

Ripples in Time

By Douglas Fox © 2013

Time was like a great pond. Every decision makes ripples. These ripples interact with ripples from other decisions, our own and decisions by others. The ripples cross and crisscross each other, directing our lives down various paths. What would have happened if Al Davis, against all contrary advice, drafted wide receiver Kyle Martin to play for the Oakland Raiders? This story picks up near the end of "Lost and Found" and follows an alternate timeline through Kyle's life. I recommend you read "Lost and Found" before tackling "Ripples in Time."

Chapter 1

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Thursday, April 25, 2013 – Martin residence in Paradise, Pa.

The TV set at my house was set to the opening of the first round of the NFL Draft. I'm Kyle Martin, a college football standout wide receiver at Penn State and winner of the 2012 Campbell Scholar/Athlete, Biletnikoff and Maxwell Awards. Forty or fifty friends and family had gathered to watch my prospects. Three and a half months of preparation culminated this night. Which team would choose me?

Eight o'clock finally came and things got started. The NFL wasted too much time with introductions to the first round of the draft. I wanted to shout, 'Just put the Redskins on the clock already. Let's get going!'

About 8:15 Commissioner Goodell announced, "The Redskins are on the clock." Less than sixty seconds later he stepped up to the podium again and announced, "The Washington Redskins, with the first pick in the 2013 NFL draft, chose University of Michigan defensive tackle, William Johnson."

I cheered as my friend Big William became a very rich man. Nobody deserved the first pick more than him. The crawler at the bottom of the screen showed the time remaining for the Detroit Lions to make their choice as the anchors praised William and talked about the many awards he had won.

Most of the Lions' fifteen minutes were gone when Commissioner Goodell came out to announce, "With the second pick of the draft, the Detroit Lions chose the University of Southern California's offensive tackle, K. J. Kirkpatrick." That was an excellent pick. The Lions need protection for Matthew Stafford and K. J. is excellent at pass blocking.

The Kansas City Chiefs didn't use all their time. They chose Owen Wright, the big offensive tackle from Wisconsin. The anchors speculated that the Chiefs would probably use him at guard instead.

My nephews, Noah and Connor, and my three-year-old brother, Hunter, were still up, even though it was past their bed time. Noah and Connor were juiced from all the people. Hunter was fading.

"I'm tired, Kyle," my little brother said. "Can you hold me?"

"Sure, big guy," I agreed. I helped him onto my lap. Hunter leaned back against my body and was asleep in seconds.

The Seahawks wasted no time choosing. Roger Goodell came to the podium with ten minutes left on the clock for the Seahawks. "With the fourth pick of the 2013 draft, the Seattle Seahawks choose University of Texas quarterback, Todd Landry." Everyone in the world expected that pick.

The ticker at the bottom of the TV showed the Raiders on the clock. My fiancée, Penny Edwards, slid in close to me and held my hand. Would Al Davis pull a bone-headed stunt and draft me? The anchors filled the time with speculations about who the Raiders would draft. Mike Mayock categorically stated that they would draft me. He reminded all the viewers how much Al Davis loves fast wide receivers before reminding everyone that I posted the best time in a decade at the Combine.

I wanted to scream, 'Don't give Davis any ideas, damn it!' I tensed and waited to see if all my warnings to their team would be heeded. Roger Goodell came to the podium when less than thirty seconds remained.

"With the fifth pick of the 2013 draft, the Oakland Raiders choose..." Penny tightened her grip on my hand. I tensed. "...Pennsylvania State University's wide receiver, Kyle D. Martin."

"NOOOO!" I screamed. Everyone stared at me. "YOU IDIOT! I'LL NEVER..." My phone rang mid-rant. I pulled my phone out and stared at the area code. It was a 510 area code, the same one I used when I called Aaron Morano in San Francisco. I punched the button and growled, "Hello?"

"Welcome to the Raiders, Kyle," Al Davis said pleasantly. I recognized his voice immediately. "I know you had certain misgivings, but when you give us a look..."

"MISGIVINGS?" I shouted into the phone. "I told you and your coaches explicitly NOT to draft me. I will never, EVER play for your joke of a team. Not in a million years for all the money in the world. NEVER!"

"JOKE? Joke of a team..." Al sputtered. "How dare you... you... God damned..." I punched the button on my phone to end the call. My phone rang again almost immediately. It was the same 510 area code and number. I ignored the call.

"What now?" Dad asked. "You need to calm down and think things through logically." I took a deep breath.

"You're right, Dad," I agreed. "I guess I need to face the press."

"Take a couple of minutes and get yourself centered," Dad suggested. "I'll go outside and tell them you will be out shortly."

"Thanks, Dad," I replied. My phone rang again. I looked at the same damned 510 number. The Raiders' obstinacy wasn't helping me calm down. Penny came over and gave me a hug. We clung together. I drew strength from my honey. My phone rang again about a minute later.

"God damn it!" I growled. "I wish they would leave me the hell alone!" I managed to spot the name on my phone before I hit the "Ignore" button. "Max, what's up?"

"Are you fully prepared to follow Plan B?"

"I'm sure as hell not playing for that idiot, Davis," I responded.

"Take a deep breath, Kyle," Max commanded. I did. "It is not as grim as it looks right now. I fielded half a dozen calls from teams that are interested in trading the Raiders for your services. They want to confirm if you are willing to play football for them."

"Oh? Who?"

"The Broncos, the Ravens, the Rams, the Cardinals, the Vikings and the Jets all have indicated an interest in your services," Max replied. "They are seeking assurances that you would be willing to play for them if they are able to trade with the Raiders for your services."

"Any of those teams are fine, Max," I answered. "I'd love it for someone... anyone to get me away from Al Davis."

"I will pass the word on to the other teams," Max said. "Be prepared for your real Plan B."

"Teaching high school?" I answered. "I have two more days of student teaching then I get my degree and teaching certificate. I'm as prepared as any new graduate can be." I chuckled. "You know I'll be staying in the Philly area now so I can be close to my sweetie." Penny gave me a kiss on the cheek.

"Give Penny my best," Max said.

"Bye, Max," I said. Penny echoed my good-bye.

"I guess it's time for me to face the press," I announced.

"Are you calm?" Penny asked.

"I can do this," I responded. I saw Andy standing nearby holding a box of NFL team hats. A Raiders hat was on top of the pile. He shrugged his shoulders to me.

"Dad wanted me to make sure you had a team hat for the team that drafted you," Andy explained. "Do you want this one?" He offered me the Raiders hat.

"Burn the damned thing," I said. "Give me the Eagles one." I got funny looks from most of the people in the room. "It's OK. I know what I'm doing." I pasted a smile on my face and headed for the press on the front porch. I stepped out into the blinding lights to face the cameras. I managed not to laugh as virtually everyone did a double-take at my Eagles hat.

"Kyle, what is your reaction to the Raiders drafting you?" one reporter asked. "Why the Eagles hat?" another added.

"Shock. Dismay," I replied to the first question. "I am disappointed that the Raiders chose to ignore what my agent and I told them a couple months ago – that I would not be willing to play for the Raiders. I am wearing an Eagles cap tonight because it looks like I will be teaching history at some high school around the Philadelphia area next fall. I can continue to cheer for my favorite team from boyhood for another 364 days."

"Why Philadelphia and why teaching?" one of reporters shouted over half a dozen other questions.

"My fiancée and soon-to-be wife is studying to be a veterinarian at the University of Pennsylvania," I explained. "I want to stay in this area so we can begin our lives together. As for teaching... well that is what my college degree is in."

"Any circumstances that you would play for the Raiders?"

"None," I stated firmly.

"What are your specific objections to playing for Al Davis?"

"Their quarterback situation is unsettled," I began. "I fully respect Elijah Carter but I doubt he will be 100% ready to play next September. They desperately need help on the offensive line, which is why Elijah got hurt in the first place. They picked up Pete Cochran to fill in until Elijah is back, but Pete's going to face protection problems too. My skills won't help turn the Raiders into a winner. I don't want to be separated from my wife and subject my body to the pounding of a football season if I can't help the team win. It's that simple."

"You and your agent denied that you had a list of teams that you wouldn't play for. Now you tell us that wasn't true. You refuse to play for the Raiders. Who else is on your list?"

"My agent and I chose to keep the fact that I would not play for the Raiders confidential between me and them," I explained. "We didn't want to single them out and embarrass them. They chose to ignore our request and draft me anyway. Any embarrassment they feel for wasting a draft pick on me is theirs and theirs alone. I have no list of teams I won't play for. As a matter of fact, my agent has already fielded half a dozen calls from teams that would like to trade with the Raiders to obtain my rights. They want to know if I will play for them. I told my agent yes to EVERY team on that list." My phone had been vibrating throughout my press conference but I had been ignoring it.

"Kyle, you need to take a call right now," Dad said as he stuck his head out the front door. "They have six more minutes to do a deal."

"It's the Rams," half a dozen different reporters gasped simultaneously.

"Excuse me," I announced. "I'll be back in a few minutes." I stepped back into the house and pulled my phone out. The current call from was area code 410 – the Ravens. "Hello, Kyle Martin."

"Thank God, I got you," the man stated. "This is Ozzie Newsome. I want to hear it from your own mouth. If I manage to swing a trade with the Raiders will you come play for my team?"

"Absolutely, Mr. Newsome," I agreed quickly. "You're close to Philly and my fiancée. I would LOVE to come play for your team."

"Stand by, Kyle," Ozzie said. "I am going to try to make a blockbuster trade to get you."

"I'll do that," I agreed. I clicked "End" to finish the call, turned to the living room full of people and announced, "The Ravens are trying to trade for me." Everyone in the room let out a cheer. Andy handed me a purple Ravens cap. "Not yet, let's let Ozzie Newsome finish the trade first."

I poked my head outside momentarily. "Can you guys stand by for a bit? Things are happening right now that you probably will want to wait for." Half a dozen reporters shouted out questions as I pulled my head inside again and shut the front door.

"What did I miss in the draft?" I asked.

"The Titans took Danny Clay with the sixth pick," Andy replied. "The Rams have another minute on the clock."

Penny slipped in beside me again and put her arm around my waist. I slipped mine around hers. Everyone stared at the TV as the seconds wound down on the Rams. Commissioner Goodell stepped to the podium and announced, "The St. Louis Rams, with the seventh pick of the 2013 draft, select the University of Pittsburgh's offensive tackle, Courtney Devine."

My phone was strangely quiet as my family, friends and fiancée sat and watched the draft, hoping someone could offer enough to free me from the Raider's grasp. The Browns took Eldon Burkholder. The Jaguars took DeMarcus Van Dyke. Green Bay swapped their first pick for Buffalo's 1st and 3rd. Buffalo chose Dylan Harris to be their next QB.

A crawler appeared at the bottom of the screen the same time the Bengals picked Marshon Wilkins with the 11th pick of the draft. The crawler announced, "Al Davis has been rushed to a hospital in Oakland. He is reported to have suffered a heart attack."

"I hope nobody blames you for causing his heart attack," Andy commented.

"Andrew, that's a terrible thing to say," Mom insisted. Andy apologized immediately. It didn't help my frame of mind. Had I indirectly caused it? Was there any way for me to know?

Mike Mayock announced that the Denver Broncos traded their first round pick to Baltimore for Baltimore's 1st and 2nd picks. Everyone perked up and watched the TV while we waited to hear if Ozzie Newsome could arrange the trade he had hinted at. Baltimore took nearly the entire fifteen minutes to make their pick. The clock was down to 20 seconds when Commissioner Goodell walked up to the podium on stage.

"The Baltimore Ravens, with the twelfth pick of the 2013 draft, select University of Florida wide receiver, Eric Peters."

"Anybody know of any high school history teacher job openings around Philly?" I called out. That drew polite laughs from my crowd of friends and family. Andy and Mom took Hunter, Noah and Connor upstairs to bed. Hunter was dead to the world. The twins were fading fast. The rest of us watched as the draft proceeded.

13. Dallas Cowboys picked Da'Rel Etherridge, OT

14. Miami – Bradford Garrett, TE

15. Green Bay Packers - Ross McCarthy, OL with the pick they swapped with Buffalo

16. Tampa Bay Buccaneers - Tre Benjamin, RB

17. Carolina Panthers - DeMarcus Hankerson, OL

18. Houston Texans - Eric Young, CB

19. New York Giants - Malo Kaapana, RB

I realized by then it was way past time to finish talking with the press. I put the Eagles hat on again and stepped outside. The cameramen clicked the TV lights on. I did my best to answer all their questions patiently. I reiterated my position that I would not play for the Raiders under any circumstances.

"Kyle, are you certain you will give up \$22 million dollars over four years to teach a bunch of high school kids?" the Fox Sports reporter asked.

"I have three goals in my life," I explained. "Family is first. I want to teach youth, because I think I am good at it and I want to coach football. Do you see striking it rich on my list?"

"No," the reporter conceded.

"Kyle... could you hold on a second?" the ESPN reporter asked. He took a small sheet of paper and read it quickly. "Can I get your reaction to this breaking news?"

"What is it?"

"My producer just received word from the network that Al Davis passed away half an hour ago," the reporter announced. "Does this change your intentions regarding the Raiders?"

"Al Davis is dead," I repeated as I bowed my head. I looked up again after about twenty seconds of silence. "This is a sad day for the Raiders and for the NFL. Mr. Davis and I may have disagreed on my utility to his team when we talked earlier tonight but I respected the man and everything he has done for football. My high school and college coaches' philosophies... even my own football philosophy are founded on the principles of Al Davis' vertical passing game. My interview with Mr. Davis before the Senior Bowl was probably one of the most interesting I have had in the past few months. Talking X's and O's with Mr. Davis was fascinating."

"Will this change your decision about playing for the Raiders?" half a dozen reporters shouted at the same time.

"Neither Mr. Davis nor I can block an onrushing defensive lineman," I replied. "I can't quarterback for the Raiders. My skill set and the Raiders' player needs have not changed with Mr. Davis' death. I wish the Raiders the best but I will not play for them... this season or in the future."

"Doesn't your decision to spurn the Raiders simply confirm earlier reports you're difficult to deal with?" Andrew Morgan from ESPN asked. "Some have called you a prima donna." Andrew had always been decent to me during other interviews. Why the hell was he spouting Brown's nonsense?

"Speak with my teammates and coaches," I countered. "I know every one of them will say the same thing. My focus on a team is making the team... THE WHOLE TEAM successful. My speed and pass-catching ability aren't going to help the Raiders become a winning team. The \$20 or \$25 million they would need to pay me as a first-round number five pick would be wasted. If I were a prima donna interested only in myself, I would grab that money instantly. I could manage to go through the motions for two or three years while that pile of money grows. They'll eventually get tired of me not producing and cut me. I would be a rich man and free of the Raiders too, but that's not who I am. I want to make whichever team I am on better and help turn them into a winner."

"Sounds like a story the Raiders have heard before," one of the reporters remarked.

"Coach, what message would you like to pass on to the Raiders organization, if any?" Jeff Morgan from the Philadelphia Inquirer asked. I'd known Jeff for almost four years. We had been on a first name (or nickname) basis for the past year.

"Trade me," I answered. "Please, trade me. Get something of value for the first-round pick you have wasted. See if you can get a good offensive lineman. Elijah and Pete will thank you for that." I looked over the crowd of reporters. A dozen had their hands up for more questions. I was exhausted and burnt out from dealing with all of this. "Let's take a minute to say a prayer for Al Davis' family in this, their time of trouble." I bowed my head while the reporters, cameramen and crews stood nervously. "Thank you, that is all I have for you tonight."

I turned and walked back into the house, ignoring the questions they shouted out to me. "Well, I'm glad that's done."

"Maybe they'll go away now so our guests can get out the door," Dad remarked.

"I want to thank everyone for coming tonight," I announced to the gathering in the living room. "I know this isn't what you anticipated when you came tonight but I do appreciate your support."

Penny and I individually spoke with and thanked the guests as they departed. John Waters, my mentor teacher, and his wife Emily were one of the last couples to leave.

"Thanks for inviting us, Kyle," John said. "It certainly was interesting."

"I'm glad the two of you were able to come," I replied. "I'll see you in class tomorrow morning."

"Between you being drafted by the Raiders and then you refusing to play for them, it will be an interesting day, Kyle," John said. "Be prepared for chaos."

"It won't be that bad," I answered. "Our kids are well behaved."

"This is the biggest thing to happen to someone at our school in decades," John answered. "Be prepared."

"It will be fine, John," I insisted. "I'll see you in the morning."

The last of the guests were clearing out when the next draftee of significance to me was announced. The New York Jets took Trevor Conwell. I knew my buddy was delighted. He loved the creative ways Rex Ryan had for applying pressure to quarterbacks. He was going to be in heaven playing for the Jets. I called him before Penny and I went downstairs to bed.

We were getting ready for bed when my cell phone rang. It was that 410 area code again.

"Hello, Kyle Martin," I announced when I accepted the call.

"Kyle, this is Ozzie Newsome." My heart leapt with hope.

"Yes, Mr. Newsome," I replied.

"We tried our damndest to pry you from the Raiders," Ozzie said. "All of this was before Al's heart attack. He wouldn't budge. No one else is ready to do anything now that Al is gone."

"I figured that when you engineered the trade with the Broncos," I replied. "You have an excellent receiver with Eric Peters. Eric is a friend of mine. He will do well for your team."

"We think so too," Ozzie said. "I'm sorry we couldn't get you in our organization. I know it would have been a long and mutually profitable relationship. Good luck wherever you end up. Maybe we can pick you up a year from now, if you make yourself available in the 2014 draft."

"I hope it happens," I answered. I snapped the phone off and set it on the dresser. It rang before I got a foot away. I checked the phone. It was a call from the 510 area code. I hit the Ignore button. Five seconds later it rang again. It was the same damned 510 phone number. I hit Ignore and climbed in bed. The phone rang again.

"I'm turning the God damned thing off!" I growled as I climbed out of bed. Fortunately, I looked at the phone before shutting it down. It was Ed Fritz.

"What's up, Ed?" I snapped. I took a deep breath. My bad night wasn't Ed's fault.

"Sorry about how your night went," Ed responded. "Who would have thought Al Davis was idiot enough to take you in the draft."

"I know," I agreed. "Look at the good side. We'll be entering the draft together, just like we did when we started college."

"Could be," Ed said. "Can I put you on speaker? I have a friend who wants to talk with you."

"Is it Eric?" I asked. "Sure, put him on. He's going to love working with the Ravens."

"I'll pass that on to Eric," Ed said. "It isn't Eric. He's at his parents' place tonight. Listen to what Elijah has to say. Do it for your best friend."

"Elijah?" I responded. "You're asking a lot."

"Listening can't hurt you," Ed said. "Let me put Elijah on."

"Hello, Kyle?" Elijah said.

"Hi, Elijah," I responded.

"Ed's told me so many good things about you," Elijah said. "It almost feels like I know you already." I chuckled.

"I know that feeling," I agreed. "Ed has a lot of good things to say about you, too. How is your knee doing?"

"I'm working through it," Elijah allowed. "I'm up to 75 degrees on range of motion."

"That's progress," I replied. "Keep working at it. You'll get there in time."

"I was really excited when the team drafted you tonight," Elijah said. "Ed has told me so many good things about working with you. I think you and I could do some amazing things together on a football field. You really should come out here to Oakland and see things. The Raiders aren't nearly as bad as you might think."

"Not a ringing endorsement of your team," I countered. "Not as bad as you think. How's your new best friend Pete [Cochran] working out?"

"Pete?" Elijah allowed. He paused a few seconds. "He's got a strong arm. He's confident. He knows football."

"He's a dick," I added. "Anybody try to run him over in the parking lot?"

"No, they haven't," Elijah allowed. "At least, not yet."

"There's a reason Ed became a Gator and I became a Nittany Lion," I explained. "Michigan recruited both of us. The reason we rejected the school is named Cochran."

"I understand," Elijah agreed.

"Tell me you wouldn't prefer a couple of high-draft-pick offensive linemen over me," I challenged. Elijah didn't answer. "I'll assume silence means you agree with me. I wish things were different. Ed's told me so many good things about you. I'd love to play with you... anywhere but in Oakland."

"I disagree but I understand," Elijah said. "Good luck, however things turn out."

"Work hard on rehab," I responded. "You'll be back better than ever by the end of the year if you put in the sweat and tears."

"Ed reminds me of how your knee turned out every time we've talked since last December," Elijah said. "I'm going to work at it and come back strong."

"You do that, Elijah," I said. "Take care." I turned the phone off when I ended the call. Penny and I didn't need more distractions.

Penny and I did make love before falling asleep. It wasn't the wild passionate sex we might have had if the draft had worked out the way we both hoped. It was slow and comforting. I needed the support of the woman I loved. I lay in bed after we finished thinking about the latest turn my life had taken. Making 20 or 25 million dollars would be nice, but spending full time living with the love of my life was probably better for me than the crazy life of a football star.

I remembered the story about the big stones that Max had told us back when we chose him for my agent. Penny was the biggest stone in my life. Professional accomplishment was a pretty big one too. I wanted to teach and coach football. Nothing that happened tonight would displace my big stones. Maybe this was just how God intended my life to unfold. Love of a good woman and learning to practice your chosen profession. Those were pretty good things.

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My first-period class the morning after the first round draft was pure chaos. John Waters sat in the back, smiling and observing while I tried to get the kids to focus on our review of the Swiss republican system of government. Instead of a discussion about the cantons and how they were governed I got questions about Oakland, the Raiders and what my future held.

"People! Stop!" I finally said in exasperation. "I know you're interested in my draft status. I will give you five minutes to get ALL your football questions asked. After that, it is back to Switzerland and the Alps. Is that a deal?" I got head nods from most of the class. I held my arm out and stared at my watch. "Your time starts NOW!"

The kids peppered me with questions about the Raiders, how much money I could have been making and how I could give that up. I let them ask questions right up until my watch hit the five-minute mark.

"OK, that's it!" I insisted. "No more football until 8:03." Derek, a sweet kid and sports fanatic, was still waving his hand for my attention. I gave him the cold stare I learned from Mom. "Is this question about Switzerland?" I stared hard. Derek wilted and put his hand down. "Ask me at 8:03, Derek."

"OK, Mr. Martin," Derek agreed. "Sorry." I proceeded to give my lecture on the Swiss system of government. The kids managed to behave through the rest of the class. Derek and the other sports fanatics hit me with more questions at the end of the period. I had to shoo them off to home room.

Home room was similarly chaotic, but shorter. I allowed no questions at all. I took roll and had the kids do the pledge and listen to the morning announcements, as usual. I had to shoo them out the door again when the next bell rang.

John came forward as the kids were leaving. I held my hands up and said, "You don't need to say it. You told me so. I don't know why I ever doubted you."

"You handled that about as well as is possible," John said. "The kids are not used to their teacher suddenly getting and then giving up twenty-some million dollars. That is bound to be disruptive."

"I plan to handle the rest of the classes the same way I did this one," I replied. "I will take roll and then give them five minutes for football questions. After that it is strictly studying until the bell."

"That's a plan, Kyle," John agreed.

The strategy allowed me to keep a modicum of control over my classroom during the day. I had one student in third period that just would not take the hint. After four times of asking inappropriate questions after football time, I was out of patience. When his hand went up again I gave him a hard stare.

"Bill, if the words football, Oakland or Raiders appear anywhere in your next question, you will be visiting Mr. Jarvis," I declared. He put his hand down and kept quiet for the last fifteen minutes of AP European History.

My phone vibrated in my pocket while I was delivering the lecture third period. I checked who called after the period was over. It was Coach Burton. I gave my coach a call.

"Hello, Kyle," Coach Burton began when he answered. "I'm sorry about how things went for you last night. Do you need Plan B? I haven't hired an offensive grad assistant yet. The job is yours if you want it."

"That's tempting, Coach," I responded. "I'd jump at the chance if it weren't for Penny. You do remember I'm getting married on July 6th? I know Ann-Marie put it on your calendar."

"I haven't forgotten," Coach replied.

"I'm afraid working for you is my Plan C," I explained. "I want to give myself a chance to find work down here in Philly first before I head back to State College."

"I completely understand," Coach Burton said. "A position here will be open for you whenever you need it. Look around and see what you can find. I'll be happy to give you a reference if you end up at a school looking for a football coach and a teacher. I'll help you any way I can."

"I appreciate that, Coach," I said. "You've been so good to me over the past four years."

"Good luck with the job search," Coach said before finishing the call.

"Job offer?" John asked after I hung up.

"Coach Burton offered me a position on staff with him."

"That's not a bad start for a soon-to-be college grad," John said. "I'll keep my ear open to see if we can find you a spot somewhere out here in the suburbs. Some district has to have an opening for a good social studies teacher." He smiled. "As soon as you get hired to teach, they'll be after you for the football staff too. Count on it."

"I hope you're right," I agreed. John reviewed the merits of the various school districts in the area over the next ten minutes. My phone rang. I stared at the 215 area code. I didn't recognize the phone number.

"Hello, Kyle Martin."

"Hello, Kyle. It's Coach Golden over at Temple," Coach Golden said in greeting.

"Are you revoking my ID to work out with you already?" I teased. I had gotten to like Coach Golden over the few months I used his facilities.

"No... certainly not," Coach Golden answered. "This call is more one Penn Stater to another. I'm sorry to hear about the Raiders taking you last night."

"I'll survive... especially if I stay away from playing for that team," I responded.

"I know how you feel, Kyle," Coach Golden said. "I got myself drafted by the Patriots when I came out of college. Not the high flying, winning Patriots everyone knows today. I was drafted by the sad-sack Patriots who went 2-14 in my only season with them. I guess it's no wonder I took up coaching early. I did a year at a high school in Jersey before getting a job as a grad assistant at Virginia."

"I didn't know that," I allowed.

"Do you want to skip the year as a high school assistant and go straight to working as a grad assistant for me?" Coach Golden asked.

"Seriously?" I gasped. "You'd take me on?"

"Seriously, Kyle. I would like you to join the Temple staff," Coach Golden responded. "Can you come in after classes are over today so we can do a formal job interview?"

"Um... sure... um... I don't have a suit handy or anything," I responded. "They're all in Paradise today... and..."

"Kyle, we're football coaches," Coach Golden said. "Come dressed as you are at class. That will be fine. What time can you be down to Edberg-Olson?"

"Um... 4:15?" I suggested.

"Good, I will see you at 4:15 today."

"Thanks, Coach," I said before clicking "End."

"Take you on?" John asked as I finished. "Did you just get another job offer? Is this one local?"

"I think Temple qualifies as local," I responded.

"Coach Golden... very nice," John said. "That should get you launched nicely into the coaching ranks."

"Yeah, I guess," I allowed. "My head is still spinning."

"Call Penny and give her the good news."

"Yeah, you're right, John," I agreed. I called my sweetie, who had taken the day off and was back at her parents' place in Paradise.

"What's up, Kyle?" Penny asked when she answered the phone.

"I have good news," I announced.

"Somebody traded you away from the Raiders," Penny guessed.

"That would be great news," I answered. "This is good news. My job search in the Philly area may not take very long. I have an interview with Coach Golden at Temple this afternoon for a spot as a grad assistant."

"Temple!" Penny gushed. "That would be wonderful. How much does it pay?"

"I don't know," I replied. "I think Anders got a \$10,000 stipend, room, board and tuition at Penn State. I don't know what Coach Golden will offer."

"Room and board wouldn't work," Penny said. "Temple is too far from the veterinary school for me to live on their campus. \$10,000 wouldn't pay our rent for a year. I don't want us to tap the Nike money for daily living expenses."

"I know," I agreed. "Will I have more Nike money after this year if I refuse to play in the NFL? I'll go do the interview and find out about the financial arrangements. Why don't you line up your parents and mine for a post-dinner meeting tonight. We can look at what Coach Golden is offering and see if it makes sense for us."

"That sounds like a plan," Penny agreed. "Will you make it back for dinner here?"

"I'm sure I won't," I replied. "My interview is at 4:15. You know the Schuylkill [Expressway]. Traffic will be murder tonight. Why don't you tell our parents we'll sit down and review Coach Golden's offer at 7:00 tonight."

"Done!" Penny said. "I love you, honey."

"I love you too."

The beginning of the last three classes were as chaotic as the first classes, but I had a plan to deal with it. We managed to spend most of each period on the appropriate topic. John wished me well after the final bell rang. I headed for my trusty VW Golf and drove for the Schuylkill Expressway. I made it to Temple in plenty of time for my appointment. Katie Hahnemann, the Edberg-Olson receptionist gave me a big smile as I came in.

"I expected you to be flying out Oakland today, not coming here to work out," Katie said in greeting.

"I won't be playing for Oakland," I replied. "I don't see eye-to-eye with the ownership. I have a 4:15 appointment to see Coach Golden."

"Go ahead, Kyle," Katie said. "You know your way around here by now."

I wanted to add, 'but not as well as I will soon,' but I didn't. I headed upstairs to Coach Golden's office.

"Come in. Sit down," Coach Golden said with a big smile. "I'm glad you were able to come in this afternoon." He pointed at the couch in front of his desk.

"I'm happy to be here," I said as I sat down. Coach Golden joined me on the couch.

"Do you know what a graduate assistant does?" Coach asked.

"I have a fair idea," I replied. "Anders Voight and Yasin Clark have filled the positions at Penn State the past two years. Both were players and friends when I started at the university. I know they do the detail stuff."

"That's a polite way to put it," Coach Golden said, grinning. "You would prep game charts. You keep everyone's playbooks up to date. You'll break down a lot of video."

"That's certainly not a problem," I said.

"I heard that about you from Bob [Burton]," Coach Golden said. "Is the rumor true? Did Coach kick you out of the film room once?"

"No, not me," I answered laughing. "That was Zack Hayes. Coach did ban him from the video room one weekend. I'm almost but not quite as bad as Zack."

"You'll deliver messages," Coach continued. "You'll do whatever detail work needs to be done to keep the team going. You will sit in on the coaching staff meetings. You may get to work with the players some too. Have I scared you away yet?"

"Not yet," I replied.

"I understand you had some practice coaching last weekend," Coach Golden said. "What did you think?"

"I enjoyed it," I replied.

"Bob Burton raved about the job you did with the Blue team's special teams," Coach Golden said. "Did you see anything in the papers this week about our Cherry and White game?"

"Sorry, Coach, I didn't pay any attention to it," I answered.

"That's fine," Coach Golden said. "I thought you might have noticed who our top receiver was. How did Dave Mitchell get so good? He tells me you have been coaching him off and on for years."

"We worked together for four summers at scout camp," I explained. "We worked at least an hour a day on passing drills while we were in camp. I worked with him during our high school's spring passing drills each year after I got home from college. I think you probably can give Walt Caffrey and Jason Turner more credit than me for Dave's abilities."

"This can't leave this room," Coach said. "Dave beat out my two- and three-year starters at the wide receiver position. By most rights, Dave should still be in high school. He was doing things on the field I haven't seen seniors in college do. I credit Walt and Coach Turner to an extent. They're both great coaches. Dave tells me you're responsible. Coach Burton agrees."

"I think they're being too generous," I protested. "I just help out the best I can."

"Don't be surprised if you're assigned to help Coach Rhule with the receivers. Matt is stretched pretty thin. He is co-offensive coordinator for the passing game and handles position responsibilities for the tight ends and wide receivers."

"I'm willing to help out however I can," I replied.

"If you can get the rest of the receivers up to young Dave's standards, we're going to blow out the rest of the Big East," Coach Golden stated.

"The Big East?" I said. "I thought you played in the MAC."

"That is past tense," Coach explained. "We are back starting this coming season. The conference realignments are getting crazy. Nine years ago they kicked our team out of the Big East. Now they need us back. It's poetic."

"Can we talk compensation?" I asked. "That will probably be the key question."

"Certainly," Coach Golden said. "Our normal arrangement with our grad assistants is a full graduate-degree scholarship, room and board and a \$12,000 living stipend for incidental expenses. We allow a week of paid vacation after the first year and eight sick days. How does that sound?"

"Not great," I answered. "I don't need room and board. My fiancée is going to veterinary school over at Penn. We have an apartment just off campus."

"Bob told me you were getting married this summer," Coach said. "We have some housing available for married grad students. I can get the two of you in there."

"My fiancée isn't comfortable with that," I explained. "I don't want her traveling around Philly if she has early morning or evening classes. She doesn't have a car. Is there any way you can drop room and board from my compensation and increase the stipend? Would that be possible?"

"I have to watch what I pay you," Coach answered. "I have to be fair to Matt Dellavecchia." Matt was a current grad assistant for the team. I had worked with him some while I was working out at Temple over the past few months.

"What is the value of room and board for a grad student here?" I asked. "I don't want to take advantage of Matt either. I have a lot of respect for Matt. He has been very helpful since I started working out here."

Coach Golden walked over to his desk. "Let me see what I can do." He looked through a folder. "I could go to \$24,000 if I don't have to take your room and board out of my budget."

"I may be able to work with that, Coach," I replied.

"There is one other important item we need to discuss," Coach Golden said. "You would be on a one-year contract. Somehow I suspect you probably won't be available after the next draft."

"I hope not," I agreed.

"I understand that and it's fine," Coach said. "You're probably a one-year rental for us, but I think my team will take value from having you with us. I know a year as a grad assistant will look good on your coaching resume. I have asked the HR department to include an out for you. You will be able to leave here on two weeks' notice if someone in the NFL manages to pry your rights away from Oakland so you can go pro where you really belong right now."

"Wow!" I remarked. "I hadn't expected that."

"That's my offer, Kyle," Coach Golden said. "I hope you will take it."

"I'm planning to head back to Lancaster County when we're done. I will go over this offer with my parents, my fiancée and her parents. Can I give you a call tomorrow and let you know if this works for us?" Coach Golden handed me a fat envelope containing the contract. That reminded me. "There is one more step I guess I have to take. Max Solomon is my agent. He's responsible for all my football contracts. I guess that includes this one."

"It is definitely a football contract," Coach Golden confirmed. He laughed. "I think you'll be the first grad assistant I've ever dealt with that used a sports agent for his contract."

"I signed a football contract with Max," I explained. "I don't think I have a choice but to involve him."

"Hopefully he doesn't take too large a chunk of your stipend for his agent's cut," Coach Golden teased.

"I'm sure he'll be gentle," I answered. "Thank you for this offer, Coach. I'll give it serious consideration and get back to you as soon as I can."

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I gave Max Solomon a call before I headed for home. "Any news on the trade front?" I asked when he answered his phone.

"Nothing new, Kyle," Max answered.

"I'm leaving Philly for home now," I reported. "I will send you a contract I received this afternoon for you to review after I get home. Al Golden wants me to coach at Temple."

"The job search didn't take long," Max said. "Are you interested?"

"I may be, if Penny and I can figure out how to survive on a grad assistant's stipend," I explained. "I think we can pull it off with a little help from our parents." Max chuckled.

"I won't demand my 3% if you sign with Temple," Max said. "The most important question I have, Kyle, is this. Does the contract have a way out if a team gets desperate enough for a wide receiver to meet the Raiders' price later in the summer?"

"Two weeks' notice and I'm free to play in the NFL," I answered.

"Excellent!" Max replied. "This would be an excellent place for you to hold out until sanity prevails with the Raiders and someone gets your rights that you can play for."

I headed west on Schuylkill, Route 202 and then Route 30. I grabbed a sandwich for dinner at the Wawa on the east end of Downingtown. I got home about fifteen minutes before our scheduled family meeting. Dad scanned and e-mailed the contract to Max Solomon. I played with Hunter and the twins until Penny, Jim and Marilyn came over for our meeting.

The meeting was anti-climactic. Jim Edwards had always planned to pay for Penny's veterinary education. That hadn't changed. Even though Penny and I would be living as man and wife, Jim and Marilyn planned to pay Penny's half of the rent on our apartment. Mom and Dad would continue to pay my charge-card bill and add to my debt as I had done throughout college.

Dad had done some research before I got home. He reported that the average starting teacher's salary was around \$35,000. That would probably have travel expenses and have to pay for the continuing education courses beginning teachers were required to take. Travel expenses would be minimal between our apartment near Penn and my potential job at Temple. I would have a scholarship so I could get to work on a master's degree. I would probably go for a degree in History. That would add value to my marketability as a teacher.

Everyone agreed that I should accept Coach Golden's offer, assuming Max Solomon signed off on the deal. Max called later that evening and recommended I accept the offer. I called Coach Golden back Saturday morning and formally accepted a position as an offensive graduate assistant for the Temple Owls. I promised to return the signed contract on Monday after my last class.

Penny and I headed downstairs to the basement after a very full night. I was psyched up to have a job and know where I would be and what I would do. I was frisky and ready to show Penny how much I loved her. We made out a little before I kissed my way south towards my lover's treasures. Penny reached down and pulled me back up before I dived below her waist.

"Let's hold off, Kyle," Penny explained as she hugged me. "I did something really dumb Wednesday night."

"I doubt it's a big deal," I commented.

"I put my pills in my suitcase Wednesday night instead of in my purse like I usually do."

"And?" I asked.

"You took off for school early on Thursday," Penny explained. "I missed Thursday morning's pill."

"Oh!"

"It should be fine," Penny added quickly. "I went down to Groff's Drugstore this morning and got the Plan B emergency contraception. Everything should be fine, but it's probably best if we hold off on sex until I finish the Plan B pills. Unless... you happen to have some condoms here."

"Sorry, honey. I only make love to you and have no need for them," I explained. I remembered a few I had stuffed in my dresser back when I was bedding Faith sixteen months ago. They might still be there. "I remembered some ancient ones I have around here somewhere. They're probably just as dangerous to use tonight as doing it without any protection at all."

"Let's just cuddle and kiss," Penny suggested. "I love you just as much this way as when we go all the way."

"That's fine," I agreed. I love kissing and cuddling with you."

Chapter 2

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Monday, April 29, 2013

My final day of student-teaching with John Waters was bittersweet. I'd gotten close to John over the last four months of working together. I told John about my new job as a graduate assistant at Temple. He envied my opportunity. He thought he would have enjoyed an opportunity like that if he had the chance after he graduated from West Chester way back when.

I kept a close eye on the clock during the lecture. I had one more thing to say to the class and didn't want to be hurried by the bell.

"Today is my final day with all of you," I said a minute before dismissal. "I've loved working with all of you this semester. You've made my student teaching experience a pleasure. Make sure you get ready for the next month's final for the class. I know Mr. Waters is planning a doozy."

"Work and study hard, everyone. I'm living proof that it pays off. One more thing before I dismiss you... I want someone to let me know when your football team beats Strath Haven next season. I know you guys can do it!"

The class cheered and clapped that pronouncement. The bell rang during their cheers. "Class dismissed!"

"Well done, Kyle," John said as I headed to the back of the room as the kids filed out. "You're going to make a heck of a teacher when you finish with football."

"This is going to be an emotional day," I commented.

"You handled it perfectly," John replied. Kids in our homeroom were streaming in, so I headed to the front again.

I repeated my speeches to start and end class through each class period. Kids stopped by my desk at the end of class each period to thank me and tell me how much they were going to miss me. I was going to miss them too. The day flew by. I felt the lectures went well. I would find out Tuesday fourth period when I sat down with Professor Buchanan and John for my final evaluation. John came to the front of the room after I dismissed the eighth-period class.

"I've had a dozen student teachers over the years," John commented. "This is always the hard part. It's been a pleasure watching you develop and turn into a teacher, Kyle." He shook my hand. I pulled him into a hug. A handshake didn't begin to express the emotions I was feeling.

"John, I couldn't have had a better mentor than you," I managed to choke out. "Thank you for everything." We held the hug for a few more moments before letting go. I blinked a few times to try to clear my watery eyes. "Keep me updated this fall on the football team. I want to hear how they do."

"I know they will do well," John answered. "I'll send you e-mails every Saturday and let you know how the team played." John gave me a forced smile. His eyes were watery too. "Now get out of here! Go make us proud."

"I'll do my best," I promised.

I was still a little emotional as I drove down the Schuylkill Expressway to Edberg-Olson Hall. I hadn't worked out since last Wednesday and I needed work desperately. I wasn't allowed to officially start my new job yet, not until I had my degree in hand.

-----oooOooo-----

I had lost track of some of my teammates' fates while I worked out my future over the weekend. Shawn Byrd ended up getting picked with the Eagles' first pick late on Thursday night. Josh Bruno went in the second round to the Texans on Friday night. Christian Hunsecker went to the Chiefs, also in the second round. Greg Nowicki was picked by the Falcons later Friday night in the third round. Damian was picked up by the Bears on Saturday afternoon with their fifth round pick.

Four of my Penn State teammates signed with teams as free agents. Bill Daugherty signed with the Chargers. Brendan Hayden signed with the Broncos. The Cowboys picked up Mitch Jackson. Tanner Riggs got an opportunity with the Rams.

Two more of my high school teammates reported signings Monday. Hal Long was signed by the Carolina Panthers. He would be competing with Olindo Mare, the Panthers kicker of the last two years. Mare was in his seventeenth season in the NFL but was very accurate. Hal was going to face an uphill battle to get a job with the Panthers.

Drew McCormick was picked up by the Buffalo Bills. The Bills' top tailback was pretty good, but they weren't deep at running back. Maybe Drew would be able to break in as a special teams player. That might give him a shot someday at being their feature back.

Tuesday morning was nice. I got to sleep later than normal. I strolled down the street to pick up a newspaper. I made a nice breakfast for Penny and me before she headed off for her Anthropology final. I headed west for school after breakfast. The drive to the high school wasn't nearly as bad at 9:30 in the morning compared to my normal, rush hour drive. I hung out in the faculty parking lot for a few minutes. Fourth period started at 9:57 AM but my appointment wasn't until 10:10 AM.

John and Professor Buchanan were seated in the back at my... well, the table in the back of the room. The performance evaluation didn't take long. John and I managed to keep our emotions in check and kept things professional. Professor Buchanan and John rated me as exemplary on all four categories – planning and preparation, classroom environment, instructional delivery and professionalism.

I scored twelve out of a possible twelve. Professor Buchanan assured me that would give me an A+ for this semester. My streak on the Dean's List that went back to my freshman spring would stay intact. I thanked John and Professor Buchanan for all their help this semester before I left.

I stopped off at the office to drop off my Conestoga Senior High School Teacher's ID. Dr. Cooper overheard me talking with Pat Green, the secretary at the front desk.

"It's been a real pleasure having you work here, Kyle," Dr. Cooper said when he appeared at the counter. "I wish there was a way we could keep you. You've done an excellent job for us."

"Maybe I'll go back to teaching after I complete my Master's in History over at Temple," I replied. "How do I find out about job openings?"

"Talk to the district office," Dr. Cooper said. "They will need a recommendation from me, since you have experience at our school already." He chuckled. "The recommendation won't be ANY problem. Good luck out at Temple, Kyle."

"Yes, good luck, Kyle," Pat added.

I headed to Temple for a workout before going home. The weight room was pretty empty. The Temple football players had finals this week and late morning wasn't prime work out time. I headed back to the apartment and had a late lunch. I rattled around the apartment a little. I was at a loss as to what to do. I should be preparing to move to a new city. I should be studying my team's playbook so I would be ready for training camp and the fall season. Instead, here I was in Philly with absolutely nothing at all to do.

I headed over to Edberg-Olson. I managed to wheedle a playbook out of Coach Golden. Matt Dellavecchia set me up in the film room so I could study video of our team while I learned the playbook. Temple's playbook was similar to but not as complicated as Penn State's. I was confident I would be able to master it well before camp opened up in August.

I spent most of the daytime in the week over at Temple, studying and getting ready for my new job. I made dinner each night so Penny could concentrate on her finals. She had her last one on Friday morning. Penny had one more task she wanted to do at school. She talked with her grad school advisor about any possible summer jobs on campus or out at New Bolton Center in Chester County. Penny wanted to find work closer than Dr. Chu's office back in Lancaster County since I would be spending my summer in Philly. We headed back to Paradise, stopping off at New Bolton Center on our way west. Penny set up an interview for the next week. They did hire summer help. Penny would be considered for a spot.

Penny worked with our moms on Saturday on the wedding plans. I packed more of my things to take down to Philadelphia. Our apartment was going to be our home for the foreseeable future. We headed to Penn State late on Saturday for my graduation. Trevor and Damian let us stay in my old room until my graduation on Tuesday.

Baccalaureate was on Sunday afternoon. Mom and Dad came up to State College Monday afternoon. The Thompsons, the Conwells, the Kolmars, the Hunseckers, the Umbles, Penny and my parents went out to dinner Monday night. Trevor, Damian and Christian talked about their experiences at their team's mini-camps. The Jets and the Bears both had full team mini-camps. They got to meet everyone, which was a positive. The Chiefs had a rookies only OTA. Listening to Trevor, Christian and Damian talk about how they were settling into their new teams was bittersweet.

We lingered over dinner. It was great to spend time together. We also knew we wouldn't be getting time together like this again. This dinner marked the end of our college experience. We would all see each other again, probably throughout our lives but not all together like this very often.

Mom and Dad decided to take a stroll around campus after dinner. Penny and I decided to go downtown. We window shopped for a bit before ending up at the Rathskeller. We relaxed over a couple of beers and talked about things. The crowd was mostly graduating seniors like us. The undergrads had left for the summer when finals finished on Friday. I did a few autographs and talked with some of my fans while I was there. We headed back to the apartment around ten o'clock that evening. Penny and I made love before retiring for the night. It had been too many days since we had the chance.

My parents, Penny and I caught a quick breakfast at their hotel Tuesday morning. We headed for the Bryce Jordan Center about half an hour before the ceremony. I took my place up front with my fellow seniors. Penny stayed with Mom and Dad.

I bumped into Chelsea Wright as the graduates were assembling for the ceremony. She was sporting a very nice engagement ring. Chelsea found her classical-music-loving boyfriend a year and a half ago. They were getting married next year, after they got established in Pittsburgh. I let Chelsea know that Penny and I had reunited and were marrying too. She wished the two of us the best.

Chad King and I found our spots in the alphabetical lineup. Chad was three persons ahead of me in line. Josh Bruno came by us as he was heading for his place near the head of the line. The three of us got to talk a bit before things started up. Josh loved working with Coach Kubiak and Coach Wade Phillips, the Texans' defensive coordinator. Chad enjoyed hearing about Josh's experiences. I could only wonder what could have been for me. Why were the Raiders such assholes?

Josh was planning to move to Houston full time rather than going back to his parents' home after the season was over next winter. He hoped to do some substitute teaching the same way I hoped to do. Chad hadn't found any nibbles yet in his search for a job. I told him about my grad assistant position at Temple and how I would have time to do my Master's degree.

We didn't get to finish our conversation as the marshal announced it was time for us to file in and take our seats. My fellow grads and I would be seated in chairs on the floor of the BJC. The parents, grandparents and other visitors were seated in the seats of the arena.

Dean Friar, the Dean of Education, opened the morning by introducing Dr. Linda Lane, the superintendent of schools for the Pittsburgh School District. She spoke for about fifteen minutes, talking about her district's "Excellence for All" program. The

district was moving beyond the “No Child Left Behind” law and shooting for higher standards for all of Pittsburgh’s children. It was a good speech.

Some of the senior professors in the College of Education were seated on stage with Dean Friar. To my disgust, Dr. P. Thomas Henderson was seated prominently, right beside the Dean.

Our valedictorian, Maria Riccioli, gave her speech next. Nearly everyone knew Maria. She was easily the smartest person in our freshman Education Psychology 14 and Educational Theory and Practice 114 classes. God love her. She chose to specialize in working with the disabled. The kids that had her as a teacher were going to be truly lucky.

Dean Friar spoke for a bit and then it was time for us to file up one by one and receive our diplomas. I had a long wait since I had a name in the middle of the alphabet. To my disgust, Dr. Henderson was handing out the diplomas and shaking hands with each graduate before they shook hands with Dean Friar. I would have to face my nemesis one more time before I could escape Penn State.

We were halfway through the big crowd when the usher signaled for our row to join the queue at the side of the stage. We filed ahead one by one as the graduates were announced.

“Chad Anthony King, Bachelor of Arts in Secondary Education.” My friend looked my way before he climbed onto the stage. I gave him a smile and a thumbs up. He walked across the stage, took his diploma and shook hands with the dean and professors. “Tyler Joseph Marinelli, Bachelor of Arts in Secondary Education” was announced as Chad walked off the stage. Chad gave his family a fist pump as he left the stage. I stepped up to the steps as Tyler received his diploma.

“Angela Marie Marshall, Bachelor of Arts in Elementary Education, with distinction,” was announced as the pretty, soon-to-be primary teacher took the stage. I stepped up to the top step as Angela received her degree.

“Kyle David Martin, Bachelor of Arts in Secondary Education,” was announced. I climbed the last step and walked across the stage to Dr. Henderson. He smiled and handed me my diploma.

“I hear you are not playing football this fall,” Dr. Henderson said. “That pleases me.”

“I’ll be working on my Master’s in History at Temple,” I answered.

“Go and be the great teacher I know you can be,” Dr. Henderson added. “Give up the childish games and fulfill your potential.”

I took the diploma from his hands and gripped his hand and shook. I looked the old bastard in the eye, tightened my grip and said, “I WILL send you a photo of me teaching.”

Dr. Henderson squeezed my hand and retorted, “THAT would please me. Do not waste your talents.” We let go of each other’s hand and I stepped over to Dean Friar.

“Good luck, Kyle,” Dean Friar said as we shook hands.

“Thank you, Dean,” I said before I stepped away.

I walked across the stage and gave my family another wave as they announced, “David William Meadows, Bachelor of Arts in Elementary Education.” I followed Chad, Tyler and Angela back to our seats. I waited patiently as everyone in the large graduating class of the College of Education took his or her turn on stage. It was after 10:30 when Emily Zook’s name was called and she took the stage to accept her degree. Emily was from Lancaster County like me. The graduating class departed from the arena as the organist played the “Pomp and Circumstance.”

It took fifteen minutes for Penny, Mom and Dad to meet up with me outside the Bryce Jordan Center. Penny took pictures of Mom, Dad and me. Dad took picture of Penny and me and then Penny, Mom and me. Finally Mom took pictures with Penny, Dad and me.

We stopped off at our car so I could shed my cap and gown before we walked downtown. We hoped Spats wasn't going to be crowded. It was just opening so there was plenty of room. We enjoyed a leisurely lunch. Everyone headed for Lancaster County after lunch. Penny and I spent the night in Paradise before heading back to Philly.

I worked my way through Temple's academic bureaucracy to get into the Master's degree program. My application was months late and I hadn't taken the GRE exam. I could take up to three courses as a non-matriculated student. I received an academic advisor, Dr. John Lester. He helped me sign-up for HIST 8101: Introduction to American History and HIST 8109: Studies in U.S. Political History Since 1928 for the summer. I would take one course during the fall football season, to give me more time for Coach Golden and the football team. I would finish the GREs and be formally accepted into the Master's of History program by next winter.

Penny had her interview at New Bolton Veterinary Center on Friday. Penny was stoked when she came back. They hired her! My honey was finally going to need to bring her car down to Philly this summer.

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Penny and I went shopping for birthday presents for Noah and Connor on Saturday morning. We had lunch with Penny's closest college friends, Dave Hansen, Dakota Sheppard, Katie Zamora, Jordan Whitaker and Erin Lambert. We went to the White Dog Café on the edge of campus.

The White Dog specialized in local foods. My first course, the Kennett Square Mushroom Soup was good. I had to try the Green Meadow Cheddar Burger. The menu said that Green Meadow Farm was located in Gap, Pa., not too far from Paradise. Our group tried the Lamb Bolognese, Crab Cake Sandwich, Southwest Chicken Salad and Grilled Steak Salad.

I enjoyed the lunch with Penny's friends. I wish I'd had more free time in the past few months to get to know them better than the occasional Wednesday trivia nights. The group called April Cheney from the café. The University of Edinburgh, where she was studying this year, didn't finish the spring semester until late June. She would miss her graduation ceremony but she would get to see everyone at our wedding.

Penny had errands to run in the afternoon around campus to finish up everything she needed for graduation and for next fall for veterinary school. I hung out at our apartment and studied Temple's playbook.

Dakota and Katie had a graduation party at Dakota's apartment that evening. The party was fun but bittersweet. Penny and her friends knew they would see each other again in the coming years but it would never be like it had been during the past four years. I supported Penny. I certainly understood her feelings. I went through the same thing a few weeks ago at the party after the Blue and White Game.

There was plenty of beer flowing that evening. Penny and I had our share. It was fortunate that Dakota's apartment was in walking distance of ours. I wasn't totally wasted, but I was drunker than I'd been in at least eighteen months. Penny and I made love when we got back. It was wonderful to unite our bodies in spite of our inebriation.

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Penny and I managed to get cleaned up and have a quick brunch before Jim and Marilyn Edwards arrived. The four of us headed over to the Irvine Auditorium for the Baccalaureate ceremony. The service included music, readings and a prayer.

Penny gave us a tour of campus after the Baccalaureate. Jim took all of us out to dinner that evening. He had made reservations for us at LaCroix, one of the top restaurants in Philadelphia. The restaurant is located in the Rittenhouse Square Hotel. Jim drove us over.

LaCroix was fancy, befitting the occasion. Jim and I had the Corn Soup for our first course. Marilyn and Penny had salads. Penny had the veal with fava beans for her main course. Jim and Marilyn both had the Hudson Valley Duck with cauliflower and waxed beans. I decided on the Divers Scallops with fennel, honey dew melon, and pork belly. It was excellent. We enjoyed some wine with dinner. White Peach ice cream topped off our meal. It was excellent too.

Penny and I gave up our bedroom to Jim and Marilyn and stayed on the pull-out sofa bed. It was small and damned uncomfortable. Thankfully we only had to sleep on it for a single night.

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We took Jim and Marilyn over to the Green Line Café on Lancaster Avenue for breakfast on Monday morning. They serve a nice selection of coffees, teas and cold drinks. They also have muffins, scones, croissants and bagels available too. I had a cold chai latte, an apple-cherry walnut bagel with cream cheese and a chocolate croissant.

Jim, Marilyn and I walked over to Hamilton Village with Penny. The undergrads, grad students and faculty were assembling there for the procession to Franklin Field, Penn's athletic stadium. Jim, Marilyn and I helped Penny don her cap and gown. All of us gave Penny hugs and kisses before we let her search out her friends in the sea of caps and gowns.

I walked Jim and Marilyn across campus to Franklin Field. We found seats in the east stands near the north side. Penny told us that would put us closer to where she was sitting in the undergrad seating. The procession arrived on time at 9:30 that morning. The baccalaureate students led the way, followed by the master's and doctorate students. Representatives of past classes followed the students into the stadium. The class officers for the Class of 1988 and the Class of 1963 came next. The faculty followed the alumni into the old brick stadium. University president Amy Gutmann, the Provost, the guest speaker, former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, and the deans came in last.

A recent graduate from a couple of years ago sang the National Anthem for the crowd. The Chaplain led the invocation and then turned the program over to the president of the Board of Trustees who introduced President Gutmann. She welcomed everyone and then asked the Provost to confer the honorary degrees to eight recipients.

Secretary Gates was presented with a Doctorate of Humane Letters. The Humane Letter degree was gilding to the secretary's outstanding resume. The program told us that Secretary Gates received his Bachelor's degree from William and Mary, his Masters from Indiana University and his Doctorate in Russian and Soviet History from Georgetown. I had total respect for the secretary. When reports came out of poor medical treatment and care at Walter Reed for our soldiers, heads rolled. Top heads too, not junior underlings. I read how he made getting body armor out to our troops a high priority. I knew he drove the military procurement people to get armored vehicles to Iraq and Afghanistan to protect the troops from IEDs. Regardless of your politics, you have to respect a leader who looks after his men and women.

The Provost introduced Secretary Gates after the eight honorary degrees were presented. Secretary Gates talked about the challenges our country faced in the coming decades. He called for the graduates to show public mindedness and to spend part of their working lives in public service. Our country needs leaders able to make tough choices and to work together on the hard task of keeping our country strong and safe.

History teaches that there is evil in the world and we will always need to be prepared for it. Secretary Gates advocated using diplomacy and development to disarm potential conflict whenever we can. He said our country still needs hard power to back up the soft power he was advocating. We also need to keep our economy and our politics strong if we expect our country's military to be up to the task of protecting our country.

Secretary Gates concluded his fifteen minute speech with a call for each graduate to find a way to serve and lead our country to greatness at home and abroad. Secretary Gates was given well-deserved sustained applause for his remarks.

President Gutmann came forward and introduced the deans, one by one. Each dean read the names of the graduates from his or her college. The new graduates stood at their chair as their names were called, saluted President Gutmann with their caps and placed them on their heads before switching the tassels to the opposite side of the caps.

Jim, Marilyn and I all stood with our cameras ready as Dean Rebecca Bushnell, the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, recited the names Andrew P. Eastman, Holly M. Ecay and Jonathan R. Edge. We were ready with our cameras when she announced "Penelope Ann Edwards, Bachelor of Arts, Summa Cum Laude."

Jim, Marilyn and I had a long wait after Dean Bushnell moved onto the next graduate. There were a couple of thousand members in the Class of 2013. We waited as the deans of the other colleges announced their graduates and then the graduate schools announced their lists. It was after noon when President Gutmann gave her closing remarks. The big crowd sang Penn's alma mater, "The Red and Blue" before the Chaplain dismissed the graduates and faculty. We stood during the recessional.

Guests and visitors weren't allowed to depart until after the end of the recessional. I called Penny after we waited our turn to exit the stadium to help Jim, Marilyn and me find Penny and catch up with her outside the stadium. Dave Hansen, Dakota, Katie, Diane, Jordan and Erin were gathered with her. Katie and Jordan's parents met up with the group ahead of us. The rest of the parents found the cluster shortly after us.

Cameras came out and megabytes of pictures were taken – parents with graduates, boyfriends and girlfriends, families, and the group of grads together. The group lingered together outside the stadium for a while but hunger got to us eventually. There were hugs and tears as the close-knit group departed and went their separate ways. I know how tough it is leaving, knowing that the close friendships you shared over the past four years will never be recaptured.

None of us were in the mood for anything fancy for lunch. We stopped at Stan's Deli to grab some sandwiches on the way back to the apartment. We ate our lunch back at the apartment before departing. Jim, Marilyn and Penny headed back to Lancaster County. I stayed in Philly. Work started tomorrow. Penny had things to do to get ready for the wedding. She was coming back to Philly on Monday, after her first day working at New Bolton Center.

-----oooOooo-----

Tuesday, May 14, 2013

Coach Golden sent me down to Temple's security office for a new ID badge that would identify me as a graduate student and employee of Temple University instead of a visitor. They gave me a parking pass so I could park in the coaches' parking lot between Edberg-Olson and the railroad tracks to the east of our facility. It will be nice not to have to search for on-street parking every day.

Coach Golden introduced me to Coach Matt Rhule when I got back to Edberg-Olson. Coach Rhule was the co-offensive coordinator for the team responsible for the passing game. Matt Dellavecchia and I would be working for him. It was no surprise that Coach Rhule was a Penn Stater too. Coaching jobs often go to who you know. I suspected but hadn't confirmed that Coach Golden's call to me two weeks ago was at Coach Burton's prompting. The timing of me turning Coach Burton down and fifteen minutes later having Coach Golden call to offer me the same position on staff couldn't have been a coincidence. Hell, Coach Golden didn't even have my cell phone number but he found it pretty darn quick before he offered me the job.

Coach Rhule showed me to the cubicle I would be sharing with Matt Dellavacchia. We were in a small room at the back of the offensive coaches' office area.

"I assume you are well familiar with the film study system at Penn State, Kyle," Coach Rhule said as I settled at my new desk.

"Sure."

"You know how it carefully indexes each play by down, distance and situation?" Coach Rhule asked. "How do you think it gets that way?"

"Some brand new grad assistant indexes all the video?" I offered. Coach Rhule gave me a big smile.

"Al said you were bright," Coach Rhule said. "Matt is about half-way done with our Big East opponents for next year. Why don't you get started on the non-conference opponents' film."

"Sure, no problem," I agreed. "Who do I start with? Who is our first opponent?" Coach Rhule chuckled.

"Notre Dame."

"At home?" I asked hopefully.

"South Bend."

"Oh... kay..." I sighed. "Challenges are a good thing... I guess."

"That happens when you aren't at a top tier program," Coach Rhule. "Matt will show you how to how slice and dice the film and then index it for our system."

"Thanks, Coach," I called out as he headed out. Turning to Matt, I asked, "What other killers are on our schedule?"

"We play Fordham next," Matt answered. "They shouldn't be any big deal. After that is Penn State."

"You guys are always on our schedule," I responded before I realized what I'd said. "Give me a little slack. It will take a while for me to get used to calling Penn State them. Those guys in State College are on our schedule pretty often." Matt laughed.

"We'll cut you a little slack..." he teased, "...at least for a week or two. Just so long as you tell us every relevant scrap of information about your old team so we can finally break the jinx they have on us."

"I'm pretty sure Coach Burton was involved in Coach Golden hiring me," I replied. "Coach Burton knows how competitive I am. I'll do whatever I need to do to help my team win. He knows I will give everyone here a full accounting of what I know about the Lions team. I'm an Owl now."

"The final team you'll index is Idaho," Matt said. "I cover our Big East opponents: Memphis, UCF, SMU, Connecticut, Rutgers, San Diego State, Louisville and Houston. Ready to get going?"

"Let's do it, Matt," I agreed.

Matt showed me how to use the computer program they had to clip out one play of video, save it to the database and add keyword indexes for the offensive and defensive formation, quarter, down and distance to go, opponents and game date. It wasn't hard, just tedious. It wasn't much different from what I did in high school, except it was better indexed.

Matt took me along when he headed over for lunch at the Artist's Palate, a small deli-type cafeteria in Presser Hall. They served salads, sandwiches, Indian food-to-go and sushi. I grabbed a sandwich, chips and a drink. Matt was surprised when I pulled cash out of my wallet to pay for lunch.

"You can use your ID to pay with Diamond Cash," Matt explained. "It's part of the meal plan grad assistants have."

"I doubt I have Diamond Cash, whatever that is," I answered. "I have an apartment off Penn's campus with my fiancée, soon-to-be wife. Coach Golden pays me a little extra so I can afford the apartment. I don't get room and board."

"Ah, I see," Matt said. "I'm single. Room, board, tuition and the regular stipend are great for me. When are you getting married?"

"July 6th," I replied. "You will be getting a wedding invitation in a week or so. I saved space on the guest list for the coaches of the team I'm on." I laughed. "That seems to be the Owls now, so you, Coach Rhule and Coach Golden will get invited."

"That's cool," Matt agreed. We found a table and ate our lunch. We headed back to Edberg-Olson and more video indexing.

My phone rang mid-afternoon. It was Trevor Conwell.

"Hi, Trev. What's up?" I noticed Matt stop working and look over at me to see if the call was indeed from his friend from Boy Scouts back home in Chester County. I smiled and nodded yes to his unspoken question.

"Hey, Coach, how is your first day of work?" Trevor asked.

"Wonderful," I answered. "I'm breaking down video and indexing it for our video system."

"Fun," Trevor said. "Steph and I are taking a break from apartment hunting this afternoon. It's murder trying to find someplace that isn't too city."

"You're looking for a place in northern Jersey," I commented. "It would be like me looking for a country setting two blocks off Penn's campus."

"I guess," Trevor agreed. "Are you going to the NFLPA Rookie Symposium at the end of June?"

"The what?" I asked. "I never heard about it."

"All NFL draftees are required to attend this symposium out in California," Trevor explained. "They're going to tell us about how the NFL works, how to avoid getting in trouble and how to act as a professional football player. The Jets tell me there is a \$50,000 fine for missing the symposium."

"I don't see how it applies to me," I answered. "I'm not a professional football player."

"I'd check into it, buddy," Trevor replied. "I doubt you can afford a \$50,000 fine on your grad assistant salary."

"I'll get Max to check into it for me," I said. "By the way, I'm sharing an office with an old friend of yours from back home."

"Who?"

"Matt Dellavecchia," I replied.

"Matty D? Cool!" Trevor gushed. "Give him my regards."

"You can tell him yourself," I countered. "He's five feet away." I handed my phone to Matt. Matt and Trevor talked for a couple of minutes before hanging up.

"Matty D?" I asked, "How did you get that nickname?" as he handed back my found.

"Easy story," Matt replied. "I was the fifth Matt in our Scout Troop when I joined. We had about seventy or eighty scouts in the troop. All the Matts got nicknames."

"I understand," I agreed. "My troop had three Nicks at one time... that was out of forty scouts."

Matt worked until 4:30 PM. I worked until 6:00 PM. I wanted to get some extra time in the office Wednesday and Thursday so I could leave early Friday afternoon to go back to Lancaster County. Penny and I had a lot of assembly to do for the twins' birthday presents before their party on Friday night.

I talked to Max Solomon on Tuesday night. Trevor had been right about the Rookie Symposium. I was required to attend according to the NFL and NFLPA's contract. He wasn't sure how the NFLPA would get the \$50,000 fine from me, since I didn't have any agreement with the Raiders or paycheck from them to garnish. He promised to check out how I would get a waiver of attending the symposium. It certainly made no sense for me to spend three days out in California learning about being an NFL player if I wasn't playing.

I made Wednesday and Thursday long days, coming in at 7:30 AM and staying until 6:00 PM. Edberg-Olson was quiet with just coaches and support staff in the building. We were between semesters. About 80% of the football team would return next Monday for summer semester. Coach Golden liked to get as many of his players on campus taking summer courses so they could carry a lighter load in the fall during football season.

-----oooOooo-----

I headed straight for the Edwards house so Penny and I could get to work on assembling the presents. The two of us purchased three balance bikes for the twins and for Hunter, when his birthday came. The boys had outgrown the plastic tricycles that they rode around the driveway and backyard. The balance bike had two wheels, a seat, a hand brake and a kick stand, just like a regular bikes. The only thing missing was pedals. The boys could learn to balance themselves as they used their feet to propel themselves and stay upright. It sounded like a much better way to learn to ride a bike than the training wheels our parents used for us when we were growing up.

Jim Edwards helped me finish assembling the three bikes when he got home from work. Penny and I bought name tags to go on the front of each, since the bikes were identical otherwise. We also got bike helmets for the boys. Jim, Penny and I spent most of the afternoon assembling the bikes and getting Noah and Connor's bikes ready for tonight. Hunter's bike went to the Edwards' basement until his birthday in July.

Mom did a kid-friendly dinner for the twins birthday – hot dogs, macaroni and cheese and broccoli in cheese sauce. Mom brought a three-tier chocolate cake when the table was cleared. Andy lit two sets of four candles, a set to each side of the cake. We sang a slightly off-key version of Happy Birthday. The boys closed their eyes, made wishes and then blew out the candles.

The boys were covered ear to ear with ice cream, cake and icing when they finished devouring their treat. Mom helped them wash up before they tackled their big pile of presents. They got some clothing, to their disappointment except for the Blue Hens #85 game jerseys their dad got them. They got a few games. Liz bought each of them a giant box of crayons for their coloring and art projects. Mom and Dad bought the boys a portable basketball hoop for the driveway. Hunter "bought" his nephews a couple of footballs, with a little help from Dad. Finally it was Penny and my turn to give the boys their presents

"Here's your first present, boys," Penny said as she handed the boys cube-shaped boxes. The boys tore the boxes open and pulled out the red helmets.

"What d'ese for?" Noah asked as he and his brother stared with quizzical looks.

"They're bike helmets," I explained.

"We don't have..." Connor said. "BIKES!" the twins screamed in unison as they put the clues together. "Where d'ey at?"

"Outside in the driveway by the back door, guys," I said. The boys dashed outside.

The rest of the family followed them outside. The boys each went for a bike, though the wrong one. They hopped onto the seats. I had made a good guess about the heights when Jim and I assembled them earlier.

"Where the pedals at?" Connor asked. "Yeah, where d'ey?" his brother added.

"These are balance bikes, guys," I explained. "You learn to steer, balance yourselves and stop without worrying about pedals. You use your feet to get your bike going. These bikes will help you learn how to use bikes with pedals."

"Oh... Kay," Connor said. Mom and I helped the boys get their helmets fastened before they tried their new bikes. The boys were a little wobbly to start with but soon figured out how to make them go. Mom explained the rules to the boys. They only could ride when an adult was out with them. They had to stay in the driveway or in the back yard. They couldn't go on the street or ride without their helmets.

I noticed Hunter seemed a little down as he watched his nephews enjoy their presents. "Penny, do you have the last box?" I asked.

"We have something for you too, buddy," I explained. "You're not a baby anymore. You understand that Noah and Connor's birthdays are this week. Yours is seven weeks away. Penny and I got this for you. It's sort of a pre-birthday present."

Hunter tore the wrapping paper off the box, tore the box open and pulled out another helmet identical to the ones Noah and Connor had. "A helmet... thank you, Kyle." Hunter gave me a smile before turning to Penny. "Thank you, Penny. Is there a bike somewhere for me?"

"It's not your birthday yet," I replied, "...but odds are pretty good you might find one when it is your birthday."

"Why do I get helmet now?" Hunter asked.

"I bet if you ask Noah or Connor, they will let you try out their bikes," I said.

"Really?" Hunter beamed. "Hey guys, can I try a bike? Please?"

"Uhh...." Noah stammered as he wheeled by, "maybe later."

"Connor?" Hunter begged.

"Later?" Connor answered.

"Boys, what did I teach you about sharing?" Mom quizzed.

"Hunter, would you like to try d'is?" Connor asked as he coasted over to his young uncle.

"T'ank you," Hunter said politely as he took Connor's bike in hand. He tried to climb on the seat but he couldn't reach it. The twins were about four inches taller than their uncle.

"Connor, why don't you ride a little longer," I said. "I'll get a wrench so I can adjust the seat for your height, little bro." It didn't take long for me to get the seat adjusted to fit my little brother. Soon the three boys were happily scooting around the driveway.

----oooOooo----

Penny and I spent the weekend at home. It was nice after months of running around to have time to relax. Ed Fritz was home from college for ten days, so we got together for a while on Saturday. All the gang we could round up went out to Encore for the evening of dancing. Jeremy and Kathy were apartment hunting in Chicago. Tammy came. Hal was down in Charlottesville at a Panthers off-season training activity (OTA). Brandon McCafferty and Holly Cox made it. Drew McCormick and Stacy Thompson were up in Buffalo, helping Drew get settled with his team.

Paige Anderson didn't make it. She was in Columbus, Ohio settling in to her new job. Holly Cox talked about her job search. She had applied to a dozen elementary schools for a teaching position. She guessed she'd live at home and substitute teach if she didn't find a permanent position for the fall. Brandon was going back to Lehigh for his master's degree. His uncle was paying his way so he could get a degree specializing in construction management. Employment wouldn't be a problem for Brandon once he finished school. He would work at his uncle's construction company.

Reverend Hollinger came over for lunch with our family after church on Sunday. He spent an hour counseling Penny and me about our marriage. Noah, Connor and Hunter were delighted that Rev stopped by to visit. It was great to see our fifty-something-year-old minister on his hands and knees playing with the kids. Our church was blessed to have this special man to minister to us.

I headed back to our apartment in Philly after dinner on Sunday night. Penny stayed with her parents. She felt it would be easier to take her car to New Bolton Center from home on Monday and then go back to our apartment after her first day of work.

I worked on more than just video indexing during work. I typed up schedules and prepped for football camps for middle and high school kids that would begin in a few weeks. Temple ran theirs differently than Penn State. They invited 6-12th graders to

spend a Saturday at Edberg-Olson working with our coaching staff. Registration opened at 8:00 AM. The camp was dismissed at 3:30 PM. Coach Golden invited me to help out. The football camps weren't officially Temple University activities. Coaches would receive extra pay for working the five Saturdays in June.

Penny's first day of work at New Bolton Center was boring. She spent half the morning reading paperwork and filling out forms. The work got more interesting as the week went on and the staff got her more involved with caring for the animals. She helped one of the surgeons with aftercare for a horse on Wednesday afternoon. It made her day and week.

Penny and I celebrated her good day by ordering Thai take-out from the restaurant down on Lancaster Avenue. Penny decided to live dangerously and have the "Evil Jungle Princess" dish of spicy chicken sautéed over a vegetable medley. She enjoyed it but it took a couple bottles of beer to quench the fire in her mouth afterward. My Pad Thai had some heat but not too much. I enjoyed my dinner. Penny finished the night off with anti-acid to settle her stomach.

Penny was getting breakfast ready for us while I showered Thursday morning before work. She burst into the bathroom and retched into the toilet inches from the shower.

"Honey, are you all right?" I asked.

"Noooo..." she replied forlornly. Penny retched again before putting the lid down on the toilet. I heard her run a little water to clean up. "I'm never... ever getting Evil Jungle Princess again. Never!"

"I thought you liked spicy food," I asked.

"I've had that dish half a dozen times since I came to Penn," Penny replied. "I've never had it affect me like this before. I smelled the brown-and-serve sausages cooking this morning and that was it. Dinner was coming up."

"My mom always said to have some soda crackers and ginger ale to settle an upset stomach," I offered.

"Mine too," Penny agreed. "I'll try it. I hope you're hungry. I think you'll have double portions of eggs and sausage for breakfast this morning."

"I'll manage," I replied. "I can work out a little extra today so I don't put on too much weight. I'm worried about that now that I'm spending so much time at a desk."

Penny was feeling better when I left for Temple. I was aiming to get into work at 7:30 AM. Penny didn't need to be out at New Bolton Center until 8:30 AM.

Matt and I finished up breaking down the thirteen Notre Dame games in the morning. We moved onto Penn State. It was interesting, if a little different, breaking down film of my former team. I had to wonder, was I here strictly for my football knowledge or was I here at Temple to help Coach Golden and Temple finally break the 52-year-old jinx? Did it matter? I was learning about coaching football with a good coach and mentor.

Penny was out of bed Thursday morning before me. Not to shower, but to throw-up again. "Maybe I'm coming down with the flu?" she offered weakly when I asked how she was doing. She was feeling better by the time I left for Temple.

Penny and I made love Thursday night. She seemed distracted during foreplay but regained her enthusiasm when she rode my rod. We cuddled together and fell asleep, fully satisfied.

"How are you feeling?" was the way I greeted my lover Friday morning when our alarm woke us up. I was concerned about her "flu."

"I'm OK," Penny replied quietly. I was still concerned. She seemed a little quiet and down. I was glad when I finished my shower without interruption. I made French toast for myself. Penny didn't want more than a bowl of Cheerios.

"Are you getting over whatever this bug is?" I asked as we finished eating.

"I'm feeling better," Penny promised. "I'll see you for dinner at my parents' house tonight."

"I'll see you there," I agreed as I gave her a kiss. "I love you."

"I love you too, sweetie," Penny replied.

"Take care of that bug," I added before heading out the door.

Penny and I were driving back to Lancaster County after work separately. We needed to ferry more of our things down to the apartment since that was going to be our permanent home for at least the next year. Anyway it didn't make sense for Penny to drive forty minutes into Philadelphia to meet me and then we both spend an hour and fifteen minutes driving back to Lancaster County. New Bolton Center was about forty minutes from Paradise.

I left Temple early Friday afternoon, thanks to the flexibility Coach Golden allowed us and to coming in to work early previous days. I hoped it would make my Philly to Paradise commute more bearable. Hah! It took two hours to travel the Schuylkill, Route 202 and the Route 30 bypass to get past Coatesville in Chester County. It only took fifteen minutes more to get from the end of the bypass to home. I was ten minutes late for dinner with Jim, Marilyn and Penny. They waited for me. I enjoyed dinner with my soon-to-be in-laws. Penny took me upstairs to her room after dinner and had me sit down on her bed.

"Secret weddings business?" I teased. That drew a giggle from my sweetie.

"Indirectly... sort of," Penny replied. "It relates to the wedding dress size," she explained as she pulled a small box out of her dresser drawer. I recognized it – a home pregnancy test kit!

"This is your flu?" I gasped.

"Maybe," Penny said. "I wanted you to be here when I took it. Give me a minute to get this started then we can talk."

Penny headed across the hallway to the bathroom. I was left to wrestle with my thoughts. I'd counseled Andy and Crystal when they found out Crystal was pregnant. I'd helped Christian Hunsecker and Bev Umble through their crisis freshman year. I had helped Johara Safay face her pregnancy. I wasn't inexperienced in these matters but... it hadn't been this personal since Penny and I had our pregnancy scare in April of ninth grade. I waited nervously for the couple minutes it took Penny to wet the test kit.

"Is this a real possibility?" I asked when Penny returned.

"I didn't think so until I threw up this morning," Penny explained.

"But you felt..." I stammered.

"...fine until after you left for work," Penny interjected. "I had a little orange juice before I headed out. It only took ninety seconds before breakfast came up. It isn't the flu. I feel fine except I throw up in the mornings." I nodded. "Last night before we made love it hurt when you played with my nipples."

"I'm sorry, I didn't know I was being too rough," I responded.

"You were fine," Penny answered. "You were gentle and what you did normally drives me wild. It hurt and it shouldn't have last night." Penny stared into my eyes. "Sick in the mornings, tender breasts, little to no blood flow in my last period... and I skipped my pill the worst possible day, two weeks before I expected my next period."

"Draft night?"

"Most likely," Penny confirmed. "We both know what color this thing is going to be." She pointed toward the pregnancy tester sitting on her dresser.

"You are taking all of this very calmly," I said. "I know we plan to have a family, but not this soon. This is going to complicate veterinary school for you. What if..." Penny shushed me.

"I'd be more scared about this if the Raiders hadn't drafted you," Penny explained. "Don't get me wrong. It sucks that they drafted you and I do want you to get your shot at the NFL, but if this baby has to come now, I feel more comfortable knowing you will be at my side all the way through. Imagine if this happened and you were spending late July through mid-January out in Oakland. I don't know how I would handle all this by myself."

"We had our plans," I commented. "I guess God has His own too."

"He does," Penny agreed. We talked for a couple minutes while we waited for the test to confirm what we already suspected. Penny walked over to the dresser after five minutes and checked the tester.

"It's pink, dad," Penny said simply as she showed the tester to me. I stood up and hugged her.

"I promise to do my best for you and our little one," I declared before I gave Penny a kiss.

"I know you will."

"Do we tell our parents now?" I asked.

"Let's wait until after the doctor confirms the test," Penny suggested. "I made an appointment for tomorrow from work this morning."

"As you wish," I agreed. "I guess we're lucky Nike still has faith that I will be a star in the NFL. I was so afraid they would cancel the contract when I didn't go join the Raiders."

"I couldn't help but laugh when Max relayed Phil Knights' comments about your contract," Penny added. "Hell no! I'm not letting Kyle out of his contact that easy. He's ours for three years and no pissing match with Al Davis' kid is going to change that!"

"We have been blessed," I agreed. "We'll do our best for this little one."

The doctor confirmed what Penny and I already knew. She was pregnant. Her due date was January 17, 2014. We informed our families of the happy news after dinner. I received a lot of teasing, all of it deserved. I had razed Dad when he knocked up Mom with Hunter. I teased Will and Abby too when they conceived Rose by accident. I hadn't teased Andy when Crystal got pregnant but that didn't stop him from needling me about this. It was in a little brother's job description to give shit to his big brother whenever the opportunity presented itself.

Will and Abby had an intriguing suggestion. They needed to find a larger place because Rose would soon need a bed of her own. They wanted a place with a second bedroom. They had started looking for an older rental house somewhere in the inner suburbs of Philly. They found houses that rented for \$1400 to \$1800 dollars a month, which wasn't much more than their rent in the city near campus. They suggested that the four of us look for a larger old house and share living quarters for a year or two.

Dad suggested some of my Nike money could make a good down payment if we found the right house to purchase. Will and Abby's rent could help pay a mortgage. Penny and I would have to be based in the Philly area for the next four years, regardless of whether I played in the NFL or not. Dad's idea might be worth pursuing.

(To be continued)

Chapter 3

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The next weeks flew by between work, preparing for the wedding, house hunting and enjoying some free time with Penny. My lover's morning sickness wasn't too bad, once she figured out the foods that triggered her nausea. Max Solomon checked in with me periodically. Mark Davis and the Raiders spoke with Max every week or two trying to coax me into coming out to Oakland and seeing what the team was doing. I always passed on the opportunity. I told Mark's dad I would never play for the Raiders. It wasn't my fault they wasted their first-round draft pick on me. Trade me so they can get a little value back from the draft pick. Apparently the Raiders asking price was too high. Teams contacted Max and the Raiders about my availability and willingness to play. I was available and willing to play for most any team NOT named the Raiders.

My work at Temple was interesting, even if a little tedious. Al Golden and Matt Rhule were good bosses. I enjoyed working with Matt Dellavechia. He was a good guy. Things got busier on campus once summer session got started. About 80% of the football team took summer courses to lighten their fall course load. I could watch from the veranda of our building as our starting QB, Chris Considine, and his backups Tyler McBride and Jim Parr worked passing drills with our receiving corps. NCAA carefully regulated the amount of time coaches could instruct their team, so I was reduced to watching without comment. God, I would have loved to have gone out there and done the drills with them. Dave Mitchell did well as they practiced together.

Tyler Jackson, the defensive grad assistant, Matt Dellavechia, and I spent May 31st collecting equipment for the various drills, the day before our first high school football camp. We came in at 7:00 AM to haul everything out to the practice field and set it up for the day's events. Parents and kids arrived well before the 8:00 AM start of registration. The coaches processed the kids as they arrived and sent them off to our team meeting room. Coach Golden addressed the crowd of sixty to seventy middle and high school kids. I wasn't surprised that fewer kids came here than came to Penn State's football camps. We're a smaller university without the national recognition that Penn State enjoyed.

The staff broke the group up into groups of fifteen or twenty kids and led them through seventy-five minutes of offensive drills. That was followed by ninety minutes of defensive drills. Matt, Tyler and I helped where needed, mostly moving equipment into position and then moving it out of the way when the drill was done.

About twenty or so parents watched the day's practice from the sidelines. They came prepared with camp chairs, drinks and books to fill their time. The university's food vendor had hot lunches available at mid-day. A hamburger, a hot dog, chips and drink went for \$7.00. I grabbed lunch from the vendor too.

The afternoon was spent on skills sessions. I got to do a little more hands-on instruction with the kids. The information was pretty simple, perfect for the younger campers going into sixth, seventh and eighth or ninth grade. I noticed a few of the senior high kids seemed distracted during the sessions. I got a chance to talk with a couple of them as I helped with the drills and again when the day ended.

Marques Smith and Tyson Brooks both played for Archbishop Wood High School. Marques, 6'-0", 175 lbs., played wide receiver and defensive back. Tyson, 5'-10", 170 lbs., was a tailback and safety. Both guys were going to be seniors this coming fall.

"Did you guys enjoy the day?" I asked as they gathered up their travel bags.

"It was cool, Coach Martin," Tyson replied.

"Yeah, not a lot different from the past two years," Marques added. "I liked the tips you gave me during the group work."

"I'm glad I could help," I answered. "What did you expect this camp?"

"I hoped to attract Coach Golden's notice," Tyson explained. "I hoped he might be interested in putting me on his team next season."

"It can't hurt for the head coach to know who you are," Marques agreed. "Do you think we have a shot, Coach Martin?"

"I'm the wrong guy to ask," I responded, shaking my head. "I'm three and a half weeks out of college and two and half weeks here. I have NO influence or knowledge about recruiting at all."

"You played top-level college ball," Tyson said. "Do you think we have a chance?"

"It's not my place to say," I responded. That was a true but incomplete answer. I doubted they were up to competition at the FBS level but it wasn't my place to dash their hopes. "Let's look at this another way. Did Coach Golden call you last month when head coaches are allowed to contact juniors?" They shook their heads no. "Did any college coaches call you last month?"

"Coach Abanish from Lincoln University called me," Marques said.

"Coach Blount from Delaware State talked with me," Tyson added.

"The coaches are probably telling you something," I said. "No FBS coaches contacted you when they were first allowed to call. You can't be too high on their list of recruits if you're on their lists at all. An FCS and a Division II coach did contact you. That should tell you where the coaches think you guys have your best shot at being successful playing college football. June is a quiet period when coaches are not allowed to contact you, but you are welcome to call them at any time. You could contact Coach McDonald, our recruiting coordinator, and ask if the school has any interest in you playing here."

"Thanks for the advice, Coach," Marques replied. "Maybe my mom and I will do that."

"Yeah, thanks, Coach," Tyson agreed. "I wish we could have spent more time with you today. The tips you gave us on receiving are going to help a lot next season."

"Good luck with that," I agreed as the boys headed off the field to meet their parents. I empathized with the two. It has to be tough to realize you won't get to play top-level football anymore when you dream about doing it. Marques and Tyson didn't have enough speed to make up for their small size. They hadn't received enough coaching to make up for their physical deficiencies.

Matt Dellavecchia, Tyler Jackson and I got to work putting all the equipment away. "I wish I had more time with the kids," I commented. "I could have given them some useful advice to improve their game."

"The ones you were just talking too?" Matt asked. I nodded yes. "I know what you mean. The juniors and seniors at the camps tend to get a little bored. They're mostly here hoping to get noticed by the coaching staff."

"Why don't we give the older kids more advanced instruction?" I asked. "Sixth graders need very basic instruction on how to play football. The varsity kids need very different instruction than the kids just entering middle school."

"I know what you mean, Kyle," Matt agreed. "I'd love to have a chance to instruct these kids in some of the things I learned as a starter when I was in high school. I don't know why Coach Golden does it this way, but this is how it's always been done."

"Maybe I'll ask Coach Golden that question," I said.

----oooOooo----

I had a chance to talk with Coach Golden the following Monday afternoon. "Do you mind a few questions, Coach?" I asked politely.

"Bob Burton warned me about you," Coach replied with a grin. "Why? Why? Why? He said you asked that constantly for the past four years."

"I'm not trying to be a pain in the neck," I responded. "I just want to learn as much as I can from good coaches."

"Fire away, Kyle."

"I was wondering why you set up the football camp the way you did," I began. Coach waved me off before I could finish my first question.

"I know you attended and probably worked Penn State's camps," Coach Golden explained. "We're in a totally different market than them. Penn State gets well-off suburban kids who love to spend a weekend in State College on campus. We need to keep our camp as economical as possible to meet our target audience. Would a parent from Bryn Mawr send their son to spend a weekend in north Philly, even if it is on our campus?"

"Probably not," I agreed.

"Our target audience is local kids here in the city," Coach Golden continued. "We need to keep the costs within their means."

"One day makes sense, given our constraints," I agreed. "What I was wondering about was why we give the sixth graders the exact same instruction as the twelfth graders? Couldn't we break down into smaller groups and offer more advanced instruction to the older players?"

"It's a function of staffing and cost," Coach explained. "I can't afford more staff to do what you're proposing without charging more for the camp and possibly driving away business."

"Matt and I weren't terribly busy today," I offered. "Could we try an experiment next Saturday? Maybe we could offer more individualized instruction to the varsity players."

"Possibly in the afternoon," Coach Golden allowed. "I wouldn't want to cut them out of the fundamentals drills in the morning."

"Absolutely, I agree," I responded. "Sixth grade, JV, varsity, college..." laughingly I added, "... even me. Fundamental skills practice is always valuable."

"Put together a proposed schedule of activities you would like to do for me to look over," Coach Golden said. "I'll consider it. I suppose you and Matt would work on this together?"

"Matt seems interested," I said. "I wouldn't mind asking a team member or two to help too."

"Do you have any one in mind?" Coach Golden asked. His broad smile told me he knew who I planned to ask – Dave Mitchell.

"Dave Mitchell," I confirmed. "He is familiar with what I have in mind to sharpen up the skills for the varsity players. Hell, he even led the drills I want to do for most of the previous two springs."

"Go ahead and ask him," Coach Golden responded. "I can probably free up a few bucks to pay him for his time."

"That's always welcome for a college student," I said. I didn't tell Coach Golden that I thought Dave would have helped with the football camp for free. He's a lot like me when it comes to football. He can't keep away from it.

Matt Dellavecchia was enthusiastic about my idea. We had to coax Tyler Jackson into helping but he decided to give it a try. Dave Mitchell was excited from the start and totally loved it after Coach Golden offered him \$50 for the day. I put together a list of drills based on what Dave's and my Wolverines high school team had been doing for years. Coach Golden accepted the idea, with one proviso. We had to recruit the varsity players to try out our drills. Coach wouldn't assign them to us automatically based on their age.

We were spectacularly successful recruiting the following Saturday when our second football camp opened up. All seventeen varsity or soon-to-be varsity players opted to try out our new skill program in the afternoon. It went well. Coach Golden, Coach [Mark] D'Onofrio, our defensive coordinator, and Coach Rhule all took time to visit with the varsity players. The players and

their parents thanked us for the special instruction when the day was done. Coach Golden complimented the four of us too. Varsity instruction would be a permanent part of our football camps.

----oooOooo----

Penny spent weekday nights in Philly with me during June. She headed back to Paradise after work on Fridays so she and our mothers could prepare for the wedding. She came back to Philly after work on Mondays. It wasn't an ideal arrangement but it was bearable for a few weeks. Penny didn't demand too much of my time, allowing me to concentrate on learning the Temple offensive system, do my grad assistant assignments, my History 8101 and 8109 homework and the football camps. Penny limited my involvement in the wedding prep to honeymoon arrangements, getting my tuxedo and writing my vows.

Max Solomon kept in touch. The Raiders called him every week or two trying to find a formula that would entice me into signing my contract and coming out to Oakland to play for them. Other teams contacted Max regularly about my willingness to play for them if they could trade Oakland for my rights. We told every one of them I would be happy to play in the NFL somewhere other than Oakland. Nothing came of the inquiries. Oakland's asking price was too high.

My and Penny's financial concerns lessened. I was worried Nike might not want a player that refused to play in the NFL representing them. I was wrong. Nike's ad agency came up with a brilliant and funny series of commercials they wanted me to do. We scheduled the shoot for two days in July, after my honeymoon and before football camp started up. Coach Golden was kind enough to give me time off to do the commercials. The other \$100,000 from the first year of my contract would be paid out on August 1st. Penny and I wouldn't have money worries.

Will and Abby spent the early part of June searching for houses in Delaware County, just outside the city. They found what they considered the perfect house for two families to share in Upper Darby. It was an old rectory that had belonged to a Catholic church that had closed after it burned down. The place had six bedrooms and two-and-a-half baths. Rent was \$1800 a month. Penny and I looked it over one evening. It was about fifteen minutes from the Penn campus. We decided it was suitable even though it needed some work. This house would provide an economical way for our two families to live together. Rose could have her own bedroom. Our little guy (or girl) could have a nursery. Penny, Will, Abby and I could take turns with babysitting in the evenings if others were busy. Penny and I decided we would move in after our wedding and honeymoon. Will, Abby and Rose would join us mid-August after the Boy Scout camp closed for the summer.

I worked furiously through the last week of June into the beginning of July to get my assignments done before my wedding and honeymoon. Coach Golden gave me off from July 4th to July 14th. He also allowed me to take off July 18th and 19th for the Nike commercial shoot. I was beat when I left Temple, hopped on the Schuylkill Expressway and headed west for home after I finished work on July 3rd.

I didn't get a lot of time with Penny between getting home from work and our wedding day. April Chaney was back from her year in Scotland and staying with Penny. Kathy Trimble and Tammy Brooke helped Penny with her wedding preparations.

It was fun to catch up with Ed Fritz on the Fourth of July. He took a few days off from summer semester to come north to be my best man. We worked out together and hung out, just like we had done when we were kids. Jeremy North and Hal Long came over in the afternoon. My friends told interesting stories about their experiences at Chicago's and Carolina's OTAs and mini-camps this spring. It was good to hear how my friends were doing in the NFL but it made me a little bitter at the Raiders. Why did they need to be such dicks? They're making me miss a year in the NFL to prove they can dictate my life. To hell with them!

Ed helped me with a myriad of wedding errands on Friday. He went along with Dad, Andy, Noah, Connor and me after lunch when we went to pick up our tuxedos. Ed headed home after we got back to work on details for the guys' night out after the wedding rehearsal and rehearsal dinner. I reviewed my wedding vows for the umpteenth time. I spent too much time worrying whether I was ready for marriage. I decided in the end that Penny was the right lady and now was the right time. I WAS ready!

Penny came over to my house about twenty minutes ahead of the time to leave for the wedding rehearsal. I greeted her with a hug and a kiss. "How did your doctor's visit go?" Penny had gone to the OB/GYN in the morning.

"Everything is fine," Penny replied with a smile. "I have a present for you." Penny handed me a large, medical-style envelope. I pulled out the ultrasound and stared. You could see our baby's head, body, arms, legs, fingers and toes!

"Wow, she's bigger than I expected," I gushed as I stared at our child.

"It's too soon to know it's a girl," Penny responded. "The sex won't be differentiated for another couple months." Penny patted her tummy and gave me a quizzical look. "Why did you decide this is a girl?"

I explained, "I won't call our child an 'it.' As far as I'm concerned and until I hear otherwise, you are carrying our first daughter. She deserves to be treated like a person not a thing."

"I agree," Penny said.

"How big is she?"

"Dr. Hendershott says she is about the size of a lime right now," Penny answered.

"Wow, it is amazing that our child is so tiny and yet you can clearly see she's going to be a person."

"Do we break the news to our friends yet?" Penny asked.

"I thought we were going to wait until the chances of miscarriage are slim," I responded.

"Chances were about 10% at the end of May," Penny explained. "Dr. Hendershott says the chances are down to about 0.5% now. It looks as if we're going to have this baby. Maybe we tell our friends tonight."

"Let's wait until after the honeymoon, sweetie," I suggested. "The night before our wedding is a strange time to make the announcement."

"April's pretty curious about my morning nausea and today's doctor's appointment," Penny responded. "I don't think I can keep the secret much longer. Would it be terrible if I told some of our friends tonight?"

"Let me know who, so I can inform their other halves," I answered.

"Kathy, Tammy, April, Katie, Steph... uh..." Penny began.

"I'll tell Ed, Jeremy, Hal, Dave Hanson, Dakota, Trevor, Christian and Damian," I suggested.

"Oh, God! Dave and Dakota... we can't leave them out of the news," Penny gasped, "...and Bev. What about Bev Umble? I don't know if she is going out with the rest of us tonight."

"I'm sure Christian will pass the word on to Bev," I reassured my lover. I gave her a kiss. "Are you ready for rehearsal, dinner and a night out?"

"Let's do it," Penny agreed. We took my car over to the church. Mom, Dad, Andy, Liz and the twins arrived a couple of minutes behind us. Jim and Marilyn Edwards, Penny's sister Nikki and her husband Adrian, Trevor, Steph, Christian, Bev and Damian were there ahead of us. Will and Abby arrived a couple of minutes late. Traffic was a bear getting through Lancaster from scout camp. They needed to drop Will's half-brothers Ethan and Cody, off at Will's grandfather's house on the way to the church.

Reverend Hollinger briefed the ushers on their duties first. He spent quite a bit of time with Noah and Connor teaching them what to do tomorrow. Liz was our backup in case Noah or Connor got scared in front of the big crowd. She would escort the boys to the front where they would give our rings to Nikki and Ed. Liz would take them back to Mom and Dad, if necessary.

Rev reviewed the wedding service and had us repeat the pledges we would give when we exchanged rings. We skipped rehearsing our vows. Penny and I decided to keep our vows secret from each other until the wedding service. Rev kept things light as we prepared for our big day. He reviewed the recessional and then it was time for some good eats.

Everyone loaded up in the cars and headed for the rehearsal dinner in Lancaster. Dad reserved a private room for our party at the Gibraltar Restaurant, located on Harrisburg Pike across the street from the Franklin and Marshall College campus.

We had a homemade mozzarella and heirloom tomato appetizer and an arugula and endive salad to start our meal. Dad's guests had a choice of jumbo crab cakes, whole Adriatic Sea Branzino, roast chicken breast or a New York strip steak for dinner.

Penny said the Mediterranean-style fish was delicious. I had a strip steak. My football "family" got a chance to know my real family and Penny's family over a relaxing dinner. Rev greatly enjoyed meeting some of the football stars he watched on TV on Saturdays.

"You're not allowed to gush tomorrow at the reception," I teased. "The guys you are meeting tonight are nobodies compared to who will be at the wedding tomorrow – the college coach of the year and Pro Bowl players. I might have topped Zack Hayes' guest list from two years ago."

"I am looking forward to meeting all of them," Rev agreed. "I will be on my best behavior."

Everyone enjoyed the meal and time we shared together. Damian, Trevor and Jeremy all pulled cell phones out just before dessert and made calls. I knew they were bringing in reinforcements for the guys' night out they planned for me. Kathy, Tammy, Steph, Abby and Nikki were planning something similar for the girls. Mom and Dad consented to allow Liz to join the rest of the girls. After all, she was eighteen and would be on her own at Princeton in September.

I was stunned after dinner when we got outside. The parking lot was full of friends. Zack Hayes, Aaron Morano and Chip Brinton were talking with Dave McCall.

"You ready for tomorrow?" Zack queried when I came over to greet my mentor.

"As ready as I can be," I allowed. I greeted Aaron, Chip and Dave before circulating to greet more of my friends.

Josh Bruno, Charlie Taylor and Shawn Byrd were hanging out together. I headed over to that cluster, followed by my entourage. I introduced Jeremy, Hal, Ed, Trevor, Christian and Damian to the other guys they didn't already know. A car pulled up beside us while I was doing introductions. Trevor boomed out, "Matty D! It's damn good you could make it!"

Matt Dellavecchia stepped out of the car and gave Trevor a big grin. "Trevor, it's damn good to see you too. Hey, Chip," he added as he gave Chip Brinton a wave. Tyler Jackson hopped out of the passenger side of the car. I introduced my coaching compatriots to the rest of my crew.

"What's the plan for the evening?" I asked Ed. As best man, it was his job to organize the bachelor's party.

"I'd like to say we're having a stag party," Ed grumped.

"Saner heads prevailed," Jeremy interjected.

Trevor added, "The NFL spent half of last week preaching about making smart choices when you go out in public. I'd like to play in the NFL a little before I get kicked out for bad behavior."

"Jeremy helped set up an evening down at the Green Iguana," Ed responded. "Plain Opposition is playing two sets tonight."

"Cool," I responded. The local rock band "Plain Opposition" played at the Green Iguana a couple of times before when we were there. They were quite good, for a local band.

"OK guys, let's load up," Ed announced. "Take a left on Harrisburg Pike and head for the center of the city. Park in the garage on Prince Street. We'll meet up outside the garage and go in the club together. They have an area reserved for our group."

Our group assembled outside the parking garage and walked down the street together to the club. Ed and Jeremy led us up to the door. A couple of words with the doorman got us entry. They checked our IDs and stamped the hands of everyone over twenty-one. My brother Andy and Charlie Taylor were the only ones underage in our group. Andy was short about six months. Charlie Taylor would be twenty-one in three weeks.

We turned quite a few heads as we entered the club. Zack, Aaron, Jeremy, Chip and I all got recognized by the other patrons. The club roped off a special section for our party. Some fans did venture over to say hi or ask for autographs. We obliged them.

The band played a mix of classic rock covers and some of their own music. They played as well as we remembered from last year. I circulated around our section and tried to spend time with all my guests. I enjoyed a couple of beers during the evening. I limited myself because I had no desire to nurse a hangover on my wedding day.

I found Matt Dellavecchia, Trevor and Chip reminiscing at one point in the evening as I circulated. They were talking about their trek to the Philmont Scout Ranch. It sounded like a trip I would have enjoyed, if I had done it when I was a scout. Talk moved on to Indian (Unionville-Chadds Ford) football. I realized as they talked they had all been on the team together for at least a year or two.

"I never connected that the three of you were on the same team," I commented. "You're from Kennett Square. Trev and Chip live in Unionville. I assumed you played for the Kennett football team."

"I don't live in the borough," Matt explained. "Kennett addresses extend half-way to Unionville."

"Matty D and I were together on varsity for two seasons," Trevor added. "He was a good quarterback. He got us to the playoffs both years."

"Matty was a God-send to me," Chip added. "He's the one who taught me how to be a varsity quarterback while I was in JV."

Matt gave Chip a wink. "And then you paid me back by coming in for my senior season and stealing my starting job. You were only a tenth grader. I had hoped to hold you off for at least part of the season so I could get a scholarship from a Division I-A school."

"It's just football," Chip allowed. "Best man plays. I hope you don't have any hard feelings."

"None," Matt answered. "I knew when I saw you in eighth grade that someday you'd come in and take my job as QB. You had everything – size, arm, brains. Losing out to you was pretty inevitable."

"Same thing happened in my high school with Ed," I commented. "He beat out a senior when he was in tenth grade. I doubt Steve has forgiven Ed yet."

"God gave out talents," Matt agreed. "He made Chip a big-time quarterback. Hopefully he gave me the brains to be a decent football coach. I think that's my niche."

"It's a good niche," I agreed. "I like it."

Our party broke up around midnight. Ed and Jeremy had designated drivers for the evening. Of course Christian Hunsecker, Andy and Charlie were on the list, since they didn't or couldn't drink.

----oooOooo----

I surprised myself by sleeping until 9:30 on my wedding morning. I grabbed a bowl of cereal to tide me over until Mom's family brunch at 11:00. I tried to zone out listening to music and reading a book until it was time to shower and get ready.

Will, Abby and Rose joined the family for our brunch. Liz's date, Alex Weber, joined us along with Liz's best friend, Annie Stoltzfus. Annie was attending the wedding to chaperone and look after Hunter, Noah and Connor during the service and during the reception. Mom made a nice breakfast casserole with eggs, sausage, veggies, potatoes and cheese. Liz baked crescent rolls too.

Things got chaotic after brunch. Everyone was dashing around getting dressed, getting the kids dressed and getting everything together. Mom insisted on pictures of the whole family in tuxes, bridesmaids' dresses or their best Sunday dresses before we left for the church.

I let Andy drive my VW since he would be less nervous than I certainly was. He was in charge of my car for the rest of the day anyway. He'd take it from the church to the reception and then turn it back over to me when Penny and I left for our honeymoon that evening. The bridal party was gathering when we arrived. Everyone headed inside to get ready.

I waited nervously at the church with Will, Andy, Ed, Jeremy and Hal for almost a half hour as my guests and wedding party gathered. Zack and Aaron stopped out in the hallway to visit for a couple minutes. Will's half-brothers, Ethan and Cody, happened to pop in at the same time. They were star-struck by the array of college and NFL talent in the hallway, especially by Aaron Morano. They twins were from the Bay area and were fanatic 49ers fans. Aaron was their favorite player on the team and here he stood. They would be telling their friends back home about this day for months to come.

Reverend Hollinger signaled it was time to start. We marched to the front of the church and took our spots. We turned back to watch for the procession's entry. All the pews were filled with Penny's and my friends and family, and teammates and coaches from Penn State and Temple.

We stood in front as the organist finished the prelude. Eyes turned to the back as Vangelis' "Hymne" started to play. Penny's sister Nikki led the bridesmaids' procession into the sanctuary. Abby entered, followed by April, Kathy, Tammy and Stephanie.

My groomsmen and I watched as they paraded to the front and took their places to the left. Reverend Hollinger gave me a big smile as the bridesmaids arranged themselves facing the rear of the sanctuary. The organist struck up Cat Stevens' "Morning Has Broken" as Noah and Connor appeared at the back door with my sister Liz. She whispered to the twins and then they scampered down the aisle to the front.

The boys looked too cute in their tuxes with the red cummerbunds. They performed well, not getting distracted or scared as they walked to the front. The twins split when they reached us, Noah going over to Abby, carrying my ring. Abby held his hand. Connor came over and stood between Ed and Will, holding Will's hand. His pillow held Penny's ring.

All eyes turned to the back as the organist struck up the "Bridal Procession" (Here Comes the Bride). Jim Edwards escorted Penny down the aisle as everyone watched. My bride was resplendent in her flowing white gown. Penny and her dad stepped forward in time with the music.

I was mesmerized by the sight. God, I was luckiest man in the world that she would have me! They proceeded forward, step by solemn step. Jim lifted Penny's veil when they reached the front. Jim hugged my bride, gave her a kiss and whispered, "I am so happy for you, sweetie. Go with my love." Jim placed my hand in Penny's.

"Thank you, Daddy," Penny answered as he pulled her veil down again. We turned to face Rev together.

Rev opened with a prayer and then read two selections from the scriptures, informing Penny and me of the importance and solemnity of marriage.

"Hand in Hand you enter marriage, hand in hand you step out in faith. The hand you freely give to each other, is both the strongest and the most tender part of your body. In the years ahead you will need both strength and tenderness. Be firm in

your commitment. Don't let your grip become weak. And yet, be flexible as you go through change. Don't let your hold become intolerable. Strength and tenderness, firm commitment and flexibility, of such is a marriage made, hand in hand."

"Also remember that you don't walk this path alone. Don't be afraid to reach out to others when together you face difficulty. Other hands are there: friends, family, and the church. To accept an outreached hand is not an admission of failure, but an act of faith. For behind us, underneath us, around us all, are the outstretched arms of the Lord. It is into his hand, the hands of God in Jesus Christ, that, above all else, we commit this union of husband and wife. Amen."

"Doubly blessed is the couple which comes to the marriage altar with the approval and blessings of their families and friends. Who has the honor of presenting this woman to be married to this man?"

Jim and Marilyn stood and announced, "We do."

"Kyle and Penny will exchange vows they have chosen," Rev announced as he nodded to my bride. "Penny..." She let go of my hand and turned to face me.

Penny said, "Today, I want you to know how lucky I feel for having found the one perfect person for me, the one who suits me so comfortably and who gives me joy and boundless hope and anticipation for the future. Every day we're together, you do nothing but make me happy.

"We found love once and lost it. The day we found each other again was the day I became truly alive, and today — our wedding day — I declare my love and devotion for you before the entire world.

"I make a vow to stand by your side through the best and worst of times, and to give you the best of what I have from now until the end of our days."

My heart swelled as I listened to my love's words. I swallowed hard and steeled my nerves for my turn. I responded, "In this life, all people really want is a love that is true and that will remain for the rest of their lives.

"I am truly blessed to have found the truest of love with you, and today, I commit my life to yours. I pledge to love you for all time, and to stay faithful and true to you. I will comfort you in your pain and encourage you with your dreams. As our journey through life begins today, I promise to you that I will forever be by your side and I will be ready to face everything the world has to offer us."

Reverend Hollinger said, "Will you please, as an expression that your hearts are joined together in love, now please rejoin your hands." Penny and I turned to face each other and held hands.

"Kyle David Martin, do you take Penelope Ann Edwards to be your wedded wife, to live together in marriage? Do you promise to love her, comfort her, honor and keep her for better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and health and forsaking all others, be faithful only to her, so long as you both shall live?"

I answered confidently, "I do"

The Rev continued, "Penelope Ann Edwards, do you take Kyle David Martin to be your wedded husband, to live together in marriage? Do you promise to love him, comfort him, honor and keep him for better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and health and forsaking all others, be faithful only to him, so long as you both shall live?"

Penny replied, "I do"

The Rev motioned to Ed and Nikki and said, "The rings?" Ed handed Penny's ring to me. Nikki handed mine to Penny.

I said, "This ring I give to you as a token of my love and devotion to you. I pledge to you all that I am and all that I will ever be as your husband. With this ring, I gladly marry you and join my life to yours." I placed the ring on Penny's finger.

Penny answered, "I give you this ring as a symbol of my love and faithfulness. As I place it on your finger, I commit my heart and soul to you. I ask you to wear this ring as a reminder of the vows we have spoken today, our wedding day." She placed the ring on my finger.

Reverend Hollinger announced, "By the power vested in me by God and the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, I declare you man and wife." Penny raised her veil. "You may kiss your bride."

We kissed, our tongues touching as our lips locked together. I felt electricity jolt down my spine as we shared our first kiss as man and wife. We parted after too short a moment.

Turning towards the congregation, Rev announced, "Join with me in prayer as we ask God's blessing on this new couple. Eternal Father, redeemer, we now turn to you, and as the first act of this couple in their newly formed union, we ask you to protect their home. May they always turn to you for guidance, for strength, for provision and direction. May they glorify you in the choices they make, in the ministries they involve themselves in, and in all that they do. Use them to draw others to yourself, and let them stand as a testimony to the world of your faithfulness. We ask this in Jesus name, Amen."

"It is my privilege to announce for the first time, Mr. and Mrs. Kyle Martin," Rev pronounced. The congregation stood and applauded as we bowed and acknowledged our friends' and families' congratulations.

Rev raised his hands to the congregation and gave the blessing. "May your joys be as bright as the morning, your years of happiness as numerous as the stars in the heavens, and your troubles but shadows that fade in the sunlight of love."

The organist struck up the recessional. I linked arms with Penny and we marched down the aisle and out of the sanctuary. Ed and Nikki, Will and Abby, Andy and April, Jeremy and Kathy, Hal and Tammy, and Trevor and Stephanie followed us out into the vestibule. The twins flanked Will and Abby as the wedding party departed. Damian escorted Marilyn and Jim Edwards out while Christian escorted Mom and Dad.

My parents and the wedding party moved off to Fellowship Hall temporarily while our guests filed out of the sanctuary. We returned for fifteen minutes of wedding photos. The guests had assembled outside the church by the time we finished. Damian and Christian had passed packets of red and white rose petals to the guests. They showered Penny and me as we walked from the church to our limo.

Penny and I invited Nikki, Adrian, Trevor, Stephanie, Ed and his date, Paige Anderson to join us in the limo as it took us to Eden Resort in Lancaster. Andy was bringing my car to the reception for me. It was packed with everything Penny and I would need for a week in the Canadian wilderness.

Our limo was the first to arrive at the Eden, so Penny and I had time to strip off veils, trains, cummerbunds and so on so we could get comfortable. As my wife put it, "It's time to PARTY!" We greeted guests as they arrived. What a turn out.

Jason Nicholson came with his girlfriend Allison Ross. Jay had been expected to start when Zack Hayes graduated, until he got hurt in a car crash when we were sophomores. He transferred to James Madison University when Chip Brinton won the Nittany Lion starting spot at QB. It was great to reconnect with Jay. Allison was wonderful. I loved her soft Virginia drawl.

Lots of Nittany Lions and former Lions came. I made a point of inviting many of the team captains who had helped me succeed in college football. Zack Hayes and Aaron Morano. Pete Klein and his wife came up from Tampa. Bo Cherry wanted to come in from Hamilton, but was unable due to commitments to his team, the Tiger-Cats. Aaron's teammate, Andrew Perkins came in too. Karol Zizka came in from Minnesota. Tyler Madden made it. I was pleased and a little surprised when NFL MVP Antwaan Booker came with his fiancée Sheree Harris.

Antwaan greeted with me a big hug when we met. "Damn good to see you, kid. Is this the girlfriend you were so in love with back when you started college?"

"Yes, this is her," I acknowledged. "Penny Edwards... [chuckling] Let's try this again. Penny Martin, this is my former teammate and team captain, Antwaan Booker."

"Very nice to meet you, Mr. Booker," Penny replied as she shook the big man's hand.

"Antwaan... please call me Antwaan," my friend replied. "It's a damn good thing you didn't become no Raider, kid. My guys wouldn't have wanted to chase you around the field for the next ten or twelve years. Thanks for sticking it to the Davises"

"The Raiders aren't a good fit for me," I allowed.

"Are you going to go somewhere in the NFL?" Antwaan asked. "My coaches are trying to move heaven and earth to do a deal with the Raiders to get your rights. Those SOBs want two first round picks and a second for you. That ain't happening."

"I expect to play somewhere within the next year," I answered. "I'm open to pretty much any team that has a decent QB."

"I hope it's with us," Antwaan said. "We got the good QB for you. Brady Rasmussen is going to be a star."

"I know," I agreed. "Brady is an excellent quarterback. I count him among my friends."

"A big guy for the slot," Antwaan said. "That's exactly what our team needs."

"You picked up Cameron Jordan [from Hawaii] in the second round, didn't you?" I asked.

"We did."

"He's a good receiver," I replied. "I know him a little from the Senior Bowl. Cameron's big and can catch balls in traffic. He should help your team this season."

"I suppose he will," Antwaan agreed. "He looked OK through OTAs and mini-camp." Antwaan looked me in the eye. "If my team comes calling, you'll consider playing for them?"

"Antwaan, I loved playing for Coach Baldwin at the Senior Bowl," I responded. "I certainly would play for the Broncos."

"Good!" Antwaan chortled. "Now all we got to do is make Davis' kid see the light and let us have you."

"Good luck with that," I answered. Antwaan and Sheree moved on. Penny and I continued greeting guests. I relayed the conversation to Max Solomon when we met later that evening. It was exciting to know teams were seriously interested in obtaining my rights. The Raiders' asking price was depressing. What team would give up two first-round and a second-round draft pick to obtain a wide receiver? Max noted that the impasse would likely continue into the NFL season. Either a team would get desperate for wide receiver help and meet the Raiders' price or the price would go down as the season went on. Either way, I was going to stay a graduate assistant coach for quite a while this fall.

The Penn State and Temple coaching staffs ended up hanging out together. I guess that wasn't a surprise. I had invited Coach Golden, Coach D'Ornofrio, Coach Rhule, Coach Buck along with my fellow grad assistants, Matt and Tyler. All the coaches were Penn State grads and knew most of the coaching staff from playing for or working together somewhere in their careers.

Jim Edwards interrupted my talk with the coaches with the announcement that dinner was ten minutes away. Much of the group headed to the bar to grab a drink for dinner before finding tables. I grabbed a beer for myself and a Coke for Penny.

Penny and I nixed the idea of a head table during the wedding planning. We sat at a circular table, just like the rest of our guests, but near the front. Jeremy, Kathy, Hal, Tammy, Ed and Paige joined us at our table.

Our guests had a choice of filet mignon with a crab cake, prime rib or shrimp imperial. Penny and I were contributing substantially to the costs of the reception. Both of us wanted the best for our guests, many of whom travelled halfway across the country to get here. We had money and there was no reason for Jim Edwards to bankrupt himself for this affair.

The Eden Resort produced an excellent dinner. I had the filet mignon with crab cakes. Penny had the shrimp imperial. We shared our entrees. Both were excellent. Tammy pronounced her prime rib to be tender, juicy and flavorful.

The waiters brought around flutes of champagne after the tables were cleared. Penny was engrossed in conversation with Tammy when the waiter asked, "Champagne for everyone?"

"My wife doesn't drink," I replied. "Could you get her some ginger ale instead?"

"Would sparkling apple cider be suitable?" he responded.

"Sparkling apple cider, honey?"

"Sure, that's fine," Penny acknowledged before continuing her conversation with Tammy. The waiter returned a couple minutes later with Penny's drink.

"You ready, buddy?" I asked Ed. He smiled and nodded yes.

Ed stood, holding his champagne flute in his right hand. "Everyone... attention," Ed insisted. Someone who could command his huddle's attention in the din of LSU's Death Valley had no trouble commanding the attention of two hundred wedding guests.

"Thank you all for coming to Kyle and Penny's wedding. I am especially glad to be here with my best friend to celebrate the day of his wedding. This has been a wonderful day that was a long time coming.

"I don't know if all of you know, but Penny is my next-door neighbor. Kyle lives two doors down from me on the opposite side from Penny. Our moms are all friends and we've grown up together since we were in diapers. Jeremy, Hal, Tammy and Kathy completed our gang of neighborhood friends. The eight of us did nearly everything together as we grew up."

"Did you notice he counted Stef [Steffany Horst, Ed's ninth grade girlfriend]?" Penny whispered to me.

"Yeah he did," I acknowledged.

"Football was one of the first things that separated our group of friends. Jeremy and I were gung ho for football from the time they allowed us to play Junior Pee-Wees in third grade. Hal was nuts about soccer then and didn't join football with us. Kyle was resistant too. We finally talked him into Pee-Wees in fifth grade. He hated it. One season and he was done.

"Coach Caffrey visited our middle school field day when we were in eighth grade and changed the course of Kyle's life. We didn't know it at the time but that event changed all our lives. Coach watched Kyle running a blazing 100-yard dash..."

Ed scanned the audience until he spotted Drew McCormick and Stacie Thompson. "If my memory serves me correctly, he beat your ass, Drew."

"He did," Drew acknowledged, nodding in agreement.

"Coach saw something in this tall skinny kid that the rest of us didn't see. Frankly, Jeremy and I were worried that Kyle was going to get killed playing varsity with the big guys. Kyle was so scrawny back then that if Kyle's birthday were three weeks later, he could have qualified to play Junior-Midgets with the fifth-, sixth- and seventh-graders as a thirteen year old, older, lighter player. Instead he was playing with guys the size of full grown men.

"Well... the football thing worked out pretty well for Kyle." The audience chuckled at Ed's understatement. "That is how Kyle found one of the two great loves in his life.

"The other love he found that same summer. Kyle and Penny think the rest of us didn't know about their first kiss by campfire-light up in Algonquin that summer, but we all knew. That was the start of what was turned into a beautiful romance. As has happened more than once, football interfered with fate... temporarily.

"Kyle and Penny didn't go on their first date until after football finished that season and Kyle had established himself as a rising star. Fate put the two of them together but many things interfered on their path to today.

"Immaturity led to a break-up in tenth grade. Fate pushed them back together again. Football and their career paths pulled them apart during college. Thank God, fate pushed them back together again last year. They stand here today, husband and wife."

Ed turned to Penny and me. "Your testing is not done. The Raiders may have temporarily sidelined Kyle but not permanently. Temple Football has graciously come to his rescue. Penny, keep communications open when Kyle puts too much focus on football during the season. Kyle, you can't spend a whole week in the film room." That drew a laugh from the crowd that knew my proclivities. "Listen to your wife when she says it's time for a break. Don't tempt fate again like you did in ninth grade and in college. Work to make sure you keep this love strong against all trials and temptations.

"Everyone, let's raise our glasses to Kyle and Penny," Ed announced. He gave the crowd a chance to get to their feet before continuing. "To a long, loving and fruitful marriage." Ed gave us a knowing wink. Most of the crowd did not know that our marriage was going to be fruitful sooner rather than later.

"To Kyle and Penny," the crowd chanted as the raised their glasses and toasted our marriage.

"That's a home run, buddy," I complimented to Ed after everyone sat down. "Well done."

"Thank God for the Internet," Ed answered. "I would have been lost without it."

"You did very well, Ed," Penny commented.

"It's our turn now, honey," I commented. Penny and I walked up to the front table where our wedding cake was on display. I held my arm up to get everyone's attention. The room got quiet immediately.

"When Penny and I... and our moms planned this event," I began.

"When our moms, with occasional help from us," Penny corrected.

"When our moms planned this," I agreed. "They wanted everyone in the family involved. "Nikki, Adrian, Will, Abby and Andy were in the wedding party. Noah and Connor were ring bearers... My sister Liz has done yeoman work greeting people, helping with the guest register and helping with the gifts. One member of our family was feeling left out when we were planning things. This is your time, Hunter. Come on up and help Penny and me cut the wedding cake."

Hunter hopped up from the kids table where he was hanging out with Noah, Connor and Annie Stoltzfus. He got about ten feet before he realized every eye in the room was on him. He froze.

"Come on, Hunter," I coaxed. He remained rooted to the floor. Finally Liz hopped up and led my little brother to the front table. "It's just you, me and Penny up here," I encouraged as I helped him onto the chair by the five-tier cake. "Nothing to be nervous about. Concentrate on Penny and me." Hunter managed to give us a smile.

"Don't be nervous, big guy," Aaron called from the second row. "You big brother had to relieve himself of his... 'butterflies' in the bathroom before his first game in college. I helped him clean up afterward. Kyle went out and promptly scored a touchdown on his first play."

"Aaron's right," I whispered to Hunter. "I puked all over the place. You're doing so much better than I did in the spotlight that day." Penny pulled the bride and groom off the top of the cake and set them aside. I gave the cake knife to my brother. Penny held his hand while I held both hands. We managed to cut three pieces without harming the rest of the cake.

We put one slice on a plate and handed it to Hunter. "There you go, little bro. Enjoy." Hunter sat down at the front table and dove in, disregarding wedding tradition. Penny and I placed slices on each other's plates. Penny fed me a piece from her cake.

"Mash it in his face," one of my cousins yelled out. I turned to face my tormentor as soon as Penny fed me my bite, carefully I might add.

"Young man, behave!" I growled sternly as I wagged my finger toward him. "You're going on 'time out' if you're not careful!" That drew a laugh from everyone in Mom's family and anyone else who knew that I was channeling Mom or Grammy Robinson at that moment. I fed Penny her cake without incident. Penny and I agreed that the wedding tradition of smashing cake in each other's faces was ridiculous.

Waiters carried the cake away to be cut and served. Another waiter delivered ice cream to Hunter, Penny and me. Hunter's piece of cake was nearly gone by the time we sat down. He polished off the ice cream quickly too. Penny and I took him back to the kids table with Noah and Connor.

The DJ set up while the guests enjoyed the ice cream and cake. Before we knew it, it was time for Penny and me to have our first dance as husband and wife. We waltzed around the dance floor as the crowd cheered us on.

"Is today everything you imagined when you were younger?" I asked.

"It is," Penny agreed as she held tighter as we spun around the room. "I hope you're able to fulfill the rest of my wedding night's expectations." Penny laughed. "You keep teasing me about how horny pregnant women are. You better not wear out tonight. I have extremely high expectations of your performance."

"I will do my best, sweetie," I declared.

Ed, as best man, and Nikki, as maid of honor, joined us on the floor for the next dance. I turned Penny over to Jim Edwards for a dance while I took Mom out for a spin. The entire wedding party was out on the floor for the following song. The whole crowd got to dancing when the wedding party finished. Penny and I danced a bit and then went table hopping, so we could visit all our guests. We got to meet Max Solomon's wife Rose. She was a real sweetheart.

Will's brothers Ethan and Cody mixed well with the younger Martins, Hunseckers, Edwards and Robinsons. Ethan seemed especially taken with my cousin, Allison Raffensberger, Aunt Mary and Uncle Mike's fourteen-year-old daughter. Cody managed to dance with every one of my and Penny's cousins between the age of thirteen and seventeen.

Penny and I continued mingling. I finally got to visit with the rest of my Penn State teammates. Dave McCall, Brian Henson, Josh Bruno, Charlie Taylor, Tanner Riggs and Greg Nowicki all made it with their dates or girlfriends. Penny and I spent time with our Penn friends too. Penny took Dakota and Dave Hansen out for spins on the floor. I danced with April and Katie.

Before we knew it, it was nine o'clock and time for two more wedding traditions. The DJ assembled all the eligible girls in the center of the dance floor. Penny chased Stephanie Kolmar out of the group. She wasn't eligible or available anymore. Penny's cousin Ann caught the bouquet.

I made a big show of hiking up Penny's wedding dress to get her garter. The DJ lined up the eligible bachelors. Brian Henson, showing true wide receiving abilities, outleapt my brother Andy and Dave McCall to snag the garter. Courtney Battle, Brian's date, was less than enthused at being teased about marrying next. Brian and Courtney had been dating for quite a few months but their relationship hadn't gotten to the talking-about-marriage stage yet.

Penny and I slipped out to the bathrooms after the throwing the bouquet and tossing the garter ceremonies were done. We changed into travelling clothes. Penny gave her wedding dress to her mom. I gave my tux to Trevor. He'd make sure I got it back next weekend when the two of us exchanged roles. I was to be one of his groomsmen for his wedding next Saturday.

Penny and I almost felt like we were in another receiving line when we came back to the ballroom. Everyone had to come by and wish us the best on our honeymoon and marriage. We were part-way through the crowd of well-wishers when Trevor took the microphone from the DJ.

"This announcement is for all the Penn Staters here tonight," Trevor intoned. "Steph and I would like to thank all of you for coming to the rehearsal for our wedding next Saturday. We'll see you in Woodmont." His announcement brought laughter and catcalls from the Penn State contingent.

I walked up and took the mike from my friend. "Penny and I would like to thank everyone for coming today. We're going to have to hit the road. We have a long drive to Pottsville and... [chuckling]... some other activities planned for the night."

Penny took the mike. "Thank you for coming tonight. We'll see you in a week or so."

The big crowd followed us out to my VW, which was parked right outside the door. Andy and April were still glued to each other. Penny was probably right. My brother was going to get lucky tonight. Good for him.

Ethan Henry was glued to my cousin Allison Raffenberg. That was too bad. They made a cute couple but she was a G.U.G. – geographically-undesirable-girl. The commute from Sunnyvale, California to Brownstown, Pa. was a bitch.

The wedding party had painted my VW with "Just Married" signs, hung strings of beads and covered it with way too much garland. Penny and I removed most of the decorations. I spotted some fishing line tied to the bumper. I cut it off with my pocket-knife.

The crowd cheered us on as I helped Penny into the passenger's side. I hopped in too and we headed off. Penny and I saw the pile of cans that stayed behind where our car was parked. Both of us rolled down our windows and gave the crowd a final wave before I turned onto Eden Road. A minute later we were on the bypass heading for Route 222 and Reading.

Penny called ahead to the Partridge House, the bed and breakfast in Pottsville where would spend our wedding night. The owners were gracious enough to reserve us their finest room, the Rose Room, for the night. They'd be up and leave the porch light on for us.

The drive up Route 222 to Reading and then north on Route 61 through Hamburg was nice. The ninety degree midday temperature had moderated by the time we reached Port Clinton. The stars sparkled in the clear, moonless sky when we left civilization's lights behind.

We found the Partridge House was a big Victorian house halfway up the hill overlooking Pottsville. The place was probably a coal baron's mansion from the previous century. I parked in one of the guest parking spots. Penny and I carried our overnight bags inside.

"Mr. and Mrs. Martin, welcome to Partridge House," Mr. Montini, the owner said to greet us.

"Sounds pretty good, doesn't it?" I said as I gave my wife a kiss on the cheek.

"We've been married for eight hours," Penny explained.

"Congratulations on your wedding," Mr. Montini replied. "I believe you will enjoy our accommodations.

We took care of signing in and paying for the room. Mr. Montini took us upstairs to our room. He had laid out a bouquet of red roses on the king-size canopy bed. A bottle of champagne was chilling on the dresser. We thanked our host, put down our overnight bags and kissed.

"Do you want to clean up before we have some fun?" I teased between kisses.

"We could do both at the same time," Penny responded.

"I doubt an old place like this has tubs large enough for what is on your naughty mind, Mrs. Martin. Why don't you go first? I won't take long to get a shower."

"OK, Mr. Martin," Penny agreed. "Have some champagne while you wait for me. Get in the mood."

"Will do, sweetie," Penny said. She disappeared into the bathroom. I was still undressing when my sweetie called out. "I need help with my back, Mr. Martin. Come help me. Clothing is not necessary."

The last comment was superfluous. I was wearing nothing but boxers. I popped into the bathroom to find my naked wife luxuriating in the hot water in a two-person-sized shower stall. "Come in, the water's wonderful, honey." I shucked my boxers and joined her in the shower.

Did we make love under the warm spray? Of course we did. We tested that big canopy bed too. Our lovemaking that evening was every bit as enthusiastic as any night we had ever spent together. We gave each other more climaxes than either of us could count.

"Wow... that definitely makes my wedding day complete, sweetie," Penny gasped as she recovered from her last orgasm.

I cuddled against my naked wife and panted, "You were pretty special too. I ran my hand over the barely noticeable bump that was our first child. We exchanged kisses for a minute or so.

"I have one more thing to make tonight complete," I said. I hopped out of bed and padded across the room to my bag. I returned with a small jewelry box. "I wanted to give you something that says how I feel about you." I handed the box to Penny.

She opened it and pulled out the interlocking rings pendant I bought last Christmas time. "This is beautiful, Kyle," Penny declared as she put the pendant around her neck. The two rings sparkled against my wife's pale skin.

"I thought this was the perfect way to represent my feelings for us," I explained. "The two rings are our lives joined together today... joined together forever."

"Together forever," Penny agreed as she hugged me. "This is the perfect end to the perfect day. I love you so much."

"I love you too," I agreed. We sealed our life together with a deep kiss. Our last time that evening? It was tender and loving. I cried when we finished. So did my wife.

Chapter 4

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Our host kindly made us an early breakfast on Sunday morning so we could get on the road. Our outfitter outside Algonquin Park was a nine-hour drive from Pottsville. We reached the familiar rustic buildings around 4:30 that afternoon. We had enough time to check over the gear and food they prepared for us before the office closed. We stayed in one of their cabins for the night.

Penny and I had cereal, orange juice and fruit for breakfast Monday morning. We loaded our two packs in the back of our car and headed west for the park. We reached Opeongo Store half an hour later. They outfitted us with a canoe, paddles, lifejackets. We loaded the canoes and gear into the shuttle boat at ten o'clock. He took us north up the North Arm of Opeongo Lake and dropped us off at the portage leading to Proulx Lake.

I helped Penny put on the big Duluth pack with our personal and cooking gear. I shouldered the second, lighter pack with our food barrel and tent. I hefted our canoe upside down onto my shoulders and followed my wife up the hill. We reached the tiny lake partway through the portage in a couple minutes. The park map showed we were supposed to canoe across the little lake. It might have been about the size of two football fields end to end.

Penny teased, "You want to canoe this piss pot or live dangerously and use the unmaintained trail around the lake?"

"I think we should live dangerously," I answered. The "unmaintained" trail seemed well worn by previous campers. Did anyone ever drop their canoe in the little, unnamed lake?

We reached the crest of the ridge between Opeongo and Proulx Lake a few minutes later. The downhill section of trail was easy – not too rocky and open above so my canoe didn't catch or brush against low branches. We found a Boy Scout troop unloading their gear from their canoes when we reached the end of the 1450-meter portage. Penny and I set our gear down and let them finish unloading. Penny and I talked with the leaders as they packed up for their portage. They were on the last day of an eight-day trek in the park.

I asked, casually, "Where are you guys from?" as a pair of scouts started up the hill towards Opeongo.

"Pennsylvania," they called back.

"Us too," I called. "Where in Pennsylvania?"

"Scranton," the second scout called back as they hiked on.

"We're from Lancaster County," Penny responded.

One of the older scouts was standing in the lake by the shore, handing out packs and other gear as the crew loaded up. He hefted the last pack and started up the trail past Penny and me. The boy, who looked to be about eighteen, was wearing a faded, very dirty Penn State t-shirt. He started up the hill but stopped short when he reached Penny and me. He gave me a brief stare of recognition.

"Hey, you're Kyle Martin, aren't you?" the young man asked.

"I am," I confirmed.

"I've been a big fan," he replied. "I've watched all your games and have planned to go to Penn State since I was little. I start in University Park in the fall." He laughed. "Actually, I start next month. I wish you were still there. I always wanted to see you play live. My dad let me get student tickets to all the home games."

"Good for you," I responded. "Cheer for my friends on the Lions next fall. I will be doing that... from a distance."

"Are you going to sign with the Raiders?" he asked.

"No chance," I answered. "I am working as a graduate assistant coach at Temple now."

"Good luck with that..." the young man responded, "...except when Temple plays us."

"Fair enough," I called out as the young man started up the hill for Opeongo Lake. "That is the one game I will NOT be cheering for the Lions."

I waded out about six feet and plopped our canoe down in the lake. "It is a small world, isn't it?" Penny remarked. "Here we are in the Canadian wilderness and you get fans recognizing you."

"It's going to get worse, not better if some NFL team picks me up," I added.

"I hope it does," Penny said. "I will love having you at home this fall but you really should be playing football. It sucks that the Raiders put you in purgatory this year."

"C'est la vie," I answered. "I'd love to play in the NFL, no doubt about it. The choice I have is to play for the Raiders or start my coaching career early. I am satisfied with the choice I have made."

"I'm glad," Penny said. "This is probably a blessing in disguise since we have our little one coming this winter."

"It is," I agreed. "Imagine the challenges of going through a pregnancy while I was half way across the country playing somewhere in the NFL."

"God may have a plan for us," Penny replied.

We set our packs in the canoe and climbed aboard. We paddled halfway across the lake before pulling into a campsite for lunch. It was the campsite on the peninsula where my crew had stayed six years ago, the last time we had been to Algonquin. The site looked much as I remembered it. We ate salami on pocket pita with mustard, some trail mix and oranges for lunch. We headed north up the narrow arm of Proulx Lake leading to the Big Crow River.

The narrow Big Crow River channel meandered through a quarter-mile-wide swamp. I followed the sinuous channel north into Little Crow Lake. Penny spotted a moose at the northern end of the lake as we paddled out of the river. The animal was too skittish to allow us to come near enough to get photos. He bolted into the woods when we were halfway across the lake.

We paddled through the narrow channel between Little Crow and Big Crow Lakes and headed towards two campsites on the northern shore of the Big Crow Lake. The first campsite we came to was nice but didn't have a great view of the lake. We paddled around a small peninsula to the second campsite. It was vacant, level and had a spectacular view of almost the entire lake. Penny and I unloaded our gear and set up camp for the next three days.

The black flies were biting at camp. Penny and I hurried our dinner preparations, ate, hung our food barrel and went to bed. Not to sleep, but to enjoy more of our honeymoon. We cuddled and listened to the loons play and call each other in the lake outside our tent. We made love three times. We even heard a wolf call to his pack and them return his howls. Later the stars came out and added to the grandeur of the evening.

----oooOooo----

After breakfast on Tuesday, Penny and I did a day trip up to Hogan Lake. We explored the lake the whole way up to Parks Bay. We got to observe a mama moose and her little one close up. Penny took lots of pictures to show our friends and family. We did a little fishing at the southern end of Hogan Lake. We caught a couple nice-sized fish that came back to camp for our dinner. It was an all-around nice day.

Wednesday morning we paddled over to the south side of the lake and hiked up to the old fire tower. We had a spectacular view of Big Crow Lake from the top. After lunch we headed down the Crow River. We visited the immense virgin pines. We got close enough to observe the beavers working on their dam just downriver of Big Crow Lake.

We got up early, ate a cold breakfast and headed back through Little Crow and Proulx Lakes. We caught the shuttle boat back to civilization at noon on the North Arm of Opeongo Lake. We turned our gear in at Opeongo Store, showered and headed east. Penny and I grabbed lunch at the pizza shop in Whitney before heading south for the Thousand Island area and the United States.

Penny and I spent Thursday night in a hotel outside Watertown, NY. We didn't need to hurry Friday. Our four-hour drive yesterday had left us with five hours that day to get to Stephanie Kolmar's church in time for the wedding rehearsal. We had a leisurely breakfast at a Cracker Barrel Restaurant before heading for Bucks County. We grabbed a light lunch near Scranton after we got off I-81 and before we got on the Northeast Extension of the Pa. Turnpike. We checked into our hotel in Willow Grove midafternoon, leaving us plenty of time to relax before heading over to the church.

Penny and I ran into Josh Bruno, Shawn Byrd and Damian Thompson in the parking lot when we came out to head for the rehearsal. We gave them a hearty greeting before following them over to the church in Warminster. Trevor's parents, Trevor, Stephanie and two guys our age I didn't know were there ahead of us.

Trevor introduced Caleb McGuire and Stephanie's brother Ryan. Caleb was Trevor's best friend since they met in kindergarten. Caleb recently graduated from Millersville with a degree in education. He specialized in technology and engineering. He just was hired to teach CADD and electronics at Drumore High school in southern Lancaster County. Ryan was starting his junior year at Rowan University next month. He was majoring in Geographical Information Science.

Stephanie's parents arrived a couple of minutes later. Stephanie introduced all of us to her minister, Rev. David Smith. He conducted the rehearsal much as Rev. Hollinger had done last weekend. Caleb was Trevor's best man. I stood beside Caleb, joined by Shawn then Ryan. Stephanie's friend from school, Lauren Patton, was the maid of honor. Penny and Shawn's fiancée Jada stood beside Lauren. Josh and Damian were serving as ushers.

Mr. Kolmar arranged to have the rehearsal dinner down the street at a restaurant called Augustino's. It was a fancy Italian place a block from the church. I enjoyed their appetizer, a mini-Angus burger and a mini-crab cake on brioche buns. Penny had a sausage and spinach flat bread pizze. The restaurant served a caprese salad of heirloom tomatoes and mozzarella cheese drizzled with a balsamic reduction. Delicious!

We had a choice of beef bourguignon, rack of lamb or cioppino. The last dish was a seafood pasta dish with a roasted tomato chardonnay sauce. I couldn't resist the beef. Penny went with the seafood pasta. She shared a bit of her pasta. It was heavenly. I let her have some of my exquisite beef bourguignon. I knew Mr. Conwell was spending a small fortune on this dinner. The well-dressed patrons and elegant décor established his restaurant an expensive, fine dining destination.

The ladies left from the church for Stephanie's bachelorette night. The guys all headed back to the hotel in Willow Grove to drop off our cars. Trevor was springing for taxis for the group so we could enjoy the evening at the lounge we were going to without worrying about designated drivers. My buddy could afford it. He received a \$1.3 million signing bonus check a couple of weeks ago. Two taxis hauled Trevor, Caleb, Damian, Josh, Ryan and me to the Spotlight, a gentlemen's club over in Bristol.

Damian teased Trevor and Josh that this club was exactly the kind of place the NFLPA recommended the rookies stay out of at their symposium last month – the one I blew off. Max had smoothed things out with the NFLPA. I would not be fined \$50,000 for missing the symposium.

Spotlight had some cute girls dancing for our viewing pleasure. Our party was tamer than the one for Zack Hayes two years ago. No lap dances. No one got dead drunk. I limited myself to two beers. I had to go home to sleep with my sweetie. No need to get her up in arms about me drinking too much. A couple of taxis picked us up around midnight and took us back to our hotel, dropping Ryan off at the Kolmars on the way.

Penny wasn't back at our room when I returned. It was late so I went to bed. My honey announced her arrival much later with too much light and clatter. Penny undressed and joined me in bed. I gave her a cuddle and a kiss on the neck before falling asleep again. We slept in Saturday morning. We didn't need to be to the church until 2:00 PM.

Most of the wedding party, less Stephanie, her brother Ryan and her parents, went out for a late morning brunch. Trevor took us to a small restaurant a couple miles down the road that Stephanie took him to frequently when he visited. Penny and I splurged. We had the crab eggs benedict. It was worth the price. Everyone headed back to the hotel to shower and dress for the ceremony.

I didn't have any special duties as a member of the wedding party, other than keeping Trevor from crawling out of his brain while he waited for the ceremony. I was uniquely qualified among our group since I was the only married person in the retinue. I hadn't done too bad last Saturday, other than spacing out for about ten minutes while I "inspected" the electrical panel in the church. Caleb, Shawn, Ryan and I talked and joked, keeping Trevor from freaking out from nerves. Mercifully the wait wasn't long before we marched to the front of the church for the ceremony.

Rev. Smith's service was very similar to Rev. Hollinger's last Saturday. Everyone played their roles properly. Half an hour later the Reverend pronounced Trevor and Stephanie man and wife. Penny and I stood with the bridal party for pictures and then it was time to head over to the Warrington Country Club for the reception. Time to PARTY!

The country club's facilities were excellent. The company was great. Half the crowd at the reception looked real familiar – the Penn State half. Antwaan Booker and Sherree Harris stayed east for the week to make it to the wedding. Aaron and Tania Morano hung out with their parents between weddings, as did Zack and Leigh Ann Hayes. Jake Washington made it in from San Diego. Trevor's wedding featured more linemen and linebackers and fewer wide receivers than my ceremony last week. No surprise. Coach Burton, Coach Csarwinski, Coach Keller, Coach Atkins and Yasin Clark represented the Nittany Lions coaching staff.

Darrelle Revis, Bart Scott, Muhammed Wilkerson, Mark Sanchez, Nate Thornton and Kevin Pettis represented the New York Jets players. I knew Nate and Kevin already since they had played at the Senior Bowl with Trevor and me. Coach Rex Ryan, Coach Thurman and Coach Dunbar came.

Mr. Kolmar (and Trevor's signing bonus) treated the guests to the best meals. Penny chose the Chicken Oscar, a breaded chicken breast smothered in lump crab and béarnaise sauce. I had the more traditional surf and turf. Caleb did a nice toast to the couple. Trevor and Stephanie took the dance floor first. Soon the whole wedding party was out on the floor. I enjoyed dancing with my sweetie.

I had an interesting conversation with Coach Rex Ryan as Penny and I table hopped and visited with our friends.

"Kyle Martin! It's damned good to see you," Rex declared as we shook hands. "You ready to play for my team in New York if my GM gets you away from those damned Raiders?"

"I'd love to play for you guys," I replied.

"Hey, Mark," Rex called to the next table, where most of the Jets players were. "We're working on getting you that wide receiver you want."

"Do that, Coach," Mark answered. "Steal him away from those guys in Oakland."

Penny and I talked with the coaches for a while before moving on to visit the Jets players. I enjoyed talking with the players, particularly Darrelle.

"I hope our GM pulls off the trade," Darrelle reported. He gave me a smile and pointed across the room towards Aaron Morano. "My buddy tells me you were hell to cover when you were together in college. I'd rather face you in practice every day than face you across the line during games that count. Competition on a team can help the receiver and cornerback both."

"Don't I know it," I agreed. "I played against Aaron in high school and practiced against him in college my freshmen year. Shawn Byrd and I fed off each other for the next three years."

"I expect Byrd to be a good one," Darrelle replied. "There's a reason the Biletnikoff and a Thorpe awards went to players from the same school last season."

It felt great being accepted by NFL players. They treated me like I was part of the league even though I hadn't set foot in a NFL team locker room yet. Penny and I mingled with the Penn Staters at the wedding. I enjoyed talking with Coach Burton about my experiences at Temple. Coach wished me the best, except next September when our teams faced each other.

We enjoyed the wedding cake and ice cream. Penny and I danced. I enjoyed the champagne and a few beers. We danced and danced and enjoyed conversation with our friends. I gave Penny the keys to our VW when it was time to go back to the hotel. I wasn't totally wasted, but I wasn't feeling any pain either.

----oooOooo----

Penny and I went back to Paradise Sunday morning after the wedding. We spent the afternoon showing off our honeymoon pictures with our families. My family and Penny's family shared dinner at my house before I headed back to Philly. Penny stayed in Paradise to return my tux and take care of odds and ends at home. She was working the afternoon at New Bolton Center and would return to our apartment Monday evening. I needed to get an early start at work at Temple. Football camp for our team started in three weeks and the freshmen reported a few days sooner. Matt, Tyler and I had a ton of work to do for the coaches so they were ready.

I worked Monday and Tuesday at Temple. Penny met me at Edberg-Olson late Tuesday afternoon and drove me to the airport. Nike flew me out to L.A. first class that evening for a two-day commercial shoot. Nike's ad agency came up with a clever take on my situation that would be featured in four commercials this fall. All featured shots of me running away from a horde of black and silver clad barbarians. Little imagination was required to figure out who the barbarians were – the Oakland Raiders and their fans. The shoot was done in the hills outside L.A. It was grueling and boring. We were out for fourteen hours on Wednesday and another dozen hours Thursday. I caught a flight back to Philly Thursday evening.

The next three weeks flew by. I put in ten to sixteen hours a day, six days a week as our team prepared for football camp. I still had to make time for my two history courses too. I saw little of Penny except in bed the first week. My loving wife decided to bring supper over to Edberg-Olson two or three nights a week the other weeks so we had a little together time.

I spent four years in a top-notch college football program but had no idea how involved the preparations needed to be to put on a football camp and get a team ready for the season. I was receiving a true graduate education on how to run a football program from Coach Rhule and Coach Golden.

Most of the NFL teams went to camp the last week of July. This led to a flurry of teams trying to extract my rights from the Raiders, without success. They still wanted too much in trade for me. Mark Davis contacted me through Max to see what it would take to get me into a Raider's uniform for camp. Al Davis dropping dead wasn't sufficient incentive, so I passed. Nothing would get me into silver and black. The Raiders wasted their first-round draft pick on me, just as I warned them they would if they chose me. Per NFL rules, all interest ended in trading for my rights, thirty days before the first game in the season. My rights were no longer tradable.

The freshmen showed up Friday, August 1st for their orientation. Matt, Tyler and I spent a lot of time with them the next two days giving tours, helping them get their equipment, learn their way around the weight room, start to learn their playbooks, and get accustomed to being FCS level college football players.

The rest of the team arrived two days later. Temple's football camp differed little from what I was used to at Penn State. I suspected the few differences I found came from the University of Virginia, where Coach Golden worked for a number of years. Otherwise it was much like the Paterno/Burton camps I was used to. Practices, meetings, study sessions, work-outs and meals

at the training table. We used the activities room/dining hall in Edberg-Olson for our training table for all meals until classes started. After that, I would have dinners with our football team for the next three and a half months.

I was curious to see the 40-yard dash times for the team when we tested them Monday morning. The top time by a player on the team was 4.37 seconds. Dave Mitchell was tied for third fastest with a 4.39 seconds. The other wide receivers did 4.4s, 4.5s, a couple 4.6s and one 4.7 second time. At Penn State we had ten to twelve players breaking 4.40 seconds each year.

The Temple coaching staff was smaller than what I was used to from Penn State. Coach Rhule, our passing game coordinator, and Coach Deal, our QB coach, were the only full-time coaches involved with quarterbacks, tight ends and wide receivers. Matt Dellavecchia and I got to do more hands-on coaching than I expected as a grad assistant. I didn't mind at all. I demonstrated techniques for the receivers as they started various drills. I gave them tips on body position and how to get a break from the d-back.

Coach Tom Berger, our special teams coach, used me to instruct the kick returners and punt returners. No surprise. I held NCAA records for most yards kick returning and punt returning as well as the best season average in yards per kick return.

The two and half weeks before fall classes started didn't seem to be nearly enough time to prepare for our first game on August 31st. Coach Golden allowed me a little extra time off as summer classes wound down. I completed a final term paper in lieu of taking a final in one of my courses. I took a blue-book-essay final exam in the other course the day before freshmen arrived on campus. I was confident I got good grades in both courses. They were grad level courses, but didn't seem that hard to me. I guess I had been doing grad level independent study in history for the past few years. No wonder Professor Brennan wanted me to switch over and become a history major when I was an undergrad.

Dave Mitchell stood out among our nine receivers. He was the fastest in the group. He ran clean routes and was able to get free of the d-backs most plays. The time he spent last spring and this summer doing drills with our quarterbacks was paying off. Coach Golden and Coach Rhule had him practicing with the first and second teams most of the time, rather than the third team with most of the other freshmen. My protégé held his own against our first team defense.

Dave and a couple other receivers asked me to study video with them. We managed to get in about ten hours of study before the first game against Notre Dame. Notre Dame had significant turn-over after last season, same as Penn State. They were starting a true sophomore at quarterback. They replaced three of their offensive linemen. Obviously they had a new middle linebacker taking Jeremy North's spot. Half the secondary was new to starting too. Could we match up against them? Time would tell.

Penny had a three day orientation August 20th to August 22nd. She had to go out and purchase a new laptop to use for classes. All notes and instructions for classes were on-line rather than printed. She had to bring the laptop to class too. My honey was taking Gross Anatomy, Pathology, Developmental Biology, Foundation of Disease, Intro to Clinical Veterinary Medicine and Intro to Comparative Medical Research. My wife was going to have a busy fall.

Coach Golden presented the game plan at the team meeting on Sunday evening, August 25th. Chris Considine, our starting quarterback, was a senior. We expected to have some luck passing. We had a senior starting tailback. His backup was a junior that had a significant number of carries last season. We expected we would be able to move the ball well on the ground. Coach Golden planned to keep Notre Dame off balance with play action passes. Nationally they had us 9 ½ point underdogs to the Fighting Irish but we thought our chances were better. We thought we had a chance at upsetting them, even though the game was being played in South Bend.

Coach Golden announced the starters at the Sunday evening meeting. I was pleased to see who was named the starting split end – Dave Mitchell. It was quite an accomplishment for a freshman to be given this much responsibility. I congratulated him after the meeting was over.

Penny started classes on the 26th. The team started practicing for the Notre Dame game. I thought the guys did well, to my new-to-coaching eye. They weren't as big or as fast as my teammates had been at Penn State, but they did play smart, disciplined football. I didn't expect Notre Dame to blow us out.

During the week I lobbied Coach Rhule and Coach Deal for us to play against type on offense when we got the ball on Saturday. Temple had rushed the ball well last year but had issues passing. I wanted us to hit the Irish with a play action pass on our first play. I sold them. They promised to work on Coach Golden. They convinced him by Thursday's practice. We ran the play a few times in practice... and with success. I got a little teasing from the other coaches when practice was done.

"What else should I expect from a Burton protégé?" Coach Golden teased. "Pass... pass... pass."

"No, Coach, you're wrong," I countered. "I'm not about pass... pass... pass... I am about hitting where they don't expect it. Our team was a running team last year. I want the Irish to see us line up to run. I want them to key on run. I want them to see Chris [Considine, our starting QB,] hand the ball off to Sam [Williams, our starting tailback,] and let Sam blast into the line. When they buy the run, we kill them with a deep pass they aren't ready for."

"That's the philosophy that sold me on using the play to open the game," Coach Golden responded.

----oooOooo----

Penny woke with me early on Friday. I dressed in a sports coat and tie. Temple had similar dress rules for team members as Penn State. As a coach now, I had to set the example. I arrived at Edberg-Olson an hour before our departure, leaving me time to make sure I had all my notes and information ready to carry out to South Bend. Buses hauled the team down to the airport. Our charter took us out to South Bend. The aircraft wasn't quite as nice as the ones Penn State chartered, but that was to be expected. Temple ran a much lower-budget operation than Penn State. The athletic department put us up in the Hilton Garden Hotel about a mile from Notre Dame's stadium.

Tyler, Matt and I were busy from the time we landed getting our meeting rooms set up and things ready for Coach Golden, Coach D'Onorfrio, Coach Rhule and Coach Buck's meetings with the team. We had to sit through the meetings and then pack everything up to take to the stadium tomorrow morning. The three of us had a short break before we needed to do bed checks. My duties kept me up until 12:30 in the morning. So what? No one cares if the grad assistants are tired while we stood on the sidelines tomorrow.

Temple's game day routine was similar to what I had become used to at Penn State. The team had a mid-morning brunch before heading over to Notre Dame Stadium. NBC was broadcasting the game at 3:30 PM. Temple vs. Notre Dame wasn't considered a big matchup but there weren't very many games played on August 31st, so we got good TV exposure.

The team went over to the stadium to prepare after a late morning brunch. I freed a few minutes from my game preparations to check on our freshmen, particularly Dave Mitchell. None of the other freshmen were starting. Dave seemed OK. I advised my friend to focus exclusively on the football field. Everything off the field – the crowds, the bands, the TV – everything was secondary to what happened on the field. I helped Chris Considine warm up by catching some balls for him. I threw some to Dave and the other receivers while they prepared for our contest.

Coach Rhule and Coach Buck were stationed in the press box where they called the plays. Coach Deal, our QB coach, signaled the play in from the sideline. Matt and I were stationed on the sidelines too. Our job was to make sure the right eleven people took the field for each play. We also were welcome to review observations and recommendations to the skill players during the game. Coach Mulligan would handle the offensive line from the sidelines.

Our team won the coin toss and elected to receive the football. The ball was booted deep into the end zone, so we took a touchback and began at our 20-yard line. Our first play worked to perfection. Vaughn Turner, our fullback led the way into the center of the line. Chris stuffed the ball into Sam Williams' belly. He dived forward behind Vaughn. ND's linebackers and safeties rushed to the point of attack. Much too late they realized Chris had kept the ball. Dave Mitchell was a dozen yards downfield and had a yard separation from the cornerback covering him. Chris coolly lobbed the ball over the defensive line. Dave caught it in stride and took off down field. The free safety was able to run Dave down and shove him out of bounds, but only after we picked up 47 yards. We needed six more plays to drive into the end zone.

Notre Dame lost their quarterback, tailback, three offensive linemen and a wide receiver from last year's #6-ranked team. Their inexperience showed. Our defense hadn't been anything special last year but we returned most of our starters. Our guys shut them down in three plays.

Coach Rhule and Coach Buck kept Notre Dame confused between rushing and play action passing. Their secondary took most of the first half to figure out how to handle Dave Mitchell's speed. We took a 24-10 lead into the locker room at halftime. Our guys were sky-high emotionally to have a 14-point lead on the #15-ranked team in the country. The other coaches and I counseled patience. We had thirty more minutes of work before we could relax.

We managed to score another thirteen points in the second half as Notre Dame figured out how to handle our unexpected speed and passing prowess. Our defense fought hard and managed to hold the Irish rally to twenty-four points before the game ended. We upset Notre Dame 37-34.

Coach Golden gladly let the team celebrate when the clock hit 0:00. This was the first time a Temple team upset a ranked opponent since upsetting Virginia Tech in 1998. Most of our team hadn't started elementary school when that happened. It was a great day for Temple football. I congratulated Dave Mitchell for a good first game. My protégé caught four passes for 112 yards and a TD. We hustled everyone into the locker room and got ready for the trip home. We head a red-eye back to Philly.

I received a text from Chip Brinton on the bus ride back to South Bend Airport. Chip congratulated us on our victory. He let me know Penn State had out-dueled Jake Kring's Syracuse Orangemen that afternoon. They beat them 38-17 in the Meadowlands Stadium at the same time we took down Notre Dame. They were ABC's feature game while we were on NBC.

---oooOooo---

Penny was in bed but still awake when I got home around 2:00 AM Sunday morning. My poor sweetie, pumped full of hormones from our little one, was horny and needed me. I was exhausted from a long day, but did manage to satisfy her before we went to sleep. We were heathens – no church on Sunday morning.

Our bye week came early. We had two weeks to prepare for lightly-regarded Fordham, an FBS school in the Patriot League. Coach Golden preached throughout the two weeks that we had to respect Fordham and be prepared to play top-notch football. I made sure to pass that message on to every player I worked with.

My family, Penny's family and Abby's family joined forces on Labor Day weekend to move Will, Abby and Rose and Penny and me from west Philly out to the big house we were renting in Upper Darby. It was good that we were able to move during my team's bye week. There was a lot of unpacking to do once everything was moved into our new house.

We played Fordham at Lincoln Financial Field, our home stadium. It was weird to me to play a game in this field in front of 50,000 empty seats. The stadium was always full when I played here when Penn State took on Temple. Of course most of the crowd in Temple's "home stadium" wore blue and white and cheered for Penn State during those games.

The team took care of business. Play was a little sloppier to start the game, but the guys got to work eventually. We beat Fordham 34-10. The celebration after the victory was muted. We would be back in the "Linc" to face our team's nemesis in seven days. Penn State was coming to town.

I gave our coaching staff every shred of information I could think of to help our team overcome the seven decades of losing to the Nittany Lions. Our kids were focused and worked hard all week. The local media speculated all week that we may finally have a shot at defeating the Lions. My old team had struggled to beat UCF last weekend, finally pulling out a 31-30 victory when Chip found Brian Henson in the end zone with seconds left in the game.

Lincoln Financial Field was filled to capacity on September 15th, the game day. Cherry and white Temple fans in the stands were probably outnumbered two-to-one by blue and white clad Nittany Lions fans. I got time to visit with my old coaches and teammates before the game started. I wished everyone a good game and headed back to my sideline. It certainly felt strange

to stare across the field and see all of them on the “wrong” sideline. I was a Temple Owl now and did my best to coach my players to win.

I would love to say Temple pulled off another upset like three weeks ago, but no, we didn’t. We were behind 35-10 in the third quarter when Coach Burton sent Jon Stafford and the Nittany Lions second string in to play. We managed to score ten more to bring the final score to 38-20, Penn State’s favor.

I can’t complain about our players’ efforts. They played their hearts out. Chris had one ball picked off by Dave McCall, our only turnover of the game. Penn State’s players were bigger and faster than ours. The Lions played nearly error free football – no turnovers and only three penalties all game. National pundits didn’t expect much from the Lions this year. The word was they lost too many seniors and needed to rebuild. Personally, I didn’t see that. My old team seemed every bit as dominant and talented as my team last year, the one that came within inches of winning a national championship.

The Philadelphia media got on our team Sunday morning. We were the same old Temple, teasing the city with our play but ultimately failing. One columnist likened us to Charlie Brown when Lucy pulled the football away every time Charlie tried to kick it. He declared Temple was doomed to mediocrity.

The coaches and team members didn’t pay a lot of attention to what was written about us. We focused on our task, beating the University of Idaho out in Moscow, Idaho. The Vandals went 1-11 last year. Coach Golden and the rest of us preached that we couldn’t overlook these guys. Our team didn’t.

Kibbie Stadium was a treat. It seated around 16,000 fans inside a domed stadium. The venue didn’t faze our kids. They played smart football, minimizing penalties and turnovers. Dave Mitchell had a field day. Idaho didn’t have the speed or skill to stop my friend. He caught eight passes for 158 yards and two TDs. Our team won easily 49-14.

----oooOooo----

I went along with Penny for her twenty week checkup. The ultrasound showed our little one was about six and half inches long. It showed one other salient thing – his thing. We were going to have a son! We celebrated with a rare dinner out. I did head back to Edberg-Olson after dinner. Our Big East schedule started next Saturday and we faced the University of Memphis. The team went 4-8 last year but had made an impressive start this season. They were 3-0.

Our team headed out to Memphis the following Friday. The Tigers had improved since last year but not as much as my team. Coach Rhule and Coach Buck called a great game, keeping Memphis spread out with our speed and then gouging them for serious yards up the middle. We won handily, 31-17. We led from the first score to the end of the game.

The University of Central Florida was next. They went 10-4 last season, finishing with a win in the Beef ‘O’ Brady Bowl over Ball State. This season they were 4-1. My contacts at Penn State told me that the Knights would be tough. The Lions barely survived their faceoff against the Knights two week ago.

About 25,000 Temple fans were on hand to watch our game on Saturday afternoon. It was... well... amazing. UCF was considered to be one of the best teams in the Big East. They were expected to contend for the Big East Championship. Did we beat them? Yeah! They were not prepared for Dave Mitchell and his speed. We were ahead 17-0 after one quarter and 30-0 at half time. They did rally a little in the second half to score ten points. We won 44-10.

Next up was the Louisville Cardinals. Louisville went 10-3 last season, finishing by demolishing Oregon State in the Sun Bowl. They were 5-0, had upset in-state rival Kentucky a few weeks ago and had thrashed Cincinnati last weekend to kick off their Big East Schedule. They were hosting us in Papa John’s Cardinal Stadium in Louisville, KY.

Local media started to get behind our team after we knocked off UCF. Our kids worked hard during the week to prepare. I had to keep Dave Mitchell’s ego in check. He started five games, had 24 catches for 387 yards and five TDs. His best friend Josh Hunsecker on the Nittany Lions team had two catches and 1 TD on a punt return. Devin Kerr, who was given a scholarship by

Penn State in preference to Dave, had four catches and one TD. Devin was returning kicks for the Lions. Dave was a promising freshman who made a good start. He wasn't an elite receiver... at least not yet.

We headed out to Louisville on Friday morning. I had never been there before. The athletic department put us up at the Courtyard Marriott out by the airport. It was a mile or so from Louisville's stadium. We had a noon game on Saturday so all our preparations had to be crammed into Friday night. Matt, Tyler and I got to bed about 1:00 AM Saturday morning with a 6:00 AM wakeup call. We had to chase a few late stragglers out of bed Saturday morning when they didn't show for the team breakfast.

Papa John's Cardinal Stadium was a newer, good-looking mid-sized stadium. It had room for about 55,000 fans. The stadium wasn't filled. We weren't a big draw to this university. My team prepared as the stadium filled. It was gray and overcast. They predicted rain later in the afternoon.

This was a big game and we came out flat. The Cardinals took the first possession, drove straight down the field and scored a touchdown. We moved the ball well when we got it back. We hit them with another play action pass on the sixth play of the drive. The Cardinals had good pressure on Chris Considine. He launched a ball to Dave Mitchell that fluttered because he had to shorten his follow-through to avoid hitting his hand on on-rushing lineman. Dave had beaten the cornerback covering him. The beaten cornerback undercut Dave. My friend couldn't get to the ball or knock it loose before it was intercepted. Louisville had no problem driving 44 yards to score their second touchdown. We were down 14 points ten minutes into the game.

Our defense held on the next series. In spite of Louisville's good defense we managed a field goal and a TD in the second quarter. Unfortunately they managed ten points too, leaving us down 24-10 at halftime. Tariq Robinson, our middle linebacker and co-captain with Sean Considine, was fired up in the locker room. He preached how the Cardinals "hadn't done nothing against our defense." He challenged Sean and the offense. "What'cha gonna do against these guys? Our offense is better than theirs!"

Coach Golden let the players fire each other up for a couple of minutes before we took our player groups aside to discuss changes in tactics. Our guys were alive and ready for fight by the time half time was over. I pulled Jimmy Bryant, our sophomore kick returner aside as we took the field.

"You remember what I taught you in the summer about hitting the hole?" I asked.

"Half speed... half speed... let the blocks develop... flash for the hole when it opens," Jimmy repeated. "My dad's a Penn State grad. We always watched your games back home when you were in college. I watched you do it a dozen times."

"Flash to the hole when it opens," I confirmed. Coach Berger, our special teams coach, was firing up Jimmy's blockers as I talked with Jimmy. "Get us good field position."

"I will, Coach," Jimmy promised. Jimmy's a good kid from Bishop McDevitt in Harrisburg. He would have gone to Penn State if they had wanted him. At 5'-9", 165 pounds and with a 4.48 second 40, he wasn't a recruit my old team particularly wanted.

Jimmy improved all season as I tutored him in kick returning and ball safety. Today, he made the return of his life. His blockers opened a small hole which he scooted through. He dodged a big linebacker, twisted free from a defensive back and spun out of a weak tackle by Louisville's kicker. A faster defensive back ran him down and dropped Jimmy at Louisville's 38 yard line.

Our offense needed six plays before Chris found Dave in the back of the end zone for a touchdown. Coach Berger managed to convince Coach Golden to take a chance on the kickoff. Coach Berger had spotted a flaw in the Cardinal's special teams. We successfully executed an on-side kick, recovering the ball at our 47-yard line. Chris and our offense moved the ball down the field before being stymied in the red zone. We settled for a field goal to bring the score to 24-20, Louisville's favor.

Both defenses asserted themselves during the third quarter. Neither team could sustain a drive to score. We had the ball back with a couple of minutes left in the third quarter. Coach Golden was pounding away with Sam Williams and Vaughn Turner. I watched as the safeties and linebackers closed up to the line after we gained four to six yards each rush. Seven plays later we

were down on their 43 yard line when Coach Golden decided it was time to stick the dagger in the Cardinals. Chris made a good fake handing the ball to Sam Williams as Sam followed Vaughn into the center of the line. Dave Mitchell cleared his cornerback as Chris lobbed the ball downfield. Dave caught it in stride and motored for the end zone. I would have made it untouched. My slightly slower protégé was dragged down at the 1-yard line. Two dives allowed our team to bull their way into the end zone for the score. We were ahead 27-24 finally. 13:22 seconds remained in the game.

Our defense held Louisville to one first down and about eighteen yards before forcing them to punt. With 9:53 remaining on the clock, our team tried running the ball on them to take time off the clock. We couldn't. The Cardinals took the ball back with 8:22 left on the clock. They succeeded where we couldn't. They muscled the ball down the field with run after run. Our secondary bit badly when the Cardinals gave us a taste of our own medicine, a play action pass. Our out of position secondary was unable to run down the receiver before he scored a touchdown. Score: 31-27, Louisville's favor.

We had 3:23 seconds left on the clock and two timeouts. The next two-and-a-half minutes were the best football I had seen Temple play since I joined the team last May. Coach Golden kept the Cardinals off balance with his mix of runs and passes. Chris was under considerable pressure most passing plays but managed to get the ball out, on time and the correct receiver.

Dave made one nearly miraculous catch over the middle. Chris was under pressure and Dave was covered tightly. He rifled the ball to Dave inches off the ground. Dave managed to dive and get his hands under the ball and pull it into his body without it touching the ground. I would have been proud to have made that catch myself. Dave's eight-yard catch was on third down and six yards to go. He kept our drive going.

Chris capped the drive off by finding senior Austin Gilbert, our flanker, in the back of the end zone. Our kicker drilled the extra point to give us a 34-31 lead over Louisville. The clock said 0:31 remained in the game. The Cardinals had one timeout left. Coach D'Onofrio turned up the heat on our opponent's QB. He avoided the blitzers repeatedly but was reduced to a dump off pass to his tailback on a fourth down and three yards to go play. The tailback picked up seven yards to our 38 but couldn't get out of bounds. Louisville used their final timeout to stop the clock at 0:12.

Coach D'Onofrio dropped our team back into prevent defense, blanketing the sideline routes with d-backs. The Louisville QB was forced to throw to his tight end in the middle of the field. Our strong safety tackled him before he got out of bounds. The Cardinal QB tried to hustle his team into line to clock the ball but couldn't. Time expired before his team was set.

Our sidelines erupted in cheers. Louisville was ranked #22 last week, so this was the third time we knocked off a ranked opponent this season. UCF was ranked #20 before we knocked them down. Notre Dame had been ranked #15 when we beat them. They fell out of the polls the next week but were climbing back into contention again. The Irish were ranked #21 last Sunday. Even our loss looked like less of a disgrace. Penn State was undefeated and climbed to #6 after they trounced the Michigan Wolverines 38-13 last weekend.

A couple of hundred students cheered our arrival when our buses pulled into Edberg-Olson late on Saturday night. Matt Dellavacchia told me he had never seen a reception like this in his six years with Temple. Penny came out to join the crowd to cheer our return home. It was great.

Bill Cosby and his wife Camille came over for the team dinner Sunday night. Bill stayed around to address the team after dinner. He praised our work and told us 'don't stop now.' He said our team had the potential to do things no other Temple team had done. Later that evening the BCS standings were released. Our team was ranked #23 in the nation by AP, #22 by ESPN and #22 in the BCS ratings. This hadn't happened to Temple in the memories of anyone associated with Temple football.

Coach Golden preached that we still had a lot of work to be do before we could rest on our laurels. Some kids hustled during the week to prepare for Rutgers. Others listened to Philly sports radio and the papers as they praised the progress our team had made towards respectability. The coaches tried to break through and shake the team into shape, with limited success. The lack of focus bit us on the ass the next Saturday.

Rutgers was 4-3 when we headed over to their stadium in New Jersey. They lost to Arkansas, UCF and Cincinnati. We were listless and uninterested in the first quarter. We also were down 10-0. We managed to wake up a little and score ten points in

the second quarter. Rutgers scored two more TDs. We rallied in the second half but it was too little, too late. The final score was 34-27, Rutgers' favor.

Our team dropped back out of the BCS rankings after the loss. Chris Considine, Vaughn Johnson and Tariq Robinson lit into the team Sunday night. The guys needed to focus on their practices. They needed to spend more time in the video room studying our opponents. Less time needed to be spent partying and celebrating. Chris predicted this team had the potential to be a great, not just a good team, if we all pulled together and worked at it. The other coaches and I could only smile at the seniors' oration.

The kids listened. They practiced harder. They seemed more prepared. It paid off. We hosted Connecticut the following Saturday. We beat them handily 34-20. The BCS rankings put us back into the Top Twenty-five, at #23. We traveled to Texas the following weekend to play SMU. We destroyed the Mustangs 42-9.

----oooOooo----

Our team ticked up to #21 in the BCS rankings after that game. I was still in the office when my cell phone rang that Sunday evening.

"What's up, Max?" I asked.

"Are you sitting down, Kyle?" Max asked. "Sit down."

"I am," I confirmed. "Whatever the Raiders are offering, the answer is still no."

"Listen before you summarily reject them," Max replied. "This is business, not personal."

"OK, what are they offering now?"

"They will give you 60% of your signing bonus as soon as you sign your contract with them," Max said. "Sign by tomorrow and you will get an immediate check for \$9.5 million dollars."

"I don't know, Max," I replied. "Why the hurry? Is Elijah Carter ready to play yet? Why would I want to join their circus?"

"I hear Elijah is a couple of weeks from taking the field," Max said. "I think you should talk this over with Penny and your parents. \$9.5 million is a lot of money to turn down."

"Big stones," I answered. "The money isn't that important to me."

"I wondered if your perspective might have changed now that you are making a pittance as a grad assistant."

"I will talk with Penny but don't count your commission yet," I said.

"I told Mark Davis already that I doubted this offer would be accepted," Max replied. "This is not about my commission. This is about you finding the right spot to play football with the best players in the country. This is too big an offer for me reject without discussing it with you. Consider the money. Consider the other big stones in your life. Do the Raiders fit anywhere?"

"I will discuss it with Penny and my parents," I promised. I headed for home as soon as I ended the call. Will and Abby were relaxing in the living room.

"I need a hand from my brain trust," I stated after my brother and sister-in-law greeted me. "I have an offer from the Raiders I need to consider."

"I thought you wanted no part of them," Will responded. "What is there to talk about?"

"We'll listen, if you think it'll help," Abby added.

"Let me get Penny," I said. I found my honey upstairs watching TV. I helped her get downstairs. My lover's belly was getting big and moving around was becoming more difficult. I helped her to settle down in a comfy chair.

"Max Solomon called a few minutes ago to relay an offer from the Raiders," I explained. "The offer is huge and he thinks we should discuss whether it makes sense or not."

"What are they offering?" Penny asked.

"\$9.5 million dollars, payable tomorrow afternoon, after I sign a contract to play with them," I said.

"\$9.5 million?" Abby gasped.

"Why tomorrow?" Will asked. "You've been holding out since last April."

"Tomorrow is the start of the tenth week of the NFL season," I explained. "I have to sign a contract by 4:00 PM Eastern Time or I can't play at all in the NFL this season."

"So they're desperate to get you signed?" Will said. I agreed. "What's changed? You have considered and rejected numerous offers from them over the past seven months."

"Is the team doing better than you expected?" Penny added. I pulled out my smart-phone and did a quick check on the Raider's statistics.

"23 sacks in 9 games," I commented. "55% completions, 8 touchdowns and 11 interceptions for my good buddy Pete. It doesn't sound promising."

"What is there to discuss?" Will asked. "It's a lot of money but what is the point? You decided you didn't fit in their team – that you wouldn't help them win."

"I was inclined to dismiss this offer out-of-hand like the rest but Max insisted I should talk to Penny, Mom and Dad," I explained. "Personally, I think here is the right place for me. I can help Penny more here than I ever could if I spent the next seven weeks in Oakland with a bundle of money."

"I think you belong here with your pregnant wife," Will said. "That is... if you really need our input. Abby, what do you think?"

"I agree with you, Will," Abby said.

"Reject them," Penny said. "The Raiders are the wrong team for you. The money isn't that important."

"That makes it unanimous," I said. "I guess I'll call Mom and Dad."

Dad answered the phone. I asked him to put Mom on the upstairs line. "The Raiders want to pay me \$9.5 million dollars to sign a contract tomorrow before 4:00 PM," I explained.

"They're desperate," Dad said. "Has anything changed with the Raider's situation? What changed since you decided the team was wrong for you?"

"Nothing," I answered.

"Why are we talking about this?" Dad asked. "Somebody at the Raiders is trying to cover up the blunder they made when they drafted you. They are a bad team and a bad situation for you. Why are we even talking about this, no matter the size of the pile of money they want to give you?"

"That is the same conclusion my brain trust down here came to, Dad," I responded. "Penny, Will, Abby and I all agree with you. I should reject this offer too."

"Good! Anything else?" Dad said.

"No, thanks for hearing me out," I responded. "I'll call Max and let him know."

I called Max and informed him. He wasn't surprised in any way by my decision. I got half a dozen reporters contacting me in the next couple days. Somebody at the Raider organization leaked the offer to the media. I guess they thought it would make me look greedy. I gave all the reporters the same quote.

"The Raiders need offensive line help and better play at quarterback," I explained. "I can't block an NFL defensive lineman to save my life. I can quarterback a little but not well enough to be of value behind an offensive line that can't protect their quarterback. A receiver such as me might get 10 to 12 yards downfield in the second and a half their quarterback gets before he's sacked. I would be wasted running ten yard routes at the price they have to pay me to get my services."

----oooOooo----

We flew out to Cincinnati on November 15th to play the Bearcats. The Bearcats were 9-1 and tied with us for the lead in the Big East with a 5-1 conference record. We were 8-2 overall and 5-1 in the Big East. We were prepared for a hard fight. We didn't get it. We won the game 48-13. The Bearcats never figured out how to cover Dave Mitchell. They couldn't stop the play action passes. They let Jimmy Bryant score a TD on a kick return. Things got so out of hand for the Bearcats that Coach Golden played Tyler McBride and Jim Parr, our #2 and #3 quarterbacks.

The BCS rankings recognized our win, boosting our ranking to #19 on Sunday night. We hosted Houston for our final regular season game. Houston ran a fast break spread offense but had no defense to speak of. They were going to be an interesting test of our team. We ran our practice that week at high speed. It probably helped our defense some but the full experience couldn't be replicated.

Houston ran a play every twenty seconds. Our defense had a hard time coping. Thankfully their defense was poorer than ours. They had trouble stopping our passing game. Their run defense was worse. The game was a score fest. We managed to get a couple stops. They didn't. The final score was 48-41, our favor.

Our players, the coaching staff and the roughly 15,000 fans in Lincoln Financial Field celebrated our victory. We were going to a BCS Bowl for the first time in the history of the school. We wouldn't know who we would play for a couple weeks. It could be someone from the ACC, the SEC or the Big Twelve. The only certainty was we wouldn't face Ed Fritz's Florida Gators. They were ranked #2 in the country and almost certain to go to the BCS Championship Game. My Nittany Lions had gone undefeated, were ranked #1 and would likely face the Gators on January 6, 2014.

----oooOooo----

My parents hosted our families for Thanksgiving. Nikki and Adrian were celebrating with Adrian's family. Jim and Marilyn Edwards joined my family and Abby's parents. Penny was given a pass on helping with dinner. Mom and Marilyn insisted she get off her feet and rest. Penny joined the men (and boys) watching football. The Detroit Lions played the Minnesota Vikings. The Vikings totally outclassed the Lions. It wasn't much of a game.

The second game of the day pitted the Dallas Cowboys against the Denver Broncos. Both teams had mediocre records. Denver was 7-5. Dallas was 6-6. Denver had an excellent defense. Denver's offense was coming around.

This game held more interest to me. Antwaan Booker, their defensive star, had been a captain at Penn State when I was a freshman and was at my wedding and Trevor and Steph's wedding. I kept up e-mails with Brady Rasmussen, their third-year quarterback, who I knew from when USC was recruiting me before college. Brendan Hayden, my teammate in State College, improbably made the team as a free agent.

Their rookie strong side linebacker, Marcus Kendricks from Boston College, and free safety, Christian Powell from Stanford, had been teammates of mine last January at the Senior Bowl. I knew their second-round pick too, Cameron Jordan, the big receiver

out of Hawaii. Cameron played for the South Team but the Senior Bowl only had a dozen receivers. We'd all gotten to know each other during our week in Mobile.

The game started off as a defensive struggle but slowly the Broncos took the lead. The score was 17-13 at halftime. Coach Baldwin used Cameron Jordan in the slot a lot, sending him into the middle where his size allowed him to match up with Dallas' linebackers. Sean Lee, their middle linebacker and a Penn State alum, did not match up well with Cameron's wide receiver speed.

It was frustrating for me to sit here and watch them play. Cameron and I were similarly large sized receivers. I had a couple inches on him but we both weighed around 210 pounds. I could be doing what he was doing. I loved playing for Coach Baldwin and the Bronco coaching staff ten months ago. Antwaan Booker and Max Solomon both told me later that the Broncos tried to trade for me on draft day. Why was I sitting here on this damned couch? I should be down in Dallas helping Denver kick Dallas' butts. That was where I belonged, not here!

I tried my best to keep my frustration from ruining everyone else's Thanksgiving. Mom handled the turkey for our dinner. Marilyn Edwards handled side dishes. Abby's mom did her usual excellent job with pies for our feast. I enjoyed the conversation among the three families.

The boys and men headed back to finish watching football, accompanied by my little niece, Rose. We rejoined the game late in the third quarter. We were in time to see Dallas tie the game with a short field goal, 23-23. Brady Rasmussen and the Broncos offense tried to move the ball. Dallas closed in the cornerbacks and safeties, sitting on the short to middle routes, keeping all the Broncos completions short.

I knew the solution. Get the ball deep and force Dallas to cover the whole field. The Broncos tried but Cameron Jordan didn't have the speed to pull it off. Omar Harris, their flanker out of Oregon, couldn't get separation when he went deep. This situation cried out for a wide receiver of my talents. Why in the hell were Al and Mark Davis so damned pig-headed? They wasted a precious first-round draft pick on me and wasted a year of my football life. For what?

I stayed in a foul mood in spite of how the game ended. Tony Romo was leading Dallas on what he hoped was a score for the lead. Antwaan Booker and Marcus Everett, the right defensive end, broke free and forced Tony into a careless, wobbly throw. Terrelle Allen picked off the wounded duck and ran it in for a touchdown. Neither team scored after the interception. The final score was 30-23, Broncos' favor.

Andy and Mom sent the twins and Hunter off for their baths when the second game ended. Will, Abby and Rose headed back home with Abby's parents. Dad, Penny and I continued watching the third game of the day, the Titans versus the Seahawks. Sam Hayes was inactive. I knew Greg Walker in passing. He was Penn State's star receiver before me but he graduated before I started. I also knew Cooper Barnes, Seattle's kicker and my former Nittany Lion teammate. Coop finally stuck with the Seahawks last September, on his third try with an NFL team. I had no real rooting interest in either team.

Todd Landry, rookie quarterback for the Seahawks, was an acquaintance from the Senior Bowl and QB of my team's opponent in the BCS Championship Game last January. Todd won the starting job for the Seahawks in training camp. It probably was a dubious honor. The Seahawks needed a lot of work. The game was lackluster. Penny and I only half-way paid attention as we relaxed and got ready for bed.

Penny slipped into bed with me after she finished in the bathroom. She gave me a belly rub as she cuddled against me. I was still preoccupied thinking about the Dallas-Denver game and didn't respond immediately to my wife's overture. Penny sat up and stared at me.

"What is up today?" Penny demanded. "You've been moody since before dinner. Dallas lost. That usually puts you in a great mood."

"It was that game and I am glad Dallas lost," I answered. "It's the damned Raiders that are bugging me. I watched my friends on the Broncos team playing out on the field. I belong there. That is my destiny. I wasn't meant to be sitting on a couch watching other people play. I could have been out on that field playing for Coach Baldwin and his staff. They're great coaches."

"I know, you said they are," Penny agreed.

"The Broncos tried to trade for me," I protested. "Antwaan told me. I could have been out on the field playing for Coach Baldwin and Coach Kovacevic. I should be playing in the NFL now. The God-damned Raiders have fucked up my life."

"Is your life that bad?" Penny asked as she bumped her big belly against my side. "Living with me and watching our son grow instead of living alone in some apartment in Denver or wherever."

"Well... yeah, that part is really nice," I agreed. "I'm glad I'm here for you while you're carrying our child."

"Are you sorry you're working for Coach Golden?" Penny asked. "Are you wasting your time with the Owls?"

"No, I'm learning a lot from the coaches over there."

"So what if you get an early start on your career, get to spend time with your wife and watch your son be born?" Penny said as she rubbed my chest. "You WILL get your chance next year in the NFL. Max promised that the Raiders can't draft you again. You'll be on the field somewhere playing with the best players in football."

I leaned up and kissed my wife. "You are my comfort. Thank you for putting up with my moods."

Chapter 5

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Coach Golden had the Owls out doing fundamentals drills and light workouts on Monday. We spent the week doing low-impact work to prepare for our unknown opponent at one of the BCS bowls. The school was hyped up about our opportunity. Parties and activities were planned all across campus for Sunday night when the bowl lineup was revealed on ESPN. Our team was assembling in our multi-purpose room for the evening. Coach Golden was providing dinner for everyone. Players were welcome to invite their girlfriends. Coaches invited their wives or girlfriends (in Matt's and Tyler's cases) so everyone could see our holiday destination. I didn't much care. Florida and the Orange Bowl would be nice. Arizona and the Fiesta Bowl would be nice too. I hadn't been to New Orleans yet so I wouldn't mind going to the Sugar Bowl.

Most of the Temple staff took time Saturday afternoon to watch Penn State play Nebraska for the first Big Ten Championship Game. A few contrarians cheered for the Huskers. Most of us, true to our alma mater, cheered for Penn State. Chip Brinton and my old team played an outstanding game, beating Nebraska 41-30. Later that evening Penny and I watched Ed Fritz guide his Gators to victory over LSU. This confirmed the Penn State vs. Florida contest for the BCS Championship. I sent off congratulations to Ed and Chip.

Penny was feeling tired Sunday night, so she skipped the dinner at Edberg-Olson with the team. The campus food staff put together a nice BCS Bowl celebration dinner for our team. We watched a bit of the Giants vs. Chargers game until it was time for the ESPN Bowl Announcement broadcast.

The announcers confirmed the Penn State vs. Florida BCS Championship Game in Pasadena. The Sugar Bowl got to select their teams next. They chose to have Ohio State come south to face LSU. The Fiesta Bowl picked Stanford to face off against Big Twelve champion Oklahoma. Our room erupted with cheers at that announcement. We were going south to sunny Miami for the holidays. The announcement a minute later that we would face Virginia Tech in the Orange Bowl was superfluous.

Coach Golden asked Bill Cosby to speak to the team after the bowl selection was done. Bill often visited our team as his time permitted this season. He had come to dinner with his wife Camille. Bill gave us a good pep talk. He announced that he was going to make it his personal mission to get Temple alumni to travel down to Miami to support their team in the biggest game ever played by our team. It was great to have "Dr. Huxtable" on our side.

Matt, Tyler and I were in early Monday morning to finish breaking down video of Virginia Tech. We had started the previous week with all three teams but had not been able to finish the task with our other duties. We wrapped up Monday before practice. Tuesday morning the coaching staff gathered to begin brainstorming our game plan against VT. I enjoyed the session immensely.

Virginia Tech ran a pro-style offense similar to ours. They ran a little more than they passed. They did a lot of play action passing. Chris Considine had a slightly better passing rating than their quarterback. They had an excellent defense, though ours was well rated too. The BCS ranking had VT at #13. We were ranked #19. It was going to be an interesting game.

----oooOooo----

I had been the beneficiary of Penny's raging hormones throughout the fall. I was happy to oblige my wife's needs. That came to a near halt in December. Penny complained about her sore back. Her feet hurt. She thought she was too fat. She complained her breasts grew immensely. I was a breast man, so I was happy. I reassured my wife she was beautiful and that I loved her. It was way cool to feel my boy kick and move in Penny's belly.

Dad and Will both warned me to be especially sweet and thoughtful at this point in Penny's pregnancy. They recommended I get her flowers or occasional gifts for no other reason than I loved her and I wasn't going through the agony of carrying our son. I managed to avoid most trouble with my brother's and father's advice.

Will, Abby and I convinced Penny that the three of us could handle hosting our families for Christmas. None of us wanted Penny to go through the torture of traveling to Paradise for the holidays. I was fortunate that Coach Golden wasn't departing for Miami and the Orange Bowl until December 26th, so I would be able to celebrate the holidays with my family.

----oooOooo----

I told Coach Golden about the leadership group we formed at Penn State two years ago and how it helped us mentor and guide our team. Coach liked the idea and suggested I have a conversation with Chris Considine and Tariq Robinson, our team captains. I pulled them aside after practice that afternoon.

"What's up, Coach Martin?" Chris asked pleasantly. We had developed a good relationship over the last six months.

"I wanted to talk to the two of you about what you can expect as we prepare for the bowl game once we get down to Miami," I explained. "A bowl game will be more challenging than you might imagine."

"Is it that big a deal?" Chris asked. "We did the Motor City Bowl last year. Won't it be similar?"

"Except Miami is warmer," Tariq added.

"The Motor City Bowl is a lot different than what you are going to see in a few weeks," I replied. "More media attention, more distractions, more temptations, more opportunities for the guys to forget why they are in Miami."

"What do you suggest, Coach?" Tariq asked. "I know you well enough to know you have a plan."

"I don't have a plan I am going to hand you," I countered. "I am available to tell you about my experiences. I was a team captain last year, just like the two of you are now. I've been to three BCS Bowl games with Penn State. I have some idea of what you are going to face."

"Penn State certainly has a good record in bowl games," Chris replied. "I know most of our coaches did bowl games too when they were in college, but that was decades ago. Coach Dellavecchia and Coach Jackson can't help much. Both of them did a couple of minor bowls when they played here."

"Tell us about what you did last year," Tariq said. "I bet the championship game was filled with distractions."

We spent about fifteen minutes talking about my experiences at BCS Bowl games, how Penn State dealt with the distractions and the tone we took regarding our "business trips" each holiday. They liked Tyler Madden's idea of recruiting other juniors and seniors to help them police the team and keep everyone focused on winning their matchup against Virginia Tech.

----oooOooo----

I completed my history final in the morning of December 10th. My second semester was done. I completed the GREs in October and had been officially accepted into the Master's Degree program specializing in History. I headed home after the final and changed to a suit before heading north for New York City. I was asked to attend the Campbell Scholar/Athlete Dinner that evening. I met up with Joe Ricci, Coach Burton and Coach Paterno at the hotel. Joe did not win the Campbell. He had to settle for the Paterno/Pearce Scholarship instead. I enjoyed spending dinner with my coaches and friend from school.

Preparations for the Orange Bowl, for Christmas dinner and for the gift exchange went well in the next two weeks. The final on-campus practice was on Friday, December 13th. Coach Golden dismissed the kids to return home until 7:00 AM, December 26th. He told them to enjoy their families and come back refreshed and ready to show the nation what Temple football could do.

Will and I bought a Christmas tree for our house ten days before Christmas. The local Boy Scout troop was selling them. Rose was a huge "help" decorating the tree and house for the holiday. My niece was toddling everywhere we didn't gate off now. One advantage of sharing the house with Will and Abby was that the place would already be child-proofed when our son was old enough to walk.

Will, Abby, Penny and I invited my family to spend Christmas Eve and Christmas Day in Upper Darby. We put Noah, Connor, Hunter and Andy in one bedroom using sleeping bags. Liz slept on the floor in Rose's room. Mom and Dad took Will and Abby's bedroom. I got lucky as we made room for everyone. I got to stay in my own bed with Penny. No one would put an eight-month pregnant woman on the floor, even if she's an experienced camper.

The whole family went for Christmas Eve services at the local Presbyterian church. Most of the group walked the half a block south and block east to the big old gray stone church. I drove Penny and Rose. It was a long walk for my niece on her short legs. Penny and I had attended there a few Sundays in the past six months. The people in the congregation were friendly. Pastor Barnes preached a good sermon for the candlelight service.

I got up at 6:00 AM on Christmas morning to put the turkey in the oven. I found four kids sitting expectantly by the Christmas tree. Noah was arguing with Connor and Hunter that it was too early to wake everyone for the present exchange.

"Unka Ky!" Connor squealed. "Time for presents?"

"Not yet, boys," I replied.

"How soon?" Hunter chirped.

"Mom-mom said we open presents at 7:30 in the morning," I answered.

"Noah, what time is it?" I asked as I pointed towards the clock on the mantle.

"Six... uh... five?" Noah answered uncertainly. His preschool was working time and numbers.

"Six-oh-five or five minutes after six o'clock," I confirmed. "It's a long time until we open presents."

"'til clock says seven-three-zero," Connor added.

"Very good, Connor," I answered. "Do the four of you want to help me in the kitchen? I need to start the turkey for our dinner."

That request met with unanimous approval. I kept the little ones busy in the kitchen for forty-five minutes, until Will joined us to begin preparations for breakfast. I helped Will once the turkey went in the oven. Slowly our family joined us in the big kitchen.

Everyone got to open one present before breakfast. Mom insisted everyone eat before we tackle the remainder of the presents. It was fun watching Noah, Connor, Hunter and Rose delight in each present as they were unwrapped. Rose was a joy. She was old enough this year to understand Christmas, Santa Claus and presents.

Will, Abby, Liz, Mom and I headed back to the kitchen to clean up our breakfast dishes and continue preparing our Christmas dinner. Penny, Dad and Andy looked after the kids. Slowly over the course of the morning we got our meal together.

Grammy and Grandpop Robinson were the first guests to arrive. Grammy Robinson headed straight for the kitchen to get to work. She took one look at Will and me up to our elbows mashing potatoes and barked, "Men in the kitchen! Now, shoo! This is work for the women."

"Grammy, I love you dearly," I replied as I continued smashing potatoes. "This is MY kitchen and Will and I are cooking today. Why don't you keep Penny company? She probably could use a grownup conversation about now."

"Will and Kyle really are good cooks, Mom," my Mom added.

"You earned the break this Christmas," Will said. "Go relax. We have this covered this year."

"I guess we'll see," Grammy said doubtfully. Will and I both gave her kisses before she headed out to the living room with Dad, Penny, Andy, Liz and the kids. I suspected Grammy was planning contingencies in case we botched the dinner. I didn't mind, if that kept her happy. Our dinner would be fine.

Aunts and uncles... cousins, grandparents... slowly the Martin and Robinson clan gathered for dinner. Thankfully our landlord, the archdiocese, allowed our guests to park across the street at the Holy Child Academy parking lot. Jim, Marilyn, Nikki and Adrian were celebrating the holidays in Lewistown this year with Jim's parents.

The meal turned out fine, in spite of Grammy Robinson's misgivings. "The meal didn't turn out too bad," she admitted. She gave me a wink. "The mashed potatoes were a little lumpy, Kyle."

"If that's the worst you can say, I think I did pretty good," I replied.

"You did, Kyle," Grammy agreed.

We spent half the afternoon enjoying cookies and pies and visiting with our relatives. It was a great way to spend a holiday, completely different from most of my past four Christmases and probably future ones too. The crowd stayed until late afternoon. My immediate family was staying another night, rather than packing up and moving back to Paradise that afternoon.

I packed my things that evening for my trip south to the Orange Bowl. I left the house very quietly around 6:00 AM. I needed to get some things together at the office to take to Florida. The team had breakfast at 7:00 AM in the multi-purpose room of Edberg-Olson. We boarded our buses and headed south for the Philly Airport. The flight down to Miami was pleasant and not too long. I was used to my Penn State trips to the opposite coast.

The athletic department put us up in a Hilton Inn in Coral Gables, across the boulevard from the University of Miami's practice fields. They might have been in use except UM had a bad season. A 5-7 record got their head coach fired. The university was willing to work with us for the week we were in town.

I thought I understood the rhythm and flow of the week before a bowl game after my four bowls with Penn State. Hah! Matt Dellavecchia, Tyler and I were on the go constantly from the time we hit the hotel and helped get our players into their rooms until after midnight when we finished bed checks for Coach Golden. It was good that we didn't need to play in the game. We were going to be exhausted by the time game day rolled around on January 3rd.

I thought practice went well during the week. Coach practiced the guys in the morning and then toured them around the Miami area in the afternoon and evenings. Coach Golden's plans for the team weren't terribly different from what I was used to. I don't doubt that was the Penn State connection in action.

The Owls were considered to be interlopers at the Orange Bowl. No one expected much of us. We were the lowest ranked team in a BCS Bowl. They listed us as nine point underdogs to Virginia Tech. We were confident in spite of the pundits' predictions. We watched the video of our opponents. We felt we matched up just fine against them.

----oooOooo----

January 3, 2014 dawned cloudy and chilly – by Miami standards. Matt Dellavecchia and I had to laugh at the TV announcer's complaints about the "chilly" 53 degree temperature. Our team had practiced outside all December in Philadelphia. The weatherman predicted the game time temperature would be in the high forties. The low clouds we had now would clear out and we would play under clear skies.

Matt, Tyler and I had a hurried brunch and then checked with the equipment people to make sure all the playbooks, charts and other gear we wanted at the stadium was loaded on the buses. We checked off team members as we loaded up, to make sure we had a full complement of players for the game.

My cell phone rang as we were riding over to the stadium. "Hi, honey," I remarked as I answered a call from Penny. "What's up?"

"You asked me to call after my doctor's appointment," Penny replied. "He says everything is going fine. No problems. Our boy should be born on schedule."

"That's excellent news."

"What we talked about last week?" Penny continued. "I think you should fly out to Pasadena after your game and cheer for your Lions."

"I don't know," I allowed. "I should probably come home in case you need me."

"I have a doctor living in the house," Penny answered. "Abby is doing her OB rotation in her residency right now. Your brother will be home until January 9th. Go have fun and enjoy the championship game. We will do fine without you."

"You're sure?" I asked.

"Go!" Penny insisted. "Enjoy yourself. I will see you next Tuesday instead of tomorrow." I didn't resist anymore.

"Thank you!" I answered. "You're the greatest. I love you."

"I love you too, Kyle," Penny said. "Go kick some Hokie butt tonight."

"Will do," I promised. My wife was the greatest. I checked my watch it was 11:20 AM. I calculated the time difference with Pasadena and then dialed my former coach. I figured the team was probably at breakfast.

"Kyle? What can I do for you?" Coach Burton asked when he answered my call.

"Do you have space for another volunteer grad assistant?" I asked. "I'm already experienced in the duties. My wife just gave me permission to come out and cheer for you guys, if you have room for me."

"We always have room for you, Coach," Coach Burton replied. "Call and leave word when your flight gets in tomorrow morning. I will send Yasin [Clark] or Glenn [Korbel] over to pick you up. I know how poor grad assistants are."

"Some," I responded. "Some who don't have three year endorsement deals with Nike."

"I like the commercials you did with them," Coach Burton said. "I'll send a car for you anyway. No need for you to fight the L.A. traffic."

"Much appreciated, Coach."

"Tell Al I said hi," Coach Burton said. "Kick some Hokie asses tonight. I want to hear that you won."

"We think we can pull off the upset," I promised. "I'll see you later tomorrow."

"You making plans for your week off?" Matt asked. He was sitting beside me on the bus. Coach Golden was giving us time off the week after our bowl game.

"Yeah, I got myself a sideline view of the BCS Championship Game Monday night," I explained. "Penny gave me permission and Coach Burton said he'd take me."

"Sweet," Matt sighed. "It must be nice. I'll be watching from my dorm room and cheering for your Lions." He gave me a wink.

"I expect to see someone on the sidelines in a Temple sweatshirt."

"Sorry, Matt, not going to happen," I replied. "I'll be wearing blue and white while I'm on Penn State's sideline. Cherry and white go back on when I get home."

"Fair enough," Matt said as he offered me his hand and we shook.

----oooOooo----

Our team went through their pre-game preparations. I thought everyone looked loose and ready for the national TV debut. Chris Considine took me aside before we went out to warm-up.

"Thanks for the talk a few weeks ago, Coach Martin," Chris said. "Tariq and I put your tips to use. I think everyone bought into the 'this is a business trip concept.' We had fun but I believe we're ready to kick ass tonight. The other leaders and I have managed to keep everyone focused and on task this week."

"Good for you," I responded. "Don't give me too much credit. I gave you and Tariq some ideas and the two of you ran with them. You guys have done a good job as team captains."

Sun Life Stadium looked good decked out in Orange Bowl regalia. "Dr. Huxtable" (a.k.a. Bill Cosby) and our alumni association had done a good job whipping up enthusiasm for Temple's Orange Bowl Game. Around 12,000 students, fans and alumni had traveled down to south Florida with us. Virginia Tech's fan base outnumbered ours. They had traveled to 26 bowl games over the last half-century-plus for their Hokies.

Coach Rhule and Coach Buck stayed in the press box during the game so they could see the whole field as they called our plays. Coach Deal signaled the plays to Chris. Matt and I helped Coach Deal make sure the right eleven players took the field each play, to match up to the formation called for in each play. The three of us would review the previous series of plays with the offense when our defense was on the field. My duties were much the same as they had been last year when I helped Jason Turner and my high school team, the Wolverines, win the state AAA championship. I was just on a bigger stage this year.

Coach Rhule and Coach Buck, with assistance from Coach Golden, called the best game I had seen them call all year. They kept the Hokies defense off balance from the first play of the game. We took the kickoff and returned the ball out to our 18 yard line. The team lined up in a double-tight-end I formation with a single wide receiver split out a couple of yards off the left tight end. Chris faked a handoff to Sam Williams, our tailback, after the fullback blasted ahead for a lead block. Virtually the entire Hokies defense bought the play fake. Dave Mitchell flew past the cornerback covering him. Chris lofted a ball to Dave, who ran through it as he caught it and sprinted downfield. The Hokies free safety managed to push Dave out of bounds after he gained 42 yards.

Whatever the Hokies defense expected, we did the opposite. It was beautiful. We were expected to wilt under the spotlight and we didn't. The Hokies were the ones who looked unsure and hesitant. We found that we could exploit the matchup between Dave Mitchell and Jonathan Lunsford, their right cornerback. We took advantage of that to build a 17-13 lead at half time.

Virginia Tech adjusted their pass coverage in the second half to account for Dave. We had anticipated the change in our halftime adjustments. We challenged our others receivers to step up and exploit the way the Hokies over-concentrated on Dave. It worked... barely. We needed an athletic interception by our right cornerback, Ahmad Jeffcoat, to seal our victory with less than two minutes left in the game and us holding a tenuous 30-29 lead.

Coach Golden ordered a heavy dose of power running to put the game away. Our offensive line, Vaughn Turner [FB] and Sam Williams pounded ahead with great runs in our power offense. I managed to stay clear when the guys doused Coach Golden with five gallons of Gatorade. We celebrated on the sidelines as the clock ticked down to zero.

"Thanks for everything," Dave Mitchell gushed as he danced by me at the end of the game. "I can't believe I'm here and we won this! It's all due to your help."

"You did well today," I agreed as I returned Dave's hug. "You earned this with all the work you've done over the past six years." My protégé had caught seven passes for 143 yards and a touchdown. He was our top receiver of the evening.

"Matt, Cody and I dreamed of playing big-time football when we were back in middle school and saw what you and Ed and Jeremy were doing," Dave raved. "I made it! It's unbelievable!"

"You did," I agreed. A junior sports reporter from the Lancaster Intel/New Era interrupted our conversation. I let him interview Dave. I knew Mike Montgomery was out in Pasadena covering Lancaster County's players at the BCS Championship Game. I was perfectly happy to fly under the media radar that evening. This game was about the players, not me.

Matt, Tyler and I helped gather up our equipment from the field and bring it back to the locker room so we could load it on the buses. We finished up the ceremonies, press conference and got everyone loaded on the buses by midnight. I hung out in the lobby as the team unloaded back at the hotel. I grabbed Coach Golden when he got off the bus.

"Do you have a minute?" I asked. He did. We found a quiet spot in the far corner of the lobby.

"What's up, Kyle?" Coach asked.

"I wanted to run something by you," I explained. "Penny allowed me to head west to Pasadena tomorrow for a couple of days so I could see Penn State play. I wanted to let you know I will be missing the charter back to Philly. I didn't imagine it would be a problem since you gave me the week off next week."

"It's no problem at all," Coach Golden allowed. He smirked. "As a matter of fact, Mark [D'Oonfrio] and I are both missing the flight too. We're staying down here in Miami for a couple days."

"Miami?" I asked. I pointed across the boulevard towards the University of Miami's campus. "Anything I need to worry about?"

Coach smiled. "Worry? No, you'll be fine. You'll be more than fine. I can't go into details now."

"OK," I agreed. I stood and shook hands with Coach. "Good luck with your stay down here."

"Tell Bob I said hello," Coach Golden responded. "I'll be watching the game on Monday night and cheering for our Lions."

Rumors had popped up a couple weeks ago about various colleges pursuing Coach Golden to take their open coaching spot. I strongly suspected he was going across the street tomorrow to explore the possibility of taking over the head coaching slot at the University of Miami. It would be a good fit for my boss. He had earned the promotion to a national football power down on its luck recently. Tonight's bowl win cemented his status as a coach deserving a promotion.

My future would be uncertain at Temple if Coach left. I was staying in Philly regardless of whether I was invited to move along with Coach Golden or not. I wasn't leaving Penny behind for a grad assistant coaching spot. Who knows? The worst that could happen was I finished my next semester as a regular grad student at Temple and used some of my Campbell Award scholarship money to pay for tuition. Penny and I could live off my Nike money for a semester until an NFL team drafted me in April. Matt had already fallen asleep when I got back to our room.

----oooOooo----

I had breakfast with the team and rode the bus to the airport. The team headed one way to catch the charter home. I headed for the check-in desk to arrange my flight west. Dave Mitchell saw me head off.

"Going to watch Penn State play?" Dave called out teasingly.

"I am," I confirmed. "You know me too well."

"Tell Matt, Josh and the other guys I said hi," Dave called back. "I'll be cheering for their team Monday night."

"I'll pass the message on," I promised.

I gave the team a good-bye wave as they disappeared into the terminal. I arranged my flight west. I had this crazy idea to book first class until the lady gave me the price, \$2147! I went economy class for \$508 instead. My back and knees can just be sore for the flight out. I gave Coach Burton a call to give him my flight info. He said he would send Zack Hayes, his other volunteer grad assistant, to pick me up instead of Glenn or Yasin.

I arrived six hours later in L.A., stiff, sore kneed, and tired from the long flight. I called Zack Hayes after I stepped off the plane.

"Hey, Kyle," Zack said as he answered my ring.

"Chauffeur? Could you bring the car around to the front?" I answered in a mock British accent. "Make sure the champagne is chilled and don't soil the running boards. One must make a good impression."

"At your service, mi'lord," Zack answered back pompously. Dropping the accent, he asked, "Where are you at, Kyle?"

"Leaving the gate," I explained. "I want to stop and get a second lunch before I hit baggage claim. Where are you at?"

"Baggage claim," Zack responded. "Didn't the airline food satisfy you?"

"A slice of lunch meat and half a slice of cheese on a hamburger roll, a bag with ten potato chips and an orange doesn't feed a hungry athlete," I replied.

"Athlete?" Zack teased. "I thought you were one of those old farts who sits on his duff all day and tells the athletes what to do. Those who can't, teach. Those who can, do."

"Those who can but don't suffer fools like the Raiders, teach too," I answered. "My teaching style is hands-on. Watch how I do this. You imitate me."

"It's an effective teaching style," Zack said. "I caught part of your game last night. Your charges did very well, especially Mitchell."

"Dave played an excellent game," I agreed. "I'll see you downstairs at baggage claim in a few minutes."

"I'll be here," Zack confirmed.

I grabbed a burger, fries and drink from the McDonalds in the concourse. I was surprised at the long line until I noticed the clock. It was noon time here in L.A. I carried my lunch out to baggage claim, figuring I could eat while I waited for my bags. My friend greeted me warmly when we met downstairs.

"What the hell is with this shirt?" Zack teased as he shook hands. I had worn a blue Hawaiian shirt with big white flowers all over it to travel. I hadn't planned this trip to L.A. so all I packed was Temple gear. I certainly couldn't show up at Penn State's hotel wearing Temple clothing.

"It's what I have that doesn't say Temple," I explained. "Do they have any vendors selling Penn State stuff? I hadn't planned on coming out here when I left home last week."

"We can't have you showing up with a big T on your chest," Zack agreed. "Probably someone will be selling something. If not I will loan you a couple of my Penn State polos." Zack didn't offer me pants because both Penn State and Temple coaching staff dress in khakis with their school polo shirts.

"I appreciate it, buddy," I said. I ate my lunch while Zack and I watched for my luggage. I was done eating before it showed up on the carousel. Zack helped me carry it out to his rental car. We headed across the city to Penn State's headquarters hotel. Traffic wasn't too bad, for a Saturday afternoon.

"You will have to bunk in the spare bed in my room," Zack explained as we unloaded my luggage at the hotel. "Rooms are at a premium this close to the game day."

"I think I can tolerate you for a few days," I responded. "I sort of expected to be on a roll-away bed in somebody's room when I showed up."

Zack helped me get registered for his room and get a key at the front desk. We took my bags up to our room and I changed into Penn State garb. The team wasn't around mid-afternoon when we arrived. They had headed for Long Beach for the afternoon and evening. Zack and I were to catch up with them there. We headed south through the center of Los Angeles. Traffic got rough as I-110 intersected I-10 near the USC campus.

It took almost an hour to get to Long Beach. Zack had me call Coach Burton to find out where the team was at. Their first destination for the afternoon was the Aquarium of the Pacific. Coach told us the buses were leaving there and heading for the dinner destination – the Battleship Iowa. I found directions to the pier where the battleship was docked on my smart-phone and navigated my friend there.

We arrived a couple of minutes ahead of the team buses. We waited for our friends by the gate into the battleship museum. It was overwhelming to get greetings from virtually the entire team at the same time as the debarked and headed inside.

My friends and former teammates greeted me with, "Great to see you, Coach," "Welcome back!" "Hey, good to see you, Coach," as they waved, shook my hand or slapped me on the back as greetings. I returned the onslaught of greetings as best I could. Chip Brinton didn't settle for a handshake when we met. He had to give me a hug.

"I'm damned glad you're here, Coach," Chip exclaimed. "Us being here at the championship game is as much your work as anybody's. You deserve to watch us win this time."

"I think you had a lot more to do with the team pulling together and getting to this game than I did," I answered.

"We will have to disagree on this," Chip responded. "Whoever got us here doesn't matter. We WILL get the results right tomorrow night, the way it should have been last year."

"Do that," I agreed. Chip headed into the museum. I spotted Coach Burton and made a bee-line to my mentor.

"Reporting for duty, Coach," I said as I greeted him. "What do you need me to do?"

"Good to have you here, Coach," Coach Burton responded as we shook hands. "Enjoy dinner and the tour of the ship. I know a history buff like you will have fun here. We have a brief coaching staff meeting each night at 9:00 PM to review the next day's schedule and responsibilities. I will brief you on your specific responsibilities at that meeting." Coach chuckled. "Your duties, beyond the obvious..."

"Bed checks," I inserted. "I've been doing them for the last week. I think I can handle that part of the job."

"Remember you are a coach now, not a player or best friends with the guys on the team," Coach Burton added.

"I've been a coach for over eight months," I agreed. "I get the difference. I have a job to do to help these kids get ready for a game."

Zack and I followed the rest of the coaching staff and last few players from the team into the museum before we boarded the ship. I enjoyed the tour of the Iowa. It was similar to its sister ship, the New Jersey. I had toured the New Jersey a couple of years ago. It was berthed on the Delaware River, around three miles from my office on Temple's campus.

The fantail of the ship was covered with a large tent. The caterer set up our dinner there. The night's theme was dim sum. I enjoyed spring rolls, dumplings, pot stickers and other small treats as I visited with my friends. The food was excellent. It also

was a reminder that Penn State operated on a whole different plane than Temple. We were a low-budget school in a smaller conference. We ate well last week but we didn't have the budget to feed our kids this way.

Buses took the team back to the hotel in Pasadena after dinner. I rode with Zack as he followed them back. I had a half an hour to get unpacked and settled before Zack and I went to the coaching staff meeting. We met in one of the smaller meeting rooms downstairs in the hotel. Zack and I took seats with Coach Caffrey.

"I suppose I'll be helping you Monday night," I commented as I leaned in towards my former high school coach.

"That's not what I hear," Coach Caffrey commented.

"Special teams?" I asked. He just smiled and shook his head no. The mystery didn't last long.

"Welcome Coach Kyle Martin to our staff," Coach Burton announced after he started the meeting. "He is on temporary loan from Temple for the next couple days. It's nice to have you back with us, Coach."

"It's great to be here," I agreed.

"Congrats on a nice victory last night," Coach Burton continued. "Your team did a nice job on Virginia Tech."

"Thank you, Coach," I responded. "Coach Golden sends his best to all of you. He said he'll be watching Monday night and cheering for all of you... er, us... well, the Lions." I felt the conflicted loyalties sharply. Was I Nittany Lion again? Was my first loyalty to the Temple Owls? I wasn't going to resolve that question in two days' time. Thankfully there was no conflict between my Lion and Owl loyalties right now.

"Coach Martin will be assisting Coach Schneider with the secondary for the next two days," Coach Burton continued. "Is that assignment acceptable, Coach Martin?"

"I'm just here to help out the team wherever I can, Coach," I answered. Zack gave me a smile as I repeated my freshman mantra to the coaches. He offered me a low-five under the table. I gently slapped his open hand to return it.

The team would have an opportunity for an early breakfast from 8:00-9:00 AM on Sunday. Buses would haul any worshipers to some of the various churches after breakfast. The main brunch would be from 11:30 AM to 12:45 PM. We would have our final practice from 1:30 PM to 3:00 PM. We would attend the pep rally at 4:30 PM and dinner with fans and alumni at 6:00 PM.

"I have a special project for you tomorrow morning, Coach Martin," Coach Burton announced. "I want you to meet with Coach 'C' and Craig [Schneider, secondary coach]. In spite of our good inside information about Ed Fritz..." Coach nodded toward Coach Caffrey and Zack. "...we need you to download every scrap of information you have about Ed Fritz and his tendencies."

"Whatever you need, Coach," I agreed.

Coach Burton went over more details of the day's schedule before dismissing us. He got me a copy of the room assignments so I could assist Zack with bed checks. We split the list in half to make it easier for us complete our task. We relaxed in our room for most of an hour before it was time to do bed checks.

I went on-line for news. ESPN reported news that didn't surprise me in the least. Coach Golden had met with University of Miami officials today. Rumors were that he was accepting the job and would be leaving Temple for south Florida. I hoped the rumors were true. Coach Golden had earned this opportunity. Where would all this leave me? I'd have to wait and see.

----oooOooo----

My meeting with Coach "C" [Csarwinski] and Coach Schneider was exhausting and interesting. I spent an hour answering their questions about Ed Fritz's interests, football philosophy, favorite plays, tendencies and the things I'd learned playing wide receiver with him. They were particularly interested in how Ed ran our high school team's spring scrimmages when he got to

call plays. Hopefully I helped them get inside Ed's head. I did not feel bad talking about personal details of my friend's life. I knew he had done exactly the same thing with his team's defensive coaches, talking about Chip Brinton and the summer they practiced together when both worked with me at our scout camp.

It was too late to try to get to one of the local churches by the time I finished my meeting, so I settled into a quiet spot in one of our meeting rooms and called home to talk with Penny. She was feeling OK, if a little run down. She was spending a quiet day relaxing. I filled her in on my last 24 hours.

The team headed over to a local high school for a final practice after lunch. It was the same high school we had used four years ago when I was a freshman. One of our team's traditions was to exchange jerseys at the final practice. I loved the look on Brian Henson's face as team captain, Dave McCall, handed Brian his #29 jersey with captain "C" on it.

"I don't know if I'm ready for this," Brian stammered to me.

"I told you a year ago to get ready," I replied. "You ARE one of the leaders on this team. You will do well next season." Brian had an excellent year, posting the third best season by a Penn State wide receiver. I held the record for the two best seasons. Brian had caught 78 passes for 1587 yards and 16 touchdowns this season.

Chip Brinton presented his #9 captain's jersey to Jeff Knox, our two-year starter at hero (strong safety to non-Penn Staters). The rest of the team swapped jerseys with other players, per tradition. I noticed Matt Sauder, off to the side, watching the proceedings. He looked a little forlorn.

"How are you holding up through your red-shirt year?" I asked my friend from back home.

"It sucks," Matt replied. "The only saving grace is that I get four more years to play. I'll know this offense cold by next season."

"That is why you started early and why you're red-shirted," I answered. "You'll do well when your day comes."

"I guess you know how I felt not playing this season," Matt added. "The Raiders put you in the same sort of spot as me, except you don't get the year back later."

"Actually, I do get it back," I said. "I have a year's experience coaching football, which fits my long term career plans."

"Good luck with that," Matt replied.

We headed out to the field. It was 81 degrees and the sky was clear as a bell. It was a great day to be in southern California. I watched from the sidelines as the other coaches put the kids through their paces. I wasn't privy to the complete game plan and didn't have much help I could give here. The guys seemed focused on the task and ready for tomorrow's challenge. They should be. Most of the team had played for the national championship last year. They understood what was at stake.

A couple of thousand Penn State alumni turned out for the pep rally. Coach Paterno, Coach Burton, Franco Harris, Kenny Jackson, Kerry Collins and Michael Robinson all spoke to fire up our fans. The rally was fun. The team bused over to the Sheraton's Pasadena Convention Center for dinner. Over 700 players, coaches, alumni and fans ate in a cavernous dining room. Nine lucky fans enjoyed dinner with Matt Frye, Troy Davis and me. I was an unexpected bonus that our table's guests hadn't expected. I enjoyed talking with the fans about the team and the game tomorrow.

I paid a little attention to the NFL Playoffs since I had so many friends on the various teams. My Eagles won the NFC East and had a bye in the wildcard round. The Saints beat Jeremy North and Damian Thompson's Bears. Max Rosen, my Penn State teammate had a spectacular game, catching three TDs from Drew Brees. The Vikings beat the Falcons. The Texans beat the Patriots. I was disappointed to see the old guys on the Steelers team beat the Broncos. Antwaan, Brady, Brendan Hayden and the others I knew on the team had improved to make the playoffs. Coach Baldwin and his team were SOOOOO close to being a great team. If only the Raiders hadn't drafted me.

----oooOooo----

Coach Burton allowed the team to catch some extra sleep Monday morning before the game. We met for brunch at 11:30 and then headed over to the Rose Bowl Stadium. The kids got settled in the locker room and then headed for their final position meetings. I attended Coach Schneider's secondary meeting.

"We have some minor changes we are making to the defensive game plan," Coach Schneider announced. That was met by groans from the entire secondary. "Relax, guys. This is a change in emphasis not wholesale changes to the plan. You have practiced everything we are planning on doing tonight. All of you know we suspected Ed Fritz could get aggressive given a chance."

I saw all the heads nodding up and down in agreement. Coach continued, "Coach Martin knows Fritz well. He confirmed our hunch yesterday. We will be doing two or three safety blitzes in the first half of the game." Coach Schneider stared at Dave McCall and then at Jeff Knox. "It is critical you get your hands on Fritz when you're sent. He HAS TO KNOW you can get to him.

"In the second half we will give Fritz blitz pre-snap reads and then drop the blitzer back into coverage. We will use Fritz's aggressiveness against him. We know he will try to exploit the blitz when he sees it and lob a ball into the spot the blitzer vacated... except the blitzer will be there to get a pick." Coach smiled.

"Our team has a great offense and is going to score some points today. The Gators have a great offense too. I expect the result of this game will come down to turnovers. Get a pick or two from this strategy and you will be national champions tonight. Can you do it?"

"Yes, Coach!" the whole group shouted in unison. Coach Schneider continued reviewing the game plan with the defensive backs. Most of the plan was new to me, but well understood by the secondary. They had been preparing based on this plan since December 9th, two days after they beat Nebraska for the Big Ten Championship and had clinched their spot in the BCS Championship Game. Everyone seemed enthusiastic and well prepared by the end of the half-hour meeting.

The kids dressed and headed out to warm up. The Rose Bowl didn't look different since my last visit to it three years ago when we thrashed the Oregon Ducks. I shagged some punts for Caleb Fuller as he warmed up. I tossed some balls to the wide receivers as they prepared. My cell phone rang as I was helping the kids prepare. I stepped off the field and answered the call.

"Coach Golden, what's up?" I asked when I saw who the call was from.

"I don't know how well news would penetrate the Lions game preparations," Coach Golden explained.

"What news?" I asked. Coach Golden chuckled.

"I suspected you hadn't heard," he explained. "The University of Miami hired me to be their new head coach."

"Congratulations, it is a well-deserved promotion," I responded.

"Mark [D'Onorfrio] is coming with me to head up the defense," Coach continued. "I am planning to bring some of the coaches from Temple along with me. I want you to be my receivers coach."

"Me?" I stammered. "Do you mean as a grad assistant working the receivers?"

"No, as a full-fledged assistant coach," Coach Golden answered. "Paid like a full-fledged assistant coach."

"Wow... I'm... uh, stunned," I stammered. "I don't know. I hadn't... uh..." My mind raced as I rambled on. An assistant coach at a major FBS program at age twenty-two? That was tempting and nearly unprecedented. What about the NFL? Could I let Al Davis and his minions chase me away from playing professionally? What about Penny? No, I couldn't leave Penny in Philly for another three and a half years while I lived in Miami. I knew a coach's hours. I'd never get time to see my wife if we were separated by 1000 miles.

"No, I have to pass, Coach," I finally answered after too long a pause. "I plan to play in the NFL next season."

"I could take you on as a short-time grad assistant, similar to the arrangement we have at Temple," Coach Golden offered. "I can let you go when you get drafted in April. I have a lot of work to do to restore this program and I need help from good people like you who know my program."

"I need to tie myself down to Philly to be with my wife," I explained.

"I knew this offer was a long shot," Coach Golden said. "I needed to try. Good coaches are hard to find and I know already you are going to be one of the good ones."

"Thank you for saying that, sir," I answered. "Do you know what happens to me back at Temple? Do I come in for work after my week off is over?"

"Of course you do," Coach Golden said. "Your contract is with the university, not with me. You work for them until they get a new head coach. He'll determine whether he wants to retain you or not. I will be recommending that he retain your services as long as he can."

"Thanks, Coach," I said.

"Good luck tonight and good luck in the future," Coach Golden responded before ending the call.

"Looks like I will be looking for work when I get home," I commented to Chip, who was nearby.

"Oh? What happened?" my friend asked.

"My boss just got hired to be the head coach at Miami," I explained.

"That sucks," Chip said. "Why don't you come attend the draft prep academy with me? You want to be able to show you still have it when the scouts and coaches come to look you over."

"I was planning on doing that locally," I said. "Pro Train has a facility in Cherry Hill, across the bridge from Philly. I worked with them last year and they got me ready."

I gave Penny a call from the sideline and relayed the news and job offer to her. My wife didn't comment but I knew she was relieved that I had turned the offer down. Time together with her and our son would be too precious to waste on a few months working in Miami, no matter what position they offered me.

Ed spotted me as my team was finishing warm-ups and waved for me to come over. I trotted across the field to visit with my friend.

"I heard you showed up for the game," Ed said as we exchanged a hug. "How's Penny?"

"She and the baby are doing well," I answered. "Can you believe I'm going to be a dad in two weeks?"

"No," Ed replied laughing. "I don't even have a steady girlfriend and you and Penny are going to be parents. It blows my mind."

"It blows my mind a little too," I admitted.

"You got those receivers ready to go?" Ed asked.

"You know Coach Caffrey," I responded. "He had them ready a month ago. They will do well tonight." I did not bother to tell my friend that I wasn't working with the receivers. He did not need to know that fact. "Take care of yourself tonight. My guys will be getting after you."

"We expect that," Ed said.

"Did you hear I may be out of a job?" I asked. I relayed the news about Coach Golden's hiring at Miami. Ed and I exchanged information about our lives for a couple minutes before splitting up. Ed had work to do and I didn't need to tie up his time more.

My team dressed and prepared for the game. Zack, Matt Sauder and I hung out in the locker room but tried to stay out of the way. We were superfluous right now. Matt would help Coach Caffrey on the sidelines during the game. So would Zack. We watched the guys as they dressed and got their heads ready for the game.

Chip Brinton gave the team a rousing speech about the importance of completing the task we set for ourselves last year. It was a good speech. I was impressed at the maturity and fire my friend displayed. This was clearly his team today. The team moved out to the tunnel and waited for our turn to take the stage. Zack and I stayed in the back. Neither of us was the story that day. We were satisfied to help if we could and let the guys on the team have the limelight. We trotted in at the back of the team as we took the field.

ESPN hoped for a tight, closely-matched game. They got their wish. Both teams were experienced playing for the championship. My Lions played here last year. Ed's Gators played for it two years ago. Both teams had excellent coaching staffs, experienced offenses and defenses. The game was back and forth all evening. The lead changed half a dozen times during the game.

I worked with the secondary, reviewing what I was seeing the Gators receivers do and how to counteract their plans. Dave McCall took Ed Fritz down on a safety blitz early in the game. Jeff Knox hurried Ed on one throw in the second quarter and flattened my friend on another blitz. Jeff nailed Ed in the side a milli-second after Ed ditched the ball. Ed would be paying attention to the safeties in the second half the way we wanted.

Ed's team took the lead in the third quarter 23-17. Chip and the Lions answered the score with a ten play drive capped off by Brian Henson out-wrestling two Gator d-backs for the ball in the corner of the end zone. Brian had been paying attention to what I taught him for the past two years.

Ed and his team responded by driving downfield from our 20-yard line. Four plays later Coach Schneider signaled in the free safety blitz fake. Dave McCall edged towards the line of scrimmage as Ed barked out the signals. Dave seemed to mistime the snap and he dashed for the line and dropped back a yard. Ed spotted the shift and barked out an audible. Dave leaned forward as Ed barked the next cadence. The ball came up into Ed's hands as Dave dropped back. One of Ed's receivers ran a curl into the "open" spot Dave was expected to cover normally.

The throw was a timing throw. Ed had the ball in the air before he could realize Dave wasn't blitzing and had dropped back in coverage. Dave had position and made the easy interception. The receiver couldn't pry the ball loose before Dave dropped to the ground.

Ed saw me standing with our team's secondary after the play was done. He stared at me and gave me a salute. I waved back before he stalked off the field.

The Gator defense was pissed. We managed to move the ball thirty yards towards the Gator end zone but couldn't get into scoring position. We settled for letting Caleb Fuller try a coffin corner kick. He was perfect, booting the ball out of bounds at the Gator 4-yard line.

Our defense was stout. The Gators executed a ten play drive but only moved themselves out to their 45 yard line. One of Coach C's well executed blitzes forced the Gators to punt back to us with 8:36 remaining in the game. Our offense went to work. Chip exhorted the guys to a supreme effort. The guys executed a thirteen-play, clock-draining drive capped off by Chip hitting Bruce "Squirrel" MacCauley in the end zone. It extended our lead to 31-23. 1:03 remained on the clock. The Gators used all their timeouts to keep time on the clock.

Ed was brilliant, if desperate, in the clutch. He worked his team down the field, gaining yards with underneath routes, taking what the defense was giving. Ed hit Demetrius Russell, the hotshot sophomore receiver that he told me about last summer, for a dozen yards. Jeff Knox missed the tackle and Russell picked up an extra dozen yards before Dave McCall pushed him out of bounds. The ball was on Penn State's 27-yard line with 0:26 left on the clock. Coach C flooded the edges of the field with seven defensive backs - Matt Frye, Dave McCall, Jeff Knox, Chris Richardson, Troy Davis, Kevin Giordano and Dan Murphy. Ed took a shot at getting closer to the goal line, incomplete.

Ed faked a delay draw to his running back on the next play before dropping deeper to pass. Kenyatta Jackson bull-rushed and blew the play up. Ed lobbed the pass out a split second before Kenyatta crumpled him. Mark Markovich intercepted the wobbly pass and immediately dropped to the ground and covered up the ball.

It was a heads-up play by the outstanding young linebacker. Most guys would have tried to return the interception to improve their stats. Mark knew the stats were meaningless to the team. Protect the ball and let our offense get on the field. The Gators were out of timeouts and we would win as soon as Chip did a kneel-down play. Thirty seconds later Chip lined the offense up, took the snap, kneeled down immediately and let the final seconds expire on the game.

Zack, Matt and I hugged wildly. Our team had done it! This capped off the team's five-year quest for a BCS Championship. Damn, I was glad I was here to see this night! The players, the coaches and 25,000 Penn State fans celebrated wildly. I made my way across the throng of people flooding the field to find Ed Fritz.

"Sorry for how things worked out, man," I said when we found each other.

"I knew what happened on that interception as soon as I saw you coaching the secondary," Ed said. "You blabbed to them and hung me out to dry."

"The coaching staff already saw your tendency on video," I answered. "I just confirmed what they already suspected. You played a good, tough game."

"I sucked," Ed replied. "Three interceptions and only two TDs. I can do better than this." My friend smiled ruefully. "I could do better than this, if this wasn't my last college game."

"Are you coming home to Lancaster County?"

"No, I'm flying back to Gainesville with the team, packing my stuff and moving across state to Pensacola," Ed said. "My agent..." He laughed. "The gentleman who will soon be my agent has a spot reserved for me at Athlete's Performance's facility in Gulf Breeze. I'll work out there for three months to get ready for the draft."

"That's cool," I answered. "I'm working out at Temple and doing a little extra work at Pro Train."

"No Combine this year?"

"No, I will stick with Penn State's and maybe Temple's pro days," I said. "I need to stay close to home right now."

"How's Penny and the baby doing?" Ed asked.

"Everything's fine," I replied. "That's how I got permission to fly out here for this game."

"Give Penny my love," Ed said.

"I'll do that," I agreed. "Good luck at the Senior Bowl and with your training."

Ed headed for the locker room. I made my rounds of the field, congratulating my former teammates on their accomplishment and basking in the sunny, warm feeling of victory. I stayed on the field for presentation of the BCS Championship trophy to Coach Burton, Chip and Dave. It was great to witness our team finally get back to No. 1 in the nation.

Mike Montgomery from the Lancaster Intelligencer/New Era interviewed me briefly. I surprised him. He hadn't heard I was in town. We looked for and found his primary interview targets together – the Lancaster County players on the team, Charlie Taylor, Josh Hunsecker, Joe Radziwill and Matt Sauder. Charlie's play was one of the keys to our victory. He ran for 143 yards and a TD. Josh was on the field for half a dozen plays but didn't have any catches. Joe played special teams. Matt watched from the sidelines, same as Zack and me.

It was great to get inside after the trophy ceremony. The four and a half hours on the field had left all of us thirsty, hungry and tired. We dug into the food in the locker room as we celebrated our victory. It was a great night. The team finally boarded our buses back to the hotel around ten o'clock that evening.

Coach Burton motioned for me to join him in the front seat as we were loading up. Zack Hayes was sitting in the seat across from us. After the bus got moving Coach Burton said, "I am not minimizing Chip Brinton's, Dave McCall's or the other team leaders in tonight's victory, but the two of you had a large part in making this happen. I'm not referring to your coaching this week, but the foundation the two of you laid three or four years ago. Your leadership, dedication and inspiration are what propelled these young men to this accomplishment. I want to thank you for everything you have done for me and for this program."

"It is no more than what you've done for me and my career," Zack said.

"Ditto," I agreed. "I owe you for everything you've taught me as a player and about coaching." I gave Coach Burton a wink. "I owe you for my first coaching job."

"It wasn't much," Coach Burton replied modestly. "I just made a suggestion to an old friend about a good man to hire. You took it from there."

"I appreciate your help, none the less," I replied.

"How's Penny doing?" Coach asked. We talked for a couple minutes about my wife and soon-to-be-born son. "Do you have a way home set, Coach?"

"Um... not exactly," I admitted. "I was hoping I could catch a ride to the airport with the team or with Zack," I explained.

"I can give you a ride," Zack offered. "What time is your flight?"

"Um... I don't know," I answered. "I haven't had time to arrange one yet. I guess I'll go to the counter and get a ticket for whatever is available."

"I have another alternate," Coach Burton offered. "We have space on the charter taking the team back to State College. Why don't you catch a ride with us?"

"I could do that," I agreed. "I guess a flight from State College to Philly will be cheaper than a flight from L.A. to Philly." I chuckled. "...or, I could hit up Charlie Taylor for a ride back to Lancaster. After all the rides I gave him in the past three years, he still owes me."

"Sounds like a plan," Coach agreed. "Breakfast is at 6:30 AM and the bus leaves at 7:00 AM."

I caught up with Charlie Taylor in the lobby of our hotel. He had ridden on a different bus from me. I asked about a ride.

"Sorry, Coach, I'd love to help but my parents are meeting me on campus tomorrow to finalize the deal with my agent," Charlie explained. "I'm not heading back to Lancaster anyway. My parents are taking my things home for me. I'm heading to Pensacola to train for the combine."

"OK, I'll figure another way home," I said. "Good luck in Pensacola. Give Ed Fritz my regards. He's heading there too."

I turned and saw Matt Sauder and Josh Hunsecker standing by us. "You need a ride home, Coach?" Matt asked. "You're welcome to ride back to Paradise with me, if you don't mind sharing a ride with Josh and Joe [Radziwill, freshman linebacker from Lititz]."

"You have enough room for me in the car?"

"My dad got me a big, old beater of a car," Matt said. "It will have plenty of space."

"Thank you, Matt," I said. "I will take you up on your offer."

Worst case, I knew I could spend the night at my parents' home and get Andy or Liz to drive back to Philly on Wednesday morning. I headed upstairs. I had a brainstorm as I rode the elevator up. I could get Matt to drop me off at the train station in Lancaster. I could take a train back to Philly. How late did Amtrak's service run? I found out on-line a few minutes later. Trains ran hourly and the last train left Lancaster at 9:47 PM. That would do just fine.

----oooOooo----

I packed and departed quietly Tuesday morning. Zack's flight didn't leave until 11:15 AM. I grabbed breakfast with the team and then headed out to the buses. The weekday morning trip from Pasadena to the airport was a traffic-clogged, time-consuming nightmare. Security added to our delays. Our flight didn't get off the ground until after 10:00 AM.

Chip, Dave McCall, Charlie Taylor, Squirrel MacCauley and Joe Ricci huddled with me on the trip home and picked my brain about my experiences last spring picking an agent, playing the Senior Bowl and performing at the NFL Combine. Chip, Dave, Charlie and Joe had invitations to the Senior Bowl and Combine. Squirrel did not. He was going to a regional combine in hopes of getting noticed.

We landed in State College a little before four o'clock. TV cameras recorded us as we debarked from the plane. The university's familiar blue buses hauled us back to the Lasch Building. A couple of thousand students, alumni and local fans filled Hastings Road. The team leaders and Coach Burton had to address the crowd. Matt Sauder, Josh Hunsecker, Joe Radziwill and I ducked out the back of the crowd and walked across campus to the East Parking Deck. It was a tight fit, but we managed to get four people and our luggage into Matt's car.

We dropped Josh off at his house in Manheim two and a half hours later. Joe got dropped off in Lititz. Matt agreed to stop in Neffsville at a deli so I could grab a sandwich for my train ride home before dropping me off at Lancaster's train station. I missed the 7:11 train by ten minutes. I gave Penny a call and let her know where I was while I waited for the 8:46 train. I ate my dinner while I waited. My train arrived on time. The ride to 30th Street Station in Philly took a little over an hour. I transferred to a SEPTA train and rode up to the Temple University Station. I walked a couple of blocks north to Diamond Street and Edberg-Olson Hall.

I loaded my bags in my trusty VW and headed west for Drexel Hill. I got home around a quarter to midnight. Penny was asleep already. I stripped down and slid into bed beside my wife. It had been a long two weeks away from home.

Chapter 6

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I enjoyed the rest of my vacation at home with Penny. Our little boy was kicking up a storm in his mother's womb. It was good that he was active but it didn't do my wife's disposition any good. I followed the news stories as the week progressed speculating about who would replace Coach Golden. Todd Bowles, a Temple grad and the defensive coordinator for the Arizona Cardinals was on the list. Chuck Heater, from the Colts, and Stan Drayton, from Ohio State, came in for interviews. One name topped my list of best choice for head coach – my boss, Matt Ruhle. Matt hadn't committed to going south to Miami with most of the coaching staff.

I found a note on my desk when I went in Monday morning, January 13th. It said there was an all-hands coaching staff meeting at 8:30 that morning. I busied myself with odds and ends until it was time for the meeting. The meeting turned out to be quite small – Matt Ruhle, Brandon Noble, Tyler Jackson, Ron Herndon, our conditioning coach, and me. Coach Noble and Coach Ruhle were teammates, close friends and 1997 Penn State grads. They were both holding off on committing to Miami until they found out if Matt Ruhle got the job as permanent head coach.

Athletic Director Bill Bradshaw joined us before the meeting started. "I thought it would be appropriate to give those of you remaining here an update on the plans for the interim between now and when we have a new head coach for the team. Matt will be the acting head coach during the transition. All of you will report to Matt. I want to thank Matt, Brandon and Tyler for agreeing to stay during the interim. Kyle, I did not get a chance to talk with you yet, though I am told you plan to stay here with our university."

"I'm yours as long as you want me," I answered. "I would like to work for the university until the end of April, if that suits the new head coach."

"Thank you, Kyle," Mr. Bradshaw said. "My plan is to complete the interviews for the head coach this week and to name the coach next week. We have a number of time-critical things that need to be done while the interview and decision process is being completed. I will let Matt explain these needs."

"Thank you, Bill," Matt said. "The most urgent item is to contact each of our recruits and make sure they stay with the oral commitment they have given us. The second item is to get ready for the four early admission recruits that will be arriving on campus in ten days. Brandon and I will confirm with each of these young men that they are still planning to come here. Tyler and Kyle, you will get everything prepared for them: room assignments, workout schedule, playbooks, etc. Our third item is to prep our players who are entering the draft with the combine-style drills."

"I'll cover that, Matt," Ron offered.

"I would be willing to help too, Coach Herndon," I added. "I plan to work those drills a lot as my time permits too. I need to get ready to show off my conditioning at the pro day."

"That would be great, Kyle," Coach Herndon said. "What better way to introduce them to workouts than with someone who has done the combine already?"

"Ron, let's keep our current players on the same workout schedule they've used this fall until the coaching staff is settled," Matt said. "Ron, you will continue to monitor that. Tyler and Kyle, would you spend a little extra time in the weight room helping Ron out. I won't have a lot for the two of you to do, such as preparing plans for the next season. That will wait until the coaching staff is set. Does anyone have any questions?" We didn't.

----oooOooo----

Matt Dellavecchia popped into the office Monday afternoon to say good-bye. He had finished packing up his dorm room and was going to hit the road for Florida when he was finished at Edberg-Olson. I wished my friend well. I had enjoyed working with him this season.

I worked half days during the week and had plenty of time for my personal workouts. Students were still on break, so the weight room was pretty empty. Penny and I had extra time together. The final weeks of pregnancy were hell for my sweetie. I did my best to keep her comfortable. Abby was a big help too. Penny appreciated a woman's perspective from someone who experienced pregnancy and labor recently.

The NFL Divisional Playoff weekend featured four games. I hoped Trevor's Jets would beat the Steelers. They did, handily. The Saints fought hard but the 49ers disposed of them Saturday night. Eric Peter's Ravens took care of the Texans without too much bother on Sunday afternoon.

I got a text from Coach Ruhle Sunday evening as I was watching the Eagles lose to the Vikings, announcing a staff meeting for 8:30 AM Monday morning. I suspected I knew the primary topic of the meeting – who would be the next head coach. The Philly papers were filled with speculation the past two days. Smart money was on Coach Ruhle taking over. That would suit me just fine.

Athletic Director Bill Bradshaw was there when we assembled for the staff meeting Monday morning. He was direct and to the point. "This is not for public dissemination until after our ten o'clock press conference this morning. Temple University is proud to name Matthew Rhule our next head coach. Coach Rhule..."

"Thank you, Bill," Matt replied. "My first order of business as head coach is to assemble my staff." He stared around the table at each of us. "I hope each of you will stay here with me to help us keep Temple going forward. All of us know where this program was in 2006 when most of us arrived here. Al Golden has built something special in this team and it is our task to carry his program forward and push this team higher. To that end, I am announcing my first hire. Brandon will be our defensive coordinator and assistant head coach for the Owls."

This news was met with smiles all around the table.

"I will sit down with each of you individually to discuss your status with the team," Matt continued. "I hope all of you are willing to continue the work we started here."

"I can save you time, Coach," I replied. "I'm Temple's until the end of April, if you want me."

"Me too, Coach," Tyler added. "I'm here to stay."

"Excellent," Matt said. "I won't put you on the spot, Ron. We'll sit down and talk after the press conference this morning."

Matt reviewed the things that needed to be accomplished this week and what our assignments were. It felt good to have direction again. Matt dismissed us to go back to work. I grabbed Tyler when we got back to the coaching staff office room.

"Why did you decide to take a chance and stay here?" I asked.

"My girlfriend and I are getting pretty serious," Tyler explained. "She's a senior with one more semester until she graduates. I didn't want to go down to Miami and abandon her."

"Love, I understand," I agreed. "Same reason I'm not going anywhere. What would be the point of going to Miami for a few months?"

"Especially with a pregnant wife," Tyler agreed. "How is Penny doing?"

"As well as can be expected," I answered. "She says she feels like she's carrying a bowling ball in her stomach. Thank God, it will all be over in a few days. She's due on Friday."

"That soon?" Tyler said. "Good luck."

"If I come rushing into your office and dump a bunch of work on your desk and act like a mad man, you'll know why."

"I'll help however I can," Tyler promised. "You just need to ask."

"Thanks," I replied.

----oooOooo----

Penny and I didn't lack for help with the pregnancy. Will and Abby helped a great deal. They were on call for driving Penny to the hospital if the baby decided to come while I was at work. I would meet them there instead of driving out to Drexel Hill and back to the city. We had Penny's overnight bag packed so she'd be pretty much ready as soon as labor started. Marilyn Edwards took a week off from work to help out too. She came down Thursday evening, the evening before Penny's due date, and planned to stay for ten days until the baby came home and Penny was settled and ready to look after our little guy.

There was one problem with all our planning. Our son didn't cooperate. Penny and I watched the NFL Conference Championship games together. My honey was sprawled out on the couch because it didn't hurt her back so much. I sat on a chair beside her and held her hand most of the day. We cheered ourselves hoarse as we watched Aaron Morano and the 49ers take down those nasty Vikings who knocked off our Eagles last weekend.

The next-to-final game for the NFL season pitted Trevor's Jets against Eric Peter's Ravens. It was hard to pick a team to root for. Eric and Trevor were both good friends. The five-year friendship with Trevor and the fact that he was in our wedding party won out. We cheered as the Jets beat Baltimore in a tight game. Aaron's 49ers would face Trevor's Jets in two weeks in the Super Bowl. Ironically, the "visiting" team, the Jets, would play in their home stadium, the Meadowlands. The NFC was designated the "home" team for this Super Bowl.

The holding pattern in our lives was frustrating. Penny went into HUP (Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania) for a checkup on Wednesday. The doctor said everything was fine but he would induce labor if the baby didn't show up before Saturday, January 25th.

I was practicing combine drills with four of Temple's seniors Friday afternoon when Coach Herndon waved a cell phone at me.

"Your mother-in-law is on the phone," Coach announced. That drew cheers from the seniors. They knew my baby was due anytime.

"Kyle here," I said when I got my phone.

"Penny's water broke a few minutes ago," Marilyn reported. "Don't come home tonight. Go straight to HUP."

"Is everything all right?" I asked nervously. "Is Penny OK?"

"Everything is fine," Marilyn reported. "Can you call Jim and your family? I want to get on the road. My family has a history of dropping babies quickly."

"You got it," I agreed. Marilyn said good bye and I clicked my phone off. "Wahoo! We're going to have a baby!" The seniors let out a cheer. The guys around me shook my hand or slapped me on the back. I dashed for the locker room. I took a thirty-second shower and dressed. The phone calls could wait until I got to the hospital. It was only ten minutes away.

I got to the hospital long before Penny and Marilyn. I called Mom, Dad, Jim Edwards, Will and Andy. Will would pick up Liz and bring her along from Princeton. I didn't need to search down Abby. By no coincidence, she was doing her obstetrics rotation this month. She was already there. I paged her to let her know Penny was on the way. I started the paperwork while my wife traveled to the hospital.

I was surprised twenty minutes later when a police car pulled up to the birthing center door with the siren wailing. Abby, a doctor and two nurses flew outside and returned with Penny in a wheel chair.

Penny managed, "Hi, honey," before gritting her teeth for another contraction. They wheeled her by.

Abby called back, "Her husband and mom will take care of the paperwork."

"It's done already," I announced. "What's going on?"

"The contractions increased quite a bit around the edge of the city," Marilyn reported. "I called 911 and got a police escort."

"Everything's fine?" I managed through my intense bout of nervousness.

"Everything is fine," Marilyn responded. "Now get in there and watch your son's birth." I hustled to catch up to Penny, the doc, the nurses and Abby.

Things didn't move quite as fast as Marilyn had feared when she drove Penny to the hospital. I was there and managed not to faint two hours later when our son appeared into the world. Words cannot do justice to the miracle as I watched him appear from his mother's womb. I was proud and relieved when my son let out his first wail and announced to the world that he was here. He was born at 6:37 PM, weighed in at 9 lbs., 12 oz. and measured 21 ¾ inches.

Penny and I chose the name David Zachary Martin a few days ago, and not because it was my middle name. Penny always liked the name David and I had no objections to it. Zachary needs no explanation. That was to honor his godfather.

I went out to the waiting room to let our assembled families know that our son and my wife were in excellent condition after the ordeal. All of us got to look at my son after the nurses had time to clean David up. I got to visit with Penny and David after Penny had time to rest up.

My son was a marvel. He was a big boy but not plump. He had an almost full head of wispy blond, almost white hair. His hands and fingers were impossibly small and delicate. I understood to my core that evening what my brothers Andy and Will, and my dad had tried to tell me about being a father. I would do ANYTHING for this beautiful boy to make sure he grew up healthy, happy and safe.

I led a parade of vehicles back to Drexel Hill around ten o'clock that evening. Will, Abby and I managed to put up everyone in our big house. Saturday morning we all returned for visiting hours. My family and Penny's family got to meet their grandson, nephew or cousin. Nikki and Adrian made it up from Charlottesville to visit.

Penny had a room full of distinguished NFL visitors too. Zack and Leigh Ann Hayes came down from Lancaster to visit their godson. Ed Fritz flew up for a couple days from his workouts in Pensacola. Aaron and Tania Morano flew in a day ahead of the rest of the 49ers so they could visit before heading back to north Jersey. Trevor and Steph Conwell came down to visit too.

Penny wasn't ready for discharge when the doctor did rounds Saturday morning, so she wasn't discharged until Sunday morning. I proudly brought my wife and son home to Drexel Hill that morning. Our house bustled during the day, with all the family and friends visiting. Things cleared out by evening as everyone headed back to Lancaster County, Virginia or Delaware. Liz did stay until Monday morning, when Will took her back to Princeton.

My first night at home with my wife and newborn son reminded me of something I had forgotten from four years earlier – exactly how noisy and disruptive a newborn can be. I was pretty bleary-eyed when I got up at 6:00 AM to get ready for work. I managed to get through the day without falling asleep.

----oooOooo----

Marilyn Edwards helpfully took a second week off from work to stay at our house and help Penny recover and get settled with our precious David. Coach Ruhle wasn't too demanding of my time. He understood about new fathers. He had an eight-month

old son at home. I got used to handling diapers, burping and getting up at odd hours of the night when David was cranky. Slowly over the next few weeks Penny and I settled into our roles as parents.

Will and Abby were a tremendous help. I loved how fascinated little Rose was by her cousin. She was gentle and sweet with her little "Davey." Rose turned two in the beginning of February. We had a nice party for our little girl. I was glad Will and Abby suggested sharing a house. It was great spending time with them. It was nice having built-in babysitters too.

Matt Ruhle needed a couple of weeks to fill out the coaching staff. Marcus Satterfield was appointed the offensive coordinator. He came to us from University of Tennessee, Chattanooga. Matt and Marcus had coached together years ago at Western Carolina. Matt decided he wanted a wide receivers coach, since I would be leaving in a few months. He brought in Terry Smith, a Penn Stater (naturally) and father of Justin King. I had met Justin when he visited campus a couple of years ago. Justin and Derrick Williams had led the Penn State renaissance in 2004-5. I looked forward to working with his dad.

I continued working out at Temple with the four seniors preparing for our team's Pro Day on March 8th. I was getting good times on the 40 yard dash and the various cone drills. Chris Considine worked with me on my pass catching and route running. I spent some evenings over in Cherry hill, New Jersey at Pro Train's gym getting ready. I wanted to put on a good show for the scouts and coaches at Temple's and Penn State's Pro Days. Max Solomon thought it would be good to attend both Pro Days, even if I didn't do all the drills both days. We wanted the NFL to know I was still in top physical condition and ready to play for whichever of the thirty-one teams would draft me.

Penny and I passed on going to the Biletznikoff Dinner in early February. Penny didn't feel up to it yet and I didn't want to go stag. We decided to attend the Maxwell Dinner on March 1st. It was Penny's first night out since David was born. We enjoyed the meal and the company. We ended up sitting with John and Paige Elway. They were delightful dinner companions. We enjoyed it for another reason – the Maxwell Award Honoree, one Winfield Ellsworth "Chip" Brinton.

----oooOooo----

Monday, March 3, 2014, 11:30 AM

I was busy in my cubicle breaking down video for next season when my cell phone rang. My phone showed a phone call from the 303 area code. I had no idea who it was.

"Hello, Kyle Martin," I stated.

"Kyle, this is John Elway," John said.

"John, I didn't expect to hear from you so soon," I said. "Did your wife misplace her sweater again?" She and John almost left the banquet hall Saturday night without it. I ran them down to return it.

"No nothing like that," John responded. "Paige made it back home with it. This is a business call, Kyle. Are you sitting down?"

"I'm in my cubicle breaking down video," I answered. "I'm sitting down."

"I need you to sign a contract with the Raiders," John stated.

"Uh... you know that isn't going to happen, John," I said. "We talked about this at the banquet. I will never play for the Raiders."

"The contract will state exactly that," John continued. "You will be paid and you will never play for the Raiders."

"You're losing me," I said. This conversation was getting surreal. "The Raiders will pay me NOT to play for them?"

"Actually the Broncos will pay you and you will play for us," John answered.

"I thought your team couldn't trade for my rights after thirty days before the start of last season," I responded.

"True, we can't trade for your rights," John explained. "We can trade for a SIGNED player after the NFL year starts next Monday. That is why I need you to sign a Raiders contract."

"Ohh... kay... uh... How do I know the Raiders won't screw you and me after I sign their contract?"

"I have been authorized to negotiate your Raiders contract with you and Max Solomon," John said. "I was thinking we could add an extra clause in the standard contract requiring the Raiders to trade you to us with a penalty of them paying you your full \$14 million dollar signing bonus if the trade doesn't happen by March 15th."

"Maybe I could consider this," I said. "Why are they finally willing to come to terms? How much am I costing your team? More importantly, how did you get the Raiders to consider trading with you? You're in the same division as them. I wouldn't have thought they would do any deal with you."

"Did you know Mark Davis hired Reggie McKenzie to be their general manager a few weeks ago?" John explained. "Reggie isn't emotionally tied to that bad decision to draft you last year. He wants to recoup the lost first-round pick. We can get you for a second round draft pick."

"A second-round pick? Really?" I said. "How did you get the Raiders to trade me so cheaply?"

John laughed. "We put the Raiders between a rock and a hard place. The bottom line is my team wants you to play for us. The Raiders can trade you to us and get something in return. I also have a tentative deal arranged with Carolina. We ship them Omar Harris, one of our receivers, and we swap first-round, #20-pick for their #3-pick." I knew Omar slightly from playing against him in the Rose Bowl three years ago. He was a decent, #2 receiver, but not a great receiver.

"... and with that pick in the draft, you'll pick me," I said.

"You got it," John said proudly. He chuckled. "I made sure Reggie knew you were going to play for us regardless of what they do."

"You get me for a second-round pick from the Raiders," I asked. "How much do you see me making? Are you going to pay me like a second round draft pick?"

"No... not at all," John said quickly. "You were the fifth pick in last year's draft. You will be paid accordingly. Now, I want you to understand, we can't pay you anything for last season. The CBA [collective bargaining agreement] prohibits us from doing that."

"OK, this is starting to sound interesting," I said.

"We believe our team is close to being something special and you are the key to getting us there," John said. "Are you willing to play for the Broncos, Kyle?"

"Definitely, John. I am willing," I agreed quickly. "Playing for your team would be a dream for me. I loved playing for Coach Baldwin last January at the Senior Bowl. What do we need to do to make this deal happen?"

"Can you and Max come out here to work on the contract tomorrow?"

"I need to talk with Penny, my parents and Max," I answered. "Oh yeah... I need to talk to my boss too. I do have a job and responsibilities here at Temple."

"Make your calls, Kyle," John replied. "I will have the travel secretary get ready for you. We'll have a ticket ready for you. I assume you would want to fly out of Philadelphia."

"Yes, Philly," I confirmed. "Thanks you for calling, John. This is fabulous news."

I was stunned at the swiftness of my deliverance from the purgatory the Raiders had consigned me to last April. I shook it off and dialed Max Solomon.

"Yes, Kyle, what is up?" Max asked politely when he answered my call.

"How's your schedule tomorrow?" I asked. "Can you meet me in Denver? John Elway would like to negotiate a contract between the Raiders and me. Are you available?"

"Elway? The Raiders?" Max asked curiously. It took a moment for the full meaning to sink in. "You sign a contract with the Raiders, who immediately trade you to the Broncos. Why would they Raiders ever, ever trade you to their biggest rival?"

"John Elway put them between a rock and a hard place," I explained. "John also has lined up a trade with the Panthers. They swap first-round picks and Denver sends Omar Harris to Carolina."

"Brilliant... positively brilliant," Max marveled. "The Broncos get your services at a steep discount if the Raiders do the deal. They get you in draft if the Raiders don't. The Raiders get something for their squandered draft pick. You get paid and get to play football. Uh... speaking of pay... did John say what pay scale they would use for you? They aren't going to pay like a second-round pick, are they?"

"No, John promised me they would pay me like the number five pick in the draft," I answered. "They seem real interested and anxious for my services. Can we set this up?"

"I can rearrange my schedule and get to Denver tomorrow so we can explore this further," Max said. "Don't get overexcited about this possibility. Are you certain you want to play for the Broncos?"

"Antwaan Booker and Brendan Hayden are friends. I know half a dozen guys on the team already," I answered. "I played for Coach Baldwin and the Bronco staff at the Senior Bowl and loved them. I would love to see what Brady Rasmussen and I can do together. Yes, Max... I want to play for the Broncos."

"Good," Max Said. "How does Penny feel about this move?"

"She's in Neurobiology right now," I answered. "I am going to call her in about fifteen minutes, after class is over."

"Call me before you fly out," Max said. "We can coordinate our travel details and come to tomorrow's meeting better prepared."

"Will do," I agreed before clicking my phone off. I headed down the hall to take care of my next piece of business. "Nadia, is Matt in?" I asked politely of Matt Ruhle's administrative assistant. Matt wasn't as formal as Coach Golden was. He insisted we address each other by our first names around the office. He was Coach Ruhle only when we were in front of the players on the team.

"Go right in, Kyle," Nadia replied. "Matt's not busy."

"Hey Matt," I said as I walked in. "You remember how I have been saying for the past ten months that I was yours until the NFL called?" He looked up and smiled. "Literally, they just called. John Elway wants me to fly out to Denver and sit down to discuss a contract to play for his team."

"That is great news, Kyle," Matt replied. "No one here is going to stop you. Don't worry about work here. Chris [Considine] can handle it and I'll pay him hourly until graduation." Chris was a senior and would graduate in May. He was already lined up to take my grad assistant spot after the NFL draft.

"Thank you, Matt," I said. "Thank you for everything."

"Go. Go do what you were meant to do," Matt answered. He laughed. "Things can get back to normal around here. It was embarrassing watching one of my coaches out-play my players."

I gathered up my coat and headed for home. I could catch Penny during her lunch break while I packed for my trip. I gave Dad a call too before I left Edberg-Olson and asked him to call Blake, Taylor and Mays. My attorneys needed to be prepared to review the contract and turn it around fast. I didn't want this opportunity to slip away. I called Penny as soon as I got back to our place in Upper Darby.

"What's up, Kyle?" Penny asked when she answered her phone.

"The Broncos want me to sign a contract with the Raiders so they can trade for me next Monday," I explained. "The Raiders gave John Elway permission to negotiate a contract with me. Max and I need to head to Denver to sit down with John tomorrow."

"The Raiders?" Penny asked. "Are you sure you can trust the Raiders?"

"I'm not sure," I agreed. "I'm not signing any contract with them without ironclad guarantees that I don't have to put up with their shit anymore."

"How long will you be in Denver?"

"I have no idea," I said. "I think Max and I will be playing this by ear."

"Call me on my cell when you land," Penny asked. "I'll set it to vibrate so I don't wake Davey."

"It could be late by the time I get to Denver," I said. "Are you sure you don't want me to text you?"

"Do you really think I will be asleep when you call?" Penny teased. Davey was doing a little better at sleeping but Penny and I got up too often every night to sooth him, feed him or change him.

"I love you, honey," I said.

"I love you too," Penny agreed. "Go get a good contract with the Broncos."

----oooOooo----

I called the Broncos when I got home. They had a ticket set aside for me on United. The flight departed at 2:45 PM so I had to hurry to the airport. I made my flight on time. God bless the Broncos. They flew me out first class. I thankfully didn't have a long layover in Chicago. The airport in Denver was huge. I took a tram from my terminal back to the main concourse and headed downstairs to baggage claim. The Broncos were supposed to have someone there to pick me up.

I found a guy my age holding a "Kyle Martin" sign downstairs. I walked over and introduced myself. "I'm Kyle."

"Good to meet you again, Kyle," the man said. "I'm Ryan."

"Have we met?"

"I used to quarterback at Cincinnati," Ryan explained. "We played against each other a couple of years ago."

"Ryan?" I mused. "Ryan Williamson... the Bearcats. You're my age, aren't you?"

"I graduated last spring too," Ryan replied. "I assume that makes us about the same age."

"Did the Broncos send a player to pick me up?"

"No, I'm an intern now," Ryan explained. "I signed with them as an undrafted free agent last spring. I made it through training camp until the final cut downs at the end of August. They let me go. I tried to hook up with another NFL team and then tried the CFL. No luck. I decided it was time to move on to my next career, coaching. Coach Baldwin took me on this January as an intern."

"I understand," I replied. "I've been working as a grad assistant at Temple since the Raiders drafted me."

"I know," Ryan said. "I watched your guys at the Orange Bowl. They did well."

"They did," I agreed.

"Let's get your luggage and get you on the road," Ryan said. "This team is putting you up in a suite near Dove Valley."

"Dove Valley?"

"That's what everybody calls our training center," Ryan explained. "Officially it is the Paul D. Bowlen Memorial Broncos Centre but everyone calls it Dove Valley. That is the name of that area of Denver."

"Let's do it," I agreed. Ryan and I talked about our experiences as an intern or grad assistant as we waited for my bags. There wasn't much difference between the two jobs other than one was for a professional team and the other was for a college team. We did the scut work for the coaching staff.

Ryan pointed out some of the highlights of the Denver area as he drove me south to my hotel. I could see the lights on the towers in downtown Denver from the interstate. I could make out the mountains a little from the snow capping their flanks and peaks in the distance off to our right. It took about forty minutes to get to the hotel. Ryan helped me check-in and promised to pick me up and take me to breakfast before taking me over to Dove Valley for my meeting. He left me his cell phone number in case I needed to reach him before he met me in the morning.

I gave Penny a call and let her know where I was staying. We talked for a few minutes about how things would work if I accepted the offer from the Broncos. Davey cut short the talk when he woke up and cried for his mommy. We had talked long enough that I was confident that Penny would be satisfied making Denver our second home.

Max Solomon called soon after I hung up on Penny. He wanted the two of us to meet over breakfast before we met with John Elway and the other Broncos officials. Max had rented a car for the duration of his stay in Denver. He would drive me to our meeting. I called Ryan and let him know he didn't need to get me in the morning.

----oooOooo----

Tuesday, March 4, 2014 – Centennial, Co.

Max took us down the street to the IHOP for breakfast. The food was good. I think Max was just as happy with the slow service since it gave him more time to talk with me before we went to our meeting with the Broncos brass. "How do you feel about playing here in Denver?" Max asked between bites of his eggs.

"I love the idea," I gushed. "I enjoyed working with Coach Baldwin and his staff at the Senior Bowl. I know half a dozen guys on the team. I'd love to play with Brady Rasmussen. I think this is just about a perfect place for me to play."

"I need you to temper your enthusiasm for the Broncos," Max said. "The team seems sold on acquiring your talents. We are here to see if we can arrange a suitable contract for your services, commensurate with your draft status. Be friendly, be willing but let them sell you on coming here to play."

"OK, I guess that makes sense," I agreed.

"This is not your only option to get into the NFL," Max continued. "We will listen to and consider their offer. You also have the option of turning them down and re-entering the draft in April."

"This looks like a good place to me," I said. "They have good players and a good coaching staff. This team is on the upswing. I think they can go places next season. I don't know where I'll be or how good the team drafting me will be if I go back to the draft."

"True," Max agreed. "There also are advantages to going into the draft. The most the Broncos can pay you is a three-year guaranteed contract. You will get four years if you wait for the draft. That extra year could be worth five or six million dollars."

"Remember the story about big stones, Max?" I asked. "I think this is a team well suited to my talents. It would be worth the extra money to come here and play for a good team."

"I don't disagree, Kyle," Max responded. "I think the Broncos MAY be a good team for you. That is a decision we make AFTER they formulate their proposal to you. Temper your enthusiasm and let them sell you on playing here. It will give me more leverage in conducting the negotiations."

"You know this business better than me," I agreed. "I promise not to kiss John Elway when we meet today." Max chuckled.

"Refraining from that would be good," Max said. "I believe today will be a good day for you but let them convince us that they are the right team for you."

"I got it, Max," I agreed.

We realized that the slow service at the restaurant would delay us from making our 9:00 AM appointment. Max called ahead to warn John Elway we would be a few minutes late.

Max headed east on East Arapahoe Boulevard through a few intersections to South Peoria Road before turning south. The road turned into East Broncos Boulevard as we passed the regional airport. He turned left into a long parking lot and drove to the other end.

"The practice fields are on the other side of these trees," Max commented as he pointed to his left. He pulled in near the building. About eighteen to twenty cars were in the parking lot. A big sign out front showed a Broncos helmet. I followed Max up to the front of the two-story, glass and steel building. The Broncos' logo and name were above the front door.

The receptionist called upstairs when we arrived. John Elway's administrative assistant came downstairs to meet us and took us upstairs to John Elway's office. The sign outside his door said his title was "Executive Vice President of Football Operations." The assistant sent us inside.

"Max, Kyle, welcome. It is so good of you to come," John said as he stood behind his desk. He motioned for us to have a seat on the couch at the opposite side of his office. Another man in his fifties was sitting in a chair beside the couch.

"I'm very happy to be here," I said. I gave him a wink as I sat down. "It has been such a long time since we saw each other. Penny and I enjoyed sharing a table with you and Paige last Saturday night."

"The Maxwell Club does throw a good banquet," John agreed as he took a seat beside the other man. "Kyle, I would like to introduce you to Rich Slivka, General Counsel for the team. Max, I believe you already know Rich." All of us exchanged greetings with Mr. Slivka.

"I appreciate you coming out here to Denver on short notice to listen to what our team proposes," John began. "We evaluate you as the top receiver available and expect you to become an elite receiver in this league. Your speed, your hands and your general football knowledge will make you difficult to slow down and impossible to stop. We want you to be a part of the Broncos family."

Max was right. This was more a recruitment than a salary negotiation. You don't start a salary negotiation by singing the praises of the person you are negotiating with.

"The Broncos are prepared to offer you very generous terms on the remaining three years of your rookie contract, based on your status as the #5 pick in last year's first round of the draft," John said. "We have confirmed with the league that there is no way for us to help you recover any money from the 2013 season. The CBA prohibits that. We can give you three-quarters of the \$17.8 million signing bonus due to a #5 draftee. The \$405,000 rookie base pay and the first quarter of the signing bonus are gone forever."

"The Broncos are offering you \$16.5 million over the course of the remaining three years of your rookie contract. We know money is tight for a married grad student with a new baby. We are willing to give you 40% of the remaining signing bonus money on or about March 15th."

Max looked at me, arched an eyebrow and gave me a slight smile. I understood his question from our discussion over breakfast. I returned the smile and gave a small nod yes.

"That is a most generous offer," Max said. "I believe in principle that Kyle would be willing to play for the Broncos, assuming we can work out all the details satisfactorily. Kyle?"

"It sounds like a fair deal," I agreed. "Max hit on the key for me. It is a fair deal assuming I play for the Broncos. I would be signing this contract initially with the Raiders. What guarantee do I have that the trade we both want will actually happen? They have spent most of the last year trying to coerce me into playing for them? I won't play for them for any amount of money!"

"Rich, I'll let you handle that question," John said.

"I explored some language with the league regarding this, Kyle," Mr. Slivka explained. "I suggest we add a non-standard clause in the contract requiring the Raiders pay you the full \$16.5 million signing bonus if they do not trade you to us within three days of your signing the contract. The clause can further stipulate that the contract is voided if the Raiders do not trade you by the payment deadline. You would become a free agent again and be eligible for the 2014 draft."

I glanced over at Max, who was smiling. He gave me a nod of approval. "It sounds like you have me protected if the Raiders try to pull a fast one," I commented. "You'll be well positioned with the #3 pick in the draft to take me anyway if the Raiders try to pull a fast one on us." John laughed.

"That's the plan," John said. "One way or the other, we want your services. It's all up to you now, Kyle. Are you interested in playing for the Broncos?"

I glanced at Max. He nodded yes. "It all sounds good in principle. I guess the next step is to work out the rest of the details."

"Exactly," John agreed. "You are welcome to sit in while Max, Rich and I haggle out the details, if you wish. I can have one of our players give you the grand tour of our facilities otherwise."

"The tour sounds good," I replied.

"Chrissie, could you ask Brady to come over to my office?" John announced into his phone. We made small talk for a couple minutes until Brady Rasmussen popped his head into John's office. He gave me a big smile.

"Great to see you, Kyle," Brady said. "Ready for the tour?"

"I am," I responded. "You have my cell, Max. Call me if you need to talk anything over with me."

"I will call when I need your input on the details, Kyle," Max promised. I gave my thanks to John and Mr. Slivka for meeting with me before following Brady out into the hallway.

"It took a year but we got you here," Brady gushed when the door was closed. "Thank God!"

"I'm excited about this too," I agreed. "Antwaan said you were trying to trade for my rights last spring."

"We've been trying to get you for much longer than that," Brady replied as he laughed. "We had the deal done with the Titans on draft day to jump up to #6 and take you. The damned Raiders grabbed you first."

"Really? It was that close?" I gasped. "I could have been playing for the Broncos this past year? I tried to put my disgust out of mind as Brady began the tour. He showed me the locker room, the training rooms, the video room, team meeting rooms, the weight room. We bumped into a couple of coaches. Coach Kovacevic, the special teams coach, seemed especially happy to see me again."

Around 11:30 AM Brady and I decided to grab a little lunch at the cafeteria. We hadn't heard anything from Max or John yet. Brady and I were part way through lunch when I felt a tap on the shoulder. I turned to find Brendan Hayden standing behind me, grinning like a fool.

"Coach! It's damned good to see you here," Brendan enthused. "I heard whispers that you were going to be here. I'm glad they're true."

"It's good to see you too, Brendan," I responded. "I caught you when I watched a couple of your games last season. You looked good out there on special teams."

"It'll be more fun if I'm blocking for you," Brendan said. "It makes the work easier when I know all I need is to open a little crack and you'll go streaking through for big yards – just like in college. Do you think there's a chance you'll end up here?"

"Decent chance," I allowed. "My agent is upstairs negotiating with John to see if they can work out a contract that works for me and for your team."

"I hope they do," Brendan replied. "I'd love to help open some holes for your returns like we used to do."

"I hope that happens too," I agreed. Brendan headed off. Brady waited until Brendan was out of earshot.

"Brendan turned into our special teams ace," Brady noted. "Nobody expected him to make the team but he did and then played well."

"He's a little small for an NFL linebacker and too slow," I agreed. "He just plays smart and makes plays. In other words, he's a Penn State linebacker."

"Yeah, exactly," Brady agreed.

Brady and I talked as we ate lunch. The meal was OK. It was institutional food, not really different than I would be having for lunch if I was back at Temple eating at one of the dining halls. My phone rang as we finished eating.

"Kyle, can you join me in the conference room beside John's office?" Max asked. "We need to discuss a couple of issues for the contract. I'm sure Brady can show you the way here."

"Conference room by John's office?" I parroted for Brady to hear. He nodded yes. "I'll be there in a few minutes, Max."

"Talks going well?" Brady asked.

"I guess," I responded. "My agent wants to review a couple of details. I guess it's good they're worrying about details. They must have the big items agreed on."

"I hope this goes well," Brady said as we headed upstairs. "You would make a great addition to our team." Brady took me upstairs to the conference room. "Check for me down in the QB's room when you and your agent are done. Do you remember where it is?"

"I do," I agreed. "I'll see you in a bit." I headed into the conference room. Max motioned for me to sit down across the table from him. "How are talks progressing?"

"Very well," Max said. "I need to discuss a couple of minor items in the agreement before we can conclude it. Before we talk about them, let's consider the big question first. Do you want to play for the Broncos? Would you and Penny be comfortable here?"

"I'd love to play for the Broncos," I said. "I will need to run the second question by Penny before we make a final decision."

"The financial offer they are making is excellent," Max continued. "They will get you every penny possible in the remainder of your rookie contract. Their offer to pay you \$5.3 million next week is extremely generous. Frankly, Kyle, it was more than I expected them to offer. This is a three-year deal. You can wait until the draft and get signed to a four year deal and perhaps gain a little more security for your family. One certainty is that you will be a free agent sooner if you make a deal with the Broncos now. You can make big free agent money sooner if you play well here for the next three years."

"What do you suggest?" I asked.

"You need to balance security and earnings," Max said. "Talk this over carefully with Penny and your parents. On balance, if I were you, I would probably take this offer. The Broncos are a rising team with a good coaching staff and front office. This is a good place to play professional football."

"I'm leaning towards accepting too," I agreed. "What time is it?"

Max glanced at his watch. "12:16 PM.

"That's 2:16 back home," I mused. "Penny should be done with Intro to Veterinary Medicine by now. I'll give her a call."

"How are things going, honey?" Penny asked when she answered my call.

"Very good," I replied. "How do you feel about making Denver our second home?"

"Denver?" Penny asked. "Is the offer that good?"

"\$5.3 million dollars, payable next week," I answered. "Right after the Raiders trade me to the Broncos. The deal is worth \$16.5 million overall."

"You're sure the Raiders won't try to keep you once they sign you?" Penny asked. I related the clauses we were putting in the contract to guarantee the Raiders behaved properly. "That's a relief."

"I think Colorado is the perfect place for outdoors people like you, Davey and me," I added. "It has mountains, places to hike and camp and plenty of nature. What else do we need?"

"Denver is pretty good considering the thirty cities other you could end up in," Penny agreed. "Are you after a final decision from me now?"

"No, I'm not," I answered. "Does this sound promising enough that we should conclude the contract negotiations? We can send the contract off to our attorneys for them to review and then sit down with our parents to make a final decision later this week."

"I like the idea well enough to let Max go ahead with the contract," Penny said. "Do you know when you'll be coming home?"

"Tomorrow or the next day, I guess," I answered.

"Good luck with the negotiations," Penny said. "Come home soon. I missed you last night."

"I'll do that," I agreed. "Give Davey a kiss for me." I clicked to end the call.

"We proceed forward with this?" Max asked. I nodded yes.

"I have two minor details to discuss with you regarding the contract," Max said. "The standard contract requires players to make themselves available for public appearances for the team from time to time. The CBA mandates at least five personal appearances. The Broncos would like you to do more."

"Are these appearances during the season or off-season?"

"Some of each," Max said. "The Broncos would like you to do eight appearances. I countered with an offer of six."

"The off-season appearances... I guess I would need to fly back to Denver for those," I remarked. "The travel for these things could get expensive."

"The Broncos will pay you \$5000 per appearance," Max explained.

"I'd still like to keep the off-season appearances down to a minimum," I said. "My off-season time with my family is going to be precious."

"Agreed," Max replied. "The second item is the workout bonus. The Broncos are offering a very generous \$200,000 annual workout bonus."

"Fantastic!" I answered. "That one should be easy for me to get. I'm fanatical about working out."

"Not so fast," Max cautioned. "You only get the bonus if you work out here in Denver under supervision of the team's training staff."

"The money would have been nice but time with my family is more important," I said. "They can offer whatever they want for workouts. I will be doing my training in Philadelphia."

"I think you should consider it for this off-season," Max cautioned. "You will be the new guy on the team. You should put in some time here preparing for the season as an act of good faith. The Broncos are rescuing you from the limbo the Raiders consigned you to last spring. It would improve your standing with your new teammates."

I paused for a moment. Max was right. 'Whatever I can do to help the team.' That was the mantra I had been repeating since ninth grade. "OK, I agree. I will put in some time here to prepare for the coming season."

"That is a wise decision," Max said.

"What's next?" I asked.

"I think that about covers everything," Max replied. "Shall we go next door and let John Elway know that you are in agreement in principle?"

"Let's do it," I agreed.

Max and I went next door to John's office. Max announced, "Kyle is aboard with what we have been discussing."

"Excellent!" John replied. "Let's make you a Bronco! Kyle, Max and I have probably another hour of discussion to conclude everything. Why don't you track down Brady Rasmussen. It will be good for the two of you to establish a relationship."

"We've been friends for six years," I replied, "...but I will be happy to hang out with Brady while you two finish the details of the contract."

"I will have our travel people line up a ticket for your trip back to Philly," John added. "Do you want to catch a flight out this evening, if one is available?"

"That would be great," I agreed. Max and John went back to work. I headed down the hall to the quarterbacks meeting room. Brady was in there working on an iPad.

"Cool!" I gushed. "Is that one of the new iPads?"

"It's not really new," Brady said. "The team got them ten months ago when we adopted the ePlaybook system."

"Can I see it?" I asked.

"Sorry, not yet," Brady answered. "You're not a Bronco and you haven't signed the non-disclosure agreement." Brady gave me a wink. "Anyway, I can't share our playbook with someone who's still property of the Raiders."

"A minor technicality," I responded, "...that will be fixed next Monday afternoon."

"It will?" Brady said, grinning widely. "That is excellent news."

"John and Max are finishing the details on my contract," I said. Brady gave me a bigger smile. "So, tell me about this electronic playbook. I heard the Dolphins and Ravens have been using this. I didn't know you guys had it too. I work at Temple and our budget doesn't have room for anything like this."

"You'll love it when you get yours," Brady said. He went on to explain how the ePlaybook worked. There was a column of buttons down the right side showing various defensive schemes. The play on screen morphed based on which defense was selected, showing how we were to react. You could show video of the Broncos running the play on the display. After the video ended, the screen listed more videos of the play along the left side of the screen. It was great!

Brady and I talked about the general principles of the West Coast Offense that the Denver Broncos ran. Much of what Brady told me I knew already from talking with Zack Hayes. The West Coast Offense was developed in the late seventies and early eighties by Bill Walsh at Stanford and at the 49ers. Mike Holmgren learned the offense from Bill Walsh and in turn taught it to Coach Bauder, who was Zack's coach. He also indoctrinated Andy Reid, the Eagles coach and Coach Baldwin's mentor and teacher.

John Elway called me over to his office while Brady and I were talking. Brady wished me the best. I headed down the hall and found a seat in John's office. Both John and Max were smiling broadly.

"We have all the details wrapped up for the contract, Kyle," Max reported. "Do you want to look it over before we send it off to Blake, Taylor and Mays?"

"No, go ahead and send it," I answered. "I can read it on the plane ride home."

"My travel people were successful getting you a flight home tonight," John said. "It departs DIA at 7:30 PM. We were able to get you a non-stop flight back to Philly. It gets you home pretty late, around 1:00 AM your time. I hope you don't live too far from the airport."

"The drive isn't too bad, about twenty minutes," I replied. "Especially at 1:00 in the morning. I doubt I'll run into much traffic heading home."

"That's not too bad," John said. "Can we schedule a time next Monday for you to sign the contract and then the Raiders and my team can get the trade turned into the league?"

"Sure," I agreed. "Does that sound good to you, Max?"

"I can make Monday work," Max answered.

"I will see if I can get Mark Davis on the line," John said. "Maybe we can get everything set before you head for the airport." Max and I both agreed. John dialed a number and we waited a minute. John put the phone on speaker, so we could hear the conversation.

"Hello, Mark. This is John Elway," John reported when the Raiders' receptionist connected us to the Raiders' managing partner.

"Yes, John?"

"I have you on speaker, Mark," John explained. "I am sitting here with Kyle Martin and Max Solomon. We have worked out a contract that Kyle and Max can accept."

"OK," Mark Davis said. "Can you send a copy over here for my people to review?"

"Certainly," John agreed. "I had my admin e-mail you a copy when we sent the draft to Kyle's attorneys. You should have it now." There was a pause in the conversation while Mark Davis checked his e-mail.

"OK, I got it," Mark said. "Give me ten minutes to review this and I will get back to you."

"Sounds fair," John said. John, Max and I made small talk while we waited for Mark Davis to read through the contract. It didn't take ten minutes before he called back.

"What the hell is paragraph 31?" Mark demanded. "We are NOT going to pay that kid \$16.5 million dollars and void this damned contract. This clause is insulting and unacceptable."

"Mark, calm down," John replied coolly. "You aren't going to pay Kyle \$16.5 million. This clause is there at Kyle and Max's insistence. You trade Kyle to us and you will not pay him one penny."

"What happens if Kyle fails your physical?" Mark demanded. "You leave me on the hook for the full cost of his contract and I won't be able to play him."

"If Kyle fails our physical he will fail your physical," John said. "The contract is terminated and your team and my team owe him nothing."

"May I add, Kyle is in excellent physical health," Max said. "He will pass any physical either team gives him. Concern about paragraph 31 is unnecessary. Trade Kyle to the Broncos as soon as he signs the contract and your team is fully protected and will owe us nothing."

"I will review that clause with our attorneys," Mark said.

"Can we schedule the contract signing for 1:00 PM on Monday, Mark?" John asked.

"We can do it at noon," Mark suggested. "The league year starts at noon here in Oakland." I shook my head violently no and mouthed the words, 'No Oakland!'

"We need to do the signing here, Mark," John said evenly.

"That little shit!" Mark growled. "How dare he? I'll be damned if I'll..."

"MARK!" John responded louder. "Of course Kyle is pissed off at your team. You cost him almost \$6 million dollars this past season. Get your ass on your plane Monday and get here to Denver! I'm giving you a way out of the draft fiasco your team

created. Get here, sign the damned contract and trade him to us or you will LOSE that first-round pick. Salvage what you can. You can have a second-round pick next month and have something to show for this mess.”

We sat in silence for half a minute. “Someone with authority to sign will be at your office at 1:00 PM Mountain time on Monday,” Mark Davis finally said. “Good-bye.”

“That wasn’t particularly pleasant but it’s done,” John said. “I will have my travel people set up tickets for your trip out here, Kyle. Would leaving Sunday and returning to Philly on Thursday work for you, Kyle? Once the trade is done we will need you to take a complete physical. Our trainers will want to evaluate your fitness and recommend some work to get you ready for OTAs and the season. We have an orientation and need to get you hooked up with a playbook.”

“That all sounds fine,” I said. “Coach Rhule at Temple has been great. I’m sure the time off next week won’t be a problem. I am anxious to get my hands on the ePlaybook. Brady was telling me about it this afternoon.”

“We will get you all of that on Monday once the league has your trade paperwork,” John said.

Max and I thanked John for his help that day. Max headed straight back to the hotel. I waited for Ryan Williamson, who was assigned to drive me to the hotel and the airport that evening. I called Penny and my parents to give them an update while I waited for my 7:30 PM flight home. Max asked me to set up a meeting with Mom, Dad, Penny and Jim and Marilyn Edwards to review the contract offer on Thursday evening.

----oooOooo----

I worked at Temple the rest of the week. Matt Ruhle was fine with me taking whatever time I needed for the Broncos. He knew the day was coming that I would go to the NFL. It just came six weeks earlier than either of us anticipated. I would work with the Owls as much as I could until the end of semester. I would be available for most of spring training, which would be a big help to Matt. I would make the Cherry and White game at the end of spring training too.

I explained my schedule to my professors. Both were willing to work with me to allow me pass the courses while missing some of the class room time. I could read and do my term papers just as easily during my downtime in Denver as I could back in Pennsylvania.

Blake, Taylor and Mays reported back on Thursday afternoon that everything looked fine with the contract as drawn up. My brain trust’s recommendation was unanimous after Max reviewed the contract with my family and Penny’s parents on Thursday evening. I should sign the contract. Denver would be an excellent second home for me and my family.

Penny and I made a few other necessary decisions. I would stay at the Staybridge Suites for any time I spent in Denver during March and April. Penny and I would search for our Colorado home after classes ended in the beginning of May. We needed a car or two out there. We needed furniture, household goods, electronics and so much more. Penny, Davey and I were going to have a busy summer.

I enjoyed a quiet weekend with my family before heading west early on Monday morning. My flight got into Denver a little after 10:30 that morning. Mark Taylor, another coaching intern, met me instead of Ryan Williamson. Mark took me for an early lunch before taking me over to Dove Valley. We bumped into Antwaan Booker downstairs near the reception area when we entered the training facility.

“You’re here, Martin!” Antwaan boomed. “It’s damn good to see you. You and Brady got to go out and score us some points next season. I’m tired of losing 13-10 games.”

“I’ll do my best, Antwaan,” I promised. “It’s is really great to be here.”

Mark took me upstairs to John Elway’s office. Max had arrived ahead of me. Mark Davis was not here yet for the contract signing. John, Max and I talked while we waited. 1:00 PM came. 1:15... 1:30... finally John got a call at 1:37 from Reggie

McKenzie, the general manager of the Raiders. His flight had been delayed. He was on the ground at DIA and would be joining us as soon as he could get across the city.

It was close to 2:30 in the afternoon when Ryan Williamson finally brought Reggie McKenzie to John's office.

"I apologize for my late arrival, everyone," Mr. McKenzie said as he sat down. "It is beyond me why a flight from Oakland to Denver needs to go through Seattle, but it did. Add a little fog and rain and you get a two-and-a-half-hour delay in Seattle." Mr. McKenzie stepped over to me and offered his hand for a handshake. "I am so sorry the way things have turned out between you and my team."

"You don't need to apologize, Mr. McKenzie," I replied as I shook his hand. "You weren't with the team when all this went down." Reggie McKenzie took over as GM about six weeks earlier.

"It's a bad way to run a team," Mr. McKenzie said. "We need to listen to people better than we did. This whole unfortunate incident could have been avoided."

"Are we ready to do business?" John asked as Mr. McKenzie took a seat. We all agreed we were.

John handed me six copies of the contract for me to sign. Max signed each copy after I was done. Max handed them to Mr. McKenzie. He signed them. I was officially a Raider, at least for a few minutes.

John pulled out the paperwork detailing the trade between the Broncos and Raiders. I watched as first John Elway and then Mr. McKenzie signed the papers that would trade me from the Raiders to the Broncos. A wave of relief swept over me. I'm a trained historian as well as a football man. I am in no way comparing my economic servitude to the fools in Oakland to the horrors of slavery and racial hatred, but Martin Luther King's immortal words summed up my feelings of unbounded joy and relief best. "Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, ...free at last!"

Epilogue

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July 9, 2036 – Kyle Martin Residence, Avondale, Pa.

“Good night, Grandpop,” Penny teased as we settled into our bed. “I hope you like your son’s birthday present.”

“It takes one to know one, Grammy,” I responded. “Anna is a little dear.” I gave Penny a hug and a kiss before we settled to go to sleep. It had been a long and hectic day. My son, David, and daughter-in-law, Sara, had graced our family with our first grandchild, Anna Beth Martin, that morning – on my forty-fifth birthday.

Penny went straight to sleep. I lingered between consciousness and sleep as I thought about the turns my life had taken.

Time was like a great pond. Every decision made ripples. These ripples interact with ripples from other decisions, our own and decisions by others. The ripples crossed and crisscrossed each other, directing our lives down various paths. I thought back to what still was the most impactful ripple of all in my life, the night twenty-three years ago when Al Davis, against all contrary advice, drafted me to play for the Raiders.

Al’s decision directly cost me a year of playing time in the NFL and almost \$6 million. Today the money doesn’t matter at all. I made twentyfold more in the next eleven years I played in the NFL. My 10% share of my brother’s software company dwarfed my NFL playing money. I had helped develop and market Andy’s “Kyle Martin’s NFL Challenge.” The program made both of us wealthy beyond all need. Penny and I could enjoy being philanthropists when we reached our retirement.

In a strange and certainly unintended way, Al Davis’ decision had furthered both my playing and coaching career. My grad assistantship at Temple gave me a good grounding in my chosen, post-playing career. I would have felt like a bit of a fraud if I had gone straight from playing for the Broncos to being an assistant coach for wide receivers at Pittsburgh without paying my dues as a coaching grunt.

My playing career in Denver had been fantastic. John Elway and Coach Baldwin expected my speed and size to stretch the field and force teams to defend every foot of turf. I did exactly that. Our team’s victories in Super Bowls XLIX and LII and the close-fought loss in Super Bowl L proved that conclusively.

I learned after the Broncos rescued me from my Temple exile that they were planning to take me with the next draft pick when Al Davis grabbed me. It seemed fate was always pushing me forward towards Denver. What would have happened if the Broncos would have taken me in the 2013 draft? Certainly we wouldn’t have had Marcus Kendricks, our stalwart middle linebacker, on our team. The Broncos took him in the first round in my place. Nor would they have had Cameron Jordan, who they took in the second round with the pick they had planned to give to the Titans so they could move up in the draft order to get me. The Broncos also picked up Richie Murray in that draft in the fourth round with the pick they got from Baltimore when they traded down in the first round.

Cameron and I have been widely acknowledged as the best wide receiver duo in the NFL since Jerry Rice teamed up with John Taylor thirty years earlier. Cam was 6’-3” tall and 215 pounds of muscle. I was 6’-4” and 210 pounds. I had speed to stretch the field. Either of us could beat press coverage and go over the middle in traffic. Coach Baldwin used us interchangeably. Teams could never be certain where either of us would line up. We were nearly unstoppable when combined with a smart, talented, Hall of Fame quarterback like Brady Rasmussen.

Al Davis’ decision to take me in the draft gave the Broncos three key players in their Super Bowl winning lineup. The defense, led by Antwaan Booker, would have been good without Marcus. With Marcus, we were dominating. I would have played with serviceable wide receivers and probably have done well without Cameron, but we did better with both of us on the team. Richie Murray proved to be a good backup to Simeon Thomas, our excellent tailback.

The Broncos would have taken someone with the 2014 second round pick they used to acquire me. Maybe they would have taken another running back to backup Simeon. Who knows? Would that person and I have been able to duplicate everything Marcus, Cameron and Richie gave our team? No, we wouldn't. The Broncos certainly fared better with Al Davis' mistake than I did personally.

I thought about another friend who may have unexpectedly benefitted from the crazy way those ripples in time change people's destiny. Ed Fritz, my best friend since boyhood and currently the offensive coordinator for my Super-Bowl-winning Eagles, had his destiny affected. I always felt a little bad about my part in the BCS Championship Game in 2014. Without Al I would have been in Pittsburgh dealing with our loss to the Steelers instead of being in Pasadena briefing Coach 'C' Czarwinski on how to beat my best friend and win the BCS Championship.

I make no apologies for briefing Coach C. I was acting as a football coach, giving my team the best chance to beat my opponent. That is how football is played. You play to win, regardless of friendships. Ed would have done exactly the same thing to me, if the situation was reversed. Would Coach C have gambled without my insight into Ed's psyche for that decisive interception in the third quarter? Ed's fourth quarter interception was certainly due to his need to score and score quickly to make up the two score deficit.

I can't say with certainty that my friend's loss in the BCS Championship Game caused his draft stock to plummet. It didn't help. Ed is almost 6'-1" and 195 pounds. That is small for an NFL quarterback. The two touchdown and three interception effort in his latest loss in the BCS Championship Game unfairly tagged my friend as a quarterback who couldn't win the big game. How would my Hall of Fame friend's career have turned out if quarterback-needy Jacksonville, Kansas City or Arizona had taken Ed?

Getting taken by the Rams in the third round proved to be an unexpected blessing to my friend. The Rams fans had no expectations of Ed when he arrived. My friend had two years to learn his craft and become an NFL caliber quarterback without all the pressure he would have faced in Jacksonville, Kansas City or Arizona. When Sam Bradford got hurt partway through Ed's third season, Ed was ready. Ed and my brother Andy put up amazing numbers. They led the Rams to the NFC Championship Game before losing to the Redskins.

Coach Sean Payton and the New Orleans Saints paid a pretty price to trade for Ed when the season was over. Drew Brees was finishing his career and Ed was the perfect successor to Drew. Coach Payton was used to having a "short" quarterback. Ed prospered under the brilliant and aggressive coach. Ed put up numbers worthy of his first ballot Hall of Fame selection in his dozen years in New Orleans.

Brady, Cam, Antwaan, Marcus and I had a great run in Denver. Brady earned his Hall of Fame place with his spectacular numbers and two Super Bowl wins. All good things eventually come to an end. Age caught up with us. Antwaan was the first to leave Denver, after my eighth season with the team. He was thirty-three and the Broncos weren't willing to pay premium dollars for an older player. Antwaan played two more seasons for the Raiders.

Cameron decided he had enough after he injured his knee in his eleventh season. He retired. Brady, Marcus and I soldiered on with Coach Baldwin. We scored a lot of points but couldn't make up for a weak, too-young defense. Marcus was still good but he couldn't be everywhere. The season ended with a victory to bring our record to 9-7. Unfortunately the Raiders beat us out for the division title. We went home.

NFL fans can be fickle. What have you done for me lately? Coach Baldwin had won two Super Bowls for Denver but that was a decade ago. Patience was at an end. He was fired the day after our season ended. Brady was thirty-seven and worn from fourteen seasons of football. His contract was up. He opted to retire. Penny and I talked long into the next night before deciding it was time for me to move on to my real career, coaching football.

I didn't lack job offers. John Elway wanted me to stay in Denver and join the new coaching staff. Coach Frank Holt, long my offensive coordinator in Denver, wanted me to join him in Green Bay. I had offers from Penn State, Temple and Tennessee (Coach Golden) to join their staffs. I ended up taking the first offer I received, to go home to Pennsylvania and work for John Schroeder and Zack Hayes in Pittsburgh as their wide receivers coach. Penny and I moved our family east.

I loved coaching and I think I did well at it. John Schroeder retired because of health issues two years after I joined the staff. Zack Hayes was promoted to head coach and I became the offensive coordinator. Zack turned play calling over to me. The Steeler offense did well, maybe too well. I lost my QB coach, Daryll Clark, who took a promotion to be the offensive coordinator in Seattle. By chance, this was the same year Ed Fritz finally retired.

My buddy had capped his career off by winning his third Super Bowl. Zack and I called as soon as the game was over and coaxed Ed, his wife, Ashley, their daughters, Katelyn and Becca and their baby son, Eddie, to come north to Pittsburgh. Zack, Ed and I made a dynamite team to mastermind our offense.

Contrasting Ed's and Zack's careers in the NFL was interesting. I rated the two about equal in quarterbacking talents. Zack was hailed as the savior and next Brett Favre by the Packers when he was drafted. Zack was thrown in as the starter in his first professional game. Coach Bauder and Packers never could develop all the parts necessary to create a good offense. My friend suffered cuts, bruises and concussions behind a bad offensive line. He lasted six seasons before he and Leigh Ann decided it was time for him to coach football.

Little was expected of Ed when the Rams drafted him. He had no pressure and plenty of time to learn to be an NFL quarterback. He was ready when his opportunity came. New Orleans and Sean Payton provided Ed good coaching, a great offensive system, and a strong supporting cast. He flourished.

Would Zack have done as well as Ed if the circumstances were reversed? I think so. Would Ed be a Hall of Famer if Jacksonville or Arizona had drafted him in the first round? I don't know. Small circumstances, ripples in time, can have outsized effects on our lives.

Would my prospects to make the Hall of Fame be better or worse if Al Davis hadn't drafted me? I don't know. My 15,099 yards and 1032 catches put me behind Jerry Rice, Terrell Owens, Randy Moss, Isaac Bruce, Tony Gonzalez and ahead of Larry Fitzgerald, Max Rosen, Tim Brown, Chris Carter, Cameron Jordan and Marvin Harrison on the all-time receiving yards list. My name has been on the ballot five times since I retired and I haven't made it yet. There was a glut of wide receivers waiting for our shot at the Hall. Not all of us will make it.

I will be fine if I don't make the Hall of Fame. I have three Super Bowl rings, two as a player and another as a head coach. I love my work leading the Eagles. I love coaching and will do it as long as I can be useful. Al Davis changed my life twenty-three years ago. For the better or for the worse? Who could know?

I had a good playing career. I have a good career coaching football, doing exactly the thing I love. I have a wonderful wife and great kids. David, my son and a world class sprinter, and Hunter, my youngest brother and a national champion swimmer, are bound for Rio de Janeiro and the Olympics in a few weeks. Now I'm a proud grandpa. Who could ask for more?

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The End

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I hope you enjoyed this alternate timeline for the end of Lost and Found. This was written in response to a reader who posed the "what if Al drafted Kyle?" question in an e-mail about six weeks ago. I was going to answer him with a short synopsis of what I thought would have happened until I saw all the possibilities opened up by the single change in fate. This story is the result of my musings on exactly how much that decision would have affected the Lost and Found story.

X of Dallas and I kept up a correspondence as I was writing Lost and Found. One of the more interesting threads was what would Al Davis' reaction be after Kyle spurns the Raiders and is taken by Al's arch-rivals, the Broncos, with the very next pick. Our conclusion was he would probably die of a heart attack. I didn't have nerve enough to kill Al off in my story while he was still alive in real life. Now that he passed away... well, you see the result.

Now that I've finished this detour, I will go back to finishing my next story, "A Reluctant Hero." This tale is set in Al Steiner's "Greenies/A Perfect World" universe. It follows Josh Warner, a young American soldier, as he struggles to survive a trek through the Cascades in the middle of the winter after disaster strikes his army unit and he is trapped behind enemy lines on the wrong side of the river. Now where did I leave my hero? Oh, yes... he's sitting on a couch with Matt Lauer and Savannah Guthrie on air doing the Today Show. Find out in a few months when I publish the story how Josh survived the snow, rain and wind in the mountains, encounters with the Chinese, what he's doing on the Today Show and why he's so reluctant about it all.

I want to thank my editors, PJoggin and CouldBeWorse, for their invaluable help. They have improved the story through their work. Any remaining errors are entirely mine.

Thank you for reading my stories.

Doug Fox

February 28, 2013

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