes.*

"Okay," said Erin. "It sounds like fun."

I risked my life by letting Alex drive again. This time I crawled into the back seat, tightened up my seat belt, and wedged myself into a corner to pray. Erin looked pretty relaxed in the passenger seat, chatting with Alex as we sped along.

"Do you think that's a good idea, distracting her while she's driving?" I managed to say from clenched teeth.

Erin glanced back at me in surprise. "What do you mean?" she asked, seemingly genuinely perplexed.

I closed my eyes and kept my mouth shut all the rest of the way to the Warehouse. *They're both nuts.*

Once again we made it alive. I was very happy to be able to crawl out of the back of Alex's car, still in one piece. It wasn't as crowded outside the club as it had been the previous time Alex and I were here, but Chugs was on duty as usual at the front door.

"Hiya, Chugs honey," said Alex as we walked up to him.

"Alex. How ya doin'?"

"Lookin' forward to fun, fun, fun until Daddy takes the T-Bird away," she replied.

Chugs chuckled, a deep rumbling sound.

"How you, Sean?" he asked.

I was a little surprised he remembered my name. "I'm good," I said.

"Who's your friend?" Chugs asked, looking Erin over. "You got an ID, sweetheart?"

Alex sidled up to Chugs. He bent down. She whispered in his ear for a few moments, and then he straightened up.

"Goddamnit, Alex," he began. She pulled him back down and whispered to him urgently again.

Finally he sighed. "You're gonna get me fired someday, Alexandra Claudine Wallace." He gestured roughly toward the door. "You hear my whistle, and you get her cute little ass out the bathroom window. You hear me?"

Alex gave him her sweetest smile. "You're the best, Darrell," she said.

He just grunted sourly, but I thought he was holding back a pleased little smile.

Inside, the place was as dark and noisy as I remembered. We found an empty booth and claimed it. The girls stayed in the booth while I fought my way up to the bar to buy our first pitcher of beer. I came back with a frosty pitcher and three plastic cups. I carefully poured out the beer, and sat down next to Alex. She casually lifted her arm and began to idly play with the hair on the back of my head as we talked.

The house band was playing. They called themselves Plaid Armor, and what they lacked in musical ability was more than made up by their volume. Erin was looking a little uncomfortable, sitting across from Alex and me, probably feeling like a third wheel.

Alex pushed at my shoulder. "Go dance with Hughes," she instructed.

It was not a suggestion, so I slid out of the booth and held my hand out to Erin.

"Go on," said Alex when she saw Erin's hesitation. "He's a good dancer."

"Are you sure?" asked Erin, looking at Alex.

Alex laughed. "Nope. Actually, he's kind of a goof. But he's fun to dance with." She wagged her hand at us. "Go. You'll have a good time."

Erin shrugged, and then took my proffered hand and slid out of the booth. We held hands as we walked toward the crowd on the dance floor.

"She can be... hard to refuse sometimes," said Erin with a smile.

"Oh, I'm finding that out," I told her. I let go of her hand, and we began dancing to the music.

I took the opportunity to watch Erin as we danced. It was a pleasure. She was a very attractive girl, slender but certainly not thin. She was filled out in all the right places. She was wearing a scoop-necked yellow shirt that had *No Angel* embroidered in shiny gold thread on it. Her shorts were tight and her legs were long, shapely, and deeply tanned. Her leg muscles flexed as she danced, showing their definition as she moved. She had her ash-blonde hair gathered loosely into a ponytail, and strands came loose as we danced and undulated around her face. I found myself admiring her body as we moved around, and I thought she was perfectly aware of my admiration. She didn't seem at all uncomfortable with me watching her so openly.

After about four songs, Alex came out and cut in. Erin laughed and acquiesced as Alex took her place. She headed back toward our booth, and I couldn't help glancing appreciatively at her backside as she walked away.

"She's cute, isn't she?" I was startled to find Alex beside me, also watching Erin.

What the hell? An odd thought flashed across my mind, but Alex didn't give me any time to ponder. She spun me around and began her seductive dancing.

We stayed out on the dance floor for a few songs, until I begged to stop. Keeping two girls satisfied on the dance floor was going to exhaust me. I was hugely thirsty already. We walked back to our booth, holding hands.

The pitcher only had a little left in it, so I poured it out for the girls and took the empty back for a refill. By the time I got back, I saw Alex and Erin heading for the dance floor. Holding hands.

What the hell, I said to myself as I poured myself a nice, cold beer. *What was I missing here?*

After a little while, the band stopped, and the girls came back to the booth. They were both breathing deeply, and a sheen of perspiration coated both their faces. Alex guided Erin toward my side, and then she slipped into the opposite seat.

"Have a good time?" I asked.

They were smiling as they nodded. Alex began waving her hand at her face, trying to create a breeze.

"It's hot in here," agreed Erin.

"Let's go outside until the other band starts up," suggested Alex. There were a lot of people heading for the exits, intent on cooling off, so we all got up and joined them. Alex held one hand, and I felt Erin grasp my other hand as we walked out.

What the hell?

The air outside was remarkably cooler than inside. It was a cooker in the Warehouse, and all those sweating, dancing bodies heated up quickly. We inhaled the cooler air deeply, stepping away from the crowds and the cigarette smoke.

"It's a good thing you're in shape, Porter," noted Alex. "You're going to be working hard keeping two girls happy and satisfied in there."

"It's an awesome responsibility, but I'll do what I can," I said.

Erin's eyes were twinkling with mischief. "Keeping one girl happy is tough. Keeping two satisfied is nearly impossible. We'll see if you can rise to the occasion," she said.

Modest? Did I once describe this girl as modest? Her double-entendre was intentional, and I could feel the blood rushing through my body as my dirty little mind began working overtime.

We stood around, making small talk, but all the time my thoughts were circling around the triple enigmas of Erin, Alex, and Erin and Alex combined. It was too much for my feeble, masculine brain. I tried to leave it all alone and just enjoy the fact I was spending the evening in the company of two very attractive college girls.

Life was good.

Our cups were empty, so I gathered all three of them and worked my way back to the door. I squeezed back into the hot warehouse and refilled the three cups from our pitcher, and I carefully made my way back through the maze, holding the three cups together in my two hands as I shuffled sideways through the people. I handed each of the girls their cup, and they thanked me.

A couple of times single guys would sidle up and try to wedge in on our conversation. Both girls were diplomatic, but Alex was particularly adept at turning them away with a smile. I began to stand up a little straighter. It was cool being between these two ladies, being the one they wanted to be with. They touched my hands, or wrapped their arms around my waist for a few moments, and occasionally reached up and touched my cheek. I saw them both furtively

glancing at the scar on my arm, but they didn't ask about it, and I found myself slipping that arm around one or the other of them. To hide it, or to feel them close to me, I wasn't sure which: either excuse was good enough for me, and neither Alex nor Erin seemed to mind at all. In fact, both of them moved a little closer to me, on each side, even when we weren't holding on to each other. I was beginning to really like the attention. A lot.

After about thirty minutes outside, we could hear the next band tuning. People started moving toward the door, and I took both girls by the hand and escorted them. The jangling guitars began, and the band started doing a very good rendition of *Surfin' USA*. We dropped our cups at our booth, and the three of us made our way up as close as we could. The band was putting on a show and we didn't want to miss it.

By the time the first set ended we were all drenched in sweat. Even Alex's hair was damp. The girls joined the crowd heading outside, and I stopped and refilled our pitcher. The band was going to take at least a half hour break, I was sure, and I didn't want to have to go back in every time my cup was empty. I got my pitcher, picked up my change, and stepped outside into the blessedly cool evening air.

Alex and Erin were off to the side, leaning against the brick wall of the warehouse. A couple of guys were standing by them, but the girls were doing a good job of ignoring them. I walked up to them and refilled their cups for them, and they both showed their appreciation by giving me a kiss on the cheek. It was enough to make the two hapless victims slink away when they saw me collecting kisses from both the girls, and it made me stand up straighter. *Prideful? No, not me.*

"So," I said, "you two never told me how you met."

Alex glanced at Erin. "Mutual friends," she said. "They thought we'd get along."

Erin had an enigmatic smile. "And we do," she said.

"So, do you, like, have a boyfriend at home or something?" I asked.

"No," said Erin. "I dated a guy my senior year, but we broke up before we left for college." She took a sip of her beer, looking at me over the rim of the plastic cup. "What about you, Sean? Is there somebody waiting for you at home?"

My good mood began to evaporate. "Not anymore," I said. I looked down at the ground. "There used to be," I said quietly.

"Ah, I understand," said Erin. "I'm sorry, Sean. Long-distance relationships can be hard to maintain."

"Yeah, well, there was an age difference, too," I said. It was a bluff, but a relatively harmless one. Erin and Alex didn't need to know that, even though she was two years younger than me, Kayla was far more mature than I was about most things.

"That makes it even harder," said Erin sympathetically. She stepped closer to me and put her arm around my waist. I looked up from staring at the ground, but it was difficult for me to look her in the eye. She didn't care about that, though. She just lifted up her head and gave me a soft kiss on my cheek. "Don't worry about it, Sean. Time heals things like this. Give it a chance."

"Oh, I am," I said. "It's not like I have much choice, anyway."

We heard the band begin its warm-up, and so we gathered up our stuff and headed back inside. Alex led the way, pulling on my hand, but Erin stayed behind me, her hand touching my shoulder the whole time.

"Enough melancholy!" shouted Alex as we put our stuff back on our table. "Let's dance!"

Once again the three of us wove our way through the crowd to get as close to the stage as we could, and we let the music wash away our troubles as we danced and shared the good vibrations.

Even during the slow songs, *In My Room* and *Surfer Girl* and the others, we tended to dance together, Erin and Alex and me our arms intertwined around one another. At one point, Alex lifted up and took my face in her hands and pulled me down to her level. She gave me a hot and moist kiss, her eyes closed as she concentrated. She broke the kiss after several minutes, let me go, and threw her head back and laughed, sheer joy personified.

Not to be outdone, a few minutes later Erin did the same thing. She didn't have to pull me down as far, so our kiss was more comfortable for me, though that was not much of a concern. When two beautiful girls decide they want to kiss you, comfort be damned. Her kiss was just as sensuous as Alex's had been, and maybe even a little hotter.

Throughout the second set of music, the contest went on. First Alex would kiss me, and then Erin would match it. Each set of kisses got a little hotter, a little wetter, and a little longer, until, finally, we were giving each other full, open-mouthed tongue kisses, right there in front of the band, as we swayed in each

other's arms. By the end of the set, the three of us were one six-armed and six-legged being, and I was having the time of my life trading kisses back and forth, swiveling my head from Erin to Alex and back again. Finally, either the music or the mood overwhelmed us, and Erin and Alex turned to each other and gave each other an equally hot, open-mouthed tongue kiss.

Damn, that's hot, I thought to myself as I watched the two girls kiss. I should have waited a moment, because a few minutes later it got even hotter when both Erin and Alex turned to me simultaneously. They both were going for another French kiss, but this time with me, and I was determined to play my part. We ended up in a three-way, open-mouthed kiss, with three tongues dancing and caressing in the middle.

Gawd DAMN. What the hell just happened? We stopped kissing when the music stopped, all three of us breathless. We looked at each other, wondering what we would see in each other's eyes. All I saw was a look of lust staring back at me from a brown pair of eyes and a blue pair of eyes, and I knew the girls were seeing the same look from me.

Alex finally broke the spell, if only temporarily. "Let's get the hell out of here, okay?"

Erin and I both agreed, and we broke land speed records getting out to Alex's car. We squeezed three in the front, with me in the middle. At each stop sign and red light, Alex turned to me and kissed me hard. While she was driving, Erin held my attention by kissing me and holding me. It was the most interesting car ride I had ever experienced, and it ended very peculiarly. Alex wheeled into the parking lot of my dorm and stopped. She grabbed my head and gave me one last hard kiss, and then pushed me away and into Erin's arms. She, too, kissed me hard, and then she slipped out to let me out of the car. I stood there and watched as Alex and Erin drove away, leaving me hot, horny as hell, and asking myself a million questions, with one in particular always floating to the top:

What the hell happened tonight?