



Phenom

Let's Play Basketball

Another Sports Thriller

By Jim Plautz



James Naismith (1861-1939)

On December 1, 1891, in Springfield, Massachusetts, James Naismith hung two half-bushel peach baskets at opposite ends of a gymnasium and out-lined 13 rules to his students at the International Training School of the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), which later became Springfield College. James Naismith became famous for creating the game of basketball, a stroke of genius that never brought him fame or fortune during his lifetime, but enormous recognition following his passing in 1939. Naismith's name adorns the world's only Basketball Hall of Fame, a tribute that forever makes James Naismith synonymous with basketball.

Phenom - Let's Play Basketball

By James Plautz

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Phenom Novels

By

Jim Plautz



PHENOM – Let's Play Basketball - Too good to be true, a mid-year transfer student leads his high school basketball team to the State Championship and along the way helps others become better students and young adults. Matthew Wilson's past finally catches up with him when the Russian Mafia seeks retribution for past transgressions.

This is a feel-good love story and suspense novel structured around a basketball theme. At graduation, students, faculty and the President of the U.S. make a vow; "If you ever need me, I'll be there for you."

Marquette Basketball is featured in three chapters in the Appendix. Alumni groups, Athletic Departments from any University or College are welcome to customize these chapters for their own Teams. It's free publicity and a great fundraiser.



PHENOM – Search for the Ark of the Covenant – Matthew Wilson cements his reputation as the greatest basketball player of all time as he leads Marquette University to four successive NCAA championships and then forms a globe-trotter team to travel the world and play all star teams from China, Africa, South America and Europe.

But basketball is only a backdrop as Matthew teams up with Father McGinnis and Jim Simpson to bring water to Ethiopia and later, to rebuild the biblical city of Babylon to its former splendor; all part of a master plan to find the Ark of the Covenant, an event heralded by Muslims and Christians as a precursor to the second coming of the Lord.

Matthew is severely injured in a basketball showdown with the Muslim basketball star known as the Mahdi, or Chosen One. Matthew's former classmates are asked to renew a vow made ten years ago; "If you ever need me, I'll be there for you."

Other Novels By Jim Plautz



Match Play Championship – Winner Take All - Drug smuggling and corporate finance structured around a 36-hole club championship golf tournament. A Miami-based drug cartel is pitted against Swiss financiers for control of a new resort and casino in Cabo San Lucas, Mexico. The match-play tournament stakes are ‘winner-takes-all’.



DOUBLE FAULT at ROLAND GARROS - Four junior tennis players destined to meet at the French Open Tennis Championship get caught up in Basque terrorist plans to destroy the newly rebuilt Roland Garros Tennis Stadium; a story of love, jealousy and revenge.

Characters

- **Matthew Wilson:** ‘Phenom’
- **Jim Simpson:** Coach; filling in for Ray Meyer
- **Father Sean McGinnis:** Roman Catholic Priest
- **Amar Rashad:** ‘The Mahdi’
- **Ken Reed:** Simpson’s right-hand man and best friend
- **Chris Lewis Reed:** Former DEA; married to Ken
- **Jerry Hayes:** Challenged by Matthew to be a leader
- **Jennifer:** Head Cheerleader and dancer, Matthew’s girlfriend
- **Shorewood High School Basketball Team:** Matthew, Rodney, Andy, Erin, Tom and Sam
- **Waukesha High School Basketball Players:** Roy Burke, Tim Rappis, Rick Roby,
- **Moses:** Built ‘Ark of the Covenant’; Mt. Sinai, 1480 BC
- **Marquette Coaches:** Al McGuire & Hank Raymonds

Dedications

For Rosann, my lovely wife and head cheerleader – Thank you!

My teammates at West Allis Central High School

‘The Bulldogs’

1959 Starters: Jack Szczesny, Dick Starcevic, Jim Eisenman, Joel
Thompson, Jim Plautz

1960 Starters: Jim Eisenman, Dave Krahn, Joel Thompson, Jerry
Lawetski, Jim Plautz

1961 Starters: Jerry Lawetski, Doug Sinclair, Chuck Pitcel, Mike
Sachen/ Tom Osteen, Jim Plautz

Phenom



Book One

Let's Play Basketball!

Chapter 1

Pick-Up Game

Swish.

There was a five-on-five pick-up game in progress, but Hank Raymonds, Al McGuire's chief assistant at Marquette University, watched from his office window. He couldn't help but notice the tall boy shooting at a side basket while waiting his turn to play. He looked like a player.

Raymonds returned his attention to the game. He had his eye on Roy Burke, an all-state forward from Waukesha High School, #1 ranked team in Wisconsin. At 6'3", Burke possessed a deadly jump shot from almost unlimited range and was the top high school prospect in Wisconsin and possibly the country. The NCAA doesn't allow colleges to conduct practices for high school students, but nothing stops a coach from watching a player that happened to show up at their gymnasium to scrimmage. After ten minutes, Raymond decided that Burke was as good as his reputation. He didn't play much defense, but who did in these pickup games. The boy could shoot.

Swish.

Moments earlier, the tall boy had walked confidently onto the court looking for a game. While he waited, he grabbed a loose basketball and began his routine that he had practiced since he was ten. Moving slowly along the top of the circle he launched 25 foot jump shots with an easy, effortless stroke.

Swish. Swish. Swish.

Raymonds watched with interest as the boy made shot after shot, each shot just grazing the back of the rim as it swished through the net, causing the ball to spin back to the shooter. Nobody is that good, Raymonds thought. The boy doesn't miss.

Matthew Wilson needed the exercise after being cooped up in a car the last three days. He watched the game while he warmed up and had a pretty good idea who the better players were. Burke appeared to be the best player; he certainly took the most shots. Matthew had seen this type of player many times in California.

The game ended and one of the ten players had to leave.

"Hey kid, care to play?"

“Sure,” Matthew responded, anticipating the competition. He could feel the adrenalin begin to flow. He found himself guarding “the shooter”, as he referred to Burke, and looked forward to the challenge. True to form, Burke received a pass the first time down the court and launched a jump shot from the top of the circle. He had made his last five in a row and expected to make this one, but was surprised when the ball was rejected. The new boy followed his blocked shot and turned it into an easy lay-up at the other end.

Raymonds grimaced when he heard Burke complain. “You fouled me,” he yelled at Matthew. “You caught me across the wrist; our side out.” Matthew remained silent while Burke’s team inbounded the ball. Raymonds watched from above. It was clear to everybody on the court that it had been a clean block, and Burke was just trying to maintain his dignity. This could be interesting, Raymonds thought.

Burke took the inbounds pass and drove strong to the basket. The new boy went up with him and deflected the ball off the backboard, got the rebound and was heading up court while Burke was complaining about another phantom foul. Raymonds watched to see if he would dunk and was pleasantly surprised when the boy slowed and fed off to a teammate for an easy basket. “You don’t see enough unselfish players anymore,” he thought.

Raymonds wondered what Burke would do next and was initially disappointed when the game was interrupted by an unexpected turn of events. Don Kojis, a former Marquette player and first team All-American, walked out of the locker room looking for a game. Burke called out to him, “Kojis, over here. You can take the new guy’s place.”

Kojis had seen the previous play and knew there was something going on. “Do you mind?” he asked Matthew.

The new boy responded easily, “I have another suggestion,” as he looked over at Burke. “Why don’t you take a rest for a while, you seem to have trouble getting your shots off anyway.”

Burke was furious as his face turned red. “Why don’t we have a little one-on-one game for a little side bet, just you and me? Chicken?”

“I’m not afraid, but basketball is a five-on-five game. Let’s pick teams. You pick first.”

“Okay hotshot, you got it. I’ll take Kojis,” Burke said with a sneer. “You can have the next four picks if you want.”

“No, we’ll just go one player at a time.” Matthew had watched the game earlier and knew the players he needed, and also knew that Burke would choose the flashy scorers. He ended up with exactly the team he

wanted. The eleventh player, a 5'8" substitute from Burke's high school team, went to Matthew when Burke said he didn't want him.

"What are we playing for?" Burke asked arrogantly.

Matthew decided to take a chance and risk his prized possession. "Let's play for the shirt off our backs. You get my shirt if you win; if I win, I get yours."

"You won't win," Burke challenged. "I guarantee it. Take the ball out. The first team to 21 wins; count by one."

Raymonds wouldn't have given the new boy's team a one in 50 chance when the game started. Kojis was a pro and Burke was one of the top high school players in the country. After five minutes, it was obvious the sides were not fair; the new boy was too good. He was all over Burke and had stolen the ball three times, feeding his teammates for uncontested lay-ups. The boy had only scored two baskets, but had a dozen assists and the score was 15-4. Rick Robey, the short kid that Burke didn't want, had four baskets.

The defining moment came in a series of plays under the basket. Kojis, who had a well deserved reputation in college and the pros as a rough, physical player, caught the new boy with an elbow as they fought for a rebound. The boy was dazed, but didn't say a word. The next time down the court he took Kojis to the basket, stopped short and faked a fade-away jump shot. Kojis went up for the block, but instead of shooting a fade-away, the boy went straight up with elbows extended and caught Kojis underneath the chin as he leaned in. Kojis knew the foul was on him and raised his hand signifying the other team side-out and was surprised when the teams retreated down court. The new boy had made the shot despite the foul. "That's a pro move," he thought.

The final score was 21-9 and Kojis congratulated the boy. "You have a good game young man; where do you play your college ball?"

Matthew smiled; he got that a lot from strangers. "I'm just a senior in high school. We just moved to Milwaukee and I'm not sure where I'm going to play my final semester."

Kojis couldn't believe that a high school player had taken him to school like he did. He looked up at Raymonds and mouthed the words "*high school*" and pointed at the boy. Burke came over and begrudgingly tossed his shirt at the new boy. "Lucky," he mumbled under his breath.

Matthew had been wearing his shirt inside out and when he took it off to change, Kojis noticed it read; Kobe Bryant, #24, Lakers.

It suddenly dawned on him who the kid was. "I've heard of you," Kojis exclaimed. "You're the kid from California that plays the Lakers' players one-on-one and beats them? Kobe talks about you."

The boy smiled. "Yeah, I've played one-on-one with Kobe, O'Neal, Odom and Payton. Shaq is too strong, but I have had some luck against the others. This shirt is my prized possession."

"You weren't worried about losing it?"

Matthew just smiled.

I was sitting in my coach's office daydreaming, thinking back to the unusual circumstances that had brought me to this position. Friday I was named interim head basketball coach at Shorewood High School, the school I had attended 25 years earlier and had been named to the all-conference team my junior and senior years. I loved basketball and still kept in touch with my old coach, Ray Meyer, who was now in his thirty-third year as head coach. I had been visiting him in October when his junior varsity coach walked into his office and resigned.

"Oh great," Meyer said to me as his former JV coach left the office. "Now I get to coach both teams until they appoint someone who probably won't know a darn thing about basketball."

To this day, I have no idea what made me volunteer. "Ray, I'll be glad to help you out until you find somebody. I have no coaching experience, but I love basketball and I love working with kids. Just tell me what I need to do."

"You're hired, Jim, and I'll see if I can get you \$120 a month coaching stipend and an extra \$1,300 if you teach a couple drivers education courses." I smiled as I thought back to that magnanimous offer. My construction and financing businesses were both very successful and I was probably earning several million dollars a month. I wasn't really concerned with the \$120 a month stipend that was in the athletic budget, but I appreciated the gesture.

One month later I was still coaching the JV when Ray suffered a minor heart attack and doctors advised him to take it easy. His wife insisted that he stop coaching basketball for a year, and, before I could say no, I was appointed interim head basketball coach. The next day the sign on the door was changed to Jim Simpson – Head Basketball Coach. I liked it.

Unfortunately, our record halfway through the season was 2 - 11 and we were mired in last place in the Suburban Conference. I didn't mind, and accepted the job eagerly. Coaching basketball was something that I always had wanted to do, but couldn't justify the lack of financial return. Schoolteachers were not paid well to begin with, and coaches seldom made

more than \$3,000 or \$4,000 extra a year, which probably translates to about \$3 per hour. There were several changes I wanted to make on the basketball team such as playing more up-tempo and pressing on defense, but my expectations were realistic. At best, we could hope to win half of our remaining games. I was still lost in my own thoughts when I heard the knock on the door.

“Hello!”

“Oh, I’m sorry, I must have been daydreaming. Please, come in,” I said, standing up to greet my uninvited guests. “Have a seat.” There were two of them, probably a father and son. I couldn’t help but notice that the young man was well over six feet tall and carried himself with an easy confidence. He looked like a basketball player.

“Mr. Simpson, my name is Ray Wilson and this is my son, Matthew. We just moved into your school area and were hoping Matthew can try out for your basketball team. We know it’s late in the season, but for business reasons we needed to move at mid-semester.”

I smiled as I thought back to that day. I had no expectations that Matthew would be the player that he turned out to be, but I remembered thinking that it would be awfully hard for a 6’5” boy not to make our team. We were not that good.

“Sure,” I replied, “we are always looking to improve our team.” Matthew was carrying a small gym bag and I figured he was ready to go. “You may start today if you have your stuff with you, Matthew. Why don’t you change and join the other kids on the floor? Practice starts in about ten minutes.”

“What position does he play, Mr. Wilson? He obviously has the height to be a center or forward.”

“I’ll let you be the judge of that, Coach. He’s played everything from center to point guard. You decide where he’ll fit best with your players.”

“Anything I should be aware of?”

“Well, there is one thing.”

Uh, oh, I thought, here it comes. Now I get the bad news. My face must have registered some concern.

“Don’t worry; Matthew is an excellent basketball player, I have no doubt about that. However, he has a tendency to take charge. I would appreciate your giving him the benefit of the doubt for a while until you see what he can do. Some might think he’s trying to usurp their authority, but this isn’t the case. He only wants to win.”

“If you’re talking about egos, Mr. Wilson, you don’t have anything to worry about with me. I’m the coach, of course, but I encourage all my

kids to think for themselves. Why don't we go out and see what your son has and we'll just take it one step at a time."

"I have a feeling you and Matthew will get along just fine."

Matthew was still stretching when I walked out on the court for our afternoon practice. "Come on, boys, two lines, let's shoot some lay-ups. This is Matthew Wilson; he's going to try out for our team."

The 12 boys formed two lines, one shooting and one rebounding before feeding the next shooter, a typical lay-up drill used at all levels of basketball. Matt took three lay-ups from the right side easily laying the ball gently off the backboard. It didn't take long to see he was coordinated. Even at 6'5", he moved with agility and ease. We then reversed the lines and the players shot from the left side although most of my players still shot right-handed. I knew Matthew was a basketball player when I saw him shooting with his left hand, easily reversing his footwork, which is the most difficult thing to learn. Most boys are right-handed and their last step before shooting is with the left leg which becomes stronger over time. As a result, they have trouble getting lift off their right leg when shooting with their left hand. Matthew had the same fluid movement from either side. We changed the drill to shooting jump shots from the free throw. Matthew made five of six shots.

We hadn't planned to scrimmage that day, but I couldn't resist getting an opportunity to see how Matthew would fit in with the rest of the team. I put Matthew at forward with the second team and later at center. He played well, rebounded, and ran the court with ease. He didn't score much, primarily because he didn't get the ball, but it didn't seem to bother him. You could tell he had fun when he played basketball.

"Okay, boys, let's call it a night. We have a big game Friday. Everybody take ten free throws and head for the shower. If you haven't met him already, introduce yourself to your new teammate." I sat down next to Ray Wilson and watched Matthew make all 10 of his free throws.

"Your son looks pretty good out there, Mr. Wilson. It's obvious he's played some basketball. Does he have an outside game?"

"Coach, you'll be pleasantly surprised."

There was something in his voice that made me stop and recognize what he said. "Just how good is he?" I finally asked.

"He's the best you've ever seen, bar none."

His demeanor told me he was not exaggerating. I found out later that his nickname in California had been Phenom.

5,000 miles away another 17 year old boy walked onto a basketball court in the old section of Istanbul, Turkey, the part of town still referred to

by locals as Constantinople. He was tall, lean and confident despite being matched up against the Turkish National Team that last year finished third in the Euro Championships. Two hours and 46 points later Amar Rashad was invited to join the elite squad. Muslims would call him ‘The Mahdi’.

Chapter 2

New Kid on the block

The new boy kept pretty much to himself the first couple of days, letting others form their initial judgments. At 6'5", 215 pounds and sandy blond hair, he looked like an athlete. He carried himself with an easy confidence that made the boys gravitate to him. Girls found him attractive. The first thing they noticed was his deep blue eyes that seemed to have unlimited depth, almost as if you were looking into a crystal clear lake. His eyes projected a serenity and calmness that made people comfortable. But surprisingly, there was little of the "he's hot" talk. Most of the comments were along the line of, "he's nice" or "he's really easy to talk to".

By Wednesday, his classmates started to notice that there was something special about Matthew. He had an easy smile and greeted everyone by their first name. There were 1,150 kids at the three-year high school and 325 in the senior class. Everyone was his friend; it didn't matter if the person was popular or a football player, he treated everyone the same.

Toby Hanson was a studious young man with few friends. Only 5'7", overweight, and wearing thick horned-rim glasses, Toby was fair game for bigger boys to pick on. Wednesday, two wrestlers took great enjoyment in walking up behind and knocking the books out of his hands, strewing papers all over the hallway. The boys laughed as Toby scrambled to recover the papers. More than 20 students walked by without offering to help, a few intentionally kicking the papers and creating a larger mess.

"Let me help you," Matthew offered as he knelt down beside Toby. Matthew asked others to help and within minutes, seven boys were on their knees cleaning up the mess. The two wrestlers watched in amazement, knowing that their prank had backfired. Matthew looked up at them and asked, "Larry, Sam, don't you think you boys owe my friend Toby an apology." It wasn't a question.

Larry and Sam were not overly intelligent, but it was obvious that they had a choice to make, and they needed to make it now. It wasn't a question of physical force, although neither boy would want to tackle Matthew alone. He looked like he could handle himself. Rather, it was the new boy's strength of personality that was evidenced in his request. He expected them to apologize and if they didn't, they would not be his friends. The boys made the right decision and mumbled an apology before departing to their next class. Later, during lunch hour, the wrestlers

tentatively approached Matthew and apologized. “We’re sorry; we won’t do anything like that again.”

“Okay; friends.” The boys shook hands and the incident was over. Word spread quickly that it wasn’t wise to mess with the new boy’s friends.

Word also spread that the new boy was good in the classroom. Tuesday, there was a pop-quiz in trigonometry class. Part of the teacher’s motivation was to see how far along the new boy was. There were ten questions and students were required to show both the answers and the derivations. The teacher watched as the new boy wrote for fifteen minutes before putting his pen down and waiting silently until the class ended. He was somewhat surprised because he had thought that the new boy might be smarter, but apparently the subject material was more advanced than he was accustomed to.

A girl seated to his right had also noticed the new boy’s inactivity. Trudy was an introverted girl that excelled in the classroom. She was also 60 pounds overweight and as a result had few friends. People did not see she had a big heart. Trudy had also finished the math test early and noticed the new boy sitting at his desk without writing. Later, she found herself next to him as they turned in their tests and walked out of the classroom.

With a slight stutter, she introduced herself to the new boy. “Uh, Matthew, I’m Trudy.”

“I know who you are, Trudy, we’re in three classes together. How did you do on the quiz today?”

“I think I did well, but I noticed you seemed to be having trouble. I would be glad to help you if you’d care to study together sometime. Maybe I can answer some of your questions you might have in our other classes. That’s all, I.....it’s not a date or anything I just thought I could help you.”

Matthew saw how difficult it was for Trudy to speak to him and how sincere the offer was. He never considered saying no, and gave her a smile that had never been directed at her by a handsome boy. “That’s nice of you, Trudy. I really appreciate your offer to help. If you have time tonight I can come over to your house about 7:30.”

Trudy almost died with pleasure; she had never expected her invitation to be accepted. She was accustomed to rejection and later half-expected Matthew to call and cancel their study date.

After class, the math teacher glanced at the new boy’s paper expecting to see a blank page. He was amazed that all 10 questions were answered correctly and the derivations supporting the answers were clearly explained. It had taken the new boy no more than 15 minutes to finish the 45-minute quiz.

Matthew showed up promptly at 7:30 and Trudy introduced him to her parents. It was obvious where Trudy got her propensity to gain weight; each was portly to say the least. Trudy and Matthew set up their study hall in the dining room and much to Trudy's amazement, it soon became clear that Matthew did not need her help in math. What she did find was a friend that had interests in literature and history that were similar to hers. They exchanged views and opinions and the two hours passed quickly. Trudy had never been able to talk so easily with another student, much less a good-looking boy such as Matthew. Trudy found herself talking about her friends, or lack of friends, and her desire to lose weight and be just one of the girls. Like all girls, she wanted to be popular. She had opened up to Matthew, a boy she had only known for two days and told him things she had never talked with anyone about before, not even her parents. Matthew made her feel more attractive than she had ever felt before. He saw inside her a person that she wanted to be and looked past the exterior. It didn't matter to him that she was overweight or wore glasses; he saw what other people didn't see.

"Are you sure you want to lose weight, Trudy, because you don't have to lose weight to be a beautiful person."

"I really do, Matthew. You know it's important to other kids. They look at me and see a fat person."

"Would you like me to speak with your parents about helping you?"

Trudy nodded her assent and almost on cue, her mother entered the room with a surprise dessert. "You kids have been working so hard, I thought you would like some chocolate cake and ice cream as a reward."

"That's kind of you, Mrs. Rodgers; would your husband like to join us?" They were about to start eating when Matthew asked, "may I offer grace and thanks for this good food?"

"Go ahead, that would be nice," Mr. Rodgers said with some apprehension. They were not a religious family. Matthew offered his extended hands to Trudy and Mr. Rodgers on his left and said a simple grace. "We thank you, Lord, for the food on our table, and the new friends we have met today. I especially ask for your help in supporting Trudy while she begins a difficult task."

"So, what's this difficult task, Trudy?" Mr. Rodgers asked as he began eating.

Trudy looked at Matthew for support and answered her father. "Dad, Mom, I've decided to try and lose weight and Matthew has offered to help me," she said with obvious trepidation.

“Trudy, we like you just the way you are. A little extra weight never hurt anybody. What if you get sick? Are you telling her to lose weight Matthew?”

“Dad, that’s not true at all. Matthew is the only person who told me I was beautiful the way I am. But, you don’t realize what all the other kids say. They call me tubby and fatty and a bunch of other names.” There was a moment of silence and Trudy looked at Matthew for support.

“Mr. and Mrs. Rodgers, both of you are big people and that’s fine. You are adults and have earned the right to make your own decisions. Unfortunately, children and teenagers can be cruel. It’s not fair, but there is little that Trudy can do about it. She’s as nice a person as I’ve met, but there are some kids that only see what is on the outside. They don’t see what a beautiful young woman she is. She will feel much better about herself if she loses a few pounds and it will help her fit in better with her classmates.”

The parents looked at Trudy who was close to tears and stared at Matthew with adoration. They loved their daughter and could see how important this was to her. “What can we do to help, Trudy?”

“I need to start watching my calories, and stop late night snacks. If you don’t mind, I would like to start right now,” Trudy said as she pushed her half-finished dessert to the center of the table. She looked at Matthew for support and was rewarded with a reassuring smile.

“Do you mind if I finish your dessert?”

Ms. Thompson loved poetry and every year she looked forward to this part of her senior English class. “Okay, class, settle down. This week we are going to study some of the great love poems of modern times. Can anybody give me an example?”

Silence was their response which was not totally unexpected. Poetry wasn’t something that most high school kids understood.

“Anybody? Come on, surely there are some boys out there that have quoted poetry to their girlfriend.”

Silence again. “Okay. I’ll give you an example,” she said as she turned to write on the chalkboard. “*Your words are my food, your breath is my wine; you are everything to me,*” a male voice said from the back of the room.

The classroom was silent. It was not only the words, but the way the verse was read, with depth and feeling

“Excellent, Matthew, Sarah Bernhardt is a great example of Victorian poetry. Do you have another example?”

“Of course. Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote.”

*“I love you not only for what you are,
but for what I am when I am with you.”*

“Do you know the rest of the poem Matthew?” the teacher asked softly.”

*“I love you not only for what you have made of yourself,
but for what you are making of me.
I love you for the part of me that you bring out.”*

Tears formed in her eyes. Browning was her favorite poet and the favorite of her ex-fiancé who had read poetry to her for hours with the same feeling that Matthew exhibited. She had broken-off their engagement last month. Ms. Thompson was fighting the tears when Matthew gave her needed time to recover.

“As I’m sure you know, Emily Dickenson was greatly influenced by Browning. The Heart is the Capital of the Mind, is one of my favorites.”

*The Heart is the Capital of the Mind —
The Mind is a single State —
The Heart and the Mind together make
A single Continent —
One - is the Population —
Numerous enough —
This ecstatic Nation
Seek — it is Yourself.*

“Can anyone tell me what this means?” Ms. Thompson asked, as she recovered from her reflections. “Debbie?” The remainder of the class passed quickly. She had never had a group of kids more interested in poetry. When the bell rang, she instructed each student to have a short poem that they could quote by heart for tomorrow’s class. “Matthew, please stay for a minute.”

“I want to thank you for changing the subject. Elizabeth Browning’s poetry affects me, for several reasons. If you know her poetry, you know the poem I wanted to avoid. I got the impression you sensed that.”

“Would you like to talk about him Ms. Thompson? He must be special to you.”

She didn't know how he knew, but found herself spilling out her heart to this 17-year-old boy. "His name is Jeff, and he is a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin. We were going to be married this summer, but I broke it off because ..." Matthew was a good listener, and twenty minutes later she admitted that she had made a terrible mistake. "I just wish he would give me another chance, but he won't even answer my calls."

The next day everyone was ready with their poem and eagerly awaited their turn. One-by-one the students read their poetry, most without glancing at their notes. It was a teacher's dream. Elizabeth Barrett Browning was off limits, but one young man had chosen a poem by her husband, Robert Browning.

Summum Bonum

*"All the breath and the bloom of the year in the bag of one bee:
All the wonder and wealth of the mine in the heart of one gem:
In the core of one pearl all the shade and the shine of the sea:
Breath and bloom, shade and shine, — wonder, wealth, and— how far
above them —
Truth that's brighter than gem,
Trust, that's purer than pearl, —
Brightest truth, purest trust in the universe — all were for me
In the kiss of one girl."*

"Jeffrey, can you tell us what Robert Browning meant?"

"I'll try. Summum Bonum is a Latin word meaning 'highest good' and in Christian philosophy, the highest good is usually defined as the life of the righteous, the life led in Communion with God. I guess Browning is equating this kiss to the ultimate pleasure."

"Excellent, Jeffrey. Okay, Matthew, your turn." She couldn't wait to see what he had come up with.

"Ms. Thompson, with your permission, I would like you to help me on this; I'll read a couple lines and then you read a couple. May we put the projector screen between us so you can have a little privacy?" The kids applauded so she was left with no choice. She knew what was coming and braced herself for the inevitable rush of emotions. It might have been a mistake to tell Matthew her secrets.

"**How Do I Love Thee?**" a poem by Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Matthew started, as a young man slipped into the room and took Matthew's chair.

“Ms. Thompson, you begin.”

*“How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.
I love thee to the depth and breadth and height
My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight
For the ends of Being and ideal Grace.”*

Tears appeared in her eyes as she paused to let Matthew continue.
It was Jeff’s favorite poem.

*“I love thee to the level of every day's
Most quiet need, by sun and candle light.”*

Tears gushed down her face as she recognized Jeff’s voice. She was sobbing as she continued.

*“I love thee freely, as men strive for Right;
I love thee purely, as they turn from Praise.
I love thee with the passion put to use
In my old griefs, and with my childhood's faith.”*

Jeff finished the beautiful poem that had been a symbol of their love.

*“I love thee with a love I seemed to lose
With my lost saints,-I love thee with the breath,
Smiles, tears, of all my life!-and, if God choose,
I shall but love thee better after death.”*

The room was still; the class mesmerized by the emotion that filled the room. Ms. Thompson looked up and saw Jeff’s face, and cried with happiness as he slipped their engagement ring onto her finger.

The class erupted with applause as they embraced.

She learned the rest of the story in bits and pieces. A guidance counselor provided Matthew with Jeff’s address and phone number. When Jeff did not immediately return his call, Matthew jumped in his car and made the 90-minute drive to Madison and camped out on Jeff’s doorstep. They talked for almost three hours before Jeff swallowed his pride and agreed to be there the next day. The ring was Jeff’s idea; at least he thought it was.

Chapter 3

“You Can Do It!”

The rout was on. The Waukesha Blackshirts, Wisconsin’s number one ranked high school team, was trouncing my Shorewood Bulldogs. There was nothing I could do about it. We had hung tough in the first half and trailed by only nine at the break, but in the 3rd quarter Waukesha started to roll. Their star, Roy Burke, had 30 points by the end of the quarter.

I glanced down at the end of the bench and saw Matthew sitting on the edge of his chair. His paperwork had still not arrived at game time and he was not eligible to play. At half time, my assistant coach told me the paperwork was due any minute from his high school in California. I couldn’t help but wonder if he would have made any difference. There was no question he was good, but the team we were playing had five players better than any of my other starters.

The score was 61-40 when the 3rd quarter mercifully ended. The team gathered around me and I could see the dazed look in their eyes. They were beaten. “Come on, kids, don’t stop trying. We still have a chance,” I said without conviction. We were overmatched, and to make it worse, my star player, Rodney, was having a terrible shooting day.

The 4th quarter started off the way the third quarter ended. Tim Rappis, the Waukesha point guard stole the ball from our guards and came down one-against-two on a fast break. He made two sensational fakes, dribbled between his legs and broke to his left. Our guards collided while he went in unmolested for a lay-up. He was laughing and pointing at our players as he ran back up the court.

Matthew wasn’t accustomed to seeing his team lose and his anger erupted when he saw what Rappis did. There is no excuse for rubbing it in like that. “Come on, play basketball!” I heard Matthew shout in anger. I looked down the bench and saw a determined look that I had not seen before. At that moment my assistant coach came running from the locker room holding papers in his hand. His smile told me that the eligibility papers had arrived.

A pass was deflected out of bounds stopping the clock. “Matthew, go in for Jerry at center,” I shouted, not waiting for my assistant to arrive. Matthew was up like a shot, racing to the scorer’s table while stripping off his warm-up suit. His eagerness betrayed him as he tripped over his warm-up pants and fell awkwardly to the floor, much to the delight of the 5,000-plus Waukesha crowd. Laughter erupted throughout the gymnasium.

Matthew seemed to pay no mind to the crowd, but instead concentrated upon loosening up. He had been sitting on the bench for almost two hours. The laughter and abuse continued while he jumped and ran short sprints to loosen his legs. Paper cups were thrown on the floor causing a delay while the mess was cleaned. Matthew continued to loosen up and seemed unaffected by the verbal assault. He had the same steely look in his eyes that I had noticed previously. He was ready to play.

Insults continued to rain down from the crowd; “teach your players to walk before they run,” one fan shouted. “He looks like a jumping jack rather than a basketball player,” another voice rang out. A third voice asked if we were putting in our B-team because we had given up.

The referees and Waukesha coach implored the crowd for silence. Inexplicably, the crowd quieted and there was complete silence, until a small voice rang out to break the spell, “you can do it Matthew, I know you can.”

It was a squeaky voice, off key, almost timid, but it shattered the silence. The sound had come from Jennifer, our head cheerleader. The Waukesha crowd again erupted in laughter and jeers. A number of falsetto voices emanated from the crowd mocking the cheerleader. Jennifer stood there embarrassed, helpless and alone and looked like she wanted to crawl into a hole until Matthew walked over to her and put his hand on her shoulder. The crowd became mute. “Thank you for believing in me, Jennifer,” I heard him say, “It means a lot to me. I’ll do my best, but I need your help,” he said as he looked at the other cheerleaders. “We need to get the crowd behind us. Spread the floor during time outs and get the fans to cheer for us.”

“These are Waukesha fans,” one of the girls complained. “Why would they cheer for us?”

“They are Waukesha fans now, but they appreciate good basketball and a team that gives 100%. Trust me. They will all be cheering for us at the end of the game.” He gave Jennifer a light kiss on the cheek and trotted back to his team’s huddle.

There were only a couple dozen or so Shorewood fans at the game, mostly parents and family of the players. Among them were Matthew’s father and younger sister, Kelly. I heard later that Ray proclaimed, “I’ll take our boys, even-up.”

“You’re crazy,” one of the other dads answered. “We’re down 23 points with seven and a half minutes to play. I’ll take that bet.”

“Okay, you’re on for one dollar. Now sit back and enjoy the show, I’ve never seen my boy this focused.”

Chapter 4

“Comeback”

We inbounded the ball and Rodney put up a quick jump shot, which missed and bounced high off the rim. Matthew got his fingertips on the ball, batting it up against the backboard. Like a flash, he was up again for the second rebound, but missed again. He was up again for the third try and laid it in, cutting the lead to 21. I was amazed at how quickly he got off the floor. His feet touched the ground for only a second before he was back up again for the rebound. Waukesha came down quickly and Burke launched a long jump shot from the left side. Matthew grabbed the rebound and in one fluid motion was heading up court before the other players reacted. He flew by the two Waukesha guards and went in alone for the lay-up. Wow, I thought. He had not shown this quickness in practice.

“Press, 3-1-1 press,” Matthew shouted, directing players to their positions while he took the middle. Waukesha inbounded the pass to the left side and easily broke the press, going past Rodney who showed no interest in defense. They quickly got the ball to Burke who went in for a one-handed dunk that would restore their momentum, but it was not to be. Matthew seemed to come out of nowhere and got a hand between the ball and the rim, deflecting the ball away. His momentum caused him to fall to the ground, but he was back up in a flash to block Burke’s second attempt. He deflected the shot into the air, soared high to grab it at its apex and passed the ball to a teammate in one motion to begin another fast break. The ball surprised Rodney who had been loafing along the sidelines. Rodney fumbled the ball and by the time he finally got control Matthew was already racing for the basket with his hand in the air, calling for a lob pass. Rodney was accustomed to being the star of the team and resented the new boy. I groaned as Rodney threw the ball much too high and could only watch as the errant pass headed for the top of the backboard.

I then witnessed an amazing athletic play, one of the best I had ever seen. Matthew leaped higher than I had ever seen a player jump and seemed to soar through the air, just barely getting his fingertips on the ball and deflecting it off the top of the backboard. Twisting 180 degrees in mid-air, he caught the ball with his left hand and threw it down into the basket while ducking his head to avoid the bottom of the backboard. The crowd was stunned. No one could believe what they had just seen. The silence was broken by Matthew’s primal scream, “let’s play basketball!”

Waukesha took a quick time out. They were still up 17 points, but the momentum had changed. My team came off the floor with exuberance and huddled around me, but Matthew wasn't with them. He was at the far corner of the gym shouting to the fans for support. "We can do it with your help," he screamed at the pro-Waukesha crowd that was determined to ignore his plea.

Jerry Hayes, captain of the Shorewood football team and all-conference fullback, was with a half dozen friends that had made the trip to the game. The group sat under the basket where Matthew had just scored. While Matthew implored the crowd for support, Hayes talked to a co-ed sitting behind him. Hayes was in the 3rd row when Matthew reached into the stands, grabbed him by the shirt and with one hand hauled him over the first two rows. "Come on, Jerry, I need you. I thought you were my friend." Their faces were only inches apart with Matthew still holding him by the collar. Still with one hand, Matthew deposited the 230-pound football player back into his third-row seat. "Be a leader," Matthew commanded, as he ran to our bench leaving Hayes in a state of shock, and a decision to make.

"Coach, we need players that are willing to hustle and play defense."

"Okay," I agreed, and looked at my top two subs. Matthew beat me to the punch.

"Andy, go in for Rodney. Erin, you go in for Sam. Remember what we talked about. If there is a loose ball or rebound, it's ours."

Andy and Erin were considered the worst players on the team, and the last two players I would have put in at this time. They seldom played, but Matthew had been sitting between them for the first three quarters, so he must have something in mind. I now knew why Matthew's father had warned me that his son might overstep his authority. I also remembered saying that I wasn't concerned about egos, just winning. I decided to let him have his way. I substituted for the other two players, leaving Matthew with a new supporting cast. It was his show.

"We press full court." Matthew commanded. "If there's a loose ball, I want everyone on it. Take the shot if you're open." We broke from the huddle with an enthusiasm that sent chills up my spine while the Waukesha players jogged slowly onto the court fully aware they were up 17 points, and the #1 team in Wisconsin.

Rick Roby sat alone on the end of the Waukesha bench. He had warned the coach before the game about Matthew, but Burke told his coach that Matthew wasn't anything special and his teammates made fun of him earlier when Matthew tripped over his warm-up suit. They weren't

laughing any more, but they still wouldn't listen to him when he suggested double-teaming Matthew and working the clock to protect the lead.

"Rick, what's wrong with you?" his coach said with disdain. "We're up 17 against a team that's won two games all year, and you want us to stall? Just keep your mouth shut and watch the game." Rick bit his tongue. He knew, without a doubt, that his time would come.

Waukesha took the ball out under their basket and Matthew was all over the passer. Rappis faked and Matthew dove to his right anticipating a bounce pass that didn't come. He looked foolish as Rappis lofted the ball over his head. The Waukesha fans jeered as Matthew quickly picked himself off the floor and raced up court.

The other Waukesha guard took the inbounds pass and nonchalantly dribbled up the court looking for the open man and was surprised when he felt the ball slapped away from behind. Matthew had raced up-court and dove just before the Waukesha guard picked up his dribble, slapping the ball to Andy. Matthew was up again racing the other way and as Andy hit him with a perfect pass for the layup. The lead was cut to 15.

Matthew picked up the ball and held it for the Waukesha guard. "Come on, laughing boy, let's play basketball." Tim Rappis, Waukesha's quarterback and a three year starter, wasn't easily rattled. He took the ball out of bounds, faked a bounce pass to his left and watched as Matthew fell for the fake again and sprawled to the floor. This guy's goofy, he thought, as he again passed the ball over his head. Matthew quickly picked himself up off the floor and raced up court, but this time the Waukesha players were ready. After the press was broken, our team resorted to a man-to-man defense. Andy was guarding the dribbler when he suddenly remembered what Matthew had told him while they were sitting on the bench in the first half.

"Andy, watch this kid, every time he makes that spin move to his right, he gives it away by dipping his left shoulder. When you guard him, just anticipate the spin move and you will have an easy steal." Although Andy hadn't been put in a game for almost a month, he had paid attention.

The Waukesha guard dipped his shoulder and Andy reacted the way Matthew suggested and found himself with the ball and an open path to the basket. Andy hadn't scored a basket all year and probably couldn't be blamed for getting excited. He picked up his dribble too soon and was called for traveling. Crestfallen, he turned to face his teammates. "Nice steal, Andy," Matthew said as he patted him on the shoulder. "Let's play defense, we'll get them next time."

Waukesha broke the press again and got off an open jump shot from the free throw line. Erin went up high and ripped down the rebound with enthusiasm. "Let's go," Matthew shouted as he raced up court on a two and one fast break. Erin hit him with a perfect pass and Matthew fed Andy who went in for an easy layup, the ball never touching the floor. Andy never thought about this being his first basket, he just turned and yelled; "defense!"

Rappis inbounded the ball again and this time Matthew sprung the trap. Pretending to go for the fake bounce-pass he dove to his right, but this time he landed in a crouched position and immediately sprang straight up in the air to intercept the lob pass that had twice gone over his head. He caught the ball on his upward flight and dunked with two hands. It happened so quickly that many people in the stands didn't see it. Matthew handed the ball back to Rappis and taunted; "come on, laughing boy, let's play basketball." Rappis grabbed the ball and tried a full court pass to break the press, but Erin was ready. He cut in front of the Waukesha player, caught the ball and passed to Matthew, who passed to Andy on the baseline. Andy made the ten-footer and Waukesha's lead was cut to 11 points.

"Time out!" the Waukesha coach demanded as he saw the shocked looks on his team's faces. Matthew again stayed on the floor and implored the fans to get behind the Bulldogs. "Come on, people, we need your help. We are trying our best." This time he was not alone. Jerry Hayes had made his decision - he decided to be a leader. Hayes and his friends were making as much noise as possible under the one basket. Noise was also coming from our team's parents, led by Matthew's father and sister. The Shorewood cheerleaders spread the court pleading with the Waukesha fans to get behind the Bulldogs, but again got only minimal response from a few Waukesha fans.

"Coach, I need Andy out here with me, but let's get some fresh bodies out here. Two minutes is enough for everyone if we work hard." I looked down at Rodney who had been sulking at the end of our bench and decided not to put him back in.

"Come on, Rodney, "Matthew said, "get your head together. We will need you before this is over. The three substitutes reported in and were doing jumping jacks and short sprints to loosen up. No one in the crowd was laughing or jeering this time. They knew their team was in trouble.

Our team burst from the huddle ready to play. Conversely, the Waukesha players walked slowly, almost reluctantly onto the floor. Rick Roby again returned to his seat at the end of the Waukesha bench. The Waukesha coach had finally decided to double team Matthew, but his

instructions were to keep him away from the basket. “Make him shoot from outside,” Coach said. “Roy doesn’t think he has a jump shot. Rick, does that meet with your approval?” he asked sarcastically.

Rick answered honestly, “he can shoot from outside, Coach.”

“Well, then what would you have us do?”

“I already suggested slowing down the game and milking the clock. You could also put me in to guard him; I have seen his moves before. Nobody can stop him now, but I think I could slow him down a little. You might also try apologizing.”

“Apologize for what?” the coach responded.

“Apologize for laughing at his team earlier, that’s why he’s mad. We made fun of them.”

“I’m not apologizing to anyone. Come on team; let’s show them why we’re number one.”

The Waukesha team did regain its composure and over the next three minutes saw Burke make two long-range jump shots and Rappis drive to the basket for one basket and assisted on two others with perfect passes to his teammates. Unfortunately for Waukesha, they couldn’t stop Matthew. He made four long jump shots and four free throws besides assisting on two other baskets. The final basket was an assist to Rodney whose attitude and defense had improved dramatically.

The lead was still five points when our team made the play that I will remember forever. Waukesha missed a shot and our center Tom Osteen went high to grab a rebound, tipping it to Matthew, who in one fluid motion passed to Rodney who was racing up the sidelines. Unfortunately, Rodney did not look up in time and the ball hit his back and veered toward the sideline. He hung his head in despair, knowing the turnover was his fault. Only Matthew and Andy reacted. Matthew was faster and with a last second dive managed to flip the ball back over his head, but knew immediately that he was a split-second too late and the ball would land out of bounds. Always hustling, he rolled to his feet and headed back onto the court, hoping for a miracle.

The miracle was named Andy Hefner. While the other players had given up, he had charged after the loose ball, knowing he would be too late. Matthews attempted save gave him the extra time he needed. As the other players watched, Andy threw his body forward and just barely got his fingertips underneath the ball before it hit the floor, slapping the ball inbounds to Matthew before crashing into the bleachers.

Matthew headed up court, switching the dribble to his left hand to drive around a Waukesha defender. He changed directions at the top of the key, but tripped as he caught his toe on the player’s foot. Matthew went

sprawling through the air searching for someone to pass to, but our other three players were still at half court. Matthew was about to launch a desperation left-handed hook shot when he heard Andy yelling for the ball. Somehow he had gotten himself off the floor and raced up court. Matthew twisted in the air, caught a glimpse of Andy streaking towards the basket and threw him a perfect bounce pass, a split second before crashing to the floor. Andy caught the pass and shot in one motion, and the lead was cut to three points. Waukesha called another time out as Matthew threw his arms around Andy and screamed; “we are a team!”

The Shorewood cheerleaders raced onto the floor and this time received a different reaction. Scattered cheers were heard from all over the field house as the Waukesha fans applauded a great effort. My entire team stayed on the court begging the fans for support. I heard Matthew scream up to the fans and point at Andy. “If you don’t appreciate that hustle, you don’t like basketball. We are giving 100% out here and we need your support.”

Matthew had worked his way down towards the far corner of the court lifting his arms and yelling at fans to stand up and cheer our Bulldogs. He stopped and watched as a man in a wheelchair struggled to stand. After several agonizing attempts, the man finally made it to his feet and applauded. Matthew watched the entire episode and nodded at the man, before he came back to our bench with eyes glistening.

There was little I could say other than suggest we double-team Rappis whenever he gets the ball. “You’re right, Coach, he’s the key to this. He is the only one maintaining his poise out there.”

We erased the three-point lead in 30 seconds and went up by a point. A deflected pass and a loose ball set up the first bucket. Waukesha had the angle to recover the loose ball, but three Bulldogs made a dive at the last second and the Waukesha player shied away. Heads cracked, but the ball was slapped over towards Matthew who took one dribble and launched a 40-foot jump shot. The ball was half way to the basket when he yelled, “defense”. The go ahead basket was set up by a traveling call when Andy again anticipated the spin move of the Waukesha guard. The boy realized his mistake and palmed the ball as tried to change direction at the last second. Matthew took the inbounds pass and drove hard to the basket before dishing off to Rodney for a 12-foot jump shot that gave us our first lead of the game.

My happiness was short lived. Rather than call a time out, Rappis dribbled quickly up court and launched a jump shot from the top of the circle. Matthew attempt to block the shot was a second too late and we were down one point with six seconds on the clock. Erin inbounded the ball

to Matthew who streaked up the right side of the court. Behind him a Waukesha player was racing to keep up, but to no avail. In desperation, the Waukesha player reached out and grabbed Matthew's shirt, trying to hold him back. Matthew swept his arm away with his left hand, took one dribble over half court and launched a 50-foot shot that swished through the basket as the buzzer sounded.

Half the crowd erupted in cheers and our entire bench raced out onto the court to celebrate. We stopped when we saw the referee waving off the basket and whistling for a foul. "That's okay," I thought. "Matthew will make the two free throws for the win." Unbelievably, the foul was called on Matthew for swinging his arm. I almost lost it.

"He was just trying to get the guy's hand off his shirt, the kid was holding him," I screamed, but the referee wasn't listening. He marched to the foul line to give Waukesha a one-on-one free throw. "Put five seconds on the clock," Matthew's father shouted from the stands. "There's still time on the clock."

I got the message. The referee wasn't going to change his mind about the foul and all we could hope for was to get as much time on the clock as we could get so we would have one more opportunity. The timekeeper finally agreed to reset the clock to 2.5 seconds. I called time out to discuss our strategy. Matthew was talking to Jennifer when I got back to the huddle. "On my signal," I heard him say. I was still trying to decide on what strategy to use, when Matthew took charge again.

"Okay, he's going to miss the free throw and Erin, you or Tom are going to get the rebound. Throw a quick pass to Rodney in the corner. Rodney, you catch the ball and in one motion throw a hook pass up the sidelines aiming for a spot right where the center court intersects the sideline. Trust me, I'll be there. Andy, as soon as they miss the free throw, you head the other way shouting for the ball, make some noise, anything to pull their defense towards you. Okay, we have just enough time to pull this off. There can't be any wasted motion, any questions?" There were none. "Okay," Matthew continued. "When I give the signal, we break out of our huddle and race onto the court."

I noticed Matthew watching the Waukesha players and remembered their habit of putting their hands together in a pack and then breaking after a time out. Matthew had also noticed that there was a two second delay from when they clasped hands to when they broke the huddle. I saw them clasp hands and Matthew nod to Jennifer. The cheerleaders broke out on to the court raising their hands and screaming for support. "Let's go," Matthew commanded, and our team raced on to the court at exactly the same time that the Waukesha players broke their huddle. The

cheerleaders did not see what was happening behind them; all they knew was that this time when they asked for support the entire crowd stood up and cheered. I'll never know how many were cheering for us, but I would bet it was the vast majority.

The cheerleaders were thinking back to Matthew's words. "If we all do our jobs, we will have the entire crowd cheering for us at the end of the game." His prophecy had come true. Sally, the cheerleader that had expressed her doubts earlier, fell to her knees ashamed of her lack of faith, but felt Matthew along side of her pulling her to her feet. "You did your best, Sally, that's all I asked." Later when she repeated her story she was told that Matthew had not come near her, but she knew that wasn't true.

The Waukesha free throw shooter was unnerved as he felt the home crowd turn against them, and his free throw attempt hit the back of the rim. Matthew tipped the ball back to Erin, who immediately threw to Rodney in the corner. Rodney turned and fired the ball to the spot where Matthew said he would be. Matthew got there just in time, caught the perfect pass shoulder high and in one motion turned and launched his shot. I looked up to the clock and saw the final 10th of a second tick off and the clock turn red. Matthew followed the flight of the ball and knew immediately it was good. He turned and pointed at Rodney and Erin as the ball swished through the basket for the one-point victory. I screamed in delight and raised my arms in celebration.

My first indication that something was wrong was when I saw Matthew fall to his knees in disbelief. One referee was signaling good, but the other referee, the same one that had called the foul on Matthew earlier, was waving off the basket claiming time had expired before the shot. I couldn't believe it and raced out at the referee not sure what I would do when I got there. Fortunately, I never had to face the problem as Matthew saw me coming and raced to intercept. The referee thought Matthew was coming at him and threw a punch at Matthew, cutting his lip. Matthew ignored the pain and grabbed me. "Come on, Coach, it's over. Let's congratulate the winners." He held me for another second while I calmed down and realized what I had almost done.

"You're right, Matthew, let's congratulate the winners."

Chapter 5

“Referees”

I heard Matthew telling Rappis what a great game he had played. “I tried to break you, but you kept your cool better than anybody else I have played against.” Despite my frustration I had to laugh when I saw him congratulating the player that had pulled on his shirt at the end of the game. When the player turned to leave, Matthew playfully tugged on his shirt in obvious reference to the penultimate play. The boy smiled and nodded his head in understanding.

I congratulated the Waukesha coach and was there when Matthew came over to add his congratulations. He had his friend Rick Roby in tow. “Rick, I know you stood up for me and I appreciate that, but don’t you think you owe your coach an apology? He is the coach, you know.”

Rick hesitated only briefly. “I’m sorry, Coach, I guess I got a little excited. I didn’t mean any disrespect, but you have to admit, he’s pretty good.”

“I’m the one that should apologize, Rick. I should have listened to some of your suggestions.”

“Coach, it might have helped if you had put Rick in to guard me, but at that point in time, I don’t think an apology would have done any good.” Neither the coach nor Rick had any idea how Matthew guessed what the argument was about.

The crowd stayed, as if they could not believe the game was over. Our cheerleaders were sitting on the floor in tears when Matthew walked over and sat down in front of a despondent Jennifer. A few minutes the girls were smiling and the tears had almost stopped, and the girls went over to congratulate the Waukesha cheerleaders. Matthew found Jerry Hayes and the rest of his group that had been so vocal in their support during the 4th quarter. Hayes had tears in his eyes and apologized for fooling around earlier when Matthew had lifted him out of his seat. Matthew embraced him and told him that what mattered was that he was there when he needed him. “You showed me you were a leader, Jerry.” I could see the tears coming back to the boy’s eyes.

Matthew walked towards the Waukesha side of the court and waved at the crowd, thanking them for their support. The crowd as one gave Matthew and our team a standing ovation. Matthew approached the man in the wheelchair who was struggling again to rise. He made it to his feet as Matthew stopped ten feet away.

"You can do it," Matthew whispered. "I'll help you."

The man's wife was behind him in case he fell. But the man shrugged her off and took a step towards Matthew, and then another step, and then another. He stood before Matthew and applauded. Tears come to Matthew's eyes as he in turn applauded the man's effort. He put his arms around the man and held him for several moments while the crowd cheered. His wife stood behind him, proud, but dumfounded. Her husband had not walked in fifteen years. Was it the adrenalin from the close game?

Matthew gathered the cheerleaders together to thank them for their efforts and to ask them for another favor. "I need you to help me tomorrow. Can you all be at the school at eight thirty?" Sixteen heads nodded in unison.

The crowd was still clapping as our team made its way back towards the locker room. Matthew stopped along the way and saw his father halfway up in the stands. The crowd separated to make room for him. As he approached his father, his resolve seemed to disappear and he collapsed in his father's arms in tears. "What did I do wrong? Why did the referee make those calls?"

"You didn't do anything wrong, Matthew. Sometimes there's no explanation for things like this. All we can do is go on and hope it makes us stronger." The crowd cheered again as Matthew and his father separated and Matthew made his way to the locker room.

There was a fight going on in the referees' locker room. Ed Corbett and Jeff Chandler were arguing vociferously when their district director came into their locker room. "What went on out there, Jeff? Those were two of the worst calls I have ever seen."

"Don't ask me," Ed Corbett said. "But I'll tell you this, I don't ever want to work with this guy again."

"Calm down Ed, let's not make things worse. Jeff, what happened? You seemed to lose your cool. Taking a swing at that kid was inexcusable."

Jeff had realized he had made a mistake when the Waukesha crowd booed the call that had helped their team win. He lost it when he saw the new kid running towards him and had reacted instinctively. He had never hit a kid before and by the time he got to the locker room he was wondering himself what had happened. "I don't know, Dick, I guess I just lost it. That kid was so good that I guess I just wanted to protect the Waukesha players. I made a fool of myself, didn't I?"

"Well, it's over, there's nothing we can do about it now."

"Yes, there is," Jeff replied with conviction. "I can go to their locker room and apologize. Would you go with me, Ed?" They arrived at

the visitors' locker room only to find the entrance barred by a determined 16-year old who had been instructed to keep everyone out until the team meeting was finished. Bill Hawkins, the school principal, had tried minutes earlier, but Johnny stood his ground.

"Matthew asked me to keep everyone out until he lets me know, and that's what I'm going to do," the young man had told him.

Ray Wilson could tell the boy was more than a little scared to be arguing with the principal, but was determined to follow Matthew's instructions. Ray pulled the principal off to the side. "Bill, isn't it amazing how quickly these boys grow up? We try to get these kids to stand up for themselves and what they believe in and all of a sudden to our surprise they are doing it. Isn't it wonderful?"

Bill Hawkins had been a high school principal for thirteen years, and knew what Ray Wilson was saying. He smiled and nodded. "You're right Ray. I know Johnny and yesterday there was no way he would have stood up to me like this. That boy just matured into a young man in front of my eyes."

They turned and saw the referees pleading with Johnny to let them in and Matthew's father interceded again. "Johnny, I know what Matthew said, but I also know that my son wants his friends to think for themselves. He couldn't have anticipated that the referees would want to speak with the team. Don't you think you should ask him if he wants to meet with them?"

Johnny slowly digested the suggestion, afraid to make the wrong decision. "Wait here," he told everyone as he entered the locker room, closing the door behind him.

Matthew was telling his teammates that they should not be happy with a close loss when he noticed Johnny at the door. He looked over at Johnny and smiled, "what is it, Johnny?"

"I'm sorry to interrupt. I know you told me not to, but, uh....."

"That's okay, Johnny, just go ahead. What do you have?"

"Your father said you might want to know that the referees are outside and would like to come in and talk with you."

"What do you think, Johnny?"

Caught by surprise, Johnny was surprisingly calm. "I think we should."

"Okay, give us 60 seconds and let them in." As Johnny headed out the door, Matthew called out at him, "You did the right thing, Johnny."

Johnny closed his eyes and counted. When he got to 60, he opened the door and allowed the referees to enter. "Mr. Hawkins, you may go in, too." It was an amazing transformation from a timid young man to a

decision maker. He would never be the timid boy that his parents kissed goodbye and sent off to school that morning.

The referees wasted no time. Jeff Chandler did the talking. “Coach Simpson, we, I should say I, want to apologize to you and your players for some of the calls I made tonight. I made some mistakes. I also want to apologize for striking your player. The game is over and there is nothing we can do to change the outcome, but I hope you can find it in your hearts to forgive me.”

“That goes for me too,” Ed Corbett said, looking directly at Matthew.

I was still disappointed about the loss and didn’t know immediately what to say. I decided to let the kids decide. “I would like to accept your apology,” I replied slowly, “but first I would like to see what my players say. They are the ones that poured their hearts and souls into this game. Matthew?”

Matthew thought a moment before responding. “I’m just one player and I’m not the captain of the team, so I can only speak for myself. I don’t think there is any need for an apology. Everyone makes mistakes including everybody in this room. It’s silly to think that the referees aren’t caught up in the excitement of the game, just like the players. We all try to do our best, but sometimes we make mistakes. Everyone does. However, these men have come asked us to accept their apology, and I believe that a sincere apology should never be rejected. I would offer my hand to these gentlemen and tell them to forget it, if it were up to me. But we are a team and I’ll do what the team decides. Rodney, you’re the captain, what do you think?”

Rodney stood and walked towards the referees. “I missed more shots and made more mistakes than anybody out there tonight, I would be a hypocrite not to accept their apology, especially after Matthew gave me a second chance tonight. Let’s put this behind us,” he said as he offered his hand. I watched as the other eleven players shook the hands of the referees. I did the same.

The referees walked out of the locker room and glanced at Matthew’s father as they walked by. “You have quite a boy there, Mr. Wilson.”

“The boys continued their team meeting and Matthew pointed out that winning was more fun than losing, but winning requires dedication and hard work. “Each one of us must decide for if we are willing to put forth the effort.”

The team set our sights on winning the rest of our regular season games and the state championship.

Chapter 6

Saturday Night

“Where do you go after the game? Matthew asked, as the players were getting dressed.

The responses varied. A few players had dates and a couple others said their parents were taking them home. “We each pretty much go our own way,” Andy replied. “We don’t really hang out together that much.”

“Is there a pizza place or somewhere we could get a bite to eat?” Matthew asked. “Care to go, Andy?”

“Sure, I’ll go. There’s a place called Mama Mia’s where some of the kids hang out. They have pretty good pizza and great garlic bread.”

“Mama Mia’s it is,” Matthew said loudly. “Anyone care to join us. Bring your parents or girlfriends, everyone’s welcome. From now on we start hanging out together. We are a team!”

Rodney and Seth started to leave the locker room when Matthew stopped them. “Hold on a minute, guys. We leave the locker room together. Come on, get your bags and let’s go. Coach, lead us out.”

I had no idea what was going on until I opened the door to a round of applause from the parents, fans and cheerleaders. The small crowd continued the applause until the last player appeared. I asked Principal Hawkins what the occasion was.

Ray Wilson said this was the tradition at Matthew’s California high school, so now it’s our tradition. Win or lose, we wait for the boys and show our support. I didn’t know it at the time but soon there would be hundreds, even thousands, waiting for us after every game.

“Thanks for coming tonight, Ray. I hope you all can make it tomorrow night at Whitefish Bay.”

“I’ll be there, Jim. I haven’t missed one of Matthew’s games yet.”

“Dad, we are going to Mama Mia’s for pizza tonight,” Matthew interrupted. “Parents are invited too.”

“We can’t make it tonight son,” Matthew’s father answered. “I need to pay off some friendly gambling wagers. I owe a few people a cup of coffee.”

“We told him we weren’t taking his money,” one of the parents said. “We all knew who really won the game tonight.”

“That’s enough of that,” Matthew replied. “We lost by one point and that’s all there is to it. Let’s learn and put it behind us.”

“Here he comes,” a coed whispered moments before Matthew and Andy walked into Mama Mia’s Pizza Parlor. The twenty or so Shorewood students burst into spontaneous applause which Matthew acknowledged by raising Andy’s arm. “Over here, Matthew, we saved a spot for you at our table.”

“Thanks, Jerry, but Andy and I are sticking together.” He looked around and spotted teammates Seth and Nick who were already at another table. “Let’s pull a few of these tables together and make one big table in the center.”

Everybody wanted to talk about the game, but after 20 minutes Matthew steered the conversation to other things. “What are we planning for the senior project?” he asked, and was met by a bunch of blank stares.

“What senior project?” Seth responded.

“Well, the high school where I came from, the senior class undertook a major project each year, something to remember then by.”

“Like what?” a boy asked.

“Well, last year the seniors built two homes for underprivileged families. They held carwashes and other fundraisers to raise the money for the materials and then got parents and volunteers to provide the expertise. The boys did most of the hard labor under the direction of professionals; plumbers, electricians, and the like. The girls did all the interior decoration; painting, wall paper, carpeting, drapes, bedding and so on. To my knowledge, the two homes are still standing,” Matthew quipped.

“We could do something like that,” Allen volunteered. “My dad’s an electrician and I know he would be happy to help.”

“Allen, put a committee together of eight or ten kids to come up with ideas that we could present to the Student Council and the school administrators. We would need their backing in order to do something like this.”

While the kids were throwing out ideas, Matthew motioned to Jennifer. “Come on, I’d like to talk with the owner. Are we all set for tomorrow morning?”

“We’ll be there at 8 AM and Principal Hawkins said he would let us in and provide us with names and phone numbers.”

“Good, did you ask them to keep this quiet? I’d like it to be a surprise.”

Mama Mia’s was a franchise and the store manager and half-owner of the franchise was in the kitchen. Matthew made his request. “We need to

reserve the restaurant tomorrow night for Shorewood students, parents and teachers. There will be more than a 1,000 students and teachers that will be ordering pizza. Can you handle a crowd like that?"

"Not all at once," he responded as his eyes lit up, "but if you stagger them over a four hour period, I'll get the people in here to man the ovens."

"Great, Jennifer will coordinate with you. The game should end about nine and the team will get here by 10 pm, but by 8 pm the place should be full with students that didn't go to the game. From 9 to 1, just start making pizzas as fast as you can. You won't have time to take orders, so just make the pizzas that are most popular and we will charge a flat amount. Keep track of how many you make and we will settle up after if there is a discrepancy, but remember, keep this quiet. I don't want word getting out that we are planning anything tomorrow night."

Jennifer got home about 12:30 and tried to sleep, but her mind was racing. So much had happened today and tomorrow would even be a bigger day. Matthew was relying upon her. Her mother had been waiting up when she got home and promised to drive her to school. "Why do you have to be there on a Saturday?" she asked. "Is there anything wrong?"

"No mom, I'm fine, in fact everything is wonderful."

She finally managed to fall asleep around 4:00 AM and two hours later the alarm went off. Jennifer washed and set her hair and by twenty of eight she was ready, but her mother was refusing to wake up. "Mother, we need to go now, I can't be late. Give me the keys and I'll drive myself."

"Okay, come on, I'll drive you," she said as she threw a coat over her nightgown. They drove up to the school and Jennifer could tell she was the last one there. She was frantic and worried that her most important day was getting off to a terrible start. As they pulled up in front of the school, Matthew walked over to open the passenger door. "Good morning Jennifer, you're just in time. Wow, I like the way you did your hair. You look beautiful." Jennifer felt the same glow that she had the night before and her anxieties disappeared.

"Mrs. Kirkland, I'm Matthew Wilson. Thanks for driving Jennifer this morning; we couldn't do this without her. Your daughter looks just like you - I can see where she gets her good looks. Are you planning on going to the game this evening?"

Mrs. Kirkland was flustered and embarrassed and chastised herself for not spending the time to make herself more presentable. She knew that her hair was a mess and she had no make-up.

"I don't think we can make it this evening, we're going out to dinner with some good friends; maybe next time."

"If they are really good friends of yours, Mrs. Kirkland, I think they would want to see your daughter cheerlead. She is really good. We are also planning a surprise party after the game and you and your friends are invited."

Ed Kirkland was reading the paper when Sandy returned home and the paper was open to the sports section. "Sandy, come take a look at this," he said pointing at the paper.

"Ed, you won't believe the wonderful boy I just met."

"Is his name Matthew Wilson?" Ed asked, pointing at the picture. There on the front page of the sports section was a picture of their daughter, Jennifer, being kissed on the cheek by Matthew. The headlines touted him as the best high school player this sportswriter has ever seen.

"I just met him, Ed, and he is something really special. He has a way of making a person feel good. Do you think Adam and Amy would agree to go to the game with us tonight?"

There were only three adults at the school Saturday morning; Principal Bill Hawkins, Peggy Jones, Director of Cheerleading, and me. The 16 cheerleaders, eight from both the Varsity and Junior Varsity cheerleading squads, waited for their assignments eagerly. "Girls, we are going to throw a party tonight and the entire school is invited. Our job is to call every student today and make sure they are there tonight. I have copies of the script that you are to use when contacting students. After you greet the person and identify yourself, here's what I want you to say.

'There is a surprise party being thrown tonight for the basketball team, this year's state high school champions. Everyone at school is invited and we really need your support.' If they laugh or ask you something about being future champions, just ask them to look at today's Milwaukee Journal sports section and tell them that Matthew Wilson personally asked you to call them. If they say they can't make it, try to find out why and somebody else will call them back later. If they need a babysitter, we will find a babysitter for them. If they have to work, we'll try to find someone to take their place. I'll be in charge of handling the follow-up calls. Tell them the party is at Mama Mia's starting at eight o'clock. Remember, this is a surprise party. Nobody from the basketball teams, varsity or junior varsity, must know. I want it be a surprise."

"Okay, if there are no questions get a homeroom list from Principal Hawkins and begin making your calls. Ms. Jones and Coach Simpson will call the teachers and parents of the players." Matthew did not tell the cheerleaders that their parents would also be invited.

"Principal Hawkins, could you help me out on something?"

“What I can do, Matthew?”

“There will be an awful lot of people packed into a small area this evening. We can expect parking problems, traffic congestion and the like. It would be nice if we could get some off-duty policemen working with us to provide traffic control.”

“Better yet,” Principal Hawkins replied, “the mayor and I are good friends. Why don’t I see if we make the entire block a pedestrian walkway? We could also call the other restaurants on that block and advise them to be ready for a crowd of hungry students.”

Four hours later everything seemed to be falling into place. 85% of the students and teachers had been contacted and said they would be there. Matthew was calling the ones that said no. My call to Ray Wilson was a pleasant diversion. “I figured Matthew was up to something,” he said. “Susan and I will be there.”

“I’m sure you already know he is quite a young man, just as you knew that he was probably good enough to make our team.”

“I do have a little fun understating his abilities and then watching the reaction as people see how good he is. I was proud of him last night and the way he handled defeat. You know, Coach, this was the first time he’s been on a losing team.”

“You mean a team with a losing record?”

“No, I mean he had never lost a game before – ever.”

“There were only two minutes to go before half-time and my Shorewood Bulldogs were up by five points, 35-30. The stands were packed as 300 people had made the trip from Shorewood to see the new player. Matthew had scored eight points, but was nothing close to the dominating player he had been the evening before. He seemed content to get his teammates involved. There were two college scouts in the stands, and one of them said he was going to get a hot dog and coke before the half-time rush. “I’ll stick around,” the other said. “I want to watch this new kid.”

“Don’t waste your time, he’s not as good as the newspaper claimed. There are four or five better players in the city conference.”

“Coach, let’s put a press on them after our next basket.”

While I made the assignments I noticed that Matthew nod to Jennifer before he headed back on court. We inbounded the ball and Kevin dribbled the ball into the fore court. He called out a play; a double screen for Matthew who came around underneath the basket and flashed the top of the key. Kevin got him the ball waist high and his 18 ft. jump shot split the net.

All eight cheerleaders jumped to their feet holding identical signs; “press, press,” They were screaming at the top of their lungs and were quickly joined by our 300 supporters. The Whitefish Bay guard was caught unaware and was double teamed and trapped in the corner. He should have called time out, but panicked and threw a long pass up court that was intercepted by Osteen. Tom passed to Matthew who launched a 25 ft. jump shot which again swished through the basket. He was yelling, “press, press,” before the ball reached the rim.

Rodney intercepted the inbound pass and put up a quick jump shot that went high off the rim, but Matthew caught the rebound above the basket and slammed it down for two more points. Whitefish Bay needed a time out badly, but there were only 40 seconds left in the half, enough time for Matthew to score two more baskets to increase the lead to 15. With five seconds to go he deflected the ball and caught up to it just before it went out of bounds. In one smooth motion, he turned and fired up a desperation shot from mid-court. He looked at the referees while the ball was in the air and both referees raised their hands and gave the “good if it goes in sign”. The ball fell through the basket as the half time gun sounded. Our five point lead had grown to 17 in less than two minutes.

Matthew raced up into the stands high-fiving the Shorewood students and supporters, and the other players followed. Matthew nodded his recognition to Jennifer’s mother as he high-fived Ed Kirkland and his friend Adam Moore. The crowd was still applauding as they returned to the locker room.

“I wouldn’t have missed this for anything,” Adam said to Ed and Sandy. “Thanks so much for inviting us.”

The scout returned with his hot dog and coke and asked what he had missed. The other scout’s player evaluation form had 10 scrawled across all categories. “If you have five players like this in the city conference, I wish you would show them to me. They could win the NCAA Championship next year. This kid is the best I have ever seen.”

The final score was 91 to 62 and the players were still celebrating as the team bus approached the school. As is tradition, the Varsity team was in the back of the bus while the JV team was in front. “Why aren’t we stopping,” one of the players asked as the bus driver drove past the school, “my car’s at the school.”

I stood up and addressed the players. “Roll down your windows, and greet your fans and admirers. You are members of the Shorewood Bulldog basketball team, future state champions. This party tonight is for you.” I glanced at Matthew and could see that he was pleased that the

surprise had worked. The players had not suspected a thing. They could see the students walking along the side of the road yelling their names and holding up State Champion signs created by the cheerleaders earlier that afternoon. We pulled up in front of Mama Mia's and the school's pep band began to play. One call from Principal Hawkins to the bandleader had been enough to get this started. Even Matthew was surprised.

Matthew led the team into Mama Mia's where parents and teachers were waiting. There were several players whose parents had never been at a game and it was wonderful to see the reaction on the boys' faces. The varsity players and parents were set up at a table in the middle of the room with the rest of the people in the booths and tables around the room. A half hour later Jennifer was sitting next to her dad in one of the booths across from their friends, Adam and Amy Moore. They were just finishing their pizza and were about to leave to make room for others. Matthew had been making the rounds talking to the parents and thanking teachers for coming. He approached the table and crouched down at the end much like a waiter taking an order.

"Mrs. Kirkland, I am so glad you could make it. Mr. Kirkland, I'm Matthew Wilson, and these must be your good friends, Adam and Amy Moore." Everyone but Jennifer was surprised that he knew their names, but then he knew everybody's name, Jennifer thought. He had greeted each parent by name when they walked in the door.

"I hope you enjoyed the game tonight. Weren't Jennifer and the rest of the cheerleaders tremendous?"

"They were, Matthew, and the team looked pretty good too. I'm so glad we did this tonight. It wouldn't have missed this for anything," Sandy Kirkland said. "Thank you so much for encouraging us to be here." Ed Kirkland and the Moore's muttered their agreement.

"Mr. Kirkland, I have a favor to ask. If it's okay with Jennifer, may I have your permission to drive your daughter home tonight?"

Ed Kirkland could barely speak, partially because he felt fingernails digging into his legs from both his wife and daughter. He knew what he wanted to say but he didn't know how to say it. "That will be fine, Matthew, just so she doesn't stay out too late. Okay, Jennifer?" Jennifer just nodded her head in agreement.

"Thank you, and thanks again for coming. Some of the other parents are leaving now and I need to say goodbye. Jennifer, I'll pull up a chair next to mine at the center table for you." With that, he was gone.

"I wish you could have seen the look on your daughter's face," Amy Moore said after Jennifer left the table.

"I didn't have to see it," Sandy replied, "I probably had the same look on my face. It reminded me so much of when Ed asked me out the first time back in college."

"Well, let me leave the tip and we can make room for the next group. Are we still planning on stopping for a cocktail?"

"I don't think so," Sandy replied. "I'm a little tired and would like to get home."

"But, it's early," Adam insisted, as he felt his wife's elbow dig into his stomach.

"What? What did I say?"

"I'll tell you later; I think I'd like to get home, too."

It was one o'clock when the final group left. Some of the players and cheerleaders stayed and helped clean up. There were 730 pizzas served that night plus another 400 orders of garlic bread. The surprise party had been a wonderful success.

Matthew took Jennifer home that night and walked her to the door. She was exhausted and her body was trembling, partially due to the lack of sleep, but mostly because of the closeness of Matthew. She had never felt this way about a boy before and didn't know what she should do. She wanted so much for him to kiss her. She was glad that her mother had forgotten to turn on the front porch light. As they got to the door, Matthew turned her by the shoulders and put his arms around her and drew her close.

"Jennifer, I'll never forget the support you have given me these last two days." He then reached down and kissed her gently on the lips.

Jennifer had been dating for two years and had been kissed by several boys, but never like this. Her body shuddered as his lips touched hers and he pulled her gently against his body.

Chapter 7

Father Sean McGinnis

Father Sean McGinnis was new to the community and this was his first assignment in the United States. After graduating from Regis Seminary School in Colorado, he had spent the six years as a missionary in remote parts of Africa spreading the gospel of the church. The first year he was shocked to see the deplorable conditions and watched as thousands died of illness and starvation while he spread the word of the Lord. He learned quickly that clean water, medicine and food were needed most and turned his efforts to building an infrastructure to help his people survive. An engineer by background, McGinnis used his training and the resources of the church to dig fresh water wells, create irrigation systems for the crops or construct a dam to power electric generators. He oversaw the construction of a rudimentary sewage system adopting concepts first used by the Romans in 300BC. The people trusted him and he soon commanded an army of willing workers.

Schools and hospitals came next, with an emphasis on educating both children and adults in basic principles of personal hygiene and everyday, practical matters. Children were taught about germs and why it was important to keep their bodies clean. Adults were trained about the importance of vaccinations against smallpox, malaria and the diseases that ravaged their people. He was rewarded by an overwhelming participation in the hospital's immunization program.

A trade school was established for exceptional students that grasped basic engineering concepts that Father McGinnis used in his public works projects. These students received advanced training and were sent out into the surrounding communities to oversee the digging of more wells, planting of more crops and building of more schools and hospitals.

Father McGinnis was tireless in his efforts and seemed to be everywhere offering direction and support. "He is not like any of the others," a tribal chieftain commented. "The others talked about their God, but didn't take care of our stomachs."

This was not entirely true, but Father Sean as he was called, would have been pleased to hear this compliment. True, there were no religion classes taught in his school, but there were daily prayers thanking the Lord for His help in taking care of His people. There were prayers thanking the Lord for the food on their table, the blessings of new babies and prayers for

the dead. There was no formal decree, but parents began having their children baptized under the name of the Lord.

Word spread throughout Africa and nations sent emissaries to view the progress that was made and see what could be imported back to their countries. The need for teachers, doctors, nurses and skilled craftsmen was filled by an ever-increasing stream of volunteers from the western world, supplemented by the education and training of local tribesmen. Money poured in from international charities that finally could see concrete results from their contributions. Conversion to Catholicism was not a requirement, and in fact, several Protestant, Muslim and Hindu ministries established a presence, but with only limited success. The people knew that it was Father Sean and his God that was responsible for their good fortune and membership in the Roman Catholic Church grew at an unprecedented rate. Rome took notice.

Father Sean was rewarded with a position at the Vatican where he spent two years rubbing elbows with the church hierarchy and became immersed in church theology and politics. After his six years in Africa doing hands-on work and seeing the tangible results of his labors, the two years at the Vatican were frustrating and boring. Exposure to Bishops and Cardinals, and several times even the Pope, was a tremendous opportunity to further his career within the church, but he couldn't help seeing how far removed these church leaders were from the needs of their constituents. Father Sean stopped talking about his experiences in Africa because he could predict the glazed look that would come over their eyes after a few minutes. The Vatican hierarchy had no idea what he was talking about and couldn't believe that a priest was actually involved in building sewers and latrines.

Father McGinnis was 31 years old and happy with his current assignment as Vicar at St. Timothy's Catholic Church in Shorewood, Wisconsin. Shorewood is a suburb just north of Milwaukee and only twenty minutes from his hometown of Wauwatosa. He had been there six months and met most of the regulars by attending men's and women's club meetings, fundraisers, jamborees and administering to the sick. He was beginning to feel comfortable in his role and believed the parishioners were starting to trust and confide in him. It wasn't as exciting as Africa, but it was God's work.

Saturday night he had worked on his homily until midnight and felt prepared. The readings were from the book of Revelation sometimes referred to as The Apocalypse of John, from the New Testament. It was a favorite subject of his and vital to church doctrine. It also provided much of

the basis for the schism between Catholics and Protestants. He had spent hours debating alternative interpretations with his peers in Rome. Was the Catholic Church the Antichrist referred to in the Revelation? It was a complex and difficult subject, particularly when he only had 10 minutes.

He made his entrance at exactly 8:00AM, preceded by two altar boys carrying the cross and the bible, and took his place at the side of the altar. Before starting the familiar litany of the Catholic mass he greeted the congregation. “Good morning, I’m Father Sean McGinnis.”

“Good Morning, Father,” the response came back.

“That wasn’t as enthusiastic as I might have hoped, but I’m sure some of us had a long night and are still trying to wake up.” The light laughter told him he was right on with a few parishioners.

“In the name of the Father and ...” he began, starting into the familiar litany of the mass before realizing that there was a murmur going through the congregation as a tall, young man walked into the church and took a seat in a middle pew next to his parents. People whispered and pointed as the young man kneeled and said a private prayer before sitting back in his seat. Most priests would have ignored the interruption and continued with the service, but Father McGinnis had a playful streak and decided to have fun with the boy. “Young man, what’s your name?”

“Matthew Wilson, Father.”

“Matthew, you seem to have everyone’s attention, perhaps you would like to give the Homily today.”

Matthew looked directly at Father McGinnis for several seconds attempting to read what was behind the offer. Later Father Sean would say that he felt the boy was reading his soul. “I would be honored. The controversy surrounding John’s book of Revelation is an exciting and provocative subject that is core to our beliefs.”

The boy had called his bluff, and from the response of the congregation it was obvious that they wanted to hear the boy speak. Father McGinnis had no choice. “I suggest we wait until after the readings in order to provide the proper context,” Father Sean suggested, “if that meets with your approval.” His Irish temper wouldn’t be completely suppressed.

Matthew smiled and nodded his agreement.

Father Sean’s mind wandered as he mechanically repeated the opening prayers. The boy looked vaguely familiar, but he couldn’t place the face. Where had he seen him before? At his first opportunity he whispered to the altar boy on his left; “Who is this Matthew Wilson?”

“Basketball player; Shorewood High School; front page of sports section yesterday.”

Everything fell into place for Father Sean. That's why the parishioners recognized the boy. He had seen the article and had marveled at the poise Matthew had shown and the way he had handled defeat. Father Sean had also noticed a small side bar that described the fan reaction, particularly the part about a man getting out of his wheelchair to applaud. His wife claimed he hadn't stood for almost fifteen years, much less walked. "It was a miracle," she told the reporter.

The first reading was from Revelations 13, describing The Sea Beast arising from the sea demanding that the multitudes worship him. The Beast receives power from Satan, referred to as the Dragon.

The second reading from Revelations 17, described the coming of the seven angels who carried the seven bowls and said; 'Come, I will show you the judgment of the great harlot ... Babylon the great, the mother of harlots.'

The final reading delivered by Father Sean addressed the Destruction of Jerusalem and the 2nd Temple, by the Romans in A.D. 70, introducing the question of whether John was talking about what happened (Preterism) or what will happen (Futurism).

Father Sean looked up when he was finished and gestured for the young man to come forward. He took his seat and watched with interest as the boy approached the podium, marveling at the boy's composure and presence. There was complete silence interrupted only by a baby's loud crying in the third pew, which ceased immediately when the boy stopped and put his hand on the baby's forehead and whispered something in his ear. "*Who is he?*" Father Sean wondered.

He watched and listened in awe as the boy spoke, marveling at his ability to bond with the congregation. He scanned the crowd and realized that each person was concentrating, and digesting his words. There were none of the telltale signs of restlessness and boredom that public speakers recognize. The boy had their complete attention.

His sermon was well thought out and his argument based upon what he believed were misinterpretations of the scripture, passages that Father Sean had often questioned. He was totally enraptured in the boy's argument when the boy suddenly concluded, exactly ten minutes after starting. His final message was; "Be prepared, the Apocalypse is coming soon and will be followed by the second coming of the Lord when All Nations will be judged."

The boy nodded his thanks to Father McGinnis and strode back to his pew as the congregation sat in silence, awed by what they had just heard and the power of the sermon. Father McGinnis was also in awe. It wasn't just the message, but the way it was delivered and the reaction of the

congregation. Father Sean was no stranger to leadership and possessed a gift for public speaking, but he had never witnessed a performance like this. Matthew Wilson was in total control of the congregation. Father Sean was smart enough to hold his own homily for another day.

“Thank you Matthew, that was most enlightening,” he said before proceeding with the Apostles Creed, the next part of the liturgy.

After mass ended and Father McGinnis stood outside the front door shaking hands with the parishioners as they exited the church. He kept an eye out for Matthew and wasn’t disappointed as Matthew and his parents stopped to introduce themselves.

“Matthew, that was a beautiful homily. I was impressed by your insight into a complex subject.”

“Thank you for the opportunity, Father. I realize I took away your time.”

“That’s okay, but I would love to discuss the subject with you in more depth.”

“Perhaps you would like to join us for dinner this evening?” Mrs. Wilson suggested.

“I accept,” Father Sean said too quickly.

Thus began a partnership and friendship that would have a profound effect upon Father Sean’s future with the Roman Catholic Church.

At Matthew’s urging and with his full support, Father McGinnis started an inter-denominational youth group consisting of high school kids from the community. The first week there were 35 kids who met in the church youth room, but attendance grew to several hundred by week three as word spread that Matthew was active in this group and was urging his friends to attend. Most kids wanted to be his friend.

The charter for the group was to obtain a better understanding of God, and Father Sean knew first hand from his missionary work in Africa that the Catholic Church did not hold an exclusive on this subject. Unlike many of his peers, he recognized that not all people that believed in God were Christians. He believed religious education and the values of the Christian Church would be better served by exploring all religious beliefs. Matthew was totally in agreement with this approach.

“How many of you attended mass within the last month and can tell me the story of how Jesus Christ was crucified on the cross and later rose from the dead?” Father Sean asked the 35 kids who attended the first week. Most raised their hands.

“Excellent, I’m sure most of you are good Christians, but let me ask you a few more questions. How many of you can tell me why Martin Luther broke away from the Catholic Church and started his own church?” About half the kids raised their hands.

“How many of you have attended a Jewish Synagogue?”

“How many have attended a Muslim service? How many have read the Koran?” No hands were raised as they began to realize how limited their knowledge was.

“What can you tell me about Buddhism?”

“Okay, that’s why we formed this group, to get answers to these questions, and more. To do this we need the participation of other religious groups. Are you with me?”

Father Sean was a natural organizer and enlisted the help of the leaders of the major religions in the area. Rabbi Goldberg became an enthusiastic supporter and representative for the Jewish faith. Overtures were made to leaders of the small, but growing Muslim and Buddhist populations in the city. Meeting locations rotated between the various churches and other places of worship in the area. I attended several of these meetings and was impressed by the enthusiasm and knowledge of the kids. They were having fun and learning too. Sure, there were comparisons of biblical scriptures and interpretations of scripture, but there was a lot of one on one dialogue and humor. There was one dress-up day when representatives from each religion dressed up in the trappings of their forefathers. It was funny, but also a great teaching aid. I also remember well the ill-fated ‘science night’ when each religion was asked to discuss their attitude towards the Ark of the Covenant.

“Next week we will discuss the Ark of the Covenant and its role in various religions. I want you to organize into four groups; Jewish, Muslim, Catholic and Protestant. Each group has 15 minutes to give us a little history and tell us what the impact would be of finding the lost Ark. Questions?”

“Should we talk about the biblical accounts of Moses and Solomon’s Temple and stuff like that?”

“Sure, but concentrate on the Ark’s influence on your religion and how it relates to current beliefs. I’ll give a 10-minute introduction and talk about Moses at Mt. Sinai and set the stage for your in-depth analysis.” Father Sean answered with a grin. “I’m challenging you to be creative.”

“Can we use pictures and props?”

“Sure, anything that helps get your point across. Okay, if there are no other questions, I’ll see you next week.”

Until that day I had just assumed that the Ark was basically a Jewish concept and had not realized that the legend of the Ark was an integral part of the Muslim and Catholic religions as well. It was also the only time that I ever saw Matthew lose his temper.

The evening started off well. Several students had constructed a full size replica of the Ark according to the instructions that God gave Moses in approximately 1250 BC while the Jews were camped at the foot of Mt. Sinai. The Ark was a box the size of a large tea chest approximately 50" in length, 30" in height and 30" in depth. It was constructed of acacia wood and plated with pure gold. On the bottom were four gold rings through which poles were inserted so that the Jews could carry the Ark. Covering the box was a pure gold covering and two Cherubs (angels) facing each other. The kids had carved the cherubs in wood working shop and sprayed the box with a metallic, gold paint. A tent was used to demonstrate how the Ark was housed in its portable Tabernacle for six centuries as the Jews wandered through the desert. They had done a wonderful job and the replica provided an excellent backdrop for the discussions. There would have been no problem if they had stopped there, but a few of them took it an extra step.

The presentations went smoothly for the first hour as the groups used videos to briefly describe how the Ark was constructed, that it housed the two stone tablets containing the ten commandments; that it represented God's physical presence on earth and was a means to communicate with man; and was used a weapon of war, notably at the battle of Jericho. The group responsible for describing the dangers of the Ark had the entire audience in stitches as they acted out the problems that befall those that did not keep their distance from the Ark.

"Luke, take a look in the chest."

"No. Moses says that we are not supposed to. It's dangerous."

"Chicken."

"I am not."

"You are too. Cluck-cluck-cluck."

"Okay, but if there is any gold, I'm keeping it for myself." Luke opened the chest and stuck his head inside. "See, nothing happened."

"The crowd roared in laughter as Luke turned around and his face was covered with measles-like spots."

I happened to glance over at Matthew and noticed he wasn't smiling.

The evening grew to a close as the various religions debated the role of the Ark in today's religious beliefs and the impact of finding the Ark.

Jews and Christians believe that finding the Ark will signify the coming of the Lord and will put great pressure on rebuilding the third Jewish temple on the original site at the Temple Mount which is now under Muslim control and is considered their 3rd most important Holy site.

The Koran and hadiths, the oral traditions relating to the words and deeds of the Islamic prophet Mohammad, proclaim that the Mahdi will find the Ark of the Covenant in Lake Tiberias while other hadiths suggest it will be found in Antioch. Most Muslims agree that together with lost Torah scrolls, finding the Ark will be fundamental in educating Jews and converting the entire world to Muslim.

The fascinating interchange was drawing to a close when smoke started rising from inside the Ark and it was encased by an eerie glow. A voice seemed to rise from the smoke.

“Moses, this is the Lord. I’ll take the Packers in Monday night’s game” The smoke cleared showing a two foot statue of a goat standing atop the Ark with smoke rising out of its mouth.

The reaction of the audience was mixed. My bible training was weak and I didn’t realize the full implications of what was happening, but I sensed something was terribly wrong. I found out quickly that my instincts were correct. Laughter rose from some of the kids, but they were interrupted by Father McGinnis who jumped to his feet and shouted; “Who is responsible for this blasphemy?”

Matthew had also risen to his feet and from forty feet away I could see the outrage burning in his eyes. His voice was deadly calm and resonated throughout the church. “There is but one God. Who dares brings false idols into the House of the Lord?”

I then witnessed something that I can best describe as frightening. Two jets of flame shot out from the Ark and the statue atop the Ark exploded into tiny pieces and the Ark itself set fire and gradually disappeared before my eyes.

“Leave us,” Father Sean commanded, “and dwell upon what you have witnessed here tonight. Pray to the Lord for his forgiveness.” Outside the sky crackled with thunder and lightning and the heavens opened up with a torrent of rain and half-inch hailstones. I was thoroughly soaked and shivering when I reached my car, but I hardly noticed as I drove home in a daze.

“Jim, are you all right?” Rosann asked as I walked in the door. “I was worried that storm came out of nowhere.”

“Rosann, sit down and let me tell you what happened. Maybe you can make some sense of this?”

It would be many years and several trips to the Holy Land before I began to understand the full significance of what had transpired that evening.

Chapter 8

Pep Rally

Basketball practice Monday was spirited, to say the least. All 12 boys were eager to show what they could do. Monday was normally a light practice limited to shooting and rebounding drills. We shot for 45 minutes; practiced out-of-bounds plays and then players took 100 free throws, in sets of two. Tuesday and Wednesday we scrimmaged and Thursday was limited to shooting and a walk-through of what we could expect from Friday's opponent. The kids were so hyper that I decided to change the routine and scrimmage five-on-five for a half-hour at the end of practice.

"Okay, that's it, boys. Shower up, and we will see you tomorrow. Great practice!" The boys were tired as they headed for the locker room. I could see they were exhausted, but pleased with their effort. Johnny and I were picking up the basketballs when Matthew asked if he could borrow a ball for a few minutes.

"Sure Matthew, go ahead." He took a CD player from his gym bag and started playing Chuck Berry music as background for his individual workout routine. For ten minutes I watched perpetual motion as he traversed the full length of the court at least fifty times, dribbling and shooting with either hand. I finally picked up the routine; right hand dribble down, through the ball off the backboard, rebound and dunk; left hand dribble back. Repeat, this time shooting a jump shot from the free throw line, repeat, this time a shot from the top of the circle. He didn't slow down and he didn't miss. But as soon as I thought I had spotted his routine, it changed. He started throwing the ball on the floor and diving, rolling and getting to his feet and dribbling towards the basket.

"Where's Matthew?" Andy asked Johnny who was putting out towels. Most of the other kids were already in the shower.

"He's still out there practicing. You should see the drill he has."

"Tell the others," Andy ordered, as he quickly got dressed, not bothering to put on his sweat-soaked practice jersey.

Andy arrived just in time to see Matthew diving for loose balls. He grabbed another ball and attempted to mimic what Matthew did. Within minutes there was a line of half-dressed boys strung out behind Matthew, emulating his every move. A half-hour later I blew my whistle and called a halt to the workout. "Come on boys, hit the shower. Save something for tomorrow. Matthew, didn't we give you enough of a workout today?"

"Good practice, Coach, but if we're going to win State we need to get in better shape."

From that day on I stepped up the tempo and intensity of practices.

"Which project should we do, Matthew?" the student council president asked.

"They are all fine projects, Seth. It's up to you and the rest of the group. Put it to a vote. Keep in mind that we have only five months before graduation."

The council was trying to decide on a senior project and had narrowed a list of ideas to three. The junior class had already decided to work with the local Mothers Against Drunk Driving chapter (MADD), to raise money and increase awareness for this worthy cause. Several students at Shorewood High School had lost family members in car accidents where alcohol was a contributing factor. It was a good cause.

The senior class wanted an even more ambitious project that would provide a legacy for future students. Ideas such as painting the football stadium bleachers or building a new practice field for the soccer team had been discarded after Matthew suggested that their project should have an impact upon the community as well as the high school.

The first project was to rehabilitate homes in the inner city for needy families. Parents and adult volunteers could provide the skilled labor and supervision while the students could provide the manual labor. "My dad's a plumber," one girl volunteered. "My uncle's an electrician; I know he will help." "My older brother puts up wall board and sheetrock." "My mother owns an interior design store. I know she will help out with the interior decorating."

"How do you plan to pay for the materials?" the faculty advisor asked. "I would guess that it would take \$5,000 or more for each house."

The students quieted as they considered the large number. Eyes slowly turned to Matthew for advice.

"Let me worry about this. We will need to set up a finance committee responsible for fundraising. I'm sure we can get some donations

and the rest we will need to earn. I have some ideas. We already have over a thousand dollars we earned Saturday evening. For now, let's assume that money is not a problem." The faculty advisor kept his doubts to himself. It was apparent that the kids took Matthew at his word.

The second project considered was a broad-based community cleanup; dredging debris from rivers, picking up litter on highways, planting perennials on highways, and so forth. The list was endless.

"Isn't this something we could do some weekend?" Matthew asked. "We could even ask other schools to get involved and make this a community wide cleanup?"

"That's a great idea," Seth offered. "We could make this an annual event."

"Yeah," another boy volunteered. "It's a great idea, but I think our senior project should have a more lasting impact upon the community. Unfortunately, the junk we pick up this year will be back again next year."

The third project idea came from a young man whose parents had moved from Atlanta, Georgia. "I think this community needs something for kids like me that don't plan on going to college. School counselors help you prepare for college, but there is nobody to help find a good job or trade." Most of the kids on student council were overachievers and planned on going on to college. The only question was which school. Nobody was interested in the boy's idea, almost no one.

"What percentage of Shorewood students go on to college?" Matthew asked to no one in particular. "Does anybody know?"

"Last year the percentage going to college was about 65%." The faculty advisor offered. "That means that about 112 seniors didn't."

"Is that 65% of the graduating class or 65% of the freshman enrollment?" Matthew pursued.

"I see your point. It's hard to keep track of how many kids drop out of school or transfer somewhere else."

"Take a guess. Would you say that another 50-100 students drop out before graduating and enter the job market?"

"That would be a fair estimate," the advisor agreed starting to warm up to the discussion.

"And let's not forget the number of kids that drop out of college after one semester or one year," Seth added. "These kids need jobs too."

Everyone recognized the enormity of the problem. "What can we do about it?" a girl asked. "What did they do in Atlanta?"

"They have an in-house job counselor, just like we do here. But they also had a community job center where kids could go and meet with representatives from trade schools, junior colleges, companies looking for

employees, etc. Kids could get a good idea of what is out there and how much they could earn before they graduate.”

“Or before they decide to drop out of school,” one girl suggested. “It would be nice to see some real numbers before making the decision to drop out.”

“I bet we could get volunteers to tell these kids what it’s really like trying to get a job without a degree. That would make more of an impression than reading statistics in a book.”

“Joining the armed services is another option,” another boy suggested. “I bet the recruiters would be glad to participate.”

“Okay, are we ready to vote?” Seth asked. “Is there a motion?”

Matthew was the first to respond. “I make a motion that we do all three. The ‘jobs program’ will be our official senior project, but we will also sponsor a ‘community-wide clean-up’ and ‘home-rehabilitation weekend’.”

The motion was seconded and carried by unanimous vote, beginning five months of hectic activity.

Attendance Thursday was 100% for the first time in school history; not one student called in sick and not one parent called to ask permission to pull their student out of school early for an appointment. Nobody wanted to miss the basketball pep rally scheduled for 2:00 PM in the school auditorium.

Rumors started floating around the school Tuesday when the pep rally was rescheduled from Friday afternoon to Thursday and from forty-five to ninety minutes. The audiovisual department, with the help of outside electricians and contractors, worked evenings installing new lighting and sound systems. A modern dance group was created Monday and the 12 girls practiced daily. The pep band was heard practicing at six AM. Something special was being planned, but only one person knew exactly what. Matthew was in charge.

I taught two Drivers-Ed classes in the morning and could feel the excitement in the classroom. I didn’t envy the teachers that had to teach one of the two afternoon classes before the pep rally.

Mrs. Pederson was trying without success to keep order in her fifth period American History class. She glanced at the clock and saw it was only 1:45; there were still fifteen minutes to go. The entire class was on edge, but Sam Arnold was acting up more than normal. He was a troublemaker who tried to get a laugh with some smart-alec comment every chance he could. He wasn’t a dumb kid; he just didn’t apply himself and

didn't have many friends. His long, unkempt hair was revolting. Mrs. Pederson had enough.

"Sam Arnold, one more word out of you and the entire class can sit here for the next two hours."

"But I know the answer, Mrs. Pederson. It was Professor Plum who shot Abe Lincoln, with a revolver."

"That's enough, one more word out of you or anyone else and you all can forget about the pep rally."

Jennifer couldn't believe this was happening to her. She had practiced the dance number with Sally and Matthew for two hours every night this week, followed by another two hours working on her surprise. She wasn't going to let this jerk ruin it for her. Sam was just about to make a wisecrack reply to Mrs. Pederson's challenge when he felt someone grab his shoulder and spin him around. Jennifer was leaning over him with her forefinger two inches from his nose. She didn't say a word, but he could see the resolve in her eyes. For a change, Sam Arnold made a wise decision and kept his mouth shut.

The auditorium was packed to capacity and students were on the edge of their seats in anticipation. Lyrics from the Queen song played softly in the background, almost too soft to discern. "*We are the champions – my friends, and we will keep on fighting to the end.*" The music set a mood of excitement and anticipation.

The auditorium went mute as the music stopped and the lights dimmed. A spotlight picked up Matthew walking slowly to the microphone amid scattered applause. Matthew held up his hand for silence. "We have two rules for pep rallies; nobody sits and everyone makes noise. Let's try this again."

The lights went dim again as Matthew exited the stage. Matthew trotted back on stage accompanied by Bill Haley's Rock-Around-The-Clock and was greeted by a screaming audience. The decibel level hit the roof as Matthew grabbed the hand mike and started dancing to the music, encouraging students and teachers to follow his lead, and we did. The song ended and Matthew shouted for volunteers to come on stage to dance. A thousand hands shot up. "Jennifer Moore, come on up! Sally Smith, come on up!"

The girls rushed on stage to the music of Van Halen and went into an impromptu dance routine that they had practiced for two weeks. The girls had changed into coordinated dance outfits. The new sound system and amps were tested as the three dancers went through their medley ranging from Rock to Disco and culminating with the Twist. The students screamed

in appreciation as the music ended and the dancers took their bows. Matthew kissed each girl on the cheek and stepped back, leaving Sally and Jennifer alone to accept the applause. He returned and joined the crowd in applause as the girls left the stage.

The crowd remained standing as Matthew grabbed the microphone and waited for silence. "The theme of this pep rally is 'kicking ass,'" Matthew started before being interrupted by hoots and whistles. "I was going to give you examples of what I mean by 'kicking ass,' but there is no better example than what you just saw from Sally and Jennifer. They worked countless hours this week on that impromptu routine you just saw. It wasn't easy, but these girls put in the time and effort to make it happen. That's what I call 'kicking ass'." Students and teachers applauded again, many of them just now recognizing that this was a planned routine. They would learn that little of what Matthew does is impromptu.

"There are three parts to this pep rally," Matthew announced loudly, holding up three fingers for emphasis, before pulling in two fingers. "My name is

The stage lights dimmed and his microphone went silent. I could see that Matthew was truly surprised as he looked up at the control booth at the back of the auditorium.

Music started to play as a spotlight focused on the back curtain. "Boom-boom-boom-boom, boom-boom-boom-boom, boom-boom-boom-boom." The drum beat keep playing as the spotlight sought out the unseen performer.

"Boom-boom-boom-boom, boom-boom-boom-boom, boom-boom-boom-boom."

The curtain moved, but the spotlight didn't seem to notice, and continued its search.

"Boom-boom-boom-boom, boom-boom-boom-boom, boom-boom-boom-boom."

"In the center," a student shouted, trying to help.

The spotlight slowed and finally settled on shoes and ankles that appeared in the middle of the stage, and slowly rose as the music began.

"I call you when I need you, my heart's on fire."

"Tina," voices from around the room shouted; "Simply the Best."

I thought I heard Matthew yell something that sounded like, "sex," but the thought was wiped away as the music continued.

“You come to me, come to me, wild and wild.”

The spotlight moved up to reveal long legs that would have made the real Tina Taylor proud.

*“Give me a lifetime of promises and a world of dreams,
Speak a language of love like you know what it means”*

The audience roared as the spotlight revealed the singer’s face. “Jennifer, Jennifer,” the crowd shouted as they recognized the singer. The 17-year old girl had changed quickly behind stage and looked absolutely beautiful, in a sexy and provocative way. I could hear the wows from the boys. Jennifer was now up close to Matthew, pounding a fist against his chest for emphasis as she sang the song’s refrain.

*“You’re simply the best, better than all the rest,
better than anyone I’ve ever met.”*

Students raised their arms high above their head, swaying side-to-side with the music. Boys whistled and shouted in admiration.

*“In your eyes I get lost, I get washed away.
Just as long as I’m here in your arms I could be in no better place,
You’re simply the best, better than all the rest.”*

Although I know it was a complete surprise to Matthew, the couple acted in unison as she leaned against him for emphasis.

*“I’m stuck on your heart,
And hang on every word you say
Tear us apart, baby
I would rather be dead.”*

It helped that most of the kids knew the song lyrics by heart, but for those of us that didn’t, the words were projected onto a large screen along with the blown-up image of the couple on stage. I could see Matthew whispering to her as she sang the next stanza.

*“You’re walking away with my heart, and my soul
Oh baby, don’t let go.”*

The noise level of the crowd increased another level as Jennifer punctuated the final phrase by again pounding on Matthew’s chest. She was delivering an unbelievable performance.

Just when I thought that the auditorium couldn’t get any louder, they kicked it up another notch. The spotlight left the couple for only a couple seconds, but when it returned the auditorium erupted in bedlam to the sound of an alto sax. Matthew was on one knee, clad in a sleeveless t-shirt, displaying bulging biceps and playing the sax with the skill of a professional. The girl next to me started screaming at the top of her lungs and didn’t stop until the wonderful performance was finished. She wasn’t alone, and it wasn’t just students. Girls on the aisles rushed to the front of

the stage to get closer. This was as close to a rock concert atmosphere as you can get at a high school pep rally.

The song ended and the students applauded and screamed; “encore, encore,” and were rewarded with a short refrain;

*“I could be in no better place,
You’re simply the best, better than all the rest,
Better than anyone I’ve ever met”*

Matthew and Jennifer pointed at each other as they sang, and then pointed to the audience. The audience pointed back as they continued to cheer the couple, and then just Jennifer, as Matthew disappeared off-stage to allow Jennifer to accept her due. He came back and held Jennifer with one arm around her shoulder as he waited for the crowd to settle. “Jennifer, I cannot thank you enough for the gift you gave me today. This will always be our song.” He pointed at the audience. “If someone asks you what kicking ass means, you tell them about what you saw here today.”

Matthew put his shirt over Jennifer’s shoulders and asked two boys in the front row to escort Jennifer to her seat. I was exhausted and the pep rally had just begun.

“Let me try this once more,” Matthew repeated, again holding one finger up for emphasis. “My name is Matthew Wilson and I play basketball, and when I play basketball, I KICK ASS.”

The auditorium roared as video highlights of Friday’s game against Waukesha were projected onto the large screen. There were two minutes of kids diving for loose balls, rebounding, playing defense and hustling. When it ended I realized that the video showed little of Matthew - it was all about the team.”

“We lost that game,” Matthew continued, “but in the fourth quarter we kicked ass.”

More cheers and whistles.

“There was one person in particular that kicked ass, and I want to thank him this afternoon.” A video started again showing 30 seconds of Andy hustling and diving out of bounds to save the ball, and then getting up and racing down court to make the lay-up on a feed from Matthew. The play was replayed in slow motion highlighting Andy’s intensity. I cheered louder than anyone when the clip ended.

“Andy, you were the first player to believe in me as a basketball player and you gave 100% when you had the opportunity. That’s what I call KICKING ASS and I will always be in your debt. If you ever need me, I’ll be there for you.”

The auditorium erupted in applause for Andy, finally interrupted by Matthew. “But he wasn’t the first to believe in me.”

The auditorium went silent again as video screen showed Matthew tripping as he took off his warm up pants. We heard the jeers and catcalls from the Waukesha crowd for what seemed like an eternity before a single, squeaky voice proclaimed, “You can do it, Matthew, I know you can.”

Many in the auditorium laughed at the squeaky voice, but quickly recognized they were out of line. Matthew stood at the podium waiting until there was complete silence. The audio visual crew enhanced the mood by dimming the lights almost imperceptibly.

“Image yourself lost, walking alone at night in a strange neighborhood. The streets are dark and a group of strangers appear in front of you. Think of the relief when one of them asks you if they can help.” The room was absolutely silent.

“Can anyone remember when you were young, lying in bed during a storm and listening to the windows creak or tree branches scraping against the window, and feeling afraid, before your mother came in to see if you were all right?” You could have heard a pin drop as Matthew paused for several seconds.

“Now imagine leaving your friends and starting at a new school. It’s your first chance to show everyone that you can play basketball, but everything seems to be going wrong. You are alone, and there are five thousand people laughing at you. Then out of nowhere you hear a voice.” They played the tape again.

“You can do it, Matthew, I know you can.”

There was complete silence, interrupted only by the sounds of girls, and boys, trying to hold back tears. The voice didn’t sound as squeaky this time.

“Jennifer, you were the first to believe in me and I will always remember that. I’ll be there for you if you ever need me. Please come back on stage so I may thank you properly.” Cheers followed Jennifer to the stage and erupted in a crescendo when Matthew hugged her and kissed her lips. Every girl watched in envy as she returned to her seat.

Sam Arnold sat two rows behind Jennifer and thought about how he had almost ruined this day for Jennifer, and vowed he would make amends.

“My name is Matthew Wilson,” he proclaimed, holding up two fingers, “and I am a student at Shorewood High School.”

The students interrupted Matthew with cheers. They too, were proud of their High School.

“and when I’m a student,” Matthew continued, “I KICK ASS.”

More cheers.

“What do I mean by kicking ass in school?” Matthew asked rhetorically. “It means that I study as hard for exams as I practice for a basketball game. It means that I try to do my best on every exam and learn from my teachers. It means that if I do poorly on a test and miss questions I should have known, I study harder and try to do better next time.”

There was silence, but I could tell that Matthew had the attention of the faculty. “Yesterday, I asked one of you how you had done on a math test. You told me you got a C, which happens to all of us. But you then told me you could have done better, but you didn’t study. You went to a movie instead.”

Matthew hesitated. I could tell that no one was sure where he was going with this.

“Imagine, one of my teammates missing two free throws to lose a game, and then telling me he could have made them, but he was too lazy to practice free throws.”

Matthew hesitated again and you could feel many of the students start to squirm.

“Don’t tell me you didn’t study, it just makes you look stupid. If you did study and you got a C, that’s fine. Ask me for help if you don’t understand something, or ask your teacher. They are here to teach us, and we are here to learn. Let’s not waste this opportunity. Kicking Ass means that we do our best.”

The teachers led the applause.

“Starting next week, we are going to honor three students and one teacher that have ‘kicked ass’ the preceding week. The student council will be responsible for collecting nominations and selecting the teacher, while Principal Hawkins will be responsible for nominating the students. We even have a trophy that commemorates this prestigious award.”

The trophy was projected onto the video screen, showing a mule kicking a farmer over a fence. Raucous laughter demonstrated the student’s approval.

“Today, I have made these nominations myself. Ms. Thompson, you are my teacher of the week for your enthusiasm and excitement you bring to your English class and the way you make poetry a part of our soul. Come on up and receive your just reward,” Matthew grinned, holding up a trophy with her name engraved on the mule’s flank.”

“You will notice that the students I nominate are not chosen because they are necessarily the smartest in class or get the best grades, or are close friends of mine. They are picked because teachers told me they

each did something special like acing a test or in one case, getting a B+ when the student normally was getting Cs or Ds. We want to reward students that improve and do the best they can.” Each student received warm applause as they received their trophies. I could see how proud they were as Matthew congratulated each of them.

“My name is Matthew Wilson,” Matthew started holding up three fingers, “and I am a member of this community, and when I work in the community, I KICK ASS.”

There was light applause.

“We will have opportunities to get involved in many community activities in the upcoming weeks, but today I want to concentrate on one area which is the foundation of the community. I am talking about the family, your mother and father and brothers and sisters. This is the foundation of every community.”

“How many of you told your mother or father this morning that you love them? How about yesterday? I did? Did anybody else?”

There was no response. “Kelly, did you?”

“Yes, but why don’t you try to spot me out?”

Laughter.

“Kelly knows better. She is the best sister any guy could have and I don’t tell her that enough. Kelly, I want you to know that you are a great sister and that I love you. I’m lucky to have you as my sister.”

“I love you too, Matthew.”

The auditorium was quiet and Matthew continued.

“You know what, that wasn’t hard to do at all. It felt good. It made me feel better, especially when Kelly told me she loved me too.”

“I have permission from Principal Hawkins to cancel all homework assignments for tonight and to ask teachers to postpone any tests until Monday. There is just one thing that each of us needs to do this evening. We want each of you to go home this evening and tell your parents that you love them.”

Matthew paused and let this sink in.

“That’s your assignment. Say it like you mean it. Look them in the eye and say; Mom, Dad I love you. Add whatever else you want, but be direct. Tell them you love them. Don’t say that ‘you know’ that I love you; the only way they know is if you tell them. Okay?”

He again paused to let everyone know he meant it.

“One more thing. I have reserved five restaurants for dinner this evening starting at 6:00 PM. The list and menus are posted on the bulletin boards. Invite your parents and tell them it’s your treat. It’s our way to

show your gratitude for all they have done. If you can't afford it, just sign your name and we'll find some way for you to earn the money. I want everyone, and I mean everyone, to attend. Teachers too, bring your husbands and wives. We won't take attendance, but I hope you all can make it."

"I have to baby-sit," a girl in the back row asked, almost in tears.

"There will be some conflicts and I apologize for not giving you more notice, but try. Do your best. If you need to pay someone to baby-sit, give me the bill and I will see that you are reimbursed. If you try, but can't make it, I will understand."

"That's it; I hope to see you all tonight. I plan on making the rounds with my parents to all five restaurants. Principal Hawkins has a brief announcement. Principal Hawkins."

"There will be a brief meeting for all faculty in the teachers' lounge. Students, you are dismissed and I hope to see all of you this evening."

Queen's "We Are the Champions" music blared as we vacated the auditorium, much louder than when we walked in. The audio visual team had done a tremendous job on short notice.

Chapter 9 Dinner

I was one of the first to arrive in the teachers' lounge and listened to the diverse reactions of the other teachers.

"I don't care who he is, there is no excuse for swearing in school. Ass is a cussword in my book."

"Oh fiddlesticks, did you see how the students paid attention when he told them to study. I've already seen a big improvement in my classes."

"That was quite a performance Jennifer put on," a male teacher remarked.

"Disgusting," another said.

Mrs. Reynolds was the oldest and had the final word. "I almost wet my pants when he started playing the saxophone. Did you see those biceps?"

Principal Hawkins arrived and the room quieted. "Okay, if everyone is here, let's get started."

Ms. Thompson burst into the room holding a bouquet of flowers. “Sorry, I’m late, but I stopped to buy flowers for my husband before they’re all gone.”

“Where did you get them?” I asked.

“Look outside, there are four florist trucks lined up and the kids are buying them as fast as the florists can supply them.”

Most of the teachers flocked to the window to see for themselves. Sure enough, there must be four hundred kids standing in line while the lucky ones walked away with their bouquets. It looked like the florists had just run out. Then we noticed the lucky kids coming back.

“Look, do you see what’s happening? The kids with the flowers are offering part of their bouquets to the kids that don’t have any.” Pretty soon, each student had at least a single flower to take home to their mother.”

“Can you believe that?” someone said. “I’ve never seen anything like that before.”

Ms. Thompson had taken the rubber bands off her floral arrangement and offered to share. “Sometimes we can learn from our kids.”

“Let’s continue,” Mr. Hawkins said. “I for one have a dinner date with my wife this evening. But I did want to talk with you about what we saw this afternoon.”

Another teacher piped in. “I just got off the phone with the principal from the high school Matthew transferred from. Did anyone else get a call?”

Every hand shot up. Matthew’s former basketball coach had called me the day after Matthew walked into my office the first day. I had a hunch what the calls were about.

“I didn’t,” Mrs. Holmes said, “although someone named Jones has tried to call me seven or eight times. I don’t accept calls from strangers.”

“You had better take the call, Mrs. Holmes, or you will wake up one morning and find a beautiful, 66-year old teacher sitting on your doorstep.” Matthew was standing in the doorway. “May I say something, Principal Hawkins?”

He nodded, and Matthew continued. “I have a hunch what Mrs. Jones wants to say, and probably what the rest of you were told by your peers at Santa Barbara High School. She will ask you to give me some leeway. They are proud of what we accomplished in Santa Barbara. Am I right, is that what the rest of you heard?”

Several teachers nodded.

Matthew continued. “Let me tell you a wonderful story. Mrs. Jones was ready to retire three years ago. She had lost her husband to cancer, and

frankly was becoming a bitter woman. Today she is the best teacher in that school and the students love her. We sent a petition to the school board to waive mandatory retirement and let her teach another year.”

Teachers listened as Matthew went on. He was speaking their language.

“My former principal called me yesterday and asked how things were going and if there was anything he could do. I told him about the pep rally and my concerns that teachers here would think I’m moving too fast. He asked if it would be all right to call Principal Hawkins. My understanding is that he mentioned it to his assistant principal and pretty soon every teacher got the word had decided to call. Believe me, I didn’t ask every teacher to call.”

Mrs. Butler supported what Matthew had said. “The teacher that called me said you didn’t know, but felt he had to call after everything you had done for the school.” Several other teachers nodded in agreement. They had been told the same thing.

Matthew continued. “I’m not trying to take over the school. We are all trying to make sure the students get the best education. Sometimes kids listen better if they hear it from another student. I think you know that and I hope you understand.”

Having said what he came to say, Matthew departed.

Principal Hawkins summed up what we were all thinking. “Not that I want to, but we couldn’t stop him if we did. Did you see how the kids worship him?”

Rosann and I arrived at Logan’s Roadhouse just after 6:30 PM. The place was already packed and we were ready to try another restaurant when Tom Osteen, one of my players made room for us at their table. “It’s the same at all the other restaurants, they are all packed,” Tom informed us. “Matthew is sending the overflow to other restaurants.”

The waiter took our order and we sat back and looked at the crowd. Everyone seemed to be in a festive mood and many of the ladies wore flowers in their hair or pinned to their dresses. Tom went to another table to talk with friends and his mother leaned over to Rosann. “Can you believe that Tom said he loved me?” She said with pride.

“What brought that on?” Rosann asked.

“He just came home from school and put his arms around me and said, ‘Mother, I love you very much. You are the best.’”

“I looked up at him to see if he was kidding, or something, but he wasn’t. You haven’t said that to me since you were seven. What brought this on?” I asked him.

“Mom, I am so lucky to have a mother like you. Someone at school just reminded me to say it.”

“I just started crying, and then he handed me some flowers and said he wanted to take his dad and me to dinner tonight, and here we are.”

Tears came to her eyes and Rosann offered a comforting hug. A woman at the next table overheard the conversation and said the same thing had happened to her. “My daughter hadn’t told me she loved me for six years and then out of the blue she comes out and tells us what great parents we are and that she loves us. My husband had tears in his eyes.”

“Another father interrupted and said that the same thing happened at their home.” The story was the same at every table.

We were waiting for dessert when a buzz started to flow through the room. Matthew and his parents were on the way. The room spontaneously erupted with applause when Matthew and his parents appeared.

Matthew ignored the many invitations and zeroed in on several small tables in the corner where families were eating alone. “Come on, let’s pull these tables together. John, Mary, Sally; introduce your parents.” Five minutes later the men were talking deer hunting and the women were talking golf. I had seen it before, but I was constantly amazed at Matthew’s ability to bring people together. Matthew took a few bites of food and began making the rounds, greeting every student by first name. He stopped briefly at our table and introduced himself to Rosann, complimenting her on her dress and telling her what a pleasure it was to play basketball for me. Fifteen minutes later he said his goodbyes and was headed for the next restaurant. Before leaving he asked everyone to introduce themselves. “Get to know each other; we have a lot of work to do together this year.”

You might have thought that people would begin to leave after Matthew departed, and a few did, but most stayed and did what Matthew had asked. It was more than an hour later when Rosann and I said our goodbyes. “Well Rosann, what do you think of him?” I asked. It was the first time she had spoken with Matthew.

“I don’t know how to say it, but he made me feel so good about myself. He looks you in the eye and makes you feel important. I have never met someone like that before.”

“I understand, I see it every day at school.”

“Besides, he is a hunk. You better treat me nice or I just might be tempted to rob the cradle.”

“I accept your challenge, starting as soon as we get home.”

“Why wait?” Rosann said, as she leaned towards me.

Friday's basketball game was anticlimactic. Matthew scored only 12 points, but we beat Wauwatosa West by 28 points. Every player scored and six were in double figures. The crowd was large and noisy and two hours before game time the auditorium was packed. There were 3,000 fans crammed into a gymnasium designed to hold 2,300 and another 2,000 cheered from outside in fifteen degree temperatures. It would be like this for every game. Matthew went outside at halftime to thank the shivering fans. "The team knows you are out here and it means a lot to us," Matthew shouted. "Thank you!"

Chapter 10 Media Bash

Headlines of the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel' Sunday editorial section read:

***Morality lacking in school system!
System Condone Cussing!
What are teachers thinking?***

Cusswords! Sex! Dancers with low-cut dresses exposing breasts! What is our school system coming to? What has happened to the rah-rah, go-team, cheers that we are all familiar with? What has happened to our society when high schools need to resort to cuss words and sexual innuendo to arouse (pun intended) fan interest?

Thursday our children attended a purported pep rally and were forced to witness a most disgusting example of the evil that is permeating our educational system and destroying the values that we, as a society, hold dear. The term "kick ass" was used more than 20 times, apparently to convey the message that the kicker was giving maximum effort. If that's the message, why not say so? Why not say, I gave 100%, or I gave everything I had? Why resort to cuss words?

The article rambled on for two pages, concluding with; "let's stop this trend before it gets out of hand. Call or write your school board and implore them to take back control of our educational system." The byline for the article was: Gus Edwards, Sr. Editor.

Rosann read the article first and handed it to me while I was still engrossed in the sports section. "Take a look at this," she added. "Apparently not everyone is enamored with the new boy at school."

"Wow," I said quietly as I finished skimming the article and began reading it again. "Is this guy talking about the same pep rally that I was at? What a prude!"

"He apparently has no sense of what was going on," Rosann offered. "He obviously wasn't there."

"It will be interesting to see how Matthew reacts to this," I mused while I sipped my coffee. I don't think he will take this lying down. Monday should be an interesting day at school."

Rosann was wrong, there was something that could be done and Matthew was already doing it. Starting with the 7:30 AM mass at St. Timothy's, there was an announcement made at the end of each church service that morning inviting parishioners to attend a meeting at 5:00 PM at the community center to discuss the article written in today's paper. We attended the nine AM mass and didn't get home until noon. Everyone wanted to talk about the article and get my opinion. I was a little surprised by the strong reactions.

By 3 PM the stakes had increased. The article had been picked up by the AP news service and was spread across the Internet. The theme was the same; "Local media up in arms over lack of discipline in schools. Parents were encouraged to make a stand."

There were over 2,000 kids and parents at the community center when we arrived. Fortunately the temperature was in the 50's and the meeting could be held outside. Microphones were set up and Matthew quickly took control of the boisterous crowd. The crowd was edgy and could easily have been turned into an angry mob under the wrong leadership.

Matthew was calm and composed as he addressed the angry crowd. "I would like to say a couple things before we open this up for discussion. Those of you that know me know that I don't swear and I don't cuss, and I resent anyone that says I do. Kicking Ass is a phrase that denotes an attitude I want to instill in this school and I believe we got off to a good start Thursday. I am disappointed that someone has taken the individual words out of context and lost the meaning of the message. I choose to believe that it was an error in judgment and that somehow we can educate these people to understand what we are trying to achieve. I will try to meet with Mr. Edwards and reach a compromise. I'm sure he will understand once he has all the facts."

"What can we do?" Matthew asked rhetorically.

"Ask your parents to phone and email the newspaper and TV stations," he said, holding up a list. "These are names, phone numbers and email addresses of the people we should contact. There are also 'talking points' or suggestions on points we should stress."

"Why not boycott their advertisers?" one parent shouted. The chorus of applause and confirming shouts indicated this was a popular viewpoint.

"Let's hold off on this type of tactic until we determine if we can work out a compromise," Matthew replied, trying to quiet the crowd. "Let's not back them into a corner unless we have to."

“They are not going to listen. The media never listens,” someone shouted.

“I hope you are wrong,” Matthew replied quietly.

Thousands of emails were sent Monday and the phones never stopped ringing; systems at both the newspaper and TV station were temporarily frozen. Wisconsin Bell added additional lines, but they weren’t enough to handle the flood of calls. Our message had been sent and all we could do now was wait for a response.

Unfortunately, the measured-response program didn’t work. Edwards refused to take Matthew’s phone calls and left a message with his secretary that he was too busy to meet with him. The crowning blow came on the 6 PM local news program where Edwards launched a strong, inflammatory editorial against “immature students that are dragging down a once-elite educational system.” The segment was later picked up and repeated by national news services on their 10 PM news hour.

Rosann and I watched in amazement as Edwards ripped into the people that defended the use of inappropriate language in schools. He went further and attacked the “sleazy dress” and “sexual innuendos” of the dance numbers, particularly the “simply the best” performance by Jennifer. “Where did this come from?” I asked. “Why did he make this personal when everything Matthew has done was in moderation?”

“Who is the kid here, and who is the adult?” Rosann added. “He obviously saw Matthew’s peace offerings as a sign of weakness. They must think they have an issue that can drive up viewer ratings.”

“I have a hunch he might have bitten off more than he can swallow.”

There was a faculty meeting first period Tuesday morning and the teachers pledged their full support to Matthew. Principal Hawkins summed it up best. “Last week I witnessed a change in attitude in the student body that I have never seen before in 30 years of teaching. These kids want to learn and our teachers seem to have more energy and an opportunity to achieve the goals we set for ourselves when we became teachers. I won’t let any uninformed opportunist destroy this opportunity.” There was unanimous and enthusiastic support for his recommendation to support the ‘we kick ass’ campaign. We waited on Matthew to tell us what to do.

Matthew spoke later to the student body at a hastily convened gathering in the school gymnasium. I was amazed at how in-depth his preparation was, particularly in such a short time. Phase two of his plan would be a boycott of the newspaper and TV station. “Urge your parents to

cancel their subscriptions. Ask them to watch a different news station. We need to show them we have clout.”

“How will the Channel 12 know that we are not watching?” a student asked.

“Good question, Billy. We have hired a local polling group to conduct an independent survey over the next week. We won’t know when, so let’s make sure that Channel 12 is not turned on at your house. We also have set up committees to get the word out to all the schools in the area. If you have a friend at another school, call them and tell them to spread the word. Talk to your neighbors and explain our position. This is a countywide boycott, and if necessary we will take it statewide or even national. I have also set up a legal committee headed up by Byron’s father who is managing director of a local law firm. They will advise on our legal options. We have media people helping us create news-clips for competing television stations and articles for newspapers. We will need volunteers to go door-to-door and spread the word, so be ready to help if you are asked. Are there any questions?”

“Why not boycott the advertisers?” someone suggested again.

“Not yet. It won’t do us any good to make enemies of large corporations. I would rather have them on our side. If the polling numbers show that we turned off their station and aren’t reading their newspaper, the advertisers will get the message. TV stations live and die on viewer ratings.”

“Why don’t we set up picket lines?” another student yelled out.

“No, we don’t want that image. It would be too easy for TV news clips to characterize us as rabble rousers. No, let’s hit them where it hurts – in their pocket books. I’ll be trying to get on other TV stations and explain our viewpoint.”

“Okay, if there are no more questions, let’s get back to work, I mean school. Remember, that’s why we are here. And when you get home, convince your parents to cancel their newspapers and tune-out Channel 12.”

“How are you paying for all this?” I asked Matthew after practice that afternoon. I was amazed at how well the kids were able to concentrate on basketball and shut out the distractions. “I could make a small donation if you need some cash.”

“Thanks, Coach, but we will be okay. I have a few ideas that I’m working on to raise some money.”

I had just sat down at dinner that night when the doorbell rang. “I’ll get it,” I said as I went to the door.

“May I help you?” I asked before recognizing the two students from my 3rd period Drivers-Ed class.

“Oh, Mr. Simpson, we didn’t know you lived here.”

“What can I do for you?”

“We were just going door-to-door asking people to help us out like Matthew suggested this afternoon. I guess we can count on you.”

“Come on in for a minute. Tell me how it’s going. Can we get you a coke or something to eat?” Rosann and Lisa had come out to listen.

“Thanks, a bottle of water would be nice. It’s been going real well,” Amy said. “We have been at it for three hours and this is our 93rd house. Twenty-five people weren’t home so we just left a flyer explaining our position, but more than eighty percent of the rest said they would cancel their newspaper and turn off Channel 12. That’s pretty good, don’t you think?”

“That’s awesome,” Rosann said. “How many teams are there?”

“We have 65 teams from our school and I know that several other schools have a bunch of kids out too and they will have more tomorrow. Our goal is to cover 90% of the houses in the county by tomorrow. Our computer group put a model together that allocated areas and set up optimum routes for each group. Well, we better get going. We have 12 more houses to go and I still have a ton of homework. Bye, and thanks for the water.”

Rosann and I just looked at each other for a few moments after girls left. “What an undertaking,” I thought. “Does Edwards know what he got into?”

The opinion poll was taken Thursday evening and the results were made available on Saturday. The newspaper already knew the results. Half the readers in the County had cancelled their subscriptions, 95% in the Shorewood school district. The Journal tried to deliver the papers anyway until angry phone calls and near fights caused them to succumb to their readers’ demands as unwanted newspapers were thrown into the streets or at the delivery trucks if the target was available. Channel 12’s share of the audience had dropped 38% overall and over 60% during the normally lucrative news hour. They had fallen from first to last in comparative viewer rankings.

Matthew had made four television appearances Wednesday and Thursday on competing networks. His calm, thoughtful demeanor and well thought out message was turning public opinion to our side. Sunday morning Matthew appeared on Face the Nation and received an invitation to appear on CNN’s Larry King Live show. Station owners scheduled an

emergency meeting at Channel 12 for Wednesday morning. They were starting to feel the heat from their advertisers.

Gus Edwards was having dinner Sunday evening with his wife Emily, daughter Glenda and son Jeffrey. The atmosphere was thick with tension until Glenda and Jeffrey were finally excused from the table after picking at their food. The dinner was one of their favorites, but nobody was hungry. In fact, Emily thought, they hadn't eaten well in a week. It wasn't hard to figure out why. Glenda was a tenth grader at Nicolet High School and was being given the silent treatment by all but a couple of her closest friends. Everyone knew it was her father that was the cause of the problem and most of her friends were going door-to-door in support of the boycott. Peer pressure was difficult to withstand when you are 16. Jeffrey was 12 and idolized Matthew Wilson; all his friends did. Everyone dreamed about growing up to play basketball like Matthew, and kicking ass.

Chapter 11

Guess Who's Coming to Dinner

Emily answered the phone and hesitated briefly before handing the phone to her husband. Only a few people had their new, unlisted number. "Gus, it's someone asking for Mr. Edwards."

"Ask who it is," he replied without taking the phone. "I'm tired of answering these crank calls."

Emily already knew who it was, but was afraid that Gus wouldn't talk to him. "Gus, please take the phone. I think you should take this call."

"Who is it?" Gus was in a bad mood.

Emily relented. "It's that boy, Matthew Wilson. He sounds nice."

"I don't have anything to say to him," Gus said as he got up and left the room.

"I'm sorry, but my husband can't come to the phone right now. May I take a message?"

"No, that's all right Mrs. Edwards. I'll keep trying to talk with him and maybe set up a meeting. Have a nice evening. Goodbye."

"Goodbye." What a polite young man she thought. It would have been better if Gus spoke to him and resolved this awful problem. I hope they find a way.

A solution came in an unexpected form the next day. “Mother, may I invite a new friend of mine to dinner tomorrow night. His parents are out of town and I thought you could make your special pork roast.” Glenda had never invited a boy over for dinner before and was in the best mood that she had been in a week. Her face was positively radiant.

“Why sure,” Emily answered. “Do I know him?”

“No, I don’t think so. It’s just a friend, not a boyfriend.” Emily wasn’t buying the story completely, but it didn’t matter. It was just nice to see her daughter smiling again.

“Okay, tell him seven o’clock. We’ll make the pork roast.”

“Oh, thanks, Mom,” Glenda replied as she gave her mom a big hug. “Is there anything I can do to help?” Now Emily was sure that something strange was going on.

Tuesday Glenda skipped band practice and got her hair done after school. It was only 6:15 and she was bugging her mother; offering to set the table, vacuum the dining room, anything to help. Even Jeffrey could tell something was going on, and was hanging around getting in everyone’s way. “Mom, what can I do?”

“Nothing, just relax and let me prepare the dinner. Don’t you have homework?”

“Get the door, Jeffrey,” his mother said as the doorbell rang.

Jeffrey swung open the door and saw the tall, young man in the doorway. He started to ask what he wanted, but stopped in mid sentence and just stared. His eyes told him one thing, but his mind was saying it couldn’t be true. “You’re eh ... eh him, aren’t you?” Jeffrey finally managed to utter.

Matthew smiled and offered his hand. “I’m Matthew Wilson and you must be Jeffrey. I’ve heard a lot of good things about you. You’re a basketball player, aren’t you?” Jeffrey could only stare in disbelief.

“Jeffrey, is Glenda at home? She invited me to have dinner with you this evening.”

Jeffrey could only nod his head as he turned and led Matthew into the kitchen.

“Who is it Jeffrey?” Emily shouted as they walked in.

“It’s him,” was all Jeffrey could say.

Emily was hunched over the stove with her back to the door. When she turned, she saw a good looking young man in her kitchen. Her first instinct was to take off her apron and check her hair and makeup. “What a hunk,” she thought.

Glenda rushed into the room and came to her rescue. “Mom, this is my friend Matthew Wilson. Matthew, this is my mother, Emily.”

The name sounded familiar, but it didn't register. Emily was still trying to compose herself when Matthew approached and shook her hand firmly. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Edwards, and I sincerely appreciate your inviting me into your home." Matthew then went to Glenda and gave her a warm hug and a brush kiss on the cheek. "Glenda, thank you so much for doing this. You are even better looking than I was led to believe. Your hair is absolutely perfect for you."

Emily thought that her daughter would faint. It finally dawned on her who young man was. She also knew that everything was going to turn out all right.

"You didn't tell me that Jeffrey had lost his voice, or is he always this quiet?"

"Don't rock the boat, I kind of like him this way," Glenda answered as she picked up on Matthew's line.

"Maybe we should send him to bed?" Emily said, getting into the fray.

"I haven't lost my voice," Jeffrey exclaimed a little too loud. "Do you want to go outside and play basketball?" he asked getting to the point.

"Maybe you, I and your dad can play after dinner," Matthew replied. "Right now I'd like to see if there is anything I can do to help your mother and sister with dinner. What can we do, Mrs. Edwards? I bet Glenda and I could mix up a great salad and maybe a light dessert."

The next half-hour passed quickly as it soon became evident that Matthew Wilson knew his way around the kitchen. The artichoke hearts salad looked and tasted splendid. "Where did you learn to cook like this?"

"I lived in France for a few years and studied a little bit at a culinary school for master chefs. Europeans have refined the art of dining to a science."

Emily wanted to hear more, but Matthew skillfully changed the subject to include Glenda. "How about you Glenda, I understand you play the piano? That's something I could never do well."

"I'm not very good," Glenda said as she blushed.

"Come on, play something. I bet you're good."

"I'm not, really."

"Let's play a duet. I'm a wiz at chopsticks."

Emily smiled as she listened to the kids play and laugh. Even Jeffrey got into the act. It seemed like they had known Matthew for years. What a wonderful young man, she thought.

"Are the cupcakes ready to take out of the oven?" Glenda asked as the timer went off?

“Let me do it, Glenda, the pan is hot.” Matthew offered. “I don’t want you burning those magic fingers.” Emily watched her daughter blush again and tried to remember if she ever acted like that when she was in high school. She knew that she had.

It was almost seven when Gus Edwards walked into the kitchen to introduce himself, but came to an abrupt halt when he recognized his guest. Glenda stepped in immediately and made the introductions. “Dad, this is my good friend Matthew Wilson. I hope you don’t mind me inviting him to dinner.”

“He has been a tremendous help with the salads,” Emily said nervously.

“He is going to play basketball with us after dinner,” Jeffrey interjected excitedly.

“Mr. Edwards, it’s a pleasure to meet you face to face. I’m looking forward to a pleasant evening. Your wife and daughter have made me feel comfortable and I hope I can earn your respect.”

Gus Edwards, to his credit, immediately recognized a stacked deck when he saw one. “You are welcome in our house,” Edwards said shaking Matthew’s hand firmly. “Anyone that gets my wife and kids behind him this quickly can’t be all bad.”

As opposed to the stilted family dinners of the past week, Emily thought dinner was one of the best she could remember. The food was good and the conversation was excellent. Matthew Wilson had a way of keeping everyone involved whether it was talking sports with Jeffrey, music and dancing with Glenda, current events with Gus or art history with her. How did he know she had majored in art history and was an amateur oil painter? In fact, how did he know the names of Jeffrey’s teacher or the classes Glenda was taking this semester? Was it a coincidence that he was knowledgeable about historical castles in Scotland, one of her husband’s favorite subjects? She slowly began to appreciate the research that Matthew had done to prepare for this evening.

Emily and Glenda cleared the table and prepared the dessert Matthew and Glenda had made earlier, refusing Matthew’s offer to help. “Come on, Jeffrey, you can help too.”

“Matthew, I guess they left us alone for a few minutes so we could talk, but I’m not sure that we have anything to talk about. I enjoyed your company this evening, but we still disagree on some basics.”

“This isn’t the time to talk about our differences, that wasn’t my objective in coming here tonight. I just feel that when people, or nations for that matter, get to know each other better, it’s easier to come to an

understanding at some future time. I appreciate your giving me that opportunity and also for the hospitality you and your family have shown me. It's been a nice evening."

"Dad, Matthew, can we play basketball now?"

"I don't know, Jeffrey. It's been a long day."

"Come on, Mr. Edwards, it'll be fun," Matthew urged; "just one game of horse. It would mean a lot to your son."

"Mom, isn't he wonderful?" Glenda said as they put the dishes in the dishwasher. "He makes you feel so good about yourself."

Glenda had nailed it right on the head. He did make everyone around him feel good, even her husband.

Twenty minutes later Jeffrey came in yelling excitedly. "Dad won! He knocked out Matthew with a long jump shot. My dad beat the best basketball player ever. And look what he gave me, a new basketball. He even autographed it."

"Let's not exaggerate," Gus said as he came in perspiring a little. "Winning a game of horse is not the same as winning a basketball game."

"I don't care Dad, I'm still proud of you."

"Well folks, I appreciate the fine evening and the hospitality. It was a great dinner, Mrs. Edwards," he said, giving Emily a light hug and brush kiss on the cheek.

"Glenda, you are beautiful, a nice piano player and a fine cook in the making. Maybe we can do a cooking show together on the food channel?" "Here is a little present for you that you might want to share with your friends and family," he said as he handed her a DVD. "It's one of a kind."

Emily noticed Matthew gave Glenda a slightly tighter hug and touched her cheek with his lips. She hoped that she had not blushed like her daughter did.

"Jeffrey; thanks for playing ball with me," he said as he shook Jeffrey's hand. "Remember to work on that cross-over dribble and those other things we discussed."

"I will, Matthew, you can count on it," Jeffrey said with determination.

"Mr. Edwards; thanks again for your hospitality. I look forward to getting together with you in the future," he said as they shook hands.

"Anything is possible," Edwards replied.

It wasn't much, but Emily thought she saw a flicker of softness in his eyes.

“That went well, don’t you agree,” Emily asked as they relaxed in front of the television. Jeffrey was upstairs and Glenda was in the den playing the DVD Matthew had given her.

“Did you know about this?” Edwards asked before answering her question.

“Nope, Glenda kept it all to herself, but I’m glad she did.”

“I am too,” Edwards admitted. “He certainly is an interesting young man.”

Jeffrey came bounding down the stairs. After a few minutes in the den he came out and gave Emily a big hug. “I love you Mom.” He then repeated the process for his Dad. “I love you Dad. Goodnight everyone, I finished my homework and I’m going to bed.”

The parents stared in amazement. “What was that all about?” Emily finally asked. “Did something happen while you were playing basketball that you didn’t mention?”

“Well, other than kicking his butt in the game of horse, there was one little incident that almost caused a problem.”

“Okay, let’s hear it.”

“It wasn’t much. Jeffrey was showing off his new cross-over dribble and faked Matthew one way, and then crossed-over and went the other way. It was pretty neat. Matthew looked pretty silly.”

“Go on,” Emily said, not voicing her doubts that a 12-year old could fake out Matthew unless he allowed him too.

“Matthew said ‘nice move, Jeffrey,’ and your son replied; ‘am I kicking ass’? Needless to say I wasn’t pleased with his choice of words. I held back from saying anything, but it was embarrassing.”

“What did Matthew say?”

“Something like, Jeffrey, there is a lot more to kicking ass than playing basketball. When is the last time you told your sister you loved her and how lucky you are to have her as a sister. Do you do your homework without being asked? Are you doing your best at school? When you start doing these things and many others, then you will know inside you that you kicking ass. You won’t need to ask anyone.”

“Wow,” Emily thought as tears came to her eyes.

“Lisa and Wanda are coming over for an hour. Okay?” Glenda shouted from the den. “They want to see this DVD, it’s awesome.”

Moments later the doorbell rang and three girls rushed into the room. Somehow they had found another friend. “Hi, Mr. & Mrs. Edwards,” the girls shouted in unison as they rushed by into the den.

Glenda looked back for a moment before closing the door. "What's gotten into Jeffrey? All of a sudden he loves me and says I'm the best sister in the world. Is he on drugs?"

Emily had just fallen asleep when she heard screams from the den. "*Are the girls still here?*" she wondered as she put on a robe and went downstairs. She found four girls glued to the TV watching the video.

"I'm sorry Mom, did we wake you?"

"That's okay, what are you watching?"

"It's a DVD of the pep rally that Dad doesn't like, but it also has words dubbed in and lots of other stuff. It's like a movie. Here, watch, we were just going to start it again."

Emily watched for ten minutes without commenting. The dance number with the two girls was good. He sure could dance. She started to yawn as Matthew started his three-part speech and then came to attention as the Tina Turner number started. Matthew was obviously surprised. He could see the girls start to edge forward as the girl screamed NO-NO-NO and pounded Matthew's chest. She then heard a scream erupt from her chest as Matthew appeared suddenly playing the saxophone. Cameras showed close-ups of screaming students and teachers, hands above their heads as they swayed back and forth to the rhythm of the music. She was still trembling as the number ended with the girl standing alone on the stage accepting the applause from her classmates. It was one of the best performances she had ever witnessed.

The girls were still watching intently so Emily knew there was more to come. She liked the way Matthew had someone escort the girl off the stage. A few minutes later she laughed out loud when she heard the cheerleader's squeaky voice shout "I know you can do it," into the silence of a hostile crowd.

"Oh, that poor girl," Emily said sympathetically. "She must be so embarrassed."

"Momm. I would die to be that girl."

"Me too," the other girls said in unison.

Emily watched and listened in silence as Matthew related his stories of being afraid before hearing a voice of support from your mother or friend. There wasn't anyone that couldn't identify with those stories. She was in tears as Matthew walked towards the young woman and promised that he would be there for her if she ever needed. She was the first to believe in him. That's kicking ass.

Glenda fast-forwarded to other areas of the tape, just enough to give Emily a flavor. The message was clear; do your best at whatever you

try; be a good student, be a good citizen, love your parents. That's what kicking ass means. There were tributes from parents and teachers at the end of the DVD, but Emily had seen enough.

"Okay girls, it's time you went home. Glenda, may I show this tape to your father? He needs to see this before his meeting tomorrow."

"No need, I saw enough."

Gus Edwards had come into the room shortly after Emily and watched from the doorway. He had been more impressed by the reactions of the girls and his wife, than he was in the DVD itself. He still had problems with some of the dancing, language and music, but in total he knew the message was a good one. He also saw the expressions on the faces of the women and knew he could not win. Meeting Matthew Wilson tonight made him sure of that.

The girls left and Glenda came back into the den to say goodnight. "I love you, Mom, I love you, Dad," giving them each a warm embrace as she went to her room.

"Well, something good came of this," Gus mused. "When's the last time both of our kids told us they loved us?"

"I have a hunch it won't be the last time either," Emily replied snuggling into his chest.

"Let's watch the whole tape," Gus murmured. "I want to make sure I have my facts straight this time."

The following day on 6:00 PM local news Gus Edwards issued a formal apology and announced he was taking a leave of absence. "I met Matthew Wilson last night and learned firsthand the positive influence that this young man has on the youth of this community. I need to take some time away from my job to discover how I could have made such an egregious mistake in judgment. I was wrong, and I apologize."

Newspaper headlines the next morning proclaimed;

***We Kick Ass
Vindicated
Newspaper Apologizes to Matthew Wilson***

Matthew appeared on the Larry King show and several other national television shows, accompanied by a contrite Gus Edwards who handled himself well. Two months later Edwards returned to his prior job, smarter and wiser for the experience. The big winners were Matthew and the kids across the nation as the We Kick Ass campaign went national.

Chapter 12

Next two Months

'We Kick Ass – The Movie' debuted at a local 26-theatre Cineplex Saturday afternoon before thousands of screaming kids. Ticket lines of teenagers and adults meandered for as long as one mile. Originally scheduled to premiere on just one screen, theatre owners added six more screens for the 1 PM showing and by 7 PM all 26 screens were dedicated to this single film. The one-hour and 45 minute movie was identical to Glenda's DVD and attracted teens from as far away as Green Bay and Chicago. The noise level was constant as screams erupted from theatres each time the Tina Turner's 'Simply the Best' number was played. Outside, there was a constant chant of "we kick ass, we kick ass".

Matthew gave me a private copy of the DVD, but Rosann and I wanted to see the movie and experience the atmosphere. A special parents and teachers show was scheduled in one theatre at 8 PM and was expanded to three theatres to accommodate demand. Rosann and I screamed like teenagers when Matthew played the saxophone, and we were not alone. The noise emanating from the adult theatres was almost as loud as the kid's. We probably surpassed the kids when it came to the tears shed during the "she was first to believe" and the "tell your family you love them" segments. We applauded when Matthew admonished students that didn't do their best at school and urged fellow students to become more involved in the community. By the end of the 1:40 minute movie we were exhausted.

"Can you imagine how it was to see this live?" Rosann exclaimed as the movie ended, forgetting for a moment that I was there. I just squeezed her hand.

"Wow, look at this crowd," I said as we walked outside. "Where are they coming from?"

A security person overheard me and pointed out that kids were watching it over and over again. "They are buying five tickets at a time and just staying in their seats. We try to move them, but they won't budge."

Rosann did the math in her head. 26 theatres, 200 seats each, \$10 per ticket, eight showings per day. “That’s \$312,000 in ticket revenues per day,” Rosann exclaimed. “Where is the money going?”

“Matthew has set up a non-profit foundation and negotiated contracts where the foundation receives 60% of the ticket revenue, 50% of the concession revenue and 90% of the revenue from souvenirs. Not bad!” I smiled.

We noticed a concession stands selling “We Kick Ass” T-shirts for \$15 and DVDs for \$25. “Is this legal?” Rosann asked. “Don’t you need permits and licenses?”

“Yes, and that’s why Matthew retained the services of a local law firm. They had five attorneys working full time to make this legal. I understand that “we kick ass” is a registered trademark and the movie rights have been copyrighted. All the work has been pro-bono and the souvenir stands are staffed by volunteers.”

“I would expect that today’s profit will more than pay for the cost of materials,” Rosann added. “I’m amazed at the planning that must have gone into this. Did Matthew do all this?”

“He started putting this together a week ago when things looked pretty bleak. Now they’re planning to release the movie nationwide.”

“Phenomenal,” Rosann said quietly. “What are they going to do with the money?”

“Matthew has already started spending it. You don’t realize how many projects the senior class has going.”

I look back at that period in my life and know it was very special. It was a pleasure to go to work every day. The atmosphere was electric. Kids wanted to learn and as a result, teachers were enthusiastic again and wanted to teach. It started the Monday after the pep rally when Mrs. Reynolds, a history teacher just a year away from retirement, apologized to her class. “I know you talk about me behind my back and say that I haven’t updated my class plan in 30 years. It’s true, I haven’t, but from today on I’m going to change. When Matthew said that some of the teachers had stopped trying, I know he was talking about me. Tomorrow ...”

“Mrs. Reynolds, it’s our fault, not yours,” a boy from the back of the room said. It was Freddie, her class clown, who always had a smart-alec reply when called upon. His long, scraggly hair was always dirty, but today his hair was cut shorter and combed.

He looked so much better. "I realize it must be difficult to try and teach the likes of me year after year, but starting today I'm going to do better. If I don't do well, it won't be because I didn't try."

"You can count on me too, Mrs. Reynolds," a boy in the front row volunteered. "Me too," another said. "I'll try harder," a third said. It seemed that promises came from all parts of the room.

Tears welled up in Mrs. Reynolds's eyes and she started to feel dizzy. Freddie saw what was happening and raced up to help her sit down. "Thank you, I'll be better now." Just then the assistant principal walked in and gave Freddie a suspicious look. "Are you okay?" he asked with concern.

"I've never been better," Mrs. Reynolds replied. "Everything is going to be great. Freddie, get a morning newspaper and lead the class through today's assignment while I go to the teachers lounge to tidy up. Tomorrow, everyone should be ready to discuss a new lesson plan based upon current events."

Mrs. Reynolds worked long hours to rewrite her entire lesson plan to show the impact that history has on current events. The lesson plan was hers, but the students bought into it. Word spread quickly around school and teachers and students recognized the effort that Mrs. Reynolds was giving. It was also apparent in her walk and her attitude. It seemed like someone had miraculously painted a smile on her face and put a spring into her step.

She was not alone. Teachers throughout the school were excited at how interested the kids had become in learning. It was no longer possible for teachers to show up unprepared. The students were giving 100% and expected nothing less from the faculty.

If the school day could be compared to a gourmet dinner, basketball practice was like dessert or icing on the cake. The kids were a delight to coach. We were winning games now and everyone was contributing, but it was more than just being part of a winning team. The kids were part of something big and they knew it. They wanted to practice and they wanted to get better. Often I was forced to physically pull the boys off the court citing WIAA rules that limited the amount of practice time. Several times I caught players sneaking back into the gym after practice to run the suicide drills that Matthew had shown them after the first practice.

We set up a personal improvement program to work individually with boys on their weaknesses. The big guys worked on coordination drills and setting solid picks before rolling towards

the basket. The pick-and-roll was a key part of our offense when opponents played man-to-man defense. The key is for the boy setting the screen to seal the defender with his butt before breaking to the basket. The defender guarding the person setting the pick has a choice to make, either stay with his original man or switch to the other man. Either way, one person would be open.

Andy and Kevin were small guards that were limited because they could only dribble well with their good hand, the right hand. Defenders overplayed their strong side and forced them to the left where they were a step too slow. The two boys spent fifteen minutes each practice going one-on-one against each other, dribbling only with their left hand. It took almost a month before they saw the improvement. One day Andy was dribbling to his right during a five-on-five scrimmage when he suddenly crossed over to his left hand and accelerated through the lane. Erin switched off his man to block the shot, but Andy used his body to shield Erin from the ball and put a soft, left handed lay-up, off the glass for two points. He had done it naturally without even thinking about it. “Way to go, Andy, nice left hand,” I shouted, and got a big smile in return as he trotted back on defense.

We worked hard in practice, but it was fun. Matthew made it fun. We tried to instill the habit of players sliding their feet from side-to-side on defense rather than crossing over, which made the defender susceptible to a change in direction. Two players tried to cover Matthew and ended up on the floor, colliding with each other as their feet got tangled. Four tenth grade girls had wandered into the gym to watch practice. It gave Matthew an idea.

“It’s almost dancing,” Matthew explained. “Watch how easy it is. Nancy, Joan, Rita, Peggy; please come down here. I need your help.” Thirty seconds later there were four wide-eyed, shoeless girls on the gym floor looking at Matthew for instruction. “Okay, line up about three feet apart and pretend you are guarding me. When I go right, you go left, when I go back, you go forward. Okay?” I still wasn’t sure what Matthew was getting at.

Matthew started slowly, going first to his right and then back to his left. He then went back, stopped quickly and dribbled forward. The girls mirrored his every move. Three minutes later they repeated the drill to the beat of the music and the girls again kept pace. Their spacing and footwork were perfect and this time you could see the lesson that Matthew was trying to convey. The

girls were dancing in a way. They were on their toes and sliding their feet, always in balance.

Matthew stopped and congratulated the girls. "Okay boys, it's your turn. Four of you grab a ball and let's see what you can do against these defensive wizards." The other eight boys howled in laughter until it was their turn. After awhile, the laughter died down and the determination set in.

"Thanks, girls, take a break while the boys go one-on-one against each other. Fellows, when you're on defense, concentrate on staying on your toes and keeping your balance." I watched and saw some improvement.

"See what I'm talking about. We're not there yet, but we're going to get better. Girls, can we count on you to be here next week with eight more girls and maybe someone in a wheel chair for Coach?" The boys were still laughing as we headed to the locker room?

The demands on Matthew's time were enormous, particularly as the popularity of the 'We Kick Ass' movement spread. He was constantly asked to speak at pep rallies at other schools. He accepted an invitation to speak at Milwaukee North, an inner city school that had a student population that was 70% black, 20% white, 10% Spanish and almost 100% poor. North had won a State Basketball Championship three years earlier and we were scheduled to play them Friday, the day after Matthew's scheduled talk.

The students at Milwaukee North gave Matthew a standing ovation when he walked out to the podium to start the pep rally. Virtually all of them had seen the "We Kick Ass" movie. He held up his hand and waited for silence before starting his speech. "My name is Matthew Wilson, and I kick ass in three ways," he started as he held up three fingers. The crowd roared with delight. "First, I kick ass on the bas..." He didn't complete the sentence. Lights dimmed, and the music began with spotlights seeking out Jennifer. The noise level was deafening when spotlights zeroed in on Matthew when he played the saxophone. Jennifer embraced Matthew and left the stage to another standing ovation.

He held up two fingers when the applause died down. "My name is Matthew Wilson and I am a student at Shorewood High School and when I'm a student, I try my best." The auditorium was quiet. "You cannot learn if you don't go to class; skipping school is

not acceptable. My challenge is this. Tomorrow our schools have a basketball game, but I expect 100% of my classmates to be at school, ready to learn. This is more important to me than the outcome of the game. I challenge the students at Milwaukee North to have perfect attendance tomorrow. Do you accept my challenge?"

There was total silence as students looked at each other. Matthew continued. "When I got to Shorewood some kids thought it was cool to skip school, not study and smart-off in class. We changed that culture. Now, students that occasionally do these things hear about it from their friends. For one day, tomorrow, I challenge you to break that culture. Many of you probably already know someone who plans to skip school tomorrow. If you are really their friend, convince them it's not cool. Tell them Matthew Wilson doesn't think the kids at North can have 100% attendance for one day. Prove me wrong."

"There must be 50 kids not here today," one teacher pointed out. "How do we get the word out to them in time?"

"Now we're talking," Matthew answered. "Let's appoint a committee right now that is responsible for contacting these kids. How about all varsity football team members not on the basketball or wrestling teams – that's your committee. Meet after school and start calling. Get the names and phone numbers from the office. If they don't have a phone or if they aren't receptive to the idea, pay them a visit."

"And what if they won't listen?" a boy shouted.

"You can only do your best, you can't force someone to do something if they don't care, but peer pressure is a great motivator. I'll make you a deal. If you are down to one or two kids, let me know and I'll talk to them. Okay? Do you accept the challenge?" There were murmurs of assent as the kids warmed to the challenge.

The next morning Matthew received a call at seven AM from the football coach at Milwaukee North. "My kids have done their best, but there is one kid that is refusing to cooperate. Are you still willing to help?"

"Where does he live?" Matthew asked. "I'll talk to him."

"I have to warn you; this kid is 6'4", 250 pounds and is one mean boy. He lives with his mother in a rundown house on 4th street. Last night he threw two of my players out of the house."

Thirty minutes later Matthew knocked on the door and introduced himself to the boy's mother. "Mrs. Jones, I need to talk

with Anton for a few minutes and convince him to go to school this morning.”

“Have at it, Anton won’t listen to me. I tried to tell him the kids were counting on him. Be careful though, he’s sleeping and he isn’t in too good a mood when he wakes up.”

Five minutes later Mrs. Jones heard a loud crash from the bedroom and knew that her son had done something to that nice boy. She was surprised when she opened the door and saw her son pinned against the wall with his feet dangling six inches off the floor. That skinny white boy had thrown him through the wallboard and Anton’s arms were pinned to his side between two studs. “There’s no need to worry, Mrs. Jones. Anton and I just had a little disagreement about what he was going to wear to school this morning.” Matthew dropped Anton at school and watched as 600 kids applauded as Anton walked up the steps.

Our team won the basketball game by 12 points, but both teams were winners. Milwaukee North had 100% attendance and edged out Shorewood which had one person counted as absent. Matthew didn’t get to school until 9:05 AM and missed the cut-off by five minutes. I always wondered why it took Matthew so long to get to school after he dropped off Anton.

Saturday morning Matthew and two dozen volunteers showed up with new wallboard, shingles, wood and paint to help Anton fix the hole in his bedroom wall, plus a few other items around the house that needed repair. Two parents, a carpenter and master plumber, supervised the work. A local roofing contractor volunteered his crew. The parents, contractor and all 24 kids were back Sunday afternoon to finish the repairs and sod the lawn. Significantly, there were twelve workers from each school. The kids had so much fun that they decided to do more projects together every month.

“Look at that,” a girl said as she admired the completed work. “It gives me goose pimples to think what we accomplished in two days.”

“Why couldn’t we do this a couple times a month?” a boy from North asked out loud. “We could get other schools involved and do jobs all over the city.”

“Why not organize a city-wide jobs program and target one weekend. We could get a lot done if every school had 100 volunteers. What do you think, Matthew? Is it possible?”

“It’s a great idea, but it won’t be easy. The kick ass fund has the money for the materials and supplies if you kids are willing to do the work. Are you up to it?”

A chorus of ‘yes’s’, and ‘we can do it’, was the response from all 25 kids, including Anton.”

“I’ll help you get organized, but you kids need to take charge. We’ll need a captain and co-captain from each school to coordinate volunteers and organize work groups. There are 24 high schools in the county so we need to get everyone together.” This was the start of a county-wide rehab program that became so successful that school districts from across the nation used it as a blueprint.

Chapter 13

Regular Season Ends

The basketball team kept winning, but it was how we won that made the season so much fun. Everyone played at least a quarter and everyone contributed. Rodney was still our leading scorer averaging just shy of 18 points a game, and he did it with fewer shot attempts. His shooting percentage was over 55% and he doubled his assists. He also played aggressive defense. College scouts that had originally written him off as a ball hog and selfish were giving him a second look. Rodney had become a complete player.

The other starters also picked up their games. Tom was leading the team in rebounding and running the floor better each week. Only a junior, he was already attracting the attention of college scouts. Kevin and Sam averaged over 10 points a game and played great defense. They both had a shot at playing college basketball at small state schools such as Whitewater, Platteville or Oshkosh.

Kevin lost his starting position when Matthew joined the team, but it didn't seem to bother him. His scoring average had actually increased as Matthew seemed to look for him when he came into the game. Two weeks earlier he hit his first six shots and was the game's high scorer with 23 points on 8 for 9 shooting and five for five from the charity stripe. Matthew had only nine points that evening, but contributed 14 assists and sixteen rebounds.

Our substitutes were outstanding. Kevin, Andy and Erin were the leaders and took great pride in creating havoc when they came into the game. The second team always pressed full court and disrupted the other team's rhythm. Their plus-minus scoring ratio was almost as good as the starters and their helter-skelter brand of play made them crowd favorites. They usually only played a little over a quarter, but always gave 100% all-out energy and effort. The 2nd team brought the same level of intensity to practice and usually played the first-team even up. Without Matthew, it would have been a close match-up.

Matthew, well, he did everything. His 15-point scoring average disappointed fans and sports columnists that just read the box scores and

didn't see him play in person. But watching him play games was not enough. You had to watch Matthew practice before you could appreciate his contributions. He could do anything on a basketball court that he wanted to, but instead he chose to make his teammates better. This was evident when I was forced to suspend Matthew for one game for missing two practices.

"Matthew, come over here a minute, we need to talk." It was ten minutes before practice ended Thursday and the team was shooting free throws. Thursday was always a light practice, especially with games Friday and Saturday. Friday we were playing at Wauwatosa East who was in third place in the conference with an 8-5 record. It was going to be a good test for our kids.

"What is it, Coach?" Matthew asked in a way that made me think he knew what was coming.

I didn't beat around the bush. "Matthew, you missed two practices this week and I don't think it's fair to the other kids if I let you play tomorrow night. I thought of having you sit out for just the first quarter, but I don't think that sends a strong enough message. I've decided to suspend you for the entire game." I looked up at him to judge his reaction.

"You're right. If anyone else missed two practices they would expect to be punished. I should be treated the same way."

"Okay," I said a little bit relieved in spite of my conviction that this was the right decision. Matthew could have made this an unpleasant situation. "I'll tell the team in a few minutes. By the way, how did it go yesterday?"

"Coach, it was wonderful. You should have seen the look in their eyes. Half of them were in wheelchairs and most of them will never be able to walk, much less play sports, but they were all competitive. I'm sorry I didn't get back in time for practice, but I just had to stay and talk to these kids one-on-one. I didn't get out of there until after seven." Matthew had flown to Orlando to speak to 500 kids at a national Make-A-Wish Foundation retreat. I found out later that he had shaken hands with every kid and many of the parents and volunteers. Monday he spoke at a Junior Chamber of Commerce convention in Washington. Call me Mr. Grinch.

"Boys, gather around, I have something to say." It's funny how kids seem to have a sense when something is wrong. They gathered around me without any of the little jokes and playful comments that I had become accustomed to.

"I've suspended Matthew for tomorrow's game against Tosa East. He missed two practices this week and you boys know the rules."

There was a moment of stunned silence and then murmurs of dissent. "It's not fair, Coach," Erin argued. "Don't you know where he was?"

"Yes, I know, but I'm coaching a basketball team, not a social service group. Our goal is to win a State Championship and it's important everyone understands that this requires 100% effort from everyone on the team. We can't be skipping practice, no matter how good the reason."

"Yeah, but what's more important," Andy asked, "winning basketball games or talking with kids that might have only six months to live?"

"That's a tough one to answer, Andy. We all know there are more important things than basketball, but that's not the point." I hesitated for a moment, not knowing where I was going with this. Matthew came to my rescue.

"I made a decision yesterday that staying with those kids was more important than practicing with the team. I believe it was the right decision, but that doesn't change the fact that I let you down. I'm proud to be a member of this team and I deserved to be punished. I won't let it happen again."

"Okay, Kevin, you'll be in the starting line-up, but don't try to do everything yourself. That goes for you too, Rodney. Just play your game. It's going to take a total team effort to win tomorrow."

Friday's game was about to begin and Matthew sat next to me in street clothes. The newspapers had gotten hold of the story and the Wauwatosa players knew beforehand that Matthew wasn't going to play. Tosa's warm-ups were spirited in comparison to ours. I still wasn't sure how our boys would react.

Tosa got the tip and immediately hit a jump shot from the baseline and hit their next five shots to take a 12-0 lead, two of their baskets coming off steals. They had surprised us with a full court press. The entire team looked shell-shocked and I decided to take a big risk. "Second team, let's turn this around. Let's take it to them, full court press. Come on Andy, be a leader."

The rest of the first quarter wasn't pretty, but it was high energy high school basketball at its best. There were turnovers on both sides and every shot was contested. The substitutes played the rest of the quarter as the starters watched from the bench. The quarter ended with Erin putting in an offensive rebound to close the lead to eight points, 20-12. We had cut into their lead and more importantly, changed the momentum. Our fans gave the team a standing ovation as they came off the floor.

“Great job, boys, take a well-deserved rest. Starters, report back in and keep it going.” I looked at them and saw a more confident look in their eyes.

“Guys, let’s give 100% and show them how we can play,” Rodney implored assuming a leadership role.

Kevin hit a jump shot for the opening basket and Rodney made a steal and lay-up off the inbounds pass cutting the lead to four points. Two minutes later Osteen put in a short hook shot off an offensive rebound to give us a two-point lead. But Wauwatosia East was hot and wouldn’t go away. The lead seesawed back and forth and we were down by two points when Sammy stole the ball with ten seconds remaining on the clock. He drove in from the right side for an attempted lay-up, but at the last second a defender came out of nowhere to deflect the ball off the backboard. It was a great defensive effort and a possible momentum buster. It was then that I heard a scream and saw Osteen leap high from just inside the free throw line, catch the ball with two hands and ram the ball through the basket.

“Arrrrrrrrrrgh,” he screamed as he grabbed the basket to regain his balance and gently drop to the floor before the surprised refs could find their whistles and call a technical for hanging on the rim.

“Tommmmm,” I screamed as I leapt off the bench along with the rest of our team and the eight hundred Shorewood fans that made the trip. We were still screaming when Kevin stole the inbounds pass from the shocked Tosa team and laid the ball in at the buzzer for a two-point halftime lead.

I tried to calm the players down at halftime and remind them there was still another half to play. It didn’t work and it didn’t matter, the game was over when Tom made that thunderous dunk. We were up by 12 at the end of the third quarter and won by 22. I substituted players freely throughout and every combination seemed to work. My post game speech was short and sweet. “Boys, Tom made the big play, but every one of you deserves a game ball for your effort. It was a great team win.”

Nobody was more proud than Matthew.

There was only one time that I ever questioned Matthew’s judgment, and it was an odd set of circumstances that caused the problem. It was so unlike Matthew.

We had an away game at Greendale High School Saturday evening. Greendale was in second place with a 10-4 record and had soundly trashed us by 30 points earlier in the year. That was, of course, BM-time; before Matthew. Looking back I think it started Wednesday when an article appeared in the morning newspaper quoting the Greendale coach as saying that they were not planning anything special to stop Matthew. “Why should

I set up a defense to stop someone that is averaging 15 points a game? I haven't seen him play yet, but he can't be that good. Sometimes kids get over-hyped around here."

The boys got a kick out of the article and ribbed Matthew unmercifully at practice. "Let him shoot," Andy yelled, "he's only averaging 15 a game." They jeered when Matthew missed a wide open 18 footer that he normally buried. I let the ribbing go because Matthew was smiling and seemed to be taking it in stride, and I wasn't sure that he didn't miss the shot intentionally.

The Greendale players added more fuel to the fire. A follow-up article quoted the team captain as saying they would hold Matthew to under 10 points and they would beat us by 30 again. A reporter showed up at practice Thursday and asked Matthew to comment on the stories. Matthew deflected his questions and referred the reporter to me.

"How many points will you score?" the reporter hounded him.

Matthew finally turned and responded. "Basketball is a team game. I just want to score whatever is needed to win the game."

The next morning the following quote appeared; "Wilson assures victory!" It went on to imply that Matthew claimed that he would score as much as he wanted. It was bad reporting, but not the first time an athlete was misquoted. Again, Matthew just laughed it off and said it was his fault for saying anything to the reporter. "I should have just walked away," he said wisely. It seemed to bother the rest of the team and they started conspiring among themselves to get the ball to Matthew.

The Greendale gymnasium was packed and hundreds of our fans were turned away as tickets were gone two hours before game time. Greendale had pre-sold tickets in advance and there were only 50 or so tickets available to our students. Four people that did get in were LA Lakers' players Kobe Bryant, Shaq O'Neal and two teammates. They were in town for a Sunday game with the Milwaukee Bucks and decided to see their old one-on-one opponent. It was a surprise for Matthew and could not have come at a worse time for the Greendale team.

The final straw came during warm-ups. The home crowd was jeering and hooting every time Matthew took a shot and roared in delight when he missed. The culminating scene when a Greendale player retrieved a loose ball that rolled behind Matthew and accidentally tripped him when Matthew stepped back just as the boy reached down to pick up the ball. Matthew stumbled and fell back awkwardly over the boy and landed flat on his back. I saw it happen and feared that Matthew might have cracked the back of his head on the hard floor or twisted an ankle. The crowd roared in delight as Matthew lay on the floor before rolling on his side and slowly

getting to his feet. It was then that Matthew first noticed Kobe and Shaq seated behind our bench. Matthew nodded as the crowd continued jeering and hooting. “He will be lucky to score 10 points,” someone yelled over the bedlam.

“Just play your game,” I instructed the kids when we huddled before the tipoff. “Don’t let the crowd get to you.” I could tell my words fell on deaf ears.

I knew Greendale was in trouble when Matthew said, “Get me the ball.” His teammates nodded in unison.

Tom Osteen won the tip and got the ball to Rodney who fed Matthew for a thundering reverse dunk that rattled the rim. Matthew didn’t normally dunk the ball, preferring to lay it gently over the rim so as not to embarrass his opponents. Tonight he played by a different set of rules.

Matthew continued with two, 30 foot three-pointers, a lefty hook shot and another dunk off a clean steal. Greendale had yet to get the ball across half court as our defense was tenacious. It was 18-0 before Greendale was fouled in the act of shooting and went to the free throw line. Matthew had one of our two inside positions and watched as the first shot came up short. The second free throw looked good as it came off the shooter’s hand, but it never made it to the basket. Matthew went over the rim and angrily swatted the ball into the seats. The message was clear. You can’t score on us.

Goal tending was called on Matthew and the score was 18-1, but that would be Greendale’s only point of the quarter. The eight minute quarter ended with the score 36-1. Matthew had 32 points.

I tried to substitute, but Matthew didn’t want to come out. “One more quarter, Coach.” I switched the other four players but without any appreciable effect. Greendale started to get a few baskets, but Matthew’s barrage continued. Long NBA range three-point jumps poured through the basket. Tremendous dunks threatened to tear down the backboard. Matthew was just as tenacious on defense and had at least 10 steals. The crowd was in a stunned silence when the halftime buzzer sounded. The scoreboard read 71-12. Matthew had 64 points. The conference scoring record was 63, for an entire game.

I was embarrassed as I walked to the locker room, knowing that I should have done something. I should have pulled Matthew after the first quarter although I know it would have destroyed the team. Matthew had been supporting them the entire year without asking anything for himself. He had finally asked that they “get him the ball” and nothing or nobody, including their coach was going to stop them from supporting him.

The kids were sitting silently when I walked into the locker room. Principal Hawkins had stopped me and asked that I do something to stop this embarrassing slaughter. "I'll try," I said.

I didn't have to try. Matthew had already decided that enough was enough. "Coach, I'm sorry, but I had to get that out of my system. I lost my temper."

"They deserved it, Matthew," several boys chimed in. "Let's go for 100," Erin said.

"No, I'm going to put an end to this right now. Coach, let me suggest something." We huddled in the corner while he told me his idea. I approved.

Matthew and I approached the Greendale coach and players and I presented Matthew's plan. They agreed and the Greendale coach announced the idea to the crowd. "Many of us have acted poorly over the last few days and we would like to put that behind us and get off to a fresh start. Matthew Wilson has suggested that we wipe out the score from the first half and pretend it never happened. The score will be reset to zero-zero. The winner of the second half wins the game." He then proceeded to shake my hand and Matthews. Players from both sides shook hands and exchanged pats on the back. The crowd reacted slowly while trying to understand the import of their coach's words. When they did the crowd came to their feet and gave the coaches and players a standing ovation.

We won the second half, 41-26 after leading by nine at the end of the third quarter. Matthew was held to seven points, but received a two-minute standing ovation from the crowd and opposing players when I took him out with a three minutes remaining. Matthew had dominated the second half just like he did the first half; he just didn't score as much.

"Looking pretty good out there," Kobe said after the game. "I liked a couple of those reverse dunks."

"You better come with a little more than that sissy shit if you want to dunk on me," Shaq said with a straight face. Matthew never could beat Shaq one-on-one.

We finished the season with 9-7 and entered the year-end State Boys Basketball Championship with confidence and an eight game winning streak.

Chapter 14

The Magician

Two weeks before the end of the regular season I received a disturbing phone call from Chris Lewis, the wife of my best friend Ken Reed. Ken also is my right-hand man and had basically been running my construction company in my absence.

“Jim, it’s Chris Lewis,” she said as I answered my cell phone. I noticed she still went by her maiden name.

“Hi, Chris, to what do I owe this pleasure?”

“I need to talk with you; got a minute?” Chris was a former employee of mine who unbeknownst to me at the time, was also working undercover for the DEA. She had been instrumental in breaking up the drug ring that was seeking control of our Mexico Casino and Resort project. She then took a job with the CIA and was helped prevent terrorists from blowing up Roland Garros tennis stadium which my construction company had just rebuilt. She married Ken five years ago and two years ago retired to stay home with Ken Jr.

“Sure, fire away.”

“My former employers asked me to set up a meeting with you Monday morning and I was hoping Ken and I could come up this weekend to talk about it. Are you and Rosann doing anything this weekend?”

“You and Ken are always welcome, but what does the CIA want to talk to me about? Is this related to my construction company?”

“No, nothing like that, and you’re not in any trouble. They just want to ask you a few questions.”

“About what?”

“Let’s wait to talk about it when we get there. It’s not something I want to talk about over the phone.”

“Okay, see you Saturday.”

I admit I was more than a little curious and was relieved when Ken and Chris arrived.

“Chris, what’s this all about?” I asked, as the four of us sat in the family room and nursed a before-dinner cocktail.

“What do you know about Matthew Wilson?” she asked, getting right to the point.

“Just that he is the best basketball player and the nicest person you would ever want to meet,” I replied defensively. “Why, what’s he done?”

Chris ignored my question. “I meant, what do you really know about him before he came to Milwaukee three months ago.”

I felt myself getting angry, but checked myself. These were my friends. “Not much, I guess. His former teachers and basketball coach think he’s God, but other than that, not much. I did try to Google him once, but didn’t get any hits.”

“He never told you anything about his past, like where he grew up, about his family, anything?”

“No, nothing. I asked a couple of times but he just changed the subject. Why, what’s this about?”

“Two months ago I received a call from my old boss who knew that Ken worked for you and had seen your name pop up in an open case file. He was doing me a favor by giving me a heads up.”

“Two months ago?” I repeated, letting Chris know I didn’t appreciate the time lapse.

Chris wasn’t buying it. “Jim, it doesn’t work that way, and the only reason you are talking with me, rather than two CIA agents, is that I convinced them you would be more willing to open up to your friends. They know about this meeting.”

“Okay, I get it. Go on.”

“Matthew Wilson’s real name is Randy Wolkson.”

“No wonder I couldn’t find anything about Matthew on the internet.”

“Ken typed the name into google search bar on his laptop, and turned the screen so we could see. Wolkson was obviously a popular fellow.”

“What’s this about him being a magician?” Rosann asked.

“Randy’s aunt and uncle had a nightclub act for twenty years before they hit the jackpot with Matthew, or should we say Randy. He was like the Donnie Osmond of magic, and even at the age of seven he was a gifted magician and showman.”

Well, that explains why he always seems so poised and in control, I thought.

“Furthermore, by the time he was ten he became known for reading minds and predicting the future.”

“You mean he claimed to be a psychic?” Rosann asked thinking of Kreskin and others that claimed to have ESP.

“Why, have you seen it?” Chris asked.

“Many times,” Rosann replied. “It’s almost like he can complete a sentence for you.”

“Rosann’s right,” I said. “Sometimes when I’m talking to the team he will start doing what I ask before the words are out of my mouth. It’s uncanny.”

“To my knowledge he never claimed to be a psychic, but other people did,” Chris continued. “There was an incident in Paris when he was only ten that made headlines all across Europe.”

“Is there someone in the audience with a question for Randy?” his uncle asked at the end of a show.

“I do,” a woman shouted from the back row. “Can your boy tell me if my daughter, Amber, is alive? She was taken from our home four years ago. She would be eight years old tomorrow.”

The kidnapping case had been in the newspapers and on television, but gradually the publicity died out although the family kept circulating posters and making appeals. The police never had any clues to follow-up.

The boy stared intently at the woman for several minutes before he answered; “Amber is alive and well, ...”

Whatever the boy was about to say next was lost in the mother’s shriek and the applause from the crowd. Randy stood on stage waiting for silence.

“Oh thank you,” the mother shouted, “you don’t know how good it feels to know she is alive.”

“Was it a scam?” Rosann asked. “Is that what got him in trouble?”

“Listen to the rest of the story, it only gets better.”

“Your daughter is living ten miles from here and is in the third grade at Washington elementary school. Her name is Frances Buvoy.”

“Oh my God,” the parents gasped, as cell phones were dialed from around the room.

“An hour later police converged on a small, two-bedroom home and found Amber asleep in her bed, and the woman that had taken her to replace a child that had died in a car accident, asleep in the next room. The next morning Amber was reintroduced to her parents after being missing for four years.”

“What a great story, Chris, I love happy endings,” Rosann sobbed, wiping tears from her eyes.

“Did it end happily for the Wolksons?” I asked.”

“This part of the story did, but not for long. Randy’s uncle couldn’t resist cashing in on Randy’s gift and soon was demanding six-figure

donations before Randy would foretell the future. This led to a lot of dissatisfied clients, if you know what I mean.”

“Why, couldn’t Matthew, I mean Randy, repeat what he had done for Amber’s parents?”

“That’s when the records become a little convoluted. Apparently, Randy chose to use his gift when he wanted to. He found three more missing children, but refused to look for buried treasure or anything else that was a money maker. For example, his uncle took \$100,000 from a mobster to predict a horse race, but Matthew’s horse lost by a nose.”

“What happened to the Wolksons and the magic show?”

“The government was closing in as well as several unhappy clients looking for a refund, when the Wolksons packed up in the middle of the night and disappeared. Five years later Matthew Wilson turns up in California as a sophomore in high school.”

“So why are the CIA and FBI involved? Was Randy ever charged with anything?”

“Not in Europe, Jim, but there was a problem in California.”

“Go on,” I asked Chris, refusing to believe what I was hearing.

“The Wolkson’s set up a ministry and a non-profit organization which grossed about five million dollars a year; apparently Matthew is quite a speaker.”

“Yes he is,” I agreed. “I assume that the government is interested in how the money was spent?”

“Yes, and they concluded that the Wolkson’s were taking million dollar salaries, plus expenses, and the IRS was about to crack down on them. They were looking at jail time if the charges were proven.”

“So what happened?” Rosann asked. “I hate stories with unhappy endings.”

“They struck a plea bargain. The IRS agreed to drop all charges and agree to a gag order that would keep the charges under seal; in return, they seized all the assets of the ministry. The aunt and uncle headed back to Europe and Matthew and his family left California for Wisconsin.”

“And here we are,” Rosann summarized.

“So that’s why they moved here in the middle of the school year. But what does this have to do with what’s going on here?” I asked, before I realized the answer. “It’s the ‘We Kick Ass,’ revenue, isn’t it?”

Chris nodded. “Are you aware that more than ten million dollars has been raised with no end in sight, and that Matthew Wilson has complete control to spend the money as he wishes?”

I nodded yes, but I’m not sure that I had ever really thought about it. “Does anyone else need another drink?”

“Let me start dinner,” Rosann said. “Chris, do you mind giving me a hand?” She knew that I needed some time to digest what I heard. Ken and I turned on the TV and watched Tiger Woods do his thing, which he did better than anyone else.

“There’s nothing I can tell the FBI,” I finally said to Ken. “Can’t Chris just tell them that?”

“They’ll still want to meet with you, Jim. They will want to put you on the record. You are pretty close to him and are on the Board of Directors of his non-profit organization.”

“Whoa, are you saying what I think you’re saying?”

“Yep, since Enron, not knowing is no longer an acceptable excuse. I think it would be a good idea for you to take a lawyer along Monday.”

“I might, and I also want to look at setting up an audit committee. You know, I haven’t even seen a P&L or a use of funds statement.”

We just sat down to dinner when the doorbell rang. “I’ll get it,” Rosann said as she headed to the front door. Moments later she reappeared; “Guess who’s coming to dinner?”

“It isn’t Sidney Poitier,” Matthew said as he entered the dining room. “These must be your good friends, Ken and Chris,” he said shaking hands with Ken and kissing Chris on the cheek. “Did you bring Ken, Jr. along?” Matthew asked. “Coach has talked about you all so much that I feel like we’re old friends,” he said as he sat down next to Ken.

You would think there had to be some awkward moments, but there were none. Chris later commented that she had never met a more charming and delightful person, which maybe under the circumstances wasn’t necessarily a good thing.

“Mrs. Simpson, the dinner was absolutely fabulous.”

“Can’t you stay for awhile Matthew?” I asked.

“No thanks, Coach. I have two exams tomorrow and need to study. Can you walk me to the car?”

I returned a few minutes later with a large briefcase which I opened in front of Ken. “Matthew said he just received the auditor’s three-month interim report for the non-profit organization.”

The four of us looked at each other in amazement before Chris finally said. “Either Matthew Wilson is very, very good or very, very bad.”

Ken and Chris slept late Sunday morning because they had spent most of the evening looking for hidden microphones or anything else to explain Matthew’s surprise appearance. They found nothing.

Monday I met with the CIA and local FBI liaison. I didn't take an attorney and simply repeated what I told Chris Saturday and shared some of the information that Matthew had provided.

"\$10,000,000 is a lot of money, Mr. Simpson. We had no idea it was that much. That's a lot of temptation for someone with his track record."

"Are the aunt and uncle involved in this?" I asked. "Aren't they the ones that you should be looking at?"

"Mr. Simpson, you know Matthew pretty well. Do you really believe someone with a 190 IQ, who speaks ten languages fluently, can be manipulated?" I didn't answer, but I could see his point. Even at the age of ten I doubted if anyone could make Matthew do anything he didn't want to.

"How do his parents fit into this?" I asked, changing the subject.

"We're not sure, but it's something we're looking into. Ray Wilson seems to be a straight-up guy, but we don't know why he let his brother have such a dominant role in raising his son."

"If that's all your questions, I need to get back to school. We have a three PM practice."

"We'll be in touch."

Chapter 15

State Championship Tournament SAT Challenge

The Boys State Championship in Wisconsin is a single elimination tournament for all public schools. There are no classes or divisions, small schools are in the same tournament as large schools. With 1,000 kids, Shorewood High School was considered a good-sized school, but not as large as some. Waukesha, for example, had over 2,300 students. The state was divided into eight sections, with the winners advancing to the three-day state championship in Madison. Each section was in turn divided into divisions.

We won our first three games easily and advanced to the sectional semi-finals where we faced Waukesha. The boys had waited a long time to get another crack at the team that was still undefeated and ranked #1 in the state. I tried to tell them that Waukesha would be a formidable opponent and that we would need to play our best basketball. They listened, but didn't hear.

I put Matthew on Rappis, their point guard, the quarterback of their team. I figured that if we took the ball out of his hands Waukesha would have difficulty running their offense and getting the ball to Burke. Unfortunately, they anticipated this and let their small forward, Steve Hyatt, direct their attack and by the end of the high scoring first quarter Waukesha led 26-22. Burke had 11 points and Hyatt eight. Worse, Matthew drew two quick fouls trying to help out on defense and then picked up his third foul just before the quarter ended. I had no choice, but to sit him down.

"Boys, the rest of you need to step it up. We can't let them get too far ahead."

"Coach, Burke and Hyatt are really shooting well. Why not try a triangle and two?" Seth suggested.

I thought for a moment and decided against it. I hated gimmick defenses, because they had an inherent flaw; they assumed that your team wasn't able to beat the other team without trickery. Playing Burke and Hyatt man-to-man while the other three defenders played a three-man zone made some sense, but I decided to keep that as a last resort. "No, I want to

play the same man-to-man basketball that we have played the last two months. The second team is going to start the 2nd quarter. Let's pressure them on defense and hustle for loose balls and rebounds. We'll see if they can keep shooting well when they are tired." It was risky, but we needed to change the pace of the game. "Okay, let's show them what we have," I implored as we broke the huddle.

The next four minutes were helter-skelter basketball at its best, Kevin, Andy, Erin and the other subs never stopped running and you could see the fast pace of the game was beginning to take a toll on the Waukesha players. They normally did not substitute much, but today their coach was forced to go to his bench early and often. When Burke went to the bench at the five-minute mark, I put our starters back in. The fifteen hundred Shorewood fans that made the 50-mile trip gave the subs a standing ovation. The starters kept up the pressure and by halftime we enjoyed a four-point lead.

My halftime speech was brief. "Matthew is back, but we're going to keep playing the same way. They are tired, so we'll keep up the full court pressure. Let's see if they have worked as hard at conditioning as we have." I was confident as we headed out for the second half.

My confidence lasted only thirty seconds, which is how long it took Matthew to pick up his fourth foul. I was shocked with the call and got a technical foul for my opinion. "The player has to have enough room to turn around," I screamed. All I got for my efforts was a view of the refs back and a technical foul. Matthew had rebounded a missed Waukesha shot and turned to run up court. Rappis planted himself right behind Matthew and flopped dramatically when Matthew turned. It was a set-up, but the ref bought the act. I had to sit Matthew and save him for the fourth quarter.

"Okay, boys, we need to do it again, just like the first half."

They tried their best, but I could see they were demoralized. Like most race horses, kids have one burst in them, but seldom can they get knocked off stride and then pick it up a second time. We ended the third quarter down by 10 points. I looked down the bench at Matthew who nodded as if to say; "It's up to me now."

Matthew took charge in the fourth quarter. Forced to play outside on the perimeter to avoid his fifth foul, he made shot after shot from behind the three-point line. His last three shots were from 28 feet, well beyond the NBA 3-point line. The Waukesha players kept trying to force Matthew into a 5th foul, but he avoided even the appearance of a foul. We were up by seven when Matthew decided to take some risks and started taking the ball to the basket for thunderous dunks. He also started to rebound and play aggressive defense. The score was 94-78 when the horn sounded, putting

Waukesha out of their misery, but the final score was misleading. I knew we had dodged a bullet.

The next evening we qualified for State with an easy 22 point victory against Milwaukee Lincoln, an inner city school that won the Milwaukee city conference with a 13-1 record. They were quick, but could not match our intensity on the backboards. One 2nd quarter play exemplified the game. Their all-conference guard came down one-on-one against Matthew. He burst to the right and juked Matthew with a between the legs dribble as he crossed over to his left hand and went up for the layup. That was the plan. His only problem was that Matthew stole the ball when he went between his legs and started a fast break the other way, finishing it off with a spectacular two handed dunk. The crowd and players knew the game was as good as over. We were on our way to the State Championship in Madison.

The SAT saga is what I remember most about Matthew during that fabulous year at Shorewood High School. It had nothing to do with basketball, but he was never more competitive. It started at the weekly pep rally that had become the focal point of the school week for many students and quite a few teachers as well. Basketball was almost over and baseball in Wisconsin was still a couple months away. It was a dead time for sports. What would Matthew do next?

The journey began in the second phase of the pep tally. “My name is Matthew Wilson and I am a student at Shorewood High School, and while I am a student, I Kick Ass.” The 1,800 students and teachers shouted the ‘I kick ass’ refrain in unison and then waited as Matthew hesitated while looking around the auditorium.

“The scores on our college entrance exams suck,” he screamed. The room became silent as everyone was taken aback by the vehemence of the message and his language. “We are supposed to be smart kids, but last year’s test scores are no better than the national average. This school was in the 65th percentile on the ACT and only 62% on the SAT last year. The next SAT test date appeared on the screen, April 23, less than one month away. “Juniors and seniors, be prepared, we are going to ace this test. Sophomores, I encourage you to take the test. There will be some materials that you haven’t covered, but it will help you next year.”

“Teachers, we need your help. Everyone will be assigned to a study group and we need mentors for each group to answer questions, administer practice tests and go through the lesson plans. Principal Hawkins will coordinate the mentor program.”

“We start today. Our guest speaker is Doctor Arthur Gammons, co-author of the Princeton Study Guide. Let’s give a big kick-ass welcome to Dr. Gammons.”

Sixty seconds later the applause, foot stomping and ‘we kick ass’ chants died down and Dr. Gammons could begin. “It is truly an honor to be here and address such motivated students. Matthew promised me you would be eager listeners and I see now what he meant. Let’s begin. Let me give you a little background. As most of you know, the SAT and the ACT tests are the two standardized testing tools that colleges and universities use to determine whom will be admitted to their schools. Don’t underestimate the importance of these tests to your future. It is more important than grade point and class ranking for most schools. Getting into a good school is the first step in being successful later in life.” The auditorium was quiet. Dr. Hawkins had their full attention.

“Many of you have taken these tests before. The ACT (American College Testing Program) has been around since 1959 and is popular in the Midwest.

We are going to take the SAT, the Scholastic Aptitude Test, which is preferred by most schools. The SAT has three sections; each is scored on a scale of 200 to 800.

SAT Format

Writing (200-800) – average score 510

Math (200-800) – average score 520

Critical Reading (200-800) – average score - 505

Total average score - 1,538 points.

Better schools require a minimum score of 2,100 which puts you in the 90th percentile. A perfect score is 2,400 points. Only 20 students received a perfect score last year; 20 out of one million. The next testing date is April 23.

I want to make one more, important point. There are ways to study for these tests that will help you improve your score, but in the final analysis, it comes down to each individual. It is up to each of you to put in the necessary work. Good luck.”

Matthew took the microphone. “Thank you Dr. Gammons. Fellow students at Shorewood High School, I challenge you to ace this test. Are you with me?” he shouted to the crowd.

“Yes,” the students answered in unison.

“How will we do on April 23?” Matthew asked again, waiting for the response he knew was coming.

“We’ll kick ass!” the students roared as one.

Kohl Stadium, home of the Wisconsin Badgers currently ranked #9 in the nation, was the venue for this year’s State Championship tournament. The 17,000 seat arena was sold out for all three days, including 2,000 tickets sold to Shorewood students and fans. I was told the entire student body was making the trip. The three day tournament started with four games Thursday with the finals held Saturday evening. We were the fourth game on Thursday, which, barring overtime in the first three games, was scheduled to start at 9:30 PM, an hour and a half later than our normal game time. This was an issue that I needed to address.

Wednesday afternoon we held a one-hour practice to get acclimated to the floor and shooting environment. The background behind the baskets and depth perception in a large arena is completely different than in a small gym. The kids had to get the feel for their shots. They had to overcome the awe of playing in an arena that they had seen only on TV. I could tell them this was just another game, but they wouldn’t believe me. This was the game of their lives.

Thursday I was up at six worrying about the game and our late start. The kids slept until nine or ten as if this was just any other day. I needn’t have worried about their lack of sleep. Instead, I worried about them sitting around all day with nothing to do, so at three PM I scheduled a walk-through practice in the hotel conference room. After an hour, we began working on out of bounds plays.

“Erin, who do you throw to if they play zone when you take the ball out of bounds under your own basket?”

“I’m not sure, Coach, but we are going to throw you in bed and tie you down if you don’t relax. You’re driving us crazy.” The boys were still laughing as I headed to my room.

We got to the field house at 7:30 to watch a little bit of the game between Eau Claire and Oshkosh. Assuming we won tonight, we would play the winner on Friday and it didn’t take me long to see we would have our hands full. Both teams were tall and played a physical game. Oshkosh was ahead by seven at the end of the third quarter when I took my team to the locker room.

“Oshkosh is going to be a tough opponent tomorrow,” Osteen said as they were getting dressed.

“Don’t be looking ahead,” I almost shouted, “we have a tough game tonight.” The laughter told me they had baited me again. I just hoped we were not over confident.

I need not have worried. Sheboygan Falls had a nice team, but we played one of our best games of the year. Rodney scored 22 points and all five starters were in double figures. I was also able to rest my starters for almost the entire fourth quarter which could be important Saturday.

“Nice game, boys,” I said as I looked at the final charts. “We had 26 assists on 32 baskets, that’s awesome teamwork.”

“Tomorrow we do the same to Oshkosh,” Rodney said.

“Let’s not take them lightly,” I warned. “You saw how big they are.”

I was up early again Friday despite not getting the boys into their rooms until after 2:00 AM. Even then we were kept awake by ‘we kick ass’ chants from the 2,000 Shorewood fans that were parked outside our hotel. Most of the kids slept until noon, but appeared groggy at lunch.

“Matthew, do you think they’ll be ready tonight?” I asked.

“I think so, Coach. The adrenalin will kick in and we should be okay tonight; its tomorrow that we need to worry about.”

We opened up with a full court press to keep the ball away from the Oshkosh big men. The strategy worked as we forced several early turnovers and jumped out to a 12 point lead after the first quarter. “Second team, keep up the pressure,” I pleaded as I rested my starters to start the second quarter. We were up by 18 points when I put our starters back in at the four minute mark. Matthew hit a couple long jumpers and we increased our lead to 24 points at halftime.

“Nice half, boys, but we can’t let up. Let’s jump on them right away in the third period and put them away.” Oshkosh, to their credit, made a brief run before Matthew led a 12-2 run just before the third quarter ended. He scored only once, but had four rebounds, two steals and three assists in the final three minutes of the period. The final score was 95-68. Matthew finished with a triple-double; 17 points, 16 rebounds and 14 assists in an awesome display of basketball.

“Madison West will be tough tomorrow, try to get some sleep,” I pleaded on deaf ears. It was well after 2:00 AM when the Shorewood crowd dispersed and I heard the boys sneaking back into their rooms.

It was our third game in three days and I could sense the boys were tired. Their eyes wandered and their reactions were slow as they warmed up for the biggest game of their lives. Even worse, they had spent the afternoon reading the newspapers which told them how good they were and installed us as ten point favorites. It was heady stuff for a team that was 1-8 at the Christmas break.

Madison West had two, small, quick guards that would be difficult to press, but their real strength was the twins, a pair of 6’8’, 240 pound

bruisers that controlled the backboards and stifled the inside game of every team they had played this year. The only two games they lost were when the twins fouled out. "Apparently, they do everything together," Kevin joked.

We started out in a man-to-man defense and picked up their guards at half court and forced a couple turnovers with our half-court trap. Tom and Kevin did a good job on the backboards and the score was tied halfway through the second quarter when we seemed to hit a wall. The twins started controlling the boards and Madison West pulled away for an eight point halftime lead, much to the delight of the partisan crowd. Matthew also surprised me as he seemed passive. Was he tired?

"Come on guys, we need to pick it up in the second half or we're going home with the little trophy," I shouted trying to raise their energy level. I could tell they were running on an empty tank and it would take something special to get them going, but I couldn't figure what to say. "Come on Matthew, you need to take charge."

The third quarter was more of the same as Madison controlled the boards and only an occasional jump shot by Matthew kept the game from getting completely out of hand. Still, we trailed by 12 as we entered the fourth quarter with the second team on the floor. The deficit was still 12 with six minutes to go when I called time out. "Okay boys, this is it, this is what you worked so hard for these last few months."

I wasn't confident as the starters reported to the score keeper, but out of nowhere an idea came to me. I walked over to the cheerleaders. "Jennifer, all year long Matthew has gotten the crowd going; now it's your turn to return the favor. We need a boost. Spread the floor and get the crowd yelling and I don't want them to stop until the game is over."

Cheerleaders led us onto the floor and the Shorewood fans stood and cheered along with large number of neutral fans that were hoping for a comeback. The noise continued unabated as the referees finally managed to get the cheerleaders off the floor. The arena was near bedlam as we cut the 12 point lead to one with ninety seconds to go. Our team had come alive and was finally playing with the energy and enthusiasm I had come to expect. Matthew was all over the floor exerting his will on the Madison West players.

It was his blocked shot and a rebound that started the game-deciding sequence. It was still anyone's game when Madison West launched a three-point shot from the top of the circle that would have tied the game. Matthew lunged and deflected the ball just enough for the shot to bounce high off the rim. The crowd roared as the twins leaped high for the rebound, anticipating another easy follow-up basket that would cut the lead

to one point. Instead, Matthew wedged himself between the two giants and leaped high with elbows extended, catching the both twins on their jaw. Matthew grabbed the ball with one hand and in one motion through a quick outlet pass to Rodney who started another fast break. The twins fell to the floor, more shocked than injured, as Matthew raced up-court. Erin's layup was too hard but Matthew was there to tip it in, giving us a five point lead with forty five seconds to go. We held on for an 84-79 victory. The Shorewood Bulldogs were State Champions.

Fans were still screaming as I accepted the championship trophy. It was no surprise that Matthew was named the tournament's Most Valuable Player.

Chapter 16

SAT One

Basketball was over, and the entire school switched their attention to the upcoming SAT. There was frenzied activity the next three weeks as Matthew pulled out all stops in an effort to prepare for the test. Study groups met before and after school. Breakfast was free, compliments of ever increasing residuals from the kick ass movie, CDs and T-shirt residuals. Parents donated their time to staff the cafeteria and clean up while the kids studied. After school, there were two-hour voluntary study halls that had almost 100% attendance. It was like basketball practice. You didn't have to go to practice unless you wanted to be on the team, and everyone wanted to be part of this team.

Students were provided a copy of the Princeton SAT Study Guide and had access to the Official SAT Study Guide and the Kaplan SAT Guide. A typical two-hour study session included a twenty-minute instructor-led review of the material, a 20-minute practice test and a 30-minute question and answer period. The final 30 minutes was free time typically used to prepare for tomorrow's material. Slower students were falling behind so Matthew set up review sessions in the evening where the better students tutored on a one-on-one basis. The motto was "everyone counts - nobody gets left behind".

We started scoring the practice tests two weeks before "TD" as the kids started calling the April 23 test date. As a study group monitor I had direct access to the practice scores and soon saw that Matthew's goal of averaging 2,000 points might be attainable. There were a few scores in the 1500-1600 range, but 75% of the kids were in the 1,800 – 2,000 point range and 15% were consistently over 2,100. The SAT writing section appeared to be our weakest section so Matthew brought in the experts from Princeton. "There is a right way and wrong way to write an essay. Never start until you have organized your thoughts and jotted down a brief outline of 'talking points'. Write legibly; if they can't read it you won't score well." The last point was meant for me.

Matthew was everywhere the final week, personally making the rounds to as many evening tutoring sessions as he could. I wondered when he got enough time to study. He described himself as nothing but a

cheerleader, but if that's what he was, he did it well. Students were worn out and wanted to get the test over with, but Matthew kept pushing them to find that little extra that often makes the difference between a good score and a great score. One group saw him coming and pretended to be asleep when he came into the room. Another tutoring group at a private home intentionally answered the questions wrong for ten minutes before Matthew caught on. A third group didn't see him coming and issued a spontaneous groan when he walked in. "We were just about to call it a night," one girl commented. "Just a few more minutes," Matthew pleaded.

TD finally arrived. We had 1,117 kids take the test, including 312 sophomores that took the test for practice – their scores would not be included in the official test results because they had not covered much of the material that was included in the exam. Principal Hawkins arranged for the test to be taken at the high school under the direction of SAT staff. They recommended we utilize the school auditorium and cafeteria as test rooms in addition to classrooms to allow everyone to spread out and to help ensure the integrity of the test scores.

The SAT measures skills in math, reading, and writing. Total test time is three hours and 45 minutes, but the elapsed time including instructions and five-minute breaks between each section is about five hours. Instructions started promptly at 7:45. One minute before the start, a roar started in the cafeteria and spread to every room. "We Kick Ass! – We Kick Ass! – We Kick Ass! The clock ticked to 8:00 AM and silence echoed through the halls. It was time for students to show what they could do.

Matthew was seated near the back of the auditorium and finished his essay in twenty minutes. There was no need to check his work so he put down his pencil and scanned the room. Most kids were writing furiously which probably meant that they had not organized their thoughts properly. "If only we had more time to prepare," he thought.

"TIME," announced the monitor. "Please put down your pencils and turn to the next section. Read the instructions carefully."

"START," the monitor announced at exactly 8:30.

Matthew breezed through the math questions quickly skipping two questions when the answers did not immediately come to mind and marking three others so that he could double-check his answers.

"In terms of p and q , how old was a cat 4 years ago, if p years from now the cat will be $-2q$ years old?"

Matthew quickly entered the correct answer ($-2q + p + 4$) and went back to double-check the answers he had questioned earlier. The key to taking a time-driven test is not to get hung up on a question, but come back to it later and allow your mind to take a fresh look. He completed his work early and again looked around the room, trying to get a sense of how well everyone was doing. He could see a few answer sheets from his vantage point and it looked like they would finish in the time allowed. He couldn't tell if the answers were correct since these kids might have started on a different section of the test.

"TIME," announced the monitor. "Put down your pencils and turn to the next section. Read the instructions carefully."

"START," the monitor announced at exactly 9:00 AM

"Far from _____, the food supply for mountain climbers was _____ at best."

Matthew smiled as he recalled his mountain climbing experiences. He chose *adequate and meager*, over wholesome and elaborate. Matthew had no trouble with the critical reading section.

Other students were not having so easy a time. Andy was a pretty good student, but math was not his strength. Geometry was okay, but trig and even advanced algebra had always given him problems. He found himself guessing more than he liked and wishing he could poll the audience or call a friend. He did better with the reading and writing sections.

Jennifer's headache was getting worse. It was hard to concentrate. She hoped that two more aspirin would help, but either way, she couldn't quit. Matthew was counting on her.

There was a fifteen-minute break at mid morning to allow monitored bathroom breaks. Cell phone calls or conversation between students was prohibited. Many of the students just stayed in their seats and closed their eyes, trying to relax. A couple minutes before the testing resumed, the roar started again: We Kick Ass! We Kick Ass! I could see the smiles come back to their faces and their demeanor brighten. "START," the monitors announced, and the testing resumed.

The final section of the SAT is a multiple-choice writing section and Matthew took the entire 10 minutes. It was no time to be careless. He put down his pencil and closed his book feeling good about his performance. He worried about the others.

"TIME, please close your books and bring them to the front of the room. Testing is completed."

There was a dance in the school gym that evening to help the kids unwind. The sentiment seemed to be they were glad it was over; it was fun,

but once was enough. I did my own mini-survey and got the impression that most of the kids seemed quietly optimistic about how they had performed. Only time would tell. The dance was scheduled to end at 11 PM, but by ten the gym was almost empty. I would bet that the majority of them slept until noon.

The waiting had begun. It would likely be two or three weeks before the tests were scored and results were announced. We were only into the second week when Principal Hawkins called me into his office and closed the door. "Jim, there is a problem with the SAT scores."

Oh no, I thought the kids had put so much time into this. They would be crestfallen. "What's the problem, Bill, didn't we do as well as we expected?"

"No, just the opposite, the scores were too good. The national testing center is questioning the results."

"Have they double-checked the scoring?"

"Yes, they even triple checked. The problem is that our seniors jumped from the 77th percentile last year to the 98th percentile this year. The average score was 2,150. Even our juniors rank in the 90th percentile. It's unprecedented, and many of them are saying impossible. They suspect cheating."

I sat back in my chair, starting to realize the ramifications of this. "How?" I asked, "How do they think we cheated? They had monitors. Do they think teachers were involved?"

"They aren't saying, although one theory is that we got hold of the test beforehand. They just keep saying it's impossible for an entire school to have that big of leap from one test to another. They don't know what is happening here."

"Okay, what can I do to help?" I asked, beginning to realize that this wasn't just an idle conversation. "Matthew?"

"You guessed it. We need to tell the students, but I think we should start with Matthew. Will you help me break it to him?"

"Sure, but let's get it over with before I lose my nerve."

Matthew saw the solemn expressions on our faces as he entered Principal Hawkins office. "It's about the test results, isn't it? They were too good to be true."

"How did you know?" Hawkins asked in amazement. "I was only notified this morning."

"I didn't know for sure, but I've been asking around and most kids feel they improved. There is no way the scores would not have jumped significantly. What are they?"

Matthew smiled when he saw the results. “98%, that’s awesome, better than I hoped. Do you have my score?” he asked with a grin.

“No, they haven’t released the individual scores, only the composites. That’s the problem, Matthew. They are threatening to throw out all the scores because they don’t believe that 98% and 90% for the juniors is possible.”

“Without cheating,” Matthew said, completing the thought. His expression had turned grim.

I hadn’t said a word, but offered a suggestion. “Just an idea, but I wonder if there is a way to validate the test scores without everyone having to take it again. Maybe we could take a few questions from each section, kind of a random sample?”

“That would take a long time to get a statistically valid sample and get everyone to sign off on it,” Bill said shaking his head.

“That’s not a bad idea, Coach,” Matthew said ignoring Principal Hawkins’ comment. “But rather than answer a few questions, let’s offer to have 10 or 12 seniors retake a new test. The SAT may choose the testing site and they pick the 12 students, as long as I am one of them.”

“That’s an excellent idea,” Hawkins agreed. “If this small test group does as well on the 2nd test they will have to honor the scores for everyone. I’ll call them right now.”

“Tell them we need an answer by tomorrow and we need two weeks to study,” Matthew said. “We can’t let everyone hanging.”

We listened as Hawkins made his proposal to the SAT director of regional testing. The conversation didn’t appear to be going well. “Director, please hold on for a second, while I consult with my people.”

“Matthew, help me out here. His board is saying that they can’t project the results from such a small group to the entire population. Is he correct?”

Matthew smiled and asked for the phone. “Gentlemen, this is Matthew Wilson, one of the seniors who took the test that is being questioned. The 14th question of the math section addressed random sampling and probabilities in determining wildlife populations. The correct answer was “c” which states that you need only a 3.5% sample. The same principle applies here. We have a population of 326 seniors that took the SAT. A sample of ten kids would allow you to project the results with a 96% confidence level, a sample of 12 will give you a 98% confidence factor. That is a +/- of only 2%, much less than we use to project election results.”

There was a pause while the SAT testing board discussed the issue. We just heard Matthew’s side of the phone conversation. “I agree you

should check my math, but that should not take three days. In fact, I'm sure my friends at the Wall Street Journal could check the math in time to make tomorrow's newspaper. They might even get a second opinion from the ACT board."

Wow, I thought, as we waited for a response. Matthew knew how to play hardball.

"May 15th will be fine. I'll leave it up to you to determine how to pick the sample group, but we need the names of the other 11 students by tomorrow. Thank you for your cooperation," Matthew concluded, handing the phone to Principal Hawkins."

"It looks like we have a new ballgame."

Chapter 17

SAT Two - The Lucky12

Principal Hawkins made the announcement to a stunned student assembly. After describing the problem, he got right to the point. “The SAT board wants 12 of you to retake a new test to validate the scores,” he concluded before handing the microphone to Matthew.

“I am proud of you,” Matthew started, pointing at the students. “You did better than anyone expected. Thank you,” he said, applauding the students. “You kicked ass! Come on, let’s hear it.”

“We kicked ass! We kicked ass! We kicked ass!”

“Okay, now 12 of us are being asked to do it again. Do you want to be one of the lucky 12?”

“Yes,” the students roared back in one voice.

“Well, you all won’t have this chance. Only 11 of you will have the opportunity to study with me for the next two weeks.” Laughter and cries of oh no and don’t pick me, rang out from the students, but no one really meant it. Everyone wanted the chance to kick ass one more time.

“I’m going to read the names of the lucky-eleven and when you hear your name, come on up and face the music. The first name is; “Lisa Andrews.” Lisa shrieked and began making her way to the stage, fighting through well-wishers.

“Eric Dithers, John Feeney, Sally Adamson, ...” Matthew read out the names and the reaction from each student was the same; delight at being one of the lucky eleven. When all 11 students were on stage Matthew asked for silence from the envious students. “There isn’t one of you that I wouldn’t have chosen as a teammate. I know the rest of you are disappointed, but maybe two weeks from now you will be relieved, because the 12 people up here have a lot of work to do.”

He looked at the kids on stage. “I’m going to ask you to sacrifice yourselves and study like you have never studied before. It won’t be easy and it won’t always be fun, but we will work together as a team and do our best. Is there anyone that isn’t willing to make this commitment? Eric? Lisa? Jane? Paul? Henry? Erica? ...” Each person responded affirmatively as his or her name was called. It was almost like taking an oath, I thought.

The student body cheered as the lucky 12 clasped hands much like our basketball team did before the opening whistle.

A week later I pulled Matthew aside. After a few pleasantries, I asked if he thought he might be pushing them to hard. "A few of the kids are looking pretty tired. Don't you think a couple days off might be good for them?"

"You might be right, Coach. I noticed yesterday that a couple of them actually seem to be regressing. Maybe we should have a party and just try to have some fun?"

"No party, they need to be alone. Tell them to go home and relax, watch TV, go to a movie with their friends, do something with their parents, go to church, anything. Just tell them to clear their mind and forget about the test for a couple days. And whatever you do, don't call them this weekend."

Monday the lucky 12 went back to work. Most were putting five-hour days, in addition to their regular schoolwork. They studied and took practice tests as a team and then broke out into individual study groups to work on their weaknesses. Their support groups were fabulous and there was no shortage of student and faculty support.

The group switched from the Princeton review and the Official SAT guide used to prepare for the first test, to the Kaplan prep book. Matthews figured the SAT testing group was going to change the emphasis in this 2nd test and they needed to be prepared for all contingencies. Wednesday they took a full, five-hour practice test that was graded and reviewed with each student. The scores reflected only a slight improvement over the first tests. This was enough to validate the initial test results, but I knew Matthew wanted more. Friday was a light study day, but the big news appeared in the morning newspaper. Headlines of the Metro section proclaimed;

STUDENTS ASKED TO RETAKE SAT AMID RUMORS OF CHEATING!

Someone had leaked the story to the media. The stakes were raised. There were sure to be cameras at the high school, which again would be used as the testing site. The team met at a small restaurant at 7 AM and ate a light breakfast. Father McGinnis said the prayer of thanks. At 7:30, the lucky 12 were driven to school in two vans and a police escort with lights flashing.

The roar started as the police car rounded the last corner and headed for the school parking lot. It was Saturday morning, but attendance

was perfect, including the faculty. Kids lined the streets cheering and roaring their support. The lucky 12 waved at the crowd of well wishers as they entered the school, accompanied by a chant of; Kick Ass! Kick Ass! Kick Ass! The 20 or so television crews including the major networks, captured it all on film.

“START,” the monitor announced, and the re-testing had begun.

Matthew finished the creative writing section and scanned the room. He noticed four video cameras filming the students from every corner and assumed there were microphones set to pick up every word. “Good,” he thought, there will be no questions this time. He noticed that his entire team had put their pencils down before time was announced.

“TIME,” please turn the page and read the instructions for the next section. They were into the routine.

Matthew didn’t notice any major differences although there were a few Trig questions that were pretty difficult. He worried that some of the others might have problems. He made himself concentrate; he had done all he could.

The We Kick Ass chant started in the stadium just before the morning break was over. I was one of the room monitors and counted 12 smiles. Outside, there was still 100% attendance.

It was almost 1:00 PM when the final test section was completed and the pencils ceremoniously thrown into a disposal basket. There would be only a short delay until the exams were graded and Matthew insisted the team wait inside until they knew the results. The first half of the tests had been turned in at the break, so it shouldn’t take too long to complete the scoring. ‘We Kicked Ass’ cheers could be heard from the impatient crowd and captured by the waiting television crews.

I had been around Matthew long enough to know that when he got involved with something, it turned out well. Expecting the best, I had volunteers put everyone’s name on the football scoreboard. As each person entered the football stadium, the person’s plus score would be put posted next to the name. A zero would indicate there was no improvement over the first test. I knew I was taking a chance, but I had never been disappointed betting on Matthew.

Matthew was pacing the floor nervously when the local SAT official came in with a pool of television cameras. His cell phone rang and he handed the phone to Principal Hawkins. After a few moments, we heard Hawkins ask if he could put the call on the speaker phone.

The image of President George Bush III appeared on television as his voice came over the speaker phone. “Principal Hawkins, I want to

congratulate you and these fine students on a job well done. I am told by my HEW secretary that the scores on your first SAT test were so good, we asked you to prove it to us, and you did just that. I am proud to tell you the scores from the test you just completed are 10% higher than the scores from the first test, the ones we feared were too good to be true. Eleven of the 12 students improved. Congratulations.”

“Thank you Mr. President. I am proud of these young adults, especially Matthew Wilson who I am told was the catalyst behind this achievement. “

“Matthew, can you hear me?”

“Yes I can, Mr. President.”

“I understand you are a quite a basketball player as well as a student, Matthew. Where are you going to college?”

“Well, I don’t have my SAT score yet so I’m not sure if I qualify anywhere.”

It’s hard to make an experienced politician laugh spontaneously, but this tickled the President’s funny bone. His laugh was genuine. “Well, Matthew, I hate to be the one to break this to you, but you were the only one of the twelve not to improve their score. Your score was the same.”

The President waited for Matthew to respond. “Yes sir,” Matthew replied confidently. He knew what was coming.

“Your score was a perfect 2,400 on both tests. Congratulations.”

The “He Kicked Ass – He Kicked Ass” cheer resounded from the stadium and could be heard by the President.

“I like the cheer. Anyway, congratulations to all 12 of you that did so well on the SAT today; you really kicked some butt. You let me know if I can do anything for you.”

The President hung up and the kids filed out of the school into the packed stadium. One by one the kids saw their scores posted on the scoreboard and received a rousing ovation. The loudest roar was saved for Matthew, the only one that had not improved his SAT score.

I managed to corner him later that day and congratulated him on his team’s performance. “You did a great job holding them together,” I told him sincerely.

“Thanks, Coach. Was it that tough coaching our basketball team?”

“No, that was a pleasure, particularly since we didn’t get as much publicity. By the way, how do you suppose the press found out that we were asked to retake the SAT?”

Matthew just grinned.

I was eager to get back to Florida, but decided to finish out the school year. Part of it was duty, but most of it was because I enjoyed being around the kids so much and didn't want to miss out on anything. I would never have this opportunity again.

Rosann invited Ray and Susan Wilson to dinner one evening, something we should have done much sooner. We saw them at basketball games and other school events, but had never seen them socially. It was our loss because the four of us had a wonderful evening and I felt a little guilty when I turned the conversation to Matthew. Ray had provided a slight opening when he told a story about his former job in California where he was partner-in-charge of the PriceWaterhouse-Coopers office in Los Angeles.

"You know Ray, I spent a bunch of time with Arthur Anderson here in Milwaukee. Transferring from LA to Milwaukee isn't really a lateral move in the public accounting profession."

"I know, but there were a few things going on in Los Angeles and we decided to make the change when we had an opportunity."

"We are so glad we did," Susan piped in. Milwaukee is a much better place to raise children and Kelly and Matthew are so happy here."

"Dessert anyone?" Rosann asked. "Susan, can you help me?" knowing the question I was about to ask.

"Ray, did your transfer have anything to do with some trouble that Matthew was involved in with your brother?" I asked when Ray and I were alone.

Ray hesitated a moment and apparently decided not to bluff his way through. "What did you hear, Jim?"

"Something to do with a misuse of funds in a non-profit company and a deal that was made to avoid prosecution," I said carefully before deciding to tell him the rest. "The local CIA & FBI offices also mentioned something about a Randy Wolkson who apparently was quite child prodigy in Europe."

"What did they want from you, Jim?"

"They just asked me to keep an eye on the 'We Kick Ass' revenues. That isn't a problem since I'm on the board of directors anyway. Ray, you know how much Rosann and I think of Matthew. We wouldn't do anything to hurt him."

"I know, Jim. Matthew thinks the best of you too and I know he trusts you. Let's have dessert and Susan and I will tell you a long story about how Matthew changed our lives." After chocolate cake and ice cream we adjourned to the family room. "Susan, why don't you begin?"

“It started when we adopted Matthew after his real mother apparently left him on the doorstep of a hospital in Santa Barbara, California. Ray and I were told by two doctors that we couldn't have children so we jumped at the opportunity to adopt Randy. Two years later the doctors were proven wrong and I became pregnant with Kelly, but we never, for a moment, regretted our decision.”

“How did he wind up in Europe with your brother?”

“That was my biggest mistake,” Ray said. “I put my career ahead of my family. I wasn't lying when I told you earlier how happy we are that we came to Milwaukee.”

“There were a lot of extenuating circumstances,” Susan said as she explained their decision to let Randy go to Europe with his uncle, Ralph. “You see, Matthew was a precocious child. He walked at six months and was carrying on discussions with adults when he was two. We had him tested and when he was four and his IQ was off the charts. At five he was already demonstrating powers that could only be described as scary.”

“Like what?” Rosann asked as we became engrossed in the story.

“Like the day the baby sitter called and said we had to come home immediately because our house was haunted. Randy apparently had the ability to concentrate and move objects.”

“Kinetic energy, I've heard of that. What are we talking about, pencils, glasses and stuff like that?”

“Sure, but he could move furniture. One evening our baby sitter was sitting in a chair watching television when all of a sudden she was sliding across the room. Randy told me later that she wouldn't play with him.”

“I'm sorry, but I can just envision the look on her face,” Rosann said as she tried not to laugh.

“Or another time,” Susan continued, “he asked our priest if Moses was a prophet or a magician.”

“He is a prophet, young man. Our Lord spoke to him on Mount Sinai.”

“But wasn't Moses an Egyptian prince that was trained in the ancient arts of sorcery?” Randy responded.

“Keep in mind, he was only five.”

“And that's just a couple examples,” Ray continued. “Stuff like this happened almost every day. We needed to get him into a special school or something, but we couldn't afford it. You remember how much a senior accountant makes.”

“Yes, and I also know the hours that are required,” I said recalling the 80-hour weeks that were standard bill of fare in the public accounting profession.

“That’s right, and I was working too,” Susan added. “We just didn’t have time to give Randy the attention he needed.”

“Then my brother comes to visit for a month and offered to take Randy back to Europe with them. It seemed like the perfect solution. Ralph had the time and Europe seemed like a good place for Randy to broaden his education. It appeared to be working out well for the first couple years. He became fluent in ten languages by the time he was eight and thrived on the history of the region. As you probably know, Matthew has a photographic memory and can read, and memorize a 1,000 page history book in hours.”

I didn’t doubt what Ray was saying. It explained a lot.

“Unfortunately, Ray’s brother couldn’t resist trying to make a quick buck off of Randy’s abilities, and that’s what got them in trouble with the authorities. Ralph and his wife, Terry disappeared and they sent Randy back to us.”

“What happened in California?” I asked. “Was your brother still involved?”

“Indirectly,” Ray answered vaguely. “Ralph and Terry had made some bad enemies in Europe that caught up with Randy in California. They couldn’t find my brother, but they knew where Randy was and were determined to recover their losses. I was afraid to go to the police.”

“Ray wanted to,” Susan said, holding Ray’s hand, “but I convinced him not to. They told me that they would hurt Kelly if we went to the authorities.”

“Anyway, Randy continued to use his skills to help people and started to earn quite a bit of money. I set up the non-profit organization and siphoned off a couple hundred thousand dollars a year to keep the Russians away from Randy and Kelly. I rationalized that we were still doing a lot of good with the rest of the money, but I knew deep down it was wrong. I never told Randy what we were doing.”

“When the IRS offered us a deal we jumped at the opportunity to get a fresh start. We changed Randy’s name to Matthew Wilson and here we are.”

“That’s quite a story,” I said, still doubting that Matthew would not catch on to what was happening around him. He was too smart. “Well, now I understand better why the CIA came to us in the first place; they want to make sure the ‘kick ass’ revenues are used for non-profit purposes.”

“Are they still out there?” Rosann wondered.

“Who?”

“The Russian mafia.”

“We haven’t heard from them since we moved, but every day we pray they don’t find us. I’m sure they still believe Randy owes them money.”

Good luck, I thought. The Russians would have to be deaf and dumb not to realize that Randy Wolkson and Matthew Wilson are the same person.

Chapter 18

Hostages

How right I was! The national press coverage given to Shorewood High School proved to be a two edged sword. Eleven of the twelve students basked in the attention and thrill of seeing their faces on TV. Matthew was the exception. He was a no-show for a local TV show hosted by his friend, Gus Edwards that was picked up and broadcast nationally by NBC. Matthew claimed he had a last minute conflict but it soon became apparent that he was avoiding any publicity.

One morning Matthew came into my office to talk and I asked him why. “Would it hurt to do a couple interviews?. If nothing else, it might stop the reporters from following you around.”

“Coach, you know it isn’t that easy. The press is never satisfied; give them a little and they want everything. It’s better to just ignore them.”

“You’re probably right, but there’s more to it, isn’t there?”

Matthew looked at me for several seconds before deciding how to proceed. “My uncle called last week.”

“The uncle that raised you in Europe?” I asked.

“Yep, that’s the one. He’s in trouble again and needs my help.”

“Russian Mafia trouble?”

“He owes them money again and they want it now. They saw my picture in the newspapers and figured I can get it for them. They also claim my uncle and I owe them money from our business in Europe.”

“How much?”

“My uncle said \$50M, but that’s ridiculous. They only invested a couple million.”

“What are you going to do?” I asked, thinking of the money in the ‘We Kick Ass’ accounts.

He read my mind. “Don’t worry, Coach; I won’t do anything that stupid. Besides, I already told Chris Lewis who passed it on to her friends at the FBI. They’re handling it.”

My relief was evident. “Well, it seems to be all you can do for now unless you can really see the future and make some money at the horse tracks.” Matthew smiled, leaving me with the impression that he could, if he wanted to.

“Coach, these guys are crazy. They are capable of anything. That’s why I want to keep a low profile.”

"You're afraid they'll come after you here, in the U.S.?" I asked in disbelief. "Would they do that?"

"Or my friends," he said gazing intently into my eyes. He wasn't smiling.

"Later, Coach. Be careful."

Mathew left my office and I sat silently for twenty minutes, trying to digest what I had just heard and contemplating my options. Should I tell Rosann? What could she do, stay home with the door locked? All she could do was worry. I picked up the phone and called Chris Lewis.

"Chris, hi, this is Jim. What do you know about Matthew being threatened by the Russians?" I blurted, showing my state of mind.

"Well, hi Jim, I've missed you too. How's Rosann?"

"Come on Chris, Matthew just told me what's going on and I'm worried sick. He said these people will do anything."

"You should be worried, Jim. These are dangerous people. We have a couple teams watching Matthew, but that's not enough to stop them if they really want to go after him."

"Do they?"

"Our sources say they are pissed, but I'm not sure they are angry with Matthew or the uncle. The problem is that the uncle is a loser and broke. They won't get any money out of him unless it's through Matthew."

"Would they go after Matthew's friends?" I asked, trying not to show Chris that I was afraid for Rosann and the kids.

"They might, but I'm not sure what we can do about it. Matthew has a lot of friends and the FBI has only so many people. We might be able to assign someone to Coach Wilson's family.

"I'd appreciate that, Chris. Thank you. What about the 11 students that made up the Lucky 12?"

"I'll see what we can do."

"Thanks, I feel a little better just talking with someone about it."

'RINGGGGGGGGGGGG'

The school loudspeaker came on with ominous message.

"The school is in a level one lockdown. Teachers and students are instructed to go to their assigned stations. This is not a drill!"

"Jim, Jim, what's going on?" Chris shouted from the other end of the line.

"I don't know," I replied before hearing shots ring out.

‘Bam-Bam-Bam’

“Someone has a gun. I have to go.”

“Don’t hang up,” Chris replied, “let me listen”.

“Okay, gotta go,” I shouted as I peered out into the hallway.

One brief glance confirmed my worst fears. The school was under siege. A hooded man stood at the end of the hall wielding an automatic pistol and was shouting at kids to find their assigned rooms. Students were screaming or cowering in terror, afraid to move. Two boys tried a side exit, but it was locked. No amount of pounding would change that fact.

The man kicked one student and told him to get moving. He carried a walkie-talkie or some kind of communication device so I figured there was more than one of them. My suspicions were confirmed when two others came into view before disappearing down the main corridor.

I shut the door and grabbed the phone. “Chris, you still there.”

“Yeah, what’s happening?”

I told her what I’d seen. “It looks like the entire school is under siege. What should I do?”

“Grab your cell phone and find a place to lay low. It might help if we have someone free on the inside.”

Office and classroom doors were being opened down the hall and I heard footsteps in the hall, it was time to go. I grabbed a letter opener and headed out the back door into a corridor leading to the school gymnasium. There was a maintenance tunnel off the corridor that provided an ideal place to hide until Chris could figure out a plan.

Simpson got out of his office just in time. Two men burst into his office moments after he had slipped out the back door. “Search the room,” the taller man ordered with a ring of authority.

Thirty seconds later it was obvious the room was vacant. “There’s a back door leading to a hallway, Yury. He could have escaped that way.”

“Follow him, we know he was here earlier.” Yury noticed that the desk phone was off the hook. He placed his finger across his lips to demand silence as he picked up the receiver. He heard nothing. Not even a dial tone. “Hello,” the man called Yury said softly.

“Who is this? What do you want?” Chris replied after a moment’s hesitation.

Yury smiled, the Coach had to be nearby. “I’m the man who controls the lives of 1,200 students. Who are you, bitch?”

It was Chris’ turn to hesitate. Should she claim she was just a friend? Should she tell the truth and admit she was just a cog in what would soon become a political and administrative nightmare. Every law

enforcement agency would be vying for control, and this was before the politicians got involved. Everyone would be looking for that 10 second sound bite that would make their career. Valuable time would be lost before order was restored; time that the hostages might not have. Chris decided to take control.

"I'm Chris Lewis, Special Agent, CIA, the bitch that decides whether you live or die, Yury." Chris attempted to throw him off guard by letting him know she knew his name. It worked.

"Well, Chris, it's nice to talk with another professional. Since you know my name I'm sure you already know that I was also involved in a similar situation, or are you still searching?"

"Oh, shit," Chris mumbled to herself as her laptop spit out the results of the new search parameters. "Besian," Chris replied slowly. "You were the lone survivor."

Chris remembered the horrific tragedy very well, but skimmed an article to refresh her memory. *The basic facts were simple. On September 1, 2004, 32 Chechnya militants took control of School Number 1, an elementary school in the city of Besian, Russia. 1,200 students, faculty and parents were taken hostage; 334 people died including 180 children and 31 of the hostages. It is the worst school massacre in Russia's long history.*

"Now that I have your attention, let's establish the ground rules. Are you listening?"

"I'm listening," Chris said as she connected a recorder to her phone.

"These demands are non-negotiable. Make sure your superiors understand that.

1. You are my sole contact. I will not deal with anyone else;
2. SWAT teams will not attempt to storm the school and free the hostages. Explosives are being wired to all doors and windows. The explosives will detonate automatically;
3. I want Matthew Wilson here by 1:00 PM or we will begin executing five hostages every hour, on the hour.

Are my instructions clear?"

"Yes, but I did something from you." Chris replied evenly, trying to think on her feet. It was definitely a good sign that Matthew was not captured.

"You are in no position to negotiate."

"Hear me out. You need to recognize how our government works. They need to know we can deal with you in good faith before my superiors will agree to anything."

"Go on."

“We need you to give us the dead and seriously wounded. There is no reason for you to keep the dead and the wounded will only make it harder on you. Agreed?”

“Agreed. I’m happy to say that to my knowledge, no one has been killed, yet. ”

“Good. Now tell us what you want. Why are you doing this? What do you stand to gain from this?”

“I already told you, we want Matthew Wilson, and the 500M Euros that he owes us.”

“He owes you 500 Million Euros?” Chris repeated in obvious disbelief.

“Including principal, interest and expenses,” the terrorist coolly replied. “It takes a lot of money to put together and equip an assault team of 32 men.” Chris doubted there were 32 men, but the number was significant, an obvious reference to the Besian massacre.

“Remember, we need Matthew by 1:00 PM today, or the killings will begin. Call me if you have any questions,” Yury said before exchanging cell phone numbers with Chris and disconnecting.

Chapter 19

CIA Rescue Plan

Chris sat back and took a moment to evaluate what she had just heard and her position. She had only two years with the CIA and had few opportunities to shine, despite spending five years with the DEA on the front lines. She was uniquely qualified for this role; Jim Simpson and Matthew were friends and Yury had asked for her. She knew that no other person was in a better position to handle this assignment. Chris accepted the challenge, knowing full well that failure would destroy her career with the CIA. That was okay as long as the hostages were released safely.

She called her boss. “John, I just got off the phone with the leader of the terrorists that took over Shorewood High School. The team needs to hear this right away. He gave me a list of demands.”

“Why did he call you? What are the demands?”

“John, I’ll tell you why later. You need to hear the recording.” Chris knew that giving her boss the demands over the phone would only serve to start the posturing and delay the decision making.

“Okay, I’ll be in the conference room in ten minutes.”

“I suggest you notify the Director, this is big and time is of the essence.” Her boss might have called the Director anyway, but now he had no choice.

Chris hung up and immediately dialed a friend in tech support. “Gary, Chris Lewis here. I need someone to do a voice recognition analysis of the phone message that just appeared in your inbox. We need it in ten minutes, or less.”

“Come on, Chris, get serious, I can’t do it that fast.”

“Gary, if it helps, I think the voice belongs to a Yury Kulayev, the Chechnya terrorist that was involved in the 9/1/2004 school massacre in Russia. Also, see if you know where he is.”

“Yes, he might be involved. Ten minutes, Gary. I’ll owe you big-time. Call me on my cell, or better yet, come to the main conference room and tell the Director yourself.”

Chris noticed Gary slip into the conference room just as the replay of recording was ending. Chris had already briefed the Director and the 23 agents, starting with the phone call she received from Coach Simpson. Chris then allowed the recording to speak for itself.

The Director asked the obvious question. “Are we sure it’s Yury?”

Chris looked at Gary, who nodded yes. “Gary Choate has just done a voice analysis of the recording. Gary what did you find?”

It’s any employee’s dream to have an opportunity to perform directly to the top man in the organization; CIA agents were no different. It was particularly satisfying when the news you brought was vital. Gary did not disappoint the Director. “It’s definitely Yury Kulayev, I am 99% sure,” he said with confidence.

“How could it be Yury?” one of the pompous assistant directors asked. “He was sentenced to life imprisonment.”

“He was pardoned six months ago,” Gary replied calmly. “In fact, Homeland Security has a photo of him entering the United States, via LaGuardia airport, four days ago.” Gary had just earned a sizeable bonus and possible promotion.

The Director interrupted the murmurs and side conversations that erupted after this unsettling news. “Okay, it’s Yury. Now what are we going to do about it.”

“Let’s put together a negotiation team and see what else he really wants, \$500M is ridiculous,” the pompous assistant director stated forcefully. He seemed to have forgotten that Chris Lewis was in the room.

“Homeland Security and the FBI will want to be involved,” another high level bureaucrat said.

“What about local law enforcement?” an agent asked.

Chris wanted to scream, but was distracted by her cell phone vibrating on the conference table. She recognized the number and held up her hand for silence. “Yury, what can I do for you.”

She waited for Yury’s response as the 25 men around the conference table sat in hushed silence. “Yes, the Director is here. I’ll put you on speakerphone if I can figure out how. Hold on a second.”

Chris depressed the mute button and looked at the Director. “Yury’s not stupid. He figures by this time we have verified his identity and are trying to figure out your next step. Do you want me to put it on speaker phone or should I tell him my phone doesn’t have speaker phone capabilities.” Chris wanted to give the Director the option of not talking with the terrorist directly – a negotiating and cover-your-ass ploy used frequently.

The Director understood. “Put him on speaker, we don’t have any time to waste.”

Chris' respect for the Director was always good, but increased dramatically. Sitting behind a desk had not dulled his instincts. "Go ahead, Yury, you are on speaker."

"Director Vance, I know you are a busy man so I won't waste a lot of your time. You heard the tape of our phone call and listened to my demands. Be assured, they are non-negotiable. Agent Lewis asked me to release the dead and wounded. I'm doing that as we speak, and am happy to report that there are no dead." Sighs of relief could be heard from around the conference table.

"It's now 10:00 AM, which gives you three hours to produce Mathew Wilson. There will be no time extensions. Understood?"

The Director contemplated his limited options. No one else dared to speak. "Director," Yury said waiting for a response.

Chris grabbed the cell phone from the table and depressed the mute button again. "Let me ask if we can trade 500 hostages for Matthew."

The Director nodded his approval. It would diminish his stature if he personally negotiated the numbers.

"Yury, this is Chris, I have a proposal for you. As you know, Matthew is a personal friend of mine. That's why he called me when this started."

"What's your point?"

"Matthew Wilson is the most famous and popular high school student in America. Asking him to voluntarily surrender to you is something I couldn't support, unless of course, we received something of equal value in return."

"Like what?"

"Matthew in exchange for all the hostages?" Chris said in a level tone, trying to ignore the looks of amazement from the Director and everyone else in the room. "*What balls,*" someone muttered.

Yury didn't think it was funny. "You're kidding, aren't you?"

"No, I'm not kidding. It'll make things easier for you. Right now you're probably trying to pack everyone into the gymnasium like sardines." Chris knew this is what the terrorists had done at the Besian school.

"In the basketball hoop, there were three bombs taped up, and one on each backboard. There were wires going to a pedal on the floor that served as a detonator. One of the terrorists always had a foot on the pedal. People were stuffed into the gym like herring in a barrel."

"300 hostages," Yury countered.

"1,000," Chris counter offered. "That leaves you with over 700 hostages," Chris lied, stretching the truth to suit her purpose. "That's more than enough."

“800, take it or leave it, half now and half after Matthew Wilson is delivered,” Yury said, obviously tired of arguing. “And I want the \$500M wire transferred to a Swiss account before any other hostages are released.”

Chris looked at the Director for his approval. “Agreed,” said the Director, “but you won’t get to spend the money if you harm Matthew Wilson or any of the other hostages. Understood?”

“Of course, Director Vance. Why would we want to harm the hostages if you give us what we request? You have less than three hours to produce Matthew Wilson. Caio.”

The call was terminated and Chris sat back, a shock of exhaustion overwhelming her. “Well done, Chris,” the Director said as Chris accepted congratulations from the other agents. Even the pompous assistant director profusely gave his congratulations. “I didn’t realize we already had a professional negotiator on the team; great job special agent.”

Coach Simpson was in for a surprise as he roamed the underground passageway that housed the plumbing and electrical grid for the school. It was almost pitch dark and he had no flashlight. He turned a corner and gasped as he ran smack dab into the chest of another man. Fearing the worst, he stepped back and lashed out with the letter opener, but missed. He stepped in closer and thrust his weapon upward, hoping to find his attacker’s throat. Instead, he felt a vice-like grip on his wrist and a huge hand pressed against his chest, driving him back against the wall. He managed to drive his right knee into his adversary’s groin and received no small amount of satisfaction when his opponent groaned and released his hold on his wrist. Coach lashed out again, but his time his opponent stepped inside his arm and drove a fist into his stomach. The man was apparently done fooling around.

“Enough,” Coach gasped, “I give up.”

“Coach, is that you?”

“Matthew?” Simpson managed to gasp. “Why did you hit me so hard?”

“Cause you were trying to kill me,” Matthew answered, laughing as he slid to the floor next to Coach. Both men sat and enjoyed the moment, at least as much as you can enjoy a moment after a kick in the groin.

“What are we going to do, Matthew? I saw three of them and got the feeling there were a lot more. How about you?”

“I’m not sure, Coach. I was in the bathroom when they came and didn’t see anyone. I heard the gunfire and managed to get into the air conditioning ducts and slip into the tunnel before they found me.”

“Are they after you?” Coach asked.

"Yeah, they're after me. I heard them talking through a grate."

"They were all talking in some foreign language," Coach replied. "Could you understand them?"

"Russian, specifically Chechen, the language of Chechnya," Matthew answered. "I lived two years in Russia and speak Chechen well. Yeah, they are after me."

"Well, at least Chris Lewis is working on it." Coach told Matthew about the phone call.

"Let's give her a call and see what she learned."

Chris accepted the accolades from her peers and superiors that reached its zenith when television cameras showed hundreds of students being released from the school; the entire sophomore class as reporters soon learned. Chris was pleased but was eager to get on with the job. "Director, we have two good men loose inside the school, Matthew and Coach Simpson. They will help us if we can come up with a plan. I have an idea that might work."

"Go on," the Director replied leaning forward in his chair, not displeased by the assertiveness of this young agent. In fact, he was downright proud that they were still producing agents with balls and creativity. He was tired of being surrounded by yes-men.

"I don't know where Matthew is, but Coach Simpson mentioned he was heading for the tunnels. These tunnels run under the school and provide maintenance workers with access to the plumbing and electrical grids. That means he can probably kill the electricity. Gary is working on getting us the schematics," Chris said, as Gary slipped out of the conference room.

"What does that get us?" an agent asked. "The utility company can shut off the power from the street or central office."

"I know, but they can't do it selectively or at exactly the right moment. Look, Yury has probably wired the building with explosive; doors windows, whatever. Let's ask ourselves, how many ways are there to detonate the explosives?" Chris hesitated a moment and let her question set in before continuing. "Sure, they can light a fuse or toss a grenade, but I'll bet most of the explosives ..."

"are detonated by breaking an electrical circuit," the Director interrupted, finishing Chris' thought.

"Cell phones or radio waves could also be used as detonators," a senior agent volunteered, but was interrupted by several men that completed his thought.

"but we can jam the signals," several agents said in unison.

“It might work,” the CIA explosives expert agreed. “We really need to see the explosives and detonators to make sure. Chris, can we contact Coach Simpson?”

Matthew Wilson always had that uncanny ability to seemingly read a person’s thoughts or do things just at the right time, like when he showed up at Coach’s house just when Chris was questioning how the ‘We Kick Ass’ money was being spent. They had no sooner sat down for dinner when the doorbell rang. There was Matthew inviting himself to dinner and later providing an Audit Report showing how the money was spent. The timing was uncanny. Chris’ cell phone vibrated and she wasn’t surprised to find it was Matthew.

“Where you been Matthew? People have been looking for you,” Chris started easily, letting the CIA people know it was him. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine; Coach and I are just sitting here talking. What can you tell me?” Chris quickly brought him up to speed including the terrorist demand that Matthew surrenders by 1 PM.

“That doesn’t give us much time. Do you have a plan?”

“Wait, I’ll put you on speaker. I’m with Director Vance and a group of interested people. He can outline our plan. Okay, go ahead Director.”

“Matthew, a pleasure to meet with you although I wish it were under better circumstances. Are you willing to turn yourself in to the terrorists in exchange for the 800 hostages Chris negotiated?”

“Chris knows that I would exchange my life for one hostage. The other 799 are a tribute to her negotiating skills. Let’s use the two hours we have to good advantage. What can Coach and I do to help rescue the rest of the hostages?”

“Excuse me,” one of the CIA negotiators interrupted, “shouldn’t we consider giving them the \$500M ransom and allowing them to go free?”

“It won’t do any good,” Matthew replied forcefully. “I know these people and believe me, this isn’t about money.”

“How can be sure?” the CIA negotiator continued. “Did you read their minds?” Chris and a few others gasped as they reacted to the rudeness of the man’s question and the obvious reference to one of the reasons the terrorists were here in the first place.

Coach Wilson tried to grab the phone from Matthew and respond to the question, but Matthew easily pushed him away and covered the mouthpiece with his other hand. “*Coach, it won’t help the hostages to respond in kind. Let me handle this.*”

"I understand your concern. We all want to find the best way to save these kids lives. You may change your mind after you hear some of the conversations I overheard. I'll first state them in Chechen and then translate." Five minutes later there was little doubt that the Russian terrorists intended to kill Matthew and all the hostages before escaping. "This will make the 9/1/2004 Besian, Russia massacre look like a picnic," one terrorist bragged.

The CIA conference room was silent as they digested what they had heard.

The CIA negotiator wasn't finished. "Nobody could be that cruel. Are we sure there isn't another way? Maybe he misinterpreted the dialects? Chechen has about 44 vowels and up to 60 consonants, depending on the dialect," he offered, trying to impress his boss with obscure information. "We can't even find a translator at Langley."

Chris had had enough and almost told this jerk to shut up, but wisely held her tongue. She knew that Matthew didn't need her help.

"I know these people," Matthew continued. "I lived in Russia for two years and traveled to Chechnya many times. I am fluent in Chechen. I understand how they think and what the Chechnya militants are after. They want notoriety, not money. They want the United States Government to put pressure on the Russian Government. They saw the President congratulate our school on the SAT scores and know President Bush will be personally involved in this crisis. They are using a five year old business dispute with my uncle as an excuse to take me and my high School hostage. They believe that embarrassing me and killing 700 hostages is their way to achieve Chechnya independence. Believe me; they will not hesitate to massacre these kids."

The Director was convinced and responded quickly, effectively shutting off all discussion. He would deal with the negotiator later. "Matthew, are you and Coach in the tunnels beneath the school?"

"Yes."

"Good, this should you the ability to do some recon work. Can you get to the main electrical room?"

"Yes, Coach knows where it is."

"Good, we are studying the circuitry now and might want to selectively cut the power to certain areas when the time is right. We'll get back to you on this."

"Okay, Coach will handle that. I might be tied up by then."

"Is there any way you can get us a description of how the explosive charges are wired on the doors and wherever else they have them?"

"Better yet, I'll upload pictures if I can get close enough."

“Can you see where the hostages are being held? Are they tied up?”

“I’ll get back to you on that. I assume they’re in the gym, but I’m not sure if that’s all of them.”

“Matthew, this is Chris. Any suggestions as to how I should negotiate with Yury? Is there any way to get more hostages released, just in case?”

“Just in case what?” Matthew asked, feigning ignorance.

“Grow up, Matthew, you’re acting like a 17 year old,” Chris said with a grin. The words were harsh, but there was love and tenderness in her voice.

“There are a lot of 17 year olds here, let’s see how many of us can reach 18 or 19, and heaven forbid, thirty. Let me see if I can get another couple hundred people released before I turn myself in. I think you pushed him far enough and ought to concentrate on making sure that he doesn’t do anything stupid.”

“What do you think about storming the school just when you turn yourself in?” and agent asked. “They might be distracted.”

“Good thinking, but let’s wait. I might be able to get some kids released early and I also want some time to get the rest of them ready.”

“Ready for what?” Director Vance asked

“Ready to kick some ass,” Matthew replied softly.

Chapter 20

Pressure Free Throws

The clock struck 1:00 PM and Matthew Wilson walked up front steps of Shorewood High School, cameras equipped with zoom lenses relaying every step to millions of viewers across the world. Matthew stood at the front doors, waiting for the Chechnya terrorists to let him in. The doors opened and Matthew Wilson crossed the threshold, possibly for the last time.

Network and cable cameras switched to commercials, but the CIA kept on watching. The miniature camera implanted in a contact lens covering Matthew's right iris recorded everything that Matthew saw including the c-4 explosives and detonation device wired to the front door.

"We got it," a technician exclaimed as Matthew gave him a perfect view of the timer.

"Can we disable it?" his boss asked.

"Cutting the electricity won't do any good, but we can zap it with a laser," the techie replied. "Give the word and we'll fry it."

"Can our men get through the door without setting off the C-4?"

"It'll take a locksmith about 90 seconds, two minutes tops, to get around the deadbolt and then we're in."

"We might not have 90 seconds. Is there a faster way?"

"Someone could open it from the inside once we knock out the detonator, any volunteers?"

"*Coach Simpson,*" the Director thought. Wilson had stayed behind while Matthew escaped from the school. Wilson had just enough time to deliver the photos and describe to the CIA what he had seen before he turned and made his dramatic 1:00 PM reentry, into the waiting arms of Yury and his gang of terrorists.

Jim Simpson waited near the electrical room for the signal to cut the power to the selected areas. The CIA people had walked him through the procedure. Now he had nothing to do but wait. He sat on the floor, a two foot long lead pipe within his grasp. "Just in case," Matthew had said when he gave him the weapon.

"I wish I had this a couple times in practice. It might have helped me get through to you knuckleheads."

"You did pretty well without it, Coach. We were lucky to have you."

“I was pretty lucky to have them,” Coach said to himself, as tears glistened in his eyes. It had been over an hour since Matthew had gone and he longed for some news. Matthew’s escape route included a climb to the roof and a twenty foot jump to an overhanging tree limb. Had he made it?

The phone rang interrupting his thoughts. It was Chris. “How you holding up Coach?”

“I’m okay, did Matthew make it?”

“He did, and turned himself over to the terrorists about 45 minutes ago. The rest of the hostages Yury promised to deliver were freed.”

“At least the bastard kept his word on that. How many are there left?”

“711, including you,” Chris replied. “We won’t forget about you. By the way, Ken wants to know if you’ll be back in time for Monday’s staff meeting.”

“Tell him I’ll skip this one, and maybe a few more after that. Tell him to keep his stories and anecdotes to a minimum, keep the meetings short.”

“Okay, I’ll tell him, but you know it won’t do any good,”

“I know.”

“By the way, Jim, there is one thing you can do for us.”

“Oh oh, here it comes. What is it?”

“It’s probably what you were going to do anyway, but now we’re putting you on a clock. Kill the electricity when they tell you and then run like hell to open the front doors. You’ll have 20 seconds.”

I tried to visualize the route I would need to take. “Chris, we are cutting it close. I hope there are no delays. Will there be a problem opening the doors?”

“No, just push down on the gold bar like you normally would. We should have disabled the detonator by then. Ignore the explosives strapped to the doors.”

“You ‘should’ have disabled the detonators by then; did I hear you correctly?”

“All I can say Jim, is be ready to improvise,” Chris said, trying to convey the uncertainty of the situation. “This is one of those situations with a lot of moving parts, a lot can go wrong.”

“Anything else?” I asked

“Yeah, good luck.”

“Thanks, Chris. You’ve been a good friend.”

I called Rosann, ignoring the CIA instructions to keep the line open and save batteries. There was a lot I wanted to say, but all I could think of was to say that I love her.

"I love you too," she replied. "By the way, we're having salmon for dinner. Don't be late."

Matthew was led into the gymnasium and was immediately struck by the stench of body odor, despair and fear. The release of 300 hostages had alleviated much of the crowding, but there was still too many people in a confined area. The mood in the room improved as Matthew's entrance was noted. The hostages sat up and the flavors of hope and optimism were added to the mixture. Matthew didn't say anything, but looked slowly around him making eye contact with as many students and faculty as possible. He noticed how the terrorists were deployed and where his basketball teammates were located. He also saw the explosives wired to the basketball rims and backboards, just like in the Besian school. Everything he saw was transmitted to CIA headquarters.

Yury stopped the small parade at midcourt. "Matthew Wilson, Phenom. You don't look so special to me. You look like some card shark that runs scams on old ladies and then runs out on his friends without paying his debts. Is that what you are? A scam artist? A con man?"

Matthew saw that one of the terrorists was filming the discussion and knew he needed to be careful about what he said. He also knew Yury had a couple screws loose and it wouldn't take much to set him off. Matthew replied appropriately.

"You're a gutless, child killer," Matthew started. "Didn't you kill enough children in Russia six years ago?" Matthew then spoke in Yury's native tongue and told him what he really thought of him. Matthew stopped and waited calmly for Yury's response.

The CIA team sat in the same conference room and was shocked when the translation to English came through. Is this the same person, calm and deliberate, that they spoke on the phone with earlier? Why was he baiting Yury?

"He knows what he's doing," Chris said aloud, hoping she was right. He never loses his temper. He has something in mind."

Yury's face turned red. It was obvious he was furious to be belittled in front of his own people, in his native language. That was a personal insult and he knew it. He would have the last word. He smiled broadly; he hit on a way to get his revenge before he killed them all. "Get me a basketball," he demanded, as an idea popped into his head. It was a perfect way to humiliate this pompous American,

"They tell me you are a basketball player, is that true?"

Matthew nodded.

"Are you the best basketball player ever?" Yury continued.

Matthew refused to answer until Yury grabbed a hostage and put a gun to her head. “Are you the best ever?”

“Some say that, but I don’t know,” Matthew responded. The answer was good enough for Yury.

“Can you make a free throw?”

“Yes.”

“Under pressure?”

“Yes.”

“Show me,” Yury ordered, handing Matthew the basketball and leading Matthew to the free throw line of one of the baskets.

“Swish,” was the only sound heard as Matthew’s free throw was dead center.

“Okay, now let’s put a little pressure on you, something to make it interesting. “Georgy, put this grenade on the metal plate attaching the rim to the basket and tie the pin to the rim.” Everyone waited as Georgy completed his work.

Yury wasn’t finished. “Now grab five of these hostages and sit them under the basket.” Georgy did as instructed.

“Now, Mr. Phenom, let’s see how good you are with a little pressure. Vlad, put this video on the internet so that the entire world can see this imposter for what he is.” Yury tossed the basketball at Matthew.

“This isn’t good,” one of the CIA agents exclaimed. That grenade is balanced precariously. It will fall if the ball catches any part of the rim. Matthew will need to get all net.”

Matthew caught the ball, but made no effort to shoot.

“Shoot the ball or I’ll execute these hostages myself and give you five more. It’s your decision.”

“What are you risking?” Matthew asked. “Are you a man or a coward?” Matthew challenged.

“What do you suggest?” Yury asked in frustration.

“The hostages go free if I make the free throw without dislodging the grenade.”

Yury smiled, knowing more than half of made free throws catch some part of the rim. “You have a bet.”

“I also want to address my classmates for what may be the last time.”

“Go ahead,” Yury said, “but keep it brief, and no tricks.”

“I want to say one last time how much I enjoyed working with all of you, particularly my teammates and those of you that were at the games. Remember the first game against Waukesha? We played zone defense and everyone took the man in their area. I asked some of you to be leaders and

you came through for me when the time was right. I scored forty points that night, but it was because of you that we won. I wish we could that again sometime. And remember, you might not be able to score 40, but when your time comes you can kick some ass. I love you.”

“He never scored 40 points against Waukesha; he only played less than a quarter. That must be the signal. We attack when he shoots his 40th free throw.”

Matthew looked at the hostages and addressed them by name. “William, Martha, Mrs. Reynolds, Peter, Susan; please do not be afraid. Pray that the Lord will watch over you.”

Mathew then eyed the front of the rim, took one dribble and calmly shot the ball.

“Swish!”

The hostages were release and five new hostages took their place. The routine was the same – only the names of the hostages changed.

“Swish!”

“Swish!”

“He never blinks,” a CIA agent commented as they watched the transmission through the camera imbedded in Matthew’s eye.

“Swish!”

“Swish!”

“Swish!”

This routine went on for just over an hour while Yury fought to control his growing rage. Matthew made 39 consecutive free throws, not one of them touching the rim. Millions of watchers were riveted to their televisions. You didn’t need to be a basketball fan to understand what was happening.

The hostages for the 40th attempt included Jerry Haas, the football player from Waukesha who Matthew challenged to become a leader. The 40th free throw banged hard against the front of the rim, dislodging the grenade and resulting in a primal scream from Matthew.

“Let’s Kick Ass”

Coach cut the electricity to the gym and areas where they knew there were explosives. Jerry Haas caught the falling grenade and hurled it behind the bleachers where it exploded harmlessly. Matthew disarmed the explosives under the basket and then raced full court to the other goal and tackled the terrorist assigned to manually detonate the explosives wired to the backboard.

Shots were fired and explosives went off, but miraculously the students did not panic. Instead, they played zone defense and attacked the

closest terrorist. There were 12 terrorists pitted against 600 angry students and faculty. The terrorists never had a chance.

It took 18 seconds for Coach to open the front door and another 24 seconds for the SWAT team to reach the gymnasium. They were seconds too late, the hostages had everything under control.

Chapter 21

Capture

“Where’s Yury?” Matthew shouted. “Did anyone see where the terrorist leader went?”

“He ran out this door,” a girl shouted. “He can’t be far.”

The SWAT team reacted quickly, but Matthew beat them to it. “You four men come with me and follow Wilson, the rest of you secure the exits,” The SWAT leader ordered. “Don’t let anybody out of the school.”

Matthew raced through the door and into the corridor connecting the gym to Coach’s office. The door was closed, but he quickly searched the office. It was empty. The SWAT team came up behind him. “I wonder if Yury found the tunnels,” he said to the SWAT leader. “I’m familiar with the tunnels. You and another man come with me while the rest of you see if he went that way,” pointing at the front door.

He called Chris Lewis and didn’t waste time with greetings. “Yury might have entered the tunnels from the Coach’s office. Get some men to close off the other exits; I’m going in after him.” Matthew hung up before she could reply so she did as she was asked.

“It’s dark down here, with a lot of places to hide. Let’s be careful,” Matthew cautioned. The SWAT leader was as big as Matthew and not accustomed to taking orders from a civilian.

“With all due respect Mr. Wilson, this is what I’m paid to do. You’re welcome to come along, but my man and I will take the lead. Agreed?”

“Agreed, but let’s hurry and remember, this guy is very dangerous. He won’t hesitate to kill you.”

“We understand. Andrew, take the lead. Be careful.”

Yury wondered how it had come to this. He had known about the tunnels and this was his planned escape route. The others would go out the front door in a suicide mission, but he would use the tunnels to reach cold air return that led to the roof and eventual freedom. Despite the problems, he had almost made it. If the SWAT team had arrived 30 second later he would already be long gone. Now he was trapped and could hear his pursuers approaching. Should he give up and hope for another pardon or prisoner exchange? That would be the smart thing to do.

He could make out the voices of the men behind him, they were that close. It was time to give up. Yury started to rise out of the little cubbyhole he had found when he heard the words that changed his mind.

“Matthew, wait here while we check out the next turn. It looks like an ideal place for an ambush.”

“He was right,” Yury thought. “Come around that bend and I’ll kill you before you know I’m here.” He quickly reconsidered. Why not let the SWAT team go past and wait for Matthew Wilson, the man Yury wanted to kill more than anyone else. It would be suicide, because the SWAT team would come back and kill him. Would it be worth it? The answer was yes.

Yury scrunched back into his little cubbyhole, his dark clothes blending into the background and his face buried in his arms so that no light reflected off his white face. Andrew, and then the SWAT leader went by without noticing the small anomaly pressed against the wall. Both men swept their flashlights briefly on Yury but neither man noticed anything unusual. Yury watched them turn the corner and knew the coast was clear, for a couple minutes at least. He waited, but Matthew wasn’t behind them. He would need to go after Matthew which was okay with Yury. It was like hunting bears in the summer. All you needed to do was sneak into their cave and take them by surprise.

Matthew waited as ordered, but also because his senses warned him of impending danger. Yury was out there; he could feel it. Matthew never proclaimed he was a psychic, he didn’t believe in psychics, but Matthew was finely attuned to his senses and had learned to trust. Matthew waited. He was not armed. His only weapons were a cell phone and a few coins in his pocket. He wished he had the lead pipe he had given Coach earlier, but he would have to make do.

He dialed all but the last digit of the code, turned up the volume to maximum, and waited. The tunnel was pitch black with visibility less than three feet. Yury was almost on him when Matthew heard the slight rustling of clothing brushing against the far wall. He depressed the last number, left the phone on the floor, and stepped back behind a pillar. Moments later, the

tunnel was filled with the immortal words and sounds of one of Matthew's favorite Chuck Berry songs;

Up in the morning and out to school
The teacher is teaching the golden rule
American history and practical math
You studying hard and hoping to pass

Workin' your fingers right down to the bone
And the guy behind you won't leave you alone

Ring, ring goes the bell

The words and song were irrelevant, what mattered was the unnerving impact upon Yury who jumped back, waiting to be attacked. He turned and fired at a noise behind him but missed all the coins that Matthew had thrown. Too late, Yury recognized his mistake. Matthew was on top of him before he could turn back. His gun went flying harmlessly and Yury gave up all fight when Matthew's fist drove into his kidney.

"Matthew, are you all right?" the SWAT team leader asked from a safe distance.

"I'm fine, come on in, it's over."

Twenty minutes later the SWAT team escorted Yury out of the building to a cheering crowd of reporters and law enforcement officials from various agencies. Matthew's role in the capture was never fully reported, which was fine with Matthew. The hostages had waited for Matthew to appear, including the 800 that had been released much earlier. They rose as one entity when Matthew came and out the school door and serenaded him a rousing 'We Kicked Ass' cheer. That was all the thanks he needed.

A week later Ken and Chris joined Jim and Rosann Simpson for dinner. Chris showed off her CIA medal and accepted congratulations on her promotion. Coach showed off the letters he received from the Governor and President of the United States. It was all in good fun.

Rosann put their accomplishments into perspective. "You know, as great a job as the two of you did, and you did do a great job, it pales to what Matthew did. Forty free throws in a row without touching the rim is unbelievable."

“You know what he said to me,” Jim added. He said, “Coach, I didn’t make forty in row, I made one in a row 40 times. Each time I said the names of the five kids and teachers that stood under the basket, and told myself that I had their lives in my hand – they were depending upon me. The free throws kept going in.”

“That’s beautiful,” the friends agreed.

Chapter 22

Graduation Ceremony

There were only four weeks remaining before graduation and most kids turned their attention to planning summer vacations, graduation parties and having fun. It was spring in Wisconsin, a fabulous time of the year when robins returned to the north and romance bloomed along the shores of Lake Michigan.

Not Matthew. There were junior and senior class projects to complete besides the community projects that Matthew had previously set in motion. Matthew was determined to capitalize on our fame. He averaged five speeches a week to various business groups, schools, churches and media. His face was constantly on TV or in the newspapers, promoting charity events, speaking to an enclave of Catholic bishops, dedicating a new synagogue or volunteering at homeless shelters.

He asked for my help. “Coach, let’s leave a little something for people to remember us by; something that others can pick up and carry on with.” For the next month, I averaged four or five speeches a week, mainly to coaching and business groups. My message was simple; “Kicking ass means that if everyone does their best, 100% of the time, the positive impact for that person is truly amazing. They become a better person and make the people around them better too.” I provided some simple examples of Matthew’s suicide drills, work ethic and values had changed the lives of his teammates and classmates at Shorewood High School. The simple message was well received and most businesses asked how they could help. Several wrote six-figured checks on the spot.

The housing rehabilitation project that started with repairing Anton's wall was a huge success and spread to cities throughout the state. Each volunteer group renovated one or two homes a month, which doesn't sound like much, but there were 13 groups in the Milwaukee area alone. Each group was a partnership between a suburban school and an inner city school and resulted in kids of different races and social levels working together for a common objective. "The long term benefits of this interaction will be the legacy of this program," Matthew told the Milwaukee Chamber of Commerce. "That's why we need your backing and technical support." \$250,000 was earmarked for this program as well as a promise to sponsor a funding bill in next year's legislative session. Matthew and I testified before a housing Senate subcommittee that was evaluating the possibility of taking the program nationwide, pretty heady stuff for a basketball coach with only 13 games of coaching experience.

The grand opening of the Community Jobs Center was scheduled for the day before graduation, a fitting monument to a senior class that had left their imprint upon the school and community in many ways. The thirty thousand square foot complex included office space, meetings\ rooms and a state-of-the-art computer system and employment data base. The Governor, two Senators, Congressmen and Mayor took turns lauding the achievement and promising to expand this concept to other Wisconsin communities. The crowd of dignitaries cheered as the Governor cut the tape to the Matthew Wilson Jobs Center.

There was one disappointment. The interdenominational faith program that Matthew and Father McGinnis started never recovered after that episode when the Ark of the Covenant exploded at the church. Two weeks after that event Father Sean had been called to Rome for a temporary assignment. I asked Matthew if Father McGinnis would return.

"I don't think so, Coach. I think he is in a little bit of trouble with the church hierarchy."

"Why, what did he do wrong?"

"I don't think the establishment appreciated his philosophy that there are many ways of serving the Lord and believing in God was more important than being a Catholic. His willingness to discuss other religious philosophies was not received well in Rome and the incident with the Ark of the Covenant was the final straw. I do know that his replacement is not eager to support our youth group. That's too bad, because it is something that is needed, not only here, but throughout the world."

"You were hoping to expand the youth program to other cities, weren't you?" I said, realizing how disappointed Matthew was in this aborted effort.

"I haven't given up." Matthew said softly. "The day will come."

Graduation was this evening and this was the final pep rally. It was also going to be an awards ceremony. As usual, Matthew had been instrumental in planning the event and there were rumors that something special was planned. I knew the rumors were true because I was involved with the security arrangements, but was surprised that the word had not leaked out given all the secret service precautions and people involved. The President of the United States doesn't go anywhere without extensive pre-planning, even for a brief, 15-minute, surprise visit.

There was an election coming up and his campaign staff thought this would be great coverage, but the President said no media.

"Then why are we doing this?" his press secretary asked.

"Because he asked me to," the President replied. "And I want to meet him."

"Invite him to the White House. It's not like he is a world leader."

"Have you read about this young man?" the President asked. "Have you seen what he has accomplished in a few months? Did you see what the school did on the SAT, not just him, but the entire school? Are you aware that Congress just passed a bill to fund his housing rehabilitation program nationwide?"

"Yes, but ..."

"Well don't tell me he isn't a world leader." The President saw something special in this young man and wasn't going to be deterred.

The pep rally started off with a twenty minute video of highlights from the school year played to a background of music ranging from James Brown to Johnny Mathis; a combination of excitement and nostalgia. The video ended abruptly and Matthew took the stage to a loud ovation. The students were keyed up.

Backstage, the President of the United States and his team slipped in and watched the proceedings. He needed to see for himself what this young man was all about.

Matthew called for silence and raised two fingers. "My name is Matthew Wilson, and I am a student at Shorewood High School, and when I am a student, I Kick Ass." The response from the students was enthusiastic, to say the least. It was the last pep rally and everyone was keyed up.

"Today, we are ..." The lights went out and there was silence for just a moment before the beat began, starting softly and increasing in volume as two searchlights scanned the curtain looking for the source of the music. **Boom-boom-boom, Boom-Boom-Boom, BOOM-BOOM-BOOM,**

BOOM-BOOM-BOOM. The students roared and screamed in delight. They had heard the song many, many times and seen it on television and at the movies, but they couldn't get enough of it.

Jennifer waited to make her appearance and almost failed to notice that the President of the United States was seated only ten feet away watching the performance on a closed circuit TV. She nodded and then turned her attention back to the song. This would be her last chance to sing this song for Matthew. She wished she could have performed alone.

Jennifer stepped through the curtain and the spotlight found her and the student body roared in delight. However, Jennifer waited and the beat continued; **BOOM-BOOM-BOOM; BOOM-BOOM-BOOM; BOOM-BOOM-BOOM.**

The students were getting restless when the 2nd spotlight shifted to the other side of the stage and settled on the split in the curtain. A woman stepped forward into the spotlight and the music started.

“You come to me, come to me, wild and wild”

The spotlights slowly moved higher.

*“Give me a lifetime of promises and a world of dreams,
Speak a language of love like you know what it means”*

The spotlight revealed the face of Tina Turner and the auditorium went crazy. “Tina, Tina,” the kids shouted as they recognized the famous singer. Jennifer, Jennifer the students screamed as the spotlight revealed Jennifer's face.

The women were dressed in identical sequined, black dresses and looked absolutely fabulous. It was amazing how a 60 year old woman can perform next to an 18-year old and not back down for a moment. Tina looked as good in person as she did on her videos. She really did have awesome legs. Both women were now up close to Matthew, pounding fists against his chest as they sang the song's refrain.

*“You're simply the best, better than all the rest,
better than anyone I've ever met”*

Students had their arms held high above their head, swaying side-to-side with the music, just like they did at the first pep rally and like millions of others have done at Tina Turner concerts or in front of their TVs.

*“In your eyes I get lost, I get washed away
Just as long as I’m here in your arms I could be in no better place,
You’re simply the best, better than all the rest.”*

The song ended and both women received a long, standing ovation before Jennifer exited to allow Matthew and Tina to sing a duet of Proud Mary.

“Thank you, Tina, and thank you, Jennifer,” Matthew started again. “As I was saying before I was so rudely interrupted,” he continued, holding up two fingers. “We have awards to present this afternoon to those of you that have excelled during their years at Shorewood High School. Principal Hawkins, would you please do the honor.” Bill Hawkins took the microphone and Matthew went off stage to meet the President of the United States.

The President had been watching the television in admiration of how Matthew controlled the audience and how they hung on his every word. He stood and greeted Matthew with a warm, presidential handshake and a Lyndon Johnson-like clasp of the shoulder. “It is truly an honor to finally meet you, young man. I have been following your exploits and am impressed.”

“Thank you, Mr. President, the pleasure is mine. I have been following your exploits and for the most part, am also impressed,” he said returning the President’s handshake with a firm grip. The President laughed at the slight twist of words and the inference, recognizing there was no agenda behind the statement, just an honest opinion that he did not agree with everything the President had done.

“Well, Laura doesn’t support me on everything either, and certainly Congress doesn’t. I would think you were a fool or a liar if you agreed on everything I have done, and I certainly don’t think you are either.”

“Thank you, Mr. President. I know your time is short, but I want you to know you are welcome to stay for as long as you like. As we discussed, you will make the presentations to the “lucky 12” who took the 2nd SAT test. We hope you can deliver a short speech. After that, you are welcome to stay for the final hour. It’s up to you.”

“What comes after we make the presentations to the lucky 12?”

“I’m going to give a medal to all the seniors commemorating their achievement.” Matthew handed the President a specially prepared sample, engraved with the President’s name and his SAT score from the year he was first accepted at Yale, the year before he enlisted in the US Navy and

fought in WW II. “We wanted you to have this as an expression of our thanks for coming here today and honoring our achievements.”

Tears streamed down the Presidents face as he looked at the medallion with the number 1942. “This is absolutely beautiful,” he said in a choked voice. “Do they all have the person’s name and SAT score? That must have cost a small fortune.”

“Yes, there is a lot of profit in that song you heard earlier. Besides, the money is well spent. You deserve it and so do the kids. You can’t imagine the effort they put into studying for the SAT test, not to mention the housing rehab project and other projects we have going on.”

“I’d like to stay until the end if you don’t mind,” the President decided as his travel secretary grimaced.

Principal Hawkins was just completing his award presentations as Matthew stepped back on stage. “Matthew, it’s all yours.

“Thank you sir, and congratulations to everyone who earned a special award today. Let’s give these people a big hand,” Matthew said as he shook each students hand before they returned to their seats.

“I now have the honor of introducing a man who will help me present individual medals to each graduating senior. Each medal has your name and SAT score to honor your achievement. I challenged you to do your best and you did. The effort you gave was the best and therefore, you should be presented your award by the best. Students and faculty, I have the honor to introduce the President of the United States, George H.W. Bush. Let’s give the President a ‘He Kicks Ass’ welcome.”

“Thank you everyone for this great greeting. The words are similar to what I hear every day from Congress, but the meaning is much nicer.” The President gave a short speech applauding their achievements, and the presentations began.

The reception line consisted of the President, Matthew and Principal Hawkins who handed out the medals. The President shook each student’s hand and made some congratulatory comment. He couldn’t help, but notice that Matthew greeted every student by name and had something personal to say. Almost every student said something like; thank you, I’ll miss you, you’re the best, I love you, etc. The President could feel the love and respect, not just from a few, but from every student. How could anyone compete against him if he ever decided to run for president? The presentation was over and Matthew offered President Bush the opportunity to say a few more words.

“I’ll be brief,” the President declared, and kept his promise. “My staff asked me why I wanted to take the time to come here today, and I told

them I wanted to come here to meet and honor a special young man and a special group of young adults who have achieved so much, in so short of time. I was not disappointed. It was privilege to be here.” He sat down to applause that slowly grew into another ‘The President Kicks Ass’ chant.

Matthew stepped to the microphone for what we knew would be the last time at Shorewood High School. The auditorium was silent. “Fellow students and faculty, we have come a long way together and because of you these have been the happiest months of my life. I asked you to do things that were difficult and you succeeded. I owe each of you so much and I want you to know that if you ever need me, I’ll be there for you. I repeat, if you ever need me, I will be there for you. Thank you. Class dismissed.”

The students started to file out as Queen’s “We are the Champions” came over the sound system, but everyone stopped when a young lady shouted out from the back of the auditorium. “If you ever need me, I’ll be there for you, Matthew.”

“I will too,” a boy shouted. Soon, the entire room was shouting the promise; students, faculty, custodians and the President of the United States. **“If you ever need me, I’ll be there for you!”**

Ten years later each person would be asked to fulfill this promise.

Chapter 23

Reminisce

Scholarship offers came in for Matthew every day, but Matthew said he wasn't ready to decide. Privately, Matthew told me that he wasn't even sure he wanted a scholarship. "I'm not sure I want to be obligated to play basketball in college. Sometimes I'm not even sure I want to go to school. There are so many other things I want to do."

"Matthew, you have a lifetime ahead of you. Don't waste the opportunity to be a young man and just enjoy yourself. Most adults will tell you that the college years were the happiest time of their lives."

"I know, Coach, but I'm not like other kids, am I? There are a lot of people counting on me." I'll never forget the expression he had on his face when he made that startling statement. There was a total absence of cockiness or grandeur, just a sad look of someone with an overwhelming burden. I realized for the first time how vulnerable he was and how difficult it must be to live up to his own expectations.

"Just because you are a little smarter than most of us doesn't mean you don't deserve to be happy. Be a little selfish for once and do what's best for Matthew Wilson." I knew it was lame, but I had to say something. I laugh every time I think of saying he might be a 'little bit smarter than most of us'. Was that an understatement or what?

"Coach, I owe it to these schools to tell them something so that they don't hold open a scholarship for me that could go to someone else. Let's tell the recruiters that we appreciate their interest, but that I have made a decision to attend another school. If they ask, tell them that we decided not to identify this school until after graduation. That will buy me some time."

"Okay but I would appreciate sitting down with you again before you make your final decision. Okay?"

"Promise," Matthew said as he shook my hand. "And, by the way, I was really lucky to have you as a coach and friend. Nobody could have done a better job than you did."

Wow, I thought. That compliment made me feel like I was floating on air. If I could frame it, I would put it on the mantle in front of our State Championship trophy.

Two of the boys did get scholarships with the help of highlight videos our audio visual department sent out to targeted schools. Rodney got a full ride to the University of Minnesota and Tom Osteen got a half-scholarship to the University of Wisconsin – Oshkosh, a smaller school about 120 miles north of Milwaukee. The juniors on the team looked forward to carrying on the tradition that Matthew had begun.

My basketball coaching experience only lasted that one year. Ray Meyer recovered from his heart attack and returned to claim his head coaching position, not that I had any interest in coaching again. I was going to quit while I was ahead. Not many coach's can claim a 15-1 record and a State Championship in their only year of coaching.

“What else was there to prove?” I joked as I told Rosann of my decision to return to Tampa.

“Nothing, unless you want to prove to everyone that it was your coaching genius and not Matthew Wilson that was responsible,” Rosann replied, putting me in my place.

“But we will never know for sure, will we?” I said as I put my arms around her.

“You know and I know,” she persisted. “There is only one Matthew Wilson.”

“Okay, I give up. Besides, I'm looking forward to getting back full-time into the construction business again. Did I tell you we are bidding on a job in Ethiopia?”

“Good, you can search for the Ark while you're there, but don't expect me to visit you. I'm looking forward to getting back home to Tampa.”

At the time I had no idea what she was talking about although I soon learned that Ethiopian Christians have long-claimed that they are custodians of the Ark of the Covenant, once the most important symbol of the Jewish faith and the only physical manifestation of God's presence on earth. I thought back again to the ill fated youth-group meeting at Father Sean's church.

I met one more time with Matthew who told me he planned to accept an academic scholarship to stay in Milwaukee and attend Marquette University.

“Why Marquette?”

“Staying at home will allow me to devote more time to the world ministry that Father McGinnis and I plan to set up in all the major cities in the world,” he explained with the deep, serious voice that I had come to recognize. “There are more and more natural catastrophes occurring throughout the world and people need our help.”

The grandiose plan did not surprise me; Matthew was always thinking big and was three or four moves ahead of the rest of us. His decision to stay in Milwaukee and attend Marquette wasn't about basketball. Matthew had bigger plans, and I had no doubt he would succeed. "Let me know if I can ever help with anything?" I offered without realizing the import of what I was saying.

"Do you mean it?" Matthew asked, looking me straight in the eyes. "I have something in mind for you if you are willing to help."

I didn't realize it the time, but this was the beginning of a ten-year journey that would take me to Ethiopia, Babylon and Jerusalem. Looking back with the benefit of 20-20 hindsight, I realize that I was only a pawn in Matthew's plan to discover the lost Ark of the Covenant.

APPENDIX

The College Years @ Marquette University



Marquette Bradley Center



Freshman Year

Marquette Golden Eagles

Vs.

1961 Ohio State Buckeyes (Championship Game)

Dean "The Dream" Meminger, the silky smooth floor leader for Marquette, was the most valuable player of the 1970 NIT Championship as Marquette beat St. John's University in the finals 65-53. It was a satisfying victory for coach Al McGuire who starred at St. John's for four years and captained the 1951 team that posted a 26-5 mark and finished third in the NIT. The championship rewarded McGuire for his decision to snub the NCAA tournament because of their decision to place the 8th ranked Golden Eagles in the Midwest Region in Dallas rather than the Mideast Region in Dayton, Ohio, which was closer to home and would be easier for Marquette fans to attend. The NCAA got the last word the following year, passing a rule that barred teams from playing NCAA teams if they refused an "invitation" to their yearend tournament; crude, but effective. The 1970 NIT Championship began an era of 'seashells and balloons' and Milwaukee's love affair with Al McGuire that culminated with an NCAA Championship in 1977, beating Dean Smith's North Carolina team in the finals. That was the last game that Al McGuire coached, choosing to go out on top as a winner and ride his motorcycle into the sunset searching for antiques and listening to the beat of his own drum.

Author's Note: *This chapter, and the other chapters about basketball, are mostly fiction. Most of the names and names are correct, but the times and places have been changed. Marquette rosters are jumbled so that every member of Marquette's Basketball Hall of Fame could be included. The games are fictitious. Most were played in a time when palming the ball, and taking two steps without dribbling, were traveling violations.*

Marquette was loaded. In addition to Matthew Wilson at shooting guard, the team featured Terry Rand, a smooth 6'11" senior who last year averaged 18 points and 10 rebounds. Maurice Lucas was at power forward, a 6'10" junior out of New York, dubbed the 'aircraft carrier' by McGuire because of his ability to carry a team. The point guard, Butch Lee, was a senior with three years' experience. Lee almost single handedly led the Puerto Rico national team to an upset of the US Olympic team the previous summer, scoring 39 points in a one point loss. The small forward was George Thompson, a 6'5", 230 pound jumping jack from New York City who played like he was 6'10". Never much of an outside shooter, Thompson brought his inner city game to Marquette and dominated much taller players.

As was typical of Marquette basketball teams under McGuire, the pre-season schedule was full of cupcakes, teams that allowed Marquette to rack up victories which got them into the year-end NCAA tournament. Their first real test was in the sixth game when they played the University of Wisconsin in Madison, and lost 72-69. Matthew was in foul trouble throughout the game and finished with only 13 points. Butch Lee had seven turnovers and was an anemic three for 14 from the field.

Marquette finished the pre-season eight and one and entered the Big East schedule with high hopes. The opening game against a mediocre Providence team proved to be a cakewalk as they got off to a fast start and won by 18. They followed this with victories against West Virginia, Seton Hall and Notre Dame before running up against a tough Louisville team in Freedom Hall. They lost by seven points as they were unable to handle the Louisville press and athleticism under the basket. Matthew had 28 points, but got little help on the front line as Terry Rand and Maurice Lucas fouled out with a total of only 13 points and 8 rebounds between them.

Big East favorite, the #3 ranked Georgetown Hoyas, came to Milwaukee the following week. It was the Golden Eagles first big test. They were more than up to it as they easily beat the Hoyas 74-58, playing smothering defense highlighted by full court press for the entire game. Butch Lee dominated the Hoya guards and finished with 26 points and eight assists. Matthew only had seven points but contributed six steals and 17 rebounds. George Thompson, only 6'5", had his way inside against the taller Hoyas players and finished with 19 points and 15 rebounds. Marquette was 22 and three as they entered the Big East tournament which they won handily; beating South Florida, Seton Hall and Pittsburgh in the finals.

Marquette was ranked #4 in the national polls and awarded a #1 seed in the Eastern region. Al McGuire would have preferred to play in Chicago,

the home of the Midwest region, where Marquette fans could pack the arena and show their support. However, unlike 1970 when he pulled his team out of the NCAA and instead won the NIT Invitational tournament, he acquiesced and accepted the invitation to play in New York. Besides, it was good for recruiting New York players.

The Golden Eagles won their first two games easily and advanced to the round of 16 at New York's Madison Square Garden where they faced the University of Nevada-Las Vegas. The Running Rebels came out hot, hitting their first seven shots, and quickly took a 17-6 lead before Marquette slowly crept back. Butch Lee got in immediate foul trouble against the fast UNLV guards and was replaced by a promising freshman, Dean Meminger. Like Thompson, Meminger was a product of the New York City playgrounds where he shattered several of Lou Alcindor's high school scoring records. Despite being only 6'1, Meminger could sky, and today he showed the national television audience why he was such a prized recruit. Meminger finished the game with 23 points and 10 rebounds and led the Golden Eagles to a 12 point victory. Matthew contributed 18 points and 14 rebounds. Terry Rand led all scorers with 23 points.

In the round of eight, the Golden Eagles were matched against Big East rival Louisville who had beaten them earlier in the year. This time Marquette jumped off to a quick start and easily beat the Cardinals, 81-66, exacting revenge for their early season loss. The Marquette was in the Final Four.

Their first game in the Final Four was against UCLA, the No. 1 seed from the West. Unlike recent UCLA teams that were dominated by the All-American centers Lou Alcindor and Bill Walton, this team featured two power forwards - David Meyers and Curtis Rowe. McGuire knew that Terry Rand and Maurice Lucas needed to have big game if the Golden Eagles were to compete. Marquette jumped off to a quick start and Matthew completely shut down Curtis Rowe who was held to 11 points. His running mate, David Myers, the consensus all-American and future #1 draft pick of the Milwaukee Bucks, had 26 points and 16 rebounds but it was not enough as Marquette prevailed, 86-82. Terry Rand had a game-high 28 points and Lucas contributed 17 points and 17 rebounds.

Marquette advanced to the finals where they were matched against possibly the greatest collection of college basketball players ever put together, the Ohio State Buckeyes, led by three-time All-American Jerry Lucas. In addition to Lucas, Ohio State featured four other starters that would go on to play pro basketball; John Havlicek, a member of the NBA Hall of Fame, Mel Nowell, Joel Roberts and Larry Siegfried. The sixth man for the Buckeyes was Bob Knight, future coach of the Indiana Hoosiers.

John Havlicek wasn't much of a scorer in college but was already a great defensive player. He set his mind to shutting down Matthew Wilson. He succeeded for the first 35 minutes and his team led by seven points. At that point, Matthew had four fouls and six points on 3 of 12 shooting as Havlicek had a hand in his face on every shot attempt. The Golden Eagles stayed close as George Thompson, Terry Rand and Butch Lee each had 15-18 points after three quarters. Rand fouled out with seven minutes to go and it was time for Matthew to step. He did. Matthew scored Marquette's next 12 points starting his spree with a rebound basket off a miss by Thompson. He then hit two outside jump shots, stole the ball from Siegfried and drove in for an uncontested layup. He finished his scoring spree with a running hook shot over the outstretched arms of Havlicek and the Golden Eagles were up by three points. This lead quickly dissipated as Lucas hit a short hook shot and then followed up a missed shot by Roberts with a rebound basket. Ohio State was up by one with only eight seconds to go.

The team huddled around Al McGuire who had a deserved reputation as one of the best game day coaches of all time. McGuire gave directions for the final play. It was typical of McGuire not to go to his shooting star, but go with the person he felt would perform in this situation, which in this instance was freshman Dean Meminger. Only 6'1", Meminger scored most of his points underneath the basket and to this point had been stifled by Lucas and Havlicek. That didn't stop McGuire from calling his number for the final play.

"Matthew, get the ball to Dean at the top of the circle. Maurice and Terry will set a double screen at the free throw line and draw their men away from the basket. Dean, fake left and drive hard right and you should have an easy layup. Questions?"

The play worked to perfection although not as originally planned. Meminger found a clear path to the basket and went up for the winning shot, only to find his path blocked by Havlicek who switched off his man to help out. 'Hondo' leapt high to block the layup attempt but at the last moment Meminger double clutched, turned in the air and found Matthew alone in the corner with a perfect pass. The buzzer went off as the ball swished through the basket. The Marquette Golden Eagles were National Champions.



Three of Marquette's best!

**Travis Diener
Steve Novak
&
Dwayne Wade**

 **Sophomore Year**

Marquette Golden Eagles

Vs.

1976 Indiana Hoosiers

(Championship Game)

Marquette entered the college basketball season as defending NCAA champions with only one returning starter, Matthew Wilson, and ranked outside the top 20 in pre-season polls. Terry Rand and George Thompson graduated and Maurice Lucas, Dean Meminger and Butch Lee left school a year early to enter the NBA draft. It was time to put Al McGuire's considerable recruiting skills to good use. His style didn't appeal to everyone, but McGuire knew his niche.

There were a couple of old adages that defined McGuire's recruiting style. He liked to say, "I couldn't recruit a kid if he had grass in front of his house. That's not my world. My world is a cracked sidewalk."

McGuire claimed he could tell right away if a recruit would accept Marquette by what happened when he entered the house. He knew he had no chance if the recruit's mother invited him to sit in the living room, but if she allowed him into the kitchen and offered him a glass of milk, her boy was coming to Marquette. McGuire was the first Marquette coach to recruit out of the New York area and had a steady stream of talent including George Thompson, Meminger and Ric Cobb.

Redshirt Freshman Glenn 'Doc' Rivers was ready to step into a starter's role and was more than an adequate replacement for Butch Lee at point guard. Earl Tatum, a seldom-used sophomore, would replace George Thompson at power forward. McGuire still needed two recruits. He landed forward Bo Ellis from Chicago, who would go on to be a future All-American. Ellis was 6'9" with a tremendous wingspan that allowed him to play taller than his height.

McGuire had only to look 15 miles to the South to find a new center; Jim Chones a 6'11" freshman from Racine, Wisconsin. Chones would prove to be one of the best big men ever to play at Marquette. McGuire

capped off a great recruiting season by finding another big man, Eugene Berce, a junior college player from California. Berce was only 6'9", but weighed 230 pounds and took up space underneath the boards.

The season opened with a tournament in Alaska; the Great Alaskan Shootout. Marquette had played an AAU team and an international team as practice games, but these would not count in the NCAA standings. The Great Alaskan Shootout was their first real test and it would be a good one because 18 of the 24 teams that were invited had been ranked in the top 25 the preceding year. Given the team's youth and inexperience, and the stellar competition, it was not surprising that Marquette lost in the second round and then lost again in the 5th place consolation game. The two losses would make it difficult to match the prior year's final record of 27 - 3.

The team started to shape into form as Marquette settled into the easy part of its schedule, interrupted only by a 15 point home win against the University of Wisconsin, the team that beat them in Madison the prior year. It was a good win and gave indications that this team might be better than some people thought. Jim Chones was turning into a dominating center with a smooth fade-away jump shot from ten to fifteen feet.

Matthew took a different approach this year. As a freshman he had been surrounded by good players and content to contribute assists, rebounds and occasional scoring; whatever the team needed. He finished the season averaging a respectable 16 points and 12 rebounds. This year, despite the emergence of Chones, he was asked to provide more offense and was averaging 23 points heading into the tough Big East schedule. They finished the Big East schedule 14 - 2, in second place behind Connecticut. Big wins against Louisville and Georgetown were offset by upsets at Seton Hall and Villanova. Still, second place finish and a #2 seed was a good way to enter the Big East tournament.

The Golden Eagles easily beat Syracuse in the opening round as Matthew scored 31 points, the fifth time this year he had been over 30. Marquette suffered a shocking upset to 7th seeded Rutgers in round two. Possibly overconfident, they came out flat and lost a heartbreaker on a last second desperation shot from center court. The team waited to see how the loss would affect their NCAA seeding. No one was surprised when they were given a #4 seed and banished to the Western Region where the top seeds were UCLA, Stanford and UNLV. Marquette was not expected to make it out of this region.

Matthew took it upon himself to call a team meeting before the first game at the large UCLA pavilion stadium. "Nobody's giving us much of a

chance this year, but I disagree. We have a good team. Let's give 100% and see what happens."

Matthew carried the team on his back, scoring 33 and 36 points as the Golden Eagles easily defeated Pepperdine and Oklahoma State to reach the round of 16 where they were matched against UNLV, the No. 3 seed. Jerry Tarkanian's Running Rebels were fast and could shoot, but paid little attention to defense. Predictably, it was a high scoring game. The outcome came down to which team was willing to step up and play defense?

Larry Johnson, destined to be the #1 overall pick in next year's NBA Draft, erupted for 26 in the first half, continually using his 6'7", 250 pound body to get position underneath the basket. At half time, Marquette switched to a man to man defense and Matthew took it upon himself to shut Johnson down. He did, holding Johnson to three points in the second half. Matthew finished with 31 points and Marquette prevailed 103-97.

The regional championship game was set for Saturday evening against the No. 1 seed, UCLA, featuring two-time All-American Gale Goodrich. Rivers put the clamps on Goodrich as Earl Tatum scored 21 points while Bo Ellis had 20 points and 14 rebounds. Chones also played a great game, finishing with a double-double, 12 points and 10 rebounds. Marquette won 89-76 and it was on to New Orleans for their second consecutive Final Four.

The final four was loaded with talent from the Big Ten plus one of the greatest ACC teams, NC State. Marquette was matched against the Michigan Wolverines who had finished 2nd in the Big Ten. The Wolverines were big and talented, featuring center Bill Bunton and three-time All-American Cazzie Russell. Russell didn't disappoint as he scored a game high 46 points for the Wolverines but it was not enough. Matthew had 41 points and 22 rebounds in a dominating display of basketball. Jim Chones had another good game and Bo Ellis contributed 19 points and 12 rebounds. After the win, the players stayed around and watched Indiana easily defeat a North Carolina State Wolfpack team led by 7'4" Tom Burluson and David Thompson. Legend had it that the 6'6" Thompson could touch the top of the backboard from a standing jump. He scored 27, but it was not enough.

Indiana was undefeated and coached by the legendary Bob Knight, the former Ohio State player and Army coach. The Hoosiers sported three All-Americans; Kent Benson, who would be the 1st overall pick by the Milwaukee Bucks in next year's NBA draft, Scott May, a high scoring shooting forward and Quinn Buckner, one of the best defensive guards ever to play the game of basketball. Although giving away five inches, Quinn

Buckner accepted the assignment of guarding Matthew who took him inside, but was constantly double teamed by Benson. Together, they held Matthew to only 11 points on four for nine shooting, but that was all Marquette needed. With the Indiana defense packed inside to stop Matthew, 'Doc' Rivers and Bo Ellis erupted for 27 and 24 points respectively and Marquette won their second national championship, 86-81.

Last year Matthew was the hero, making the final shot, while this year the accolades went to his teammates. Matthew could care less. There is no I in TEAM, at least the way Matthew Wilson played basketball.



Chapter 33

Israel

Matthew's trip to Jerusalem had political overtones from the start, but the basketball game was one of the most entertaining sporting events I have ever witnessed. Part of it was that the Jewish people in this oppressed country were desperately searching for something to cheer about, but a lot of it was Matthew.

There is no shortage of Jews at the executive levels of the NBA, including the commissioner of the league, David Stern. There have been a few great Jewish players in the past including Hall of Famer Dolph Schayes, who played for the Syracuse Nationals throughout the 1950s, and Ernie Grunfeld, the son of Holocaust survivors, who went on to star with the New York Knicks in the 1980s. Today, though, there are no Jewish players in the NBA. An Israeli-born player has never played in the NBA.

Israeli basketball star Oded Katash is trying to become the first. Last summer at the European Championships, Katash's 22 points per game for the Israeli National Team was the best average among all tournament scorers and was one of the 20 top players picked for the first-ever European All-Star game. There is also a money issue. If Katash makes the team, he'll have to accept a salary that would reportedly be in the \$400,000 range - considerably less than what he makes playing basketball in Israel.

The last Israeli player with serious hopes to make the NBA was Doron Sheffer, who starred for the University of Connecticut from 1993 to 1996. He was selected in the second round of the 1996 NBA draft by the Los Angeles Clippers, but decided to return home after not being offered a guaranteed contract. Three other Israeli players in the past have attended summer free-agent camps with respective NBA clubs. Amit Tamira, a 6-foot, 10-inch recent graduate from the University of California at Berkeley, and Elad Inbar, a 26-year-old forward, at the University of Massachusetts at Lowell, are also NBA prospects. Israeli basketball legend Mickey Berkowitz had offers from the Atlanta Hawks and New Jersey Nets in the early 1980s, but a contract with Maccabi Tel Aviv stood in the way. These four players all played on the Israeli national team which beat Russia to win the European championships two years ago.

The score was tied at the end of the first quarter before Matthew's team pulled away and took a comfortable ten point lead into the halftime break. It was good basketball and the crowd cheered both teams. The same

crowd erupted spontaneously when the Israeli team came out on the floor to start the second half, including two new players in the starting line-up; two women whose homes are only about 10 miles away from each other along the Mediterranean Sea are changing the way Israelis look at basketball; Shay Doron, a junior at Maryland and an All-American candidate and Liad Suez-Karni, a senior All-Big East selection at Villanova.

Suez-Karni, a 6-foot-2 senior forward, started playing basketball in Israel the same way many American girls learned the ropes - she just tagged along when her big brother went to the court. The most popular woman player is point guard, Shay Doron who is almost a rock star. Maryland women basketball games are televised back to the small nation and eight million people follow her every move.

The girls were no slouches on the court and the crowd went wild as Doron stole the ball from Matthew and went in for a layup to give the Israelis their first lead. The lead went back and forth until Matthew's jump shot put his team ahead by two points with only 12 seconds remaining. The Israeli team called time out to set up the final shot.

The ball was inbound to Oded Katash who had 24 points on 10 for 12 shooting and was the team's go-to man. Katash drove off a screen and headed to the basket where Matthew was waiting to block his shot attempt, but the shot never came. At the last moment Katash passed out to Doran who had set up at the top of the circle, just outside the men's three point line. The ball was in the air when the final buzzer went off and fifteen thousand people screamed for the ball to be good. The cheers changed to groans as the ball bounced hard off the back rim, but changed again to a thunderous roar as miraculously, the ball reached its pinnacle and slowly dropped down through the center of the net. I was too emotionally drained to follow the crowd as they stormed the court to celebrate.

It took twenty minutes to restore order and get the fans back to their seats. Matthew congratulated the Israeli team and awarded the game's MVP trophy to Shay Doran, much to the delight of the crowd. "This proves once again, that women can compete with men and deserve the right to be treated as equals." The crowd was momentarily silent as they glanced over at the president's box, waiting for a reaction to this obvious criticism of Muslim traditions, before erupting in applause. Matthew waited stoically for the noise to abate before continuing, and when he did, Matthew got right to the point.

"The Jewish people are being oppressed once again, but I promise you that this will not last." Pointing directly at Ahmadinejad in the presidential box, he said the words that rocked the world; "the end is

coming and your time is almost over. God will not allow false idols in the house of Yahweh.”

The crowd gasped as the words sunk in before erupting again with a standing ovation. I watched Ahmadinejad’s face turn blood red as he stood and pointed at Matthew. I couldn’t hear his words over the noise of the crowd, but the meaning became clear as armed guards marched to the podium to arrest Matthew. The crowd booed as Matthew was forcibly escorted away. Scores of Jews piled onto the basketball floor and the heavily armed guards were moments away from firing on the unruly mob. We were moments away from an awful slaughter when Matthew held his arms above his head for silence. “Have faith, my children, and trust in the Lord. Yahweh will protect me.”

I called Rosann a half-hour later, but she had already heard. The game had been televised nationally and all major networks were provided footage of the arrest.

“What happened, Jim; it was like he wanted to be arrested.”

“I’m not sure, but I hope he isn’t trying to be a martyr.”

“Get out of there, Jim, there is nothing you can do that isn’t being done. The network says that the President has already called demanding his release, as have presidents from almost every Western country.”

“I know, Rosann, but I have to try. I’ll call you in the morning.”

I was at the Temple Mount with thousands of other protestors, when, surprisingly, Matthew was released just before noon. Matthew calmly walked down the steps as his supporters roared their approval. He smiled when he saw me.

“Hi Jim, what are you doing here?”

“I was bringing you a toothbrush and pajamas; figured you would be here for a while. How did you break out?”

“I’m not sure why they released me, but I’m glad they did. It wasn’t comfortable in there.”

“Did you meet with Ahmadinejad?”

“Oh yes, and I can assure you it wasn’t his idea to set me free. I think he mentioned something to the effect of rotting in hell.”

“I’m confused. He’s the top guy, isn’t he?”

“Apparently not, or at least not in this instance. I think it had something to do with not wanting to cancel next week’s basketball game. They want to see my butt kicked by that Muslim kid everyone is talking about.”

“Why did you get yourself arrested in the first place? Were you trying to draw attention to the Israeli plight?”

“Yes, but I was also passing on a message. His days are numbered.”

“Do you know something? What’s going to happen?”

“All in good time, Coach.”

I wasn’t going to get any more out of him so I decided to pass on the good news. “By the way, did you know that Lake Tana only dropped 13 feet when we released the water to Somalia? Everything looks good.”

“That’s great. Father McGinnis called me yesterday and told me the Somalians are pleased. Your team did a great job. Please congratulate them for me.”

“Thanks, Matthew, I’ll pass that on. Is there anything you need from me before I head back to Ethiopia?”

“No, I’m heading back to the United States for the game against the Turkish team.”

“Good luck! The Muslim kid is pretty good.”

“Good luck to you, Jim. What you are doing in Ethiopia is more important than any basketball game.”

At the time I thought that Matthew was referring to our efforts to get water to the Somalians, but I would soon learn that Matthew was a step ahead of me again.

Amar watched the events in the basketball game unfurl and shouted in anger as Matthew was led away. He knew it was time to act. The following morning he flew from Istanbul to Jerusalem to meet with Ahmadinejad. Matthew Wilson was freed from prison an hour later. Matthew Wilson’s release had little to do with basketball.

EPILOGUE

A NEW BEGINNING

Rev. 16:12 The sixth angel poured out his bowl on the great river, the Euphrates; and its water was dried up, so that the way would be prepared for the kings from the east.

Rev. 16:17 Then the seventh angel poured out his bowl upon the air, and a loud voice came out of the temple from the throne, saying, "It is done."

Rev. 16:18 And there were flashes of lightning and sounds and peals of thunder; and there was a great earthquake, such as there had not been since man came to be upon the earth, so great an earthquake was it, and so mighty.

Rev. 16: 19 The great city was split into three parts, and the cities of the nations fell. Babylon the great was remembered before God, to give her the cup of the wine of His fierce wrath.

The flotilla of native Ethiopian boats sailed from Lake Tana, forded the spectacular Tis Abay falls, and began the two-month journey to Jerusalem; the original site of Solomon's Temple built to house the Ark of the Covenant. The path took them South along the Blue Nile River, past the falls and hydro-power station, before the Blue Nile curled west and then north towards Khartoum, Sudan, where the Blue Nile merged into the Nile. The flotilla sailed north along the Nile towards Cairo, Egypt and the Aswan dam.

Millions of Egyptians lined the river, eager to catch a glimpse of this magnificent procession. The symbolism left no doubt that this was a convoy sent by God to defeat the Antichrist.

Dedications

For Rosann, my lovely wife, proofreader supreme and head cheerleader – Thank you!

Teammates at West Allis Central High School.
'The Bulldogs'

1959 Starters: Jack Szczesny, Dick Starcevic, Jim Eisenman, Joel Thompson, Jim Plautz

1960 Starters: Jim Eisenman, Dave Krahn, Joel Thompson, Jerry Lawetski, Tom Osteen, Chuck Pitcel, Jim Plautz

1961 Starters: Jerry Lawetski, Doug Sinclair, Chuck Pitcel, Mike Sachen/ Tom Osteen, Jim Plautz

Author's Note

This book is a work of fiction. A few of the characters in Part One, 'Let's Play Basketball', have names similar to former teammates and opponents, but that's where the similarity ends. All of the events and basketball games are fictional.

The Marquette players and names of their NCAA opponents are very real. I grew up listening to Marquette basketball on the radio and Terry Rand was the first name I remember. I played basketball and baseball with Tom Kojis, Don's brother. I pray Tom achieved everlasting peace. I was on the University of Wisconsin freshman team when we upset a great Ohio State team in 1962.

The International players are also real, although the basketball games are mostly fiction. I enjoyed most the research I did on Yao Ming and Dikembe Mutombo and learned to appreciate the impact these two men have upon their countries. The same goes for the Lithuanian basketball players and the suffering their country endured to regain independence.

The Ark of the Covenant is mentioned frequently in both the Bible and the Koran. Graham Hancock's book, 'The Sign and the Seal', was invaluable; I actually read the whole book, some parts more than once. This book is a must-read for anyone interested in delving further into the Ark of the Covenant, James Bruce, The Knights Templar, the Ethiopian Black Jews and other themes in this book.

Matthew Wilson and Amar Rashad are fictional, but the belief in the 'Second Coming' and 'The Mahdi' are very real for their respective religions. The idea of an Antichrist is also well documented, although the idea that Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is the Antichrist is probably fictional. I find it intriguing to think of what would happen if the Ark of the Covenant was found. Would it create pressure to return the Ark to The Temple Mount and rebuild Solomon's Temple on the site currently occupied by the Al Aqsa Mosque, Islam's third most holy site? The Ark of the Covenant may indeed still be hidden on one of the many islands in Lake Tana, Ethiopia.

I apologize to anyone offended by my simplified treatment of very complex and controversial subjects.

The Agents (Coming Soon)



The Next Sports Thriller by Jim Plautz

“I regret to inform you that you that your petition to purchase the New York Yankees has been denied. A majority of owners have decided that your ownership group fails to meet the high standards that major league baseball has established for admission into this closed fraternity. As a result, the Yankees have decided to move in a different direction. The Commissioner’s Office appreciates the time and effort your group has invested. We wish you luck in future endeavors.”

“Screw you, you sanctimonious bastard, and screw the rest of you that voted no. Your fraternity is nothing but a sham. I’ll see you in court. This isn’t over by a longshot.” Having vented his immediate rage, Malcolm Linebaum stormed out of the conference room. His attorneys and minority partners followed, with one exception. There was always Plan B.

Jim Simpson made his decision. Malcolm could have his revenge and the new owners would make a very nice ROI on their investment. Simpson hurried to catch up with Malcolm Linebaum.

‘Yankees win! Yankees win!’

“Sound familiar? It should. The 2009 World Series victory over the Phillies was the Yankee’s 28th championship, 25% of the championships played since 1903. St Louis is next with 10. Chicago last won 1n 1908. Milwaukee’s only championship came in 1957, 52 years ago. Is life fair? Is baseball fair?”

“What’s your point?” Malcolm Linebaum asked. “That’s why we were willing to pay \$2.4 billion for the privilege of owning that money-making

machine. Shit, they could finish last and still be the most profitable franchise in sports.”

“In the short term, yes; but they need to continue winning in order to maximize television revenues. That new stadium gives them a tough nut to crack before they break even.”

“So.”

“So, what if we found a way to equalize the playing field?”

“Are you talking Salary Cap? It’ll never happen, and revenue sharing is a joke? There will never be a level playing field in baseball. It’s been that way since Ruth and Gehrig.”

“I’m not talking revenue sharing – I’m suggesting we beat them at their own game. What if they didn’t have CC Sabathia, A.J. Burnett and Mark Teixeira this year?”

“But they do.”

“Imagine what might have happened if Sabathia had stayed in Milwaukee?”

“But, that’s never going to happen. The Brewers are a small-market team. They offered Sabathia \$100M over five years, but the Yankees offered \$161M. The Brewers will never be able to outbid the Yankees.”

“What if they could, or better yet, what if they didn’t have to?”

“You do remember Curt Flood and Catfish Hunter.” Malcolm replied with sarcasm. “We now have something called free agency.

“Yeah, and Baseball also has the Rule 4 Draft and a bunch of other regulations that protect the owners. Players are still at a disadvantage for the first five years of their career. Let’s use this to our advantage.”

How?” asked Malcolm, leaning forward across the table. Simpson knew he was hooked.

“Form a new league.”

“No way; it would be impossible. We would need stadiums, television contracts and hundred other things. The league would lose money and end up just like the WFL and ABA. Are you serious?”

“Very serious. Baseball revenues are generated by the star system. The league that has the stars will control the market.”

“And how do we sign the stars?”

“Agents.”

