

Taylor Davidson took a job at a school with an undefeated football team and national championship dreams. What the professor learned about the program led him to inform the public. That's when the trouble started.

MR. FOOTBALL

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MR. FOOTBALL

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CHAPTER 1

Davidson was sitting in the football stadium when the guy jumped off the top of the press box and landed on the concrete steps below. The guy who jumped died. Not much mystery there. How Davidson got to that point in his life is a pretty good story.

Once, in what to Davidson seemed a long time ago, he heard a guy say that the number one fantasy of American males was to “do” a cheerleader. He overheard the comment at a bar. Davidson guessed the guy who was talking owned one of the larger “leisure hotels” in Chicago. Once prostitution had been legalized and controlled by the politicians, society needed a name for each establishment in order to issue the business a license. So, the city government called them “leisure hotels” but they were still whorehouses. At any rate, Davidson remembered the guy saying that every Wednesday evening was “dress-up” night and the paying customers could request that their favorite lady of the evening appear dressed in whatever costume the “john” desired. The number one choice for “dress-up” night was cheerleader. The guy said he owned more cheerleader outfits than most big-name colleges. Incidentally, he said the second most frequent request was for a French maid. You know - the black outfit with the little skirt and the black stockings. Weird. Full-dress nun was also extremely popular.

Davidson was thinking about cheerleaders because he was sitting in a university football stadium and watching some of them perform as part of the half-time entertainment. ***They do look, well, ...enticing***, Davidson thought to himself. ***Young women in tight sweaters and tiny little skirts jumping up and***

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down - whoa, jeez, I need a date. Davidson had been lacking female companionship. For what seemed like a long time.

Davidson had been a college professor and it was just about to dawn on him that he was going to have to swallow his pride and get a “real” job. However, in a stroke of good fortune, the Dean of the College of Business at Northern States University, Dr. Kenneth Stone, visited him at an adult continuing education class he was teaching (for pocket and beer money). Stone offered a position at Northern States. No questions asked. So here he was, sitting at a big-time college football game with the dean of the business school. It is often nice in the Midwest in September. It was a nice day today.

There was no doubt that Northern States was now in the big time. The University had struggled for many years as a poor relation to the big boys like Illinois, Iowa, Michigan, and Wisconsin. Those schools were Division I powerhouses and Northern States was a struggling Division II semi-power. The university was simply unable to compete academically due to its inability to attract quality students and faculty. Northern States faced a “Catch-22” like many schools across the nation. How can a university improve its reputation if its reputation is not good enough to attract the kind of people that will enhance its reputation? You get the idea. The answer? Sports, naturally. Just like Michigan, Ohio State, Florida, and any number of other schools. Northern States would only be able to hire well-known professors and recruit top academic students if they built a first-class sports machine. How do you do that in a relatively short amount of time? You cheat. It’s simple, really.

The idea is to move up to Division I. That means money. Big money. Money for facilities and coaches and equipment and bigger arenas and on and on. The place to start is with the community and the alumni. Administrators regale the Chamber of Commerce, Jaycees, Eagles, Mooses, Lions, and other

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animals with tales of the riches to be had when people pour in from all over the Midwest to spend money during football and basketball weekends. Then the alumni are hyped by visions of grandeur and how nice it will be to say they graduated from such a prestigious university. Both groups are promised scads of opportunities for jock-sniffing (hobnobbing with the players) and are offered choice seats at all the games (there are no students on the fifty-yard line in Division I college football or mid-court in Division I basketball). These seats are usually granted on a lifetime basis and passed down in wills and bequeaths. Cool. As the money coffers fill up in anticipation of athletic glory, the administration makes the next crucial move.

That usually means basketball. Football requires the recruitment of too many quality athletes. In basketball, all you need is a couple of studs (“thoroughbreds” in the vernacular of the business) and a decent support group to build a winner. However, it also means hiring the “right” coach.

For Northern States that meant Augie “Tip” Johanssen. Johanssen had played eleven lackluster seasons in the NBA, and had been assistant coach and city recruiter for the University of the West for eight years before he had been “let go” for NCAA rules violations. Perfect contender. Northern States is less than one hour from Chicago. The high schools in the city are famous as a large pool of excellent athletes. Very tall, very agile black kids would show up on the first day of high school just as their parents would show up for the first day of their new jobs in the school district. Excellent coincidence. Chicago is a hotbed of basketball talent, and Johanssen had a world of connections in the recruiting pipeline.

These kids don’t come cheap. The going rate for a shooting guard is currently \$30-40,000 a year as well as a car and a bogus job during the summer. A seven-foot center could cost substantially more and the athletic department would more than

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likely get caught. If a school wins a recruiting war, you can be sure that the schools that lost out will report some “strange dealings” to the NCAA. It is the nature of the beast. So, the powers at the NCAA slap your program with a two-year probation for recruiting violations. By this time, you’ve got several 20-win seasons under your belt, maybe a couple appearances in the big tournament in March, and your program is an established national entity. The money rolls in from ticket sales, alumni contributions, and licensed products. The university floats a revenue bond sale and uses community funds to build a spanking new, 14,000-seat, state-of-the-art basketball arena named after an illustrious graduate billionaire who chips in a few million for the privilege. Bam! The Lyle T. Spitz Arena. Life is good. For some of the alumni.

For years after it entered Division I, the Northern States football team played “early season patsy” for a number of schools. They were an independent without the protection provided by a conference. The deal is that weaker programs are scheduled for football powers as a sort of tune-up for the coming season. Northern States would travel to places like Colorado and Nebraska and get their heads handed to them. Why? Again, money and exposure. The larger schools pay a big guarantee and the games are always on regional TV if not on a national feed. Then they use the cash as seed money, float another revenue bond, and presto! - a new 78,000 capacity football stadium complete with press box, adjacent parking lot (for alumni tailgaters), and skyboxes (enclosed sections of seats surrounding the upper perimeter of the facility). The biology students don’t have enough test tubes. Tough.

The skyboxes are the key. Again, for reasons of money. A skybox usually encompasses 12-16 seats and is generally self-contained in terms of concessions and other amenities. The boxes are rented yearly by corporations and are used to impress

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business associates, reward prized employees, or just to show off. Amazingly, the rent for a year is often well over \$100,000 and does NOT include the price of the tickets. A license to print money. This phenomenon has not gone unnoticed by those most callous of capitalists, the businesspeople running the National Football League.

Several years ago, the Baltimore Chiefs were beset by a number of problems. Their stadium was falling apart and was located in an undesirable area (read: lots of minority folks). By then seats in the farthest reaches of the end zones were priced at \$64 a pop and the sport was increasingly being removed from the working stiff's ability to pay. In addition, the Native American tribes had never let up on their protests about the "Chiefs" name. A large corporation had purchased the team, like the majority of NFL franchises. Corporations do not like these kinds of hassles. So they decided to move the team to a new stadium in Virginia. In a corporate meeting to decide what to do about the number of complaints originating from the paying fans, a very-junior executive by the name of Charles Simpkins came up with a unique plan.

"Fuck 'em." He was from the marketing department.

The other executives seated around the large, oval conference table put down their Cuban cigars and looked at Simpkins.

"Chuck, what do you mean..."

"I mean just that. Fuck 'em. These slobs bellyache about this and bellyache about that and for what? Why do we put up with 'em?"

Several murmurs of agreement could be heard around the table. Emboldened, Simpkins continued.

"You guys are all sittin' here talkin' about how profitable the skyboxes are and how many you can squeeze into the stadium plan without disturbing the number of seats available for the

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‘common’ fan. Well, shit, make the whole goddamn thing out of skyboxes.”

“Chuck, ah, you don’t mean not to have any outdoor seating, do you?”

“Yeah, fuck, that’s exactly what I mean. Build concentric rows of skyboxes and rent all the suckers out to corporations. The higher up the stadium wall, the more prestigious, and the more expensive. Hell, you ever been to a pro fuckin’ football game? Boring. It’s much better on TV. Screw the fans. All they really want to do is gamble and drink, and shit, they can do that at home. For a lot less money. You’ll get all your cash up front from the rentals and still be able to collect on the ticket sales. Tom, you can use your catering outfit to provide all the food and booze to the skyboxes at outrageous markups and not even fool around with a concession contract. Jesus, it’s so simple. We are in business to make money, not cater to a bunch of low-brow cretins who pee on the floor of the bathrooms. The corporation suits will love it. And while we’re at it, fuck the goddamned Indians too. You want a cool franchise? Dress the players in black from head to toe and call the team the Washington Killers or Murderers or Zombies or Voodoo Units or Bulletheads or something scary that nobody can complain about. Hey, Bill, how do you think you’re clothing business will do with Voodoo Units jerseys? Shit, the fuckin’ assholes out there will eat it up.”

It came to pass. At first people were shocked at the stadium design and particularly the lack of sound in the facility. It was eerie not to hear any cheering. People got used to the idea, and the Virginia Vandals were making money hand over fist. There were five “Simpkin” stadia in the pros now and more on the way. It didn’t escape the notice of certain columnists in this country that pro football these days looked less like a game and more like a gladiatorial contest staged for the patrician class.

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That observation was dead on. Rise and fall of the Roman Empire, baby, and right here in your hometown.

It should be mentioned that all this worked for the colleges in the same way. Students and faculty alike clamored to bask in the reflected glow of athletic “bigness.” A degree from Northern States was going to be considered the equal of a degree from Michigan or Wisconsin, and the faculty was going to earn the University a reputation as one of the top research institutions in the nation. All according to plan. Now Davidson was part of the process. He needed the job and it didn’t take him over a second to accept the position. Ethics, smethics. A man has to eat.

Northern States was a consistent loser in football. The basketball team was doing fairly well but football was a disaster. The crowds began to dwindle after the initial awe of Division I competition passed. The school was losing money rapidly and....

Davidson’s eyes were drawn to the press box on the other side of the stadium. The press box was at the highest point on the far wall. Davidson thought he saw movement on the top. He kept watching until a figure appeared and stood up on the precipice of the press box, at least one hundred feet from the concrete seats below. Davidson elbowed Dean Stone and pointed to where the person was standing. It was a long distance, but Davidson was sure it was a man. The man was yelling something. It took a few moments, but during a lull in the action, some people near the press box heard his voice. They looked up and began to point and shout. The reaction reached most of the stadium like a wave.

The reporters in the box were sticking their heads out trying to see the man, but were unable to see him due to the overhanging roof. He walked another step toward the edge and

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the crowd gasped in unison. Davidson could not hear what he was yelling, but he was waving his arms like Moses trying to part the sea. Directly below him fans began to move to the side. Quickly. Davidson understood. The guy intended to jump and he didn't want to hit anyone down below. ***Highly considerate.***

In the press box, another man was leaning out directly under the jumper's position. He had a reverse collar on that was visible to Davidson. A priest. He had a television cable tied around his mid-section. Davidson almost laughed. He guessed the priest didn't trust God enough to lean out on his own without extra insurance.

The guy on top of the press box waved his hand in dismissal of whatever the priest was saying. Undoubtedly it was some platitude about a permanent solution to a temporary problem.

Yeah, like people actually listen to that crap.

It was one of the most bizarre things Davidson thought any person had ever witnessed. The entire stadium was focused on the man on the edge of the press box. Even the football players were standing in the middle of the field looking at the potential jumper. The only things not pointed toward the man were the network cameras. The talking moron-heads in the booth were probably saying silly bromides about not encouraging such activities. ***Okay.***

The silence. It was almost deafening. You could even hear the birds. Then it happened.

The man spread his arms and pushed himself up on his toes. He teetered for a moment, and then began the slow descent forward. It seemed as if you could hear the rush of the wind below his chest as he fell forward. He somersaulted once, twice, and then hit the concrete on his back. The sound was something no one in that stadium would ever forget. Ever. Still the silence.

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Then pandemonium. People began yelling and running for the exits. Davidson could not figure out this reaction. Stone made a quick move to his right, but Davidson grabbed his coat sleeve. Stone looked at Davidson with a panicky face, and then immediately calmed down. Both men stood still looking at the scene unfolding before them.

Not one person approached the body of the man who had just killed himself. Not for what seemed like a long time. Then the paramedics arrived. He was dead. That was obvious from even the other side of the stadium.

Davidson couldn't sort out his thoughts. *What would make a man do that? What could be so bad? How will they decide the outcome of the football game? Will this be on Sport Center? Who was the guy? Did it hurt? Will anyone be unhappy he is gone? Does it matter? Are the cheerleaders sad?*

They finished the game in almost total silence about forty-five minutes after the suicide. The administrators who had stuck around could not figure anything else to do. Northern States was undefeated, for Christ's sake. We cannot sacrifice the season for one loon who takes a dive off the press box. The Eagles won the game. The world was safe again for football fans everywhere.

CHAPTER 19

Davidson's phone rang and Martha Tomlinson, the department secretary, was on the other end.

"Davidson?"

"Hey, Martha, we got some cookies going on?"

"No, not today."

"Shit, don't tell me I've got to start baking my own. That's ridiculous."

Tomlinson laughed.

"Taylor, I've got a little surprise for you."

Davidson was the only professor in the department that wanted the secretary to call him by his first name. They all demanded to be doctors or professors. *Whatever.*

"You're getting a divorce and we're running off together."

She laughed again.

"No, I love my husband too much. And he's better looking than you. I've got a visitor here looking for you."

Davidson was puzzled. If it was a student, all they had to do was knock on his door. He couldn't think of anyone else who would want to see him.

"Well, go ahead, just send them on down."

Tomlinson hesitated.

"Taylor, it is Bongwait Allison."

Davidson sat back in his chair and looked off in the distance. He could not imagine what the big fullback would want with him. Then again, should Mr. Football be surprised that the biggest Eagle of them all would want to speak with him?

"Martha, send him on down."

Davidson hung up the phone. He was so curious.

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Bongwait Allison was born in Cook County Hospital. His mother was a crack addict. Toward the end of her pregnancy, she was sitting on a filthy mattress in a crack house at four o'clock in the morning. She felt her water break. She held her breath and motioned to some other dooper sitting nearby. She was motioning for him to pass her the "bong" that was providing their most recent high. The guy she was looking at was kind of freaking. He could see the water gradually pushing out from under her rear end. She signaled again for the bong. And laughed.

"Gimme da' bong. The little shit can wait."

In the hospital, after giving birth to a drug-addicted infant, she remembered her "classic" line in the crack house and decided it would make a great name for the kid. That gives you an idea of how much the people at Cook County care about some of the people in their care. They calmly and without question wrote the name on the birth certificate. Welcome to the world, Bongwait.

His grandmother, Sally Colder, picked up the little boy two weeks later. His mother had left him in the hospital the day after his birth so she could run out and get high again. Again and again. She died two days later and was buried without a ceremony before her son could get out of the infant ward. Sally Colder was her mother and little Bongwait's grandmother. She was a good woman. Everybody just called her Miss Sally.

All of Colder's children were gone by now so she and the boy lived alone. They didn't have much but their place was clean and there was always food on the table. Bongwait was a quiet child and Colder did not bother him much. She figured he had a right to his private thoughts and moments. More of a right than anyone she had ever known. He was a good kid and didn't cause her any trouble. Mostly stayed in his room after school and read.

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There was a gentleman who lived across the hall from Miss Sally. His name was Alphonso Rodriguez. Rodriguez was probably in his late fifties or early sixties, but looked much younger. The skin around his face was taut and he had a full head of hair. He was in excellent physical shape. His apartment had one more room than Miss Sally's, and he had converted it into a small weight and workout room. The apartment was on the ground floor so there was no one to hear the banging of the weights on their ceiling. He had some free weights, a lat machine, a bench press, and a leg press. It was probably illegal to have this equipment in an apartment, but none of the neighbors complained. Whenever there was a ruckus on any floor, Mr. Rodriguez (as everyone called him) would magically appear. He usually had his shirt off with a fine sheen of perspiration making his well-defined muscles stand out. He would stare down at the perpetrator of the disturbance and calmly ask, in a basso voice, "May I help you?" That always took care of the problem. So nobody ever mentioned the illegal gymnasium of their protector. It would be bad form.

Rodriguez had noticed Bongwait going in and out of Miss Sally's apartment. By now, he knew the boy was living there for good. He and Miss Sally got along well. Whenever the old lady was not feeling well, Rodriguez would pick up her milk, or groceries, or prescriptions, or whatever she needed. She would cook him pies and take them over to his place for a little conversation. One day she invited him in for coffee and he accepted.

"You take cream or sugar, Mr. Rodriguez?"

"No, thank you, Miss Sally."

The old woman slowly sat down across from her neighbor.

"You don't talk much. Do you?"

Rodriguez took a sip of his coffee and put the cup back down. He took a napkin and carefully wiped the corner of his

mouth. He moved his head back and forth on his neck the way weight lifters always do. Either to loosen the muscles or to give him time to think. He looked directly at his table companion. She did not flinch and waited patiently for his answer.

Rodriguez smiled.

“Don’t have much to say.”

“I have a boy just like that. Don’t say much. But he’s a good boy.”

Rodriguez did not reply. He waited. He knew something was on the old lady’s mind and he could guess what it was. The kid needed some male attention.

“I worry about him. He’s really a sweetheart to me but he’s gettin’ older now and there are gangs around here and he’s gonna’ have to stick up for himself and I don’t know how to teach him to do that.”

Rodriguez smiled again.

“What is his name?”

Miss Sally visibly flinched. She hesitated and then just blurted the name out.

“Bongwait. Bongwait Allison.”

Rodriguez sat back and arched his eyebrow in surprise. It was hard to surprise him due to some of the names he had heard in the neighborhood.

Miss Sally smiled.

“Don’t ask. Can you help?”

“Tell the boy to come see me after school tomorrow. We’ll talk. If he seems receptive, maybe we can arrange something.”

Bongwait dutifully reported to the older man’s apartment immediately after school the next day. The two sat at the kitchen table. Rodriguez stared at the boy and the boy stared at the table. They sat in silence for quite a while. Rodriguez finally spoke.

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“Son, do you want to learn to be a man?”

The boy did not move. He continued to stare at the table. Rodriguez was afraid he might be a slow learner, and that would complicate the process. After a few minutes, the boy slowly raised his head and looked directly into the old man’s eyes. Rodriguez involuntarily backed up into his seat. Only years of self-control allowed him to sit motionless. What he saw in those eyes was a fire like he had never witnessed. The black centers of Bongwait’s eyes were deep and clear and held no compromise.

“Yes, sir.”

So it began.

At the start, Bongwait would spend one or two hours at the older man’s apartment every Tuesday and Thursday. They would talk about things going on in the neighborhood. As he grew older, they talked about the world and racism and economics and literature and on and on. Rodriguez was a reader and they had that in common. They also had the weights in common. The boy took to the exercise like he was born to it. His development even exceeded what Rodriguez thought to be possible.

As time went on, Bongwait would spend five or six afternoons a week at the apartment across the hall. Rodriguez added a punching bag and taught the kid some boxing and general self-defense. However, that was not a big problem for Bongwait. The years of weight lifting had given him a bull neck and eighteen-inch “guns.” Biceps to everyone else. The most amazing part of his physique was his thighs. The young man could leg press over 600 pounds for fifteen repetitions. His leg strength never ceased to amaze Rodriguez. He was a natural athlete. No one bothered him at school.

Beyond the physical aspects of his appearance Bongwait had developed a “look.” In many of their conversations, Rodriguez had taught his protégé to learn to hide his feelings. He talked to him about how it was important to look unapproachable and then people would be less likely to “fuck” with the kid. Bongwait had adopted a way of holding his head slightly at a downward angle. He would lower his brow and look out from under his ample eyebrows. He would hunch his shoulders to give the appearance of not having a neck. He walked very fast. It was an impressive demeanor. Nobody fucked with him. Nobody. The only place he couldn’t use the “look” was in the presence of Miss Sally.

“Now Bongwait, I know you’re puttin’ on that face to keep the world outta’ your heart. And that’s just fine. But not here. No sir, not in our home.”

Bongwait would look up and smile at his granny. Miss Sally would smile back.

“That’s my good lookin’ boy. That Mr. Rodriguez is sure fulla’ some strange ideas. But that’s okay. Now let’s get washed up. I got your favorite. Chicken pot pie. Yessir.”

Allison knocked on Davidson’s door. The professor yelled “come on in.”

Bongwait slowly opened the door. He turned his back to Davidson and shut the door. Then he slowly shuffled to the front of the professor’s desk. He was looking at the ground the entire time.

Davidson looked closely at the young man. He had heard stories of his size, but he wasn’t quite prepared for the real-life version. The young man’s neck had to be nineteen inches around. The muscles of his shoulders bunched around that neck giving his head the appearance of a block of granite sitting on a wider block of granite. His shoulders were immense and

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Davidson didn't know if his thighs would allow him to sit in one of the chairs in the office. The professor couldn't see his face completely. Allison kept his eyes down and his forehead hunched over in protection of his gaze. He gave the impression of someone who was living in a society that was as alien as it could be to someone from another planet.

Davidson put out his hand.

"Mr. Allison. My pleasure."

Allison didn't move. After a moment, Davidson took his hand back. Unoffended, he addressed the young man again.

"Okay, will you sit down?"

Without a reply, Allison slowly moved the chair directly behind him and sat down. Every move he made seemed so deliberate. He still stared at the floor.

Davidson shrugged and sat down himself. If this was going to be a one-way conversation, he could not imagine what to say. He didn't even know why the kid was here. So Davidson decided to wait him out. As he patiently sat there, behind his desk, he watched the most amazing transformation he had ever seen in his life. The movement was almost imperceptible. Bongwait's shoulders began to relax and the big man seemed to settle further down in his chair. Then he leaned forward a little, and Davidson could see him take a long breath and then take even longer to exhale it. The forehead relaxed and the brow receded. Bongwait's scalp actually moved backward. As his head began to tilt back to an upright position, the football player sat up straight in the chair. Then Davidson saw the eyes and he almost gasped. They were black, and deep, and clear, and they burned. In a flash the professor had an inkling of what was going on and was absolutely intrigued by this young faker.

Davidson spoke first.

“Ah, I see. That is quite a look you got going there. You must have practiced that scowl for a long time. What do you call it?”

“Merely an illusion, Professor. An illusion carefully designed to create an effect. I call it the Neanderthal. Well, actually my girl friend coined the term. Quite descriptive.”

Davidson didn't know if he was being rude but he couldn't help laughing out loud. And then he laughed again. Allison smiled, and then he joined in as well. Both men were laughing when Allison stood up and stuck out his hand. Davidson stood up as well and both men's hands met in a longer-than-usual grip. Then they both sat down. Davidson knew exchanges like this were rare in life. It was corny, but it was as if the two men had known each other's secrets for years and were comfortable with that intimacy. Davidson took off his glasses and wiped his eyes with the back of his hand.

Bongwait Allison was an all-state stud running back in high school. He led his team to the state finals both his junior and senior years. They lost both times but the big colleges took notice all over the country. Not only was he one of the top recruits in the nation, but the kid had good grades to boot. Most of the recruiters laughed at that. They had talked to Bongwait and he seemed as dumb as a post. They just figured the administration fudged on his grades to keep him eligible. Well, that was okay. Hell, they were probably going to have to do the same thing. Standard procedure.

Miss Sally's small apartment was filled with boxes of letters and brochures from about half of the top-tier football colleges all across the land. USC. Alabama. Ohio State. Michigan. Florida. Florida State. Oklahoma. On and on. They all wanted Bongwait Allison to bring his talents to their campus. And, of course, Northern States wanted him so bad that Doomer

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Hendrickson just about salivated every time the kid's name was mentioned.

Mr. Rodriguez had offered to help him with the process. The older man had been an excellent linebacker in his day and had gone through the recruiting process himself. Well, nothing like the full press that Bongwait was going through. There were fewer opportunities for an African-American player back in his day. But, he played four years at Grambling and they gave him a free education. Rodriguez considered it an equitable deal. Bongwait didn't really need his mentor's assistance on this project.

Bongwait's decision was going to be easier than anybody had anticipated. He did not want to stray far from Miss Sally's small apartment. She had taken care of him when nobody else would, and the big man was going to pay her back. Big time. He wanted to pay her back now. He did not want to wait until he could enter the NFL. So that meant he had to make it known that he would be willing to play if the cash was right. Bongwait did not consider this unethical at all. It didn't enter his thinking. He was willing to do as many illegal things during and after the recruiting process as was humanly possible. Bongwait Allison had a plan. It was on track.

He visited dozens of schools. It was almost always the same. In his hotel room Bongwait would sit and wait. Eventually, one or two or three players would show up to take him on the town. For most recruits, that meant strip clubs. The owners were usually dependable "jock sniffers" and would allow the underage men to drink as much as they liked and to paw the strippers as much as they liked. Anyway, it was good for business if the town had a successful football team. Brought in all kinds of tourists and other college kids.

Bongwait never went out. As the players would stand in front of him and exhort him to come out with them he would

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say no over and over again. Finally, in exasperation, they would ask the “dumb shit” what he wanted. Bongwait would look into their eyes and say one word: “Money.” The players were usually so taken aback that they would leave immediately. They always relayed the message to the correct assistant coach. Their job was done.

Bongwait would go home the next morning. Several days or a week later a padded envelope of some kind would arrive at Miss Sally’s and Bongwait would take it into his bedroom. Miss Sally figured it was more of those stupid brochures. Bongwait knew what it was. Sometimes \$1,000. Often more. Sometimes up to \$5,000. Always a promise of more if the kid would sign a letter of intent to attend and star at old Big U. Bongwait would then get a small diary out and record the date the letter was received, the sender, the amount, and any other details that were pertinent. Then he put the cash in a safety deposit box at the corner savings and loan. The tellers could not imagine what that stupid kid was doing with a safety deposit box.

In a little less than nine months, Bongwait accumulated over \$86,000. He was very pleased. He had never promised anyone he would attend their school. The recruiters were not about to ask for their money back. Realistically, they could not even say that they had given the kid any money. It was illegal. They just figured it was a cost of doing business in big-time sports. In their world you just had to call it sunk costs and get on with it.

Northern States sent him \$3,000 and the name of a booster who would be his “sponsor” for the entire time that Bongwait would be on campus. In December of his senior year, the young man signed a letter of intent to attend Northern States on a full-ride scholarship. Doomer Hendrickson almost had cardiac arrest when he heard the news. His wife, Marcia, found him dancing a jig in the family room and singing the school

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fight song at the top of his voice. She figured he had finally lost his mind or that poor Bongwait kid had agreed to come on board. What a name. What a business.

Now Bongwait's only problem was getting some of the money funneled to Miss Sally. He couldn't just hand her some cash. She would want to know where it came from. When she found out, Bongwait didn't want to be in the same room. She would not understand, even if he tried to explain his plan. However, her morals did have one little bit of a lapse. Like a lot of older black folks, Miss Sally played the numbers. Every Thursday a local runner that Bongwait only knew as "Jacks" would come to the apartment, pick up Miss Sally's meager wager, and then make his rounds of the other apartments. Just like the state lottery, the numbers represented a beacon of hope to poor people. There were always stories of people just a few blocks over who had hit it big. They never actually knew anyone who won more than a few dollars, but it WAS possible. That is why it is called hope.

Rodriguez knew Jacks. He would never play the numbers, but he was aware of every person who came within his jurisdiction. That obviously included Jacks. Bongwait explained the situation and Rodriguez smiled at the kid's ingenuity. He didn't think taking that money from those big colleges was much of a sin. On Thursday, as Jacks was entering the apartment building, Rodriguez came to his doorway and called out to the man.

"Jacks. Jacks. Let me talk to you a minute."

Jacks looked at Rodriguez and froze in his tracks. He had always given the older man a wide berth. The numbers runner figured Rodriguez was thirty years older than he was, but the guy looked like he could walk through walls.

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“Jacks. Come here.”

Jacks hesitated, sighed, and started moving, slowly, toward Rodriguez standing in his apartment doorway.

When Jacks got near the older man, Rodriguez stepped aside and motioned that Jacks should precede him into the apartment. Jacks hesitated, sighed again, and walked in. Rodriguez closed the door behind them.

“Jacks, I have never bothered you. I know you take these people’s money and that you give that money to the knuckleheads who run the crime around here. And sometimes you give back a paltry amount just to keep them interested. Strangely, it gives most of these folks a little bit of hope in a rather dreary existence. That is good. That is why I leave you alone.”

Jacks started to say something but Rodriguez held up his hand and the runner closed his mouth.

“Jacks, guess what? This apartment building is the goddamn luckiest place you have ever seen. At least it is now. Here’s what I want from you. Every Wednesday I want you to come knock on my door. I will answer the door and hand you a manila envelope. In that envelope will be cash. Are we getting this so far?”

Jacks just nodded. He was too flabbergasted to speak now anyway.

“Good. You will make your rounds on Thursday as usual. Payout day is Friday, right?”

Jacks nodded yes.

“Out of the money in the envelope you will take one hundred dollars for yourself. The rest you will divvy up among selected residents in this building. The names of the winners and the amount that they won will be on a separate piece of paper. Simple, yes? We will do this for as long as I say. And you will

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not tell anyone of our arrangement or I will rip your scrotum off your body and shove it down your throat. Are we clear?"

Jacks swallowed and nodded his assent. Again.

"Good. I'll see you on Wednesday."

Rodriguez opened his door and Jacks gratefully walked out and down the hall. The plan worked perfectly from then on. Life got a little better for the folks in the apartment building. Everyone couldn't believe how lucky the place was. And especially Miss Sally. She really seemed to be on a roll.

Bongwait couldn't have been happier. Heck, Miss Sally started to buy more expensive chicken pot pies for her boy, and so he made out as well.

During one of their bull sessions, Bongwait thanked Rodriguez for his efforts.

"I really appreciate your help in this, Mr. Rodriguez. And you know, if you ever need any money, anything I have is yours. You know that."

"Yes, I do, son. Thanks. I don't really need much. But I'll tell you. It's a little like playing god when you get to decide each week who the winners are going to be. Damned if I don't get a kick out of doing it. You know that crabby asshole Morrison in 3C? Son of a bitch has been bossing people around here for years and you know what? He's the only son of a bitch in the whole goddamn apartment building that hasn't hit a winner! Now that's some kind of coincidence."

Anyone walking down the hall could easily have heard two men laughing behind the door to Mr. Rodriguez' apartment. Laughing so hard they were having a difficult time breathing. Things were really looking up.

Davidson put his glasses back on and looked at the young man on the other side of his desk.

“Well, Mr. Allison, the Neanderthal is quite an effective illusion. You have your reasons, I guess.”

“Yes, I do. Call me Bongwait.”

“No, I call all my students by their last names. You have to call me Doctor or Professor or something similar and I figure the students should get as much respect around here as we do. After all, you do pay the bills.”

“Well, I don’t really pay anything.”

Davidson laughed.

“Yeah, well, I guess you don’t. And I hope I don’t offend you. How is it you speak so well with your background.”

It was Allison’s turn to laugh.

“I use the jump ‘n’ jive when I’m Neanderthal man. However, I am well read. Mostly on my own. And most of the extensive conversations I am involved in are with my girl friend. Ebonics would not go over very well with her.”

Davidson smiled his assent. Allison continued.

“Dr. Davidson, I need a favor from you.”

“Wow, that’s really sudden. Shouldn’t we date a while before we get into favors?”

Bongwait laughed and started to feel at ease with the professor. It amazed him that he could feel so comfortable with someone he had just met. This guy was just a regular person. A highly-educated regular person.

“Possibly, but I don’t have that much time. Allow me to get right to the point. I have accumulated a large sum of money. A big chunk of it came from the recruiting circus I conducted before I signed my letter of intent here. The second amount has been given to me by a booster here on campus. Or should I say my ‘sponsor’ here on campus. Ah, I can see your doubts. No, professor, when I say a substantial amount I mean in six figures.”

Davidson made a face and whistled.

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“Jesus, Mr. Allison, should you be telling me this? Aren’t we talking about illegal stuff here?”

“Yes, we are. But I was told I could trust you.”

Now it was Davidson’s turn to be amazed.

“And who would have told you that?”

“A gentleman by the name of LeRoy Mattoon.”

Davidson shook his head and leaned back in his chair.

“And how is LeRoy these days?”

“He’s doing great. He made full detective and is one of the most decorated officers on the Chicago police force.”

Davidson looked incredulous.

“You mean he wears a suit?”

Bongwait laughed and he could see a picture of the big man in his mind.

“Yeah, and he looks just awful. You can’t get a decent suit to fit a guy his size. At least not on a cop’s salary. But he struts it just the same.”

Davidson smiled. He and Mattoon had gone to college together at Eastern Illinois. They also did some party time together and became good friends. LeRoy had helped Davidson with a little problem a few months ago. He hadn’t seen him since. Bongwait waited a minute for Davidson to reminisce a little and then he interrupted the professor’s musings.

“He said you could be trusted.”

“No he didn’t.”

Bongwait looked perplexed.

“Those are not the words he spoke.”

Bongwait laughed.

“Yeah, you’re right. Actually, he said – and I’ll try to get it exact – ‘Talk to Davidson. He’s at your school now. He’s a slow, constipated honky motherfucker but if he tells you he’s going to do something, you can take that to the bank.’”

Davidson smiled.

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“Yeah, that sounds more like it. You get in trouble?”

“I met him when I was younger and he kind of saved me from a situation. He’s like that with a lot of the kids on the street. He remembers. And he tries to give back. I admire him.”

“Let me get back to this money you say you have received. How exactly is the transaction handled? I mean, this has got to be pretty sensitive stuff especially as hard as the NCAA is trying to crack down on the cheaters.”

Bongwait decided he could be forthright with this man.

“After every home game, there is a little ritual called the C-Note Express. The players walk out in a line and the boosters are all there. Your booster, or sponsor as they call it, walks over and gives you a big hug and a handshake. In that hug an envelope appears inside your jacket pocket. We always have to wear a coat and tie before and after games. The envelope will be filled with one hundred dollar bills. The better you are playing, the bigger a difference you make in the game, the more c-notes. It can be as much as three or four thousand. And I don’t have any expenses to speak of. So the money mounts up pretty fast. And this is my third year here. Do the math.”

“Does everybody get that kind of money?”

Bongwait smiled before he answered.

“No. On this team, probably only me and Travers get that kind of green. A couple of the receivers probably do pretty well. Some of the other guys get only three or four hundred a game and some don’t get anything at all. Don’t let your babies grow up to be offensive linemen.”

“Travers is Billy Cole Travers? The quarterback?”

“Yes.”

Billy Cole Travers was eighteen years old three years ago. He was a senior in high school and the starting quarterback on

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the football team. More precisely, he was the “golden boy” of high school football in the Midwest. The kid was movie-star handsome, stood six foot four and weighed 235 highly-muscled pounds. His passes were like laser beams and his demeanor on the field was unflappable. He was the most highly recruited athlete in the country. He was also a homosexual.

Now, for most of us, the acceptance of the gay lifestyle has mostly entered the realm of at least passably acceptable. Most of the population realizes that gay people exist and have adopted a live and let live attitude. There are bigger problems to worry about than what someone does in the privacy of their own home. However, that attitude has not translated well to the world of athletics. Particularly not to the world of big-time football.

So, Travers kept his inclinations to himself. He even dated occasionally. The girls were always excited to be asked out by such a stud, and he was unwaveringly polite and chaste. They thought it was their problem that he didn't try anything with them. So they kept the lack of sex a secret. That worked out great for Travers.

His biggest problem was not girls. It was his father. Dr. Talis B. Travers was a fire-and-brimstone Episcopalian preacher. He stood two inches taller than his son and weighed about 60 pounds more. He had a voice that didn't need a microphone. He was definitely a presence in the pulpit. When the reverend got rolling, it was said the entire Indiana valley shook.

The last four years had seen the most turmoil in his church than the reverend had ever encountered. The church had been a part of the Mid-Continent Episcopalian Congregational organization for over fifty years. Four years ago the MEC began to discuss ordaining gay ministers and recognizing homosexuality in its bylaws. Reverend Travers went ballistic.

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He was as anti-gay as a human being could be. He knew his scriptures and he believed that these foul acts, sordid acts that he could not abide nor even think about, were an abomination of mankind. So he fought his organization every step of the way. Last year, when the MEC ordained its first openly gay minister, Reverend Travers pulled his church out of the organization and went independent. Most of his congregation agreed with him on this decision.

Now try to imagine being his son and gay. Against all preconceived notions of a situation like this, Billy Cole and his dad were extremely close. Billy Cole loved his dad and would never want to disappoint him in any way. So he kept his secret to himself. And one other person.

Tommie Crusoe was the only lover Billy Cole had ever allowed himself. Crusoe was one year older and was relatively more sophisticated than the star quarterback. Crusoe had moved on to college and rarely came home. Travers had a lonely senior year. Oh, and incidentally, Crusoe had enrolled at Northern States University.

In October of that year, Travers was visited by a booster from Northern States. He promised all the usual accouterments of the recruiting business including a full-ride scholarship, an automobile at the player's beck and call, lots of money, and anything else the young man could think that he might need. Travers told the man he was thinking about a number of universities and Northern States was not really a consideration. That was a lie, of course. He and Crusoe had talked a number of times about living together when Travers enrolled at Northern States. Travers just didn't want to give this smug son of a bitch the satisfaction. The man gave the football star his card anyway and on the way out of the house turned around and said, "Oh, and by the way, if you go to Northern States your dad

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would never have to find out that you are a homosexual. Wouldn't that be for the better?"

Travers was shocked into silence. The man left. Travers looked at the man's card and the tears began to roll down his cheeks. How could they have possibly found out his closest-kept secret? How?

Now he had been at Northern States for three years. He knew the information about his sexuality had come from Doomer Hendrickson but he still didn't know how the big man had gotten the information.

Life was difficult. A number of his teammates suspected that Travers was gay. He was living with Crusoe in an off-campus apartment and the rumor mill was working overtime. In a world where we often hear of the bonds of teammates and lifelong friendships and there's no I in team, the reality was much more sordid. This "bond of teammates" did not exist for gay males. In the mode of immature athletes everywhere they did things that were supposed to be funny. Feminine napkins hung in Travers' locker. Dildoes hidden in his uniform pants. Boxes of fudge left in his locker. On and on the immature humor worked its way into Travers' life. You would think, with the victories beginning to pile up, that a player like Travers would be immune to such stupidity. You would be wrong. The kid hung in there and kept his mouth shut. He couldn't help but feel his day would come. Soon.

"I can't believe this. No, shit, I believe it. The C-Note Express? Jesus, the cheaters are literally taking over. What a swamp! Where are the ethics and morality? Mr. Allison, do you have any idea how I feel about this crap?"

"Yes, I do. I have read some of your papers and I watch your TV show every week. Powerful stuff. You do a good job. From that show and some of your articles I looked up, I guessed

you are first and foremost an educator. So, the money that is poured into big-time athletics at a place like this comes almost directly from undergraduate education. Or, as you would say, stolen from undergraduate education. See, I have read some of your stuff. But remember, this money is paid to me directly by a booster. It does not come from the school.”

“Aw, that’s splitting hairs and you know it. But I’m still talking to you.”

“Good. Now here’s my problem. Do you have time right now?”

Davidson looked at the Cubs clock on his wall. The big bat was pointed at 12 and the small bat was pointed at 2. Two o’clock in the afternoon.

“Yeah, easy. I don’t have a meeting for another hour.”

“Good. Back to my problem. I have a girl friend. Actually, she lives with me and I plan on making her my wife just as soon as possible.”

“How does she feel about the Neanderthal?”

“She hates it. But she knows why I do it. And you will too in a minute.”

Davidson sat back in his chair again and promised himself he would not interrupt the kid again.

“She is in her senior year here. She is a psychology major. Yeah, I know. She wants to go to grad school. She has the grades. She does not have the money. And she will not take any money from me. She wants to be a child psychologist and help young people. I want to help her. Here’s the favor I am asking. Would it be possible for you to invent some kind of graduate school psychology scholarship? I will provide the money. I will get her to process the necessary paperwork. She will win the scholarship. I will tell her the truth after she graduates. She will be angry but it will be too late. It may be devious, but my intentions are totally honorable. And she is

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worth the effort. No question. She's a tough lady but just does not have any way to generate sufficient income right now to go to grad school. What do you think?"

Davidson pondered the request. What the kid was asking was really rather simple for someone in his position. He would only have to contact one of his colleagues in the profession to process the scholarship so there would be no suspicion on anyone's part of the legitimacy of the stipend. He even knew who that would be. Giles Carmeyer. *And, Christ, the money was coming from some rich numbnuts who gets off on knowing football players. What a world!*

Davidson rocked forward in his chair and slapped the palm of his right hand on his desk. Loudly.

"Done! Kid, you are a first-rate schemer from way back."

"Professor, you don't know the half of it."

"Give me a few days to work out the details and I'll get back to you. Why don't you write down your phone number and e-mail address on one of those sticky note things there."

Bongwait did as Davidson asked and handed him the Post-It Note.

"Now, Professor, we should talk about pay back for your efforts."

"Mr. Allison, what you are asking me to do is provide a vehicle so a young lady can finish her education and help other young people. That is a noble cause and I do not mind using some of this yahoo's money to accomplish it. But I don't want any of the money. That is crossing the line."

Bongwait held up his hand, palm out, toward Davidson. It was a gesture the professor had used many times himself.

Weird.

"Professor, you misunderstand me. I am not offering you anything as plebeian as money. I am offering a proposition. I have carefully documented everything that has occurred in my

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athletic career since grade school. And I mean carefully documented. I have over three hundred handwritten pages that tell the complete story of one black man's journey through higher and lower education as a sought-after football player. That's the reason for the Neanderthal. If people think you are a total dumb fuck, they will say almost anything in your presence. Literally. Without bragging, I believe the information about my recruiting and what has transpired since I enrolled at Northern States could blow a big hole in the fabric of college athletics. But I am not a writer. My proposal to you is that we collaborate on a book using this information. I provide the background and you provide a comprehensible narrative. And we share the credit for the entire project. Fifty fifty."

Davidson couldn't believe what he was hearing and his face must have shown the shock. Bongwait laughed out loud.

"Come on, Doc. Do it. This is just the kind of thing you want to do to make people see what a crock this entire process is. Maybe you could wake some trustees up all over the country and maybe they would try to take back their institutions of higher learning and return them to education and the educators. I heard you say that exact thing. It could happen."

"Mr. Allison, do you want to do this now? Like right now?"

"Well, the timing is a little tricky. I certainly don't want to publish the book while I am here on campus. And I most certainly do not want to do it before my girl friend leaves. But that may be a moot point. Don't let this get out, but I am mulling leaving school early by declaring for the draft. I'll have to make that decision pretty soon. That would mean we could publish the work almost as soon as it was written. Once I am a professional there is nothing that can come back to bite me. And I don't think we will have a difficult time finding an audience."

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Davidson sat back and pondered what Bongwait had said. The project was certainly interesting to the professor and he would like to see what the football player had in terms of documentation. Davidson knew that his “dumb” pose would have been effective with the people the kid had to deal with. He had pulled a clever ruse and Davidson admired the kid’s self control. It was also a time commitment. Dr. Norwell was pushing to get a publication out of their joint work combining chaos theory and the practice of sociology. Davidson didn’t think it would be impossible to accomplish both, just a bit tricky. *And, damn, this is the kind of trouble-making stuff that I just love. And I want to see his material.*

“Okay, Mr. Allison, you’ve got a deal. But you owe me a favor.”

“A favor. What about the material for the book.....?”

“That’s a joint project for you and me. And we’ll probably profit from it. But you still owe me a favor for the scholarship thing.”

“Yeah, Doc, you really did grow up in Chicago. Okay, what is the favor?”

“When you sign your first contract in the pros, I want you to set up a permanently funded psychology scholarship fund. I want it to provide the funds for graduate school for a deserving person every year. Someone who couldn’t go to grad school without help. That’ll make us even.”

“Doc, you have a deal.”

Bongwait stood up and so did Davidson. They shook hands and somehow both men knew that this was the beginning of a long and close friendship. Indeed it was.

Taylor Davidson took a job at a school with an undefeated football team and national championship dreams. What the professor learned about the program led him to inform the public. That's when the trouble started.

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