

Lost and Found

Part 7

By Douglas Fox

Chapter 61

My final week of school was relaxed since I had my mornings free. Two mornings Josh Bruno, Chad King and I got together to review our teaching courses so we would be prepared for our finals. I wrapped up my last term paper for my Civil War History course. Dr. Williams gave us the option of writing a term paper or doing the essay final. I opted for the term paper. Either way I was going to write, so I might as well do my writing over the course of a couple weeks instead of trying to cram the work into an hour and fifty minutes during the finals period.

Tuesday evening Coach Burton called all seniors to a meeting after dinner. The meeting was brief. Coach warned us about sport agent contacts. They were allowed to contact us this summer, now that we were starting on our fourth year of eligibility. We were not allowed to accept anything of value from a prospective agent, including meals or travel. Our family wasn't allowed to accept anything of value either. We could not contract with an agent verbally or in writing. If we broke the NCAA's rules we would automatically lose our final year of eligibility.

Coach recommended that we entirely avoid contact with agents until after our final game. They would be a distraction to our football season. He asked us not to discuss agent contacts with the underclassmen or with each other. None of us needed the distraction or the potential jealousy among ourselves.

I was pleased to see more thumb prints showing up on the "On to Phoenix" plaque in our locker room during the week. Chip, Brian, John Crosby, Bob Smith and Charlie Taylor came to me and my fellow captains for a ruling. Was attending summer semester and working on the passing game in their free time this summer considered 'going above and beyond the call?' Trevor, Damian and I agreed it was. The five proudly put their thumb prints to the glass.

Coach Burton called me in Wednesday morning for a meeting. "Coach, I would like you to help out at one of our football camps this summer," Coach Burton said when I sat down beside him on the couch in his office.

"Sure, I'd enjoy chaperoning the kids again like I did last year," I responded. "That was fun."

“Actually, I wasn’t looking for you to be a chaperon,” Coach Burton said. “You’re too valuable for that. I have dozens of team members who can handle that job. I would like you to be on the coaching staff for one of the camps.”

“Sure, I would enjoy that too,” I replied. “Do you mind if I ask you a question? Why...”

Coach Burton’s laughter stopped me. After a few seconds he managed to get himself under control. “I’ve known you for four years, Coach. All I ever hear from you is ‘Why do we do this?’, ‘How does this work?’ and ‘Why do we do that?’ I love it!” Coach Burton chuckled a little more. “You’re a hell of a football player and you’re going to be a hell of a coach, Kyle. The why is this – I like to encourage young men interested in my profession.”

“Thank you for the help, Coach,” I said.

“God forbid, if something should happen to you next season and you can’t play,” Coach Burton said. “...or if some nitwit team in the NFL that doesn’t know how to win a game if you spotted them twenty-eight points drafts you, DON’T play football. Come here. I will have a coaching job for you any time you ask for it.”

“Wow! Thanks for telling me that, Coach,” I said. “I hope I stay healthy next season and get a good opportunity in the NFL, but it’s nice to know I have options if I don’t make it.”

“You do have options,” Coach Burton said. “I’ll hire you five minutes after you get your sheepskin next May, if you need me to.”

“Hopefully that won’t be necessary,” I replied. “When is the football camp you want me to help with?”

“I’d like to use you at the Senior Camp on June 29th to July 1st.” Coach Burton said.

“I’ll check with my brother and his boss to see how much time I can get off that weekend,” I said. “It’s the start of the scout camp’s Fourth of July week. Attendance is usually down a little. I may be able to get off on Sunday afternoon too.”

“That would be helpful,” Coach said. “The university will cover a motel room and food for the weekend for you. I can give you a 25% raise in pay for the weekend over last year since you’re part of the coaching staff.”

“The bump in pay is excellent, Coach,” I said. “I don’t know that you need to get me a motel room. Chip is keeping our apartment this summer. I can crash with him. Put my meal money on my eLion card and I’ll be happy, Coach.”

“Done!” Coach Burton said. He rose and I followed his lead. We shook on the deal.

“I’m looking forward to working with you, Coach,” I said.

“I’m looking forward to it too,” Coach Burton answered before I left his office. I was pleased with the offer Coach made. With the bump in pay for coaching, I would make more from Friday afternoon until Sunday at football camp than I made in a week of Scout Camp. That’s sweet.

The finals schedule was announced that week. My Adolescent Development final was on Monday, April 30th at 2:30 pm. Dr. Ward’s SS Ed 412 final was on Tuesday, May 1st at 8:00 am. My C I 412W final was Wednesday, May 2nd at 12:20 pm. I wouldn’t be free to leave on Wednesday. Coach Burton called a coordinators and team captains meeting for 9:00 am on Thursday morning.

Normally the NFL draft was a big deal on our campus. This year it wasn’t. Tyler Madden was our highest rated player. He was expected to go in the second or third round. Aidan Nagy, Max Rosen, Ben Walker, Mehmed Marsic, Andrew Perkins and Salim Rogers all hoped to be drafted.

I did the final proofreading and printing for my history term paper Thursday night during the first round of the draft. I didn’t bother to watch. Tyler had no shot at being chosen then. Tyler headed home to Norristown after classes on Friday. He and Kayla would watch the draft there. Andrew Perkins decided to head home to Carlisle that weekend too. The rest of the potential draftees stayed on campus. They knew IF lightning struck them, it wouldn’t be until late on Saturday.

My roommates and I planned to throw a big final party of the year on Saturday night. We were busy with preparations for the party and for our Saturday night dinner cookout. We had the draft on our TV. Lightning struck around 9:30 that evening when Roger Goodell stepped to the podium and announced, “The New York Giants, with the 57th pick in the draft, select Tyler James Madden, free safety, of the Pennsylvania State University.”

The four of us let out a big cheer for our friend. We waited half an hour and then tried to call him. The phone was busy. We didn’t reach Tyler until almost eleven o’clock. The four of us offered our congratulations as we passed the phone around the room.

We left the TV tuned to ESPN Saturday while we studied and prepared for our cookout and party. Damian and I found some nice steaks at the grocery store. Chip and Trevor bought cheap, disposable grills to cook our steaks on. I prepared Potatoes Lyonnais for our dinner along with some early sweet peas we found at the store. Damian prepared a Black Forest Torte for our dessert.

I invited Molly to join Trevor, Steph, Damian, Billy, Chip, Claire and me for dinner. We studied for Monday’s Adolescent Development final while my dishes cooked on

Saturday afternoon. Chip and Trevor grilled the steaks perfectly. Everyone enjoyed my side dishes. Damian's dessert was fantastic.

We were doing the dishes after dinner when the TV caught our attention again. Former 49er hero Dwight Clark took the stage to announce their sixth pick. "The San Francisco 49ers, with the 174th pick, chose placekicker Andrew Perkins of the Penn State Nittany Lions." We cheered for our friend's good fortune.

Teams rarely drafted kickers, they normally signed them as free agents. The coaches in San Francisco must have decided that Andrew's talents were worth the risk. I knew Aaron Morano had complained about their kicker last season. He missed two short field goals that cost the 49ers two games. I guess Andrew was supposed to fix that problem.

We got through on Andrew's cell phone just before our party started that evening. A dozen guys must have talked to Andrew and congratulated him before we hung up. No more Penn State players' names were called that evening.

Our party got going just about the time the draft finished. We went all out to have top notch snacks. Damian did an all-star hors d'oeuvres review of his best this year. Trevor and Damian stocked up our supply of booze with the best around. Most of our "party money" went to funding the evening. We kept a small stash for our next party in August when we returned to school.

Molly and I talked as we enjoyed the music, talking with friends and drinking our beers that evening. I hit my limit of three early. What the hell? Given my Mom's attitude about alcohol and the fact that I would spend half my summer at a scout camp, I probably wasn't going to have more drinks until the end of July. I wasn't going anywhere so I indulged myself.

Salim Rogers received a phone call in the middle of the party. He took it outside. He came back inside grinning ear to ear. "I'm a Dallas Cowboy now!" he announced to the cheers of his friends and teammates. Max Rosen received a similar call that evening. He was getting a try-out with the New Orleans Saints.

Molly spent a lot of time talking with Mitch Jackson, our punter, later in the evening. The two of them ended up leaving the party together, fairly early that night. Good for Molly. She deserved a nice guy like Mitch.

I was introduced to a new girl, who was a friend of a friend of Beth Naylor's. The girl, Kaitlyn Carter, was a knock out. She gave me another beer, my fifth, as we talked. I wasn't wasted yet, but I wasn't feeling any pain either.

Kaitlyn was fun to talk with. She was a sophomore communications major who hoped to get into radio or TV news. She asked me about my family and my plans after football. She was fun and easy to talk with. We found room on the couch and had a seat together. Kaitlyn leaned against me as we continued our conversation.

My cock stirred when I smelled her sweet perfume. I tried to will my organ to remain soft, with limited success. Kaitlyn snuggled closer as we talked and enjoyed the music. She talked more quietly so I had to lean her way to listen.

I suppose my conscious brain knew I was being seduced. My subconscious was enjoying the hell out of the experience. I should have stopped things but it was too damn easy to just go with the flow. After a few more shared whispers, Kaitlyn rolled on top of me, faced me, wrapped her arms around my neck and smacked me with a big kiss on the lips.

“I like you a lot, Kyle,” Kaitlyn purred. “I would like to get to know you... intimately.” She punctuated the last word by grinding her luscious, ripe tits against my chest. Alarm bells should have been going off in my slight fuzzy brain.

Thank God they were! “Oooohh...” I stammered. “This... this is sooo, soooo tempting.” I squirmed out from under her. “I have a girlfriend in Philly... I... I just can’t.”

“Hmmph...” Kaitlyn huffed. “Beth warned me not to bother trying for you. I guess she is right.”

“Sorry, I just can’t,” I responded.

“Nobody has refused these,” Kaitlyn said, making one more try for my attentions. She cupped her breasts together. God, they had to be 36D or even 36DD. I took a deep breath.

“If I wasn’t attached already...” I said. “I would so take you up on your offer.”

“But you are attached,” Kaitlyn said. “Your girlfriend is a lucky girl.”

“Thank you,” I said as I retreated to safety.

“You dodged one there,” Trevor commented as I headed for the kitchen. “You do know Penny has spies here, don’t you?” He pointed over at Shawn Byrd and his girlfriend Jada. Shawn gave me a thumbs-up.

“I’m going to go and take a cold shower now,” I replied to Trevor. I didn’t really do that. Instead I went to the downstairs bathroom and beat off until I had relieved my steely cock of its hardness. I decided one more beer wouldn’t be the end of me.

I was pretty drunk by the time the party ended. I managed to help my roommates and their girlfriends clean up before we went to bed. I collapsed in my bed before I had time to change the damp sheets.

I was head sore, sticky and beat when I woke on Sunday morning. I knew the feeling only too well. I took a couple aspirin, drank a bottle of water and took a long, hot soaking shower to relieve my hangover.

I gave Penny a call after I finished the newspaper in the afternoon.

“How’s studying going, honey?” I asked.

“I’m plugging away,” Penny answered. “I have spent all weekend studying organic chemistry. My final is at eight o’clock tomorrow morning.”

“Good luck with it,” I said. “My first final is at 2:30 tomorrow.”

“I have some news that you might find interesting,” Penny said. “My roommate April got some great news on Friday. She’s been accepted to study at the University of Edinburgh next year.”

“Oh really?” I teased. “I guess you’re looking for a roommate.”

“Know anyone who might be interested?” Penny responded.

“Yes, I do know of someone, but only for Spring semester,” I said.

“We can work that out, Kyle,” Penny said. “I’m sure I can find someone who needs an extra semester to finish their degree. They’ll be happy to have an apartment for one semester.”

“How much is the rent?” I asked.

“\$1295 a month,” Penny said. “I hope that isn’t too expensive.”

“I don’t know,” I replied. “I’ll talk with my parents when I get home in a few days.”

“When is your last final?” Penny asked.

“I finish finals at 4:20 on Wednesday,” I explained. “I have a leadership meeting with the football team Wednesday night and a meeting with Coach Burton and our coordinators Thursday morning. I should be home Thursday afternoon.”

“My last final is after lunch on Thursday,” Penny said. “Daddy is picking me up Friday. He’s borrowing Grandpa’s pickup truck so we have enough room to haul everything back to Lancaster County.”

“Do you want help moving?” I asked. “I could probably do that if your dad would like some help.”

“Really? That would be great, Kyle,” Penny exclaimed. “Are you sure you want to spend your first day home helping me move?”

“Spending a day with you?” I replied. “I can’t think of a better way to spend my day.”

“OK, I’ll let Daddy know,” Penny said. “I’m sure he won’t mind the help. Good luck with your finals.”

“Good luck with yours too,” I added. “Study that organic chemistry. I expect to hear that you got an A in the course.”

“I’ll do my best,” Penny said. “I love you.”

“I love you too.” I replied before we ended the phone call.

My Adolescent Development course final was a piece of cake. I finished up in 75 minutes. I rechecked my work, turned it in to the proctor and headed back to my apartment.

I found out how the other seniors were faring with the NFL. Mehmed Marsic signed as a free agent with the Atlanta Falcons. Ben Walker was trying out for the Cincinnati Bengals. Aidan Nagy was still trying to hook up with an NFL team. His agent was trying the CFL and Arena Football too. Aidan hoped he would find somewhere to play football after graduation.

The Nittany Lions hadn’t done nearly as well placing players in the NFL as the last two years. I suspected my class would do better than Tyler’s class had done. If I guessed, I would say Trevor, Damian, Bill Daugherty, Josh Bruno, Shawn Byrd, Christian Hunsecker, Greg Nowicki and I were locks to get drafted. Some of the other guys probably would get into the NFL too.

Chad King and I got together Monday evening to study for Tuesday’s SS Ed 412 final. We both felt well prepared after a couple hours work. I enjoyed working with Chad. I doubted we would see much of each other after our last final on Thursday. Chad was student teaching in Pittsburgh next fall while I would be on campus. In the spring semester Chad would be on campus while I did my student teaching in Philadelphia. We might not see each other until we graduated next May. I knew I could count on seeing him at graduation. King and Martin are close enough together alphabetically that I was sure we would be seated close to each other at graduation.

Dr. Ward’s SS Ed 412 final was easy. Most of the class finished up before the hour and fifty minute period was over. Chad, Josh Bruno and I got together to study for our last final Tuesday evening. Dr. Bell’s final wasn’t hard either. I was certain I aced the final.

I was confident that I stood a good chance at having straight A's for the first time in college.

The leadership group met at our apartment Wednesday evening. Damian and Trevor supplied everyone with beers. Trevor, Damian and I discussed our expectations for the summer. We wanted each member of the group to keep in touch with their charges, see that they continued their training, and that they knew the playbook by heart before everyone returned for football camp in August.

Some of the guys headed out to study. They had finals tomorrow. They rest hung around and joined our bullshit session. We reminisced about the last couple seasons and what we expected in our games next year. We wished each other a good summer and told each other to be ready on August 5th. We would need to be ready to work if we really intended to take our team to Phoenix at the end of the season.

I gave Coach Turner, the Wolverines football coach, a call. We talked about what the high school kids were doing for the passing drills. I let Coach know that I planned to stop by and start helping out when they practiced Tuesdays and Thursdays the way I had last year. Coach Turner thanked me for my help but said I was on my own with the help. The PIAA didn't let him get involved in their practice since it wasn't an official practice.

I loaded up most of my things in my car after I talked with Coach Turner. I wanted to bolt from State College as soon as I was finished with my meeting with Coach Burton. Chip agreed to let me store some spare things I wouldn't need at home or at scout camp in our apartment. He would look after them for the summer. My Blu-Ray DVD player and HD TV would stay in State College. That was good for Chip. Trevor was taking his TV home for the summer.

I did French Toast for everyone Thursday morning. Chip joined Trevor, Damian and me for breakfast. He had a 10:10 final that morning. Trevor, Damian and I wished Chip good luck with his final before we headed over to see our coaches at the Lasch Building.

Coach Czarwinski and Coach Adams were with Coach Burton when we arrived. Coach Burton offered us seats on his couch. He spent half an hour talking about his expectations for us as captains. He talked about some of the things he expected of us as leaders of the team – setting the example for the other players, communicating with the rest of the team, and how to bring our group together.

The talk was old hat to Trevor and me. We both learned it when we took the Boy Scouts' Youth Leader Training course. Damian was less familiar with the skills of leadership. Trevor and I would make sure we got him up to speed as the season started.

We told our coaches about our plan to keep in touch with everyone on the team during the summer so we could monitor their training and preparations for training camp in August. I was relieved that we weren't expected to come in early when the freshmen reported three days ahead of the rest of the team.

Coach let us know that G J DeLuca, Ben Witte and Joe Cleveland had agreed to serve as residential assistants. It gave them some extra cash for the job and it gave the team three solid individuals to monitor the freshmen and sophomores in the dorms.

The coaches told us to relax over the summer and come back ready for some football in the fall. Damian, Trevor and I said good bye. Trevor and I headed for the East Parking Deck and our cars. Damian was staying an extra day. Billy didn't finish finals until Friday afternoon.

I had my car unloaded when I got home before I headed over to the school in the afternoon. I arrived about 2:40 pm, in time to check in at the office before class dismissal. The secretary at the front desk told me which classroom Jason Turner worked in. I headed over to talk with him when classes were over.

Jason and I had a nice talk. I told him how Coach Caffrey was doing up in State College. He told me about his plans for the team in the fall. He invited me to come help coach again during the playoffs, as my schedule permitted, in the fall. Jason introduced me to his new offensive coordinator, Patrick Brady.

Patrick looked to be around twenty-seven or eight years old and was a Lehigh grad like Jason. One of Jason's duties as a grad assistant his last year at Lehigh was to tutor Patrick, the rookie QB. Patrick seemed like a nice guy. The high powered Wolverine offense was going to be in good hands with these two Robert Burton acolytes at its controls.

I stayed with Jason and Patrick until after classes dismissed and the students cleared out of the halls. I headed back to the office to sign out before I joined the passing drills outside. I felt funny walking the halls of my old high school. I no longer felt like a student. My perspective had changed thanks to my ten weeks working at Bellefonte High School. I felt more like a faculty member now.

I found Matt Sauder, Dave Mitchell and Cody Stevens organizing the drills. That answered one of my questions – who was running the drills this year. Normally the graduating seniors ran the drills for the team, but this year our most knowledgeable players were all juniors.

I observed from a distance for awhile as Matt, Dave and Cody got everyone started. The drills had been running for a few minutes when Dave saw me standing off to the side. He waved me over.

“Hey Coach, you made it!” Dave exclaimed. “Coach Turner said you might be home this afternoon. It's good to see you.”

“Yes, my last final was yesterday afternoon,” I said.

“Where are your associates?” Dave asked. “We could use Jeremy’s help with the defense.” He chuckled and shouted in a voice loud enough for Matt to hear, “God knows, twinkle toes over here could use Ed’s help.”

“Ed’s probably flying home as we speak,” I said. “Last I heard, Jeremy and Kathy are leaving South Bend tomorrow morning. They’ll be home sometime late Friday night or Saturday.”

“That’s cool,” Dave said. “Are they going to help us out?”

“Last I heard they were planning to,” I said. “Of course Ed won’t be here very long. His summer classes start in a week or so.”

“We can use any help we can get,” Dave said. “Coach, do you mind working with the JV d-backs and receivers? I thought you could help them for about forty-five minutes. You and I can swap. I’ll go work with the JV and you can help the varsity.”

“That sounds like a plan, Dave,” I agreed. I jogged over to the JV field and gathered the kids around. I briefed the guys on what I wanted to see and put them to work. The kids were enthusiastic but had so much to learn. I worked with them on the basics.

After forty-five minutes Dave Mitchell took over instructing the seventh and eighth graders. I joined the kids on our varsity team. I knew our tight end Gary Harrison; his back up Tim Hoffman; Garrett Houseman, our slot receiver; and Jared Stoltzfus, now lining up at split end after backing up Dave last season. Gary introduced me to his fellow freshmen, Kyle Pratt and Chris Gable. Kyle was backing up Garrett. Chris would back up Dave at the flanker position.

I put the guys through their paces. They did well. I gave them tips to help them get better. All the kids, except Kyle and Chris had been varsity last year. I thought the two ninth graders would be good backups next season.

I promised everyone I would see them next Tuesday afternoon for their next practice. Matt, Dave, Cody and Gary made a point of thanking me for helping. I headed for home in good mood.

I barely opened the front door when a small herd of kids ambushed me with calls of “Unka Ky home,” “Unka Ky!” and “Kyle!” from my nephews and little brother. We had about twenty minutes until supper, so I had time to play with them after I greeted Mom and Liz. Playing with the kids was fun, so was dinner with the family.

I continued unpacking my car and doing laundry that I had put off for the last week. Noah, Connor and Hunter did their best to “help” me with my work. Things went faster when Mom called the boys upstairs for their baths.

I gave Mr. Edwards a call later in the evening.

“Mr. Edwards, this is Kyle Martin,” I said when he answered the phone. “I volunteered to help you move Penny and her things back home, if you can use the help.”

“Use the help?” Mr. Edwards replied, “Certainly I can use the help. Do you have any idea how much stuff a college student accumulates in a year?”

“I do, sir,” I said. “I spent half of last evening loading my stuff up and then came home and spent half the afternoon and part of the evening unloading everything. Mr. Edwards, what time are you heading down to Philly?”

“You’re an adult now, Kyle,” Mr. Edwards said. “Please call me Jim.”

“OK, I can do that,” I said. “What time do you want to leave, Jim?”

“I’m not in a big hurry,” Jim Edwards replied. “If we get on the road too early we’ll run into the Philly morning rush hour. That would NOT be pretty. I’d like to leave around eight o’clock tomorrow morning.”

“That sounds good, Jim,” I said. “Do you have enough room in the pickup truck for the three of us and all of Penny’s things? I could follow you down in my car if we need more space.”

“My father-in-law has an extended cab truck,” Jim replied. “We should have plenty of room.”

“OK, I’ll see you in the morning,” I answered before hanging up the phone.

I was privileged to read the kids their bedtime story that evening. I headed downstairs for my daily workout when the three boys were settled. My cell phone rang in the middle of my workout.

“Hey Ed, what’s up?” I asked when I saw who was calling.

“I hoped to get together with you later tonight,” Ed said. “It’s not happening. I’ve been sitting here in Atlanta for the last five hours. The airline is telling me that my plane to BWI probably won’t leave until ten o’clock. Do you want to hang together tomorrow after lunch?”

“After lunch? No,” I replied. “I agreed to help Penny and her dad move her back home tomorrow. Maybe we can get together after dinner.”

“After dinner is cool,” Ed said. “How are things going between you and Penny?”

“I think we’re progressing towards becoming a couple again,” I said. “I’m hopeful. When do your classes start for the summer?”

“Monday a week from now,” Ed said. “I’ve used my forced idleness here to organize a night at the Green Iguana Saturday night. Are you and Penny interested?”

“Maybe, I’ll have to talk with her,” I replied. Ed chuckled at my response.

“I guess the two of you really are going together again,” Ed said. “That’s exactly the same thing Penny told Kathy about Saturday night. Talk with her and work it out. Everyone wants the two of you there.”

“I’m sure we will be,” I said. “I just don’t want to commit us without talking with Penny first.”

“Spoken like a good boyfriend,” Ed said. “I’ll see you tomorrow night, Kyle.”

“See you, man,” I replied before we ended our phone call.

The kids were delighted to see me at breakfast Friday morning. They weren’t used to that when I was home. I headed over to Mr. Edwards’ house before Mom and the kids left for work and the babysitters. I met Mr. Edwards and Penny’s grandfather, Bill Hunsecker, in front of his house.

“I have to give Bill a ride home, Kyle,” Mr. Edwards said as I climbed in the back seat of the truck. Mr. Hunsecker had a nice pickup, a Ford F-350 extended cab. It looked like it couldn’t have been more than a couple years old.

I had known Mr. Hunsecker since Penny and I were growing up and playing together. I knew Mr. Hunsecker had retired from working at Case New Holland, the local farm implement manufacturer a few years ago, shortly before Penny and I broke up during our freshman year in college.

Mr. Hunsecker was a football fan. He asked knowledgeable questions about the Nittany Lions and our prospects for the next season. He also asked me about the Steelers’ new center, Jelani Hill, as he called him. Mr. Hunsecker knew more about the Steelers than I.

My friend JT was anointed the starter at center when the Steelers convened their first mini-camp this spring. I hadn’t heard that news. I told Mr. Hunsecker that the Steelers were going to be very happy to have a center of JT’s abilities. He shouldn’t worry about that position for many years.

Jim Edwards dropped his father-in-law off at his house a little north of Intercourse. Bill took a couple back roads and ended up on the main road between Intercourse and New

Holland that I knew. Jim drove east on Route 23 from New Holland to Morgantown to get on the Pa. Turnpike. We avoided the ugly traffic on Route 30 and Route 202 through Chester County that way.

Jim Edwards and I talked about school, work and football as we rode through the eastern Lancaster Country countryside. It was all small talk to fill the time. Jim pulled onto the Pa. turnpike a little before nine o'clock.

"Do you mind a father being nosey?" Jim asked after he merged onto the turnpike.

"No, I don't," I agreed.

"I know this is an old fashioned question but I'm going to ask it anyway," Jim said.
"What are your intentions regarding my daughter? Is this a serious relationship?"

"Mr.... uh, Jim... Penny and I are taking things slowly," I explained. "Right now we are just dating. I would like us to become a steady couple, when Penny is ready for that. Beyond that, Penny and I will have to take things one step at a time."

"Do you hope to marry my daughter some day?" Jim asked.

"Penny and I talked about getting married and spending our lives together when we were a couple in high school," I answered. "Both of us wanted that back then. I still want it, but I can't speak for your daughter. I don't want to hurry her. She's had a tough time with the boyfriends in her life."

"She certainly has," Jim agreed. "That's part of why I'm pressing you for answers. You are one of the boyfriends that hurt her. You're still going to Penn State and Penny is going to Penn. What will be different now from three years ago?"

"A lot has changed since our freshmen year," I replied. "Both of us have the support of close friends at college now. We get along with our roommates and we know how to handle the college workload. Penny and I are better equipped now to handle the stresses of a long distance relationship. We did well this spring while we were apart. We have the summer to see if we can rekindle what we had before."

"And what happens in the fall when both of you go back to school?" Jim asked.

"I'm planning to come back to see Penny on Labor Day weekend after I finish my first game," I explained. "We'll have Saturday night, Sunday and Monday together that weekend. I have invited Penny to come up and visit a couple weekends when we have home games during the fall. We can be together at Thanksgiving. I am planning to help coach our high school football team during the playoffs. I can come home to Paradise just as easily as heading back to State College after those games. We will have about a week together at Christmas break. After that... well, do you know about Penny's roommate studying aboard next year?"

“Yes, I do,” Jim replied. “I understand you’re interested in helping fill that vacancy.”

“In the spring semester when I do my student teaching somewhere around Philadelphia,” I said. “Is that OK with you?”

“That is up to Penny,” Jim replied. “She’s twenty-one. She may live with whoever she wishes.”

“I have to work out the financial details with my parents,” I said. “My athletic scholarship doesn’t cover room and board if I live off campus. I think I will be able to borrow the money from my parents.”

“I imagine your parents will go along with that, Kyle,” Jim said.

“Your daughter and I did well dealing with our seven week separation this spring,” I said. “The most difficult thing will be dealing with the separation from the beginning of August to the end of December. I think we can make it as a couple if we can handle those five months.”

“I think you underestimate the difficulty of what you are trying to accomplish, Kyle,” Jim said. “After Penny gets her bachelor’s degree next spring, she is facing four years of veterinary school and internship. I presume you are planning on a career in the NFL.”

“I’m hoping to make it,” I agreed, “...if I can stay healthy.”

“Veterinary school is an intense experience, as is professional football,” Jim said. “How are the two of you going to cope with the long separations you will inevitably face? Hopefully Penny will be at Penn’s Vet School. You have no idea where you will end up playing football. It looks more difficult to me to cope with that kind of experience than what the two of you face next year.”

“At first glance I agreed with you Jim,” I countered. “As I thought about what our lives would be like if we were a couple, I realized it isn’t as daunting as it looks. The NFL training camps start the last week in July. That is only one week earlier than college football camps. The season is typically over by the first week in January, unless your team makes it into the playoffs.”

“OK,” Jim agreed.

“Usually NFL teams break camp and go back to their regular training facilities in the middle of August,” I explained. “Penny can come out to wherever my team is and spend evenings with me for three or four weeks, until her classes start. All NFL teams have a bye week. I can fly into Philly and spend that week with your daughter. Penny can fly out to wherever I am for Thanksgiving and Christmas. I figure we will be able to spend

five to six weeks together over the course of an NFL season. That's a lot better than we'll have this coming fall."

"You've thought this through, haven't you?" Jim said.

"I thought about what I will do if I don't get into the NFL too," I continued. "I will look for a teaching and high school football coaching job somewhere near Philadelphia. If Penny doesn't make it into veterinary school, I hope Penny would be willing to follow me to whichever city I end up in. Heck, if the worst happens and neither of us end up where we expect, I have a concrete job offer at Penn State. Coach Burton will hire me to be a grad assistant for the Lions. The job comes with room and board in the grad housing area. I would get a discount on tuition and presumably my wife would too. Penny could do advanced studies while she works out her future. I'm sure that would be a plus with her biology degree."

"You have a thoughtful plan, Kyle," Jim said. "I will give you credit, Kyle. You are an honorable and decent young man. Even though you almost cheated on my daughter and compounded your error by breaking up with her, you felt so remorseful that you felt you needed to break up with Penny. That wasn't one of your better decisions."

"I certainly agree with you about that," I replied. "That was probably the stupidest thing I ever did in my whole life."

"In contrast, that bastard..." Jim stopped and took a big breath. "...excuse me... that PERSON... apparently cheated on my daughter from the time they started dating. He had the nerve to propose marriage to her at the same time his dating another girl. That snake... he has no honor or morals. You... you did the wrong thing but at least your intent was honorable, if misguided."

"I wish I hadn't gotten drunk that night and gone back to that girl's room," I said. "I just can't change what happened."

"You can change how you handle yourself in the future," Jim replied. "Did your arrest last fall wake you? Do you still drink?"

"That is how things get distorted in the newspapers," I responded. "I'm sure you saw that I was arrested for underage drinking and DUI. That was big headlines in the newspapers. Did you see a follow up about what happened to the case?"

"I assume you paid a fine and did some community service," Jim replied.

"No, the blood test showed I hadn't been drinking," I said. "My blood alcohol content was zero. The case was dropped because I was innocent. That fact, if it made it into a newspaper at all, was buried in tiny article in the back of the paper."

"I didn't realize that," Jim said.

“I will admit that I drank too much before,” I said. “I did stupid things when I got drunk. I realized last spring that I needed to clean up my act. That is why I broke up with my previous girlfriend. She still wanted to go out to parties and get drunk. I couldn’t do it anymore. The night I got arrested we had a big fight over it. I went to bed. She went to a frat party with her roommate and her roommate’s boyfriend. I got a call at 2:30 in the morning to come and pick them up. The frat president took away their keys and wouldn’t let them drive back to their apartment. I left my warm bed in the middle of the night and drove across town to pick up the drunks and take them home so they didn’t hurt anyone. That’s when I got arrested.”

“That answers one of the concerns I had about you dating my daughter,” Jim said.

“I won’t tell you I never drink, Jim,” I said. “I do. I try to limit myself to a beer or two. Part of why I want to be with Penny is that she tempers my excesses. She brings out the best in me.”

“That’s good to know,” Jim said.

“I have wished ever since that black day that I could change what I did to your daughter,” I replied. “All I can do is try to show her how much I love her, and to treat her the way she should be treated. I hope the two of us can work everything out.”

“I’m glad we had this talk, Kyle,” Jim said. “We understand each other better.”

“I am too, Jim,” I agreed. “I want you to understand I want the best for Penny. I love her dearly.”

The conversation the rest of the way to Philadelphia was lighter. We talked about the weather, the Phillies, the Eagles and our summer plans. Jim timed the traffic perfectly. We sailed down to King of Prussia and hopped on the Schuylkill Expressway, hitting it after the morning rush hour traffic had cleared.

I called Penny as Jim pulled off at the Girard Street exit. Jim drove down Girard a couple blocks and then headed south on 34th Street past the zoo. A few minutes later we hit Powelton Avenue. Penny called me back and told me to have her dad go down to 36th street. Dave Hanson was outside trying to save us a parking space near the entrance to her apartment.

A minute later we passed the Courts Apartments and turned onto 36th Street. I spotted Dave standing in the empty parking space and watching for us. I gave him a big wave and pointed Dave out to Jim. Jim maneuvered into the parking spot before anyone else had time to take it. We hopped out of the pickup.

“Jim, it’s good to see you again,” Dave said as he shook Jim’s hand.

“It’s good to see you too, David,” Jim replied.

“You two know each other?” I asked.

“Certainly, Penny has introduced me to her friends when I’ve come down to campus,” Jim said.

“Good to see you, Kyle,” Dave said.

It was Jim’s turn to be surprised. “You know Kyle?” he asked as we shook hands.

“Of course,” I said. “We’ve known each other for four years. We met at the state track finals when we were in high school.”

“Yeah, you’re talking to the second fastest man in Pennsylvania,” Dave said to Jim.

“Maybe,” I added.

“You’re talking about Henson, aren’t you?” Dave asked. I nodded yes. “Shawn told me about him. Shawn says he’s damn near as hard to cover as you are.” The two of us laughed at Shawn’s characterization of Brian and me. We filled Jim in on how Dave and I met, who Shawn Byrd was and how Brian Henson was performing on the Nittany Lions as Dave led us inside past the security guard at the entrance and upstairs to Penny’s third floor apartment.

Penny greeted us when Dave knocked at her door. I found out when we stepped into the apartment why Jim hadn’t been worried about getting help to move Penny, her furniture and her things home. Penny had lined up a gang of her friends to help move things down to the pickup truck.

After greeting her dad and me enthusiastically, Penny introduced us to the rest of her friends. She introduced me to April Chaney, her roommate since November of their freshmen year; Diane Johnson, a Philosophy, Politics and Economics major from near Pittsburgh; Dakota Sheppard, a mechanical engineering major from Staten Island and Dakota’s girlfriend, Katie Zamora, a computer science major from Linden, New Jersey.

Dave, Dakota, Jim and I were responsible for moving the big things out to the truck. The girls would help Penny with the clothes, boxes and other lighter items. They would go in the backseat of the truck cab.

We started with the bedroom, hauling the bed downstairs, followed by the night stand and small chest of drawers. We dismantled the dining room table and took it down along with the chairs to the table. Penny’s desk and chair went last.

It was close to noon when we had all of Penny’s furniture moved out. Penny called Powelton Pizza to order lunch for everyone. Dave and Dakota volunteered to walk over

to the next block to pick it up. I decided to walk along. I wanted to see the neighborhood, in case I moved here next January.

We crossed over 36th Street and walked past row houses along that block as we followed Powelton Avenue west. Stan's Deli was on the corner. We went down the short side street. Powelton Pizza was on the corner of 37th and Lancaster Avenue. We picked up the three pizzas and three bottles of soda and headed back.

We talked as we made our pickup. Penny and Dave had filled Dakota in on who I was. He told me he played tight end for his high school team. He was too small and slow to get any interest from college teams.

Everyone dug into the pizza when we got back to the apartment. The group of friends spent a good part of lunch reminiscing about their three years of college. Everyone in the group except Katie had roomed at King's Court/English House on campus when they were freshmen. Katie got to know the rest of her friends through Dakota, when she started dating him a year and a half ago.

We had all of Penny's things packed with Dave, Dakota and me helping the girls after lunch. Penny thanked each of her friends for their help. April and Penny exchanged a particularly touching good bye. Other than the weekend they planned together at Penny's house, the two girls wouldn't be seeing each other again until graduation next spring. Jim and I went downstairs with Penny while she turned in her key and signed out of her apartment.

Traffic wasn't too bad on the way back home. Jim took Route 202 and Route 30 home since we were coming through Chester County before the afternoon rush hour. My cell phone rang part way home.

"Hey Ed, what's up?" I asked when I saw his name on my phone.

"Where are you at, Kyle?" Ed asked.

"We're passing Downingtown," I replied.

"Are we on for training tonight?" Ed asked.

"You bet," I agreed. "If you make it about eight, we can include Andy too. He'll be reading the twins and my little brother a bedtime story before that."

"Sure that's cool," Ed agreed. "Are you and Penny up for going dancing tomorrow night? I just finished talking with Jeremy. He and Kathy were interested in going to the Green Iguana. Kath is driving now. They just passed Bedford. Jeremy says they will be home around seven o'clock tonight."

“Let me ask Penny,” I said. Turning to my girl, I asked, “Are you interested in going to the Green Iguana tomorrow night?”

“Sure, absolutely,” Penny said.

“Count Penny and me in,” I said. Who else is coming? Drew? Brandon?”

“Nope,” Ed replied. “Brandon’s last final is next Tuesday. Stacy’s commencement is in a week. She and Drew are staying in Morgantown until then.”

“Oh well, we can catch the rest of our friends next week,” I said. “See you later tonight, Ed”

“See you, Kyle,” Ed agreed.

“Dancing tomorrow night,” Penny said after I put away my phone. “This will be fun. Maybe we can finally try out the downstairs.”

“One of us is still underage,” I said.

“Poor baby,” Penny replied. She gave me kiss on the lips. “We’ll just have to go upstairs for a few more weeks for my little boy.” I returned the kiss.

Jim cleared his throat. “You two do realize that I’m right here in the truck with you.”

“I’m sorry Daddy,” Penny said. “We haven’t had enough time together lately.”

“Am I to presume that you will have a guest tonight, honey?” Jim asked.

“I’m going to get settled at home tonight, Daddy,” Penny replied. “Sorry honey, we’ll have our fun tomorrow night.”

“That’s fine,” I agreed.

We got back to Paradise around 3:30 in the afternoon. Jim backed the truck up in the driveway to make it easy for us to unload the furniture into the basement through the outside door. Jim and I got started unloading furniture while Penny unloaded boxes of other things. Ed Fritz spotted us and came over to help. We wrapped up around five o’clock. Jim and Penny’s mom invited me to stay for dinner but I declined.

Andy was home from Delaware when I returned home and was playing with the kids. I joined in the fun. Andy and I chased the three little ones around as we played ‘footbah’ [football]. After dinner Andy and I relaxed in the family room. Andy studied while I watched TV and the younger kids played.

I went downstairs to train when Andy took the little kids to bed. Ed and a surprise guest, Jeremy, showed up a few minutes after I started training. Andy joined us soon afterward, when he finished the kids' bedtime story. Andy and I expressed surprise at Jeremy coming over so soon after he got home.

"I sat on my duff for two days driving in from South Bend," Jeremy explained. "It will feel good to work the weights."

"Yeah, I know how you feel, man," Ed said. "Eric [Ed's roommate] dropped me off at the airport at 6:30 yesterday morning. I didn't get home until midnight. It literally would have been faster to drive home. I can drive it in around fifteen and a half hours."

"I got home in two hours," I teased. "Piece of cake... I didn't even run into rush hour traffic in Harrisburg or Lancaster."

"I got home in forty-five minutes today," Andy added.

"Yeah, but did you get to play for a national championship?" Ed countered.

"Maybe if you went to a quality school, you'd get that chance," Jeremy added.

"One play short of the championship game," I replied as I held up one finger. "...that God damned miracle Hail Mary pass to end the Ohio State game two years ago."

"Wishes... wishes... don't make it so," Jeremy replied, staring at me. "Until you get there..." Jeremy turned to Ed and grinned, "...and you win the damn ring, you ain't done shit." He held up the ring finger where he normally wore his national championship ring. Of course Jeremy wasn't wearing it while he worked out.

"My team will be in Phoenix next January," I said. "Count on it."

"We'll be happy to play you, Kyle," Ed teased.

"No, we'll play them," Jeremy added.

The argument was in jest... mostly. Each of us was intensely competitive. I would bust my ass to get my team to the championship game. Jeremy and Ed would do no less.

After the four of us finished with the weights, we ran our three mile route around town. It was a warm spring evening and we ran into a lot of friends and neighbors as we ran. Couples out for an evening walk greeted us as we passed. After six years of running, our town was used to us crazy football players and our training regimen.

When Andy and I got back home Mom told me about a telephone call.

"A Mr. Andrew Faulkner called while you were out," Mom said.

“Andrew Faulkner?” I replied. “I don’t know anyone by that name. What did he want?”

“He didn’t say,” Mom responded. “He said he would call back tomorrow.”

Phone calls for me started right after lunch. The first call was from Mr. Scott Lehmann from the Empire Sports Agency in New York. He was polite and said he wanted to introduce himself and the agency he worked for. Empire was an East Coast based agency that he said represented dozens of top players in the NFL. I politely let Mr. Lehmann know that I wasn’t interested in talking with agents at all.

The calls kept coming during the afternoon. I received solicitous calls from Todd Rosenbaum at the Football Management, Inc., George Sears of the Creative Artists Agency, and Steven Frost, Jr. from the Steven Frost Agency. Andrew Faulkner called again. He was an agent too. I tried to politely tell them I wasn’t interested in talking about agents yet. By the end of the afternoon I was getting a little ticked off at all the calls.

Mom had a list of chores and errands she expected me to do around the house to help out. To quote her, “If you’re going to goof off at home for six weeks until your job starts, you can just help out the family.” I had no problem with that, no problem at all. In addition to the chores, I agreed to prepare dinner weekday evenings like I usually did. I enjoyed doing that.

Ed came over later to hang out. We watched a movie and played a few computer games before dinner time. Ed and I marveled at all these guys calling me. Ed wasn’t getting phone calls yet. He had two years of eligibility remaining. The NFL Players Association wouldn’t allow any agent to contact him for another year.

I took off for home around five o’clock. I headed downstairs to shower and get ready for my date. The last of the agent calls came while Ed and I were hanging out. Douglas Nolan of American Sports Management called.

All the agents were polite. They wanted me to know their agency was interested in representing me when the time came. I was polite too but let all of them know that the appropriate time would be next January after my bowl game.

After dinner Noah, Connor and Hunter hung out while I shaved and got ready for my date.

“Unka Ky, you have gir’friend now?” Noah asked.

“I have a date tonight,” I said. “But she isn’t my girlfriend.”

“Who with?” Connor asked.

“You know her,” I explained. “...Penny Edwards, who lives down the street.”

“Why she not your gir’friend?” Noah asked. “Penny nice.”

“You ask her?” Connor suggested.

“Yeah, that good,” Noah agreed.

“I wish it was that simple guys,” I replied. “I’ll do my best to convince her.”

“Yeah!” the three boys cheered.

I finished preparing for my date with the boys help. I headed over to pick up Penny at her house around 6:30 pm. Jim and Marilyn Edwards greeted me warmly when I arrived. We talked for a couple minutes.

“You do understand, Kyle,” Marilyn said. “You are welcome to share our daughter’s bed if she cares to invite you.”

“That’s very kind of you,” I replied. “I don’t know what our plans will be after we finish dancing tonight.”

“I’ll call you and let you know our plans before you go to bed,” Penny added.

“Thanks, honey,” Jim said.

“Have fun tonight,” Marilyn added.

We stopped at Texas Roadhouse on the east side of Lancaster for dinner before we headed to the club. We met Jeremy, Kathy, Ed, Paige, Holly Cox and her date at the Green Iguana Club. Holly introduced us to Dan Baugher, a friend from school who lived over in Parkesburg. The whole group headed for the downstairs entrance for the over twenty-one crowd.

“Hey guys, I can’t go in there yet,” I said as we joined the end of the line. “My birthday isn’t until July.”

“Shit, I forgot,” Ed apologized.

“Yeah, sorry about that, man,” Jeremy agreed. “I’ve gotten used to not worrying about which clubs I go into.”

“We’ll go upstairs for you, Kyle,” Kathy added.

“Thanks everyone,” I replied. “Sorry to be a drag on your evening, everyone.”

“No problem, Kyle,” and “Been there, buddy,” echoed from my group of friends.

“Hey, I have an idea,” Jeremy said. “Let’s enjoy the music and dance here for awhile tonight. I have a couple cases of beer I picked up this afternoon. We can go back to my house and enjoy a few brews. That is... we can if our little boy thinks he can make it home after a night of drinking.”

“I think I can make it across your backyard to Penny’s and then home from there,” I countered.

“Or maybe not quite that far,” Penny added. “I might want some company this evening.”

Everyone headed inside the club. We found a table and ordered drinks. We had about twenty minutes to talk while we waited for the first set of music. Jeremy, Kathy, Penny and I kicked around some ideas for the camping trip we wanted our group to do later in the spring.

Penny had friends who did an upper Delaware River canoe trip a couple years ago. They told Penny that it was beautiful countryside and that the river had lots of rapids to keep the trip exciting. We agreed that it sounded like a fun idea instead of a three day backpacking trip. Ed was disappointed he would be down in Florida and wouldn’t be able to go. Paige wasn’t disappointed Ed wasn’t going. She wasn’t big on camping the way the rest of us were.

The band got going so all three couples got out on the floor and danced. We had fun, dancing and talking when we took a break. We stayed until after the second set of music, around 11:30 pm. Jeremy led the way back to his house. It was a warm spring night with a new moon and bright stars. The group decided to hang out on Jeremy’s back patio and enjoy some beer quietly and to enjoy the beautiful night.

Penny and I each had a couple beers during the hour we spent talking and relaxing at Jeremy’s house.

During a pause in the conversation I asked Jeremy, “Did you get any calls from sports agents today?”

“Get calls?” Jeremy replied, laughing. “All I did this afternoon was talk to damn agents. Seven of them called trying to butter me up.”

“I had six calls today,” I said. “They’re a royal pain in the neck. Coach Burton told us to avoid contact with them as much as possible. They’ll only take our focus off what matters now – playing football.”

“Yeah, Coach Kelly said the same thing,” Jeremy agreed. “I read in the local papers online that you were named a captain. Congratulations. Who else made it? Anyone I know?”

“Thanks,” I said. “You know the other two captains quite well. Trevor was elected and so was Damian Thompson.”

“Thompson?” Jeremy said. “I know him too well. Hell, I still have bruises from that game three years ago.”

“Did you get elected for your team?” I asked.

“No, Coach doesn’t let us choose captains until August,” Jeremy said.

“It seems weird for the two of you to be talking about your last year of football,” Ed commented. “It feels like I’ve barely gotten started.”

“You’ll nail down the starting spot this summer, buddy,” Jeremy said. “Enjoy the next two years. This experience flies by.”

“Your time is here,” I added. “You’re going to knock’em dead in Florida.”

The girls agreed with my analysis of Ed’s prospects to be the starter for the Gators. We talked a little more about football before grabbing more beer and moving onto other topics.

Around a quarter to one all of us agreed it was time for bed. We helped Jeremy clean up and then he and Kath headed over to her house. Kath’s parents didn’t mind the two of them sharing a bed for the night, unlike Jeremy’s strict Catholic parents.

Paige went home with Ed. Penny and I followed the other couple across the backyard towards her house.

“Do you want to spend the night at my house or do you want me to go over to your place?” Penny asked.

“We can go wherever you’re comfortable,” I answered.

“I am looking forward to some fun before we go to sleep,” Penny said. “I guess we’ll have to be quiet wherever we go, with our parents’ bedrooms being nearby.”

“No, that’s not right,” I said. “Did you forget my bedroom is in the basement now?”

“Duh! Of course,” Penny responded. “We spent so many wonderful afternoons and evenings in your bedroom upstairs that I forgot. Let’s go to your place, loverboy, I’m ready for you.”

“I’m at your service,” I agreed.

My house was dark and quiet, except for the porch light that Mom and Dad left on for me. We headed downstairs to my basement lair. Penny was undressing by my bed when I came down the steps after locking the basement door.

“I’m going to have to bring an overnight bag next time I spend the night,” Penny commented.

“You can go home quick to pick a few things up, if you want,” I suggested.

“No, I’ll be fine,’ Penny answered. “I’m going to be a bad girl tomorrow and skip church. By the time you satisfy me, at most I might be able to get five hours of sleep before I have to get up to get ready. That isn’t enough sleep.” Penny chuckled. “I don’t want you to hurry tonight. I want you to take your time and show me how much you care.”

“That will be my pleasure,” I agreed as I stripped down to my boxers. “It will be my absolute pleasure.”

I joined my lover in my bed. Penny and I made out like we used to as teenagers for awhile before switching to 69. We brought each other to climaxes before the main event. I let Penny ride me cowgirl our first time.

The second time Penny wanted me to take her in the deep penetration position she always loved the first time we dated. Penny put a pillow under her lower back to raise her butt and pulled her knees up to her shoulders, folding herself nearly in half. When I took her I clearly was in the dominant position but I let Penny’s cues guide me. We gave each other a wonderful workout before we had nearly mutual orgasms. We kissed and cuddled a bit before we fell asleep.

It was after ten o’clock on Sunday morning when Penny’s quick trip to the bathroom woke me.

“Good morning, lover,” Penny said as I opened my eyes. She gave me a kiss on the mouth. Her breath was sweet. Penny didn’t have a tooth brush here but she must have used my mouth wash to help with her morning breath.

“Good morning,” I agreed. I received another kiss for my acknowledgment.

“Are you up for a morning matinee?” Penny asked, rubbing my chest. She reached down and stroked my hard morning woody. “I think your family is gone.”

“I’d love that,” I agreed. My bladder was filled to bursting from the beers last night. “Hold that thought. I need to use the bathroom for a moment.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” Penny said. I hopped out of bed and dashed to my bathroom. I brushed my teeth and used mouthwash while I waited for my hard-on to wilt enough so I could take care of business. I headed back to bed and my naked lover when I was done.

We made out for a bit to get each other excited. After a couple minutes Penny rolled me on my back and straddled me. We humped each other without penetration for three or four minutes while we continued kissing and caressing. Penny reached between our bodies when she was ready, grasped my hard seven incher and placed it against her muff hole.

I thrust upwards, impaling her. Penny sat up and rode me, alternately bouncing and grinding herself on me. After a few minutes in control, she crouched down over me and began kissing me. On cue, I started humping and thrusting up into my lover as she held herself still over me and we kissed.

After a few minutes Penny suggested, “Get on top, Kyle. I need you over me.”

“As you wish, honey,” I agreed. We hugged each other as I rolled us over, still connected. I continued thrusting and grinding on her clittie each time I bottomed out. Penny’s pinkish hue and panting told me she was close to climax. I coaxed my lover to one orgasm and then pounded her hard, as she begged for more. She came a second time before I felt my own climax approach. I gave Penny long hard strokes as my body tensed in preparation for its explosion. We panted and moaned as the denouement approached.

I grunted and planted my cock deep in my lover and exploded. It was enough to push Penny into a third climax. We clung to each other as our bodies pulsed and throbbed together. I collapsed on top of Penny, spent. She rolled us to our sides, still connected and exhausted.

We held each other as we recovered our wits. We exchanged tiny kisses and hugged each other as our senses calmed.

“I love you so much, Penny,’ I gasped. “I haven’t told you that enough.”

“I love you too, Kyle,” Penny answered. “This spring has been perfect.”

“I’m glad,” I said as I kissed her again. “Is our relationship on the right track? Are you happy?”

“No and yes,” Penny answered. My eyes went wide with surprise as Penny stared into them. “Yes, I’m very happy.” I gave her a smile. “...but no, our relationship is not right.”

“What...” I started before she smothered me with a kiss.

“Our relationship is not right,” Penny continued. “You should be my boyfriend, not my date.”

“Are you serious?” I asked. I hadn’t expected her to agree to my wishes this fast.

“I want us to be a couple,” Penny said. “Exclusive girlfriend and boyfriend… I want us to build a relationship that lasts.”

“We can do that,” I said. “Have I told you how much I love you?”

“You’ve mentioned it,” Penny teased. “I love you too, honey. I think we can make this last.” We sealed our agreement with a long, lingering kiss.

Chapter 62

My parents and Penny's parents were delighted at our news Sunday afternoon when we told them. Hunter and the twins were ecstatic at the news of my "gir'friend," which shocked Penny. I explained how much the kids enjoyed when Kelly had played with them during her visits. I warned Penny that the kids would expect the same from her.

Liz and Andy were happy that their "big sister" was back in my life. Both my younger brother and sister had busy weekends. Liz spent Saturday on preparations for the junior prom, which was a week away. Liz wanted her night with her boyfriend Wyatt to be special.

Andy was busy studying. He had one week of class before finals the following week. He also lined up his summer job working at the same restaurant on Route 30 where he worked during high school. They were glad to have an experienced line cook back for the tourist season.

Penny started work at the veterinary clinic for Dr. Chu on Monday morning. I went shopping for food for the dinners I would prepare for the family while I was home. Jeremy went to work for the landscaper he worked for the past two summers. Ed stopped in the afternoon to hang out, watch TV, toss some balls and play a few computer games.

I got two phone calls from prospective agents on Sunday. Seven more called me on Monday during the day. Over dinner I brought the subject up to my parents.

"All these agents calling are pains in the ass," I growled.

"Language, Kyle," Mom warned as the twins and Hunter giggled. I wasn't used to censoring my speech yet.

"Sorry, Mom," I replied. Turning back to Dad I said, "I can keep telling these agents that call that I'm waiting until after my bowl game to talk, but I don't think it will stop them from calling. I have talked with some of my friends that went through the agent and NFL process the last couple years. I need your help getting prepared, knowing how crazy things will be when I am done with the bowl game. I'm going to need a sports agent, a financial manager and probably a legal advisor. I can't make all these choices next January completely unprepared or without your help."

"That's good thinking, Kyle," Dad agreed. "Do you want to sit down and talk about it tonight?"

"How about tomorrow night?" I suggested. "I wanted to visit scouts this evening."

"Done!" Dad agreed. "We'll sit down and discuss this after dinner tomorrow."

“We also need to talk about where I will live next winter and spring while I’m student teaching,” I added. “The university doesn’t provide off campus housing to athletes and I will be teaching somewhere around Philadelphia. I hope I will be able to borrow the rent and food money for spring semester.”

“I think Mom and I can pay room and board for you,” Dad said. “Especially considering these will be the only college expenses we have for you for your four years of education.”

“Oh... cool!” I replied. “I didn’t expect that you would pay my way. I thought it would be a loan, like the rest of my expenses have been.”

“Good, the three of us will sit down tomorrow night and help you start planning life after college,” Dad said.

“I’d like to include Penny in the discussion, Dad” I said. “It affects her future... or at least I hope it affects her future too.”

“You’re sure about this?” Mom asked. “Are you and Penny that serious after less than two days as a couple?”

“I am,” I said. “I hope Penny is too, but I don’t know. I think she should be invited to be a part of the discussion even if we’re not certain about where we are going as a couple.”

“It won’t hurt if she’s involved, I guess,” Dad said. “She has a good head on her shoulders.”

I stopped by my scout troop’s meeting to visit after dinner. The Senior Patrol Leader was out that evening, so Gary Harrison was running the scout meeting. Gary did a good job. I would have liked to talk with him, but he was too busy. Gary and I would have plenty of time to talk over the summer. Gary was on my pool staff.

I stopped by Penny’s house after scouts.

“Honey, do you have a minute?” I asked when she invited me inside. “Are you busy tomorrow after dinner?”

“No, why?” Penny answered.

“I’m sitting down with my parents to talk about my financial future,” I explained. “I will have to deal with a sports agent, a financial planner and a legal advisor next year. We will also be talking about where I live next spring semester.”

“Are you sure you want me sitting in on this?” Penny asked. “Maybe I can come over when you talk about sharing the apartment. I can leave when that part of the discussion is over.”

“I want you there for everything,” I said. “You know me. When you agreed to be my girlfriend I think you knew I wasn’t talking about the next six weeks or just this summer.”

“I know,” Penny agreed.

“We’ve talked about how to make things last next year,” I said. “We will see how things go in the fall, but I hope we are together for the long haul. Is that OK?”

“We’ll see how the fall goes,” Penny said, “...but yes, I hope we last beyond the next twelve months.”

I gave Penny a hug and a big kiss. “I hope all the things we said we wanted back in high school are still possible.”

“We’ll see, but I hope they are too,” Penny agreed.

“That’s wonderful,” I said. “I’ve got to go work out. I’ll see you tomorrow evening, say around seven o’clock.” We sealed things with a kiss.

Ed, Jeremy and I showed up Tuesday afternoon to help coach the high school passing drills. Ed spent half of practice polishing Matt Sauder and Jacob Baughman’s work at QB. Jeremy worked with the defense, especially the linebackers. Nate Trimble loved getting more instruction from his sister’s boyfriend.

I spent half the practice with the varsity receivers, less Dave. Dave worked with the younger guys until our mid-afternoon break. Dave and I switched and I worked with the younger guys the rest of the afternoon. The young kids were green, but willing to listen and work hard. I could see improvement over last Thursday by the end of practice. By the end of school they would be performing pretty well for JV receivers.

The twins were delighted when Penny arrived after dinner, at least until they realized she was joining Mom, Dad and me in Dad’s study. The little kids were sent off to the family room under Liz’s supervision while the grown-ups had our discussion.

“Now that everyone is here, we can begin,” Dad said. “I did a few calls after we talked last night, Kyle. I learned who handles financial planning for Aaron Herr, Jeff Smoker, and Dan Kreider.” [Aaron Herr is the son of Tommy Herr, the all-star second baseman for the Cardinals and Phillies. Jeff Smoker and Dan Kreider play professional football, Arena League and the NFL, respectively]

“Are you sure I should be here for this discussion, Mr. Martin?” Penny asked. “It seems like this discussion should be among family.”

“My son seems to think that this may affect your future too,” Dad said. “He wants you involved. Also, call me Dan. You’re not a little kid anymore.”

“OK, Dan. I guess you can continue,” Penny said.

“This financial advisor handles business for the High family, the Horst family and the Wares,” Dad said. “I thought it would be good if I sat down with him and picked his brain for information about what we’re facing in the next year or two. I see us needing to gain knowledge about the whole professional sports business – how things work, what challenges you will face and what pitfalls you need to watch for.”

“I agree, Dad” I said. “Zack and Leigh Ann Hayes are coming in for a vacation in a couple weeks. I think it would be good to sit down with Zack and see what suggestions he will have.”

“Definitely,” Dad agreed. “Are you going to dinner with Chase next Sunday after the Phillies game?”

“Yes, Chase invited Penny and me to join him and Jena for dinner when the game is over,” I said. I noticed Penny’s eyes get big. I forgot to tell her about that part of our visit to Citizens Bank Park the next weekend.

“I’ll ask Chase for advice when we’re down there,” I agreed. “He should be able to give me some ideas.”

“That would be good,” Dad said. “The more information we can get, the better. We need to find out if a sports agent handles more than contracts. Who handles endorsements? Do you need a legal advisor?”

“Good questions,” I agreed.

“I probably should talk with John Hayes and find out how involved he has been in Sam and Zack’s business dealings,” Dad added.

“OK, we have the start of a plan,” I said. “I talk with Chase and Zack. You talk with Zack’s dad and the financial planner. We can make a more detailed plan of action after we have more information.”

“OK,” Dad said. “What’s the next question?”

“I guess that would be where I will live next winter,” I replied.

“I have offered to share my apartment with Kyle,” Penny said. “My roommate and I secured the lease last February. Now she is studying in Scotland next year and I need a roommate.”

“I don’t see why that would be a problem if you can put up with my son,” Mom said. “He’s sloppy and leaves the toilet seat up much too often. He is handy in the kitchen though.”

“I’m NOT sloppy,” I countered. “I’m organizationally challenged. You’ve got to be PC, Mom.”

“I’m used to him, Mrs. Martin,” Penny said, chuckling. “Anyway, I’m sure I can train him.”

Mom gave Penny an odd smile and chuckled too. “I’m sure you can dear. I’m sure you can. By the way, call me Sharon.”

“I think the important question is cost,” Dad interjected. “What is the rent on this apartment? Is it in a good neighborhood?”

“Next year’s rent is \$1295 a month,” Penny replied. “The building has security at the front door, is in a nice neighborhood and only a block from Drexel and two blocks from Penn. April and I haven’t had any security problems this year.”

“Half of \$1295 sounds reasonable, I think,” Dad said. “Do you know what Penn State charges for housing, Kyle?”

“I think they charge around \$3200 for the semester in a four person apartment like I have now,” I said. “That is around \$800 a month. What Penny and I are proposing is actually a little cheaper than paying for an apartment on campus at University Park. I’m sure it is much cheaper than the alternative for me next spring – that I go find an apartment for myself. What could I get in suburban Philly for \$650 a month?”

“A closet with a pullout sofa-bed,” Dad said, chuckling. “I think the rent sounds fine. How much are you going to need for food and other essentials?”

“My roommate April and I spent about \$450 a month per person for food and household supplies.”

“A meal plan at Penn State varies between \$1,800 and \$2,200 for a semester,” I added.

“Does that sound reasonable, honey?” Dad asked as he looked over at Mom.

“Feeding someone Kyle’s age and size?” Mom replied. “That sounds like a bargain.”

“OK, that’s settled,” Dad said. “\$650 a month for rent and \$500 a month for food and household supplies. Sharon and I will talk to your parents and make sure they are fine with this, Penny.”

“Do you have a roommate for the fall?” Mom asked.

“Not yet,” Penny said. “I’m advertising for someone with Penn and Drexel’s housing offices. They assure me that I shouldn’t have any problem finding someone that needs a place for one term. Lots of kids need an extra semester to finish their graduation requirements.”

“Let’s reconvene this meeting in a couple weeks after you talk with Chase and Zack and I have time to do my research,” Dad said.

Penny and I grabbed some iced tea in the kitchen and headed outside to enjoy the warm weather outside on our deck.

“Are you serious about Chase Utley inviting us to dinner?” Penny asked.

“Sure, that’s what he said in the e-mail he sent me last week,” I replied. Penny shook her head.

“I can’t believe this,” Penny said. “This is just amazing.” Penny had a slightly dazed look.

“I’ve seen that look before,” I said.

“What look?” Penny responded.

“You look like you don’t believe you belong here,” I said. “You had the same look back in ninth grade when we started hanging out with the ‘cool kids’ at school. You got to know them and then it was fine.”

“It’s not the same at all,” Penny insisted. “That was Zack Hayes. Now we’re talking about having dinner with a superstar ball player. It’s totally different.”

“Is it?” I asked. “Would you think having dinner with Zack Hayes was a big deal now?”

“No, of course not,” Penny agreed.

“There are people in Wisconsin that think Zack will be the second coming of Bart Starr and Brett Favre rolled into one,” I said. “They would be awed to be in his presence. We know better. Dinner with Zack and Leigh Ann will just be a dinner with friends for us. That’s all.”

“But we’re talking about Chase Utley,” Penny insisted.

“Who you haven’t met yet,” I said. “Chase is a genuinely nice guy who happens to work with a ball, a bat and a glove. You will understand when you meet him on Saturday. You don’t hold Ed or Jeremy in awe. Ed is now a huge star in the Gator nation, thanks to

rescuing their season and nearly taking them to a national championship. Jeremy is huge among the Fighting Irish fans. You know better. You will find Chase and Jena are simply nice people.”

“Who make millions of dollars on TV,” Penny said.

“Are you going to hold me in awe if I make millions of dollars?” I asked.

“No, but you don’t make that,” Penny replied.

“Only because I value my education,” I countered. “A couple of the draft gurus thought I would go mid-first round in the NFL draft if I had declared for the draft this year. A year from now we may have plenty of money.”

“In my head I know what you’re saying is true,” Penny agreed. “It all just seems so unreal.”

“You’ll get used to it,” I said. “Some of the perks that come with a famous boyfriend can be pretty nice – like dinner with Chase and Jena Utley.”

“Yes, they are nice,” Penny agreed, chuckling. “Some of the other perks are nice too, like this morning, loverboy.”

“I’m glad you enjoyed this morning. I certainly did,” I replied. “Relax and go with the flow on Saturday. You’ll see what I’m talking about when you meet my friends. They’re nice, down to earth people that I know you will like.”

Hunter and the twins found us outside, effectively ending our conversation. The three kids loved having Penny around and Penny loved playing with the little ones. We played with them until it was bath time. Penny hung around and helped me with their bedtime story.

Ed, Paige, Kathy, Jeremy, Penny and I went to dinner at Ruby Tuesdays in Rockvale Square. After dinner we headed over to the Village Greens for an evening of mini-golf. After golfing, we grabbed some ice cream at the Ice Cream Shop in the center of Strasburg before heading home.

Penny and I went shopping after dinner Thursday night. We needed to get birthday presents for a certain pair of young boys who turned three next Thursday. Penny wanted to stop by the Sports Authority in Park City while we were shopping. She had developed a certain rooting interest in the Nittany Lions and needed a proper shirt to wear when she visited Penn State in the fall.

The clerk at the store recognized me immediately. He was the same one who helped Kelly and me last summer. I ended doing half a dozen autographs, including two on my replica jerseys, before Penny and I finished. We also picked up a Nittany Lion plush toy for Hunter. Both of us knew he was going to have trouble when Noah and Connor were showered with presents at their birthday party and he received nothing.

Penny came over after dinner Friday night with her overnight bag. We caught a movie outside Millersville before heading back to my house. Penny and I performed the rites of spring twice that evening before falling asleep beside each other.

Penny and I got up around nine o'clock on Saturday morning. Hunter, Noah and Connor appeared the second Penny and I came up from the basement. I made ham and cheese omelets for my lover and myself. I made small cheese omelets for the three mooches. The boys enjoyed their second breakfast with us.

"T'ank you, Unka Ky," Noah said as he finished his omelet. "Breakfast good."

"Yeah, t'ank you," Connor agreed. "T'ank you for being here, Penny."

"Good you are Unka Ky's gir'friend," Noah added. "You nice."

"Yeah, nice," Connor agreed.

"Yeah, Penny good," Hunter said.

"Thank you, boys," Penny replied. "I enjoy spending time with you."

"You p'ay [play] wit' us?" Connor asked. "P'ease p'ay wit' us, Unka Ky."

"Yeah, p'ease Unka Ky?" and "Please?" the others begged,

"Sorry, guys" I said. "Penny and I are going to a baseball game today. I bet there are some good cartoons on TV now."

"Cartoons?" Noah said. "Yeah, let's see cartoons."

"Yeah, let's go, Noah," Connor agreed. The twins raced off for the family room TV.

"Yeah! 'toons," Hunter squealed as he ran after his bigger nephews.

"That was deftly handled," Penny said as the kids disappeared.

"It's just from practice," I replied. "The kids are great but they're easily distracted."

"You're going to make a good daddy someday," Penn said.

“I think I’ll enjoy it when the time comes,” I said. “I envy how close Andy is to his boys, though I wouldn’t have wanted a family under his circumstances.”

“You’ll have a family eventually,” Penny replied. “Let’s get cleaned up so we can get to the ball park. I can’t wait to meet some of the players.”

“Sounds good to me,” I agreed.

I finished up the breakfast dishes with Penny’s assistance. We took off for the ball park as soon as we finished. I thought it was faster to go down Route 41, 1 and 322 from Gap to Chester and then up I-95 to get to the ball park than to go to King of Prussia and down the Schuylkill Expressway. Penny disagreed.

I listened to my lover and she was right. I pulled into the parking lot at the ball park an hour and ten minutes later. We probably saved ten or fifteen minutes following Penny’s route. The parking passes Chase sent us got me into the VIP parking area near the entrances.

We headed inside. I gave an usher the note Chase gave me to send to him when we arrived. Penny and I found our seats in Section 118, behind the Phillies dugout. We were about three rows back from the front rail and the fourth and fifth seat in from the aisle. We had to squeeze by a nice looking lady who looked to be around thirty years old to get to our seat.

She gave us a friendly smile as we passed her. I noticed she was wearing a Chase Utley jersey. I presumed she was a fan of his. A Phillies warm-up jacket was draped on the seat between me and her. I assumed that belonged to her boyfriend or husband, who was out getting snacks for his lady.

Penny and I got settled and watched the Phillies ground crew prepare the field. The players came out a couple minutes later. We watched as our team prepared for the afternoon’s battle. The lady to my right did the same.

“Do you get to Phillies games often?” she asked after we watched for a couple minutes.

“No, not nearly enough,” I replied. “I go to school at Penn State. Between school and working over the summer, I don’t get to see many Phillies games. Are you a big Chase Utley fan? He’s my favorite player on the team.”

“Mine too,” Penny added.

“I guess you could say he’s mine too,” she answered, chuckling.

“Taylor!” a familiar voice beyond exclaimed. “You met Kyle.” Penny, the lady and I turned towards the voice. It was Devin Kerr. “Kyle, I see you met my step-mom.”

“We were just talking, Devin,” the lady replied. Suddenly I remembered. This was Taylor Utley Kerr, Chase’s sister and Devin’s step-mom. “Taylor, this is Kyle Martin, the wide receiver from Penn State who helped Chase and me get tickets to a Penn State game two years ago and helped me when I went to football camp last summer.”

“It’s very nice to meet you, Kyle,” Taylor said. “Devin has such nice things to say about you.”

“Kyle, this is Taylor Kerr, my step-mom and Chase’s sister,” Devin said by way of introduction.

“It’s very nice to meet you, Mrs. Kerr,” I replied.

“No... no, call me Taylor,” she answered.

“This is my girlfriend, Penny Edwards,” I explained. “Penny, this is Taylor Kerr, Chase’s sister and her step-son Devin. Devin is a wide receiver like me and a prospect the Nittany Lions are looking at.”

Penny greeted Chase’s sister and nephew warmly. We talked for a few minutes as we watched the Phillies players warm up for the game. Jena Utley joined us a few minutes later. I introduced her to Penny. Chase concentrated on preparing for his game, ignoring the five of us in the stands.

When warm-ups were finished Chase gave our group a wave and motioned for us to come down to the rail at the end of the Phillies dugout. Chase greeted Jena and Taylor. He high fived Devin before turning to me and Penny.

“Hey Kyle, it’s great you could make it,” Chase said. He reached up and we shook hands.

“Thanks for inviting us, Chase,” I replied. “I’d like to introduce you to my girlfriend, Penny Edwards.” Turning to my lover, I added, “Penny, I’d like to introduce you to my friend, Chase Utley.”

“Mr. Utley, it’s such a treat to meet you,” Penny gushed as she shook Chase’s hand.

“Mr. Utley is in California,” Chase answered. “Please call me Chase.”

“Wow! Thanks... Chase,” Penny raved. “I’m a huge fan of yours.”

“That’s very kind of you,” Chase said. “Let me introduce you to a few of my friends.”

Penny’s eyes grew big as Chase called over his teammates to say hello to us. We met Ryan Howard, Jimmy Rollins, Placido Polanco, Carlos Ruiz, Jason Werth and Shane Victorino. The guys greeted Jena and Taylor as they mingled with us. They knew Devin

by name. He obviously had spent significant time around the big club thanks to his father.

Penny collected autographs as she talked with her heroes. The guys left when Coach Davey Lopes chased them inside to finish preparing for the Cubs. We headed back to our seats. Penny was dumbfounded at meeting so many of her baseball heroes in the space of five minutes.

“My friends at school will be astounded!” Penny gushed. “We were in the crowd on Broad Street last fall cheering these guys during the parade after the World Series. My friends aren’t going to believe I met them.”

“They will be fine with it,” I replied. “Do you want to go find some lunch before the game starts? I’m getting hungry.”

“Sure, that sounds good, Kyle,” Penny agreed. We headed across the stadium. I knew I wanted some barbecue from Bull’s Barbecue. Penny spotted the Tony Luke’s stand and had to have one of his delicious roast pork sandwiches. I remembered just how good Tony Luke’s pork sandwich was last winter when Penny brought her sandwich back. We ended up getting the best of both. I shared some of my barbecue with Penny and she shared some of her pork sandwich with me.

We settled back at our seats with large sodas and dishes of Turkey Hill ice cream and waited for the start of the game. Devin chattered away about his experiences as a football recruit.

A dozen college coaches had called him now that they were allowed to talk with him. Penn State remained at the top of his list of preferences. He planned a fall official visit to us, hopefully the weekend of October 6th. That way he could get in to see us play Michigan.

Roy Halladay was on the mound for the Phillies that afternoon. He faced the Cubs’ Carlos Silva. Silva was a big right handed Venezuelan pitcher who was 6-1 on the season. He was very tough on left handers, which included a good part of the Phillies lineup.

The game turned into a real pitcher’s duel between Silva and Halladay. Neither team got on base until the fourth inning. The Cubs’ Marlon Byrd managed a broken bat single to get on base. The next batter, Tyler Colvin, the Cubs’ young left fielder, crushed an off speed pitch and sent it out of the park. The Cubs took a 2-0 lead. Halladay wasn’t rattled. He retired the next three batters.

The game stayed at 2-0 Cubs into the seventh inning, when Silva seemed to run out of gas. Jimmy Rollins smashed a line drive into the gap and sprinted to first base well ahead of the throw. Placido Polanco worked Silva hard but unfortunately popped up on the 3-2 pitch.

Chase stepped into the batter's box. He worked Silva to three balls and two strikes. He fouled off a couple more nasty pitches before drawing a walk. Chase took his base as Jimmy trotted ahead to second.

Ryan Howard took another practice swing and strode up to the plate. Lou Pinella, the Cubs manager, called time and headed out to the mound to talk with Silva and the Cubs' catcher, Geovany Soto. After a couple minutes conference, Pinella walked back to the dugout, allowing Silva to try to get Howard out.

Big Ryan fell behind on the count 1-2. He crushed the next pitch. It flew down the first base line. The hushed crowd waited for the umpire's call. The crowd let out a collective sigh as the umpire signaled the ball was foul. Silva dug deep and unleashed a fast ball low on the inside. Ryan couldn't handle it, striking out swinging.

Jason Werth took the plate confidently. Jason was on a hitting tear lately, batting over .350 in the past three weeks. I think Silva meant to throw a curve on the first pitch, but it didn't curve. It came right down the middle, slow and tantalizingly juicy. Jason smashed it into the stratosphere. It looked like it would go the whole way to Ashburn Alley at the far end of the park. It didn't make that far but there was no question whether it was a home run. It was.

Jimmy, Chase and Jason trotted around the bases to the cheers of the big, partisan crowd. The score was now Phillies – 3, Cubs – 2. Carlos Silva was done for the afternoon. Shane Victorino managed to get on base in that inning but Carlos Ruiz couldn't advance him.

Charlie Manuel let Roy Halladay continue pitching. Roy cruised through the eighth and then the ninth, not letting anyone on base. The Phillies ended up with a nice 3-2 victory over the #2 team in the NL Central.

Penny and I hung out as the crowd streamed to the exits. As they were departing Jena asked Taylor, "Do you and Devin want to hang around? Chase and I are taking Kyle and Penny to dinner."

"No, that sounds like fun but someone... who shall remain nameless, is trying to squeeze in a ballgame and a birthday party today," Taylor replied.

"I have to go!" Devin insisted. "That party is for my girlfriend's best friend. Bailey would crucify me if I missed Danielle's party. I didn't want to miss this pitching matchup either. Halladay versus Silva – it was just as good as I expected."

"The two of you better get on the road if Devin is going to stay in Bailey's good graces," Jena said. She gave Taylor a big hug. "It was good to see you, Taylor."

"It was good to see you too, Jena," Taylor replied.

“Aren’t you going to give your aunt a hug before you go, Devin?” Jena asked.

“Aunt Jena!” Devin fussed. “I’m seventeen!”

“C’mon, Devin,” Jena asked. She held her arms out to her nephew.

“All right,” Devin replied as he gave his aunt a perfunctory hug, complete with the eye roll that seventeen year olds specialize in.

“I’ll see you, Aunt Jena,” Devin said when he was released. He turned towards us. “It was nice to meet you, Penny.”

“It was nice to meet you, Devin,” Penny replied.

“Did you find out, Kyle?” Devin asked. “Are you going to work any of the football camps this summer?”

“I am,” I replied. “I’m working the Senior Camp this summer.”

“Cool! That’s the one I’m going to,” Devin said. “I hope I’m assigned to your floor in the dorm.”

“I’m not in charge of a floor this summer,” I answered. “Coach Burton asked me to help coach the wide receivers.”

“That’s even better,” Devin said. “I’ll see you next month, Kyle.”

“Yes, I’ll see you then, Devin,” I replied.

Jena, Penny and I hung out at the ball park for about forty minutes until Chase was ready for join us. Jena gave her husband a big hug and a kiss when he met us. All of us complimented Chase on his game.

“No, I didn’t have a good game,” Chase protested. “I didn’t get a hit all day. Silva came with his best stuff.”

“It happens,” Jena consoled. “You had a great at bat in the seventh. You wouldn’t let Silva get you out. You advanced Jimmy with a walk and made Jason’s game winning home run happen. That’s not a bad day.”

“Statistics don’t always matter,” I added. “Last season my best two games statistically were the two my team lost. My worst two games were important victories for my team. We both play team games. You contributed to the win today. That’s what matters.”

“Yeah, I know,” Chase agreed. “Still, I’m going to have to go in early tomorrow and do more film study to see what I did wrong today.”

“Watch out, Penny,” Jena said. “You’re going to have to get used to playing second fiddle to a film machine sometimes if your boyfriend is as driven as my husband. How long have you dated? Have you seen that side of successful athletes?”

“We’ve only dated two months,” Penny answered. “... this time. Kyle and I were high school sweethearts. I know how it is. ‘Sorry honey, I can’t go out tonight. I have to watch video of the team we play next Friday.’ I understand completely.”

“You knew I was a football player six years ago when we first dated,” I demurred. “You knew I was a football star when we started dating again in eleventh grade. You certainly knew I was the captain of the Nittany Lions football team last weekend when you agreed to us being a couple. I don’t see where you get to complain too much. You know you love me in spite of football.”

“I do,” Penny agreed. I got a kiss on the cheek for saying the right thing.

“I love mine too,” Jena agreed. Jena gave Chase a kiss too.

“Now that it is settled, let’s eat!” Chase said. “I’ve worked hard today. Where do you want to go, Kyle? Do you have any preferences?”

“Where you took my family last spring was good,” I said. “That was Chickie’s and Pete’s, if I remember correctly.”

“You know we may run into those sharks that broadcast for Channel 17 if we go there, don’t you?” Chase responded.

“I think I’ll manage to avoid embarrassing you, my team or myself if we run into them,” I said.

“Chickie’s and Pete’s it is,” Chase agreed. “Do you want to ride with us or follow me to the restaurant?”

“I’ll follow you,” I replied. “I have an expert on Philadelphia directions with me.”

“I go to Penn,” Penny added. “Chickie’s and Pete’s Crab House is on Packer Avenue a couple blocks from here, right?”

“You got it,” Chase responded. “Follow us.”

Penny and I followed Chase and Jena out to the parking lot, hopped in our cars and headed north on Broad Street.

“I told you Chase was a regular guy,” I teased as we followed him through traffic.

“You were right,” Penny agreed. “He and Jena are nice. I expected he would act like some big superstar, which of course he is.”

“Down to earth and nice as can be,” I said. We pulled into the parking lot outside Chickie’s and Pete’s after I said that. Penny and I followed Chase and Jena into the restaurant. The place was packed. The hostess recognized Chase and took the four of us to a table immediately.

The waitress appeared immediately and took drink orders. Chase, Jena and Penny all ordered draught beers. I skipped my usual iced tea to try something different – Hank’s Black Cherry soda. The waitress returned with our drinks and left menus for us.

I decided to try the blue crab since this was a crab house. I ordered Chickie’s and Pete’s Crab Fries too. Penny ordered the chicken cutlet parm sandwich. Chase had the blue crabs too. Jena decided on the green salad with grilled chicken.

Pete Ciarrochi, the public face of the Ciarrochi family, stopped by our table to visit after we placed our order. He thanked us for stopping by and congratulated Chase on a good game. I was impressed. Pete remembered who I was from my visit a year ago. He wished me a fine season of football before he departed.

We talked as the kitchen prepared our dinners. I could see Penny relax as we visited with Chase and Jena. Quite a few fans recognized Chase and stopped by as we talked. He talked with them briefly and gave them autographs if they asked. No one bothered with me. That was OK. It was a nice change of pace.

The conversation was casual through most of dinner. Everyone, except me, ordered a second beer. I decided it was time to hit Chase for some advice.

“Chase, do you mind a couple business questions?” I asked politely. Chase nodded yes. “I’m on my last year of NCAA eligibility, as of last week. I’ve been inundated with calls from sports agents. I don’t have a clue what I’m doing. Could you give me a little direction on exactly what a sports agent does?”

“I’m certainly no expert, but I’ve had to deal with them for the past dozen years,” Chase answered. “What he does depends on what you want from him. A sports agent can negotiate your contract. He could line up endorsements for you. You could use a different agent for your contract and endorsements. It is entirely up to you. Don’t forget that the agents work for you.”

“Endorsements? I hadn’t thought about that,” I replied. “What kind of endorsements would someone want from me?”

“It doesn’t have to be something big like Donavan McNabb and Campbell’s Soup or Michel Jordan and Hanes underwear,” Chase said. “It could be regional or even local companies that are looking for someone prominent to appear in their commercials.”

“OK, I guess that’s possible,” I commented.

“You need to decide if you want one agent to do both functions or if you want to have different agents for contracts and endorsements,” Chase said. “I’d recommend you consider splitting up the two jobs. Someone who is good at the intricacies of contracts may not be the best person to get you endorsement deals.”

“OK, that makes sense,” I agreed.

“You are going to need a good financial planner,” Chase said. “I know your dad can help you line up someone, but don’t have your dad be your financial planner. If things go wrong, you don’t want your family wrapped up in this.”

“Dad doesn’t want the job,” I replied. “We’ve already discussed it. He’s looking into who some of the well-to-do people in Lancaster County use to manage their wealth.”

“That makes good sense, Kyle,” Chase said. “There are a lot of agents and financial planners who will specialize in working with young players. Mixing gobs of money with young men who know little about money management attracts the swindlers and scam artists. You’re better off with someone used to handling large accounts. It really doesn’t matter if the client is twenty-two and newly rich or has inherited an estate with old family money. Money is money.”

“That’s good advice, Chase, I agreed. “My parents and I hadn’t thought about endorsements. Getting a second agent to specialize in that area makes sense. We’re on the right track with what we’re thinking about a financial planner. Thanks for the advice.”

“No problem,” Chase said. “I’m not an expert, particularly for the NFL. I’m sure you know some football players that went to Penn State. Talk to some of them for better advice about your sport.”

“I plan to,” I replied. “Zack and Leigh Ann Hayes are coming home to visit with Zack’s parents so they can see their granddaughter. Penny and I are taking them out to dinner so we can discuss agents with them.”

“That’s good,” Chase agreed. “Just remember the agent is your employee. He works for you. He’s there to give you advice. In the end the decisions are made by you. It’s your future.”

“Thanks for the advice,” I said. The check for dinner came while we were talking. Chase and I split it. The NCAA would frown on me accepting a gift from a recruit’s uncle. They also wouldn’t want me paying for dinner for Chase either.

Chase and I were lucky that evening. John Clark and Mike Missanelli, the WPHL post-game broadcast team, had cleared out without noticing Chase or me. That didn’t bother me. I wasn’t looking for publicity.

The four of us headed out to our cars. “Thanks for lining up tickets for Penny and me, Chase,” I said.

“No problem,” Chase replied. “Look after Devin when he visits. He’s a good kid.”

“Yes, he is,” I agreed. “I’ll keep an eye on him, but you don’t need to worry. He has enough talent of his own to get top treatment as a recruit.”

“Thanks, Kyle,” Chase said. “It’s been a fun evening. I’m glad you and Penny came down here.”

“Thanks, Chase,” I said. “I appreciate the offer. Let me know if you and Devin want to visit Penn State again, after his official visit in October. I can probably arrange something for you...” I gave him a wink. “...say in November when you’re finally done with baseball.”

“I hope our season lasts that long,” Chase agreed. “That’s what our team is shooting for.”

“The championship... that’s the only goal to shoot for in sports,” I replied. The four of us finished saying good bye before heading our separate ways. Penny helped me find my way back onto the Schuylkill Expressway to get us home.

Once we were safely headed back to Lancaster County, I asked, “Did you enjoy the afternoon?”

“It was amazing,” Penny replied. “You were right about Chase and Jena. They are really nice people.”

“I’m glad you enjoyed the day,” I replied.

“The conversation after dinner was kind of surreal,” Penny added. “I know I sat in with your parents when you talked about agents earlier this week, but talking with a millionaire superstar about the subject really brought it home. You’re going to be a rich man a year from now.”

“I MAY be rich,” I replied. “A lot can go wrong between now and next summer. I want to be ready if it happens but I will be fine if something goes wrong. I’ll have my degree, my teaching certificate and be able to coach somewhere. That would be a good life.”

“You have such a wild range of possibilities,” Penny said. “Play in the NFL and be watched and cheered by millions of people or be an unemployed teacher looking for a job.”

“It’s no different than you,” I countered. “A year from now you could be ready to start veterinary school or you could be an unemployed grad with a degree in biology. What would you do then?”

“I don’t know… probably go to grad school,” Penny said. “There aren’t a lot of job openings for someone with a bachelor’s in biology.”

“If I miss the NFL we can both do grad school,” I said. “We can get an employee discount at Penn State. Coach Burton offered me a grad assistant coaching spot if I want it next year.”

“What happens if I get into veterinary school and you don’t go into the NFL?” Penny asked.

“That’s easy,” I said. “I’ll be looking for work down here around Philly so I can be with you. Whatever happens a year from now, I want us to be together.”

“Daddy tells me you have things figured out if you get into the NFL and I get into vet school too,” Penny said. I related my plan for that contingency.

“Do you think that plan is feasible, honey?” I asked when I finished explaining the plan.

Penny took a deep breath and exhaled. “I guess if we manage to make things work out this coming year, we could make things work longer.”

“I lost you twice and now that I’ve found you, I don’t want to lose you again,” I said. “I want to make things last the way we talked about in high school.”

“I would like that,” Penny agreed. “…if it is possible. We will see how the next seven months work first.”

Traffic wasn’t bad on the Schuylkill Expressway. We flew through light traffic on Route 202 and 30 to get back home. We got to Paradise so early that Penny and I decided to catch up to our friends in Lancaster at the Green Iguana. We changed into fresh clothes and headed for the club.

Most colleges had wrapped up classes. Hal and Tammy joined our group. Jake Kring was back from Syracuse. Drew McCormick and Stacie Thompson were back from

Stacie's graduation from West Virginia. Stacie made it into WV's law school. She and her sweetie had at least another year together in Morgantown. Brandon McCafferty was home from Lehigh. Holly Cox joined Brandon as his date. Ed, Paige, Jeremy and Kathy were in our crew.

Eric Connell and Sammy Hoover dragged my brother Andy along. Kenny Weaver was back from Villanova. Mike Johanson made it up from Texas too. Half a dozen girls Andy and Kenny's age were there too. The night had become a regular Wolverines reunion.

Penny and I sat with Kathy, Jeremy, Hal, Tammy, Paige and Ed. Hal and Tammy had returned home late last night. Hal had his last final Friday afternoon. We got to catch up with their lives since Penny and I hadn't seen them since the holiday break.

Hal, Tammy, Jeremy, Penny and I got to talk about our idea for a trip down the upper Delaware River. We decided to go after Memorial Day, when the river would probably be less traveled. We would meet at Jeremy's house next Wednesday evening to plan our trip.

We enjoyed our drinks and danced awhile with our girls. A cluster of girls, including Penny, headed for the lady's room. I took that opportunity to talk with Mike "Tex" Johanson, who I hadn't seen since high school graduation last spring.

"Hey Mike, how was your first year of college?" I asked as I sat down beside him at his table.

"Good... very good," Mike replied. "I think I should make Dean's List this semester. I kicked ass on my finals."

"That's excellent, Mike," I responded. "I expect I'll make Dean's List too."

"A brain like you? Of, course you will," Mike said. "Hey, did you hear that I made it into the starting lineup?"

"I saw that when I watched your bowl game last January," I said.

"No, I wasn't a starter then," Mike replied. "Our right cornerback was dinged up and wasn't quite ready to go. Coach Muschamp put me in to cover for him. He's graduated now. I officially made a starter for the Orange-White game this spring."

"That's excellent," I said. "I thought you did well at the Fiesta Bowl. Nick expected to be able to pick on you, but you weren't having anything of that."

"Nick?" Mike asked.

"Nick Wilson, Michigan's quarterback," I responded.

“The QB? Yeah, he thought he’d slip some by me,” Mike said. “Shoot! I spent three years here covering you, one of the best receivers in college, and then your brother after that. Covering the guys I see now is easier, not harder.”

“I’m glad you’re adjusting to the college game,” I said. “Did you enjoy Phoenix for the holidays?”

“Phoenix? Yeah. It was fun,” Mike agreed. “Our team liked it so much that we plan to go back again next winter.” He chuckled. “You know the championship game is played there?”

“Yeah, I know,” I said. “My team’s been checking out the accommodations. We thought we might like to go there after New Year’s.”

“Yeah, the Fiesta Bowl is great,” Mike replied. He smirked before adding, “Y’all oughta stick around after the Fiesta Bowl is over and watch the championship game. My Longhorns will put up a good show against whatever sacrificial team the BCS sends us.”

“Sacrificial? I don’t think so,” I protested. “My team will be one of the ones charging out of the tunnel when the championship game is held. Count on it!”

“Meh’be you will, meh’be you won’t,” Mike said. “I KNOW the Longhorns will be there.”

“Did you pick up your southern accent again after a year down South?” I teased.

“Nah, I lost my Yankee accent,” Mike responded.

Penny and the other girls returned as Mike and I talked. She joined me. She was pulling me towards the dance floor.

“Seriously, Mike, good luck next season,” I said. “Maybe your team and mine will meet in Phoenix.”

“That would be cool, Kyle,” Mike replied.

“If you got some spare time this spring, we could use a defensive back coach to help the Wolverines during their passing drills,” I said. “We meet at 3:00 Tuesdays and Thursdays on the practice fields. It hasn’t changed since last year.”

“I could help for a couple weeks,” Mike responded. “I’m doing summer session classes. A lighter fall class load will be nice,” Mike chuckled. “Being an hour away from my girlfriend is good too. She lives in New Braunfels.”

“Good luck, Mike,” I said. “I’ll see you at practice next Tuesday.”

“I’ll see you, Kyle,” Mike replied as Penny and I headed for the floor.

In spite of my brother’s low opinion of his desirability to females, he was asked to dance quite a bit that evening. He was still on the floor at 11:00 pm when Ed, Paige, Penny and I headed for home. I had volunteered to drive Ed down to BWI Airport the next morning for his flight back to Gainesville.

Paige went home with Ed. They planned an intimate good bye before Ed gave Paige a ride home that evening. Penny ended up in my basement pad as planned. We made love twice before I walked her home. She wanted more sleep than she would get spending the night with me. I had to get up at five am.

I got about four and a half hours of sleep when my alarm rudely awoke me. I dragged my tired ass into the shower and cleaned up for the morning. Ed didn’t look any better when I knocked at his front door half an hour later.

“Good morning!” I said, with forced cheer. “You look like hell.”

“Yeah, I do,” Ed retorted. “I also had a hell of a lot of fun getting like this.” Ed eyed me as we loaded his bags in the back of my car. “You look like you and Penny had some fun too last night.”

“We did,” I acknowledged.

“I can sleep on the drive to the airport, I have a chauffeur,” Ed said. As we climbed into my car he added, “To the airport, James... and step on it.”

“At your service, sir,” I intoned. I pulled onto the street and headed for Route 30. “Did you and Paige have fun last night?”

“Paige gave me a hell of a send off,” Ed replied. “Wake me when we get to Baltimore. Paige wore me out last night. I want to catch up on my ZZZs.”

“You got it, buddy,” I agreed.

There was almost no traffic on the road. That’s not surprising. Who in their right mind would be driving at 5:30 in the morning on a Sunday morning? Ed snored softly as I headed west to York and then down I-83 to Baltimore. Ed woke up as I approached the beltway on the north side of Baltimore.

We talked for about twenty minutes about Ed’s experiences at the national championship game last January. Ed had played in big games before and he expected the game to be like the SEC championship game and the other bowls he had gone to. It wasn’t. There

were so many more distractions and so much more press attention that Ed felt his team hadn't been as prepared as they should have been. I would have to watch that if my team got the opportunity to play in Phoenix next January. Football had to be #1. Everything else would be a distant second to preparing to play our best football.

Traffic picked up as we got onto I-95 south of Baltimore. Many of the cars were heading for BWI too. The short stretch of I-195 that took us to the airport was busy. The terminal was jammed. I pulled up at the U. S. Airways gate and double parked. I helped Ed unload his luggage.

"Good luck, man," I said as we shook hands. "Don't let Walker take your job."

"I got that covered, Kyle," Ed replied. "The Gators are my team now. You take good care of Penny. Don't screw things up. She's your destiny."

"I know," I agreed. "I'll do my best." We gave each other a manly hug and back slap. "Camp won't be right without you being there."

"I'll miss it," Ed agreed. "I've got to take care of my business in Florida. It's my job."

"See you, man," I said as he gathered up his bags.

"Yeah, I'll see you after Christmas..." Ed called as he walked towards the door. "... or at spring break. Don't blow us off this year."

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

My grades arrived on Monday afternoon. I opened the letter expecting good news. It was excellent news. I received A's in Adolescent Development, SS Ed 412 and C I 412W. Dr. Williams gave me an A+ in History 444. I had my first semester with a 4.0 GPA. This semester pulled my overall college GPA up to 3.68. I made the Dean's List with honors.

Mom and Dad took off work on Tuesday to go down to Will's commencement. He received his Master's Degree in Physics that afternoon. After a summer at scout camp, Will would head to Princeton in September to work on his doctorate. Abby had one more year of med school at Penn before she started her internship.

Jake Kring came to the Wolverines passing drills and took Ed's place instructing the quarterbacks. Kenny Weaver came to help Jeremy with the defensive instruction. Mike Johanson came to help our defensive backs. Hal worked with our kicker and punter to get them ready for the coming season. I continued working with the receiving corps. The kids put out a good effort.

My week was idyllic. I got to sleep late in the mornings. I did my workout in the afternoon then prepped supper for my family. I spent evenings with Penny and sometimes with the kids. Noah, Connor and Hunter enjoyed hanging out with Penny and me. We enjoyed the little kids.

On Wednesday Penny and I met with Jeremy, Kathy, Hal, Tammy, Jake Kring and Brandon McCafferty to plan out our Delaware River canoe trip. I was arranging to rent canoes from a local troop in Lancaster. I knew the scoutmaster pretty well from camp. Brandon's Explorer could tow the small canoe trailer. Brandon, Hal and I would drive the group. Kathy and Jeremy volunteered to buy food for the trip.

We would start on Wednesday, May 30th at Skinner's Falls along Route 97 in New York, about 5 miles north of Narrowsburg. We would canoe down to Narrowsburg the first night and stay at a campground there. The next night we would canoe down to a place near Barryville, New York. On Friday we would stay at a campground near Pond Eddy. Saturday we would canoe down to Matamoras, PA. We expected to be finished canoeing late Saturday afternoon. We would drive home that evening. The whole trip was around 46 miles of canoeing.

Thursday was a big day for my family. Andy finished his last final before lunch. He returned home mid-afternoon. Will, Abby and Rose arrived from Philadelphia. They were staying in Paradise for the next week and a half. I invited Penny to join my family for dinner that evening when we celebrated the twins' third birthday.

Dad had me pick up steaks for everyone for dinner. I made twice baked potatoes and a garden salad. Mom picked up ice cream and a birthday cake on the way home from work. Andy and Dad grilled the steaks while Mom helped me finish off my dishes.

Baby Rose was cute as could be. Hunter was fascinated by his little niece. Noah and Conner were more used to little babies and took Rose in stride. The twins were old enough to understand that birthdays meant cake, ice cream and presents. They had been talking about this day since I came home from college.

The steaks were excellent. People complimented me on my side dishes too. We talked to kill time while the twins waited impatiently for the cake, ice cream and presents. Mom and Dad invited the twin's grandparents, Mr. and Mrs. Wagner to join us for dessert and the party. We didn't expect Mr. Wagner to show up but everyone knew that G'amma Wagner would be there.

Crystal, the twin's mother, was living in Louisiana with her husband Larry. He was in the army and stationed at a base down there. It was a shame that Crystal didn't get to share the joy the twins gave all of us. She hadn't seen them since she left the hospital three years ago.

Mrs. Wagner arrived around 6:15 pm. The twins raced to the front door to greet their G'amma. Mom had the dining room table cleared and loaded up with the presents from their grandparents, dad, uncles, aunts and cousin.

We sang 'Happy Birthday' to the boys when Mom brought the cake out of the kitchen. She put three candles on each end so both twins could make their wishes and blow out their own candles. The twins dug into their birthday treat with gusto. The cake and ice cream was good.

When Noah and Connor finished eating, they tore into their presents. The two kids had an amazing haul of presents from their four grandparents, their dad, three uncles, two aunts and a cousin. They received toys, stuffed animals, clothes, books and games. They were in heaven.

Poor Hunter looked forlorn as he watched the twins continue to open presents. I called him over and let him sit on my lap. Penny ducked out to get the special present we had purchased for him.

"You understand that today is Noah and Connor's special day?" I said quietly to my little brother.

"Yeah," Hunter agreed.

"They get presents because it is their birthday," I explained. "You have to wait another six weeks before it's your turn. You'll celebrate your birthday the 3rd of July. My birthday will be a few days after yours. Then we'll get all the presents and cake."

"Yeah, I know," Hunter agreed.

"Don't tell anyone," I whispered to Hunter. "Penny and I got you an early birthday present. Is that OK?"

"Sure, Kyle," Hunter agreed.

Penny handed the small wrapped package to Hunter. He tore open the package and pulled out the Nittany Lion stuffed animal we bought him.

"Nitt'y Lion!" the proud boy beamed. "T'anks Kyle. T'anks Penny." Hunter ran around and showed everyone the toy he had received.

Will gave me a wink and noted, "You're going to make a good father one of these days, Kyle."

"When my time comes," I replied.

“You’ll definitely be a good daddy, Kyle,” Penny added. She gave me a kiss, more passionate than necessary at the dinner table.

“Don’t you two get a head start on a family,” Abby teased.

“No! We’re not planning on that,” I protested.

“We’ve learned to be VERY careful about that,” Penny added.

Mrs. Wagner updated our family on Crystal and Larry Burkholder. Crystal was expecting. Noah and Connor’s half sister was due in the end of August. All of us asked Mrs. Wagner to give Crystal our best wishes.

Zack, Leigh Ann and Lauren Hayes flew in on Friday night, May 18th. Will and Abby insisted that Penny and I join Will, Abby, Zack, Leigh Ann and their kids for a cookout at Abby’s parent’s house Saturday evening. Penny and I brought a pasta salad for the evening. It was a small gathering of friends.

The big gathering would be the following Saturday night at the Edward’s house. Penny’s sister Nikki was graduating from law school and a big party with all Nikki’s friends was planned.

Will grilled hamburgers and hot dogs for us. Each couple brought a side dish to go with our meal. Will and Abby supplied the beer. The food was good. I enjoyed reuniting with my football mentor and meeting his adorable daughter Laurie.

Laurie was almost three months old and had a surprisingly full head of golden hair. She had some of her dad’s genes in her too. She was as big as Rose, even though my niece was a month older than her. Laurie was well behaved. She didn’t mind as she was passed from person to person that evening.

Rose wasn’t as even tempered. She cut her first tooth last week. Abby said she was probably starting the other bottom incisor. She was whiny and crying until Abby gave her a teething ring.

Leigh Ann and Penny hit it off. Zack regaled us with stories about playing for the Packers. Will talked about his plans for next year. He was teaching a calculus course along with two freshman physics classes at Princeton next year in addition to working on his doctorate.

We talked and enjoyed the conversation into the evening. Everyone enjoyed Will’s beer, a good German import. We stopped at two each. None of us was interested in getting wasted. The cookout broke up about around eight o’clock in the evening. Both Rose and Laurie were getting whiny and were ready for bed.

As Leigh Ann was loading Laurie into her car seat, I asked Zack, “Could Penny and I invite you and Leigh Ann to dinner someday next week? It will be my treat. It’s not entirely a social occasion. I would like to pick your brain about agents, financial managers and how the draft process works in the NFL.”

“Are the agents after you already?” Zack asked, chuckling.

“They’re swarming,” I replied. “I must have had seventy calls in the last eight days.”

“Honey, are you interested in another dinner with Kyle and Penny?” Zack asked.

“Sure, why not?” Leigh Ann replied, her head still inside the car as she strapped Laurie into her car seat.

“Are you interested in visiting the Wolverines’ passing drills? I’m sure the kids would enjoy seeing a bona fide NFL star.”

“Are you guys still doing that?” Zack asked. He chuckled. “That started out as me and Mike trying desperately to get you and Ed ready to play varsity.”

“The team regularly gets fifty to sixty kids out twice a week to run the drills,” I explained. “The guys try to live up to our legacy and bust their balls trying to get better. What do you think? They meet at three o’clock on the high school practice fields on Tuesdays and Thursdays.”

“Maybe I can visit,” Zack said. “Of course I will need to check with the boss.” He pointed towards Leigh Ann, who was pulling her head out of the backseat as he spoke.

“Go have fun with your friends, Zack,” Leigh Ann said. “Laurie and I can use the peace and quiet of not having you under foot for an hour or two.”

“I’ll try to get by on Tuesday, Kyle,” Zack said.

“You probably could give Matt Sauder some pointers,” I said. “It would help the Wolverines this season and the Lions after that.”

“That’s right... Coach Burton did tell me Matt verbally committed to play at Penn State,” Zack said. “I guess I can help a couple of my favorite non-professional teams that way.”

“Cool! The kids will enjoy seeing you again,” I said.

“Tuesday at three o’clock,” Zack agreed. “Why don’t we do dinner the same night?”

“Works for me,” I agreed. “What do you think sweetie?”

“Sure, dinner on Tuesday evening is fine,” Penny agreed. “We need to make it after 5:30 so I have time to shower after work. I doubt any of you want to smell barnyard on me at dinner. Dr. Chu has had me working in the field a lot.”

Zack and Leigh Ann headed for Zack’s parents’ home. Will grabbed me before Penny and I left.

We have a problem on pool staff, Kyle,” Will said. “Ben Shoemaker decided not to come back to camp. He found a real job that pays him money and everything.”

“Any ideas who we can replace him with?” I asked.

“I do have one,” Will replied. “I wanted to run it by you before I asked the kid. What would you think if we got Eric Connell’s little brother Zac to help at the pool?”

“Zac?” I answered. “Yeah, Zac would be good. I had him for canoeing a few years ago. He was good in that class. Chip told me he was a standout in his lifesaving class last summer. Does he have his BSA Lifeguard yet?”

“No, but we can get him through it during staff week,” Will said. “You know all the drills we do to prep the staff. If he does well on those I can send him to Abby at the end of the week to review First Aid Merit Badge. He will meet all the requirements assuming he has CPR certification.”

“That would work,” I agreed. “Our troop has been doing CPR recertification classes every year for the last four or five years. I’m sure Zac is certified.”

“I’ll talk to Zac and see if I can get him recruited,” Will said. “It shouldn’t be too hard. Eric tells me that their parents are on Zac’s case to get a job this summer. He hasn’t found anything yet and will probably jump at the chance to get paid to spend the summer at scout camp.”

“That’s cool, let me know if it works out,” I said.

Penny and I headed back to my place. Penny’s parents were spending Saturday night in Charlottesville so they could make it to Nikki’s graduation on Sunday afternoon. Penny had a nice, quiet, very empty house. We stopped by my house so I could pick up an overnight bag before we returned to her place.

We watched a movie when we got back to her place. Well... at least we watched most of it. Penny and I got a little carried away after cuddling awhile. We moved upstairs to her bedroom after we gave each other oral orgasms. Making love to Penny in her bedroom was just as good as I remembered it from years ago. We did it twice before settling down for the evening.

“Are you going to church tomorrow?” Penny asked as we relaxed.

“I should,” I answered. “I haven’t made it there yet since classes ended. I think Reverend Hollinger is going to start wondering if I still exist if I don’t get there soon.”

“Do you mind if I go with you?” Penny asked.

“Sure,” I agreed. “I’d love to have you sitting with me tomorrow but I’m a little surprised. Your parents have always been particular about you attending your own church.”

“Our church got a new minister a year ago,” Penny explained. “Rev. Gerlach retired. There is something about the new minister. I’m just not that comfortable with him. I remember how much I enjoyed listening to your minister the times I went with you when we were in high school.”

“Rev is excellent,” I agreed.

“I’ll make us breakfast in the morning then you can go home and get changed,” Penny said. “I’ll meet you at your house. What time do you normally leave?”

“Around 8:45 am,” I replied. We cuddled and fell asleep around midnight.

Penny and I woke up in time to go to church on Sunday morning. I let her shower first. She made omelets for us while I showered. I headed home to change into good clothes after breakfast. Penny met me just before my family left for church.

Penny and I found seats in the pew behind the rest of my family. With Will and Abby plus Penny and me, we had way too many people to fit in one pew. Reverend Hollinger had an excellent sermon that day.

I tried to introduce Penny to Reverend Hollinger when we were departing from the sanctuary.

“Rev, I like to introduce you to...” I began.

“Miss Edwards!” Rev enthused. “It is so nice of you to visit. I heard you were dating Kyle again. Welcome to our church.”

“I’m surprised you remembered me,” Penny said. “It’s been years since the last time I visited with Kyle. The sermon was wonderful, Reverend.”

“Of course I would remember a lady as lovely as you,” Rev replied. “Kyle shows good judgment to date someone as pretty as you.” Rev turned to me. “Make sure you don’t let this lovely lady go, Kyle.”

“I certainly won’t, Rev,” I agreed. We shook hands with my pastor before exiting the church. Penny was charmed by my preacher. She gushed how much more she liked him than the minister at her church.

Penny and I spent part of the afternoon at her house, enjoying our free time together. Later in the afternoon we headed back to my house so we could play with Noah, Connor and Hunter. Mom invited Penny to have dinner with us since her parents wouldn’t return from Charlottesville until Monday evening.

Zack Hayes showed up promptly at three o’clock on Tuesday afternoon to visit the Wolverines’ passing drills. The soon-to-be seniors welcomed Zack, but weren’t carried away with hero worship. They had met Zack two seasons ago during their playoff run when they first made varsity.

The younger kids were an entirely different story. Zack was a person they watched on TV and didn’t associate with our school. He was more of a legend than a live person to them. They stuttered and stammered as they were introduced to this football god. Zack promised autographs to the kids when the practice was over.

I was near the edge of the crowd around Zack beside Chris Gable, a soon-to-be sophomore receiver on our varsity team. Chris commented, “I can’t believe I’m meeting a guy who plays on national TV on Sundays. It’s unbelievable.”

“Hey Chris, are you forgetting that I play on national TV on Saturdays?” I asked.

“Well... it’s not that same thing, Coach,” Chris replied. “I’ve known you since I was in seventh grade. You always help out with our spring practices.”

“Zack is a very good quarterback,” I agreed, “... but don’t put him on a pedestal. He’s a regular guy who practiced on this same field as you and me.” I couldn’t really blame Chris for feeling that way. Zack graduated from this high school when Chris was finishing third grade.

Matt, Dave, Cody and Bill Wenger eventually got everyone focused on practice. Jake Kring, Jeremy North, Kenny Weaver, Mike Johanson, my brother Andy, Hal Long and I assisted with the instruction as the varsity, JV and younger players went through their drills.

Zack worked with Matt and his backup, Jacob Baughman that afternoon. I enjoyed concentrating on the varsity receivers while Andy instructed the JV and younger players. This was the first time I could share tips with Dave Mitchell, since Dave had worked with the other half of the team previously.

Matt Sauder asked Zack to address the whole team when practice was done. Zack called everyone into a big semi-circle around him.

“I was impressed by the work you guys have done today,” Zack observed. “You made so much progress since our team began these passing drills six years ago. Kyle, Ed Fritz, another receiver and I got together every Saturday in the summer to prepare ourselves for the coming season. This program has grown with the leadership of Kyle, Jeremy, Ed, Jake, Kenny, Andrew, Mike and others. It is one of the keys to the success our team was enjoyed in the last half a decade.

“I’ve talked with my teammates in college about what their high school teams did to prepare for football. Most of the successful players were on teams that spent extra time in the weight room, in the film room and out practicing like you are doing today.

“Every one of my NFL teammates came from high school programs that had off season programs like the one we have. You guys have a big opportunity at this school. I have it on good information that your new coach is excellent. You do the work – study the film, do your training and practice, practice, practice... you WILL have success in the fall and in your future.”

“Thanks for speaking to our team, Zack,” Matt said. Matt turned towards the right end of the semi-circle and looked at the younger guys that congregated at that end. “I heard this same speech years ago when I was your age. I listened, busted my ass training, studying and practicing and now I am going to Penn State on scholarship in six months. You can do the same.”

Matt, Dave and Cody called the team into a huddle and did their cheer before dismissing everyone for the afternoon. Zack stuck around for a bit and talked with the more senior members of the team. He teased Matt for his early commitment to Penn State and warned him to be prepared to be in the head coach’s dog house a lot as he learned to play Penn State football. Coach Burton would have high expectations from day 1 of spring practice.

“This was fun,” Zack said as the last of the kids headed for home. “I’m glad you talked me into coming by to help this afternoon, Kyle.”

“No problem,” I replied. “You and Leigh Ann will be ready around six o’clock, right?

“Do you have any place in mind?” Zack asked. “I think we would enjoy something Lancaster County style.”

“How about Jennie’s Diner?” I suggested. “You can’t beat Jennie’s for good Lancaster County home cooking.”

“Excellent,” Zack said. “Leigh Ann and I can stop by your house and we can go from there.”

“That’s cool, Zack,” I said. “Penny will have time to shower after work.”

“See you then, buddy,” Zack replied.

Zack and Leigh Ann met Penny and me at my house at the appointed time. They followed us to Jennie’s Diner over by the outlets on the Lincoln Highway (Route 30). There was a small crowd at the always busy diner. We talked together while we waited for our table.

None of us needed long to choose from the menu. The diner served simple hearty fare and plenty of it. The four of us talked easily while the cook prepared our order. Leigh Ann, God bless her sweet heart, made Penny feel at ease and comfortable with Zack and Leigh Ann. I almost certainly wouldn’t end up on the same team as Zack, but I hoped we could get together during off season to maintain our friendship.

The dinners came out to our table on immense plates. Jennie’s was noted for serving large portions of simple, well prepared food. We dug in. Zack and I, with our athletes’ need for food, finished our plates. Leigh Ann and Penny barely made it through half the food they had been served. The waitress promised to prepare doggie bags for each of them.

“The waitress is eyeing this table,” Zack said. “They’ve got a line of people out the front door waiting for dinner. Why don’t head over to my house. We can sit out on the back deck in the shade, have some cold beer and talk all night.”

“That sounds cool,” I agreed. Zack and I argued over the check at the end of the meal. Since I asked to Zack and Leigh Ann to meet with us, I ended up paying. I followed Zack back to his parents’ house. Leigh Ann put Penny’s doggie bag in the refrigerator to keep the food cold until we headed for home.

Leigh Ann retrieved Laurie from her doting grandparents and brought her out back to join us. Zack brought cold beers for everyone.

“So, you want to know more about agents and the NFL,” Zack said expansively after we were settled with our drinks. “Fire away. What do you want to know?”

“I’ve been swamped with agent contacts this month,” I explained. “Frankly, it’s getting a bit ridiculous. I’m still fielding eight or ten calls a day from agents wanting to talk with me.”

“The NFLPA [NFL Players’ Association, the players’ representatives to the team owners] licenses over two thousand agents,” Zack explained. “I’m not surprised you’re swamped with calls. These agents think you’re going to be a high draft pick and want a piece of

the action. You've got to take control of things. Don't let all these agent contacts distract you from your games this fall."

"I know, that's why I want to talk with you," I replied. "How in the hell do I stop unsolicited calls from all these agents?"

Zack paused and smiled for a moment. "I can tell you what my parents and I did. First thing, never, EVER give out your cell phone or school phone number. My parents were my only point of contact for prospective agents. We put a special message on our answering machine directing agents to leave their name, phone number and address. We promised to send out information. That put us in control of the process of selecting an agent instead of them being in control."

"That's a good idea," I agreed. "What kind of information did you send them?"

"I put my dad in charge of winnowing out the agents to a group that he felt would be best for me," Zack explained. "Dad and I talked once a week so he could keep me informed of the progress, but I never got involved in the details until after the Rose Bowl. Dad came up with a questionnaire he used to the initial agent contact."

"What sort of questions did he ask the agents?" I asked.

"Educational background, experience, who do they represent, what services do they offer, etc.," Zack said. "It is a detailed questionnaire. I'll have my dad get a copy to your dad."

"Does Max Solomon do contract negotiations only, or do you have him handle endorsements too?" I asked.

"Max does both," Zack answered.

"I hate to appear dumb, but who is Max Solomon?" Penny asked.

"Max is my agent," Zack explained. "You and Kyle feel so natural together that I forgot you came into this thing in the middle."

"Max also represents Aaron Morano," I added.

"Who is Aaron Morano?" Penny asked.

"He's a sweetie," Leigh Ann said. "Aaron was Zack's best friend in college and the best man at our wedding last year."

"You probably have seen him," I added. "Do you remember our last game against Berwick when we were freshmen?" Penny nodded yes. "Aaron was the cornerback who shut me down."

“I guess I’m getting up to speed,” Penny said. “I’ve got so many names to learn to follow who is who on Kyle’s team.”

“Any way, do you and Aaron have Max handle endorsements?” I asked.

“Yes, both of us do,” Zack replied.

“That’s interesting,” I said. “Chase said I might want to consider using different agents for endorsements and negotiating a contract...”

“Chase?” Leigh Ann asked quietly as she leaned towards Penny.

“We had dinner with Chase and Jena Utley last Saturday night,” Penny answered quietly.

“I thought the idea made a lot of sense,” I continued as the girls talked. “A guy who is good at contracts may not be as aggressive or competent at finding endorsement deals for me. I think Chase had a good point.”

“I never thought about that,” Zack admitted. “It makes sense.”

“How is everything working out with Max?” I asked.

“I haven’t had a lot of opportunities for endorsement deals yet,” Zack answered. “He did excellent work for me with my contract. Max was fine with my need to get the contract completed before the training camp started, even if it cost me a little money. As a future leader on the Packers, I felt it critical that I be at camp for every second of training. Max worked with my needs and came up with a fair deal with our GM.”

“What are you doing about financial planning and management?” I asked.

“Leigh Ann and I choose Iron Mountain Sports Financial Planning,” Zack said. “Antwaan and Phil both recommended them to me and they are NFLPA certified. They’ve done a good job for me.”

“I’m showing my ignorance again,” Penny said as she leaned to me. “Who are Antwaan and Phil?”

“Phil DiStefano was the Nittany Lions’ starting QB before Zack,” I explained. “Phil is with the Chicago Bears now. Antwaan Booker is a defensive end with the Denver Broncos and the MVP of the NFL last season.”

“That was MVP of the AFC,” Zack corrected. “Antwaan was our teammate at Penn State.”

“Sorry to interrupt guys,” Penny apologized.

“I am leaning towards using a local financial firm for planning and managing my finances,” I said. “What is the difference between me if I have millions next year and someone twenty-two years old that inherited millions? Wouldn’t I be less likely to run into unscrupulous people trying to capitalize on my youth and inexperience with money management if I avoided the firms that specialize in football players?”

“You may be right,” Zack agreed. “Make sure you and your dad carefully check out whoever you use.”

“We are doing that now,” I replied. “He’s checking out who the local movers and shakers like the Highs, Horsts and Wares use.”

“That’s not a bad place to start,” Zack agreed. “Do you have a timeline planned for choosing your agent or agents?”

“Not really,” I admitted.

“You and your dad need to do your homework during the fall season,” Zack instructed. “I waited too long when I chose Max at the end of January. I would recommend your dad whittle down prospective agents before Christmas. Invite all the prospective agents for interviews and meeting with you and your family in State College the weekend after your bowl game. You should interview the final candidates and make a choice as soon as possible after that.”

“Why so soon?” I asked. “That seems to be rushing things.”

“An agent’s duties should include helping you prepare for the Senior Bowl and to get you ready for the Combine,” Zack said. “I didn’t give Max enough time to help me prep for the Combine. I did a single weekend here in Lancaster County with Stan at Pro-Sports Training.”

“Who is Pro-Sports Training?” I said. “I’ve never heard of them.”

“Stan Pyfer owns and runs Pro-Sports Training,” Zack explained. “Stan has his doctorate in sports training and was a trainer with a couple pro teams before opening his own training center. He works with athletes to create individualized training regimens to maximize their abilities. He specializes in pro-football players. Stan will go over all the drills they have at the NFL Combine and give you tips to help you get your best performance. Stan’s help could get you an extra million or two dollars if you perform well at the Combine.”

“And he’s local?” I asked.

“His gym is in Mount Joy,” Zack said. “You have to set aside time in the winter to train before you go to the Combine.”

“OK, I’ll remember that,” I replied shaking my head. “I had no idea I needed to choose an agent that soon. I expected to take my time after the season is over.” Mentally I tried to remember all the things we talked about. What did I need to do next? “Could my dad talk with yours about that agent questionnaire? It would help us get a place to start and might help me get all these agents off my back.”

“Sure, I know Dad would be happy to talk with your dad,” Zack agreed.

“Do you know if I’m allowed to hire a lawyer now to help us get my representation set up?” I asked. “I hope I don’t have to wait until after a bowl game to get legal help in place.”

“I think you can do that now,” Zack said. “Check with Jim Claire in the athletic department’s compliance office. He should be able to tell you what the NCAA permits.”

“Thanks for talking with us about agents,” I said. “Do you mind some questions about playing in the NFL? Is it as difficult to learn the playbook as they say? The commentators on TV always talk about how fast the game is. Is that true?”

“You have no idea,” Zack said chuckling. “You remember how you and I studied film together our last year and did sight adjustments on certain plays based on the defense?”

“Yeah,” I agreed.

“I’m playing the West Coast offense now,” Zack said. “The playbook is three times the size of Coach Burton’s. The entire passing game is like what you and I did. Every passing route has multiple decisions to be made as the play runs, based on the defense’s set and reactions. If you see this defense, you’ll run this route. If you see that defense, you adjust your route to exploit that hole. If you see another defense, you’ll sprint deep downfield. Everything depends on you reading the defense correctly as you run the route and then I have to read the defense the same as you so I deliver the ball to the route you actually run. It’s complicated and damn near unstoppable when the receivers and quarterback are on the same page on reading the defense.”

“That sounds like an offense designed for you and me,” I said. “What went wrong to put your team at four wins and twelve losses?”

“A lot of things can go wrong,” Zack said. “Our defense broke down too often. Early in the season I was too green. I made the wrong reads and threw the ball into coverage too much. After I got settled, about the fourth game, I averaged 27.2 points a game. If I had a defense to back me up, that probably would have gotten us more wins.”

“Yeah, 27 points a game sounds good,” I agreed.

Zack leaned in closer to me. “You can’t repeat this to anyone!” he insisted. I nodded yes. “My offensive line sucks! They just couldn’t keep the rush off me.”

“It’s terrible,” Leigh Ann agreed. “Poor Zack came home from games so battered and bruised. He could barely get out of bed on Monday mornings.”

“Did Coach Graham get you help in the draft?” I asked.

“They drafted a fricking running back!” Zack answered. “Don’t get me wrong. Terrell is a talented back and I’m glad he’s on the team, but neither of us are going to produce without blocking help.”

“I guess,” I agreed.

“Don’t take this wrong, Kyle,” Zack said. “I’d love to play with you again at the professional level, but if Green Bay takes you with their first round pick next spring, it will be a wasted pick. I need a great left tackle to watch my back. I have plenty of receivers to catch three to five yard routes. If you were in Green Bay too you would be running your thirty yard route and I would never get you the ball. I’d be flat on my back before you got to the point where I throw to you.”

“I see what you mean,” I agreed.

“Maybe,” Zack said. “I prided myself on how much I knew about football when I came out of college, but I’m learning so much more here. You asked about fast... the speed of the pro game is amazing. Every cornerback you face is an Aaron Morano. The linebackers are quick. The defensive linemen move like college linebackers. The tempo is quick, like you won’t believe until you play in the NFL.”

“I’m anxious to see how I stack up against them,” I said.

“You should come watch me play to get an idea of what it is like,” Zack said. “My team is playing in Philly on October 14th. You should slip away from campus and come see us play.”

“I’d love to,” I agreed. “...but there is no way I can do that. We play in Iowa that weekend. I would anticipate that the game will be a 3:30 start, so the team won’t get back to State College until early morning. There is no way I can get down to the stadium in Philly in time for a game.”

“How about you, Penny?” Zack asked. “I’m guessing the logistics won’t be so difficult to get to the game from the University of Pennsylvania. Would you like two tickets?”

“I guess,” Penny agreed. “I’m sure one of my friends would accompany me to the game.”

“Cool!” Zack said. “You’ll be with my parents, Leigh Ann’s parents and her brother Mike. Leigh Ann and Laurie are flying in a few days before the game so all the grandparents can spoil Laurie for a while.”

“I appreciate the offer, Zack,” Penny said. “Thank you very much.”

“Give Leigh Ann your college contact info before you go,” Zack said.

“I should probably head inside,” Leigh Ann said. “Laurie is sleepy. She needs a bath before I put her down for the night.”

“Penny and I should probably get going,” I said. “Thanks for spending time with us this evening. I think you’ve helped me get a better handle on what’s coming up next spring.”

“Yes, thank you for your help, Zack,” Penny added. “Thank you Leigh Ann. Tonight was fun, if a little overwhelming.”

“I know where you’re coming from Penny,” Leigh Ann answered. “I was an average college student before I met my guy. The last three years have been interesting. You will get used to living with a sport star and all the trappings that come with it.”

“I guess,” Penny agreed. “It certainly will be an interesting senior year.”

(To be continued)

Chapter 63

Dad picked up the questionnaire from John Hayes Thursday on the way home from work. We looked it over and made a few minor changes. I decided to save Mom and Dad the time and trouble of mailing these questionnaires out. I would post them on a website. The agents could download them, fill them out and return them to my Dad when they were done. Andy helped me set up the website. Our phone rang in the middle of work on the webpage.

“Kyle, I’ve got another agent on the phone,” Dad yelled up to us in Andy’s bedroom.
“Do you want to take this or should I give him the new web address?”

“We’re not quite done with it yet,” I answered back. “I guess I can talk with this joker.”

I grabbed phone in the upstairs hallway. “Hello?”

“Hello Kyle, this is Max Solomon,” the voice said. “I hope I haven’t called at an inconvenient time.”

“No, this is fine, Mr. Solomon,” I replied.

“Please call me Max,” Max said. “We have broken bread together. There is no need to be that formal.”

“Sure, that’s fine, Max,” I agreed.

“I will keep my introduction brief,” Max said. “I am sure my brethren are driving you to distraction right now. You are a supremely talented young wide receiver. I hope at the appropriate time next winter when you are considering agents, that you will permit me to make a presentation about my firm. I believe we could represent you well as you begin your professional career.”

“You’re right about the other agents, Max,” I said. “My Dad and I are setting up a website with a questionnaire for potential agents to fill out. My Dad will review them and come up with a short list for me to interview next January when my team is finished playing football.”

“That sounds like a wise plan,” Max said.

“If you give me your e-mail address, I’ll send you the link later tonight,” I replied. “My brother and I are just starting to set up the page and don’t have it on the web yet.”

“I would be most appreciative, Kyle,” Max replied. “I have two clients who have told what a wonderful young man and gifted receiver that you are. I would enjoy the opportunity to work with you.”

“Those two clients have extolled your virtues to me,” I answered. “Don’t tell your competitors but Aaron and Zack’s say so is good enough to get you on my short list to interview.”

“That is very kind of you,” Max said. “I will get off the phone and let you continue your work. Good luck, Kyle. Work hard and have an outstanding senior season. Nothing else will come close to ensuring you a good spot in the NFL draft.”

“Thanks for calling, Max,” I replied. “I’ll talk to you next winter after my season is done.”

I headed downstairs to talk with Dad when I hung up the phone. “That was an opportune call,” I said. “It was Max Solomon, Zack’s agent. Zack and Aaron Morano have said excellent things about him.”

“I take it you hope he will make the short list of agents,” Dad said.

“I’m sure he will,” I agreed. “He’s a good agent if both Zack and Aaron recommend him.”

“I will vet him thoroughly for you,” Dad said.

“He will stand up to scrutiny,” I replied. “Zack and Aaron have excellent judgment. I trust what they tell me.”

Penny, my friends and I spent a good portion of Memorial Day weekend preparing for our canoe trip on the upper Delaware River. I helped Brandon McCafferty pick up the canoes and trailer Saturday afternoon from Mr. Chapman, scoutmaster of one of the many Lancaster troops. We promised to have everything back by early Friday evening. Mr. Chapman’s troop had a canoe trip planned for the coming weekend.

Our group met bright and early Tuesday, May 29th at Jeremy’s house for our four day water adventure. Jake Kring rode with Brandon in the Explorer pulling the trailer of canoes. Hal, Tammy and Kathy rode with Jeremy. Penny rode with me. We were taking one car too many so we could shuttle cars back and forth and always have an extra car at the end of each day’s canoe trip and could get the drivers back to our day’s start to pick up their cars.

It took about four hours to get up to Narrowsburg, New York. The hairpin curves on Route 97 north of Port Jervis were a treat. I’m sure Brandon had fun negotiating them

pulling a canoe trailer. We pulled into the campground beside the public boat landing around 11:15 that morning. We would camp at that campground that evening. Penny and I jumped in the back seats with Brandon and we headed north for Skinner's Falls, our starting point.

We had a quick lunch before we loaded up our canoes and headed for the falls. We were travelling light compared to our trips to Algonquin. All our food and camping gear stayed in the cars. We took water, rain gear, and water-proof cameras down the river.

Going through Skinner's Falls was fun. There is approximately a twenty to thirty foot drop in a quarter mile stretch of river. It's exciting. It got extremely exciting for Jeremy and Kathy. Jeremy got too far to the left and took their canoe over a couple three foot high rock ledges on the way down. In spite of that, he and Kath enjoyed the ride. We liked the falls enough that we carried our canoes back up and went through three times before we continued down river.

We did half a dozen nice rapids on the four and a half mile stretch of river on the way to Narrowsburg. None of them were as exciting as Skinner's Falls. Mr. Chapman, who had canoed this stretch of river many times, gave us excellent advice.

Hal, Jake and the girls relaxed at our campsite while I drove Brandon and Jeremy up Route 97 to get their cars. Jeremy and Kathy made dinner while the rest of us set up camp. Everyone relaxed around a campfire after dinner.

"Hey Kyle, do mind taking a walk with me?" Jeremy asked after the discussion had gone on for awhile.

"Sure," I agreed. We walked about a hundred yards before I asked Jeremy, "What's up that you don't want to discuss around everyone?"

"Agents," Jeremy answered. "You know how Brandon gets sometimes when we talk about all the things that go on as successful college football players." I nodded in agreement. "I also wanted to spare Hal's feelings. Did you know he hasn't had a single agent contact him this month?"

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

"Are the agents still driving you crazy?" Jeremy asked. "I know you talked with Zack to find some ideas to cope with the nuisance."

"Not one agent called me since last Thursday night," I answered.

"You're joking!" Jeremy responded. "How in the hell did you manage that?"

"It was Zack's idea," I said. "When you call my house you get a recording on our machine directing agents to a website I set up. The website has a detailed questionnaire

for the agent to fill out. It also warns them that if they contact me or my family, or ignore the other directions on the website, they will be removed from consideration when I chose my agent.”

“That’s brilliant!” Jeremy exclaimed. “Hit them in the pocketbook if they don’t listen to you.”

“Why would I want an agent that can’t follow simple directions?” I added.

“Do you think your dad would show my dad what you’re doing?” Jeremy asked. “I’d love to save my parents from more of these damn phone calls.”

“I’m sure Dad would help,” I said. “I bet if your dad talked to my brother Andy or to Eric Connell, they could help him set up a similar webpage for you.”

“I’m going to call home right now,” Jeremy said. I rejoined our group while Jeremy spent about five minutes on the phone. He had a big smile when he sat down beside Kathy. “I think Kyle’s suggestion will fix my phone problem at home,” he explained to Kathy. No one else was clued in about that cryptic message except Kathy and me.

Brandon and Jake shared a tent. They had suffered through listening to Hal and Tammy; Jeremy and Kathy; and Penny and me make love that evening. I wasn’t sympathetic. They knew what was going to be going on when they decided to come on this trip without girlfriends.

Penny and I were cooks for Wednesday. We made breakfast for the group while Brandon followed Jeremy down to Barryville. Brandon’s SUV and the trailer were left at the Barryville campground while Jeremy drove the two of them back to our campsite. Breakfast was ready when they returned. We loaded up all the camping gear in my car and Jeremy’s car.

We headed down river around 9:30 in the morning. It was an exciting thirteen miles with lots of rapids. We ran into the first of the eel dams that Mr. Chapman warned me about. The dam was a few feet high at the highest and V shaped. During the eel season the fishermen would put their traps at the apex of the V. They left room on the right side of the dam for us to get around. It was a rush dropping a few feet as the water sluiced through the paddle-around spot at the end of the dam.

Brandon drove Jeremy and me back up to Narrowsburg for our cars when we finished canoeing in the afternoon. Penny and I made spaghetti for our group when we got the cars back. We grilled some garlic bread on the griddle. We served it with a salad I picked up at the market when I left Narrowsburg.

We relaxed and talked over some more of Jeremy's beer in the evening. The next morning we shuttled cars down to the campground near Pond Eddy. The section of river between Barryville and Pond Eddy was excellent. We started off with a couple of long, exciting sections of rapids near Barryville. We passed a couple eel dams along the seven mile stretch of river before we pulled into our campsite for the evening.

We were running short on milk and eggs, so Jeremy, Brandon and I drove our cars down to Matamoras for groceries and to drop off two cars at the end of our trek. I insisted we buy our groceries at the Turkey Hill Minit Market. I stocked up on Turkey Hill Iced Tea for everyone, so we didn't go into iced tea withdrawal.

Friday's run was fun and at ten miles, one of our longer days on the river. We ran into some great rapids and quite a few eel dams. My only disappointment was at Mongaup. Mr. Chapman had told me about how much fun the rapids and standing waves were when his troop came down through last fall.

I had the map out and recognized the small creek coming in on our left and knew about the big retaining wall on the Pa. side of the river holding the railroad tracks forty feet up from the river. I never would have known there were good rapids there without those two landmarks. We passed through with barely any riffles on the surface as we went by. Mr. Chapman said there were standing waves 24" high when he went through.

I guess that shows how much a river can change with time of year and amount of flow.

We paddled into the boat launch on the Pa./Matamoras side of the river a little after one o'clock. Jeremy drove me back up river to Pond Eddy while the rest of our group loaded the canoes on the trailer Brandon was towing.

We stopped off on the north side of Reading for dinner on our way home. Jake knew about a good barbecue place. The place turned out to be half a mile from Penn State's Berks Campus. I knew Berks Campus from when I was a high school senior. I had gone there for placement testing and initial course sign up before I started at Main Campus.

The barbecue place was a chain restaurant. I ordered a rib combo platter with half a rack of baby-backs and a serving of brisket. It was quite good in spite of being produced by a chain. These guys knew barbecue.

I was a bit melancholy as I drove the final forty miles to my house. Our four day camping and canoe trip had been wonderful. At most, all of us might be able to do something like this one more time, next spring during spring break. All of us, except Jake, would be graduating from college in a year. We were probably going to scatter to the winds if we achieved our dreams of playing in the NFL.

My friends and I participated in two more afternoon passing drills the following week. By popular agreement among the players, we would hold a final scrimmage the last day

of school. We decided to include everyone, from the little, soon-to-be seventh graders up to the almost seniors. Jeremy would coach the Red Team with Andy and Jake's assistance with the offense. I would coach the White Team with Kenny and Mike's help on defense.

The six of us stayed around Tuesday after the drills were over and picked our teams. Jeremy won the coin toss and got to select the first quarterback. Of course he took Matt Sauder. I was OK with that. I thought Jake Baughman would do fine for my team. I grabbed Cody Stevens and Dave Mitchell. Jeremy took Gary Harrison.

I had an advantage when we picked the offensive and defensive lines. I had watched the older guys play the last season or two. Jeremy hadn't seen our lines play since the two of us graduated from high school.

Mike Johanson grabbed my attention as we were drafting the youngest of the kids for our teams.

"You gotta take Joe Eberly," Mike insisted.

"You sure?" I asked. "Isn't he finishing sixth grade now?" We were still drafting kids from last year's JV and middle school teams.

"Trust me, Coach," Mike agreed. "He's big for his age and he has spectacular instincts for a kid so young. He's the best cornerback available now."

"I'll take your word for it," I replied. Jeremy, Andy and Jake snickered at my selection.

Mike smiled, leaned close to me and whispered, "He's the best cornerback that age that I've seen in about seven years. Coach could put him on JV this fall and he would do well."

"I trust your judgment, Mike," I replied. I smiled. I knew exactly which seventh grade cornerback from seven years ago that he was referring to – himself. I agreed with Mike's judgment too. I hadn't seen a better cornerback in high school than him.

The kids were doubly excited the following Tuesday. It was the final day of school and they were let out at 11:30 am. They got to play some football too! Most of the senior high and middle school players met at our stadium and ate bag lunches before dressing for the scrimmage. The boosters and coaches were kind enough to let the kids use the school's pads, helmets and practice uniforms for the afternoon.

I dressed for the part. I carried a clipboard of notes and ideas I wanted to try. I wore my Penn State "Coach" visor that I got the previous Christmas too. Some of the older kids teased me about the visor but I didn't care. I was getting to practice my craft that day

too. The guys were stretching and getting themselves ready when I spotted Coach Turner and Coach Brady sitting high up in the stands. I trotted up to say hi.

“Hey, Jason. Hey, Patrick, it’s good to see you today,” I said as I arrived at their row.

“It’s best if we don’t talk before whatever is happening on the field today,” Jason replied. “I don’t want the PIAA to think I had anything to do with organizing a team function now, since that would be against the rules.”

“I understand,” I said. “I’ll let you guys be. Enjoy the show.”

“Of course, if you and the other ‘coaches’ should happen to end up at the pizza place afterward, I’m sure Pat and I would enjoy hearing about how your day went,” Jason said. He gave me a wink. “Hell, I’d even spring for sodas and a couple pies for our school’s famous alumni.”

“I’ll pass the word to my friends,” I agreed. “I’m sure sodas and pizza after an afternoon in the sun will sound good to all of them.” I passed the invitation on to my assistants and to Jeremy and his assistants.

The scrimmage turned out to be much lower scoring than last year. Jake called a more conservative game than Ed had the previous spring. Matt Sauder didn’t have his fast, deep threat to stretch my defense either. Dave could run deep routes for me but Jake Baughman, my quarterback, didn’t have Matt’s arm strength or accuracy.

What Jake Baughman could do was run the option. He did great, making proper decisions about when to hand the ball to Cody and when to keep it. We were able to move the ball on Jeremy’s Red Team, to his great disgust. Jake managed to complete a couple deep play action passes to Dave before he was done playing at halftime.

The varsity offensive players had us teach our varsity defense how to play zone defense this spring. Both teams used zone coverage during the second quarter so our offensive guys could get game practice beating the zone. Gary Harrison was deadly between the deep and short zones. Dave Mitchell worked the deep seams well too. My team had a 21-20 lead over Jeremy’s guys.

My friends and I had an informal depth chart for the six quarterbacks. Matt was #1, of course. Jacob Baughman was #2. Jeremy took the #1, #4 and #5 quarterbacks when we drafted our teams. I had our #2, #3 and #6 quarterbacks.

Ryan Newswanger, my second quarterback, took over to start the second half. Ryan was thirteen, almost fourteen and would start ninth grade in September. He was big for his age. I kept things simple for him the first two plays. He handed off to our tailback, picking up eight yards on two plays. I called a short option pass. I did include a deep route by the split end, just to draw some of Jeremy’s defenders away from the point of attack. Ryan faked the handoff to the tailback and then rolled to the right.

I expected Ryan to hit the flanker about five yards downfield. Jeremy's defense left my split end in single coverage and rushed towards my QB. Ryan scanned the field, stopped and set up. To my horror and shock, he spotted the open split end and hurled the ball across his body to the far side of the field.

Nine quarterbacks out of ten don't have the arm to make that throw. The tenth quarterback usually regrets making that throw because it is picked off more often than not. Ryan got lucky. Our split end got loose, snagged the ball on his fingertips and sprinted for the end zone. He scored a TD before Jeremy's defenders could catch him.

"High five!" I declared as he jogged off the field. We slapped our hands together.

"Thanks, Coach," Ryan said.

"Don't ever throw that pass again," I added.

Ryan stopped short, stared back at me and grunted, "Huh?"

"You made a hell of a throw," I replied. "You were lucky to complete that pass. Nine times out of ten that throw ends in an interception."

"Sorry, Coach. I didn't realize that," Ryan said.

"I'm going to find you some deeper passes for the next drive," I said. "I didn't realize you had such a gun for an arm. We'll find deeper, but safe passes for you."

"OK, Coach," Ryan said. I worked through some pass plays for Ryan to try on his next drive while Kenny and Mike took care of our defense. The Red Team managed a field goal after a long drive. The score was White-28, Red-23.

Ryan did well on the next drive. He managed to extend our lead with a field goal on a ten play drive. He threw the ball with accuracy and velocity. I decided by the time the drive was over that our varsity team would be set in a year or two at the QB spot. I expected Ryan would out-shine Jacob by the time both were playing varsity.

Neither my nor Jeremy's seventh grade quarterback could move his team in the fourth quarter. Jeremy's QB was better, but Mike and Kenny had called a brilliant defense.

They stacked up nine players on the line of scrimmage to stop the run. A cornerback shadowed Red's best receiver while Joe Eberly, the promising seventh grader, played center field as our free safety. Andy and Jake Kring tried to exploit the stacked defense but couldn't. Joe had the speed and athleticism to get to any receiver going more than ten yards deep. I understood what Mike had told me last week. Joe Eberly was going to be an excellent player some day.

The final score was White – 31, Red-23. The two squads congratulated each other at center field and then headed to the locker room to change and return the gear. Jeremy, Hal, Jake, Kenny, Andy, Mike and I gathered as the players dispersed. We congratulated each other for a good game and off-season drills. I pointed up towards the stands where Jason Turner and Pat Brady were climbing down towards the field.

“Coach Turner invited us to go over to Nino’s,” I said. “He’ll treat us to pizza and Cokes. I think he wants to pick our brains about what we observed working with his players.”

“Pizza! Cool!” “Sounds great!” and “Count me in,” my friends chimed following my invitation. I gave Jason a smile and a thumbs-up as the seven of us headed for our cars. I saw Jason and Pat head for the parking lot too. Our big group invaded Nino’s Pizza about five minutes later, ending the late afternoon quiet at the pizza shop.

I introduced Jason, Pat and my friends. Jason took drink orders and suggestions for pizza toppings and headed over to the counter to place the order. The rest of us pulled enough tables together to make room for all of us.

“This is fantastic guys,” Pat gushed. “Jason told me about the dedication of the football players before I was hired here, but I didn’t understand until I saw it for myself.”

“We’ve been doing this a long time,” Jeremy said.

“I know,” Pat agreed. “I was impressed by the kids’ dedication to weight training this winter. I was pleased to see them studying film too.” He chuckled. “My classroom looks out over the practice fields. I was amazed to see sixty kids out when they started practicing in the spring… and the whole thing is student run.”

“It always has been,” I agreed.

“I saw the tempo and quality of play improve when all of you returned home last month,” Pat said as Jason sat down beside us. “Do all of you play college ball?” He got head nods from us. “I know where Kyle and Jeremy play. The whole country knows that. Where do the rest of you play?”

“Villanova,” “Delaware,” “Syracuse,” “Rutgers,” and “Texas Longhorns,” my friends replied.

Pat stared at Mike for a second and commented, “You’re a long way from home.”

“You betcha,” Mike agreed. “Up here is a long way from home.”

“Mike’s a Texas transplant,” I explained. “His dad works for New Holland Ag, the farm equipment manufacturer in New Holland.”

“You can tell he’s from Texas by his grating-on-the-chalkboard accent,” Jeremy teased.

“Y’all suck!” Mike retorted.

“Seriously, guys,” Jason interjected. “You guys all put in an incredible effort to help our team improve. I want to thank you for your efforts this spring.”

Jason got us settled down and focused on the task he needed from us – to evaluate the kids’ practices and the scrimmage. It didn’t take long to get to one of the keys to the game.

“How in the hell did you guys hold back Matt Sauder?” Pat asked. “He’s supposed to be all-state quarterback and a top recruit.”

“That was easy,” I said. “Jeremy won the coin toss when we picked teams. He took Matt. That meant I got Dave Mitchell. We didn’t dare put the two of them on the field together. It would have been a massacre.”

“Yeah, like it wasn’t hard enough slowing down Gary Harrison,” Kenny added. “That kid is a royal pain the ass to cover.”

“He reminds me so much of Greg,” Jeremy commented.

“Greg?” Pat asked.

“The guy that Harrison Field is named after,” I explained. “Gary’s older Greg played tight end with most of us.” I motioned around my circle of friends. “Greg was a good tight end, a great teammate and leader.”

“I think Gary might end up as good as his brother,” Jake said.

“You only saw Gary play as a senior,” I countered. “I think Gary is a better player today than Greg was when he started tenth grade.”

“Where did the kid learn to block so well?” Pat asked. “I’ve never seen a ninth grader hit like that.”

“That would be my doing,” I explained. “Gary worked at my scout camp last summer. I taught him what I learned about blocking from my coaches and from my roommate.”

“You know his roommate,” Jeremy added. “Damian Thompson. Thompson is a hell of a blocker. I should know. He knocked me on my can more than once when we played against each other a couple years ago.”

“I’ve seen him play on TV,” Jason agreed. “He is a hell of a blocker. He can run the ball too.”

“Coach, you should know that Matt, Dave, Cody and Gary will be working out with me this summer,” I said. “All of them work for me as lifeguards at our scout camp’s pool. We train every day after lunch.”

“You were a scout too?” Pat asked. “I did my time in scouts when I was younger.”

“Most of the guys here were scouts or Venturers,” I said, “...except Kenny and Mike.”

“I was a scout... back in Texas,” Mike added. “I got too busy keeping up with Andy and Kyle when we moved here. I concentrated on football instead.”

“I’m sure you’ll give my guys good instruction over the summer,” Jason said. “Let’s talk about some of the other players.”

We went through the varsity and then the JV players, one by one.

“What did you think of Baughman’s arm?” Jason asked.

“He’s not the strongest I’ve ever seen,” I replied. “...but how could you expect two guys like Matt Sauder on one team? Jacob did well for what I asked of him.”

“I guess I saw what I could do with Baughman if, God forbid, anything happens to Matt next season,” Pat said. “...lots of option plays. Baughman looked good on the play fake off the option.”

“How about Newswanger?” Jason asked. “He pulled off a couple good drives, except...”

“I know,” I interjected. “I chewed him out after he threw back across the field on that rollout.”

Jeremy laughed and asked, “You chewed your quarterback out for throwing a touchdown pass? That’s a good one.”

“The touchdown was beside the point,” I replied.

“It’s a dangerous, low percentage pass,” Jason said. “I’m glad you reminded him I don’t want that sort of thing.”

“Other than the one bad decision, Ryan played well,” I said. “He has a better arm than I expected.”

“I saw you opened up your offense when you realized that,” Jason said.

“It made sense,” I explained. “I ran option when I had a quarterback suited to it. When I had a guy with a strong arm I took advantage of it.”

“You’ll make a good coach when you get your chance, Kyle,” Jason said. “A lot of coaches twice your age don’t remember to tailor their offense to the talent they have.”

We talked some more about the other JV and middle school players, though not in quite as much depth. Jason and Pat had years to learn about them before they arrived on varsity.

“Who was the kid you had playing free safety at the end of the game?” Pat asked. “Is he going to be on JV next fall?”

“I doubt it,” Mike answered. “Joe Eberly finished sixth grade this morning. He isn’t eligible for JV yet, is he?”

“No, he isn’t,” Jason confirmed. “He could be a hell of player when he gets bigger. What was your thinking with the defense in the fourth quarter, Kyle?”

“Ask Mike and Kenny,” I replied. “They handled the defense for me.”

“I didn’t figure that deep passing was a big threat,” Mike explained. “I thought I could stuff the run at the line and dare them to pass deep. I told Joe to play centerfield and just go for the ball if anyone tried throwing. Joe would have just as good a chance as the receiver to come up with the ball. Taylor [the seventh grader playing QB for Red in the 4th quarter] doesn’t have the arm strength or accuracy for deep balls yet.”

“Yeah, it worked out that way,” Jake agreed. “I tried to get Taylor to go deep but he couldn’t put the ball on the money. I never got White out of the stacked defense in the fourth quarter.”

“I’m impressed with all of you,” Jason said. “Walt Caffrey was right. The seven of you are excellent football players and good at coaching too. Thank you for all your efforts. You have made my and Pat’s jobs much easier come August.”

We thanked Jason and Pat for the pizza and Cokes and wished them good luck for the coming season. None of us would be able to see how the Wolverines did when football two-a-days started in the middle of August. We would be in the middle of our own training camps.

My six week vacation was ending too quickly for my taste. Penny and I made good use of every minute we had left that week. We went Mini-golfing with Jeremy, Kathy, Hal and Tammy Thursday evening. Penny decided to spend the night with me even though she had work on Friday.

I spent most of Friday packing and getting my things ready for my six weeks in summer camp. I warned Penny to dress up for dinner. I took her to Iron Horse Inn in Strasburg. I had read excellent things about their food.

We enjoyed a leisurely dinner in the quaint old inn. I enjoyed their stuffed mushrooms appetizer while Penny had crab and artichoke dip. Friday was prime rib night, so both of us ordered that for our main course.

We headed over to the park and relaxed along the banks of the Pequea Creek. We cuddled, talked and enjoyed a romantic evening as we watched the stars come out. Kisses were shared at the park but no more. Penny and I headed back to my house to become more intimate.

Our favorite ice cream, mint chocolate chip, shared in my kitchen gave us more energy for our lovemaking. Downstairs, we made out for awhile before sharing our bodies together. We lay in bed cuddling after our first time, in that mellow state between climax and alertness.

Penny leaned over and gave me a kiss. "I love you, Kyle."

"I love you too," I replied immediately.

"I need to tell you something important," Penny said. I roused myself and stared into my lover's eyes. "The last three months together had been wonderful. Spectacular actually, but you need to know that I've been holding back a little."

"I haven't noticed," I replied.

"I have," Penny repeated. "I guess it isn't surprising given my history with the men in my life. I thought you and I would last forever when we were in high school and then you broke my heart."

"I am sorry," I said. "It was a stupid, immature thing to do and..."

"Shhh..." Penny insisted. "I know you're sorry and I have forgiven you. I'm not looking for another apology tonight. I thought I found true love again with Harrison after you and I broke up. I thought the two of us would last forever. I guess it could have been if I didn't mind our marital bed getting a little crowded from time to time."

"You're done with Harrison," I said quietly. Penny nodded her head in agreement.

"You can see why I was leery of deeply committing myself to our relationship when we started dating again this spring," Penny said.

"I understand and it's fine," I said soothingly.

“I want you to know that all my reservations are gone,” Penny said before planting a big kiss on my lips. “All the things we talked about when we were in high school, I believe we will have them – a life together, a family and happiness in each other’s arms. We can have all of that. I am certain of it.”

“I believe we can, too,” I agreed.

“We’ll survive the next six months of separation with occasional visits,” Penny continued. “Abby said she and Will would loan us their cabin a couple evenings this summer when things are quiet at the pool.”

“I’ll come down to Philly over Labor Day Weekend,” I added.

“Do your parents still go down to Cape Henlopen that weekend?” Penny asked. I nodded yes. “Why don’t we meet there after your game? That would be more fun than hanging out in Philly.”

“It’s a plan,” I agreed.

“I’ll come up and visit a couple weekends in the fall,” Penny said. “We’ll try to get together when the Wolverines do their playoff run. Then after Christmas... well, I hope it will be as idyllic as the past six weeks have been.”

“That’s sounds wonderful,” I agreed.

“Be patient with me,” Penny asked. “I’m still getting used to having a famous boyfriend that gets stopped everywhere he goes, plays on national TV most weekends and may be rich a year from now. It’s a lot to process for me.”

“Thank you for being willing to put up with that side of my life,” I said. “I know it’s difficult. I love you so much for being willing to do this with me.”

“I love you too,” Penny agreed. “Show how much you love me, Kyle. Do me the way you used to, deep and hard.”

“As you wish,” I agreed. I doubled Penny up so her knees were up against shoulders and slipped into position behind my mate. I drove my cock into her love tunnel, bottoming out with a grunt.

“Do me hard, Kyle,” Penny gasped. “Pretend we’re starting that family we want.” Penny grunted as I withdrew my cock part way and speared her again. “Make our first baby... please....” I impaled her again. “Knock me up... I know it makes you hot...” Penny gasped as I drilled her again.

She was right. It does make me hot. I gave Penny exactly what she was asking for. We had more than enough passion to make a baby. Thankfully the biology wasn’t right.

Penny came twice as I showed her my love. We collapsed in a sticky heap when I climaxed and fell asleep entwined.

Saturday morning Penny and I got up around eight o'clock, showered and dressed for the day. I made breakfast for her and the three little mooches who never missed a chance to eat with me. Penny and I exchanged a heartfelt good bye before she headed for home. I loaded my car with the last of my camp things.

Eric Connell drove by as I was finishing loading. That didn't surprise me. All directors reported to camp that morning. I was surprised to see Sammy Hoover and Eric's little brother Zac in the car too as Eric drove by. Sammy and Zac gave me a wave as they passed me.

I followed them about ten minutes later, heading for Lancaster and north up Rt. 501. A little after ten o'clock I pulled into the camp parking lot near the office. I met Eric, Sammy and Zac outside the office.

"Hey guys," I said as Eric, Zac and I exchanged handshakes. "Hi Sammy," I added as I gave her a friendly hug. "I'm surprised to see you and Zac here a day early."

"My car broke down last night," Sammy explained. "My dad is going to get it fixed for me eventually. I had to get a ride with Eric today."

"I'm sure Will and I can find things for the two of you to do to help us get ready for the rest of the staff's arrival tomorrow."

"That's what Mr. Holloway said," Eric added. "I'll probably catch you over at the pool or at the health lodge."

"I know, I know..." I agreed. "Everyone – camper, staffer, director – all of us report to Abby for health checks and to Will for swim tests. Some things are eternal."

"Yeah, they are," Eric agreed. Eric, Sammy and Zac headed back to the parking lot for their things. I went into the office to see John Holloway, the camp director.

"Morning, John," I said as my boss rose to greet me.

"Good morning, Kyle," John replied as we shook hands. "It's good to have you back again."

"I'm glad to be back," I agreed. "I plan to wring every second of enjoyment out of the next six weeks. Who knows when I can come back to work at camp after that?"

"I understand," John agreed. "Here is a schedule for staff week. You already know the drill – pick out a tent and move your gear in, see Abby for the medical recheck and go to

the pool for your swim test. I trust you won't have any problem passing the test." John gave me a wink.

"I can keep my head above water," I teased.

"I'll see you at lunch, Kyle," John added as I departed. I headed back to the parking lot and moved my car down to the staff site. I moved my gear into my usual tent. It was going to be weird not sharing a tent with Ed Fritz. The two of us were ALWAYS tent mates since our first year in scouts ten years ago. I supposed someone would come along looking for a tent mate tomorrow.

I changed into my swim suit, grabbed my medical form and headed for the health lodge. Abby was at her desk reading a book when I arrived. Rose was in her baby seat sitting on the desk.

"Welcome to camp, Kyle," Abby said as I handed her my medical form.

"Hey Abby," I replied. I leaned over the desk to see my niece. "Rose sweetie, how are you?" I gave her a kiss on the forehead. "May I hold her while you do your thing?"

"Sure, go ahead, Kyle," Abby agreed. "She's freshly changed and fed. She should be happy to see her uncle."

"Thanks," I replied as I picked up Rose and cuddled her in my arms. I rubbed noses with her, eliciting a giggle from her. I cooed and talked with her while Abby reviewed my medical info. Rose's second tooth had come in, giving her a slightly goofy smile.

"I doubt anyone else today has been as poked, prodded and tested by as many doctors and trainers as me," I teased.

"I doubt it," Abby agreed. "Everything is in order, Kyle. You can head over to the pool."

"I'll catch up to you two at lunch," I said as I placed Rose back in her seat.

I headed for the pool. As I approached Will waved and shouted, "Hey LITTLE brother, it's about time you got your ass out of bed. Get in here and get to work!"

"You got it, Shorty," I responded. It irritated Will to be reminded that I was nearly three inches taller than he was. Almost as much as it irritated me to be called a little kid. Of course that was why we still needled each other every chance we got. We might be grown-ups now but both of us enjoyed teasing the other as much as we did when we were young.

"What am I going to do with the two of you?" Rob Young demanded as I came out of the shower. "Do John and I need to hire a referee for the two of you?"

“No, Kyle’s OK,” Will deadpanned. “He may be a dumb jock but he does OK with constant supervision.”

“Dumb jock?” I protested. “I made Dean’s List with honors this semester!”

“Go jump in the pool!” Will ordered. Rob laughed and shook his head as I trotted over to the deep end, followed by my brother.

“Can you jump in water over your head?” Will asked as I lined up along the edge.

“Of course,” I replied.

“Can you swim?” Will asked, repeating the second question we were required to ask everyone before they took their test.

“Like a dolphin,” I replied.

“Go!”

I jumped in feet first, surfaced and began swimming for the far end of the pool. “You better not flunk this, Mr. Dean’s List with Honors.”

“I can do this....” “...in my sleep,” I called each time my head surfaced while I breast stroked.

A minute later I finished with the elementary backstroke and floated on my back for about fifteen seconds. Will blew his whistle and called out, “Out of the pool. You passed.”

I grabbed my towel, walking to the shallow end of the pool as I dried off. Will popped out of the office and tossed me a whistle. “You take care of the rest of the swim tests this morning. Someone left a God awful mess in the bathroom.”

“You got it, bro,” I agreed.

“Grab Eric, Dustin and Zac when they come by to help you with the rest of the tests,” Will said before he disappeared into the shower house with a mop and plunger.

Eric, Sammy and Zac were the next people to show up at the pool. I put the three of them through their swim tests. Sammy headed back to the staff area to organize her tent. Eric and I showed Zac how the swim tests were done, how the buddy board worked and filled him in on the pool rules. Zac was the only aquatics staff member that hadn’t worked our area last year, either as a paid staffer or as a CIT.

Dustin Carter, our other director down at the boat yard, showed up about twenty minutes later. I put him through his test and put him to work. Directors and other early arriving staff dribbled in throughout the morning. It was fun reuniting with each other. Most of us had worked together for years and had become good friends. Zac was the only newbie in camp that morning.

We had two new directors on our staff this season. Dale Wolf was Ed Fritz's assistant last season. He stepped up to run our Pioneer program for first year scouts. Chris Sheffield, who worked Scoutcraft the past two years, was starting up our new mountain biking program.

All the directors were finished at the pool by lunchtime. Will, Eric, Dustin, Zac and I headed over for a simple lunch, prepared by our excellent camp cook, Nancy Lantz. Sandwiches and salad provided a refreshing meal for mid-day.

Anderson Hastings, the camp ranger, came by the pool and reviewed pool operations with Eric, Dustin and me. He made sure we remembered how the chlorinator worked, how to clean the filter system and how to log all the water tests we were required to do daily. Zac vacuumed the pool meantime. Will had us clean the changing areas and clean and disinfect the showers that afternoon. Will announced at lunch that we would have a staff swim at 4:00 pm. Will, Eric, Dustin and I took turns guarding.

After dinner everyone met with John Holloway in the dining hall. John reviewed the rest of the staff roster and we reviewed and received assignments for various training sessions we ran to get the staff up to speed about their jobs and how to do them.

Naturally I was assigned to give the Teaching EDGE lecture, same as I had done the last three years. I had to make sure I kept my lecture simple. The staff didn't need as much detail as I was learning in my courses back at Penn State. EDGE is a BSA acronym to remind instructors of the steps involved in effective teaching – Explain, Demonstrate, Guide as the student tries it on his own, and Enable, in other words, get the hell out of the way and let the boy do it.

Eric and I set up the computers in the staff lounge. I sent Penny a good night e-mail before I went to bed. That had been my habit with all my girlfriends throughout my seven years on staff. Now that Penny and I had reconnected, I wasn't going to let anything screw it up.

Sunday afternoon was a blast. For most of the staff it was reunion day. We got to see our friends that we hadn't seen since last summer. John Holloway lined up nineteen fourteen and fifteen year olds to be counselors in training or CITs for the summer. Half of them would work the first half of summer and the other half would work the last four weeks of camp. We had a few new staff members that hadn't been CITs last year.

Will, Eric, Dustin and I processed the staff through their swim tests in the afternoon. Zac helped us for an hour or so before Will dismissed him so he could go meet the rest of the staff and to find a tent mate for the summer.

Patrick Finnegan stopped by to see me while I was filling in buddy tags and the other directors were supervising the tests.

“Hey, Coach. It’s good to see you,” Pat said as we exchanged handshakes. “Do you have a second?”

“Sure Pat, what’s up?” I answered after glancing toward the pool and seeing no one else exiting from their test.

“I had planned to tent with Adam [Zimmerman] this summer,” Pat explained. “Adam is sixteen and Rob Young warned me that I can’t. I turned eighteen a couple months ago and am considered an adult by the scouts now. Since Ed Fritz isn’t here this summer, do you need a tent mate?”

“I’d be happy to share my tent with you,” I replied. “...but you better check with Rob. We’re OK for the next three weeks but I turn twenty-one soon. I don’t know if you will be allowed to stay after my birthday. I wouldn’t want you to move in and then have to switch tents three weeks from now.”

“I’ll talk to Rob,” Pat promised. “...but it’s OK with you for me stay with you if Rob is OK with it?”

“It’s fine with me,” I agreed. “Welcome aboard, Pat. I warn I’m a bit of a slob and you better be quiet the days you guard polar bear swims and I get to sleep in.”

“I’ll be quiet those mornings,” Pat promised.

The supply of staffers to test dwindled to nothing by 3:30 that afternoon. Will, Eric, Dustin and I closed up the pool. Will headed to the health lodge to see Abby and Rose. The rest of us went back to the staff area to get settled and to see who our new neighbors were. Rob Young OKed Pat sharing a tent with me for the summer. Pat already had his stuff in the empty half of my tent when I got back from the pool.

After dinner John Holloway did the usual introduction of staff members. I wasn’t surprised when Rob Young’s seventeen seasons on staff gave him the most time served. Will was second with eleven seasons. I was surprised that Mike Lafferty, the Scoutcraft Director, and I were tied for third with seven seasons on staff. Everyone else, including our camp director, had less experience on staff than me.

Mrs. Lantz served a snack to everyone after John finished the introductions and orientation. He reviewed the week’s schedule with us before he dismissed us.

Monday and Tuesday morning were consumed with finishing setting up camp. The Order of the Arrow had set up about half of camp the weekend before we reported. We had to finish the job before we got our merit badge areas ready.

I did my effective teaching lecture Monday evening. I think most everyone stayed awake during it. Hopefully they took my recommendations to heart. John and Rob, both school teachers, complimented me on my lecture.

Will and I finally got to start working with our staff on Tuesday afternoon. Over the next day and half we drilled them on every single requirement in Swimming and Lifesaving Merit Badges and in the Mile Swim, BSA Snorkeling and BSA Lifeguard requirements. We even did a head, neck or back injury backboard drill. My guys performed it nearly flawlessly. Hopefully we would never need that particular skill.

Thursday the whole aquatics staff headed to the lake to do the canoeing and rowing drills. Will and I observed as Eric and Dustin took the lead. The guys looked sharp except Tyler Moyer, Gary Harrison's close friend. Dustin worked with Tyler on his rowing skills. He was up to standard by the end of the afternoon.

On Friday Rob sent the CITs off to the first week's assignment. Two went to the lake with Dustin and Eric. Two more came to the pool to help me. I spent Friday reviewing teaching methods for Swimming and Lifesaving Merit Badges. I assigned Patrick to coordinate the two Lifesaving classes each week

Matt Sauder, Cody Stevens, Josh Hunsecker and Dave Mitchell each would be the lead instructor on one of the four Swimming Merit Badge classes. Alex Maddox, Adam Zimmerman, Gary Harrison, Tyler Moyer, Zac Connell and two CITs would be parceled out to assist the lead instructors each period, based on class size and subjects to be taught. I gave the last hour of the afternoon to the lead instructors to review their lessons plans for next week with their helpers.

I wandered back to the pool office as the lead instructors reviewed the plans with their assistants.

“Goofing off?” Will teased as I sat down beside him.

“It's called delegating responsibility to my assistants,” I countered. I cocked my head and stared at Will, “I learned that from the best.” Will gave me a smile.

“What do you think of our staff?” he asked.

“I think they're top notch,” I replied. “They're well prepared, smart and will make my job easy.”

“...and when your job is easy, my job is easy,” Will agreed. “I love it when a plan comes together.

Gary Harrison and Austin Keller, another fifteen year old first year staffer, headed to Penn State Friday afternoon. They were signed up for the university’s Football Camp I that I helped with last year. Austin played linebacker down at L-S. He was going to work out with us after lunch when the campers arrived. Staff week was too busy for our usual post lunch workouts.

John Hollway reviewed emergency procedures with the entire staff on Saturday. We helped serve a dinner at our dining hall for the council executive board and some of our major givers. The council executive was making a pitch to them for spending more money on our camp. He asked me to circulate around the room and talk with the board members and visitors. I didn’t mind. If my glad handing would put the board in the proper frame of mind to vote for the improvements, that would be good.

The staff had a quiet morning on Sunday prior to the arrival of our first week of campers. Matt, Dave, Josh, Cody, Dustin and I headed out to the parade field to practice after breakfast. Since we didn’t have many defenders, I helped Dustin cover Dave, Josh and Cody. It was a fun way to kill time.

We had around three hundred campers the first week of our season. Will gave the troops a safety lecture before they headed to the pool. I did a lecture on pool rules and how the buddy system worked before the kids showered and headed inside for their swim tests. Eric and Dustin oversaw the tests themselves. The operation moved smoothly.

Near the end of the afternoon, John Pfauz, long time scoutmaster of Troop 27 from Lancaster, stopped by to talk while I had a lull between troops.

“Hey Mr. Pfauz, it’s good to see you again,” I said as we shook hands.

“It’s good to see you too, Kyle,” Mr. Pfauz responded. “Are you ready for a big season?”

“I hope so,” I replied. Mr. Pfauz was a Penn State grad. The two of us had talked about Penn State frequently over the past four years, since I committed to playing for the Lions.

“What do you think about Nebraska?” he asked.

“I’ve been studying video of them over the winter,” I replied. “They’re going to be tough this fall, but I’m confident we can beat them.”

“I don’t mean this season’s game,” Mr. Pfauz responded. “What do you think about them joining the Big Ten?”

“Huh?” I grunted, totally startled.

“Haven’t you heard?” he asked. I shook my head no. “The Big Ten extended an invitation on Friday morning. The Cornhuskers accepted hours later. They’re going to be part of our conference starting next season.”

“Wow! I don’t know what to say,” I said. “I heard vague talk of the conference expanding sometime in the future, but not this soon.”

“It’s done,” Mr. Pfauz explained. “They moved right after Colorado jumped to the Pac-10. The future of the Big 12 is up in the air since they lost two of their teams. No one knows if the conference will exist after this season.”

“Ummm... I’m at a total loss for words,” I said. “Nebraska in the Big Ten, Colorado in the Pac-10, I don’t know what’s next.”

“Our team has a slight edge on Nebraska on wins,” Mr. Pfauz said.

“I don’t know the record before us beating them two years ago,” I replied.

“I think we’re 8-6 against them overall,” he answered. “The Cornhuskers will be a tough opponent but our Lions will do fine against them.”

“I don’t know about long term, but we’ll beat them this season,” I replied. “I’m confident of that.”

“You do that, Kyle,” Mr. Pfauz said. “I’ll see you later. I’ve got to get my troop back to the campsite and finish setting up.”

“See you later, Mr. Pfauz,” I replied as he collected the kids in his troop. We did swim tests for one more troop after the Lancaster troop. We wrapped up a few minutes after five o’clock. Eric and Dustin took care of closing up the pool, so I had a few minutes of free time before I needed to change into my uniform for dinner. I decided to give Chip Brinton a call to see if he knew more about the Big Ten’s expansion.

“Hey Coach, what’s up?” Chip said as he answered the phone.

“Hi Chip,” I replied. “How is your summer going?”

“Good! My two classes aren’t hard,” Chip answered. “I have plenty of time for film study and working out. Jon, the receivers and I get together every afternoon to work passing drills. They’re looking damn good.”

“That’s good to hear,” I said. “I called for a reason. I just heard about Nebraska joining the Big Ten. What’s the deal?”

“It’s something, isn’t it?” Chip replied. “The campus has been buzzing all weekend. People are speculating what it all will mean. I know it won’t affect you. The Huskers don’t join the conference until after you graduate. For me... well, I hope I’ll be leading our team to a conference championship game when I’m a senior.”

“That’ll be cool,” I said. “I guess they’ll have to set up divisions if they are going to have a conference championship game. Heard any guesses about what they will look like?”

“There’s been a lot of speculation on campus,” Chip said. “I think they will have to put Ohio State and Michigan in one division. There’s no way they can break up that rivalry. I’m guessing that puts us in the other division with Nebraska. I’m guessing Iowa will go with us too. Nebraska and Iowa have been big non-conference rivals for decades. I think Wisconsin will have to go with Ohio State and Michigan. Beyond those guesses, anything is possible.”

“I guess we’ll find out this fall,” I said.

“I hear you’re staying with me next weekend,” Chip said. “Housing sent me a notice that I will have a roommate.”

“Yes, Coach Burton asked me to help with the Senior Football Camp,” I explained. “He offered to put me up in a hotel for the weekend. I thought that was silly. I have a perfectly good place to stay on campus. Why should the university waste money on a hotel room for me?”

“Makes sense to me, Coach,” Chip said. “When do you expect to arrive?”

“I should be up late Friday morning,” I replied.

“I have an 11:15 to 12:05 class,” Chip said. “I’ll catch up to you after class.”

“We could do lunch together,” I suggested.

“Cool!” Chip agreed. “I’ll see you then.”

“I’ve got to get back to my tent and get dressed for dinner,” I said. ‘I’ll see you Friday.’”

“Bye, Coach,” Chip replied before we ended the call.

The first week of campers went off without a hitch. My staff performed well. That wasn’t surprising. Seven of my ten staffers had worked aquatics previously.

Half the aquatics staff worked the polar bear swim each morning. Will, Eric, Dustin and I took turns supervising the early morning swim. We had three morning merit badge

periods, lunch and then my friends and I worked our passing drills after lunch. We did one more merit badge session after siesta and then had two hours of open swim at the pool.

Swimming Merit Badge flotation, the quarter mile swim, camp wide games, the mile swim and night swims filled our evenings. Will plus the football players worked out and did a three and a half mile run in the evenings. I made sure I e-mailed or IMed Penny each evening before bed time.

The first week of camp just flew by. I headed for State College after breakfast on Friday morning. Coach Burton scheduled a 1:00 pm coaching staff meeting. I pulled into the parking lot in front of the Lasch Building a little after eleven o'clock. I headed inside to the reception desk.

"Hey Marie, how's it going?" I asked our receptionist.

"Good, Kyle," Marie replied.

"Is Coach Burton free?" I asked. "I wanted to check in and say hi."

"He's in a meeting until lunch time," Marie explained. "You'll have to wait until the one o'clock coaches meeting to see him."

"That's cool," I said.

"I have everything you'll need until then," Marie added, pulling an envelope from her desk. "I have your room key and schedule for the weekend. Your meal money and pay for working this weekend have been placed on your eLion card. You should be all set."

"Thanks, Marie, you're a sweetheart," I replied.

I drove over to the parking lot nearest to my apartment and moved my things back into my room. I relaxed a bit watching TV while I waited for Chip to return from class. Chip and I grabbed sandwiches at the Mix around 12:15, when he returned. Chip and I reviewed how the younger guys were progressing at the daily passing drills Chip ran in the afternoons. He invited me to join them at 3:30 that afternoon, if my schedule permitted.

I made it back to the Lasch Building about five minutes before the start of the coaches meeting. Coach Caffrey waved me over to an empty seat beside him. I smiled and waved as I spotted Jason Turner sitting on the other side of Coach Caffrey.

"I didn't know you were going to be here," I said as I shook hands with Jason.

"I could say the same thing, Kyle," Jason replied. "I guess this is a gathering of Burton acolytes."

I shook hands with Coach Caffrey before taking my seat. The Penn State coaches around the big table greeted me as I got comfortable. All of them called me “Coach” as they greeted me.

Jason leaned in to Coach Caffrey and whispered, “I didn’t know Kyle was called that here.” I smiled and shrugged my shoulders.

“Our kids from back home started that last summer at football camp,” Coach Caffrey explained. “Coach Burton liked the nickname so everyone calls him ‘Coach’ now.”

To emphasize the point, Shawn Byrd strolled in, spotted me and came over. “Coach, it’s good to see you. How has your summer been?”

“Good, Shawn,” I replied. “It’s good to see you here.”

“We’ll talk after the meeting is over,” Shawn said as he glanced at his watch. Shawn headed down the table and sat down beside a coach I didn’t know. I gathered from what I overheard that the man was Shawn’s high school coach from Liberty High School.

Coach Adams, Coach Czarwinski and Coach Burton walked in the room together at five minutes before one o’clock and took their seats at the head of the table. Coach Burton welcomed everyone and thanked them for agreeing to help staff the Senior Camp this weekend. He had each of us introduce ourselves.

I hadn’t noticed until the introductions that Central High School’s Coach Williams was sitting at the opposite end of the table from me. It was nice to see him here helping. No one in our state had the record of sustained excellence over more than three decades like his. He was going to help Coach Schneider with the secondary. Jason would be working with Coach Peterson with quarterbacks.

Coach Burton reviewed the weekend schedule with us before dismissing the meeting. Shawn and I talked for a bit after the meeting and then I chilled out at my apartment until 3:30.

Chip’s passing drills were held on the practice field beside Holuba Hall at the corner of Hastings and University Drive. It was a bigger deal than I expected. Jon Stafford, Bob Huber and our newest QB, Trey Connelly, participated. Trey started summer classes days after his high school graduation.

Brian Henson, Squirrel MacCauley, John Crosby, Jared Cantrell, Ian Davis, Bob Smith and Will Jones all showed up to practice. Ian’s brother Troy, Matt Frye, Chris Richardson, Jeff Knox and Kevin Giordano came to provide coverage on the receivers worked on their passing drills. Will Jones was a freshman tight end who started classes in January. Kevin Giordano was a freshman safety who started classes with our summer

semester. Shawn Byrd arrived in workout clothes a couple minutes after me. We told Chip to put us in the drills just like everyone else.

Chip took charge and organized the drills. He assigned a quarterback to each field and divided d-backs and receivers among the three fields. Shawn and I went with Chip along with Squirrel and Brian. He put Shawn and me on the field first. Chip gave me a deep route on the first play. I took off downfield and juked at fifteen yards. Shawn wasn't fooled. He kept running with me. Chip launched a bomb when we were twenty-five yards downfield. He put it perfectly over my shoulder away from Shawn. I pulled the ball in and nestled it to my side.

Shawn tapped me with two hands immediately, "tackling" for purposes of the drill. Man, that completion felt good! I hadn't gone deep on anyone since spring practice. Dustin Carter was much too slow for us to run deep plays at scout camp.

"You're as much a nightmare to cover as ever," Shawn teased as we jogged back.

"And you give me about an inch a daylight to make the catch," I countered.

"Nice job, Coach," Chip said as we returned to the start. "Good coverage, Shawn."

"The throw was perfect, Chip," I responded.

Brian Henson went in next against Shawn. Chip sent Brian deep. Shawn bit momentarily on a fake ten yards downfield. He barely recovered from his error when Chip launched the bomb to Brian. Brian out-jumped Shawn, pulling it in for a sweet completion.

Chip sent Jeff Knox on the field to cover Squirrel on the next play. Shawn joined me on the sideline. "Damn, he's getting to be as hard to cover as you, Coach," Shawn protested. "If you, Christian and Brian all go on the field when we scrimmage next month, our defense is going to be toast."

"That's what we're trying to do to our opponents," I replied.

"There is no way GJ or Denzell can cover Brian," Shawn said. "He's too quick. He's developing some good moves too."

"I saw you bite on that fake last play," I teased.

"I recovered," Shawn responded.

"Only because Chip didn't lead Brian enough," I said. Shawn smiled and shrugged his shoulders, not even trying to argue my point.

Bob Smith went in against Jeff Knox next. He ran a curl against Jeff. Bob boxed Jeff out, caught the ball and got a couple more yards. I was impressed even though pass catching had always been Bob's strength. If he improved his blocking to match his pass catching ability, we'd have an excellent candidate for starting tight end.

I watched the progress and rotated in as needed. Chip had each of us work against double coverage against Shawn and Jeff. Brian and I made completions against the double but Squirrel still had some trouble.

I watched Jon Stafford work with ET LeBlanc, Jared Cantrell and John Crosby against Matt Frye and Chris Richardson. They seemed to be doing well. Bob Huber and Trey Connelly worked with Ian Davis and Will Jones against Troy Davis and Kevin Giordano. They made more mistakes, but that was expected. They were the greenest players in the drills.

I complimented both offensive and defensive guys as they made good plays. Brian looked especially impressive. Tanner and Christian definitely needed to worry about their starting jobs in the fall. Brian was going to be hard to keep off the field.

“Nice job, Chip,” I said as the practice was breaking up. “It was well organized and thought out. You’ll be helping the team if all your practices run like this one.”

“Thanks Coach, I’m glad you liked what we’re doing,” Chip replied.

“Is Ben Witte participating in the drills?” I asked. “Isn’t he on campus this summer?”

“Yeah, he is,” Chip said. “Ben makes maybe half the drills.”

“Half? That’s not good,” I said. “We need more from him than that.”

“Bob will do fine if Ben isn’t ready,” Chip said. “I have confidence with Bob on the field this fall.”

“That’s good,” I said. “I’m glad you’re comfortable with our tight end situation.”

“It’s much better than last season,” Chip said. “No matter who starts, our tight ends will be more productive than last year.”

“Good,” I agreed.

“Shawn, Matt, Jon, Brian and I are heading downtown for dinner,” Chip said. “Do you want to come along? We’re going to Baby’s for burgers.”

“Check back with me after showers,” I replied. “I have a certain tight end I want to talk with.”

“I understand, Coach,” Chip agreed as the two of us headed into the Lasch Building to shower after our workout.

I got a hold of Ben Witte before I left the Lasch Building and offered to treat him to supper at the Diner. Chip and his friends headed downtown without me. I picked up Ben from his apartment and we walked across campus and down the Mall to College Avenue. The Diner wasn’t busy on a summer Friday night.

We ordered burgers, relaxed and talked. We had known each other for three years but weren’t close friends. Ben was into hip hop while I enjoyed rock music. We didn’t frequent the same team parties over the years. I did learn Ben’s home was in West Philly, not that far from where Penny and I would be living next spring. I told him about recoupling with my high school sweetheart. Ben told me he had convinced his sweetheart back in high school to join him here at Penn State. They were still together.

I offered to get us grilled stickies for dessert, which Ben readily accepted. He had as big a sweet tooth as me. We talked football while we enjoyed our dessert.

“I know you well enough Coach to know you didn’t take me to dinner to talk about West Philly or girlfriends,” Ben stated as he finished eating. “What’s up? I know you have an ulterior motive for taking me to dinner.”

“I do, Ben,” I agreed. “The team leadership is touching base with every player on the team. I’m doing all the tight ends. I talked with Bob and Will at passing drills this afternoon. It’s your turn. How are you preparations going for next season?”

“Direct – I like that,” Ben replied. “I’ll be ready now that it’s my turn to start.”

“Turn?” I questioned. “We don’t have turns on this team.”

“Well, no, but...” Ben began. I cut him off.

“You waited three years for Evan, Jibril, Jabari and Amir to graduate,” I said. “If I waited like you did until all the older players graduated, I would be hoping to make starter this coming season. I didn’t do that. Instead I’m an All-American with two full seasons of starting. Christian and Tanner started last season while Aidan, Max and Alex sat on the bench. I know they didn’t like being replaced by juniors. That’s too bad. Coach Burton plays the best players regardless of age and experience. The guys that give us the best chance to win play...period!”

“Well yes, I know...” Ben added.

“I watched Bob Smith and Will Jones practice this afternoon,” I said. “Bob looked extremely good catching passes. Both of us know that he excels at that skill. If Bob manages to come close to your ability blocking, you may find yourself on the bench again this season. Is that what you want?”

“Hell no,” Ben said. “I put in my time. I deserve to be the starter.”

“The player that gives our team the best chance to win deserves to be the starter,” I countered. “You’re a hell of a blocker but you need work on the passing game. Chip is running drills every afternoon to help people prepare for the season. If I were you, I wouldn’t miss a single chance to practice catching passes.”

“It seems strange for you to be lecturing me on working out,” Ben said. “You’re not here this summer. Where do you get off...”

“I get off telling you this because Chip and I spent two solid years working together every day on our passing game,” I said. “We have worked together so long we practically read each other’s minds. I’m on campus for a single weekend. What was the first thing I did when I had a little free time? I went out and did passing drills with Chip and the other players.”

“I get busy sometimes,” Ben offered.

“If you want to see games from the bench, keep doing what you are doing,” I replied. “Bob will be happy to be the starter. The rest of the team will be happy if he’s the best player at his position. The choice is yours, Ben.”

“Do you really think Coach Burton would put the kid in as starter?” Ben asked. I was pleased, I had rattled his over-confidence.

“I know Coach Burton wants more production from our tight end this season,” I said. “All of us have to step up our game if we want to go to Phoenix and play for the national championship.”

“Yeah, I know,” Ben agreed. “You and Coach Burton have been saying that a lot this spring. I’ll do better, Coach.”

“Excellent, that’s what I want to hear,” I said. Ben and I walked back to campus, talking football as we went. I was pleased, Ben seemed to have taken my message to heart. Hopefully he would work harder on his pass catching so he was ready for the fall.

I headed for the Lasch Building around a quarter to seven. I sat with the other coaches in the back of the auditorium as we waited for the players to arrive. Matt, Dave and Cody greeted Coach Caffrey warmly when they spotted him. Josh Hunsecker, Devin Kerr and another kid were tagging along with Matt, Dave and Cody. Devin introduced me to his roommate for camp, Austin Caldwell. Austin was a tailback from Huntington, Pa.

I spotted Jeremy Carter, the wide receiver I met at the Blue and White game in the audience. I spotted Jacob Meyer too, the running back from West Grove, Pa.

Coach Burton called the group to order a couple minutes before seven o'clock. He reviewed the schedule for the weekend and then handed out the "test." I helped the other coaches collect the answer sheets. We sorted through them while Coach Burton went through some basic football terminology.

Coach C led the defensive players down the hall to one of the large meeting rooms. Coach Adams reviewed offensive plays that the kids would be working with for the weekend.

Coach Caffrey and I looked over the dozen wide receivers we would be working with. Coach divided the stack in two piles. He handed me one. They were the kids I would be working with for the weekend: Joshua Hunsecker, Dave Mitchell, Devin Kerr, Jeremy Carter from West Lawn, Pa., Mike Williams from Erie, Pa. and Garrett Knowles from Hanover, Pa. Coach had me look over the second list after that. It included Ty Butler from Uniontown, Pa., Quinn Lawson from Gaithersburg, Md., Chris Brown from Hatfield, Pa., Bradley Phelps from Norristown, Pa., Victor Parrish from Edinboro, Pa. and Nick Hess from Abington, Pa.

Matt, Dave, Cody, Josh, Devin and Austin Caldwell stopped by to talk when the evening session was over. "Do you want to go downtown for some pizza with us, Coach?" Matt asked. "We have an hour and half until we have to be back in our dorm rooms.

"I could be persuaded to join you," I agreed.

"Do you want to invite Chip?" Dave asked. "We haven't seen him since last summer. It would be cool to catch up with him."

I'll give him a call, guys," I agreed. I spoke with Chip briefly before answering my friend's question. "Sorry guys, Chip has a hot date tonight. He won't be joining us for pizza tonight. He'll try to catch up to you guys tomorrow."

"That's cool," "All right," and "Sounds good," came back from my cluster of friends. We headed downtown and ended up at Hiway Pizza. We sat, relaxed and talked, the way friends do. Matt, Cody, Dave, Josh and Devin all joined in the conversation. Austin mostly sat and listened. This went on for about fifteen minutes, until shortly after our pizza arrived.

During a lull in the conversation, Austin asked, "You guys seem like pretty tight friends. How did you get to know each other so quickly and why do you call Kyle Coach?"

"We've known each other for a long time," I replied.

"Matt, Dave and I go to the high school Coach went to," Cody explained. "He's helped us out, teaching us about football since we were little. We've always called him Coach."

“The three of us, plus Josh, all work as lifeguards for Coach at our scout camp,” Matt added.

“Yeah, Coach is our boss in the summer,” Dave said. “He runs the pool we work at.”

“OK, I see,” Austin said nodding his head. “Devin, how do you fit into this crew? I know you’re from Allentown and all of them are from... Lancaster?” My friends all nodded yes when Austin was unsure of our home county.

“Kyle introduced me to these guys last year at football camp,” Devin explained. “We texted and IMed since then, keeping in touch. All of us got together at the Blue and White game this spring.”

“How do you know the biggest star on the Lions team?” Austin asked.

“I met him though his uncle, who is a friend of mine,” I said. I didn’t plan to reveal more about Chase.

“Yeah, Kyle arranged for my uncle and me to see a game in Beaver Stadium from one of the boxes,” Devin enthused. “It was really cool.”

“A box? How’d you get a box?” Austin asked. “Beaver Stadium is sold out for nearly every game in the season. My dad and I have been trying to get tickets for years and can’t. Box seats only go the big wigs. How’d you pull that off Kyle?”

“There are perks to being a star on the team,” I replied. I wanted to keep my answer short.

“You can get box seats, Coach?” Matt demanded. “Why haven’t you ever gotten us box seats? That would be really cool.”

“Umm...” I stuttered. I was searching for a plausible answer that wouldn’t out Devin’s uncle.

“It’s OK, Kyle,” Devin said. “I didn’t want Kyle telling you who my uncle was last year. I wanted you guys to accept me as a good football player in my own right.”

“Well you are,” Dave said.

“Who in the hell is your uncle?” Cody demanded. “Box seats – he must be a big shot. Are we going to know who he is?”

“Yeah, you’ll know who he is,” I said. “He plays a little baseball.”

“My uncle is Chase...” Devin explained. “UTLEY????” a chorus of shocked voices added, drowning out the rest of Devin’s words. Devin nodded yes. Five pairs of saucer

sized eyes stared at their friend like he had grown an extra eye in the middle of his forehead.

“Your uncle... is Chase Utley?” Josh demanded. “The best second baseman in baseball?”

“He is,” Devin agreed.

The five kids peppered Devin and me with questions about our relationship with Chase. Devin talked about his father working for the Phillies organization and his experiences with his famous uncle. I told the story about how I met Chase. It took most of the pizza to satisfy their curiosity. When most of the questions were answered, Matt posed one more.

“So a month ago when you and Penny went down to the Phillies game, you were Chase’s guests?” Matt asked.

“Yes, we were. Penny and I sat with Devin, Devin’s step-mom who is Chase’s sister, and Jena, Chase’s wife,” I replied. I gave Devin a wink and added, “I hope your birthday party was good. Dinner with Chase and Jena was excellent.”

Devin returned the wink and smiled. “The party was good. The after-party was better. Bailey and I got some privacy... and we had a VERY good night.”

The general consensus of the group was that Devin made the right choice. Getting laid beat dinner with me and your uncle, even if the uncle was Chase Utley. I countered that I got the best – I had dinner with Chase and I got laid that evening. It was close to 9:30 by that time, so I reminded my young friends that they had a ten o’clock curfew. I walked with them as far as my own apartment as they headed back to Hartranft Hall.

Chip was upstairs “entertaining” his date when I got back. I tried to be strong, but listening to Chip screw his date was too stimulating. I had to play with my snake to get it to go down. It was going to be a long four weeks until I was with Penny again!

I grabbed a paper and breakfast at the Mix Saturday morning and went back to my apartment to relax until practice started at football camp. Chip and his date were still asleep at a quarter to nine when I left for the practice fields. No surprise, what right thinking college student would get up early on a Saturday morning if they didn’t need to?

Matt Sheppard led the entire group of football camp participants in stretching and warm up exercises when they were assembled on the fields. Coach Caffrey called all the wide receivers together and then separated them into the two groups we chose last evening. Dave, Josh and Devin were delighted to end up in my group. Jeremy Carter, who I met at

the Blue and White game, was smiling too. Mike Williams and Garrett Knowles completed my group.

Dave, Josh and Devin all cleared 6'-2" or 6'-3". They were prototypical big receivers, ready to bump and fight off smaller d-backs. Jeremy was around 6'-0" tall. He was reputed to have excellent speed. Mike and Garrett were shorter, maybe 5'-10" tall. Hopefully they would exhibit good leaping ability or speed to let them compensate for their small stature.

Shawn Byrd was with us, shepherding six defensive backs. Coach Goodwin was coaching five running backs that would work with us. My friends were delighted to see that the three quarterbacks in our group included Matt Sauder. Coach Peterson took charge of our group of players.

We put the kids to work doing drills. I critiqued and gave tips on techniques to my guys as they ran their routes and caught passes. Shawn and the coaches did the same. We spent most of the morning on the drills.

After lunch Coach Adams took the kids inside the Lasch Building to teach them how to break down and study video. I worked with my six charges at one of the video machines, showing them what to look for as they studied their opponents.

Coach Caffrey stopped by while we were working to check out our progress. He teased, "Pay attention to Kyle, guys. I've never had a player study as much video as Kyle has." He chuckled. "That list of players includes Mr. Video himself, Zack Hayes."

"Thanks, Coach..." I allowed. "I think."

"Seriously, guys," Coach Caffrey replied. "Video study is an important tool in your development as a football player. I credit a good deal of Kyle's success in high school and college to his compulsive drive to be completely prepared for each opponent."

We took the kids back outside to continue the drills after an hour of video study instruction. Shawn's guys worked double coverage while the receivers and quarterbacks practiced the techniques to beat the coverage. The last hour was devoted to straight man to man coverage again.

I observed my charges as they worked. Jeremy Carter was excellent. He had the speed attributed to him. He had sure hands and ran excellent routes. He was the best of my six receivers. Josh Hunsecker's performance was eye opening. I was used to his work. He stepped up his game when he was faced with the best of Shawn's cornerbacks. Devin Kerr performed nearly as well as Josh and Jeremy.

Dave Mitchell disappointed me a little. He had trouble when we threw double coverage at him. He just didn't look as sharp as Josh, Jeremy or Devin. I was going to need to work with him some more.

Garrett and Mike had nice hands but were small, lacked speed to break free and didn't have a burst to get separation to get open. They were competent high school receivers, but I didn't expect to see either of them playing college ball. I gave them tips that would help them be successful in the final season of high school football.

Dave, Josh, Devin, Cody and Matt invited Jeremy and one of the quarterbacks he had worked with that day, Chris Reed, to go to dinner. They asked me to join them. Cody got on the phone and invited Chip too. The high school kids went back to their dorm to shower before they rejoined Chip and me at our apartment.

Chip and I recommended that the kids try Baby's Burgers and Shakes. They agreed. We walked over to Shortlidge, down and across College Avenue and then down Garner to the popular restaurant. Most of the guys ordered Baby's 1/3 pound burgers. They spotted the Fred's Fries on the menu and decided the fries topped with cheddar cheese, bacon, ranch dressing and scallions sounded good. The kids chose well. I had a burger, Fred's Fries and my usual mint chocolate chip shake.

After dinner Coach Burton did a classroom session with the offensive players to teach them about recognizing and exploiting zone defenses. I noticed Matt, Dave, Cody and Josh all paid particular attention to this lecture. I knew why my guys were worried about zone coverage. I assumed Josh was paying attention in case the Wolverines decided to pay back Central with some of their own medicine in the fall.

My circle of friends decided to end the day with a trip to the Natatorium pool. Chip had assured us at dinner that the pool was properly staffed. He was one of the lifeguards on duty that evening. I told my friends that I would join them. Before I could leave the auditorium, Coach Burton called me over to join him and Coach Caffrey.

"I'd like to get your evaluation of the six young men you were working with today, Coach," Coach Burton said. "Please rank them by abilities."

"Sure Coach, no problem," I agreed. "Jeremy Carter is clearly the best of the six. I understand why you offered him a scholarship already. I'm glad he accepted. That's very good for our team's future."

"OK, how about the rest?" Coach asked.

"I'd put Josh Hunsecker next," I continued. "Josh did well beating double coverage. He has good speed and hands. He is able to get separation. He's just as talented as Christian. The next two receivers are closer. I would give Devin Kerr an edge over Dave Mitchell. Both are talented but I thought Devin showed a little more skill than Dave. Dave had trouble with double coverage and creating separation."

"I concur," Coach Caffrey said.

“How about the last two?” Coach Burton asked.

“Mike Williams and Garrett Knowles are decent players for high school players,” I replied. “They’re too small and slow to make it at our level. I don’t see either of them playing college ball. Maybe they could hook up with a Division III team.” Coach Burton and Coach Caffrey nodded their head in agreement.

“It must be tough telling me Dave Mitchell doesn’t measure up to the competition, Coach” Coach Burton said. “I know he is a close friend of yours.”

“I’m just telling you what I saw,” I replied. “I have a lot of work to do with Dave in the next four weeks. I know he can do better than you saw today.”

“I told you he would be a straight shooter,” Coach Caffrey added.

“You did. I expected Coach would give me the straight info,” Coach Burton agreed. “The next thing I tell you is strictly confidential, Kyle. Do you understand?” I nodded my head in agreement. “I am going to offer Joshua a scholarship to attend Penn State tomorrow morning. What do you think his reaction will be?”

“Josh idolizes his big brother,” I explained. “He’d love nothing more than to follow in Christian’s footsteps and play here at Penn State. It’ll take him about five seconds to answer. The first four will be to catch his breath and then you will get an emphatic yes.”

“Good, your read on the situation matches mine,” Coach Burton said.

“How about Devin and Dave?” I asked.

“I have slotted three or four scholarships for wide receivers in this class,” Coach Burton explained. “I have assigned two of them already. I’m not prepared to commit to the others at this time. I need flexibility to award them based on senior season performance. Kerr would get one if I had to make my decision today, but I can wait on him. I plan to offer Kerr and Mitchell preferred walk-on status tomorrow.”

“Devin and Dave will be disappointed,” I said. “...especially Dave. He has his heart set on attending Penn State. He arranged his senior classes so he can graduate in December. He plans to start classes here with Matt Sauder next January.”

“He can,” Coach Burton replied. “He’ll just have to do it as a walk-on.”

“Unless he blows you away with his performance next fall and earns one of the last two scholarships,” I added. Coach Burton chuckled.

“Exactly,” coach Burton said, chuckling. “I seem to remember some young hot shot doing exactly that to me after I told him he wasn’t good enough for a scholarship.”

“I’m going to have some counseling to do after Dave finds out tomorrow,” I said.

“That isn’t your job,” coach Burton replied. “You don’t have to fix things for Mitchell.”

“Actually I do,” I responded. “I can’t have one of my lifeguards moping around, not paying attention to the kids in my pool.”

“Oh... I guess it is your job,” Coach agreed.

“I can make him understand,” I said. “I have two good examples. You didn’t offer me a scholarship and look how things worked out. I can use Damian as an example too. He proved your judgment was wrong about him.”

“...and I’m delighted to be wrong about him,” Coach agreed.

“I think Dave has gotten too comfortable,” I said. “He beats high school cornerbacks easily. He’s practicing against a Division III cornerback now who isn’t a big challenge. I think it’s time Dave faced someone bigger and faster than him.”

“You,” Coach Caffrey said, smiling.

“Exactly,” I agreed.

“I remember the tapes I saw of you playing d-back in high school,” Coach Burton said. “I was evaluating Hunsecker at the time. You weren’t half bad as a d-back. You were raw but I could see potential. I would have put you in our backfield if you hadn’t had such good hands... and instincts for the ball.”

“I’m glad I proved to you that I should be a wide receiver,” I said.

“Good luck with your project,” Coach Burton said. “It’s a win for our school and for Mitchell if you succeed in improving his game.”

Coach Burton dismissed me after that. I’m sure he wanted to debrief Coach Caffery about the receivers he coached during the day. I stopped off at my apartment and changed into a swim suit before heading up the road to the outside pool by the Natatorium.

About forty of the kids from football camp were relaxing and fooling around at the pool when I arrived. John Coleman had plenty of guards on duty. I talked with Chip for a bit and some of the other guards I knew from working the pool during school before slipping in the water and relaxing with my friends.

I stopped by the Mix on the way back from the pool and picked up some things for breakfast. Chip broke out some beer. I didn’t ask where he got it. Chip had nine months

to go before he turned twenty-one. I had nine days. I enjoyed what probably would be the last illegal drink I would have in my life.

Chip and I stayed up for awhile talking about football and how our teammates were doing preparing for the fall's contests. Chip had spoken with Trevor a few days ago. Trevor contacted all the defensive linemen. He said they were ready to go for the start of football camp. Josh Bruno had talked with Trevor too. Josh reported most of the linebackers were ready to go. A couple young guys weren't as serious about preparations as they should be. Josh lit a fire under them.

Shawn Byrd reported to me that the defensive backs were progressing nicely and would be ready for camp. All the quarterbacks were on campus, so Chip could report his guys were working hard to be prepared for next season. I still needed to contact Damian about the running backs, Greg Nowicki about the offensive line and Tanner Riggs for our special teams players.

I got up around eight on Sunday morning, showered, enjoyed some breakfast and watched CNN to catch up on the world's happenings. I didn't have time to run down and get a paper for the day. Chip was still asleep when I headed for the practice fields.

Dave McCall, Joe Ricci, Marco Cucchiella and Charlie Taylor had the campers up and on the field in time to avoid Coach Burton's wrath. I talked with the four chaperones while their charges stretched and prepared for the morning's workout.

I called Dave Mitchell over before the session started. "What's up, coach?" Dave asked as he trotted over to me.

"Do you still hope to come here next year?" I asked.

"Of course I do," Dave insisted. "I'm counting on it."

"Penn State normally brings in two or three wide receivers each year," I replied. "Coach Burton might bring in a fourth this year since he only recruited one wide receiver last winter. You know Jeremy Carter has been offered a scholarship already, don't you?"

"Yeah, I know," Dave agreed. "Jeremy is an excellent receiver and a really good guy."

"How would you rate Josh's performance this weekend?" I asked.

"Josh has been smoking!" Dave raved. "He looked fantastic yesterday."

"How about the rest of you?" I asked.

“I think Devin and I played well,” Dave said. “We are about even. We’re both much better than Mike and Garrett.”

“Mike and Garrett aren’t really college prospects,” I said. “They’re here strictly to improve them skills for their last season in high school. You hope for more, don’t you?”

“Of course,” Dave agreed.

“This is not the only football camp Coach Burton runs,” I said. “Not all recruits attend football camps. Do the math, Dave. There are three open spots, Jeremy has taken one and Josh performed better than you yesterday. If you’re serious about playing here, you need to play with urgency. You’ve got to impress the coaches watching you. Do you understand?”

“You and Coach Caffrey will speak up for me,” Dave said confidently. I said nothing. “Won’t you?” he asked with less confidence.

“Coach Caffrey and I are Nittany Lions now, not Wolverines,” I replied. “We are looking for the best wide receivers available. Performance counts and nothing else.”

“I see,” Dave said. I could see my conversation had rattled him.

“You’re a good receiver, Dave,” I added. “Go show these coaches what I’ve seen back home when you practice. Show them you deserve to be considered. Play with URGENCY.”

“OK, I got it, Coach,” Dave agreed.

Matt Shepherd assembled the crowd of teenagers and led them in warm up exercises before turning them over to the coaching staff. We spent the first hour of practice working on zone coverage. Matt Sauder and Dave Mitchell excelled, being the only two players on the field who had worked against this defense in a real game before.

I was glad Dave did well. I knew it wouldn’t change Coach Burton’s choice to offer Josh a scholarship and tell Dave he could be a preferred walk-on. That was OK. Anything that Dave did to boost his stock now might help him get the scholarship he wanted next fall.

The kids worked for an hour learning to play or exploit zone coverage. Coach Burton had the group go back to standard drills they ran yesterday against man coverage after that. Penn State coaches called the campers over one by one for conferences while the rest of the group practiced under the supervision of the guest coaches.

Josh Hunsecker was ecstatic when he finished his conference with Coach Adams. He came bouncing back to our group.

“I made it! I made it!” Josh gushed. “They’re offering me a scholarship! Isn’t it great Matt? What do you think, Dave?”

“Excellent!” Matt responded. “We finally get to play real games together. It’ll be great.”

“Congratulations, teammate,” Jeremy Carter added. “This is good news.”

“Yeah... congratulations, Josh,” Dave added, forcing a weak smile on his face.

Coach Adams called Dave over next. He spent about ten minutes with my coach. Not surprisingly, Dave was pissed when he returned to our group. Matt and Josh tried to engage him to find out how his conversation went. Dave responded with clipped, monosyllable non-responses.

Dave did one other thing that was familiar to me. He reacted by taking his frustrations out but driving himself harder on the football field. I did exactly the same thing four years ago. When he started to get too physical with the cornerbacks covering him, I called him over.

“I know your meeting with Coach Adams didn’t go the way you wanted,” I said.

“No shit! He offered to let me come as a walk-on!” Dave snapped. “You knew that didn’t you? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I did know it,” I replied. “That was confidential information and it wasn’t my place to inform you of Coach Burton’s decision.”

“I can’t believe how much they’re disrespecting me,” Dave snapped. “I deserve better than walk-on status.”

“Don’t look at it that way,” I replied. “You’ve been offered preferred status at one of the top universities in the country. That’s not disrespect. Four years ago when I was here at football camp, all they offered me was preferred walk-on status. How’d that work out for me?”

“Pretty good,” Dave admitted.

“Do you know who Damian Thompson is?” I asked.

“Of course,” Dave responded. “He’s the starting tailback and a team captain with you.”

“...and started here as a preferred walk-on,” I added. “The team only has three or four scholarships to cover wide receivers this year. Two have been offered already, so it’s simple numbers. Coach Burton has to keep one or two scholarships available to give to the top performers this fall. You really want to attend Penn State, don’t you?”

“I have... I had it all planned out,” Dave said. “Matt, Josh and I would come here, we would play together and make it big.”

“You can do that,” I said. “Coach Adams invited you to be a part of the Nittany Lions, one of the best teams in the country. There are a lot of receivers who won’t have the opportunity you are being given.”

“I guess,” Dave conceded.

“You and I will work hard over the next four weeks to help you improve your game,” I said. “This fall you will blow away the competition and give Coach Burton no choice but to give you a scholarship. You’ll see. Your plan can still work.”

“I guess so, if you say so, Coach,” Dave agreed.

I sent Dave back onto the field to continue practicing as Coach Adams called others aside one by one to discuss their performance that weekend and their future in football. Jeremy Carter was pleased with the review when he returned from his conference.

“That was fun,” he declared, his smile stretching from ear to ear. “Coach gave me some things he wants me to work on this fall. I can’t wait to be your teammate, Coach.”

“Umm... I’m a senior Jeremy,” I replied. “I won’t be here a year from now when you start college.”

“No, I’m starting classes in January,” Jeremy replied. “You’ll be here then, won’t you?”

“Actually, I will be in Philadelphia doing my student teaching,” I answered. “I may see you on campus occasionally. I’m sure I’ll be back a few weekends during spring semester.”

“That’s cool,” Jeremy said. “I don’t know if I should tell you this, Coach. I watched you on TV back when I was in ninth grade. You inspired me to work harder to be the best wide receiver. I dreamed that I could get an opportunity to do the same thing at Beaver Stadium when I was in college.”

“You have that opportunity,” I said. “I expect you, Matt and Josh to keep our team on top after my friends and I graduate. I want to see a national championship or two while you are here.”

“I’ll do my best, Coach,” Jeremy promised.

Mike Williams and Garrett Knowles returned from their conferences with smiles on their faces. Mike made a point of seek me out to talk.

“Thanks for all your help, Coach,” Mike said. “I enjoyed this and you gave me a lot of good tips that will help me this fall.”

“Coach Adams didn’t dash your aspirations of college glory?” I asked.

Mike laughed. “Right... sure... I’m just what you guys need – a short, slow, white guy who can’t jump. I’m not playing college football. I plan to use the tips you and Coach Adams gave me to play better for my high school this fall and enjoy my last season.”

“Good luck with that season, Mike,” I replied.

“I’ll see you guys up here anyway... from the stands,” Mike added. “I plan to go to college here. All my family went to Penn State.”

Devin Kerr took the offer to come to Penn State as a preferred walk-on philosophically. He said he would just have to work harder in the fall. I believe some of his uncle’s work ethic had rubbed off on Devin. That is a good trait to have.

Coach Burton called the entire camp together at the end of practice to thank them for their hard work and wish everyone a safe trip home. After he dismissed the campers they did a “We are... Penn State” chant for the coaching staff. I spotted Matt, Jeremy and Josh all helping to lead the group in the cheer. I wished my campers good luck as they headed back to their dorm to check out and head for home. I teased Matt, Dave, Cody and Josh to hurry up. They could help Will with the tail end of the swim tests at camp if they hurried.

Coach Burton invited the entire coaching staff to lunch when the campers left the field. He arranged for us to have lunch in the large back room at Damon’s Grill just north of town. I had a half rack of ribs, which were delicious. Coach thanked everyone for their help over the weekend. I enjoyed seeing our coaching staff let their hair down and have some fun with each other.

As the party was breaking up I cornered Jason Turner. “I doubt I’ll see you again until Thanksgiving,” I said. “I would be happy to help you on the sidelines, assuming our team is still in the playoffs that weekend. If you don’t need my help on the sidelines, I’ll be in the stands cheering you guys on.”

“Of course I’d like your help on the field, Coach,” Jason replied. “Let’s keep in touch this fall. I’ll let you know about our plans... [he chuckled] ... assuming we stay in the playoffs long enough for you to join our staff.”

We shook hands and exchanged e-mails before Jason left. I stayed around as the room cleared. I wanted an opportunity to talk with Coach Burton before I headed back to camp. I got my chance as the last of the coaches headed out.

“Coach Burton, do you have a moment?” I asked.

“Sure, Coach, what do you want?” Coach Burton replied.

“I wanted to let you know how my teammates are shaping up for football camp next month,” I explained. “Trevor, Damian, the other team leaders and I have been in touch with nearly every member of the team to make sure they’re ready.”

“That’s good,” he said.

“Trevor reports that all the defensive linemen are working hard to be ready for camp,” I said. “Shawn said the defensive backs will be ready to work hard for you. Josh Bruno reports the linebackers are working out, except for a couple who were trying to slack off a little. Josh set them straight.”

“Good,” Coach Burton agreed.

“You’ve probably seen the group working with Chip in the afternoons. I’m confident all the wide receivers and quarterbacks will be well prepared for camp. I personally talked with all our tight ends. Bob and Will are looking sharp. I had to light a fire under Ben Witte. He felt entitled to the starting tight end job.”

“You disabused him of that notion?” Coach asked.

“Definitely,” I agreed. “I expect that you will see him outside every afternoon working with Chip to improve his pass catching skills after this. He wants to be a starter. I believe he got my message.”

“That’s excellent, Coach,” Coach Burton said.

“I need to talk with Damian and get a report on the running backs,” I continued. “I also need to talk with Greg Nowicki and see how our offensive linemen are doing in their preparations for camp.”

“Thank you for the report, Coach,” Coach Burton said. “I like how you are keeping in touch with the entire team this summer.”

“‘On to Phoenix’ is more than a slogan,” I replied. “We are going to make it happen, Coach.”

“I believe you,” Coach Burton said. “It’s going to be a fun ride along the way.”

(To be continued)

Chapter 64

The Fourth of July week was a small week at camp, only around 250 campers. My staff worked smoothly. Everyone was in the routine needed to run our camp successfully. I played cornerback against Dave Mitchell as we practiced after lunch, challenging him to do better on both speed and possession routes.

Will, Abby and I called home Tuesday evening as the quarter mile swim got started. All of us wished Hunter a happy birthday. We had mailed our presents to him earlier. Mom reported they had arrived on time. Hunter wasn't much of a conversationalist on the phone but he recognized our voices and was happy we called.

Mom reported that the entire family would spend my birthday evening visiting with Will, Abby, Rose and me. We would end the evening with cake and ice cream for my troop, as we always did. The best news was that Penny was coming too! I would get to see my girlfriend for an hour or two, when I wasn't on duty at the pool.

Week 2 was easy, week 3 wasn't. The second week of July traditionally was a big week of camp. My troop would be there. Josh and Christian's troop from Manheim would be there too. The camp was expecting over five hundred scouts.

The first troop showed up at the pool at a quarter to two on Sunday afternoon for their swim tests. John Holloway assigned all the CITs who had worked the pool this summer to assist the aquatics staff. Will and I did the safety lectures while Dustin and Eric kept things organized in the pool. The commissioners came down to help prepare buddy tags after the kids finished their tests. It was organized chaos, but it worked.

The Manheim troop showed up around mid-afternoon. When I finished the pool talk to his troop, Christian came up to greet me.

Hey Coach, it's good to see you," Christian said as he shook my hand.

"Good to see you too," I agreed. "How's your summer been?"

"I'm getting myself ready for August," Christian replied. "We got a lot of work to do to get our team to Phoenix in January. Do you have time free to hear my report on the other receivers' progress?"

"Not now," I answered. "Tell me tomorrow after lunch. I assume you're meeting us at the parade field to practice like usual. Things are a little busy right now."

"I can see that," Christian agreed. "I'll talk to you then unless you're working the polar bear swim. I volunteered to bring our scouts down tomorrow morning."

“Yeah, I’m working polar bear tomorrow,” I agreed. “We’ll talk then.”

Christian followed his troop into the shower house while I sat the next scout troop down for my tenth pool talk that afternoon. My troop came through about half an hour after Christian’s. I greeted the young scouts in my troop along with the leaders. Mr. Clark was still the scoutmaster even though his son had graduated from college a couple years ago. I didn’t know the rest of the leaders in our troop as well. Their kids were much younger than me or my brother Andy.

My staff and I wrapped up testing the last of 517 scouts around 5:15 pm that afternoon. We closed the pool quickly and hurried back to the staff area to change for dinner. Our chaplain, Todd Weller, caught me after dinner.

“We’re on duty for the polar bear swim tomorrow, right?” Todd asked. Todd had sat in with me the days I ran the polar bear swim to provide the required adult supervision of the swim. The BSA required someone over twenty-one to be present at all times when we were running the pool.

“Didn’t you hear?” I teased. “You get to sleep as late as you want. My birthday is tomorrow and I no longer need training wheels to run the pool. I turn twenty-one in around seven hours.”

“Let me be the first to wish you a happy birthday, Kyle,” Todd said. “I will enjoy my extra hour of sleep tomorrow.” He gave me a wink. “I hope John and Rob don’t notice that I don’t get up early to help you with the polar bear swim but I bet they will rearrange the rotation of adults helping Eric and Dustin to include me.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right,” I agreed.

“It’s all good,” Todd added. “Up early two times every three weeks – that’s not too bad.”

“You have three to go this season, I have five before I leave for football camp,” I replied. “Enjoy your sleep tomorrow.”

I liked Todd a lot. He was very good at counseling the younger scouts who got homesick. This was his second year on staff and most likely his last. He was going to finish divinity school in the spring and would be looking for a permanent job next summer. I knew that feeling.

I left my tent quietly on Monday morning. I hadn’t planned out the polar bear swim duty schedule very well. My tent mate Patrick and I worked opposite mornings. I was on duty Monday and Friday this week. Patrick worked the early swim Tuesday and

Thursday. If I had been smart, I would have had him work the same mornings I did so noise wouldn't matter when we got up.

Dave, Josh, Alex, Gary and Zac worked with me that morning. Danny Crawford, one of this week's pool CITs, joined us. The same crew would work on Wednesday for Zac's brother Eric. A crowd of scouts and leaders were at the gate to the pool when we arrived at 6:20.

Some scoutmasters woke the poor kids up at Oh-Dark:30 and dragged everyone down to the pool to swim on Mondays. As the week went by both the scoutmasters and the kids wanted sleep more than swimming time. On Friday I would see roughly half this size crowd. [Oh-Dark:30 is military slang for 'too damn early' that Kyle picked up from a friend doing ROTC.]

Dave and Josh both wished me a happy birthday as we set up for the swim. Alex, Zac, Danny and Gary overheard and wished me a happy birthday too. We opened up the gate for the campers exactly on time and let them have their forty minutes of early morning swimming.

Dave manned the buddy board, ensuring everyone checked in with a buddy and left with the same buddy. Zac manned the lookout chair. Josh, Alex, Danny and Gary spread out along the sides of the pool, guarding the swimmers. We were a well oiled machine by the time we hit this, our third week of campers.

I leaned back against the fence around the swim area and watched the campers play as my staff supervised. I was relaxed and at peace. I had looked forward to this day for a decade as I wished grown-ups would stop treating me like a little child when I was younger, wishing I was older as I progressed through my teens, and dreaming of the day I would be liberated when I turned twenty-one.

That day was today. Legally in all respects I was an adult. I didn't feel any different. My debt to my parents was about four summers of my camp salary. I knew that debt was going to grow this year too. I still had to go to school. I had no permanent job. Was I really different from yesterday, last month or last year? A scoutmaster interrupted my reverie to talk Penn State football. I obliged him. Someday I might figure out the answers to my questions.

My birthday went smoothly. I was looking forward to the evening. My family was coming to visit Will, Abby, Rose and me in the evening. Penny was coming along. I was going to get to see my sweetie!

I had one dread during the day. I knew at one of the meals Will would get up and make me stand in front of the group and make a big deal about my birthday. He had done this every year for ten years. He let me have my breakfast in peace. He didn't bother me at lunch either.

The afternoon went well. Will and I were hanging out by the fence sixth period, watching the scouts enjoy our pool to avoid the hot weather. My staff had just finished the next to last buddy check when I heard two high pitched voices call out, “Unka Wih’, Unka Ky, we here!” Will and I spun around to find our two nephews with their noses pressed through the fences.

“Hey guys, you’re early,” I said. “I didn’t expect for another couple hours. How’d you get here?”

“Mom-mom’s car,” Noah said, pointing back towards the rest of my family. Little Hunter was running as fast as his little legs could go to catch up to his larger nephews. Andy, Liz, Mom and Dad were trailing the boys, trying to catch up to the little dynamos.

“Hey guys, it’s really good to see you,” I said.

“Yeah, welcome to Boy Scout camp,” Will added.

“We swim now?” Connor asked as he pointed towards the crowded pool.

“Not now,” I said. “The big kids would run over you if you went in the pool now.”

“P’ease, we swim?” Noah begged.

“Yeah... yeah... yeah... swim!” Hunter added enthusiastically.

“I don’t know if you have time, guys,” I replied.

“Maybe we can work something out,” Will added.

“Be careful what you promise, Will,” Andy said. “My boys will hold you to it.”

I hoisted one twin over the fence. Will picked up Hunter. Andy held the other twin up at fence level while we greeted our young ones with kisses and hugs. After exchanging Hunter and Noah and greeting them properly, Will returned Noah to his dad, while I gave Hunter to ours. Will picked up Connor, greeted him, and then let me greet my nephew.

The rest of us exchanged verbal greeting and hugs over the fence. “I’m shocked you’re here so soon. I didn’t expect you until 7:00 or 7:30. What’s up?” I asked.

“Thank your big brother,” Mom said.

“I thought we should do things up right for your twenty-first,” Will said. “At least as well as we can at a scout camp. I arranged with John for the whole family and Penny to have dinner at the dining hall tonight.”

“That’s wonderful,” I said. “Speaking of Penny, where is my girlfriend?”

“She’s about fifteen or twenty minutes behind us. She got off work late and needed to shower before she came up here.”

“I got things covered here, Kyle,” Will suggested. “Why don’t you take the family on a tour of camp?”

“That’s a great idea,” Dad said. “You can start by showing us the camp’s freezer. I have ten gallons of ice cream melting in coolers in the car. We need to get them somewhere cold PDQ.”

“What PDQ?” Noah asked from his perch on Andy’s shoulders.

“Pop-Pop means very quick,” I said. “If we don’t hurry, the ice cream will be a big puddle in the back of Pop-Pop’s car.”

“Ewww!” a chorus of ice cream lovers moaned, myself included.

We went back to the car and picked up the ice cream and cake for the night and carried it over to the dining hall. Nancy Lantz was nice enough to interrupt her supper prep to help us put my treats in a safe place until later in the evening.

I hoisted Connor up on my shoulders like his brother, who was on Andy’s shoulders. Dad gave Hunter a ride. I took the family around the center of camp. We stopped in the office to introduce the boys to John Holloway and our camp clerk, Kayla Hastings, our Ranger’s sixteen year old daughter.

I took my family down to the staff area and showed the kids how we lived in camp. Noah and Connor were dumbfounded that I lived in a tent all summer. I teased Andy that it was time to get his kids out camping in the back yard. It wouldn’t do for Martin boys to dislike camping.

Abby and Rose met us at my tent. She announced that Will called and said he could get the kids a little time at the pool at the end of the staff swim. I grabbed my uniform so I could dress at the pool and have more time with my family. Dad and Andy took Noah, Connor and Hunter into the changing area to get their swim suits on.

When they came out, Andy outfitted Noah and Connor with water wings on each arm and then strapped them into small PFDs. He lowered Connor into the water first. He bobbed up and down in the water at chest level. He splashed and laughed as Andy prepped his brother.

Dad walked out to the pool with Hunter. He had no wings, no PFD, nothing at all. Hunter stepped up to the edge of the pool and jumped in feet first. He swept his arms to come back to the surface, rolled on his back and did a couple strokes of backstroke.

Hunter rolled back on his stomach again and dove down using a pretty decent breast stroke.

“What the heck have you been doing with Hunter?” I asked.

“You haven’t seen him at his swim lessons before, have you? Liz asked. “Our brother is a swimming prodigy.”

“This is amazing,” Will commented. “How young do they start swim lessons for kids now?”

“As young as eighteen months,” Dad replied.

Will, who was holding Rose at that time, nuzzled her. “Rose sweetie, it looks like you’re going swimming next summer. Won’t that be fun?” She giggled at her dad’s attention.

“Are Noah and Connor afraid of the water, Andy?” I asked.

“No, they’re fine,” Andy replied. “The boys can swim a little but they like the comfort of wearing the flotation. They enjoy playing without worrying about staying above water. Boys, can you show Uncle Kyle and Uncle Will how well you can swim?”

“Sure,” “OK,” the twins answered. They paddled to the side. Liz and Andy helped them pull their wings and PFDs off. The two boys slipped into the water and doggie paddled for about thirty seconds before coming back to the side and climbing out. They were outfitted with their flotation again and returned to the pool to happily splash and play while their nephew swam around them.

“Am I late?” a sweet familiar voice asked from behind us.

“SWEETIE!” I exclaimed as I turned to face my lover. “I’m so glad you made it.”

“Happy birthday, Kyle,” Penny replied. I started to hop the fence so we could hug.

“Bad example, Kyle,” Will commanded. “Use the gate.” I jogged for the gate and my reunion. “No running on the pool deck!” I slowed to a fast walk until I cleared the gate and then I dashed to join Penny.

“Oh, God! I missed you so much,” I exclaimed as I met and hugged Penny. Her first words were equally gushy, but lost in our deep kiss.

“No public performances,” Will teased. “Let’s keep this G rated.”

Penny and I parted, blushing.

“It’s twenty-five to six everyone,” Will said. “Let’s get the kids,...” he waved towards me, “the big one and the little ones, changed for dinner. Kyle and I are required to be at the retreat ceremony at 5:45, no exceptions allowed.”

“Give me a minute, honey,” I said. “My uniform is in the pool office. I’ll change and rejoin you.”

Penny smirked and asked, “Need help changing?”

“Oh... that’s a lovely thought,” I agreed. “But I don’t have enough time for you to ‘help’ me as much as I want.”

“Move it!” Will directed. I headed for the pool house. Andy and Dad took Noah, Connor and Hunter back to the camper’s changing area to get dressed. I threw my scout pants over my swim suit, since the suit was dry. I hadn’t been in the water since about 2:30 that afternoon. I was dressed in full Class A uniform in about two minutes.

The three little kids took longer to dress. Will and I headed over to the parade field accompanied by Penny and Liz. Mom, Dad and Andy would bring the little kids along as soon as they were ready.

Unknown to me, Will had been busy. He had the dining hall staff set up an extra table for my family so we could eat together. There was only room for ten of us. Will, Abby and Rose sat at the head table like normal.

Noah, Connor and Hunter loved eating dinner with the big kids, as they called the scouts. I loved eating dinner and talking with Penny. Every moment we could have together was precious.

When dinner was over, Will walked to the front of the dining hall and raised his hand in the scout sign to silence the assembled scouts and leaders. It took about thirty seconds to quiet the crowd. I knew what was coming.

“Today is a special day for one of our scouts...” Will began in a voice strong enough to carry through the big dining hall. “Excuse me, I guess I need to say, today is a special day for one of our leaders. Kyle Martin, please join me up front.”

The scouts cheered and clapped as I jogged to the front of the crowd. One of my staff, I don’t know who, blew a whistle and yelled, “No running on the pool deck!”

“I’m in the dining hall,” I called back.

Nathan Howard, the dining hall steward, yelled, “No running in my dining hall!” I slowed to a walk as I neared the front. The scouts laughed at our ribbing.

“Today is my little brother’s birthday,” Will announced as he made me climb on a chair so everyone could see me. “Kyle is twenty-one years old today.” The scouts cheered the announcement. No surprise. Will and I are probably the two most visible and well known staffers in the camp. Everyone, every single person, comes to our pool every day to swim or do merit badges.

“Let’s sing ‘Happy Birthday’ to my LITTLE brother,” Will announced as the din quieted. The 642 people (plus my family and girlfriend) did a passable job of singing the song. I gave everyone a smile and a wave as I started to climb off the chair.

“Show us your touchdown dance, Coach!” a loud voice from someone at a staff table demanded. I ignored the request. Will stopped me from getting off the chair.

“Your fans want to see a touchdown dance,” Will announced for the crowd to hear. That drew a loud cheer from the assembly.

“No... no thank you,” I answered to the demand.

“Come on, Coach,” another staffer yelled. “You can do it. Let’s see your touchdown dance.”

“No... No, I’m not doing that!” I protested. The demands from the staff continued and some scouts voiced their wishes too.

“You can do it!” a loud voice called from the back of the room. It sounded a lot like Christian’s voice.

“I don’t have a touchdown dance,” I protested. “I score too often. I don’t have time to figure one out every time I get in the end zone.”

“Touch... Down... Dance!” the chant began among the staff. The campers quickly took it up. They began banging on the table in time to the chant. “Touch... Down... Dance!”

John, Rob and Will let the chant continue for a minute or so. I steadfastly refused. Finally Rob came up and whispered in my ear, “Just do it and end this.”

An idea popped in my head before I had to concede defeat and dance. I held up my right hand in the scout sign, demanding quiet from the audience. It took about forty-five seconds, but they got quiet.

“I will make a deal with you,” I announced. “If all of you promise to turn your TVs to the national championship game next January 7th and to cheer for Penn State when we play... when my team wins, I will go to the fifty yard line and do a national championship dance.” That drew loud cheers from the crowd. I added, “...and Christian Hunsecker will join me... right Christian?”

“We win the national championship, we’ll dance!” Christian shouted from his seat near the back of the dining hall. I finally got off the chair as they cheered Christian’s promise.

I started back to my table but Will stopped me. “Not yet,” he said.

“Enough silliness,” Will announced. “It’s time to sing a song. All of you know it. Kyle and I are going to lead you in it. Everyone knows ‘God Bless America,’ but we’re not doing that one. We’re doing ‘God Bless my Underwear.’ Let’s go.

*God bless my underwear, my only pair.
Stand beside them, and guide them,
Through the rips, through holes, through the tears,
From the washer, to the dryer, to the clothesline in the air.
God bless my underwear, my only pair,
God bless my underwear, my only pair.*

“One more time,” Will demanded. The group repeated the song, louder than the first time as the first year scouts caught on too. Everyone was laughing and having a grand time as they repeated the goofy song. “Kyle, dismiss everyone,” Will commanded when the song finished.

“Everyone who is taking BSA Lifeguard is dismissed,” I announced. The six kids and leader got up and headed for the exits to the dining hall. “Everyone taking Lifesaving Merit Badge is dismissed.” About forty kids headed for the exits.

“Everyone taking Swimming Merit Badge is dismissed.” Seventy or eighty kids got up to leave. “Everyone who has been in the pool this week is dismissed,” I announced. Finally I said, “All the rest of you dirty, stinky scouts, you are DISMISSED!” Everyone got up and headed outside.

“All you smelly scouts who left last,” I shouted. “Come to the pool and get a shower. Your tent mate will appreciate it.”

I headed back to my family at our table. “Is it always like this?” Penny asked.

“No, it isn’t,” I answered. “Unlike tonight, we can get really silly sometimes.” Penny cracked up.

Will, Abby and Rose joined us at our table. “When is a good time for the whole family to get together to do presents for Kyle?” Dad asked.

“I have to work from 7:00 to about 8:45 tonight,” I said. “After that, I guess.” My watch said I had about twelve minutes until the Swimming Merit Badges students descended on the pool to do inflation while the Lifesaving scouts did disrobing and rescue throws.

“You can all get together now,” Will said. “Abby and I will have two presents for Kyle. I can give him the first now. We’ll do the other one later in the evening.” Will turned to me. “Happy birthday, Kyle,” Will said dramatically. “You’re first present is the night off. I’ll run your classes this evening. You can entertain Penny.”

“Thank you, Will,” I said. “That is an excellent and most appreciated gift.”

“Feel free to relax over at my cabin. Watch TV or whatever,” Will said. “I will not be back to the cabin until after cake and ice cream at our troop site tonight.”

“I’m going to be with Mom, Dad and the rest of our family to show them camp,” Abby said. “The two of you can enjoy the quiet and the privacy.” Abby gave me a wink that I totally understood. She and Will didn’t mind of Penny and I satisfied our baser urges tonight at their cabin. I had the greatest brother and sister-in-law.

Abby volunteered to be the waiter for our table and clear the dishes, sweep and wipe down the table while the rest of us headed outside. We were to meet at the picnic tables in the staff area in five minutes. Abby sent Rose to the pool with Will for the evening.

I went straight to the staff area while the rest of the group headed to the cars to get their presents. I did very well that evening. Mom and Dad bought me a set of pots and pans for my apartment. Damian and I were going to enjoy them. We had some old, beat up hand-me-downs last year.

Liz gave me a gift card to download music. Andy, Noah and Connor bought me a year’s membership in the Penn State Lettermen’s Club. Hunter bought me a pair of leather driving gloves for the winter. Mom insisted Hunter actually did help pick out the gloves.

Penny saved her gift for last. She handed me a fifteen by twenty inch box about three inches tall. I tore the paper off to find that the box was from Deerskin Leather, the quality leather goods store in Park City. I opened the box and found the leather jacket I had admired back in May when Penny and I went window shopping while we were looking for presents for the twins.

“This is wonderful, honey,” I said. “...but it is too much. I bought you a case of beer for your birthday. I saw how much this jacket cost. You should save your money for things you need.”

“Nonsense, Dr. Chu pays me well,” Penny replied. “You will look good in this and I want a handsome gentleman to escort me around campus next spring when you are living in Philly.”

“OK, I love you,” I said before giving her a big kiss.

My family decided to go up and visit our troop’s campsite and show the little boys how Boy Scouts lived when they went camping. After that, Andy and Abby would take them

down to the boat docks to watch scouts canoeing and rowing during the evening open boating and then over to the pool to watch the Swimming Merit Badge students inflate their shirts and pants after they disrobed in the deep end of the pool. Penny and I wished my family a fun evening. We headed over to Will and Abby's cabin.

I set my MP3 player in Will's docking station to provide some nice music to set the mood for Penny and me. We relaxed on the couch and talked for a couple minutes. It wasn't long before we were kissing and making out feverishly.

"God, it's been too long!" Penny moaned after a couple minutes. "Little Kyle just doesn't satisfy me."

"You still have Little Kyle?" I asked. That was the name she gave her dildo when we were dating in high school.

"Of course I do," Penny answered after another kiss. "I did rename it about three years ago, but I still have it. I want to test your Big Kyle tonight." She gave me another kiss before asking, "Do you think it's all right if we use Will and Abby's bedroom?"

"I've done it here on this couch already," I replied without thinking. That comment drew a hard stare from my lover. "Sorry, that was a dumb thing to say. Remember, both of us have been with other people since we broke up three years ago."

"I'm not mad, Kyle," Penny said. "... though it is a bit of a buzz kill to have you tell me where you and Kelly had sex."

"Let's forget about that," I said. "We're together now and Kelly and Harrison aren't part of our lives any longer." We went back to kissing again. It didn't take long to recapture the feeling we had a few minutes earlier.

"Let's check out the bedroom," I suggested after a couple minutes. I led Penny by the hand back to the bedroom in the small cabin.

"You don't think Will and Abby will mind, do you?" Penny asked as we stepped into the bedroom. I laughed in response. "What?"

"They left us a note on the bed," I declared. I picked it up and scanned it. "It says: 'Please put the spare sheets on the bed when you are done. Love, Will & Abby.' I think that answers the question about whether they mind us using their bed."

I pulled the bedspread down while Penny drew the curtains closed on the room. Neither of us wanted to give an educational show to any scouts who might happen by and be curious about the light in this cabin.

I started to unbutton my scout shirt. Penny said, "Make it sexy, honey. Let's have some fun with this." Penny hummed musical accompaniment as I endeavored to strip

seductively out of my Boy Scout uniform. That is a hard thing to do, if you've ever tried it. Penny made a good audience, shouting out encouragement as I disrobed piece by piece. I felt more natural by the time I was down to my swim suit.

"It's your turn now, you big tease," I said after I inched my boxers down a couple inches but didn't reveal all.

I hummed a seductive tune while Penny put a show on for me. I shouted out encouragement as she took off her clothes piece by piece. "God, I'm the luckiest man in the world," I declared when she dropped her bra, leaving my vision of loveliness clad only in skimpy panties.

"Tell me more, loverboy," Penny teased.

"I love your golden hair and the graceful curves it makes as it frames your face," I said. "Your breasts... Venus De Milo has nothing on you. They are full, firm and shapely. Your slim waist is perfectly proportioned to your size. I love the shapely curve of your hips... and then your legs... Mmmmm... Perfection."

"Let me look you over, Kyle," Penny asked. I spun around so she could see me better. "Take it all off... I want to see everything." I dropped my boxers and spun around again. "Michelangelo could have used you as the model for David. You look very handsome with your shorter haircut. It makes you look older and more professional."

"That's why I cut it," I agreed. "I needed to look like a school teacher rather than a student this spring."

"Your muscles... oh my, they are amazing," Penny continued. "A girl dreams of a strong, handsome prince. You are so strong that I know you can handle anyone if they bother us. Still, you have a sweet and gentle side that makes me want you even more. I AM the luckiest woman on the face of the earth."

Penny dropped her panties and we embraced, sharing a deep, soul searing kiss. We meant to be slow and romantic but our postponed needs and desires were too much. We kissed for minute or so on the bed, rubbing our naked bodies together. I took her as soon as she demanded that I mount her.

I'd like to say it was slow and loving. Fast and feverish is a better description. Both of us needed this too much to make it last. Our nearly mutual climaxes may have been quick, but they were glorious.

As we lay cuddling in the afterglow, I commented, "We have an unusual relationship. Our separations are excruciatingly painful. But damn, our reunions are spectacular."

"Don't talk about this reunion in the past tense, Kyle," Penny said. "I'm expecting a lot more loving before I will be satisfied."

“Give me a few minutes,” I replied. “I certainly am planning on an encore. Now that we’ve taken the edge off, maybe we can make our second time last a good, long time.”

“That would be lovely,” Penny agreed.

We cuddled for a minute or so before giving each other some 69 stimulation. I brought Penny off. She got my ‘Big Kyle’ hard again. We made love the second time, slowly and wonderfully. We collapsed into a sweaty heap when we completed our coupling.

“God, that was great, sweetie,” I gushed as I gave Penny little kisses on her cheeks and neck.

“It was” she agreed. “I hope this was a good birthday.”

“It has been,” I agreed. We kissed deeply. “God, I do love you.”

“I love you too, Kyle,” Penny agreed.

“Three and a half weeks until we get to do this again,” I commented.

“I know,” Penny agreed. “Are you still planning to come home on Thursday afternoon? Dr. Chu gave me that day and Friday off from work.”

“I am,” I replied.

“Good. Our friends and I want to take you on a proper birthday bash.”

“I was hoping everyone would want to get together before we went off to college,” I said.

“We’re going to take you to Entourage, the dance club east of Lancaster on Route 23.” Penny said. “We’ve gone there a couple times this summer. It’s fun.”

“Entourage?” I asked. “Why haven’t we done it before?”

“You weren’t twenty-one yet, silly,” Penny responded. “They don’t have a section for under age teens like the Green Iguana. You’ll like it. They have excellent music.”

“I’ll follow your lead,” I agreed. “It is going to be nice to go out for a drink without worrying about getting caught.”

“You’re right, it’s great,” Penny agreed.

I checked the clock on Will’s night stand. It was almost 8:45 pm. “I guess we better get dressed and go meet my family for the rest of my birthday celebration.”

“The non X-rated portion of the celebration,” Penny teased as we climbed out of bed. Penny freshened up in the bathroom while I put new sheets on the bed for Will and Abby. I cleaned up too and put my uniform back on. We walked hand in hand back to the pool where we found Abby, Rose and the rest of my family hanging out as Will and my staff closed things down from the merit badges sessions that evening.

Will and Andy volunteered to get the ice cream and cake from the dining hall. The aquatics staff followed along with Penny and my family. They were invited to the celebration too. Hell, half of them were members of my troop. We couldn’t leave out the rest of the group.

Dad, Matt Sauder and I carried Noah, Hunter and Connor up the hill to our campsite. The boys were getting worn out from staying up past their normal bed time. Christian Hunsecker joined the party too. I had invited him after lunch before football practice. Andy and Will appeared a couple minutes later with cake and ice cream.

My troop serenaded me with an off key rendition of Happy Birthday. I blew out the candles and made my wish – for a safe and injury free football season for myself and all my friends. The leaders in my troop dished up the ice cream and cake. It was tasty.

The twins and Hunter perked up again when the cake and ice cream were handed out. Mom predicted they’d go for half an hour and crash after their sugar rush, hopefully after they made it back to the car again.

Liz enjoyed the snack but wasn’t boy crazy like previous summer camps. The only guys in camp her age were Matt, Dave and Cody. Matt was her best friend Annie’s boyfriend. Cody was an ex-boyfriend. Dave, for some reason unknown to me, was never considered boyfriend material. The fourteen to sixteen year old scouts paid lots of attention to my sister. She maintained a cool indifference to their flirting and attention.

Mr. Clark, my scoutmaster, and the other assistant scoutmasters bought me a gift too. It was a “tie” – or so they claimed. It came in a 4” by 4” box, 18” tall. They directed me to send it home with my parents and open it at home after camp was over. Mr. Holiday whispered to me that it was a chardonnay “tie” and hoped I would enjoy it. I thanked them and told them that Penny and I would enjoy it over dinner at the end of the month.

I escorted Penny and my family back to the parking lot. Noah and Connor managed to make it on their own two feet. Hunter had conked out a few minutes earlier. Dad carried him down to the mini-van. Will, Abby and I waved good bye as my family headed for home.

Penny hung around for a couple extra minutes after Will and Abby returned to their cabin with Rose. We enjoyed a lingering good bye kiss that wasn’t too risqué for the camp parking lot. I promised to e-mail everyday and couldn’t wait for August 2nd to come. I promised to be home by 2:00 pm.

With the addition of younger football players from my troop and Josh and Christian's troop, we had enough people to play some football instead of just practicing passing. We divided the group into fairly balanced teams. Thankfully Central's varsity backup QB was a Boy Scout, so I didn't need to play quarterback for my team. We divided the teams so each had a mix of Paradise and Manheim players. Dave and I ended up on one team with Jon Kuipers, the backup QB from Manheim. Christian and Josh played on Matt Sauder's team.

We strictly enforced the two hand touch rule to avoid injuring anyone with a tackle. If Cody, Dave, Josh, Christian, Gary or I were to tackle one of the little seventh or eighth graders, we could seriously hurt them. The games were for fun.

I enjoyed having my troop and Christian's troop in camp. The week passed too quickly. Next thing I knew, it was Friday night and the week was almost done.

Matt Sauder took off after dinner on Sunday of our fourth week. He was catching a flight to California on Monday for the Elite 11 Quarterback Camp. ESPN organized this competitive camp for the best quarterbacks in the nation. Matt had gone to the regional competition at Virginia Tech in April and had impressed the coaching staff. He was selected as one of the twelve quarterbacks for the four day camp out in San Diego.

The camp included well known quarterbacks as counselors, including Brady Rasmussen, Drew Brees, Nick Wilson from Michigan, Todd Landry from Texas and Ed Fritz from Florida. I didn't find out until I got home but Chip Brinton was a last minute addition as a counselor. Chip took a spot when the QB from Alabama couldn't come.

I took over Matt's Swimming Merit Badge for the week. I enjoyed working directly with the scouts. Will covered some of my normal duties while I taught.

I did my best in the after lunch passing drills to fill in for Matt as the QB. He definitely was superior to me at passing the ball. We had fun that week even if we didn't learn quite as much.

Matt was ecstatic when he came back Sunday afternoon at the start of our fifth week. He loved getting to know his high school peers. He also enjoyed hob nobbing with the professional and college quarterbacks that helped at the camp. Ed had e-mailed me mid-week to report he thought Matt was one of the strongest QBs at the camp. We got to watch him perform when ESPN started posting videos on-line of the QBs doing their drills later in the week.

It was a routine Tuesday afternoon in the fifth week. We had around one hundred twenty kids in the pool for the sixth period free swim. We had done the first buddy check with

the minimum delay as the younger scouts sorted themselves out and found their buddies. I had assigned a couple of especially tardy buddy pairs to five minutes of trash patrol to help them remember to stay with their buddies. By the end of the week I knew everyone would stick to their buddy like glue instead of letting him wander off.

I had checked on Gary in the lookout chair and was walking back towards the pool office when two young scouts dashed past me. I gave the two kids a loud blast on my whistle. Before I could yell at them, Matt blasted his whistle too and shouted, “No running on the pool deck!”

“Freeze!” I added a split second later. The second kid, close to me, stopped instantly. The first took two more steps and dove into the pool, trying to escape the coming punishment.

It was a beautiful dive, describing a graceful arc upward and then slicing into the water. It would have been perfect in the deep end of the pool. Unfortunately, it was too steep for the three feet deep, non-swimmer’s section. Everyone turned as they heard the sickening thud as flesh and bone collided with the unyielding pool bottom.

I dashed to the pool, searching among the cluster of swimmers, trying to find my offender. I was at the edge when I finally saw him, lying motionless on the bottom of the pool. I let out three blasts on my whistle and shouted, “BUDDY CHECK! EVERYBODY OUT OF THE POOL CAREFULLY. NO WAVES!” as I slipped into the water. The young scouts hurried out of my way as I strode to the young victim. Matt Sauder was two steps behind me.

“Patrick, take charge of the buddy check,” I shouted. “Dismiss everyone when you’re done, except this guy’s buddy.” The body floated up to the surface face down as I gave directions. “Help steady him, Matt,” I demanded as I grasped the back of his head with one hand. I reached my other hand under him and clasped his jaw. My forearms clamped down on this chest and back, immobilizing his neck temporarily.

I grabbed a deep breath and dove under the victim, coming up on the other side, carefully rolling him face up as I moved. I grabbed another breath and shouted, “Cody, grab the backboard and the medical kit. Dave and Josh, get in the pool to help. Zac, call Abby at the Health Lodge and get her over here NOW! Call Mr. Holloway and report this. Also call Will down at the boatyard and get him back here NOW! The rest of the staff, help Patrick.”

As I began checking the victim’s vitals, he sputtered and spit out some water. Thankfully he took a breath on his own. “Scout, are you all right?” I demanded. I got no response. His eyes were closed.

Cody arrived with the medical supplies. “Give Matt the neck brace,” I directed. Matt took it and carefully placed it around the scout’s neck. I released my grip on the scout’s

head and neck as Matt got the collar in place. Without direction, Dave and Josh brought the backboard into the pool, pushed it underwater and slipped it under the victim.

The scout moaned a bit and his eyes fluttered open. His gaze was unfocused.

“What’s this scout’s name?” I demanded, looking over at his buddy, standing along the side of the pool watching as my staff strapped his friend into the backboard.

“Jordan... Jordan Shaeffer,” his buddy replied timidly.

“Jordan, you may have hurt your neck,” I said to the victim. “Lie still and let us strap you to this backboard. We’ll take good care of you. Squeeze my hand if you understand me.” Jordan gave my hand a good strong squeeze.

“Good, Jordan,” I said. “Medical help is on the way.”

“OK,” Jordan replied.

“Shhh... don’t talk,” I said. “We’re taking good care of you.”

Matt, Dave and Josh had him immobilized on the back board by then. “Let’s get him out of the water, guys,” I suggested. Matt, Dave, Josh and I floated Jordan across the surface of the pool to the nearest side.

“OK Jordan, we’re going to get you out of the water now,” I said soothingly as we approached the side. The four of us lifted Jordan up and handed the front of the backboard to Cody and Adam. They pulled the backboard more than halfway onto the pool deck while Matt and I steadied the bottom end. Dave and Josh hopped out of the pool and pulled Jordan and the backboard completely onto the deck.

I hopped out of the pool and checked vitals while I waited for help to arrive. Jordan was conscious and talking quietly to us. That was an excellent sign. Abby arrived as I was finishing my check.

“The pulse rate is 94, respiration is 16 and he is conscious,” I said as Abby bent down to check him herself. I stepped out of the way as Abby worked. She engaged Jordan in conversation as she took his pulse and respiration rate. I was impressed at the thorough, professional way Abby handled the crisis. I guess that was to be expected. Abby had worked an emergency medicine rotation in the UPenn Hospital last year.

I briefed John Holloway when he arrived. Abby joined us a few feet away when she finished her examination. Will arrived from the lake about the same time. All of us gathered in conference to hear Abby’s evaluation.

“I suspect he has a concussion,” she explained. “He may have neck and back injuries too. There is no way to tell here. I would like an ambulance as quickly as possible to transport him to Lancaster.”

“It’s on the way already,” John said. “When Zac told me Kyle ordered the backboard to immobilize the young man, I knew he would be taking a trip to the hospital. The local ambulance should be here momentarily.”

“Excellent,” Abby said. “Jordan is stable but I am going to stay here with him until the ambulance arrives.”

“Kyle, would you escort this scout back to his campsite and find his scoutmaster,” John directed. “Bring one of the adult leaders back to the pool. They will need to accompany this scout to the hospital.”

“You got it, John,” I answered immediately. Looking at the other scout, I added, “Come on, let’s get you back to your campsite.”

I made sure he took his buddy tag off the board on the way out. I talked with him as we hiked back to his campsite. They were down the hill below the pool. I found out the boy’s name was Geoffrey Young. He and Jordan were twelve years old and lived in Kinzers, only a few miles from my home. They were members of Troop 410, which met at the Gap Fire Hall.

I emphasized to Geoffrey why I was such a pain in the ass (not my exact words with the twelve year old) about not running on the pool deck and not diving in the shallow end. The young man was contrite and apologized for causing trouble at the pool.

We met his scoutmaster on the road to their campsite. Other scouts from his troop had reported that something happened to Jordan at the pool. He was on his way to find out what was going on. We sent Geoffrey back to camp. I walked the scoutmaster, Joe Good, back to the pool, explaining what had happened and Jordan’s condition as we went.

The EMT and driver were loading Jordan into the ambulance when we arrived. Mr. Good went with his scout. John and Will called me over to the pool office. I had to fill out a detailed accident report describing what happened, and the actions and treatment I administered. I turned my report in to John at the camp office on my way to my tent to dress for dinner.

Eric brought the boatyard’s backboard and medical kit up to the pool immediately after dinner. Normally we had open boating available after dinner on Tuesdays, but Will decided to close that down so we could operate safely at the pool and be fully equipped. Rob Young went out to the fire house later that evening to pick up our back board and neck brace. The ambulance crew brought them back from the hospital after they delivered Jordan.

My staff and I were in the middle of the quarter mile swim when Joe Good returned from the hospital. He motioned for me to come over to the pool.

“Thank you for everything this afternoon, Kyle,” Joe said. “The ER docs said you and your staff did an excellent job immobilizing Jordan. I stayed through the initial evaluation and x-rays. Jordan definitely has a concussion. He does not have any fractures. The doctors are holding him in the hospital for observation tonight. He should be released tomorrow. He may come back to camp if he and his parents want him to.”

“That is excellent news,” I replied.

“Jordan talked with me most of the way to Lancaster,” Joe added. “He’s sorry for trying to get away when you caught him running. He doesn’t remember anything after he went in the water until he woke up with you holding his hand while the staff strapped him to the backboard. Thank them for us too. They did a fantastic job.”

“I’ll do that, Mr. Good,” I replied. “We’re all glad things will work out so well for Jordan. It looked a lot worse when I first went in the pool after him. He was unconscious and lying on the bottom of the pool when I went for him.”

“You’re a hero, Kyle,” Mr. Good responded. “You saved Jordan’s life.”

“No, I’m not,” I replied. “I had a lot of help from my staff. All of us were just doing the job we were trained to do.”

“Think what you will, Kyle,” Mr. Good answered. “I know and appreciate what you did. Jordan and his parents know and appreciate it too.”

“I’m just happy everything worked out so well,” I said. Joe headed off. I went back to supervising my staff and making sure things were done safely. We finished up the quarter mile swim and then some lifesaving drills for the Lifesaving Merit Badge students. We had a night swim for half the troops in camp that finished around 9:30 pm. Normally the staff had free time when the swim was over. John Holloway called an all-hands staff meeting for ten o’clock.

The staff assembled at the appointed hour in the front of the dining hall. John Holloway stood up, held up the scout sign and waited for silence. That took a few seconds, at most. He began speaking.

“I’m sure most of you have heard about the incident at the pool today. I don’t want rumors or wild stories circulating among the staff and the campers. A scout did a dive into the shallow section of the pool and knocked himself unconscious. Kyle and his staff responded immediately, bringing the young man to the surface, getting him on a backboard, removing him from the pool and giving him proper first aid until more help

arrived. Mrs. Henry monitored the young man until the ambulance came to take him to the hospital.

“I spoke with the young man’s parents about fifteen minutes ago,” John continued. “He gave himself a severe concussion and will be spending the night in the hospital. His parents asked me to convey their thanks and appreciation to Kyle, his pool staff and Mrs. Henry for their help during the accident. The young man is not returning to camp at his doctor’s recommendation. He will make a full and complete recovery. He already announced to his parents that he is coming back next year because ‘camp is awesome.’

“I want to remind everyone, if you get any press inquiries, please direct them to me. I will handle them as appropriate.

“Thank you again to everyone involved in today’s accident. We spent a lot of time during staff week reviewing emergency procedures. All of you did exactly what was needed in the crisis. I think Kyle, his staff and Mrs. Henry deserve three cheers.”

Rob Young stood and led the camp staff in cheering my pool staff, Abby and me. When he finished, Rob announced, “Mr. Holloway has decided tonight is an excellent night for a treat. Mrs. Lantz and the kitchen staff will be making banana splits for everyone.”

The assembled staff cheered loudest for that announcement. We filed through the serving line to pick up our evening treat. I made a point of thanking every one of my staff members personally for their help during the emergency. Matt, Cody, Dave, Josh, Adam and Zac had performed their parts perfectly helping me get Jordan to safety. Patrick, Gary, Tyler, and Alex had done a good job clearing the pool, allowing me to focus on Jordan. Their performance was superb.

Things got back to normal the next day. Late Wednesday afternoon I got a call from someone I was quite familiar with – Mike Montgomery, the sports editor for the New Era/Intelligencer Journal.

“What can I do for you, Mr. Montgomery?” I asked when he identified himself. “Are you doing an article on Penn State’s preparations for next season?”

“No, I’m not. For starters, how about you call me Mike?” he asked. “Mr. Montgomery seems awfully formal for someone your age.”

“OK, Mike,” I agreed.

“I’m not calling about sports today, Coach,” Mike said. “One of the editors knew that I know you pretty well. He is preparing Saturday’s Red Rose section today.” Our local paper had a section in the editorial page recognizing good deeds each Saturday night. “Could I give him your number? He would like to talk to you about the rescue you did yesterday.”

“If it’s about scout camp business, you need to talk with the camp director or with the scout executive in Lancaster,” I replied. “I’m not allowed to talk about camp business with reporters.”

“I understand, Coach,” Mike agreed.

“Do you need the camp number or the number for the scout office in Lancaster?” I asked.

“No, I have them,” Mike replied. “I’ll call Dick and get clearance for someone to talk with you.” Apparently Mike was on a first name basis with our Scout Executive, Dick Wallace. “One of the editors will be giving you a call after they get clearance.”

“OK, Mike,” I replied. “I’ll see you in a few weeks... at Media Day I guess.”

“I’ll see you, Coach,” I replied. Little did I know the firestorm of press that was about to be unleashed on us.

Mike Montgomery called back Thursday morning on my cell phone. “My editor liked what I told him so much, Coach, that we would like to do a feature story on you and the rescue for Friday’s paper. Can you make time for me to come up to camp and visit you for the interview?”

“How about sometime between three and five pm?” I suggested.

“Could we do it earlier?” Mike asked. “My editor would like to get this story in the paper tomorrow morning. I would be cutting things a little close if I interviewed you in the later afternoon.”

“The only other time that could work for me is at siesta time – around 1:00 pm,” I said.

“I can be at your camp at 1:00 pm today,” Mike agreed. I called over and warned John Holloway after I got off the phone with Mike. John knew already. The paper had cleared things with our Scout Executive who called camp to warn John.

I met Mike at the pool at the appointed time with my staff. I did not want the story to be about just me. Everyone on my staff had a part in saving the young boy’s life and they deserved to be recognized.

Mike Montgomery greeted me warmly when I met him outside the fence in front of the pool. I invited him to come inside to the pool office for the interview. I called my staff over to meet him when we got inside. Mike was taken aback when he met the guys.

“Matthew? Cody? David?” he stammered as he saw who worked for me. “Joshua? You are allowed to associate with all these Wolverines?”

“Sure, they’re good friends,” Josh replied. “We’ve been friends longer than we’ve been rivals on the football field.”

“Yeah, Josh and I have shared a tent for the past three summers.” Dave added.

“Don’t be surprised, Mike,” I said. “You know Josh’s brother Christian and I are good friends and roomed together when we were freshmen.”

“Is everyone on your staff a football player, Coach?” Mike asked as he gazed down the line.

“No, only about half of them,” I replied. “Scouting is our common bond, not football.”

“Being together at camp is a nice side benefit,” Matt added. “If you weren’t here, Mr. Montgomery, we’d all be out on the parade field practicing football instead.”

“Sorry to take you away from practice,” Mike replied.

“Don’t worry about it, Mike,” I answered. “Let me introduce you to the rest of the staff so you can get your interview done. We all have classes to teach at two o’clock today.”

“I don’t want to get in the way of your work,” Mike said.

He asked me to narrate an account of the accident and how my staff and I handled it. Matt, Dave, Josh, Cody and the others interjected comments and clarifications as I talked about what happened. Mike made notes as we talked. He asked a couple questions as I related the tale.

Mike asked some questions to clarify his understanding after we finished describing the incident. He seemed quite pleased with what we were telling him. Finally Mike smiled and commented, “That’s a great story, guys – absolutely great. I interviewed Jordan and his parents this morning. Jordan related pretty much the same story that you told me. Mrs. Shaeffer had this comment about the rescue: ‘I think Kyle and the other lifeguards are heroes. Jordan is so fortunate that they were there to save him.’ Coach, how would you respond to that?”

“Hero? No, I don’t think so,” I responded. “All of us did what we were trained to do.”

“We practiced putting an injured swimmer on the backboard during staff week,” Matt added.

“Coach and Will made sure we knew exactly what to do if this happened,” Cody said. “We’re Boy Scouts. We’re supposed to ‘Be Prepared’.”

“Are any of you Eagle Scouts?” Mike asked. Eight hands shot up. “You’re kidding! Eight of you. That’s amazing.”

“Not really,” I said. “We recruit the best scouts to come here and work.”

“Those of you who aren’t Eagle Scouts, are you close?” Mike asked. He looked at Gary Harrison first.

“I am,” Gary answered. “I finished all my merit badges and did my project. I need to write it up and then do my Scoutmaster’s Conference and Board of Review. I expect to finish in September or October.”

“How about you?” Mike asked, looking over at Tyler Moyer.

“I’m not quite as far along as Gary,” Tyler explained. “I finished my project too. I need to finish Family Life and Citizenship in the World.”

How about you, Zac?” Mike asked. “Are you close?”

“Not as close as these other guys,” Zac answered. “I am almost finished with Life, the rank before Eagle. I would be done if I wasn’t working here. My older brother is another of our assistant aquatics directors. The staff was short handed so Eric asked me to come to camp and help out this summer. I will get my Board of Review for Life as soon as I get home from camp.”

“That is really outstanding, all of you,” Mike commented. “You’re a little old to still be a Boy Scout, Coach. Why are you still involved?”

“It’s still fun is the biggest reason,” I replied. “I’ve learned so much as a scout that I want to give something back.”

“Such as?” Mike asked.

“We’re trying to develop good character in the young men in our program,” I explained. “We teach good citizenship and help our scouts develop themselves to be physically and mentally strong. Most important, I think, is that we teach scouts how to be leaders.

“Is a scouting background common among football players?” Mike asked.

“I can speak only about my own experiences,” I said. “About a quarter to a third of the Nittany Lions team has a scouting background. When I was in high school, the Wolverines were similar to my current team. In both high school and college we had a preponderance of team leaders who were Eagle Scouts. Ed Fritz, Jeremy North and I were all captains and Eagle Scouts for the Wolverines. Trevor Conwell, Josh Bruno, Christian Hunsecker and Greg Nowicki are team leaders and Eagle Scouts. We have

more coming among next season's leaders. Dave McCall, Chip Brinton and Joe Ricci are Eagles."

"I know this coming season's Wolverines will have plenty of Eagles in its leadership," Mike said. "How about your team, Josh?"

"There's Bill, Tom and... uh... Aaron," Josh said. "I guess there are four of us among the seniors on our team."

"This is interesting... very interesting," Mike commented to no one in particular.

"Are you planning to use this in your article tomorrow?" I asked.

"No... no, I'm not," Mike replied. "This gives me an idea for a future feature article on sports leadership. This information gets filed away for later."

"Do you have any more questions about the rescue?" I asked as I glanced at my watch. "I've got to put these guys to work soon." The early birds for the fourth merit badge period were already lining up at the gate to the pool.

"No, but I would like to get a couple pictures of the staff together by the pool," Mike said.

He lined us up along the end of the pool, using the pool as a backdrop for the shot. My staff got to work after the pictures. Mike hung around at the office while they started letting scouts in for their next class.

"Coach, do you mind if I stick around and take a few pictures of your staff in action?" Mike asked.

"Go right ahead, Mike," I agreed. "You need to stay out of the fenced area around the pool. The Boy Scouts are very strict about having everyone in the swim area have a proper medical [form] on file before they can go swimming. I wouldn't be setting a proper example for the scouts here if I gave you a special exception to that rule."

"I understand, Coach," Mike replied. "I was a Boy Scout myself." He chuckled and added, "I learned to swim in this very pool. I attended summer camp here four summers, starting when I was eleven. It was the year the camp opened, back in 1969."

"I guess you have some good memories of this place," I commented.

"Great memories," Mike answered.

"Take your time and take all the picture you want, Mike," I said. "I've got to get to work. I'll see you in a few weeks, at Media Day, I guess."

“I’ll be there, Coach,” Mike agreed. I went to work. Mike spent about half an hour taking background photos of scouts and the pool.

Mike Montgomery’s article appeared on the back page of Friday’s morning paper. Anderson Hastings, our Ranger, brought the paper to the dining hall at breakfast to show everyone. Mike had done an excellent job, accurately describing what had happened and how we took care of young Jordan Shaeffer. John Holloway and Rob Young loved the positive publicity for our camp. My staff and I got some ribbing from the rest of the staff about the article, but that was to be expected from teenagers.

I was happy Mike Montgomery did the article and that we were done with that. I was ready to focus on my job, running the pool, and in enjoying the last seven days of working at scout camp.

My day ran normally, at least to the middle of second period. I was in the shallow end of the pool teaching four non-swimming scouts how to swim when Will called for me.

“Kyle, John’s on the phone for you,” Will yelled.

“OK, tell him I’ll be a few seconds,” I shouted back. “I’m working with some scouts right now. I gave the four boys a drill I wanted them to practice before hopping out of the pool to find out what my boss wanted.

“Yes John, what’s up?” I asked when I reached the phone.

“I’m getting swamped with interview requests after the newspaper article came out,” John answered. “Can you come down to the office to help deal with them?”

“I’ll check with Will,” I responded. “I’m teaching a class right now.”

Before I could explain myself, Will said, “I know what John wants. I’ll take your kids for the rest of the period. Go take care of business.”

I relayed word to John that I would be at the office in a few minutes. I dried off, pulled on scout shorts and a shirt and hurried down to the office. Our clerk showed me into John’s office immediately

“Thank God you have some experience with the press,” John said as I sat down. “It started with Channel 43. They saw Mike Montgomery’s article and thought it was a good human interest story. A few minutes after they called, Channel 8 called and asked for an interview. Channels 21 and 27 also want in.”

“The media does travel in a pack, doesn’t it?” I commented.

“The PR from the article this morning is golden,” John said. “Dick Wallace called already. He loves the article. I know he will want us to accommodate the press requests. Dick loved what you said about why you’re in scouts. He loved Dave Mitchell’s comment about scouts being prepared too. That’s exactly the message we need to get out to the world.”

“I’m glad the article worked out,” I replied. “I’m willing to meet with the media.”

“I’ll give the stations a call,” John said. “Would meeting with them work for you after lunch?”

“Umm... not really,” I said. “I want my whole staff available for the interviews. All of them helped with the emergency. We’re busy at the pool after lunch today helping scouts catch up on requirements they missed for their merit badges. Why don’t we tell them to come after sixth period... say at 4:45 pm.”

“Will you and your staff have time to process all the merit badge cards on time?” John asked.

“I can give the lead instructors time off during fifth and sixth periods to get their cards ready for me,” I answered. “I’ll sign and sort the cards for Rob after dinner. We can make it work. I’ll get Will, Eric and Dustin to run the staff swim while my pool staff is doing interviews.”

“You have more experience dealing with the media,” John said. “Do you think they will accept these restrictions? Scouting can use the good PR this incident is giving us.”

“They want the story, John,” I replied. “They’ll live with our conditions, especially if we tell them why we’re not available until then.”

“OK... maybe I can say this...” John suggested. “Our camp prides itself on providing our scouts a safe, healthy and fun aquatics program during the day. Our pool staff will be providing that program until they get off duty at 4:45 pm. They will be available for interviews from then until 5:30 pm.”

“That’s perfect, John,” I agreed.

I headed back to the pool. Between second and third period I informed my staff of our opportunity to be on TV. They were excited, especially after they heard we would be interviewed by all four local TV stations.

Things got more interesting at lunchtime. John Holloway let me know that Jordan Shaeffer and his parents would be joining us for the interview. His parents had paid for the parent’s night dinner a few weeks ago. Jordan’s doctor said he was well enough to visit camp for a few hours. Jordan and his parents planned the trip to camp before the TV

stations called to arrange interviews. All of them jumped at the chance to see Jordan and me together at the pool.

The TV trucks arrived a little after 4:00 pm and set up near the pool. John Holloway came over and talked with the crews, allowing me and my staff to concentrate on running a safe swim for the sixth period. Jordan Shaeffer and his parents arrived around 4:30. I walked over to the fence to greet them.

“How are you doing, Jordan?” I asked. The young boy was wearing a collar around his neck.

“My neck still hurts,” Jordan replied. “They made me stay in bed Wednesday and Thursday morning. It was so boring. I couldn’t read, listen to music or watch TV. They finally let me watch TV today.” As his parents caught up, I reach a hand over the fence to greet them. “Mom and Dad, this is Kyle. He took good care of me during the accident. Kyle, this is my mom and dad.”

“Thank you so much for rescuing Jordan,” Mr. Shaeffer declared as we shook hands. He paused for a couple seconds and stared at me. His face lit up as he realized who I was. “You’re Kyle Martin, the receiver from Penn State, aren’t you?”

“I am,” I agreed.

“Wow! This is a pleasure to meet you, Kyle,” Mr. Shaeffer gushed, in full fan mode now. “I had no idea who you were when Jordan said ‘Kyle the lifeguard’ rescued him. This IS a pleasure to meet you.”

“It’s very nice to meet you, Kyle,” Mrs. Shaeffer agreed, clearly less impressed with my fame than her husband. “Thank you so much for taking good care of my son.”

“Honey, do you know who this is?” Mr. Shaeffer asked urgently. She shook her head no. “Kyle is a star for his team and the best damn football player at his position in the country.”

“I’m glad you’re a good lifeguard,” Mrs. Shaeffer responded. “Thank you so much for saving Jordan. I don’t know what we would have done if we lost him.”

“I’m glad as I was in a position to take care of him for you,” I said. “Have you learned anything from all of this, Jordan?”

“Don’t run at the pool, don’t dive in the shallow end and listen to what the people in charge tell me to do,” Jordan said.

“Good! I’m glad you understand what you did wrong,” I said.

“How were you going to punish me if you caught me?” Jordan asked.

“I probably was going to make you pick up trash in the shower room and around the fence for ten minutes,” I said.

“I should have taken the punishment,” Jordan said. “I would be on the other side of the fence now having fun with my friends.”

Almost as if on cue, Patrick blew three blasts on the whistle to clear the pool for the end of the free swim. Some of the kids from Jordan’s troop spotted him and gathered at the fence to talk with their friend.

I heard John Holloway calling to the TV crews. “We will do the interviews in the order I received calls this morning. Channel 43, you’re up first.”

“Excuse me, folks,” I said. “I have to round up my staff for the interviews.” The Shaeffers agreed. My staff checked all the campers out of the pool and then followed me outside the fence for our interviews.

The producer for Channel 43’s team spotted the eleven of us heading over to join him. “No, I don’t need all the lifeguards,” he protested. “I just need Kyle.”

“We did this as a team,” I answered. “If you want to do the interview, it’s with everyone or it’s with no one.” I saw John Holloway’s face drop. I knew he wanted to see us get some good PR on TV. I also knew that my requirement would be met. The TV crews hadn’t spent all this time getting here only to leave without a story. They would agree to my demand.

The producer looked like he’d swallowed a lemon, but he agreed, “OK, everyone is on camera.”

I heard my staff behind me whisper, “Thanks, Coach,” “Good job, Coach,” and “Thanks.”

The Shaeffers, my staff and I talked with the producer for three or four minutes as he outlined how the interview would proceed and the questions we would answer on camera.

Debra Knowles, pretty, late twenties slip of a lady, was the reporter for the story. I had seen her work on TV over the last few years. She was a decent reporter. Kelly had even complimented her work when we watched her last summer when we were together.

Debra began by asking Jordan to describe how the incident began. When Jordan got to the part about him diving in the pool, Debra turned to me and asked me to continue the narration. I described how the rescue proceeded, making sure to credit Matt, Dave, Josh, Zac, Cody and Adam for their parts in getting Jordan stabilized and out of the water. I thanked Pat, Alex, Gary and Tyler for their part in clearing the pool, keeping the water

calm, and getting the rest of the scouts out of the way so we could concentrate on taking care of Jordan.

When I finished Debra asked Jordan, "What do you remember about your rescue, Jordan?"

"I remember trying to get away from the lifeguards so I wouldn't get in trouble," Jordan began. "I remember hitting the water and then I don't know anything after that. When I woke up, I knew I was still in the pool. I couldn't see clearly. The thing I remember most was Kyle holding my hand and telling me I would be all right. He made me feel safe."

"How does it feel to be a hero, Kyle?" Debra asked me.

"I'm not a hero," I responded. "I'm a lifeguard. All of us just did what we were trained to do."

"My son knocked himself unconscious on the bottom of the pool," Mr. Shaeffer added. "Jordan could have drowned if you hadn't pulled him out."

"We are very thankful for what you and the other lifeguards did on Tuesday," Mrs. Shaeffer added.

"Have you learned anything, Jordan," Debra asked.

"Don't run at the pool, don't dive in shallow water, and listen to the lifeguards," Jordan answered. "I won't do anything dumb like this next year when I come to camp. I promise that, Kyle."

The producer had me shake hands with Jordan and then his parents.

"That's what is happening in Brickerville today, Don," Debra announced, staring back at the camera.

After about fifteen seconds of silence, the director announced, "Cut!" The Channel 43 crew moved their gear out of the way so Channel 8 could set up. The Shaeffers and I talked with Channel 8's producer as she outlined how she wanted to conduct the interview. Channel 8's interview went about the same as the first interview.

Channel 21 set up next. While we were waiting for it to start, Cody noticed who was holding the sound boom for Channel 27's crew – his older brother Rob.

"Hey Coach, do you mind if I go talk with Rob?" Cody asked.

"Sure, go right ahead," I agreed.

Channel 21's producer engaged me to discuss the next interview, so I lost track of Cody and Rob. Their interview went pretty much like the first two. Jordan and my staffers Zac and Tyler were getting a little antsy. All I could do was chuckle. If they thought this was getting boring, they should try a bowl game media day. Those interviews lasted two or three hours.

While Channel 21 was packing up the producer from Channel 27 sidled up and asked, "Do you mind that my soundman is bothering your lifeguards?" she asked as she pointed over at the fence where Will, Rob and Cody were talking. I chuckled before replying.

"Your soundman isn't bothering my lifeguards," I explained. "Your soundman is talking with his younger brother, who happens to be one of my lifeguards. The other lifeguard is my boss and older brother, who happened to be best friends with Rob while they were growing up. They also happened to be best man at each other's weddings."

"Ahh.. I see," she replied. "I understand now why one of our best PAs [production assistants] volunteered to fill in this afternoon for a sick soundman."

"Yes, it would," I agreed.

"Doing sound is a bit of a step down for him," she continued. "I couldn't understand when we left the station. Robert is likely to get promoted to producer in a few months. Our most senior producer is retiring in October."

"Good for Rob," I said. "I'm glad to hear that."

Channel 27's interview went much like the others. I think all of us were glad when we finished. My staff and I hurried to change into uniform and get over to the parade field to help serve the barbecue picnic to the scouts and their families.

I hurried over to the pool after dinner and grabbed my merit badge cards and records and headed for the camp office. I joined the in-progress director's party, where all of us were signing merit badge cards for completed badges, and marking partials down for incomplete badges. When that was finished, we had to sort all the cards by troop and put them in envelopes for each troop. It was a pain in the ass but it had to be done, and done Friday night before we went to bed.

I was about half way through my stack of a hundred sixty-some cards when my cell phone rang. No name came up on the screen.

"Hello, Kyle Martin," I said into my phone.

"Hello Kyle, this is Elliot Hancock of ESPN," the voice responded. "I heard about the story on the local news this evening. I understand you rescued a boy from drowning this week."

“I did have to pull a Boy Scout out of the water on Tuesday afternoon,” I replied. “Why is ESPN interested in something like this? I was surprised that the local station had any interest in the story.”

“Hrmmph... Are you joking?” Mr. Hancock responded. “One of the biggest receivers in college sports saves a boy from drowning and you’re wondering if EPSN would be interested. You’ve got to be kidding.”

“I don’t know that I’m that noteworthy,” I said.

“You have gained more yards than any running back, receiver or returner in college history and you still have a year of eligibility left,” Mr. Hancock said. “You’re a star, Kyle, and when you do something like this, it’s news.”

“Do you want to do a phone interview now?” I asked.

“No, I want to bring a camera crew out, sit down with you and do a proper interview,” Mr. Hancock said. “I’m in LA right now but my assistant is lining up a flight to...” There was a pause while I heard him question his assistant. “... to Harrisburg tonight. Can you sit down with me tomorrow morning?”

“Let me check with my boss,” I replied. “I’m on duty most of the day tomorrow. We have scout troops to check out and then a big group of Cub Scouts are coming in for an overnight.” I turned to John, who was sitting across the table, helping sort completed paperwork to go to the troops. “John, can I fit another interview in tomorrow? ESPN wants to talk to me.”

“We’re not real busy immediately after lunch,” John said. “The Cubs are moving into their tents then.”

“OK, Mr. Hancock, I have about half an hour at one o’clock tomorrow,” I said.

“Where are you at, Kyle?” Mr. Hancock asked. “I think I have your home address.”

“That won’t help,” I said. “I work at our local Boy Scout camp,” I explained. “You’ll have to do the interview here at camp.” I gave him the address for our camp.

“OK, I got it,” Mr. Hancock said after I finished. “By the way, why is a star football player hanging around at a Boy Scout camp? Shouldn’t you be practicing for the coming season? You don’t stay on top if you slack off with your preparations.”

“I’m working out here,” I said. “I do weight training, running and passing drills to keep ready for the season.”

“Passing drills?” Mr. Hancock said, trying to stifle a laugh. “Do you have one of the kiddies toss the ball to you?” He pissed me off with his dismissive attitude.

“We run top notch practices here,” I insisted. “Until this summer Ed Fritz, with the Florida Gators, threw to me. Ed’s down in Gainesville now, so I have to play catch with one our local high school quarterbacks, Matt Sauder.”

“Sauder? Why do I know that name?” Mr. Hancock replied. After a short pause, “Sauder... yeah, an Elite 11 quarterback. You really are keeping yourself in practice aren’t you? I saw Sauder at the camp. He is a sharp QB.”

“He is,” I agreed.

“OK, you’ll do an interview at one pm,” Mr. Hancock said. “I’ll pick up a camera crew from the local ABC station and meet you at this camp. Until then, Kyle.”

“Good Bye, Mr. Hancock,” I replied before clicking to end the call.

The whole deal with rescuing Jordan Shaeffer was starting to balloon out of control. I knew I had to make another phone call before the crew from ESPN came tomorrow and the story went national.

“Hello, Coach Burton?” I said when I voice answered my next phone call. “It’s Kyle Martin. Sorry to disturb you at home on a Friday night.”

“It’s fine, Coach,” Coach Burton said. “What’s up?”

“There’s a situation brewing that you and the athletic department need to know about,” I explained. “I had to pull an injured scout out of the pool on Tuesday. The local paper picked it up as a story on Thursday and then the local TV stations came to interview me today.”

“I had heard about that,” Coach Burton said. “Walt still reads the Lancaster newspapers. He pointed the story out to me yesterday. That was good work you did. Tell Matt and Josh I’m proud of their involvement too.”

“I will,” I agreed. “The reason I called was that ESPN caught the story too. They’re coming to interview us tomorrow afternoon. I thought you and the university should know what is happening, in case any other news organizations call you about the story.”

“Thank you for the heads up,” Coach said. “I trust your judgment when you do interviews, but remember, we don’t need to talk about our “On to Phoenix” slogan publicly. I don’t want other top teams to feel we are slighting their abilities by wild predictions of us playing for the national championship.”

“I’m sure I will be asked questions about our team’s goals,” I said. “How about if I say, ‘Our aim is to win the national championship, but then, isn’t that every team’s aim?’

Time will tell if we're good enough to pull it off. That's why we play the games.' What do you think, Coach?"

"I like it," Coach Burton said. "It sets a high goal and isn't too cocky. We don't need to set too big a target on our backs. I knew we wouldn't sneak up on anyone but I didn't need the challenge the preseason polls give us."

"What's that?" I asked. "We're pretty isolated here at camp. I didn't see the preseason polls."

"We're ranked sixth in the nation," Coach Burton said. "Michigan is eighth and Ohio State is ninth. They aren't going to be too pleased to be ranked below us. Don't throw gasoline on the fire with your interview."

"I got it, Coach," I agreed.

"I'll see you in about ten days, Coach," Coach Burton said.

"I'm looking forward to getting started this season," I replied before clicking to end the call.

I received an e-mail from Penny congratulating me on the rescue and telling me about the TV coverage we had recognizing our effort. Penny reported everything was arranged for Jeremy, Kath, Hal and Tammy to join Penny and me for a night of dancing at the Entourage Dance Club on Thursday evening, before Jeremy had to leave for Indiana. Tammy lost the drawing. She was going to be the designated driver for our belated celebration of my twenty-first birthday. I thanked Penny and asked if she recorded the broadcast. I wanted to see it when I got home next Thursday. I was looking forward to this new dance club.

The Cub Scouts came in on Saturday morning between eleven and noon. Staff guides moved the Cubs and their parents to their campsites. Everyone convened in the dining hall for lunch at 12:15 pm. I was semi-surprised to see Channel 27's broadcast truck pull in around 12:30, while we were still eating.

I expected Harrisburg's ABC station to provide the crew for the interview since they were much closer than Baltimore or Philadelphia. I didn't expect the crew to show up half an hour early. John Holloway motioned for me to go out at help the crew get settled until after lunch.

I trotted out to the truck in the parking lot. The driver gave me a smile and a wave as I got close. The passenger in the front seat hopped out.

“Hey Kyle, how’s it going?” Rob Stevens said in greeting.

“Are you working sound again?” I asked. That drew a chuckle.

“I did much better with this assignment,” Rob answered as he came around the front of the truck and greeted me with a handshake. “Most of the senior producers are off or out on stories. They are letting me produce this segment.”

“Cool! Congratulations,” I replied. “That is very good news.”

“I know I’m early,” Rob said. “I figure everyone is still in the dining hall at lunch. I wanted to be here early and set up before Hancock gets here. He isn’t here yet, is he?”

“No, I expected he would come to camp with you guys,” I replied.

“No, we’re meeting him here,” Rob said. “If it’s OK, I’ll go get set up for the interview over by the pool like yesterday.”

“That’s cool,” I said. “We’ll be out in fifteen or twenty minutes. You know how it is in the dining hall.”

“Yeah... announcements, sing a song, do all the other silliness,” Rob agreed.

“Yeah, it hasn’t changed since you and Will were scouts,” I said. “Do you want the whole pool staff for this interview?”

“No, just the ones involved in the rescue,” Rob said. “...also all the staffers who work the passing drills you run after lunch. This is for ESPN. We’re playing up the football angle on the story.”

“You got it, Rob,” I agreed. I headed inside to finish lunch while Rob and his crew set up for the interview. I let Dustin and Gary know that they were invited to sit in on the ESPN interview. Both guys were a little nervous but I assured them they would do fine.

A big black Hummer pulled in the parking lot as lunch was being dismissed. A tall man dressed in a dark suit stepped out of the passenger’s side. When I got closer, I recognized him as Elliot Hancock, one of the Sports Center anchors.

“Hello, Mr. Hancock, I’m Kyle Martin,” I announced as I extended a hand to greet him. He gave me a weak, diffident handshake.

“Am I ahead of the film crew?” Mr. Hancock demanded. “Did those incompetents get lost?”

“No, their producer thought the pool would make a nice backdrop for a story about a water rescue,” I explained. I wasn’t getting a good vibe from my interviewer. “He’s over there setting up right now.”

“That’s a good idea,” Mr. Hancock said. “Which way is it?”

“I’ll take you there,” I offered. To my surprise, Hancock hopped back in the Hummer and had his driver follow me across the parking lot, and down the short road to our pool. God, this guy was a dick! I took a deep breath and settled myself again when we reached Rob and the film crew. Matt, Dave, Cody, Josh, Zac, Adam, Dustin and Gary had gathered to watch the crew set up.

Mr. Hancock talked with Rob for about five minutes before calling all of us together. Rob and Mr. Hancock laid out how the interview would go. Rob’s crew produced a couple stools for me and Mr. Hancock to sit on. My staff stood behind me for the interview.

“This is Elliot Hancock reporting from the woods in central Pennsylvania,” Mr. Hancock began when the camera light clicked on. “I am meeting with Penn State wide receiver and team captain Kyle Martin. Good afternoon, Kyle.”

“Good afternoon, Elliot,” I answered. Mr. Hancock asked me to use his first name during the interview.

“Kyle, you are one of the top wide receivers in college football today,” Elliott continued. “You have a most unusual way of preparing for the coming football season. I am meeting with you in woods in central Pennsylvania at a Boy Scout camp where you work as the head lifeguard at the camp’s pool. I understand you had to put your lifeguard skills to the test earlier this week. Can you tell us about that, Kyle?”

“Sure, Elliot,” I agreed. I proceeded to outline how Jordan hurt himself and the steps my staff and I took to rescue him. I made a point of crediting Matt, Dave, Josh, Cody, Zac and Adam for their help as we immobilized and carried Jordan Shaeffer to safety.

“That’s an amazing story, Kyle,” Elliott said after I finished the story. “How does it feel to be a hero?”

“Hero? No... I’m not a hero,” I snorted. “I just did my job.”

“What would you call what you did?” Elliott asked.

“I wasn’t courageous,” I answered. “I ran to the pool, slipped into three feet of water and waded over to where he was. I don’t call that heroic.”

“You’re being too humble, Kyle,” Elliott countered. “Would the young boy have drowned if no one pulled him out?”

“Well... that’s true,” I agreed.

“And you pulled him out,” he continued. “I think most people would call that ‘being a hero’.”

“It’s just what I’m trained to do,” I insisted. I looked to Matt, Dave and the others for support.

“Yeah, we drilled on exactly this situation during staff training,” Matt added.

“Coach and Will made sure we knew exactly how to handle an emergency like this one,” Dave added.

“Be that as it may, I think we’ll have to disagree about whether you’re a hero or not,” Elliott said. “The rescue you did earlier in the week is only a part of why I wanted to interview you and your staff. Kyle, you’re one of the top college wide receivers in the country.” I nodded in agreement.

“Other top receivers around the country are on campus preparing for the season,” Elliott continued. “This rescue focused the spotlight on you. How could you possibly prepare to play Division I football here in a Boy Scout camp?”

“With a lot of help from my friends, Elliott,” I replied. I motioned to my staff standing behind me.

“How many of you young men play football?” Elliott asked as he scanned the group behind me. Everyone but Adam and Zac raised their hands.

“Do any of you play college football?” Elliott asked.

“I play cornerback for Division III East Stroudsburg University,” Dustin said.

“The rest of you play high school ball?” Elliott asked. That drew head nods from the other players. “I know Matthew Sauders is in this group. I saw you at the Elite 11 Camp last week. You performed well there, son. But Kyle, how...”

“My last name is Sauder, not Sauders,” Matt said, interrupting.

“Sauder, OK...” Elliott agreed. “But Kyle, how can you expect to train at a high level if you work mostly with young players used to a much lower level of football?”

“I disagree with your assessment of my friends,” I said. “As you noted, Matt is one of the top high school QBs in the country. He has already accepted a scholarship to attend Penn State next year. Josh Hunsecker, my friend Christian’s younger brother, is planning to attend Penn State on scholarship too. Dave and Cody are high school seniors being

recruited by many FBS colleges. Gary is a sophomore and one of the best high school tight ends I have ever seen play. My friends provide me with good opportunities to work out.”

“What do you and your friends do to prepare?” Elliott asked.

“We train in the evenings after we’re off duty,” I explained. “All of us do a three and half mile run when we’re done with the weights. Weekdays we work passing drills after lunch.”

“Could we film you and your friends working out?” Elliott asked. “I think it would be instructive to see.”

“You’re welcome to, assuming my friends don’t mind,” I replied. I looked back at my friends to see their reaction. Everyone was smiling and nodding yes to the question.

“Excellent! Where do you guys practice?” Elliott asked. “We can get the camera set up over there and the film on your workout.”

I glanced at my watch. “I’m sorry,” I explained. “We’re running out of time for the interview. My staff and I have about five minutes before we have to go to the pool to set up for the Cub Scout’s afternoon swim.”

“Are you telling me you’re blowing off the rest of the interview after I fly across the country to see you?” Elliott demanded.

“I’m not blowing it off,” I countered. “I clearly told you last night that I was available from 1:00 to 1:30 pm today. It’s already 1:40. We will be practicing from 10:30 to 11:30 or so tomorrow morning. You’re welcome to come back tomorrow.”

Elliott Hancock looked like he hadn’t gone to the bathroom for a week, but he bowed to the inevitable. He wasn’t returning back to ESPN with a half finished story. My guys headed to the pool to set up for the afternoon swim. I hung out while Rob’s crew packed up.

I overheard Hancock say to Rob Stevens, “That was good work this afternoon, Stevens. Have your crew here at ten o’clock tomorrow morning.”

“That’s not up to me, Mr. Hancock,” Rob replied. “My boss makes that call.”

“Be here, Stevens,” Hancock said. “I will set it up through corporate.” Without saying another word, Hancock strode over to his Hummer, climbed aboard and headed away.

“He certainly is a dick, isn’t he, Kyle?” Rob commented.

“At least he liked your work, Rob,” I responded.

“Yeah, there is that,” Rob agreed. “In case I end up here tomorrow morning, where do you guys work out?”

“We’ll be over at the parade field,” I said. The first group of a hundred Cub Scouts and their parents came around the corner and headed for the pool. “See you tomorrow, Rob.”

Rob and his crew finished packing their gear and headed back to Harrisburg. I joined my staff at the pool for a fun and exciting afternoon chasing little kids around the pool.

Immediately after breakfast on Sunday my staff and I headed for the pool to do our pool’s weekly vacuuming and cleaning. The rest of the staff helped the Cub Scouts and their parents pack up, clean up and check out of camp. We wrapped up early so Matt, Dave, Cody, Josh, Gary, Dustin and I could head over to the parade field a little early.

Rob Stevens and the Channel 27 crew were setting up along one end of the parade field when we got there. I gave Rob a hearty backslap and commented, “I knew you’d be here. A guy like Hancock gets what he wants.”

“You have no idea, Kyle,” Rob replied as we shook hands. “The senior producer at our station desperately wanted to work with Hancock today. He raised holy hell when ESPN called our station manager and demanded that I be assigned to Hancock today. Hancock wanted me. I’m here.”

“Congratulations, Rob,” I answered. “That probably doesn’t hurt your career at all.”

“That’s the same thing my boss said,” Rob agreed. “Why don’t you and your guys go ahead and do your normal practice while we wait on Hancock. I’ll get some background shots he can use in his report while we wait for him.”

“We weren’t planning on waiting for him,” I replied. “We’re down here to work out for ourselves, not for your crew.”

“That’s the right attitude, Kyle,” Rob agreed.

I huddled with my friends. “Ignore the camera this morning,” I directed. “If you want to impress anyone with this TV report, just practice like you always do. If you try too hard you are going to screw up and embarrass yourself.”

We set up with Dave and Josh taking turns running routes against me while Gary and Cody took turns working against Dustin. Both receivers went out on every play, while Dustin and I didn’t know who Matt’s hot receiver would be on any given play. Matt got to practice check downs too, as he saw who was covered and who was open on each pass.

I required Matt to count out loud, “One Thousand-One, One Thousand-Two, One Thousand-Three....” as he simulated his three, five and seven step drops. I wanted Matt used to the amount of time his offensive lines would give him during real games.

We worked while Rob and his crew filmed us. I pressed Dave Mitchell hard, making him improve his technique in order to get completions. I had been doing that since we returned from Penn State at the beginning of July. Dave was improving too. He could work for position now, doing the little things that were the difference between a completion and an incompletion.

Dave was going to be real tough for a high school cornerback to cover alone. He might have a shot at the scholarship to Penn State he was hoping for. If not, some other university would catch him with a scholarship or Penn State would get an excellent preferred walk-on.

Elliott Hancock arrived sometime during practice. I didn’t notice when. He observed as Rob and his crew filmed our work. Normally we practice until 11:30 on Sunday mornings before we shower and change into our uniforms for lunch and the next week’s troops’ arrival. I shut things down at 11:15 that morning, so Hancock could have time to talk with us if he wished.

“That was very impressive,” Hancock said as I circled my guys around our interviewer. “Matthew, you looked just as sharp as you did in San Diego a couple weeks ago.”

“Thank you,” Matt replied, beaming at the praise.

“David and Joshua, I think the two of you could probably play college ball now, if you were old enough to graduate,” Hancock said.

“My dad wouldn’t go for it,” Josh replied. “I want to finish out high school in December the way Matt and Dave are going to do, but Dad won’t let me. He insists I take my time and enjoy my senior year of high school.”

“Yeah, Matt and I are planning on early graduation and getting a head start in college,” Dave added.

“Where are you considering, David?” Hancock asked.

“I hope I get a scholarship to go to Penn State with Matt,” Dave said. “I have serious interest from Syracuse, Rutgers, Maryland, Temple and Virginia too. I’ll probably visit three or four of them, in addition to Penn State.”

“Gary, how about you?” Hancock asked. “What are your college plans?”

“I have no idea yet,” Gary said. “I’m starting tenth grade and really haven’t thought that far ahead. Coach tells me how great Penn State is. I guess I’ll consider them... and Boston College too.”

“Why Boston College?” Hancock asked.

“They were so nice to me when I visited with my family on Senior Day last fall,” Gary explained. “My brother Greg...” I saw my young protégé take a deep breath and struggle to control his emotions.

“Gary’s older brother Greg would have been a senior at BC last fall,” I said. I could feel my own eyes tearing a little. I managed to keep my emotions under control. “Greg was a year ahead me in high school. He was a teammate and a good friend. A drunk driver T-boned Greg’s car one Saturday night when he was a senior in high school, killing him. Greg had accepted the scholarship BC offered him, but he never got to play for them. It was a really great thing that Coach Spaziani did last fall when he invited Gary and his family to join the BC team for what should have been Greg’s final college game.”

“I know Coach Spaziani,” Hancock said. “He is a quality coach. This story doesn’t surprise me at all.”

“Those of us left playing football try to remember Greg each week before we go out to play,” I added. “If you check inside my helmet before a game, you will find I have Greg’s number, ‘82’ written on the inside of my helmet. I know Ed Fritz and Jeremy North both still do that. I think Zack Hayes out at Green Bay does too.”

“Really, that is a great tribute to a fallen comrade,” Hancock commented. “I’d forgotten that Hayes, North and Fritz were from your high school. I can see why you feel comfortable training with the young men here. I’m impressed. I have one last question for you, Kyle. Wouldn’t you do better if you were with a college level quarterback?”

“We had two college quarterbacks last summer,” Matt said. “Ed and Chip both did the workouts with us then.”

“Chip?” Hancock asked.

“Chip Brinton,” I said.

“Brinton? It certainly worked out for him spending a summer working here with you, didn’t it?” Hancock asked. “He chased Nicholson out of State College and put his mark on your team.”

“It worked out for Chip,” I agreed.

“I want to thank all of you for taking time to talk with me and letting me film your practice,” Hancock said. “I have enough here to make a good segment. I expect it should air tonight or tomorrow.”

“Thank you for coming, Mr. Hancock,” I said, shaking his hand.

“Good work Stevens,” Hancock said as my friends and I turned away and started back to the staff area. “I’ll follow you back to your studio. You and I can sit down there and turn this raw video into a proper report.”

“Thanks, that would be great Mr. Hancock,” Rob replied. All of us gave Rob a wave before we left, except Cody.

“Hey bro, see you later,” Cody shouted as we left. That drew a funny look from Hancock. Apparently he never put two and two together and figured out that his producer, Rob Stevens was related to Cody Stevens, one of the subjects of his story.

The report aired later Sunday evening on Sports Center. I didn’t know until bedtime, when I did my daily e-mail to Penny. I had a strong feeling of déjà vu when I saw the address for e-mail in my inbox – kokeefe352@psu.edu

To: kmartin87@psu.edu

From: kokeefe352@psu.edu

Subject: ESPN Story

I saw you on ESPN tonight. That was a great thing you did for that scout. I can see all of you – Matt, Dave, Cody, Josh, Abby and you – at the pool working on that young boy. That’s the boyfriend I remember.

I hope you’re having a good summer. I still think of you sometimes.

Your friend (hopefully)

Kelly

It was nice of Kelly to write. I hoped she wasn’t expecting more to come from this contact after eight months of silence. I didn’t need ex-girlfriend problems to add to all the other things I had to deal with this fall.

On Monday morning Will announced the changes to the aquatics staff to get ready for my and Dustin's departure for college later that week. Adam Zimmerman was swapped to the lake to take Dustin's place. Dustin would work at the pool for the week. Patrick would run the pool in my place when I left at noon on Thursday. Our best two CITs this summer, Lucas Pfeiffer and Jon DeMarco, were offered paid positions for the rest of the summer. Jon and Lucas would work at the pool.

My last week of camp was relaxed, with all the extra help I had at the pool. It was bittersweet too. I was looking forward to seeing Penny again. That would be wonderful. After seven seasons on staff, this was it. I loved doing this but I knew I wouldn't be coming back again, possibly ever. Maybe someday, if I had a teaching job, I could come back for part of the summer, until I had to get ready for football camp. After all, if I was teaching I would be coaching football too.

I packed almost everything in my car Wednesday night after working out. I started Thursday morning right. I covered my final Polar Bear swim. I said good bye to Rose and Abby after breakfast. Three short hours later I was saying good bye to my staff and Will.

Dustin and I headed over the camp office together. John Holloway rose from his desk and shook our hands when we stepped into his office.

“It’s been a pleasure, men,” John said. “Dustin, I’m looking forward to seeing you again next summer.”

“You bet, Mr. Holloway,” Dustin replied. “I’m working here as long as I can.”

“Kyle,” John said before taking a breath. “I guess this is it, you won’t be back, will you?” I shook my head no as I struggled with my emotions. He gave me a hug as he added, “It’s been a pleasure, Kyle. I’m going to miss you.”

“You’ve been a great boss, John,” I agreed as I hugged him back. “I’ll miss you and this place more than I can tell you.”

“You do your best, wherever you end up next summer,” John said as we separated. “I’ll be watching and cheering for you, whatever team you end up on.”

“I’ll try to stop by and visit next summer, if I’m able,” I promised. “Bye and good luck on the rest of the summer.”

Dustin and I said good bye outside the office, before heading to our cars. Both of us headed south for Lancaster and home. I gave Dustin a wave as I pulled onto the bypass at the northern end of Lancaster. He continued south through the city for Drumore and his home.

I gave Penny a call on my cell phone while I was stopped at one of the many traffic lights along the Lincoln Highway East.

“Hi honey, where are you at?” Penny asked when she answered my call.

“I’m across from Rockvale Square,” I replied. “I’ll be home in about ten minutes.”

“Did you have lunch?” Penny asked.

“No”

“Come straight here,” Penny said. “I’ll make lunch for both of us.”

“See you soon.”

Twelve minutes later I pulled up in front of my house. I left all my things in my car and jogged down the street to Penny’s house. She met me on the front lawn.

“God, I missed you, Kyle!” Penny proclaimed as she hugged me.

“I missed you too,” I replied as I tried to savor the feelings of my lover pressed to my body. “It’s so wonderful to hold you, sweetie.”

“Let’s head inside,” Penny suggested. “I have lunch nearly ready.”

“That sounds wonderful,” I agreed. We strolled in Penny’s back door holding hands. I had a seat at the table while Penny finished off our meal. Penny assembled club sandwiches for us. We had chips, iced tea and ice cream with our sandwiches.

“What’s the first thing you want to do this afternoon?” I asked as Penny cleared the table when we finished eating.

“I want to jump your bones,” Penny purred. “It’s been too long. I’m sick of ‘Little Kyle’. I need the real thing.”

“How about if we settle for starting laundry before you jump me?” I countered. “I do have to get rid of a week’s smelly laundry.”

“Is your house empty?” Penny asked.

“Mom, Dad, Andy and Liz should all be at work,” I replied. “The little kids should be at day care. We should have a big empty house, all to ourselves.”

“Let’s go, loverboy,” Penny said. “The clock is ticking.”

We headed back to my car. Penny helped me carry my bag of laundry inside and down to the basement. Penny was pulling clothes off both of us as soon as we got downstairs. I tried valiantly to resist my temptress and begin my washing, but I didn't make it. We made love fast and furiously, partially quenching our desires.

We cuddled for a bit before getting out of bed and starting my laundry. Our second time together was slower and much more satisfying. The first load of wash went in the dryer and the second load went in the washer. Penny and I went back to bed. We cuddled and put on a movie while we waited for the laundry.

Penny and I were still down in the basement at five o'clock, waiting on the last load of my laundry, when we listened as the small thundering herd arrived home from day care. We heard them enter the house and stampede for the family room, calling Unka Ky! Unka Ky!" as they searched for me.

"Where's Unka Ky?" they chanted when they didn't find me in the family room. They clattered through the kitchen and down the basement steps. "Unka Ky here!" "Kyle home!" and "Penny here too!" echoed as the boys charged down the steps, climbed in bed with us and smothered us with kisses and hugs.

"I hope the boys didn't interrupt a welcome home," Mom teased from the top of the steps.

"No, Penny and I finished welcoming each other an hour ago," I replied. "We're hanging out down here until I finish my laundry."

"That's good," Mom teased back. "I raised a thoughtful son. I'm glad you didn't stick your poor old mom with your dirty laundry."

"I have done my own laundry for the past three years," I insisted.

"Relax, Sharon," Penny teased. "I'm making sure Kyle behaves properly."

"Good for you, dear," Mom said before heading upstairs to start dinner.

Penny and I played with the little kids until dinner time. I had prearranged with Mom, Dad and Penny for Penny to stay over and eat dinner with us. Penny headed home to clean up and get dressed for our night out with our friends. I did the same.

Noah, Connor and Hunter were still fascinated by my preparations for my date. The twins especially peppered me with questions about shaving, deodorant, and how to dress for a date. They didn't see anything like this from their dad (or older brother). Being a teen dad put a severe crimp in Andy's love life.

I met Penny at her house a few minutes before eight o'clock. Tammy stopped by promptly at eight to pick Penny and me up. Penny and Kathy graciously agreed to sit in the back of the mini-van. A college linebacker and a tall college wide receiver have no business trying to squeeze into the back of a mini-van. Hal sat up front beside his girlfriend. Tammy had lost the draw a couple weeks ago when my friends planned my pluck my bar "cherry" with this belated twenty-first birthday celebration. She was the designated driver for our crew.

Tammy headed down Route 30 for Lancaster. Fifteen minutes later we were pulling up to a big boxy night club called Entourage on Route 23, a half mile east of the bypass. Many cars were pulling in and parking as we arrived. We had to wait in a line at the door to get carded and admitted.

"ID?" the bouncer asked gruffly as I stepped up to the front of the line. I handed him my wallet with my driver's license showing. "Go in," he growled.

I gave him a big smile and said, "It's my first night in a bar since my birthday. Thanks for carding me. It was fun."

"Don't give me no trouble," he snapped back.

"I know, party in moderation," I answered. "I've learned that lesson already."

Penny, then Kathy, Jeremy, Tammy and Hal followed me past the bouncer. We paid our cover charge and found seats inside the big dance room. The night's DJ was already spinning some tunes.

"What would you like to drink?" the cute waitress asked soon after we found our seats. She looked directly at me. I guess I sat in the seat she started taking orders from.

"What kinds of beer do you have on tap?" I asked.

"No... no..." my friends insisted.

"You're trying a Frozen Gumby for your first legal drink, honey," Penny declared.

"A Gumby? What the hell is a Frozen Gumby?" I responded.

"It's one of our specialty drinks," the waitress answered. "It is made with melon liquor and vodka topped with a refreshing lemon-lime slushy."

"I don't know..." I stammered.

"You got to do it, Kyle," Jeremy said.

"You'll love it," Kathy added.

“Be kind to me, guys,” I responded. “I don’t want to get kicked off my team before the first practice. That would be a bad way to start off my captaincy.”

“We’ll take good care of you, Kyle,” Tammy promised. The others echoed her thoughts. I agreed to try the Frozen Gumby. The others placed their drink orders too.

My friends were right, the Frozen Gumby was pretty good. We enjoyed our drinks and listened to the music before taking the floor to dance. The mix of music was eclectic. They played anything from the classic rockers from the 70s up to current releases. Rock, pop, Motown, a few country tunes, they played them all. It was a fun and lively mix.

I managed to limit myself to just two more mixed drinks in the evening. It was great to be free to drink without worrying about who might catch me. I had a bit of a mellow buzz going, which was nice. I enjoyed dancing with Penny. That made my night.

Later in the evening as most of us were winding down, Jeremy asked, “Are we ready for this? Our last season before we find out if the NFL wants us?”

“They’ll want you, man,” Hal replied. “They’ll want you too, Kyle.”

“The NFL is going to come knocking for you too, Hal,” Jeremy added. “They need top notch kickers with your accuracy and range.”

“Maybe,” Hal conceded. “Robbie warned me about breaking into the NFL as a kicker.”

“Robbie?” Jeremy and I asked simultaneously.

“Robbie Gould, you know… the Chicago Bears kicker,” Hal explained.

“How do you know Robbie Gould?” I asked. Gould was a Penn State player from the early 2000s who turned himself into one of the better kickers in the NFL.

“Coach Schiano brought Robbie in this spring to help me with my kicking,” Hal explained.

“How does your coach know Robbie Gould?” Jeremy asked.

“It’s partly Coach’s Penn State connection,” Hal said. “My coach and Kyle’s coach are friends and were grad assistants together at Penn State, where Robbie went to school. Coach Schiano also still has contacts from the three years he worked for the Bears. Coach used his contacts to ask Robbie to come to New Jersey to help me out this spring.”

“That’s cool,” I said. “Did Gould have any good advice for you?”

“Yes, I think so,” Hal said. “We talked a lot about the mental aspects of kicking. I have a much better understanding of what I’m doing now. With my workout program, my leg is stronger than it’s ever been. I believe I’m going to have a good season.”

“That’s cool,” I agreed.

“Why wouldn’t you get a try at the NFL if you do as well as you expect?” Jeremy asked.

“Robbie and I talked about what it takes for a kicker to make it in the NFL,” Hal said. “Almost no kickers get drafted. They have to go through a few training camps before they get a shot. Robbie went to training camps with New England and Baltimore before he played for the Bears. Even that wasn’t a regular gig. He was the fill-in when their regular kicker got hurt. He just stuck with the team when he played well.”

“It was like that for David Akers too,” I commented. “Akers was with three or four teams before he stuck with the Eagles. He has a bunch of Pro Bowls now to show he’s one of the best in the NFL.”

“You gotta try, Hal,” Jeremy said. “You’ll kick yourself for the rest of your life if you don’t try.”

“Jeremy’s right, sweetie,” Tammy added.

“You’re going to be in grad school in a year, honey,” Hal said. “How are we going to afford that if I don’t have a job more than a couple months? I don’t know if that’s what I want for our future.”

“I think you should, sweetie,” Tammy said. “We’ll talk more later.”

“I guess you and I don’t have to wonder about that, do we Kath?” Penny commented. “We know what our guys will be doing a year from now.”

“Don’t count too heavily on it girls,” Jeremy said. “One injury and that dream could be history.”

“Yeah, you have to have a Plan B,” I added. “I’ll have my teaching degree and can go straight into the classroom and coaching if I don’t make it in the NFL.”

“I’ll probably go to grad school,” Jeremy said. “A Masters in Kinesiology will be better than a Bachelors degree.”

“I have a second option too,” I said. “Coach Burton offered me a coaching position at Penn State. All I have to do is ask for it and he’ll hire me.”

“That’s excellent, Kyle,” Jeremy said. “That’s got to be tempting to consider. Skip all the training and pounding from football and go straight into coaching at a national powerhouse.”

“Coaching at Penn State is the backup to the backup,” I said. “I’d never accept the job in State College unless Penny didn’t get into veterinary school. If I’m not in the NFL, next year you will find me somewhere around Philly, close to my honey.”

That earned me a kiss on the cheek. “That’s sweet, Kyle.” Penny said.

“Is it time to head out?” I asked. “I’ve enjoyed this evening but I’m ready to head to bed.”

“Me too,” my bed partner agreed.

“Aw, c’mon, one for the road, Kyle,” Jeremy teased. The rest of my friends encouraged me. I tried to demur but they wouldn’t let me go until I had one more Frozen Gumby. It was good, but I was more than a little drunk now. They helped me out to the mini-van and poured me into one of the middle seats.

Tammy dropped Penny and me off at my house. It was a quarter to one in the morning and the house was dark. We headed downstairs as quietly as possible to my bedroom lair. Penny and I managed to satisfy each other in spite of the alcohol. We dropped into a deep, peaceful slumber after our climaxes.

My house was silent when I woke up the next morning. I had a headache from the drinking, but not too bad a one. I took two aspirin, hydrated myself and took a long hot shower to ease the pain. Penny joined me part way through the shower.

Nothing funny happened in the shower, other than we washed each other. The headaches along with having sex four times the previous day had lessened the urgency of our needs. We dressed and headed upstairs for breakfast. I made French Toast for the two of us.

We headed for Gettysburg after breakfast. After a year of studying Gettysburg and the Civil War, I was anxious to visit the battlefield before school started. Penny was a history buff too and was willing to indulge my interests.

Our tour started at the first day’s battle area. I stared across the fields at the approach Heth’s Confederates used as they marched on the town before they bumped into Buford’s cavalrymen. We stood at the base of Culp’s Hill where Early and Ewell debated attacking Culp’s Hill on July 1st. What if? There were so many possibilities on this battlefield.

After lunch, we went over to Confederate Avenue and stood where Evander Law’s troops lined up to start Longstreet’s attack on July 2nd at the southern end of the battlefield.

Penny and I hiked all over Big Round Top and Little Round Top following the course of the attacks.

We toured Devil's Den, the Wheatfield and the Peach Orchard. We walked the route of the 21st Mississippi Regiment's attack, finishing at the Trostle Farm where the Mississippians slaughtered the 9th Massachusetts Battery.

Penny and I hiked across the field from the Lee Monument, following the route of Pickett's Charge until we reached the High Water Mark by the copse of trees. We retreated back across the field the same way the defeated Confederates had retreated after their repulse.

Penny and I ended the day at the new visitor's center. The restored cyclorama painting was so much more vivid than I remembered from my visits in high school. We headed downstairs again and started touring the exhibits. We turned a corner and ran smack into a good friend.

"Cam! How's it going?" I said as I sidestepped to avoid bumping into my friend.

"Kyle! It good to see you," Cameron answered. "Imagine the odds of a history major bumping into a future history teacher here."

I chuckled and agreed, "Yes, what are the odds?"

"Yeah, I guess they are pretty good aren't they?" Cameron agreed.

"I'd like you to meet my girlfriend, Penny Edwards," I said. Cameron smiled and shook Penny's hand. "Penny, this is Cameron Miller. Cam and I were neighbors when we stayed in the dorms our first two years of college. Cam is a history major. We've shared more than a few classes in the last three years."

"It's very nice to meet you, Cameron," Penny replied.

"Are you taking Military History 454 this fall, Kyle?" Cameron asked.

"Of course I am," I agreed. "I suppose I'll see you sitting in the seat beside mine when classes start in a few weeks."

"You know it," Cam agreed. "I wouldn't miss a chance to take one of Dr. Brennan's courses."

"I know," I agreed. "I can't wait to see Dr. Brennan again." I turned to Penny and explained, "Dr. Brennan is one of the best professors at Penn State. I love her courses."

“You don’t have to wait to see her,” Cameron said. “I’m here helping her with a two day staff ride she did for a bunch of army officers. The officers left about fifteen minutes ago to get back to D. C. She’s right around the corner. Do you want to see her?”

“Hell yeah,” I agreed. Cameron took Penny and me around the corner. Dr. Brennan was about fifty feet down, staring at a display of nineteenth century rifled muskets.

“Hey Doc, look who I found,” Cameron called out.

“Kyle! You’re my favorite non history major!” Dr. Brennan teased. “Have I brought you over to our side yet?”

“Not yet,” I said. “I’m still working on becoming a history teacher. Someone has to teach the high school kids basic history so they’re ready to take your courses when they get to college... and I still have that thing for football. I’m not ready to give that up.”

“I’ll keep working on you,” Dr. Brennan teased. “Who’s the lovely lady accompanying you?”

“Forgive my manners,” I replied. “This is my girlfriend, Penny Edwards.” Turning to my lover, I added, “Penny, this is Dr. Katherine Brennan, my favorite professor.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Miss Edwards,” Dr. Brennan said. The two shook hands. “You know brown nosing your professor won’t get you good grades next semester. You still have to take the tests in my class.”

“I never doubted that at all,” I agreed.

“What are you and your lovely girlfriend doing here?” Dr. Brennan asked.

“We spent the day touring the battlefield,” I explained. “We decided to wrap up with a visit here.”

“Do the two of you have plans for dinner?” Dr. Brennan asked. We shook our heads no. “Why don’t the two of you join Cameron and me? We are heading out to dinner soon.”

I glanced over at Penny. She gave me a smile and nodded yes. “That would be great, Dr. Brennan.”

“Good! We’re going to the Farnsworth House and I’m treating,” Dr. Brennan pronounced. “If you’re ready to go, follow us.”

I followed Dr. Brennan back to town. We parked in the lot behind the Farnsworth House Inn. I had heard about the Farnsworth House. It had an excellent reputation for good food but I never had a chance to confirm that before that day.

We ended up outside in the garden. It was a beautiful setting. Dr. Brennan suggested we order the Game Pie. It was an individual casserole with turkey, pheasant and duck mixed with mushrooms, bacon, red currant jelly and long grain and wild rice covered with a pastry crust. She was right. It was delicious. Dr. Brennan ordered wine for everyone that perfectly complimented the casserole. She treated us to dessert before we left.

“Thank you so much for the meal, Dr. Brennan,” I said as we reached our cars. “I appreciate the favor.”

“It was my pleasure, Kyle,” Dr. Brennan. “I guess I’ll be seeing you around campus soon, Kyle.”

“The freshmen football players reported today,” I said. “I have to be back on campus on Sunday afternoon.”

“Maybe I’ll see you next week,” Dr. Brennan said.

“Only if you look for me on the football field,” I replied. “I will be pretty busy for the next two weeks. I will see you in three weeks in class.”

“Good bye, Kyle. Good bye Penny,” Dr. Brennan said. “Come on Cameron. I’ll drive you back to your car so you can get home.”

“See you, Cam,” I added as they climbed into her car. Penny and I climbed into my little VW.

“I see why you like her so much, Kyle,” Penny said after we closed the doors. “She is a treat.”

“She is simply the best professor I’ve ever had,” I said. “I love her classes.”

“I can see that,” Penny agreed. I headed back to Lancaster County.

We got home too late to see the twins or Hunter before they went to bed. Penny and I hung out with Andy, Mom and Dad for awhile before heading downstairs for the night. We made love a couple times before spooning and going to sleep.

Penny and I slept late Saturday morning. I made breakfast for my lover, my nephews and little brother, as usual. The three kids never missed a chance to enjoy my cooking. I didn’t mind. The boys were cute and I couldn’t spend enough time with them.

Penny helped me pack my things and load my car in the afternoon. We cleaned up before dinner. I took Penny to Red Lobster before we headed for the movie theater in Millersville. The movie was fun. Penny and I enjoyed ourselves on our date.

Penny spent Saturday night with me. We made love a couple times. Post coitus, Penny asked, "What time do we get up for church tomorrow?"

"Are you coming with me?" I asked. I was pleased but surprised.

"Of course," Penny said nonchalantly. "I've gone to your church quite a few times this summer. I like Reverend Hollinger. He preaches excellent sermons."

"I understand that," I agreed. "Rev is great."

Penny came to church with my family on Sunday morning. Since the family pew was full, we sat off on our own. Rev's did his usual remarkable job with the sermon. We headed through the greeting line at the end of the service.

"Kyle, it's wonderful to see you," Rev said as he pumped my hand up and down vigorously. "I guess you being here today means you're heading back to college soon."

"In about an hour," I agreed. "As soon as I get lunch at home."

"Penny, how is my favorite visitor?" Rev said as he shook my lover's hand. "Is it too soon to ask if you're interested in joining our congregation?"

"I would, Reverend," Penny replied. "... but I probably shouldn't decide that until after I graduate. Who knows where Kyle and I will be next spring."

"Good point," Rev agreed. "Good luck with your football season, Kyle. I'll be cheering for you as I watch on TV this fall. I'll see you next week, Penny."

"I'll be here," Penny agreed. The two of us headed back to my car.

"Would you really consider switching your membership to this church?" I asked as we climbed into my car.

"I would, if I could get here more often than half a dozen times during the school year," Penny answered. "It seems silly to change now, since everything about our life is up in the air after next May."

"We'll take things a visit at a time until next spring," I agreed. "We'll figure things out when we know our destinations."

"I know wherever we end up," Penny said, "it will be wonderful if we're together." She leaned over and gave me a kiss.

(To be continued)

Chapter 65

I pulled into the parking lot beside Pollock Commons a few minutes before four o'clock. I grabbed my key from Housing and Residential Life before heading back to the Nittany Apartments. The place was buzzing as forty-four football players moved into their homes-away-from-home for the next nine months.

I grabbed a luggage cart and loaded it with my things before pushing it to my apartment. Virtually every player greeted me with a hearty, "Hey Coach, welcome back," "Hey, there's our hero," or something similar. I acknowledged everyone as I headed for Apartment 12.

I parked the cart by my door and picked up the first box. I literally bumped into Damian in the doorway as I tried to go in and he opened the door and tried to go out. "Hey, Coach. Welcome back to campus," Damian said.

"Have you been here long?" I asked.

"About an hour," Damian said.

"Is Trevor here yet? How about Chip?"

"Chip has two more days of classes," Damian explained. "He didn't have a choice except to be here. I haven't seen Trevor."

"I guess we'll run into him eventually," I said. "I'm moving my stuff in now."

"I have to move my car over to the East Parking Deck," Damian said. "I'll give you a hand when I get back."

"Thanks, man," I said. I carried my boxes and bags inside, distributing them to the kitchen, living room and my bedroom, as appropriate. Damian rejoined me a few minutes later. We worked about ten minutes before the third corner of the leadership triumvirate appeared.

"Big guy! You're back!" Damian proclaimed.

"I am," Trevor agreed as he and Damian exchanged bear hugs. "Hey Coach, my hero!" Trevor exclaimed when it was my turn.

"Don't you start," I protested. "I had enough of that hero crap last week."

"That's a good thing you did," Trevor countered. "Anyway, what did you expect? A feature on Sports Center – of course it's a big story. You're going to get that all season."

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” I replied. “It really wasn’t that big a deal.”

“Tell me about what happened,” Trevor insisted. I related a bare bones version of the story of the rescue, making sure to credit Matt, Dave, Josh and Cody. Damian and Trevor knew them from their visits to campus.

“That’s quite a story, Coach,” Trevor said. “You may disagree with the word ‘hero’ but not many people will agree with you. When you pull an unconscious boy from the bottom of the pool and he lives, most people are going to consider it heroic.”

“I’m just proud of my staff,” I replied. “They kept their heads and did exactly what I wanted done.”

“As did you,” Damian said.

“I guess,” I admitted. “Let’s get this last load inside, Damian. We can help Trevor after that.”

Metal clattered together as Damian picked up the last box. “What’s in this, Coach?”

“You’ll like that one,” I replied. “My mom and dad gave me a complete set of pots and pans for my birthday.”

“Cool!” Damian exclaimed. “I can’t wait to put these babies to work.” Damian happily carried that box to the kitchen while I carried my box to my bedroom. We tackled Trevor’s boxes next. It took about twenty minutes to get my buddy’s things moved into our apartment.

“Where’s Chip at?” Trevor asked as we finished. “I know he’s around somewhere. His shit is scattered all over the apartment.”

“I saw him when I got here,” Damian said. “He headed over to the Lasch Building. He wants to get in some more study on Nebraska’s defense. He’s worried about them.”

“He should be,” I agreed. “They’re going to be nasty. But we can’t overlook Kentucky or Temple. They will put up a fight too.”

“Yeah, they will,” Damian agreed.

We finished moving Trevor’s things into the apartment around five o’clock. We spent the extra time until the team’s supper talking about our summer experiences. Chip returned from his video study session just before supper time. The four of us joined the stream of juniors and seniors as we headed across the Nittany Apartment grounds to Pollock Commons. Everyone was in a great mood. It reminded me of our camp staff reunion at the start of the summer. This time I was reuniting with my football family.

“Who is going to quiz the freshmen after dinner?” Damian asked.

“I found some good questions for them,” I offered.

“Good, you’re doing it,” Trevor said.

“I thought it would be better if we double teamed them,” I replied. “One of us can ask them the question and the other can educate them with the answer... or we could each take one of the three questions I have and do both question and answer.”

“I like the second idea better,” Trevor said.

“Dibs on the Pattee question,” Damian interjected.

“I’ll do the Hartranft question,” I suggested. “You do the Beaver Stadium question first.”

“OK,” Trevor agreed. After a pause he looked at me and asked, “What’s the Hartranft question? I have no idea what that one is about.”

“It’s an easy question, but hard to answer,” I replied. “I’m going to ask who Hartranft Hall is named for.”

“I have no idea even though I lived in it for two years,” Trevor said.

“I don’t know that one either,” Damian admitted.

“You will when I’m done with the freshmen,” I promised. We joined the crowd of underclassmen going into Pollock Commons and followed the group to the Training Table. We greeted our friends and teammates as we joined the serving line.

I spotted GJ DeLuca at a table with eight freshmen. I knew they had to be his kids from the fourth floor of Hartranft Hall. Ben Witte had six freshmen crowded around him in line for dinner. That would be our third floor Hartranft crew. Joe Cleveland arrived a few minutes later with the final six freshmen. They were housed on third floor of Mifflin Hall. GJ, Joe and Ben were our resident assistants in the dorms this year.

Trevor, Damian, Chip and I went through the line for our dinner and then went looking for a table. Christian, Denzell, Shawn and their new roommate, Dave McCall had room at their table. Dave had taken GJ DeLuca’s spot in their apartment when GJ became an RA.

We talked and caught up on each other’s summers as we enjoyed dinner. I got a lot of ribbing, not unexpected, about my rescue earlier in the summer and all the publicity it had generated. Trevor, Damian and I ate quickly and took our trays up to the cleaning station.

The three of us circulated around the room, greeting teammates and letting the leadership group know they had a meeting at our apartment after Coach Burton's team meeting that evening. Beer would be provided.

Trevor, Damian and I watched the team's progress with dinner. When it looked like everyone was done, I gave Trevor and Damian a nod. We strode to the front of the cafeteria and motioned for silence. I almost put the scout sign up but caught myself. The room took about a minute to get quiet.

Trevor announced, "Would all freshmen please join us at the front of the room?" Damian and I watched to make sure the freshmen who started classes in January joined them.

"Davis twins, this includes the two of you," Damian said when he spotted Ian and Troy still sitting at a table.

"Markovich, don't slouch," I commanded when I noticed Mark trying to get out of view. "Get up here with the other freshmen."

When all twenty were assembled in the front of the dining hall, I began. "Black shoes, plain uniform with no name on the back and a white helmet with a blue stripe – that's Penn State football. You stand here today thinking you're worthy of the name Nittany Lions." I stared hard at the group and demanded, "Are you worthy?" I received head nods and a couple weak yeses in response.

"Are you worthy?" Trevor demanded. "Jenkins, who is Beaver Stadium named for?"

Omar Jenkins, one of our new defensive ends stammered, "Umm... uh... somebody named Beaver?"

"Somebody named Beaver?" Trevor responded. "You have got to be kidding me! You think you should be a Nittany Lion and you know nothing. James A. Beaver was a prominent lawyer in this county. He raised and served as colonel to the 148th Pennsylvania Volunteers in the Civil War. Colonel Beaver was a trustee and acting president of our university. He also served twice as governor of our state. That, gentlemen, is who James Addams Beaver was."

"Markovich," I demanded. "You live in Hartranft Hall, don't you?"

"Yes," Mark answered.

"Who is Hartranft Hall named for?" I solicited.

Mark pursed his lips, let out a sigh and said, "Some general or governor or something. I don't know, Coach."

“Not a bad guess,” I allowed. “James Frederick Hartranft was a governor and a general. He grew up outside Pottstown. He raised two regiments. The first was the 4th Pennsylvania Volunteers, a three month regiment at the beginning of the Civil War. When they went home he raised the 51st Pennsylvania Volunteers. Colonel Hartranft served in numerous battles, rising to brigade and then division command by the time of the campaign around Richmond and Petersburg in 1864. He ended the war with the rank of Major General. James Hartranft won the Medal of Honor for his service at the First Battle of Bull Run. After the war he served two terms as governor of our state. That is who James Hartranft was and who your dormitory honors.”

“Turner, it’s your turn,” Damian said. Grant Turner, the first year tailback from Williamsport cringed a bit and then steeled himself for his ordeal. “Who is the Pattee Library named for?”

Grant shook his head sadly. “I don’t know. Enlighten me”

Damian explained, “Pattee Library is named after Professor Fred Lewis Pattee, longtime professor of American Literature here. Professor Pattee’s other claim to fame is that he wrote our university’s alma mater.”

“It’s a great song,” Trevor said.

“Wouldn’t everyone like to hear it?” I asked to the audience. I tried not to laugh as the freshmen cringed. They knew what was next.

“That’s right freshmen,” Damian announced gleefully. “It’s time for you to sing the Penn State Alma Mater. Let’s go!”

They stared at the floor... at each other... anywhere but at Trevor, Damian or me. I let them squirm for about thirty seconds before taking over.

“You think you deserve to wear our black shoes, white pants and plain helmets?” I demanded. “If you want dinner tomorrow I expect to hear the Alma Mater sung with all four verses to the satisfaction of your teammates. Is that clear?”

The group all nodded their understanding. Coach Burton took over from there. “Thank you, captains. We’ve had our entertainment for the evening. It’s time to get to work. We have a team meeting in the Lasch Building auditorium at seven o’clock. Be on time.”

“On time means five minutes early, everybody,” I added. The crowd of football players got up and lined up at the cleaning station to bus their dishes and trays. Damian, Trevor and I went straight out since we had done our dishes already.

We were the first people in the auditorium when we arrived. Damian grabbed a seat in the rear row immediately.

“Sorry, buddy,” I said. “We should sit down near the front.”

“Yeah, Coach is right,” Trevor agreed. “We’re the leaders. We have to set the example for the group.”

“Being a leader can be a pain in the ass,” he commented as he sat down beside Trevor and me.

“Yes, it can be,” I agreed. “It’s also very rewarding when everything works and you know you’re responsible for it happening.”

The team members followed standard church seating protocol as they arrived – sit as far from the pulpit as possible. That was OK. Trevor, Damian and I were setting the right tone. We’re engaged and active participants in our team, not hiding somewhere in the back of the room.

Two minutes before seven o’clock Coach Burton walked to the front and signaled for silence. The lights went down as he announced, “Welcome to the Nittany Lions football team everyone. It’s pleasure to see all 109 of you in one place this evening. You are members of a good football team.”

The projector came on and showed a clip of me streaking down the field against Tennessee on a play action pass to score my second touchdown in the Capital One Bowl last January. The team cheered the play. “Good play, Coach,” Coach Burton commented.

A clip from the same game came next. Greg Nowicki fired through the gap between Tennessee’s two defensive tackles, and blasted into the middle linebacker, knocking the linebacker to the ground. Damian thundered through the hole, dodged past Greg and rumbled downfield. Damian ran over the free safety when the guy tried to tackle Damian.

“That had to hurt,” Coach Burton commented. The other defensive backs finally gang tackled Damian fifteen yards downfield. The clip drew extended cheers from our team.

Another clip showed Trevor sacking Nick Wilson from Michigan. Another clip showed Bill Daugherty and Trevor sandwiching Illinois’ quarterback for a sack. A clip of Josh Bruno knifing into the backfield and dropping Minnesota’s tailback for a three yard loss drew cheers.

I was a little confused by what Coach Burton was showing us. Usually he showed us clips of great plays to start the meeting, but they were clips of feats performed by our departed stars. Was the coach trying to tell us we were a great team already? That didn’t seem right. The message at the start of camp should be ‘We’ve got a lot of work to do.’

Shawn Byrd's interception of a Boston College pass was featured next. Things became clearer to me with the next clip. It was one of Chip's interceptions against USC last fall. The cheering stopped.

Coach showed a clip of a Cincinnati cornerback intercepting a ball in front of me and then maintaining possession while I tried to strip it away.

"Nice pick," Coach Burton commented.

It still stung to watch that play. The next clip showed a big USC tackle hitting Chip in his blind side and driving him into the ground for a big sack.

"Oww... I know that one hurt," Coach Burton commented.

Coach concluded the video replay with a clip of the final play of the Michigan State game. Damian had taken a check down pass at Michigan State's 10 yard line. He bulled his way ahead, trying to drag half the Spartan team across the goal line. The five guys finally dropped Damian on the three yard line as time expired in the game. We lost that game 35-31.

We sat silent for a few seconds, sobered by the reminder of our fallibility. Coach Burton intoned, "On to Phoenix!" He paused dramatically for about five seconds. "Maybe we have a little work to do before they anoint us the national champions."

Now that he had our undivided attention, Coach Burton launched into his standard talk about our training schedule, workouts, video study, position meetings and team meetings for the next two weeks. He reminded everyone about our sexual conduct, drug, alcohol and personal conduct policies. I paid attention, even though none of what he talked about was different from what I heard the past three years.

Trevor, Damian and I reminded the other team leaders about the meeting at our apartment. Josh Bruno, Shawn Byrd, Christian Hunsecker, Greg Nowicki, Tanner Riggs, Dave McCall, Joe Ricci, Charlie Taylor, Chip Brinton, Jared Cantrell, Kenyatta Jackson, GJ DeLuca, Ben Witte and Joe Cleveland assembled at our apartment about fifteen minutes after Coach Burton's team meeting ended. Trevor, Damian and I handed beer out to all who wished to partake. Christian and GJ were the only two to refuse the offer.

"Thanks for coming tonight," I said when everyone got quiet. "We have a lot to do over the next few weeks and months if we are going to get to Phoenix. Everyone here will play a crucial part in making sure our team operates at peak efficiency this season.

"I'd like to welcome GJ, Ben and Joe to the leadership group. I would like to thank you for accepting the RA jobs. You have a critical role in helping our underclassmen learn to balance football, scholastics and a social life. God knows, that is stressful, especially given the amount of time they are expected to devote to our team. Make sure you let the freshmen know that Coach Paterno is available to help line up tutors, counsel them on

time management, or just lend them an ear. I know Coach Paterno helped me get my head on straight.

“Chip, Josh, Shawn, Greg, Christian and Tanner will be in charge of looking after your position group of players this fall. Make sure their academics go well, study to get good grades, that they practice hard and that they learn the playbook and that they stay out of trouble.”

“You named the seniors, Coach,” Jared asked. “What do you want the juniors to do?”

“You will help the leader in your position group,” I replied. “Joe, you’ll help Josh; Dave, you’ll help Shawn; Charlie, you’ll help Damian; and so on. All of you are here to assist your leader this fall. You’re also here so our team has a leadership group organized and ready to go next spring when Trevor, Damian, the other seniors and I are done. This was Tyler Madden’s idea, and it’s a good one. I’m passing it on to you. You do the same thing next spring and bring in the best sophomores to lead the following year when you’re done.”

“How about Thon?” Dave asked. “Do you want me to run it again?”

“No, I don’t, Dave,” I answered. “I want you to serve as the advisor and overseer to next year’s Thon chairman. Trevor, Damian and I will pick one of the sophomores to take that task this year. I like the idea of using the Thon chairmanship as a leadership development tool. We’ll pick someone we think is likely to be a team leader when their turn comes.”

Dave gave me a weak smile. He understood exactly what I had left unsaid. I expected Dave to be one of the team captains next season, along with Chip. Dave would do an excellent job when his turn came.

We talked for awhile longer about everyone’s roles and our expectations of the team. By the time we handed out second beers to most of our guests, we had degenerated to reminiscing about our two or three years here at Penn State – things the Hungarian twins had done, JT Hill hoisting me by the collar to set me straight about conduct at practice, Zack Hayes tales, feats of strength by Antwaan Booker and other memories. Our confab broke up around ten o’clock. After all, we had practice promptly at nine am the next morning.

The team made a rather motley collection as it assembled on Monday morning for our first practice. The freshmen were dressed in an assortment of odd workout clothes. Most of the sophomores had outgrown their Penn State workout clothes they received a year earlier, thanks to Coach Collins’ workout regimen. The clothing on the juniors and seniors fit better, but had seen better days after a year of use. This afternoon we would look better, after new workout clothes were issued.

Coach Burton started us off with 45 minutes of stretching and warm up exercises. We broke into five groups, headed by Trevor, Damian, me, Josh Bruno and Shawn Byrd. Our groups rotated around the field and through the Lasch Building to get weighed, tested and outfitted for the coming season.

Interestingly, Coach Burton assigned Brian Henson to my group. I wasn't sure if that was a challenge to me to beat him, for him to beat me, or just a challenge for both of us. Coach had his ways to keep all of us on our toes.

My group ended up inside the Lasch Building with Coach Collins and Matt Shepherd. My group went through the fitness tests. Coach Collins smiled as he looked over my numbers.

"You're up more than I expected on the bench press," he commented. "That's very good. Keep doing what you're doing, Coach. This is excellent."

"Thanks, Coach," I agreed.

We headed to the locker room to be outfitted. That took awhile to get everyone all the equipment and clothing they would need. The freshmen who started classes this term talked with Larry Fitzgerald, our equipment manager, to pick out their jersey numbers for the coming season.

We hit the 40 yard dash station next. Coach Burton was manning it along with Coach Adams and Coach C. "Why don't you hit the 40 first, Coach?" Coach Burton suggested.

I knew which of us Coach Burton was motivating now – Brian. He wanted Brian to try to outdo me. That was fine. I had been the fastest man on the team for the past three years. I had no intention of relinquishing that title now. I lined up for my sprint.

I steeled my nerves and focused on visualizing myself flying down the field, just the way my track coach taught me in high school. At the tweet of Coach's whistle, I burst from my crouch and exploded down the course. In a few strides I was full speed. I pushed my body hard, striving to maintain peak speed through the entire 40 yard course. My legs and lungs screamed from the extreme effort but I pushed through the pain. I propelled myself past the stop before slowing to a jog and then an easy trot.

I headed back to the coaches to find out my time. Coach Burton smiled as I waited for the word. "Four Twenty-seven, Coach," Coach Burton reported.

"All right!" I exclaimed as I pumped my fist in celebration. "That's my best time ever."

"Good job, Coach," echoed from my teammates and other coaches.

“Henson, you’re up next,” Coach Burton announced. I think most of the team members outside turned to watch and find out if Brian was up to my challenge. Brian settled into his crouch and waited for the signal. Coach Burton tweeted for the start. Brian burst forward and powered himself down the course. I had to admit he looked damn fast.

Coach Burton, Coach Adams and Coach C were chuckling and comparing stop watches when Brian completed the forty yards. Brian jogged back for the verdict.

“Four Twenty-seven, Brian,” Coach Burton announced. I let out a sigh of relief. I was proud of my protégé. I didn’t mind sharing the title of fastest on the team with him.

Brian’s grin spread across his face before he let out a howl, “I KNEW I could do it... I knew it!”

I walked over and shook his hand. “That’s excellent, Brian,” I said. “I’m happy to share the record with you.”

“Thanks, Coach,” Brian replied. “I wasn’t sure if I could match you.”

“Don’t count your chickens before the eggs hatch, guys” Coach C teased. “We got forty more guys to time on the forty.”

Our confidence wasn’t misplaced. Shawn Byrd managed 4.29. Ryan McGuire, the freshman cornerback from New Freedom, Pa., did the forty in 4.30 seconds. Christian Hunsecker’s time was 4.31 seconds. Those skitter bugs down in the SEC better watch out. They weren’t going to outrun our team.

We completed the five stations in the morning, cleaned up in the locker room and headed down the road to the Training Table for lunch. We had position meetings after lunch.

Our receiving corps was impressive. Christian Hunsecker was backed up by Bruce MacCauley. Jared Cantell backed me up. Tanner Riggs and Brian Henson covered the slot position. John Crosby, Ian Davis and our newest guy, Rodney Greer provided depth.

Our front three, presumably Christian, Tanner and me, I thought were as good as anybody in the country. There was little drop in talent when Bruce, Brian and Jared went in. I knew Brian was a threat to take a starting spot. Bruce wasn’t far behind Brian. He had talent and speed too. John was quick. I knew Ian could develop into a good receiver. Rodney was highly regarded. We’d see after he learned what he was doing.

We spent our afternoon practice doing drills to improve our fundamental skills. At the end of practice we continued the tradition we started in the spring. We assembled everyone for our chant, “On to Phoenix!”

The freshmen did a creditable job singing the Penn State Alma Mater before dinner. We allowed them to eat. After dinner we had another video study session.

The coaches concentrated on fundamentals drills on our first two days. Pads came out on Wednesday. We did a couple days work at half speed with light hitting. The coaches didn't want to rush us and get someone hurt before we were ready.

We did our normal practice Saturday morning and did a controlled scrimmage in the afternoon. It was eleven on eleven but the coaches set up situations and we would run a few downs. We did some running plays, some short and then deep passes. We ran two series using the wildcat package of plays. We practiced in the red zone.

Trevor, Damian, Chip and I had our first party of the semester Saturday night. I stopped off at the Uni-Mart on College Avenue and picked up a couple 32 oz. lemon-lime slushies before the party. The first dozen or so guests got treated to my version of the Frozen Gumby. They enjoyed them.

We went to full speed contact at practice on Monday. The week's practices went well. Damian, Trevor and I kept an eye on the guys, making sure everyone took the preparations seriously. Our teammates took our goal, "On to Phoenix" to heart and worked hard.

I watched some of the battles for starting spots with curiosity. The biggest, from my perspective, was the competition for the other two starting wide receiver spots. By my evaluation, Christian was hands down our second best receiver. I was certain he'd line up across the field from me on September 2nd when we faced Temple.

The battle between Tanner and Brian was much closer. Brian was faster and was learning to use his size to beat the coverage. Tanner knew our offense better and had a year of experience as a starter. Brian practiced with the Ones (first team) nearly the entire week. Ben Witte and Robert Smith were dueling for the #1 tight end spot.

Wyatt Smith and Charlie Taylor were dueling for the #2 tailback spot behind Damian. I thought Charlie had an edge over Wyatt. That had to be killing Wyatt. He came to Penn State as the four star recruit that would be the next Curt Warner, Larry Johnson, or Shawn O'Conner. It would be a real blow to his ego if he fell back to #3 this season.

We had to find a starting hero (strong safety). Jeff Knox was competing for the spot with Marco Cuchiella. Joe Ricci and Tony King were pushing last year's starting outside linebackers, Jarrell Cook and Brendan Hayden, for starting spots.

GJ DeLuca and Denzell Hunter were competing for the right cornerback spot. Matt Frye and Chris Richardson weren't far behind them in capabilities. The defensive line starting spots were set but the backups were looking good. That's important for our team since Coach C rotated linemen so often.

We did our normal practice on Saturday morning. We did a full scrimmage after lunch. The coaches ran it like a regular game except that we practiced in the red zone two extra

times at the end of the game. My Blue Team beat Trevor's White team handily, 35-17. Shawn's prediction earlier in the summer that our White (#1 team) defense would have trouble holding back Brian and me when we both got on the field was prescient. I caught two long touchdowns and Brian caught another two. The White defense finally got a handle on our squad when the third string receivers went onto the field. Chip's performance was vastly superior to what he did twelve months ago.

Saturday night's party was similar to the previous week – lots of guys, plenty to drink, not nearly enough girls to go around. Everyone, me included, was looking forward to Thursday when the freshmen and Commonwealth campus transfers would arrive.

Media Day was Tuesday, August 21st. The team headed to the stadium after lunch instead of our normal after lunch meetings. Even the younger guys with little chance of playing significant time during the season were required to show up. Their hometown papers were likely to have someone there to do a story on their favorite son.

Trevor, Damian, Christian, Chip, Brian, Bill Daugherty, Josh Bruno, Shawn Byrd, Dave McCall and I were the popular interviewees. The athletic department set us up around the perimeter of the stadium to meet with the media.

Most of my questions were easily anticipated. 'How is our team going to do this year?' My answer was the same that Coach Burton and I worked out last month – 'Our goal is to win the national championship. What other goal should a team have? We'll play the games and find out if we're as good as we hope to be.'

I answered questions about my background. Most reporters asked about my rescue of Jordan Shaeffer last month. I still insisted that I wasn't a hero. I was just doing my job. Some asked me about my personal goals. That was easy – win the national championship game. When pressed, I insisted that winning games was all I was worried about. My personal stats would take of themselves if our team won games.

Mike Montgomery from the Lancaster Paper interviewed me. Jeff Morgan from the Philadelphia Inquirer talked with me. I did interviews with papers from nearly every city in the state. The central Pennsylvania TV stations all talked with me. Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, Wilkes Barre/Scranton, and Altoona stations showed up too. ESPN, Fox and CBS Sports interviewed me too.

Jeff Morgan asked one question that surprised me. "Kyle, how would you rate your chances of winning the Heisman this season?"

"Heisman?" I said before laughing. "How about no better than a snowball's chance in hell."

"You're almost certain to hold the career record for all-purpose yards," Jeff responded. "If Desmond Howard and Tim Brown were worthy, why not you?"

“And both won the award before I was born,” I said. “The Heisman goes to quarterbacks, running backs and an occasional cornerback, not someone like me.”

“You are on the Heisman watch list,” Jeff said. “Your athletic department has ‘Martin for Heisman’ handouts. Haven’t you seen them?”

“I’m honored to be on the watch list,” I replied. “It’s flattering that they are touting me, but I have no expectations of being in New York next winter for their banquet. It’s not happening.”

“Why shouldn’t you have a shot at winning the Heisman?” Jeff asked. “You already beat Brian Westbrook’s all-purpose yards per game record. You’re number two and stand an excellent chance of beating his career all-purpose yards record. You probably will beat David Ball’s 58 career touchdown receptions. You are on track to beat Jerry Rice’s career reception yards record. Westbrook and Rice – that’s pretty elite company you are keeping.”

“They did have excellent college careers, didn’t they?” I challenged. “Did either of them get the Heisman?”

“Fair enough,” Jeff answered. “Neither of them won the Heisman. I still think you’re deserving.”

“My main focus this season will be on making sure my team is successful,” I said. “Personal honors aren’t my top priority.”

“Good luck with that, Kyle,” Jeff said.

Wednesday morning brought the first bit of clarity to the job competitions. Tanner Riggs was sent to practice with the Twos (second string). There were no grand announcements. He simply was sent down. I knew how competitive he was. He took the demotion well.

When practice was over I sought out Tanner. Not that it was hard, his locker is two stalls down from mine.

“How’s it going, Tanner?” I asked quietly so we wouldn’t be overheard.

“I’m good,” he answered quickly. After a few seconds pause, he added, “Surprisingly... Things didn’t work out the way I planned when I was back in high school.”

“No, I guess not,” I agreed.

“I had this grand plan that I would come here, make starter my first year and have glorious career, and set all kinds of records,” Tanner said. “Boy, was reality a shock when I got on the field three years ago.” I nodded in understanding.

“I’ve always been the fastest guy on the field before college,” he continued. “Nobody could touch me. That first day of practice three years ago blew me away. Not only did you beat my time in the forty, half a dozen other guys did too. You took the kick and punt returners jobs that I thought I should have. I couldn’t stand you back then, Coach.”

“I understand,” I replied.

“I started to understand this business when I saw you blow past Alex, Max and Aidan two years ago,” Tanner said. “I knew I had to work my ass off if I wanted to get on the field. No one hands jobs to you. I was delighted when I finally won a starting spot last year. I also saw enough of Brian to know my hold on a starting spot was tenuous, at best. He’s faster and bigger than me. This was only a matter of time.” Tanner gave me a smile. “I held him off for a year.”

“You’re a good receiver,” I consoled.

“But Brian is better,” Tanner answered. “You can count on me to help the team any way I can, Coach. Isn’t that what you used to say to all the upper classmen when we were freshmen?”

“Yeah, it was,” I agreed.

“I thought you were just sucking up back then,” Tanner said. “I understand now. You were just saying you wanted to help. Don’t worry about me going all prima donna and making trouble, Coach. I’m going to wring every ounce of fun out of this season. Let’s see how far we can take this thing.”

“Yes, let’s do that, Tanner,” I agreed.

I gave Tanner a lot of credit for the way he was planning to handle his demotion. Would I have done the same thing if the places were switched? I wasn’t sure.

The campus was flooded with freshmen, parents, and transfers Thursday morning as they reported to campus for their first day. Coach Burton modified our practice schedule for the next three days. We would have our nine am practices Thursday and Friday. Saturday morning we would have a scrimmage. The afternoons were set aside for preparations for classes.

I had an appointment with Dr. P. Thomas Henderson after lunch. I hated visiting my advisor. He always gave me attitude about my playing football. Unusually, he was ready to see me at the appointed time.

We reviewed my classes for the semester: Education Theory & Practice 420 – Education & Public Policy, Geography 160 – Mapping our Changing World, History 454 – U. S. Military History, Art History 100 – Introductory Art History and English 184 – The Short Story.

“This is a nice lineup, Mr. Martin,” Dr. Henderson commented when we finished reviewing my lineup. “I hope you are able to maintain your high standard of performance in spite of your athletic endeavors.”

“I would think my 3.68 GPA would show you that I can maintain my academic standing while playing football,” I countered.

“Can you maintain your past standards while performing athletically and captaining a team?” Dr. Henderson asked. He didn’t leave time for me to answer. “Mr. Martin, you are one of the most promising teaching students in our department but you insist on wasting my time, my colleagues’ time and your own in persisting in obtaining a degree for which you will have no use. I can read the newspapers. You are going to play this child’s game professionally after graduation next spring.”

“Yes, I expect to be drafted to play in the NFL next year,” I replied, trying not to lose my temper with this... this.... windbag. “IF... and that is a big if... IF I play in the NFL, average careers last two or three years. If I manage to beat those odds and stay, say five years, I will be done at age twenty-seven. What do I do then? I’m too young to retire. Contrary to what you might think, I won’t have enough money to retire. I WILL teach!”

I was on a roll and didn’t give Dr. Henderson time to interject. “I love teaching. I have done it for seven summers at Boy Scout camp. The best experience I have had in college was last spring with C I 495C when I was teaching the students at Bellefonte High. I WILL teach, I guarantee it.”

“I take exception to the way the powers at this university give preferential treatment to athletes,” Dr. Henderson shot back. “You, and others are taking your student teaching experiences out of order. It will harm your ability to get the most out of those experiences.”

“I am contractually obligated to the university to train, prepare and play football for them each fall,” I countered. “The university pays for my tuition, room and board, and books and gives me an education in return. The university controls my schedule, both academically and athletically. It is out of my control whether I do C I 495C and 495E in back to back semesters like most students or with a semester interruption to accommodate my athletic career. I would suggest you take your concerns up with

someone with higher authority. If you have nothing else, I will take your leave. I do not wish to waste your time further.”

I turned on my heel and walked out. Dr. Henderson did not reply to me. Thank God I had one more term and I would spend it in Philadelphia, out of Henderson’s line of sight and line of fire.

I stopped off at the book store to purchase my textbooks after I finished my meeting with Dr. Henderson. They cost a small fortune, as usual. I put them on the charge card the athletic department gave me and said a silent thank you to Coach Paterno for giving me a scholarship.

I went over to the Natatorium to lifeguard for a few hours when I was done. A few freshmen showed up for their swim tests, but not many. Friday and Saturday would be the big days for the tests. Chip and I were scheduled to help both afternoons.

More roster decisions became apparent Friday morning. Jarrell Cook was sent back to the second team. Tony King took the weak side linebacker starting spot. Jeff Knox worked the whole practice with the Ones. Marco worked with the second team.

No resolution came for Charlie Taylor and Wyatt Smith. They continued to split time as Damian’s backup. Ben Witte and Bob Smith fought for the starting tight end spot. Ben had improved his pass catching some since I had the talk with him earlier in the summer. Bob looked impressive as a blocker, though not quite as dominating as Ben.

Chip and I grabbed a quick lunch at Pollock Commons and headed for the pool after practice. The place was mobbed with freshmen waiting for their turns to do the swim tests. We changed in the locker room. Someone turned into our aisle as we were changing, saw us and hurried away. I thought I recognized him.

“Hey Mike... Mike is that you?” I called out.

Mike O’Keefe poked his head around the corner. He didn’t look comfortable seeing me. “Hey, what’s up Mike?” I asked. “How are you doing?” He visibly relaxed when he saw my big smile.

“Hey, Mike,” Chip added. “Good to see you.”

“Hi, Chip. Hi, Kyle,” Mike said as he came over to us, extending a hand to shake. “I wasn’t sure if you would want to see me, Kyle.”

“Why?” I asked. “Did you get me arrested for drunk driving?” He gave me a slightly goofy grin. “I never had a problem with you. Your sister and I... yeah, we had problems, but not you and me.”

“That’s a relief,” Mike said. “You guys here to lifeguard too?”

“Too?” I asked.

“Mr. Coleman hired me a couple weeks ago,” Mike explained. “I sent my credentials ahead from scout camp. He hired me as soon as he heard I was BSA Lifeguard certified.”

“John does have an affinity for Boy Scouts, doesn’t he?” I replied. “I thought you worked in campcraft.”

“That was last summer,” Mike said. “This year I applied for aquatics. They took me.”

“Good for you,” I said. “Do you mind me being nosey?” Mike smiled and nodded his assent. “Why are you on campus already? Most sophomores don’t come until tomorrow or Sunday.”

“I had a thing with my advisor this morning,” Mike explained. “I drove uh... Kell...”

“It’s OK. You can say her name around me, Mike,” I said.

“Well... I drove Kelly and me up yesterday,” Mike said.

“Your big sister let you drive?” I teased.

“She doesn’t have a choice,” Mike answered. “I guess you haven’t heard about what has been going on with her in the last few months.”

“No, we have had no contact other than the e-mail she sent me a few weeks ago congratulating about the rescue I had to do,” I said.

“I saw that,” Mike said. “That was good work. I’m glad I never had to do anything like that.”

“So... what’s up with Kelly and not driving?” I asked. “I thought her ninety day suspension for underage drinking would be over by now.”

“It was,” Mike said. “At least the first one was up in May. Sis got caught at a DUI stop on a Saturday night in May after hanging with her friends. She lost her license for another year.”

“Ouch, I’m sorry,” I replied. “We may be split up but I don’t wish anything bad for her. Tell Kelly I’m sorry to hear about her misfortune. I hope things go better for her this year.”

“It was bad luck for her but good for me,” Mike said. “Billy bought a car of his own this spring. The old clunker dad gave him was to go to Kelly but with her license suspension, Dad gave the car to me.”

“Does Kelly realize what she is doing is screwing up her life?” I asked.

“Yeah, I think so,” Mike answered. “Dad blew a gasket after her second arrest. Kelly has been doing AA meetings since her hearing this summer.”

“I’m glad she is getting her act together,” I said. “I wish it had come sooner, but I am happy she’s getting help. Is she staying with Jen, Bev and Cindy? I hadn’t heard any news from Christian.”

“No she isn’t,” Mike answered. “Bev and Cindy weren’t interested in rooming with her again. Jen and Mark decided to share an apartment. Kelly is rooming with three other journalism majors.”

“I guess we better get changed,” I suggested. “John needs all the help outside that he can get.”

“I remember what it was like last year,” Mike agreed.

“Tell Kelly I said hi,” Chip added as we finished talking.

Mike was assigned to the gate to scan eLion cards as the freshmen checked in. Chip and I worked along the side of the pool, ready in case any of the freshmen got in trouble while they were taking the test. Hundreds of freshmen came through during the afternoon. It was just as grueling as Sunday afternoon swim tests at scout camp.

Saturday’s scrimmage went well. My Blue team beat Trevor’s White again but the score was closer. My team was ahead 31-21 at mid-fourth quarter. Jon Stafford and our Twos staged a good drive to score. They tried an onside kick to keep possession of the ball. Brian Henson batted the kick to me. I grabbed it and collapsed to the ground in a ball to protect myself and the ball. Trey Connelly, Grant Turner and ET LeBlanc preserved our win by killing the clock and not letting White have the ball back before the coaches ended the scrimmage.

Chip, Mike and I all worked the Saturday afternoon shift at the pool. Chip and I invited Mike and his roommates to stop by our party that evening. Damian invited Billy Robinson, his lover, over for a romantic dinner at our apartment. Trevor was reuniting with Stephanie Kolmar over dinner downtown. Chip had a dinner date too. I went downtown with some of the younger unattached guys for burgers and shakes at Baby’s.

Trevor, Steph, Chip, his date Amanda Lombardi and I returned in plenty of time to help Damian, Billy and their cover “girlfriends” Melanie and Sarah set up for the evening’s party. Damian and his crew had hors d’oeuvres ready. Snack foods were out on the

table. We had a good supply of beer, wine and liquor. We were ready to kickoff the fall semester properly.

My friend and former Wolverines teammate Jason Harting made it to the party. Another friend from the Wolverines made it too. Kevin Peachey, who played free safety and returned kicks, was starting college on Main Campus this semester. I ran into him Friday afternoon at the swim tests and invited him to come by my party.

It took me awhile but eventually I recognized Chip's date Amanda. She had been the girl he brought home back in the beginning of July when I spent the weekend on campus for football camp. Maybe my friend was outgrowing some of his earlier womanizing and craziness.

Mike O'Keefe and his roommate Jim Hill made it to the party. My friends and I welcomed them and made them feel at home. We had plenty of girls at the party, a welcome change from the past two Saturdays.

The Davis twins escorted a pair of good looking young women to the party. I was busy when they arrived and didn't get a good look at the girls they were with. I saw Troy's date from the back. She seemed familiar, but I couldn't place her.

Later in the evening Troy's date passed me when she was heading for the bathroom. My jaw dropped open when I found out who she was – Ashley Burton, our coaches eldest daughter! I motioned for Troy to come over.

“What's up, Coach?” Troy asked politely.

“You do realize this is a beer party, don't you?” I asked.

Troy waved his half full cup of beer in front of me and said, “Well... duh, yeah.”

“You brought our head coach's daughter to a beer party as your date?” I asked pointedly.

“Ashley?” Troy responded, laughing. “Ashley isn't my date. She's just a good friend. Are you worried about her saying something to her dad about the drinking?” I nodded yes. “Relax, Coach. Ashley is cool. She, Ian and I have been to parties where there is drinking before. It's fine.”

“It's a big risk, Troy,” I said.

“I'll have Ashley talk with you when she gets back, Coach,” Troy said. “She can reassure you that her coming to the party won't be any problem.”

Ashley rejoined Troy a couple minutes later. He sent her straight to me for a talk.

“Hi, Kyle. Troy tells me you’re concerned about me coming to a team party,” Ashley said as I shook her hand.

“Well... it concerns me a little,” I agreed. “Your dad has the power to make or break any of us. There would be hell to pay if he heard about our parties.”

“Relax, Kyle,” Ashley responded. “What am I going to tell my dad? ‘Hey daddy, I went to a beer party with your football players.’ I don’t think so. I would be grounded so quick my head would spin. Whatever happens here remains our secret, Kyle. You can count on it.”

“OK, I guess so,” I agreed. “If any of the guys gives you a hard time, let me know. I can take care of it for you.”

“They won’t,” Ashley answered. “As a matter of fact, I’m being recognized. I’ve talked with a number of cute guys, but none are interested in dancing.” She gave me a wink. “...or more. I’m having trouble getting serious attention from dad’s players. I think they’re afraid of me.”

“That’s understandable,” I agreed. “Your dad does control their careers. None of us wants to cross him.”

“Pass the word, Kyle,” Ashley said. “I won’t bite or breathe one word of tonight’s party to my dad. What am I going to say? ‘Daddy, while I was at a college beer party, so and so did this.’ That wouldn’t go over well for the guy or for me.”

“Point taken,” I said.

“I want to be treated like any other college freshmen,” Ashley explained. “I don’t want special treatment because of my dad, nor do I want to be cut out of the fun normal students have.”

“Enjoy yourself and don’t drink too much.” I gave Ashley a wink. “That’s advice I give to all the freshmen here.”

I noticed later Ashley did succeed in interesting a guy into dancing – one who didn’t know or didn’t care who her dad was. Kevin Peachey shared a few dances with Ashley before the two found an open chair. They started making out. I was happy she found someone, especially Kevin. He’s a nice guy.

I was less pleased when things escalated. I was back to being concerned when the two of them went in search of a bedroom. They found my bedroom was empty and went inside to explore each other – and do other things I would rather not contemplate a friend of mine doing with my head coach’s daughter. I would be doomed to hell by my coach.

Mike O'Keefe found himself a nice looking, dark haired freshman. After a bit of dancing and making out, Mike succeeded in convincing her to leave with him, presumably to go back to his apartment for some horizontal one-on-one. Ever polite, Mike and his new squeeze stopped to talk before leaving.

"Thanks for inviting me, Kyle," Mike declared. "I'm glad I came here tonight. I wouldn't have met Jamie." He paused and gave her a quick kiss. "See you later."

"No problem, Mike," I replied. "Nice to meet you, Jamie." I called as they headed out to carry on with their bedroom rendezvous.

Kevin and Ashley finished with my room a little later. They parted with a hug and kiss. Ashley met up with another girl I didn't know and the two left with Troy Davis. I saw Kevin a few minutes later when we bumped into each other in the kitchen when we went for beers.

"Damn, Coach, I'm going to love college," Kevin declared when he saw me. "I've been on campus three days, I'm here partying with the football team and I got laid. I like Ashley too. She is one hot babe. I hope I get to see her again."

"Be careful, Kevin," I cautioned. "Did you realize that you slept with the head football coach's daughter?"

"Oh, smack!" Kevin exclaimed. "You're shitting me."

"Her last name is Burton," I replied.

"I didn't get Ashley's last name," Kevin said.

"If Coach Burton finds out you screwed his eldest daughter at a beer party at my apartment, there could be hell to pay, Kevin," I cautioned. "Shit flows down hill. If I get trouble from my coach, you're going to get trouble from me."

"I do hope to see her again," Kevin replied. "She gave me her number and asked me to call her. I'll treat her real careful, Coach."

"Good for you," I said. Kevin wandered away, slightly dazed now that he realized who he slept with. Had I been that unworldly when I started college?

Most of the singles and couples started to drift out between midnight and 12:30. I helped Trevor, Steph, Chip, Amanda, Marco and his girl du jour clean up the apartment. Marco was staying in Damian's room that evening. Jon Stafford took his conquest back to the room they shared in Hartranft.

The team was on our normal in-semester schedule now that the rest of the students arrived. We were required to eat dinner at the Training Table each night. Upper classmen in the apartments could get their other meals at Pollock Commons or use credits from their meal plan to buy things at the Mix or other on-campus stores and eat at their apartments. Chip, Trevor, Damian and I usually ate at the apartment.

Chip, Trevor, Damian and I were all required to attend the "Be A Part From the Start" rally for freshmen at eight pm Sunday at Rec Hall. The Lion Ambassadors, the cheerleaders, the pep band and the Lion all entertained the crowd as the freshmen were taught Penn State songs and traditions. The freshmen football players, along with selected team stars went down to the floor for introductions. None of my roommates stayed for the dance afterward.

Classes started up on Monday morning. I had no eight o'clock classes at all. That was nice. Monday, Wednesday and Friday I had English 184, The Short Story from 11:15 to 12:05 followed by History 454, American Military History from 12:20 to 1:10 pm.

My English class was in the Willard Building. It was taught by John Charles Reed, a grad teaching assistant in his late twenties. I assumed he was working for his doctorate the same way Will was at Princeton. The course sounded interesting. We would be studying short stories by American authors of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

I headed up the hill past Pattee Library to the Chambers Building for History. I found Cameron Miller sitting a few seats back in the first row when I came in the door. I gave my buddy a big grin and took a seat beside him in the second row. Other students walked in, many that I recognized from my Civil War or Gettysburg courses.

Cameron and I had been talking a couple minutes when I caught a glimpse of bright red hair out of the corner of my eye. I looked at the door and found Kelly standing there, scanning the room. She spotted me and hurried across the room and took a seat in the end row by the windows.

I wasn't surprised to see Kelly there. I knew she loved Dr. Brennan as much as I did and this was the only time this year that History 454 was offered. I was determined to be a proper gentleman. I waved to my ex-girlfriend and gave her a warm smile. The attention flustered Kelly momentarily. She returned the smile and gave me a timid hand wave in return.

Dr. Brennan outlined our course. We would study American military training, doctrine and actions from Captain John Smith and the founding of the Jamestown Colony through the French and Indian War, the Revolution, the War of 1812, Mexican War, Civil War, war with Spain, World Wars I & II, Korea, Vietnam, Kuwait and up to our current adventures in Iraq and Afghanistan. That sounded great to a military history buff like me.

"See you later, Cam," I said as the class was dismissed.

“See you Wednesday, Kyle,” Cameron responded.

I purposely stayed seated until Kelly got up to leave. I thought the two of us should clear the air a little if we were going to be in the same classroom for a semester. I stood and walked for the door so Kelly and I would meet as we left the room.

“Hi Kelly,” I said as we met.

“Umm... uh, hi Kyle,” she stammered uncomfortably.

“I’m glad you’re taking this course,” I said. “I know how much you love Dr. Brennan. I felt bad when you dropped the Civil War course last winter. You would have enjoyed it.”

“It would have been too hard for us to be in the same room last winter,” Kelly replied.
“I’m going to take the course this spring.”

“Good. I’m glad to hear that,” I responded. “You’ll like Dr. Barnes. He’s an excellent professor. “Do you have a minute to talk? I thought we should clear the air if we’re going to be seeing each other three days a week for the rest of the semester.”

“I can do that, Kyle,” Kelly said. The two of us stepped into the hall to continue talking. When we were out of the way of the departing students, Kelly said, “I want to say how sorry I am ...”

“Stop! No, I’m not looking for an apology,” I protested. “It isn’t necessary.”

“Yes, actually it is, Kyle,” Kelly responded. “It’s a big part of my twelve steps. I need to apologize to those I’ve hurt and try to make amends for the wrongs I have done. I am truly sorry for all the wild drinking I did and for dragging you into it with me. I am sorry for risking your football career to satisfy my whims.”

“Apology accepted, Kelly,” I replied. “I don’t hold you entirely at fault for what happened last year. You never would have conceived of doing some of the things you did when you and I started dating freshmen year. I feel I corrupted you with some of the bad situations I put you in back then.”

“No, you didn’t, Kyle,” Kelly responded. “I never did anything with you that I didn’t want to do. I wasn’t a good little Catholic girl, naïve about the world. I was a good little Catholic girl looking to be bad and break out from all the restrictions I faced when I was growing up.”

“I wish things had turned out differently for us,” I said. “I will always treasure our time together. Mike told me you’re going to AA meetings. Is it helping?”

“Mike told me we ran into you this past weekend,” Kelly said. “Little brothers do have big mouths.” She was smiling as she said it. “AA is helping. I’ve realized I am an alcoholic and I cannot have any part of drinking if I want to stay sane. Do you still drink?”

“In moderation,” I answered. “I’ve learned to curb myself... usually...” I chuckled. “...except for when my friends dragged me out to celebrate my twenty-first birthday. Jeremy, Kath, Hal, Tammy and Penny got me pretty drunk that night. We were safe though. Tammy lost the draw and was the designated driver for the rest of us.”

“That’s how your friends are, Kyle,” Kelly said. “Party and have fun but do it responsibly. That’s a skill I never learned. Leigh Ann and Zack told me you and Penny are a couple again. How is that going?”

“We’re good,” I said. “We’re enduring the frequent absences but damn, the reunions are fantastic. I am going to the beach in Delaware this coming weekend after we finish playing Temple. I can’t wait to see her.”

“I’m glad you’re happy, Kyle,” Kelly said. “Good luck against Temple. I’ll be in the stands cheering for you.”

“Thanks, Kelly,” I replied. “I’m glad we cleared the air.”

“I am too, Kyle,” Kelly responded. “I’ll see you Wednesday.”

“Yeah, see you Wednesday,” I agreed. Kelly headed down the hall one way. I departed in the opposite direction. I felt good that the two of us were starting to bury the old animosities. I was especially happy my ex-lover was straightening out her life. I truly wished her the very best.

Tuesdays and Thursdays were my busiest days. I started off with Geography 160 over in the Deike Building from 10:10 to 11:00 am. Dr. Mark C. Mitchell was the professor. We had around 240 students in the lecture hall. On Friday mornings I would meet with Dr. Mitchell’s grad assistant, Matt Pierce, for our lab.

I headed from Deike to Waring Hall for my Education Theory and Practice 420 course about Education and Public Policy. Dr. Melissa Byrne-Hawkins taught the course. Dr. Byrne-Hawkins was an attractive professor in her late thirties. The course looked interesting.

After lunch at 1:00 pm, I headed to the Forum for Art History 100. This was a massive class for nearly three hundred students. Ms. Jennifer Allen was our instructor. The course outline seemed OK. Art History wasn’t my passion, but I needed one more

elective to complete my graduation requirements. Friends said the course wasn't difficult.

I headed to the bursar's office after the first class was done. I switched from Art History being a graded to a pass/fail course. I could use the break from this to concentrate more on my football and other courses. Art History wouldn't harm my GPA and I wouldn't need to bust my ass to get an A to keep my average up.

All my classes went well. At history on Wednesday Kelly gave me a nice smile and wave when she came in the room. She still sat at the other side of the room from me, but I was glad things weren't so strained anymore.

Football practice was going well. My teammates practiced hard and were fulfilling my challenge to them to go over and above normal expectations to prepare for our season. The freshman bought our program too. Another fifteen or so thumb prints appeared on the "On to Phoenix" plaque on the locker room wall during the week.

Trevor, Damian and I spent the week preaching to our teammates that Temple was a good team and we needed to play our best to beat them. They went 9-3 last season and went to a bowl game. They weren't the same doormats I had spurned when I was a high school senior. We clamped down on clowning during practices. Some fun was excellent before practice started or after we went back to the locker room. On the field, we had to take care of business.

Tuesday press conference brought clarity to the remaining starting spot on our team. Coach Burton named Bob Smith as our starting tight end. Bob did well this summer and deserved the spot. Ben Witte worked hard too but never progressed to the point where he could keep up with Bob's receiving ability. The handwriting was on the wall when Bob showed he could block as well as Ben.

Penny and I had a long phone call Thursday evening, confirming our plans for the beach. I talked with Mom and Dad too, making certain everything was ready and that I knew which campsites our extended family was staying in. Liz convinced our parents to let her invite Wyatt Musser down to the shore for the weekend.

Mom, Dad, Liz, Wyatt, Noah, Connor and Hunter were leaving after school Friday. Will, Abby, Rose and Penny were coming after they finished classes Friday afternoon. Andy would join the family late Friday, after his team played West Chester University. I would arrive late Saturday night after a long drive from State College to Cape Henlopen. I couldn't wait for the weekend to come.

The university held a pep rally at the Bryce Jordan Center Friday evening after dinner. The team headed for Toftrees after the rally for a quiet night of preparation and relaxation for our first game.

The friends and I spent part of the evening studying the game plan. Later we convened our usual poker group and played until bed time. I was glad the university sprang for the hotel for us before games. I heard how wild some parties got back on campus on Friday nights on game weekends.

Our wakeup call came at 6:30 am on Saturday morning. The team assembled for breakfast at 7:30. We packed our things and returned to the Lasch Building to prepare. I circulated around the locker room, talking with my teammates and friends. I kept a particular eye on Mark Markovich, Tom Kowalchuk, Will Jones, Kevin Giordano, Omar Jenkins and Dan Murphy. They were freshmen playing special teams.

Remembering back to my freshman year, I queried each about how they were doing. No one was ready to upchuck the way I had. The guys seemed loose and ready to play their part. I wished each one of them good luck. I checked on Bob Smith too. Bob felt good.

We headed for the stadium around 10:30. Big crowds of our fans lined the walkway when our blue buses dropped us off outside our locker room. We took the field for warm-ups. It was a beautiful late summer day. The high temperature was predicted to be 78 degrees. We had a light wind, maybe ten miles an hour coming from the northwest. It was perfect weather for our game.

Our game was being televised on the Big Ten Network. Game time was noon. We finished our preparations and then headed for the tunnel and our introductions. Damian, Trevor and I lined up in front of the team right behind Coach Burton. The 107,000 Penn State fans cheered wildly as our team stormed onto the field.

“You ready?” Trevor asked after Coach Burton briefed us before the coin toss.

“Let’s do it,” I added as the referee motioned for the team captains to join him at the center of the field.

“You do the talking, Coach,” Damian added as we trotted to the center of the field. The three of us had agreed earlier to switch spokesmen each game. Trevor and Damian insisted that I take the lead for our first game.

The referee reviewed his expectations and then asked the Temple captains to call the coin toss. He called tails. The coin was heads.

“We’ll take the ball,” I said.

“We’ll defend that end,” Temples’ middle linebacker said, pointing toward Mount Nittany. The referee lined us up facing each other, parallel to our goal lines. Everyone shook hands and wished each other a good and safe game. We jogged back to our sidelines.

Brian trotted out with our kick return team. He handled a well-kicked ball on the goal line. Temple stayed in their lanes, covering the kick properly. They downed Brian at our 32 yard line. Chip and I led the offense out onto the field. Chip was Mr. Cool personified. He called the first play.

Coach Burton kept things simple to start out. Damian carried a couple times to get us a first down. Coach mixed in passes after that, but kept the throws short. Brian, Christian or I always ran a deep route to pull the free safety away from the primary receiver. We moved the ball well, making a couple more first downs. On the eighth play, Brian ran a post route. I was the primary on the play. I ran a hitch. The play was designed as a setup for a big play later in the drive.

Temple corner played off the line, respecting my speed. We expected I'd get six to eight yards. At the snap Brian sprinted deep while I ran downfield six yards and turned back to Chip on my route. Chip zipped the ball to me immediately. Temple's d-back came up to tackle me as I spun to get free.

Amazingly, he didn't wrap me up. He grabbed thin air as I sprinted to get free. I ran down the sideline. Brian threw a good block to take out the free safety. I motored into the end zone. I raised my hands in triumph as the crowd roared its approval. Chip, Bob, Christian and Brian gave me high fives and hugs in the end zone. The Lion gave me a high five too as I jogged back to the sideline.

I was surprised by the result of the play. A six yard catch followed by twenty-seven yards after the catch would certainly improve my YAC (yards after the catch). Jared Gray booted his first PAT easily to give use a 7-0 lead.

Jared put the ball deep in the end zone on the ensuing kickoff. Temple took possession on their 20 yard line. We expected Temple to play better than last year. They certainly did. They mostly ran the ball, mixing in a screen and a couple quick out passes to keep our pass rush at bay. They made two first downs and pushed the ball across midfield.

Temple tried a play action pass next. Our guys weren't fooled. Their QB threw the ball up for their deep guy, who was covered by Denzell Hunt and Dave McCall. Dave read the play perfectly, cutting off the receiver and snagging the ball in front of the intended receiver. Denzell blocked the receiver, preventing him from tackling Dave. Dave started downfield with the ball but was quickly hemmed in by a pair of linemen.

Just before they tackled Dave, he spun and tossed the ball back to Shawn, who had trailed Dave along the sideline. Shawn tucked the ball away and kicked into high gear. He sprinted down the sideline. The QB had a chance at a tackle from a bad angle but whiffed. Shawn motored into the end zone untouched.

The crowd let out a big cheer as Shawn handed the ball to the ref and waved to the crowd. He jogged for the sideline, not making it far before his jubilant defensive teammates mobbed him. Jared Gray kicked the PAT. Score: Penn State-14, Temple-0.

Jared kicked the ball back to Temple. They took the ball on the 2 yard line and advanced it out to the 24. Mark Markovich made the tackle. The Owls tried a run up the middle. Coach C had anticipated them. Josh Bruno was run blitzing on the play. He blew between the center and right guard, nearly taking the handoff from the QB to the tailback.

Josh pounded the tailback to the ground, knocking the ball loose in the process. Unfortunately a Temple lineman rolled over and covered the ball, retaining possession for his team. Our good coverage by our d-backs forced the quarterback to throw the ball away on second down and fifteen. Trevor Conwell beat Bill Daugherty to the quarterback for a sack on third down. Temple was forced to punt the ball back to us.

Excellent kick coverage forced Tanner Riggs to call for a fair catch at our 42 yard line. Damian got two carries, moving us across midfield. Coach Burton called our “killer” play set up by my short hitch that ended with a TD on the previous series.

The play started the same. Brian ran a deep post route, drawing the nickel back and free safety with him. I went six yards down and stutter stepped like I was doing a hitch. Chip pumped the ball. The d-back on me came flying up to stop the hitch and/or tackle me this time. I flew down the field for the goal line as his momentum took him out of the play. Chip hit me twenty-five yards downfield. I sprinted into the end zone after straight arming the free safety out of my way near the goal line.

I tossed the ball to the ref and then raised my arms in triumph as the Blue Band struck up our fight song. Brian, Christian, Bob and company congratulated me and celebrated with me as we jogged off the field. The Lion and I shared a hug for the fans when he finished his pushups. Jared Gray booted the PAT through the uprights to extend our lead to 21-0.

Temple did get their act together. They went on a head knocking twelve play drive that took them down into the red zone. Our defense managed to hold them to a field goal. Score: Penn State-21, Temple-3

Temple’s drive had extended into the second quarter. We played things more conservatively, not trying for big plays. Temple feared Brian’s speed, but they feared my speed and demonstrated playmaking ability more. I got the double coverage. Brian got a touchdown on our ten play drive.

Our defense turned Temple away after six plays, forcing a punt. Tanner picked up a dozen yards, giving us possession on our 38 yard line. Our next drive featured more running by Damian with some short passes. Temple pulled a linebacker and went with nickel coverage for the drive. Brian and I both got double coverage. That left Christian free. He picked up an 18 yard pass and then a 16 yarder for us, the second putting us on Temple’s 5 yard line.

We tried pounding the ball up the middle twice but they held. On third down I did a fade route. I out leaped two defenders, snagged the ball and come down for my third touchdown of the day. Jared booted the PAT to bring our lead to 35-3.

Our long drives had eaten up most of the time in the second quarter. Temple tried their two minute drill to score but our defense wasn't having that. Trevor, Bill, Josh and company made sure the Owls went into the locker room disappointed.

Coach Burton announced at half time that the Ones were finished for the day. Jon Stafford and our second string would finish the game. Our Twos matched up pretty well with Temple's Ones. Jon and his crew managed a touchdown and two field goals against the Owls' two touchdowns in the second half. The final score was 48-17 our favor.

I had seven catches for 142 yards and three touchdowns in the first half. I also had a reverse for 12 yards and an end around for another 11 yards. I led the scoring with 18 points. Jared Gray had 15 and Brian, Shawn and Charlie Taylor had six points each.

Even though the game was a blow out, I still felt Temple was a good football team. My first touchdown was due entirely to a poor tackle by one guy. Dave McCall's interception was a great play by a gifted athlete. Dave compounded the damage to Temple with his heads up play lateraling to Shawn for the TD.

When Temple was down twenty-one points they had to abandon their run-first game plan. Our team became a snow ball growing larger and larger as we rolled over them. I expected to see the Owls have a winning season, maybe even win the Mid-American Conference.

I headed to the center of the field to visit with the Owls players and to meet with the media like usual. I bumped Coach Golden after he finished talking with his college friend and coach, Coach Burton. My coach was a brand new grad assistant at Penn State when Coach Golden joined the team to play tight end. They got to be good friends as the new coach got to know the future coach.

"Hey Kyle, good game!" Coach Golden offered as we shook hands.

"I know you have a good team coach, in spite of the score," I offered. "I hope there aren't any hard feelings about me rejecting your team back when you recruited me."

"I never felt that way, Kyle," Coach Golden said. "The big guys were leery of you thanks to your knee injury. If I managed to snatch you up and your knee was good, I'd have a great player. Even if your knee wasn't good... say I got you at 90% of your real capabilities for four years, that would be a good thing for my team. I need all the guys with strong character and leadership that I can get."

"Thanks for the compliment, Coach," I replied.

“The culture when I came to Temple was so bad,” Coach said. “Everyone knew they were going to lose, even though they weren’t sure how. Now I have them believing that they can win most of their games. We need to take another step up before we compete with you and the other big boys. We need to believe we WILL win every game. Period! I know that is how your team is, isn’t it?”

“Yes, we know every single week that we will win,” I agreed. “It is part of our culture here. We’re usually right, too.” He gave me a wink.

“Don’t breathe a word of this in Philadelphia,” Coach whispered to me. “I still have a bit of Blue and White in me. I’m glad you chose Penn State if you didn’t come play for me.”

“Thanks, Coach,” I said as we parted. “Go beat up on the rest of the MAC.”

“We’ll do that, Kyle,” Coach Golden replied. “We WILL do that.”

I was glad Coach Golden didn’t hold a grudge from me spurning his team back when I was in high school. At the time his team was 5-19 and hadn’t seen a bowl game since my father was in elementary school. He had made big strides over the past six years and I hoped things would continue to go well for him.

Since I had the biggest plays offensively, I got hit up for a lot of interviews as I tried to leave the field. I answered as many questions as I could before I found refuge in the locker room. As I finished showering, Coach Burton reminded Trevor, Damian and me that captains were expected to attend the after game press conference. SHIT! I desperately wanted to get on the road for Cape Henlopen and my girl.

I had to endure another half hour’s grilling by the press before I could hit the road. I left State College a little before five o’clock. I didn’t worry about dinner. I’d find that on the road. Google estimated it would take me five and half hours to get down to the shore.

The traffic was jammed getting from State College to the Route 322 bypass. Traffic flow smoothed out when the road went to four lanes. I grabbed dinner at the Red Rabbit Drive-In in Clarks Ferry. The food was pretty decent, something I needed to remember when I was looking for food on the way to or from school. I stopped at my house for five minutes to pick up a couple camping items I forgot when I went back to school.

I headed down Route 41 from Gap into Delaware, took 7 around to Route 1 and followed it the rest of the way into Lewes. I arrived at the camping area a little after eleven o’clock that evening.

“Finally, you’re here!” Penny exclaimed before I could get out of the car. She engulfed me, hugging and kissing as I climbed out of the car. “It’s so good to see you.”

“I missed you too,” I agreed.

“Ssshhh!” Mom cautioned. “It’s quiet time in camp. Don’t wake the boys.”

Mom needn’t have worried. Penny and I didn’t need words to express ourselves. The fiery hugs and the attempts Penny and I made to give each other tonsillectomies with our tongues kept us quiet for a minute. Finally we separated to breathe.

“Hey everybody,” I said as Penny and I pulled apart except for holding hands. Mom and Dad got one handed hugs and a kiss on the cheek.

Hey bro, how was your game?” I asked after giving Andy a slug on the shoulder.

“Three touchdowns, just like you,” Andy answered. Delaware had played West Chester Friday evening. “...but your 165 yards beats my 123.”

“What was the final score?” I asked.

“We beat them, 31-20,” Andy answered. “I played almost the entire game at flanker.”

“Good for you,” I said.

I greeted Liz and her boyfriend Wyatt and then Will and Abby. It was great to be with my family and lover again. Mom had leftover cake from dinner that she shared with Penny and me. We turned in after the snack.

I wish I could say I made love to Penny before falling asleep, but I can’t. An early wake up call, a football game and six hours on the road had done me in. I fell asleep before Penny and I could get past kissing. I woke up in a hotel in State College and fell asleep in a tent at the beach in Lewes, Delaware. It had been a hell of a day.

I awoke Sunday morning comfortably spooned with Penny, who was still sleeping. I slipped an arm over her tummy and cuddled with her, so warm and safe.

“Mom-Mom, when Unka Ky get up?” a twin asked, outside our tent.

“Shhh... you need to be quiet, Noah,” Mom replied. “Uncle Kyle had a long day yesterday and needs his sleep. He played football and had a long, long drive to get here. He’s tired this morning just like your Daddy was yesterday morning.”

“Daddy tired today too,” Connor added. “He’s s’leeping in our tent.”

“Wanna p’ay [play] with Unka Ky and Penny,” Connor added.

“There’s time for all that later today,” Mom promised.

“Mmmmm....” Penny purred as she clasped my hand and pulled it tighter to her body.

“You awake?” I whispered.

“Mmm... yes,” Penny agreed. I gave her a gentle kiss on the neck. “What time is it?” I opened my eyes and saw it was daylight, at least a couple hours after sunrise.

“I’ll check,” I said as I scrambled for my cell phone. “It’s almost nine o’clock.”

“I’ve got to pee,” Penny said. “I wish we had time to finish what we started last night, but I guess we don’t. The little ones are awake now.”

“Sorry about that,” I replied. “I didn’t realize how tired I was. I’ll make it up to you today.”

“I’m sure you will,” Penny agreed. We pulled on some clothes and went outside. The twins and Mom greeted us. The twins wanted to play immediately but we promised them to do that later. We headed to the shower house to clean up for the day. Dad and Hunter were up when we returned. Within half an hour the entire family plus Liz’s boyfriend Wyatt were assembled for breakfast.

Will and Abby volunteered to cook. They made scrambled eggs and bacon. We toasted bagels and English muffins on a griddle too. It was all tasty. After we finished eating, Will and Abby started collecting the dirty dishes.

“Penny and I can do that, Will,” I offered. “We don’t mind.”

“It will give us some quiet time,” Penny added. “We will get a chance to relax.”

Will chuckled and gave us a wink. “Make sure the two of you relax quietly. The neighbors are packed pretty close to us.”

“We will be the souls of discretion,” I promised. “Penny and I will meet you at the beach later this morning.”

“Unka Ky, why not come beach?” Noah asked innocently. “P’ay and re’ax wit’ us.”

“Yeah, come to beach wit’ us, p’ease?” Connor agreed. “It’s fun!”

“We’ll catch up to you guys later this morning, I promise,” I answered.

“We’ll help you build a sand castle. How does that sound?” Penny added.

The twins accepted our promise. The rest of my family teased Penny and me about our morning plans. So what? Neither Penny nor I had any intention of waiting until that evening to share our love with each other.

When the family was packed up and safely away, Penny and I returned to our tent to “relax” properly. Over the next half hour Penny and I took away any tensions, cares or concerns we may have had. All was copacetic with the world when Penny and I finished making love. Penny and I dressed and headed outside.

“Hey, it’s the long lost football star,” a vaguely familiar voice called to us. “It’s about time you got your ass out of bed.” I looked up and saw my friend from years ago, Rob Lang, standing at the road holding his girlfriend’s hand.

“Hi Rob. Hi Missy,” Penny said as we stood and walked over to our friends.

“Rob! Rob Lang! It’s good to see you,” I said as I pumped his hand up and down. Turning to his girl, I added, “Missy Smith, you look as lovely as I remember from four years ago.”

“It’s Missy Lang now, Kyle,” Missy answered.

“You’re married?” I responded. “That’s fantastic. Congratulations.”

Turning to Penny, Rob asked, “You didn’t tell Kyle?”

“I never got the chance,” Penny said. “My guy got in last night around eleven, talked with his family for a few minutes and then we went to bed. He crashed before he could even give me a proper good night kiss.”

“Sorry about that,” I said, giving Penny a peck on the cheek. “I was up early and had a long day.”

“I know,” Rob agreed. “ESPN Mobile reported you had three touchdowns. That’s a good day’s work.”

“Thanks, It was a good day for me,” I said. “So... how long have you two been married?”

“Since June,” Missy said.

“A few weeks after I graduated,” Rob added. “How about you two? Have you set a date? You’ve been dating for like... four or five years?”

“Actually it was two and a half years in high school,” I explained. “We started dating again six months ago. We haven’t...”

“Yeah, we’ll see where we are at next winter, after Kyle moves in with me,” Penny inserted. “He’s doing his student teaching in Philly so he can be closer to me.”

“So, there is a good possibility for the two of you to get hitched,” Missy said.

“I don’t know...” I replied.

“Yes, there is,” Penny interjected. “We still have to deal with a lot of questions. Where is Kyle going to play football next season? Will I be able to get into veterinary school?”

“I see,” Rob said.

I looked over at Penny and arched my eyebrows questioningly. This was the first she had indicated she was expecting us to have a long term future together. In the past the most she would say is, ‘We’ll see.’ Penny returned my look with a smile.

“That’s sounds really wonderful for the two of you,” Missy said. “You make such a nice couple.”

“Where are the two of you living?” I asked.

“We have an apartment in Gettysburg,” Missy explained. “I have one more semester before I graduate.”

“Things couldn’t have worked out better for us,” Rob added. “I snagged an IT job for the college. Another guy and I take care of all the computers and other hardware for the athletic department. I get to hang around with the football team even though I’m not a member anymore. It’s great to continue working for Coach Streeter.” Rob had been a cornerback for the Division III Gettysburg College Bullets for the past four seasons.

“That’s excellent,” I agreed.

“Are you guys heading for the beach?” Rob asked. “We’re on the way to catch up to the rest of our friends.”

“We are,” I agreed.

“Knowing you played a game in State College yesterday,” Rob teased. “I bet the two of you took advantage of the quiet campsite for a little morning loving.”

“Well... yeah, you know how it is,” I agreed. “You two are practically honeymooners. You probably were doing the same thing.”

“No, actually I was feeling a little sick this morning,” Missy answered. She gave us a sheepish smile. “I’ve had this a lot lately... morning sickness.”

“You’re having a baby!” Penny squealed before hugging Missy.

“Is this a good thing?” I asked Rob as the girls talked excitedly.

“It is. It is a very good thing,” Rob answered. “It’s sooner than we had planned but it’s a good thing. We originally planned to get married next winter after Missy graduated.”

“How far along are you?” Penny queried.

“Four and a half months,” Missy answered.

“You can’t be,” I said. “You’re too thin to be that far along. I can’t even tell you’re carrying a child.”

“That’s a kind thing to say, Kyle,” Missy answered. “If I take this loose T-shirt off, you’ll know right away that I’m pregnant.”

“You look lovely, Missy,” I said.

“Just like I keep telling you, honey,” Rob added.

The girls continued talking about Missy’s condition as Penny and I finished gathering our things for the beach. I drove our friends down to the beach. Penny and I joined my family. Rob and Missy joined the rest of the Langs, Pattons, Randolphs and Watsons. We would join them after lunch.

Penny and I helped Andy, Noah, Connor and Hunter build a sand castle. We walked the boys out into the surf and let them bounce in the waves and get wet. Hunter wanted to swim without holding my hand. He threw a fit, forcing Mom to give my little brother a time-out. Hunter was better behaved after that. Rose got a taste of the ocean when Will held her as the waves washed around the two of them. Rose laughed and giggled as she shared her first experience in the water with her dad.

Penny and I bought lunch at the food stand by the boardwalk entrance to the beach. We brought our food back to eat with my family. Penny and I headed off to meet up with our West Virginia friends when we finished eating. Mom ordered Andy to come along and be a kid for a few hours. She would look after the twins for the afternoon.

Rob, Missy and their relatives and friends were down the beach a little from us. We found my sister Liz and her boyfriend Wyatt had been hanging with them for the day. The gang greeted me warmly after my four year absence from Henlopen.

Tim Randolph was there with his long time girlfriend, Kelly Lee. My long ago temptress and Tim’s twin sister, Alicia, didn’t make it this year. She was the editor for her student newspaper. She couldn’t get free from campus. Tim’s nineteen year old brother Tyler was there with his girlfriend Jenna Douglass.

Wes Patton was there with his girlfriend Molly Short. Wes's sister Trish made it too, but without her boyfriend Sean. Trish was a sophomore at Virginia Tech. Sean was a junior. He had to stay back on campus this weekend.

Missy's cousins Josh and Lauren Watson made it there. Lauren was starting her second year at Hood College in Frederick, Md. Lauren was currently unattached, having dumped her freshman year boyfriend over the summer. Lauren seemed quite interested in Andy.

Josh strutted like the big man on campus. He was the quarterback for the Martinsburg Bulldogs, the #4 ranked team in West Virginia. He and his family arrived late Friday night after his team thrashed the Potomac Valley High School team.

The would-be stud picked up a girl, Alexis Scott, Saturday morning. Alexis was a cute sixteen year old from Lansdale, Pa. I had to admit that Josh had developed considerable since he was a skinny kid learning about French kissing with my sister four years ago. Alexis stayed glued to her young stud while we hung with the gang.

Penny and I enjoyed catching up with our old friends from West Virginia. They seemed to enjoy my stories about playing football for Penn State. Nearly half the guys had played football in high school. Rob had played, and Tyler currently played, football for their Division III colleges. Both guys were cornerbacks.

We swam a bit and played volleyball in the afternoon. We enjoyed an afternoon ice cream together too. Lauren paid close attention to Andy, making sure she was close by him all afternoon.

Who was I to judge? I was sure Lauren wanted to have a romp with Andy, as she had done four years ago. I suspected, but Andy wouldn't confirm, that the two of them had done the horizontal mambo regularly on past Labor Day weekends.

Andy's dutiful father routine was fine, but he also was a normal, horny nineteen year old that needed to have a piece occasionally. It wasn't good for him to be a hermit. If Andy never dated while he was in college, how would he find a wife to help him raise his boys when he finished college? The three of them couldn't live at home forever.

Our group split up at dinner time. Andy, Liz, Wyatt, Penny and I headed to our campsite. Our West Virginia friends headed back to their sites. We agreed to meet later down at the beach for an evening campfire.

Dad grilled hot dogs and hamburgers. Mom made a couple side dishes. We had more of the chocolate cake Mom brought from a bakery near home. We lingered after dinner, talking and playing with the boys. Rose enjoyed being held by her aunt, uncles and grandparents.

Liz, Wyatt, Penny and I headed for the beach around 7:30 for campfire with our friends. Andy stayed at camp with the boys until their 8:00 bedtime. He would join us after he read the boys their story and they were safely asleep.

I brought a small cooler Penny had filled with some of Dock Street Brewery's Pale Ale. We met the Langs, Pattons, Watsons and Randolphs near their campsites and headed for the beach. Wes Patton and Tim Randolph brought coolers too. We got a small campfire going on a secluded section of beach. Everyone sat, circling the fire. We talked about the typical kinds things college students talk about – movies, music, the things going on in our lives and, of course, sex.

Beers got passed around the circle. I said nothing when Liz and Wyatt took some. My days of being Liz's big brother/protector were over. She's a high school senior. She needed to learn to control her own behavior.

Penny's Pale Ale was quite tasty. I enjoyed it. Some of our West Virginia friends tried it and agreed. Alexis, Josh Watson's date, seemed hesitant about the beer but drank it anyway. Missy limited herself to bottled water mixed with a straw of Crystal Light flavoring, to protect her unborn child.

Andy showed up about forty-five minutes after the rest of us. Lauren Watson grabbed a beer for Andy when he arrived and sat down with him to cuddle, like the rest of the couples were doing.

The older couples like Penny and me, Rob and Missy, and Tim and Molly sat together near one side of the circle. The younger couples tended to congregate at the other end of the circle. My peers cuddled and talked as the night wore on. The younger kids moved on to kissing and making out. It was no surprise as the night wore on that younger couples disappeared to do more than make out. Andy and Lauren were among the couples who drifted off into the darkness.

We older couples were luckier. We shared tents with our partners. We didn't need to deal with hard ground, sand getting into things and mosquitoes buzzing you as you tried to make love to your girl. It was much better in your own tent on top of a sleeping bag and mat.

Liz and Wyatt headed back to our campsite around a quarter to eleven, leaving just enough time to make their curfew. Penny and I decided to go back too. We thanked everyone for a fun evening. The people not otherwise preoccupied with making out, wished us luck with school and football. Andy and Lauren were still gone when we left. That was OK. Andy was nineteen and didn't have a curfew. He asked me earlier to warn Mom and Dad that he'd be out until midnight or a little later.

Wyatt and Liz made a good couple. He was a friendly kid who treated my sister well. I liked Wyatt but doubted I would see him again when I came home at Thanksgiving. Cody Stevens held the record for dating my sister. He lasted six and a half months. Josh

Strickler was a close second with almost six months. Wyatt had dated Liz at least since March, so his days as Liz's boyfriend were probably numbered.

The four of us shared some leftover cake with Mom and Dad before retiring to our tents. Mom, Dad and Hunter shared one campsite with Andy and the twins. Wyatt, Liz, Penny and I took the second campsite. Will, Abby and Rose were on the third site. I think Mom and Dad planned it that way on purpose. They could keep the two couples most likely to make X rated sounds farther from the neighboring campsites.

Penny and I stripped and crawled under our shared sleeping bag/blanket and began making out. We could hear Liz and Wyatt in the next tent. They tried to be quiet but we still heard them as they got intimate again.

Our morning lovemaking had taken the edge of our most urgent needs. Our first lovemaking session was long and most satisfying. We tried to be discreet but apparently weren't. We overheard Liz and Wyatt giggling and whispering about us when we climaxed and got quiet again. Oh well.

The two fell asleep before we shared ourselves again. We could hear Wyatt snoring gently next door. Penny and I made love a second time. It was wondrous. We lay cuddled when we were done, our desires quenched.

I gave Penny a kiss as we held each other. "I DO love you totally, sweetie," I declared. "I'm the luckiest guy in the world."

"I'm pretty lucky too," Penny answered after kissing me on the cheek.

"When we were talking with Rob and Penny this morning, you seemed pretty confident about our future," I said. "Do you really see us staying together past graduation? Usually you say 'we'll see,' when we talk about our future."

"We haven't talked about this since May, Kyle," Penny answered. "I was dubious back in March when you suggested we try dating again. I wasn't sure this would work. April went OK. May and the beginning of June was fantastic. It reminded me of what we had back in high school. That is why I agreed to share an apartment with you and to us being a couple again."

"I'm so happy you did," I said.

"We've been doing this for six months, Kyle," Penny said. "I do believe we're going to make this work. We only have four months until we move in together."

"We'll see each other in a month," I added. "The Michigan game should be a good to watch and the rest of the weekend will be great too."

"Did you get a ticket for me?" Penny asked.

“I did,” I answered. “Coach Burton set things up for you to watch the game with the coaches’ families.”

“Oh... OK,” Penny said, less than enthusiastically. “I thought maybe you could find me seats with Bev Umble or Steph Kolmar.”

“They sit in the student section,” I said. “I can’t get you seated there without a student ID. You’ll do fine in with the coaches’ families. You remember Mrs. Caffrey from elementary school, don’t you?”

“Oh... yeah, I do,” Penny agreed.

“Sit with her,” I suggested. “I’m sure Mrs. Caffrey would be delighted to see you again.”

“I forgot,” Penny said. “Mr. Caffrey is your coach now, isn’t he?”

“He sure is,” I replied. “Karen is a nice lady and you’ll love their kids. Jonathan is thirteen and a Penn State fanatic. He’ll tell you everything you ever wanted to know about our team. Emily is nine years old and a real sweetie. You’ll love her.”

“OK,” Penny agreed. “Were you able to set up things for the game at the end of October?”

“Absolutely,” I replied. “I have a ticket for you for the game against Northwestern on October 27th. It’s with the coaches’ families too. Is that OK?”

“It’ll work, Kyle,” Penny agreed.

“Steph will put you up both Friday nights,” I explained. “Coach Burton cocoons the team in a local hotel the night before home games to make sure everyone stays focused and gets a good night’s sleep. You and Steph can move over to our apartment on Saturday night and stay with Trevor, Chip and me.”

“What about Damian?” Penny asked, innocent of Damian’s secret.

“He always stays at his lover’s apartment on Saturday nights,” I explained. “He’s more comfortable there.”

“I met Billy in April,” Penny said. “He seems nice.”

“You know about Billy?” I gasped.

“Of course, silly,” Penny responded. “You told me about them when I visited in April.”

“I’d forgotten.”

“Get some sleep, honey,” Penny said as she gave me a kiss. “You have a long drive back to school tomorrow.”

“Are you ready to sleep too, honey?” I asked as I gave her a kiss.

“I am,” Penny agreed. We exchanged good night kisses, spooned together and fell asleep.

Chapter 66

I made it back to campus around four pm, in plenty of time to make the team dinner Labor Day evening. Coach Burton had offensive and defensive meetings after dinner to review our performance against Temple. The offensive meeting was very positive. The coaches had to stretch to find things to chew us out about. The entire team assembled in the auditorium when the reviews were done.

Coach Burton launched into a preview of our next opponent – The University of Kentucky. The press was going to have a field day with this game. Coach Galen Hall, the previous Penn State offensive coordinator before Coach Burton, had resurrected Kentucky to football respectability. He retired last fall and turned his program over to his offensive coordinator, Jay Paterno. This was going to be Jay's first game in Beaver Stadium since he left seven years ago to become the head coach at Brown. Kentucky had lured him back to the FBS to become the offensive coordinator and heir-apparent to Galen Hall three years ago.

Coach Jay and Coach Hall had heavily recruited ex-Penn Staters for their coaching staff. Shane Conlan was his defensive coordinator. Zach Mills, a PSU QB from a dozen years ago, handled quarterbacks. Tony Hunt handled running backs. Ryan Reynolds, who I worked with closely my first two seasons when he was a grad assistant with us, coached their tight ends. Joe Jurevicius, newly retired from the NFL, was coaching their wide receivers. Mike Zordich coached their defensive backs.

Coach Burton warned us that playing the Wildcats was going to be like looking in a mirror. Their offensive and defensive systems were similar to ours. Our talent and will to win would be the difference in the game. We weren't going to surprise them with anything we did.

I finally got to catch up on the rest of the Saturday's games after the team meeting on Monday night. There weren't many surprises. #1 Texas took out Wyoming, #2 Florida beat Bowling Green 48-10. Ed Fritz had an excellent three quarters before his red shirt freshman backup came in to finish the game. #3 Oklahoma beat North Texas. #4 Alabama beat San Jose State. The Crimson Tide won, but needed a fourth quarter drive to win 35-29. #5 USC easily handled Hawaii.

Boise State, Ohio State, Notre Dame and Michigan won handily, keeping their spots in the polls behind our team. Jeremy North had a dozen tackles and a sack helping the Fighting Irish to beat Boston College. Rutgers rolled over Norfolk State. Hal Long kicked three PATs and two field goals in the win. Mike Johanson had an interception in Texas' victory. Drew McCormick's West Virginia fought a tough game against Florida State. Drew carried the ball twenty-two times for 112 yards and a touchdown. Drew's contribution wasn't enough. The Mountaineers lost 24-21 to the Seminoles.

I was pleased with how my last friend's team did. Jake Kring won the dubious honor of quarterbacking the Syracuse Orangemen. Jake's team managed to beat Toledo 31-27. Jake threw two touchdowns but also threw two interceptions. For once I could send off congratulations to my buddy.

The news from the NFL was interesting too. Tyler Madden made the Giants squad. No surprise there for a second round draft pick. Mehmed Marsic was put on the Falcons' practice squad. Andrew Perkins beat out the 49er's current kicker. That was unusual but excellent news for my friend. Salim Rogers, Ben Walker and Vlad Lazlo were all cut by their teams. Evan Foster won the starting tight end job for the Saints over aging Jeremy Shockey. Shockey had too many injuries in the past two years to play at the pro-bowl level like when he was younger. There was one more surprise from the Saints. They put Max Rosen on their team – not practice squad, but on their active roster.

The week's practices went well. The coaches, Damian, Trevor and I kept the focus on preparing for Kentucky. Chip, Christian, Brian, Bob Smith, Damian and I put in extra time in the evenings studying Kentucky's defense to make sure we were prepared for Saturday. Coach Burton was right. Kentucky's defense did look like ours.

The Wildcats used a Cover 3 zone defense as their base defense. Christian, Brian and I would see three defenders in deep zones through most of the game. Chip was going to need to hit us in the seams between the zones if we wanted any deep balls. He also would need protection so he had enough time to complete the balls. They wouldn't be easy throws, but we knew Chip had the arm to put the ball on the spot if our offensive line gave him time.

I noticed last season that Kentucky used an extra d-back to shadow Eric Peters when Florida played them. It complicated getting completions to Eric. The Gators' other receivers picked up the slack. Christian and Brian would do the same if they managed to slow me down. All of us were confident we would be able to beat the Wildcats.

I gave Ed Fritz a call Wednesday night. We had a long talk about his observations playing the Wildcats. Ed's team played them every year. Ed put Eric Peters on the phone with me too. Eric had a few suggestions for me specifically. Gators fans would be happy to see our team take down an SEC Eastern Division opponent.

Trevor, Damian, Dave McCall and I met Thursday after dinner to discuss who would chair our Thon effort this year. Our discussion focused on Brian Henson, Jeff Knox, Marco Cuchiella and Jon Stafford. I championed Brian but the others preferred to have Jon run the Thon.

"Don't forget, Coach," Trevor added as we were breaking up at the end of the meeting.
"You're dancing this year. There's no debate. You're dancing."

“I don’t know if that’s possible,” I replied. “I will be teaching in Philly next winter. Anyway, who will I dance with? Penny isn’t a student here. I doubt they would allow a non-student to dance.”

“I’ll find out, Coach,” Dave offered. “I’m sure with your record of support for Thon, they will let you dance with whoever you want.”

“You don’t need to make a special effort for me,” I countered.

“It’s no problem, Coach,” Dave answered. “I’m happy to do it.”

Whether I liked it or not, my friends were going to get me out on the dance floor next February. I knew Dave was right. Even if the Thon rules said non-students couldn’t dance, they would make an exception for me and Penny. I needed to have a talk with my lover when she got to campus next month.

The week flew by before the Kentucky game, filled with classes, homework, practices and video sessions and meetings. I talked with Dad Thursday evening. He and Liz were attending my game that weekend. They planned to take me out to dinner after the game. I agreed to the Boalsburg Steak House. Dad made reservations for us. Kelly wished me good luck at the game when I saw her at class. She promised to cheer for me.

I did some video study after dinner Friday night with Brian, Chip, Christian and Bob. We met the blue buses outside the Lasch Building at eight o’clock for the short trip over to Toftrees. The night was uncharacteristically cool for the 7th of September. The day had been overcast with a high of 70 degrees.

Our wakeup call was at 6:30 Saturday morning. I watched the weather while Trevor showered. They predicted steady 20-25 mile an hour winds coming from the northwest through most of the day. We would have scattered clouds and the temperature wasn’t expected to go over sixty-six degrees. This was probably a blessing. State College could hit eighty-five or ninety degrees in early September and make conditions hell on the football field for us players.

We went through our normal preparations when we returned to the Lasch Building. We dressed and boarded the buses for the stadium. The usual big friendly crowd cheered us as we debarked on Curtin Avenue and marched into the locker room. We went outside to warm up after arriving at Beaver Stadium.

I spotted my friend and mentor Ryan Reynolds across the field as I finished my preparations. I jogged over to say hi.

“Hey, Kyle. It’s good to see you,” Ryan said as we shook hands. “How’s stardom treating you?”

“I’m managing,” I replied. “I’m learning to deal with the fans and press. How about you? Do you still like coaching?”

“I love it, Kyle,” Ryan answered. We talked for a couple minutes. Anders Voight saw us and joined the confab. Ryan and Anders had been friends when Ryan was a grad assistant with us. We talked for a few more minutes.

“Hey, Kyle, I should introduce you to Joe, our wide receivers coach,” Ryan said as we wound up our talk. “You two have a lot in common.”

“Sure, that’s cool, Ryan,” I agreed.

“Hey Joe, come here a second,” Ryan yelled down the line to the tall, ex-wide receiver. Joe walked gingerly up the field to our group. “Hey Joe, I thought you should meet Kyle Martin. You two have a lot in common.”

“Kyle, it’s good to put a face to the voice I’ve talked with on the phone before,” Joe Jurevicius replied as we shook hands. I noticed Joe was maybe half an inch taller than me. It looked like he was carrying a few more pounds than me too. Still, both of us had height and size to dominate defensive backs.

“Thanks Joe, it’s good to actually meet you,” I agreed. “I appreciate all the advice you gave me when I was starting out.”

“You’ve certainly used it well,” Joe replied. “I think you found some more things out on your own. I spotted you doing some things while I was watching film from last week’s game and from last year that I know Bobby and I never did.”

“Thanks, I appreciate the compliment,” I responded. “How do you like coaching? It’s certainly a change from playing.”

“It was time to quit playing,” Joe said. “I’ve got way too many miles on these creaky knees. I had to choose between coaching and broadcasting. Jay offered me a spot, so here I am.”

“Good luck today,” I said as we parted. “...but not too much luck.”

“You too,” Joe agreed. “Don’t abuse our DBs too much.”

“I’ll let them survive,” I agreed as I headed across the field. Turning, I called back to Joe, “I’m going to call you in the winter for Thon. We still need your contribution.”

“I can probably help out,” Joe called back. “I doubt anyone in Kentucky will disown me if I contribute to a Penn State charity since it is to help with cancer.”

I headed inside after warm-ups. We had a light lunch before doing our final preparations. We lined up in the tunnel and waited until the Blue Band struck up our fight song to charge onto the field. Trevor, Damian, Coach Burton and I led the way.

We got settled on the sideline as the Kentucky Wildcats took the field. Coach Burton gave Damian, Trevor and me our final instructions before we trotted out to midfield to meet the referee and the Wildcat captains. It was Trevor's turn to be our spokesman.

Kentucky called heads on the coin toss. It was tails. Trevor called for us to receive the kickoff. Kentucky chose to defend the western end zone so they would have wind in their favor to start the game.

The twenty mile an hour wind aided Kentucky's kicker. The ball sailed into the end zone where Tanner was forced to down the ball. Our offense assembled at our 20 yard line.

We found out pretty quickly that our offensive line could give Chip time to throw but had trouble moving the Wildcat linemen off the line of scrimmage. It was going to be a long day for Damian and our other runners. The good news was that Chip had time to work our passing game.

Kentucky shadowed me with an extra d-back while putting everyone else in their base Cover 3 zone defense. That was no surprise. The whole college football world knew how dangerous I was. Kentucky did their research. They assigned a guy to Brian more often than not, too. Four runs and seven passes took us down the field. Chip fired the ball to Christian in stride in the seam between the short and deep zone. Brian and I blocked our guys out of the way while Christian bolted for the end zone.

The wind forced Jared Gray's kickoff down around Kentucky's 5 yard line. Their return man carried the ball out to their 27. The Wildcats' offense did remind me of ours. They played with three wide outs, a tight end and a tailback. Their offensive line protected their redshirt freshman quarterback well.

Coach Jay Paterno used rollouts, a screen play and a couple option plays to slow Trevor, Bill and the rest of our pass rush. The Wildcats moved the ball down the field much too easily for our tastes. Their QB rolled out and scooted into the end zone to even the score to 7-7 each.

Both offenses continued moving the ball though the first half, almost at will. We traded scores. Christian got loose for another TD. They scored a field goal. Christian's success forced the Wildcats to back off Brian and me. I got the next touchdown. The Wildcats got the ball back with a couple minutes left. They drove the length of the field but didn't have enough time to score a TD. They settled for a field goal. We led by an uncomfortable 24-20 margin when we went into the locker room at halftime.

Coach Adams and Coach C collected their players in separate meetings when we got into the locker room. Coach Adams preached to our offense to keep working the way we had

been doing. It was critical that we keep scoring on every possession to take the pressure off our defense. Coach outlined a few wrinkles we would add in the second half but we wouldn't make any major changes.

Coach Burton spoke briefly to the whole team before turning the floor over to Trevor.

"I'd like to thank the offense for saving our asses in the first half," Trevor began. "Defense, it's time to step up and be counted. We have got to get STOPS on these guys. Who's going to stand up and show this SOBs who we are?"

"I thought I spotted something on the film last week," Shawn said as he stood in response to Trevor's challenge. "I confirmed the tell as I watched these guys operate in the first half. I GUARANTEE the next ball coming my way will be a pick. Count on it!"

"The best teams play big when things are tough," I barked. "Who are we?"

"WE ARE... PENN STATE!" the team responded as one.

"WHERE ARE WE GOING?" I demanded.

"ON TO PHOENIX!"

"KICK ASS IN THE SECOND HALF!" Damian shouted as we headed for the field again.

Kentucky took possession of the ball to start the second half. Coach C added a wrinkle to our defense to confuse the Wildcats. We lined up in a 3-4 defense instead of our standard 4-3. Trevor stood up and took half a step back from the line like a linebacker instead of lining up with his hand on the ground the way Mike Pollard, Jerry Whitfield and Bill Daugherty did.

Coach C used Trevor as a wild card, shifting him along the line until the snap. Kentucky knew Trevor would rush the passer, but they didn't know where he'd come from. They weren't able to double team him anymore.

The extra pressure on their quarterback helped but the Wildcats still moved the ball down the field on us. Six shallow passing plays moved them down to our 42 yard line. On the seventh play Trevor lined up a half yard off the line of scrimmage on Josh Bruno's right.

At the snap Trevor took half a step back like he was dropping into coverage. Bill Daugherty rushed around the left tackle drawing him outside. Mike Pollard bullrushed forward, drawing the left guard's attention. Trevor dashed into the opening between the guard and tackle. The Wildcat tailback tried for a cut block, but Trevor hurdled him and dashed for the QB. The kid did well, getting the ball away a split second before Trevor leveled him.

The poorly thrown ball fluttered down the field. GJ DeLuca alertly snagged it before a Wildcat could touch it. He picked up about five yards before he was tackled. It was our ball on our 28 yard line.

Our offense didn't fool around. We moved the ball crisply down the field with short to medium passes. On the sixth play the Wildcats had me double covered. The cornerback slipped as he started his backpedal. Chip spotted the error and fired the ball to me even though I wasn't the primary receiver on the play. I boxed the free safety out with my body, making a clean catch.

I spun away as the safety tried to tackle me. He didn't wrap me up properly, so I broke loose and sprinted down the field. Another d-back shoved me out of bounds at the Wildcat 6 yard line.

Coach Burton sent out Tanner Riggs to join Christian, Brian and me. We lined up with trips right (three wide receivers on the right side) and me alone on the left. We hoped the three receivers would leave me single covered. Kentucky didn't do that. I ended up double covered in the back of the end zone.

Chip spotted Bob Smith coming over the middle on a curl a couple yards short of the end zone. He fired the ball to our young tight end. Bob was hit immediately by an outside linebacker. Bob managed to use his 235 pounds to bull his way into the end zone anyway. Touchdown! Jared Gray completed the PAT. Score: Penn State 31, Kentucky 20

Our better defensive pressure forced Kentucky to be more conservative with their passes. We limited them to a field goal on their next possession. Tanner Riggs almost broke the kick return on our next possession. We took possession of the ball on our 47 yard line.

Coach Burton called for our wildcat immediately. The play was a simple end around the right. Chip blocked the backside pursuit. Bob and Brian sealed the front side to get me to the corner. Kentucky's players were disciplined and knew I could throw the ball. The cornerback on Christian kept him covered, so I tucked the ball in and ran around the end of the line. I picked up ten yards before I was shoved out of bounds.

We went deep the next play. Christian and I drew double coverage, so Chip threw the ball to Brian down the middle. Chip was under heavy pressure and floated it too much. The nickel back snagged the ball. Brian couldn't tackle him. Chip slid wide to my side of the field. I was able to run the d-back down as Chip slowed him and penned him against the sideline. Kentucky had the ball on our 42 yard line.

We couldn't hold them. The Wildcats needed seven plays, but they pushed their way into the end zone for a touchdown. Score – Penn State-31, Kentucky-30.

The wind aided Kentucky's kicker, pushing the kickoff deep into the end zone. Tanner took the touchback to give us possession on our 20 yard line. Five plays, two runs to

keep the defense honest and three passes – 12 yards to Christian, an incomplete and 8 yards to Bob moved us near midfield.

Coach Burton called for another end around option play. Greg Nowicki snapped the ball to me. Brian Henson, in the slot on the weak side, occupied the outside linebacker as I sprinted across the field for the corner. Kentucky's well disciplined d-back kept Jared Cantrell covered. I tucked the ball under my left arm and sprinted down the sideline. Jared blocked his guy out of the way as I sprinted by.

The free safety made a desperate tackle at the 5 yard line, catching my heel. I tumbled and rolled to the ground in the end zone. The ref marked me down at the 2 yard line.

Coach Burton called a fade route to the corner of the end zone on the next play. I out jumped and out muscled two defenders to catch the touchdown. Jared made the PAT to give us a more comfortable 38-30 lead.

Shawn Byrd got the chance to make good on his promise on Kentucky's next possession. On the fifth play of the drive they ran a repeat of the play he had diagnosed earlier. Shawn cut in front of the receiver, snagged the ball, and sprinted down field for the end zone. Kentucky's QB caught Shawn and shoved him out of bounds at Kentucky's 34 yard line.

Coach Burton called a tailback screen first to slow down Kentucky's rush on Chip. Damian picked up a dozen yards. Chip hit me for a slant for another eight yards the next play. Brian caught a touchdown on the following play. Jared drilled the PAT through the uprights. Score: Penn State-45, Kentucky-30

Now that it was the fourth quarter, the wind drove Jared's kickoff deep into the end zone. Kentucky was forced to go eighty yards to score. Our defense gave up any pretense of playing the run. We blitzed to add to their confusion. Kentucky still managed to move the ball spasmodically down the field. Our defense forced them to accept a field goal instead of a TD. Score: Penn State-45, Kentucky-33.

Coach Burton used quick outs to the wide receivers and dump offs to Damian in the flat to burn time off the clock. Damian barreling out of the backfield with a full head of steam is a daunting sight for a 180 pound d-back. We used twelve plays to move the ball down the field. Kentucky forced us to try a field goal. The snap was bad and Jon Stafford, our holder, was forced to try to scramble and try to carry the ball for a first down. He didn't make it.

Kentucky took over with three minutes left at their 14 yard line. Trevor and our defense kept enough pressure on the Wildcats to make sure their time and timeouts ran out before they got into position for a score.

We celebrated our 45-33 victory over JoePa's son's team to the cheers of 107,000 fans. Coach Paterno normally watched our games from the coaches' box and gave our staff

suggestions as he observed the action. This game, he came down to the field for the first time since his retirement as we finished our last offensive drive.

JoePa waited beside Coach Burton until the game ended and then accompanied his successor across the field to meet Coach Jay. The media swarmed around the three men as they met and talked at the end of the contest. Coach Jay and Coach Burton shared long ties to Penn State.

Jay had been a raw freshman during Coach Burton's red-shirt senior year in 1989. They continued their association while my coach worked as a grad assistant and later wide receivers coach while Jay was a member of the team and later was a grad assistant. Their association continued until Coach Burton left to be the offensive coordinator at Lehigh in 1996. My coach returned to Penn State when Jay left to coach Brown University in 2005. The three men talked much longer than the perfunctory greetings normally exchanged at midfield.

I did my interviews with local and national media before leaving the field. I praised everyone involved in our victory. Chip had thrown for over 400 yards, completing almost 70% of his passes and made six TDs. Christian's stats were best among the wide receivers. He had caught eight passes for 152 yards and two TDs. I caught seven passes for 120 yards and two TDs. I also ran for 57 yards on two carries. Brian had six passes for 102 yards and a TD. Bob Smith had five catches, as did Damian.

Hopefully our offense would play as well next week when we went out to Lincoln to play Nebraska's Cornhuskers. Our defense had better improve too. If it didn't, we would find ourselves on the wrong end of the score.

I gave Dad and Liz a call when I got in the locker room. We arranged a time to meet after I showered, changed and did my duty at the post-game press conference. I met Dad and Liz outside the Lasch Building a little after five o'clock. Dad had moved the car over to the Lasch Building parking area. We took off for Boalsburg and a nice steak dinner.

We were a little early for our six o'clock reservations. We hung out in the bar while we waited for dinner. I enjoyed a beer. Dad and Liz stuck to sodas. Half a dozen patrons came over to congratulate me on my game while we waited for our table.

Dad and I both ordered the generous cut of prime rib for dinner. Liz was satisfied with a New York strip. I caught up on some of the happenings at home since last weekend. Liz reported that our high school team went down to Drumore Friday night and walloped them 50-13.

Dad reported twenty-seven agents had returned questionnaires. Five more agents' actions had put them on my 'do not consider' list. Dad planned to start checking references in the next few weeks.

Liz revealed some information on her love life. She and Wyatt had a big fight at school on Wednesday. By Friday they had split up. As usual, details were lacking in her story. I wasn't surprised at the news.

I enjoyed the dinner. Liz seemed more mature than I was used to at home. That was a good thing. She was shopping for colleges now and would be on her own in a year. She had Penn, Princeton, Columbia, Bucknell and Dickinson on her list. Poor Dad, he was going to have to spend fortune for Liz the same as he did for Will. Luckily for him, Andy and I took care of our own college expenses.

We enjoyed dessert at the steakhouse before we departed. I had delicious Bailey's cheese cake. Dad and Liz had the chocolate mousse torte. Dad drove me back to campus. He wasn't in any hurry to leave State College. He wanted the football game traffic to clear before he headed for home. Dad let me know that he and Mom would be attending my home game against Kent State in two weeks. Andy's team was on the road at Richmond that weekend.

Trevor, Damian and Chip had everything set up for the party when I got back to the apartment. Amanda was Chip's date again this weekend. I talked with Steph during the party. She reported that this was the third weekend in a row that Amanda had been with Chip. The two hadn't announced they were a couple, but signs certainly pointed that direction.

Ashley Burton came again with the Davis twins and a few other freshmen friends. She was at the party last weekend when I was down at the shore. I guess if something bad was going to happen, Trevor, Damian, Chip and I would have been called into Coach Burton's office and read the riot act by now.

Kevin Peachey came to the party too. No surprise. If an eighteen year old freshman gets laid his first weekend on campus, he's going to tend to frequent the place it happened again, hoping for a repeat. Kevin attempted to talk up Ashley, but she wasn't interested at all. Kevin gave up after awhile and went in search of other female companionship.

I bumped into him later that evening in the kitchen as we both went for more beer.

"That Ashley is one cold fish," Kevin commented.

"Why do you say that?" I asked.

"Two weeks ago we had a good time in bed," Kevin explained. "Last weekend and tonight she won't even give me the time of day. Oh well, I guess that's OK. She was a sweet piece of ass that one time."

"...and you're wondering why she isn't interested in you?" I added.

"Yeah," Kevin agreed, nodding his head.

“Maybe your attitude has something to do with it,” I said. “You’re talking about her like she’s a piece of meat. You had fun in bed with her. Did she?”

“Have fun?” Kevin asked, clearly perplexed. “We screwed. Of course it was fun.”

“You had fun, did she?” I repeated. “Did she cum?”

“Umm... I don’t know...” Kevin replied. “I guess... maybe?”

“Clearly not,” I responded. “Thank God I had a bigger brother to teach me things.” After chuckling I added, “...and a then-his-girlfriend, now wife to set my sexist brain straight about the facts of life a long time ago.”

“Making babies and things?” Kevin said. “I know about that, Coach.”

“No, I mean how to pleasure a woman you’re with,” I explained. “You know... foreplay, oral...”

“Blow jobs?” Kevin interjected. “Yeah, they’re cool.”

“No, licking her pussy,” I replied. Kevin crinkled his nose and brow. “Don’t even say it. Yes, I mean it. Give her pussy a good licking. I hope you weren’t one of those guys that kiss her a bit, stick it in, rut around a little and explode.”

Kevin blushed as stared the floor briefly before looking back into my eyes. “I didn’t know any better.”

“Don’t feel too bad,” I replied. “I’m lucky to have an older brother to set me straight.”

I took about five minutes discuss my philosophy of pleasing women. Kevin listened closely. He shook his head when I finished.

“Damn, Coach, I wish I had someone talk to me like this when I was growing up,” Kevin said. “It all makes sense. I’m going to have to have a talk with Allen.”

“Allen?” I queried.

“You know, my brother....”

“Oh, yeah,” I responded. “He’s a running back on the middle school team.” I remembered Kevin’s fourteen year old kid brother who played for Jeremy in the end of school scrimmage last June.

“Actually Allen is JV now,” Kevin explained. “He and I are going to have to a long talk when I get home again.”

“Urgent talk?” I asked.

“No, probably not,” Kevin responded. “He has a girlfriend but I don’t think they’ve gotten much past holding hands and good night kisses. Thanks for the advice, Coach. Maybe I’ll give Ashley another shot and make it up to her.”

“Or maybe just move on,” I suggested. “Let the other girls talk about how much they enjoyed spending a night with you.”

Kevin headed off to try his luck with one of the other freshmen that evening. I never noticed if he was successful. The party started to break up around a quarter to one that evening. We cleaned up and headed to bed.

Sunday morning I picked up breakfast at the Mix and grabbed my copy of the Philadelphia Inquirer. I flipped immediately to the sports section to see how other teams fared yesterday.

Nothing dramatic happened with the five teams above us in the polls. #1 Texas beat UCLA handily. #2 Florida trounced the University of Central Florida 48-10. Ed played into the third quarter before handing his team over to his second string. #3 Oklahoma went to Baylor and won 34-21. #4 Alabama destroyed West Carolina 41-7.

#5 USC came east to the Carrier Dome and played Jake Kring’s Syracuse Orangemen. Jake’s team led a sloppy Trojan team at halftime 17-7. The Trojans woke up in the third quarter and dumped 21 points on the Orangemen in about ten minutes. The final score was 38-23.

Jeremy and Notre Dame faced off with Georgia Tech, winning 34-28 to avenge their early season loss last year. Jeremy had nine tackles and a sack on the game. Hal kicked two field goals and four extra points as Rutgers beat Florida International 34-21 down in Florida. Drew McCormick had twenty-one carries for 102 yards in West Virginia’s 38-28 victory over Marshall’s Thundering Herd.

I flipped the page to check out the local (to Philly) teams. Andy’s Blue Hens beat South Dakota State 27-17. Andy caught six passes for 95 yards and a TD. I found out in my emails later in the afternoon that Mom and Grandma Robinson took Noah, Connor and Hunter along to the game. The twins got to see their father in a live football game. Mom reported that the boys were fascinated by the crowds, the noise, the mascot and all the excitement of a college football game. They even watched Andy a little. On the way home Noah solemnly declared he wanted to be just like his dad when he grew up.

Ohio State and Michigan easily handled their inferior opponents to keep pace with our perfect record. Nebraska, our opponent next week, came east to play Pittsburgh. They

beat the Panthers 24-20 in a tight defensive struggle. The Cornhuskers strangled Pitt's normally productive offense. I was going to need to study the video of that game very carefully during the week.

One advantage I had with a girlfriend half a state away was that I had extra free time on Sundays to get ahead on my homework. I put a couple hours into my first history term paper and still had time to go over to the player's lounge and get in a couple games of pool. Josh Bruno and I beat Matt Frye and Chris Richardson followed by Bob Huber and Caleb Fuller. I called and talked with Penny until she had to get back to work on her veterinary school application. It was due in three weeks. We talked for about a half an hour.

I had another unfinished piece of business to take care of before our game with Nebraska – to contact my ex-girlfriend Julie Simpson and see if she wanted to visit Friday. I called home and talked with Dad. He was able to get me Julie's grandparents' phone number. I called them for Julie's info. The best they could do was to get me Julie's parents' phone number in Grand Island. I called and spoke with Bill Simpson, Julie's dad. He gave me Julie's e-mail. I shot off an invitation for her to have dinner with me Friday night at the restaurant of her choice in Lincoln. Obviously she would know the area better than me.

Coach Burton started our review of the game against Kentucky after dinner Sunday night. He got on our case pretty good. He predicted that we would need to play much better next week to have a prayer of beating Nebraska in their stadium.

Trevor, Damian and I passed the word through the team leadership that everyone needed to knuckle down and put extra time in to prepare for our early season showdown with the #11 team in the country. Nebraska had a daunting defense and a decent offense.

I was proud of my teammates. They listened to us and the coaches, focused and practiced and studied with intensity during the week. They executed the plays crisply. Mistakes were dealt with and corrected immediately. That was all good... right?

On Wednesday evening on the way from the Lasch Building to dinner at the Training Table Damian made a thought provoking comment to Trevor, Chip and me.

"I love the intensity everyone is showing on the field," Damian observed. "Are we missing something?"

"What?" all three of us replied.

"Football is supposed to be fun," Damian answered. "I don't want everyone so intense from practices that we play uptight."

"What do you propose we do about it?" I asked.

“I don’t know, but I think we need to talk about it,” Damian answered.

We decided to discuss it further at dinner. I gathered up Josh Bruno, Shawn Byrd, Christian Hunsecker and Greg Nowicki to broaden the brain power we would apply to the question. The consensus of our group was that Damian was right. We could use a little fun to get everyone loose and fresh for Saturday. We talked all though dinner and came up with two ideas.

The first was to have a game night at our hotel Friday night. The second idea would be at the end of practice on Thursday, if Coach Burton permitted it. We would do a fifteen minute scrimmage. The wrinkle was that the defensive players would play on offense and the offensive players would play defense in the scrimmage. The group agreed Trevor, Damian and I would tackle Coach Burton after dinner to get permission for the scrimmage.

The three of us headed for the front of the room after we bused our trays. Coach Burton was just getting up from the table when we got there.

“Do you have a minute to talk, Coach?” I asked.

“Sure,” Coach agreed as he sat his tray on the table again and sat down. “Have a seat. What do you want to talk about?” He waved for us to take seats at the coaches table with him.

“Damian had a good idea we wanted to discuss with you,” I replied.

“The guys have been working real hard to get ready for Nebraska,” Damian explained. “We’re worried that the guys may be uptight by the time we get to Lincoln. We’d like to remind them that football is fun.”

“Football is fun...” Coach said, smiling. “That’s a good observation. What do you have in mind?”

“The first idea is to have a game night in one of the conference rooms at our hotel on Friday night,” I said. “We would give everyone some time for fun and build our teamwork. We’d like to get sodas and snacks to go with the evening. Of course, it would be scheduled for after we finish our meetings and prep for Saturday’s game.”

“That’s easy,” Coach said. “It’s done. I will see to the arrangements at our hotel. Anything else?”

“We would like to use the last fifteen minutes of tomorrow’s practice for a scrimmage,” Trevor said. “The fun part will be that the defensive players will play offense in the scrimmage and Coach, Damian and his crew will play defense. It will put a different spin on things.”

“Of course, we only do this if you and the other coaches think everyone is properly prepared for Saturday,” I added.

“I think we can spare fifteen minutes tomorrow,” Coach said. “I’ll get my staff to organize the details tomorrow morning.”

“Actually, I would like it to be less organized,” I said. “We’d like you and the other coaches to act as referees for the scrimmage. The players will organize it. We want to have three different scrimmages, one for each team.”

“It will have to be two hand touch,” Coach Burton said. “I don’t want Chip out on the field trying to tackle a linebacker pretending to be a running back.”

“Absolutely, Coach,” I agreed. “I just want the guys to blow off a little steam and have some fun.”

“I like the idea, captains,” Coach Burton said. “Let’s do it.”

“We’ll get the details organized,” I replied.

“No, let’s keep the whole thing impromptu,” Coach Burton countered. “Just for fun, like when they were kids and doing a pickup team out in the field.”

“OK,” I agreed. Trevor, Damian and I headed for the Lasch Building for our evening study sessions. Coach Burton may have wanted impromptu teams for the scrimmage but the three of us knew the plans and couldn’t help doing a little planning. Damian talked about how we would use the first string offensive personnel after our evening study sessions were finished. I’m sure Trevor did too.

After 75 minutes of regular practice on Thursday Coach Burton called the whole team together. “Coach Martin will take charge for the last fifteen minutes today,” our coach announced. “Take it away, Coach.”

“Everyone has worked very hard to get ready to take on Nebraska,” I announced. “Trevor, Damian and I want to thank you for your efforts at practice this week and ask that you exhibit the same determination and drive on Saturday when we take on the Cornhuskers. Damian made an excellent observation last night. ‘Football is fun.’ To further that idea, we are going to have an overtime style scrimmage. First team offense against first team defense. The ball will start at the 25 yard line. Second string and third string teams will also face each other. Here’s the twist. The defense will get possession of the ball and the offenses will try to stop them from scoring.”

“Coach Burton doesn’t want things to get carried away,” Trevor continued. “This will be two hand touch. The guys in the red jerseys may not tackle. Tanner Riggs and Jarrell Cook will be in charge of the second string teams. Mark Markovich and Will Jones will take charge of the third string. Team coordinators, you have five minutes to get your team organized.”

“The first string will play on the east field,” Damian announced. “The second team will take the north field. The third team will play on the south field. Our coaches will act as referees and scorekeepers.”

“I want to add one more thing gentlemen,” Coach Burton announced as the team started to scatter. “The top scoring offense and the defense that allows the fewest points will get a treat tomorrow night when we do our evening snack before curfew. Have some fun gentlemen.”

Damian and I collected our twelve players and got them organized. I had our normal offensive linemen line up like normal, except they would be stopping the ball this scrimmage. Greg Nowicki was given the choice of lining up with his hand down as a lineman or to stand up and play middle linebacker. Damian and Bob Smith took the outside linebacker spots. Christian and Brian became our cornerbacks. I assigned Chip to play free safety, where he would be furthest from the action and least likely to get himself hurt. Mitch Jackson would be our nickel back. Trevor and I agreed the previous evening that each team would accept the kicker or punter as a reserve player.

Trevor organized his team in a similar fashion. The lineman would play guards and tackles. Josh Bruno would be their center. He had done this a little in high school. Denzell Hunt would be their quarterback. He was his high school team’s backup quarterback in addition to playing defensive back.

Shawn Byrd and Jeff Knox played wide receiver. Dave McCall took the tailback slot. Brendan Hayden was Trevor’s fullback. Tony King took the tight end slot. Tony had played tailback and tight end in high school before settling into the defense here at State College.

Trevor’s team kept it simple at first. They planned to hand the ball off to Dave and let him follow Brendan into the line. Josh and Denzell fumbled the snap. Trevor was lucky to cover the ball up before I could pounce on it. Dave went on a sweep right next play. Damian and I caught Dave after a couple yard gain. On third down they tried a pass to Jeff Knox on an out route. Denzell didn’t have the best arm. The fluttering ball forced Brian and Jeff to switch roles back to their normal jobs. Jeff managed to keep Brian from intercepting the pass.

Jared Gray lined up as a shotgun quarterback on fourth down. The guys on my team chattered as Trevor’s team lined up, trying to figure what the hell was next. We lined up in a standard 4-3-4 defense, ready for who knows what. Josh Bruno managed to snap the

ball back to Jared cleanly. I shadowed Tony King on his curl route. The other pseudo d-backs followed their “receivers.”

Glances at Jared as I covered Tony shocked the hell out of me. Jared dropped back half a dozen steps and then dropped the ball on the ground. Damian screamed, “Drop kick!” Everyone on the field stopped and stared as Jared booted the ball off the ground and split the uprights. Coach Burton threw his hands in the air to signal a field goal.

“Is that legal?” I yelled across the field. The coaches refereeing our contests couldn’t stop laughing to answer.

“Drop kicks are legal, Coach,” Damian said as our first string defense laughed along with their coaches.

“Three points for Conwell’s team,” Coach Burton called out. We lined up at the 25 yard line to give them their next crack at the end zone. My team stopped a couple running plays for small gain. On the third play Christian snagged a pass intended for Jeff Knox.

Trevor’s team scored a TD on the third series when Dave McCall broke loose on a pitchout to the weak side of our defense. Time ran out before we could run another series.

The second team defense made two touchdowns. The third team defense did best at scoring. They made three TDs. My offense and the third team defense won the treat on Friday evening. The team joked and teased each other as we left the field to cleanup and dress for dinner. It was a little odd but the impromptu scrimmage seemed to accomplish its purpose. Get everyone loose.

Friday morning a parade of upper classmen football players headed from our apartments to the Lasch Building with our overnight bags, meeting a similar crowd of underclassmen coming from the dorms. Blue university buses delivered us to the airport for our 9:30 flight to Nebraska. We would be staying two nights in Lincoln. The Huskers preferred to play early season games at night to avoid the heat. TV probably would have forced the game into the evening anyway. #6 Penn State against #12 Nebraska did draw national attention. We were ABC’s feature prime time game for the night.

We had lunch on our charter flight. I spent my time studying the geography I was missing as we flew west. We had boxed lunches at noon. Our plan touched down in Lincoln around 1:30, which was 12:30 central time. After grabbing our luggage, coach buses took us across the Platte River to our downtown hotel, the Embassy Suites. We were located adjoining Nebraska’s Lincoln City Campus.

I roomed with Trevor, same as last year. Damian roomed with Chip. After we got settled I gave Julie Simpson a call.

“Hi Julie, it’s Kyle martin,” I said when Julie answered her cell phone.

“Kyle... it’s good to hear your voice,” Julie replied. “Where are you?”

“I’m in Room 412 of the Embassy Suites,” I replied. “I’m looking out over your campus from my window. Where are you?”

“I just finished my last class for the day,” Julie said. “I’m leaving the CBA now...” she chuckled. “The College of Business Admin Building, it’s a couple blocks from you. Do you want to meet now or later for dinner like we discussed in the e-mails?”

“It’ll have to be an early dinner,” I said. “I have to get downstairs in a few minutes for position meetings. I’ll be tied up until four o’clock.”

“It has to be early for me too,” Julie said. “We have a pep rally at 7:30 tonight. Some raggedy bunch of easterners showed up to play a football game with us tomorrow.”

“Yeah, I heard about that,” I teased. “We’re going to whip your farm boy asses too.”

“We’ll see, Kyle. We’ll see,” Julie countered. “Are you sure you want to invite Sean to come to dinner too?”

“Of course,” I responded. “Sean’s your boyfriend and I bet you having dinner with an ex-boyfriend will go a lot better if he’s there.”

“It’s very generous of you to offer to take both of us to dinner,” Julie said. “Do you want to give me a call when your meeting is over? Sean and I can head over and meet you at your hotel when you’re done.”

“That’s cool, Jules,” I said. I hadn’t used that diminutive in quite a few years. “Did you find somewhere nice for our dinner?”

“Sean and I thought Buzzard Billy’s Armadillo Bar and Grill would be good,” Julie replied. “It isn’t as crazy a place as its name suggests. You’ll enjoy it.”

“You know restaurants in Lincoln better than I do,” I said. “I put my trust in you. I’ll give you a call when my meeting is over this afternoon, Jules.”

“I’ll see you then, Kyle,” Julie agreed before ending the call.

Trevor and I headed downstairs to the Regents Ballroom. Room A was set up for banquets. A sign outside Room B said “Penn State Offense.” I went in there. Trevor headed down the hallway for his room. Coach Adams reviewed the game plan and everyone’s responsibilities at the meeting. He dismissed us a little before four o’clock.

I gave Julie another call. She and Sean met me in my hotel lobby about fifteen minutes later. We walked a couple blocks west on Q Street, the street my hotel was on, to get to Buzzard Billy's Armadillo Bar and Grill.

Buzzard Billy's was in an older three story brick building with a wide porch covering outdoor seating right up to the sidewalk. The temperature was still in the mid-eighties, so we went inside where it would be cooler. The waitress showed us to a table in the restaurant section away from the bar.

The waitress delivered menus and took our drink orders. I decided to try a locally brewed draft Scottish ale. Sean ordered a draft Coors. Julie ordered a glass of chardonnay.

"You still don't care much for beer, do you?" I teased after the waitress left.

"Did you and Julie do much drinking back in high school when you dated?" Sean asked.

"Just a little, honey," Julie replied. "Mostly at football team parties."

"Yeah, Zack Hayes could throw some humdingers," I said.

"Zack Hayes?" Sean asked. "The Packers' Hayes?"

"One and the same," I agreed.

Turning to Julie, Sean said, "You do know some very famous people, honey."

"It's not that big a deal, Sean," I said. "We had an excellent coach and a strong football program that gave me and my friends many opportunities. We've worked hard to take advantage of the opportunities."

We talked more about what Ed, Jeremy, Hal, Drew and Jake were doing. Julie was surprised to hear Jake was in a big time college program too. That was news to her.

The waitress came by and took our orders. I insisted that we try appetizers in addition to our entrees. We ordered Armadillo Eggs, Crawfish Crabcakes and Chicken Quesadillas for our appetizers. The Armadillo Eggs were chicken strips and jalapeno pepper strips wrapped in bacon. Julie ordered a Cobb Salad. Sean decided to have a Shrimp Po'boy. I decided on the New Orleans Shrimp Boil.

I repeatedly referred to Sean as Julie boyfriend as we talked and passed the time until our food came.

"Actually Kyle, Sean is my fiancé," Julie corrected after about five minutes.

"Oh my, I'm sorry," I apologized. "I didn't know. I didn't see your ring."

“It’s at the jewelers,” Julie said. “It’s getting fitted now.”

“My sweetie wouldn’t part with the ring for weeks, even though it didn’t fit correctly,” Sean added.

“This is wonderful news. Congratulations,” I asked. “How long have you been engaged?”

“Sean popped the question a month ago,” Julie said. “How about you, Kyle? Are you still dating that cute redhead from two years ago?”

“Kelly? No, we broke up last fall,” I said.

“Was that related to when you got arrested for drunk driving?” Julie asked. “Did your girlfriend get upset about your drinking?”

“It was related,” I agreed. “But it wasn’t the way you might think.” I related the story of my arrest, the roust by the football player hating cop and my eventual exoneration. “It’s typical of the media. News of my arrest was national front page news. When I got exonerated, nobody considered that front page news.”

“I guess there are drawbacks to being famous,” Sean observed.

“You better believe it,” I said.

Our dinners arrived. Julie enjoyed her salad. Sean liked his shrimp sandwich. My shrimp boil was OK. The shrimp were fresh and well cooked but the whole dish was bland. They billed it as a New Orleans Shrimp Boil but the spices I expected were missing.

We talked about our classes. Sean was doing his masters in agricultural engineering. Julie had one year to go on her undergrad in business management. I asked about Julie’s younger brother WJ.

WJ won the starting QB spot for his team, the Grand Island Islanders. His team was playing extremely well. They were tied for lead in A League, District 1. They played Kearney, Bryan and Columbus High Schools already this season and won all three games. They had a showdown game that night with Lincoln Northeast, the co-leader in their district.

Julie’s mom and dad were doing well. Bill Simpson loved running New Holland Ag’s Grand Island plant. They doubted they would be returning to Pennsylvania’s Lancaster County any time soon. Julie’s remark confused me. She explained that Lincoln was both state capitol and county seat – for Lancaster County, Nebraska.

The three of us skipped dessert. Julie had to get back to campus to help rally her fellow students to beat us tomorrow. I needed to get back to my hotel to study ways to beat her Huskers.

I gave Julie a hug and a kiss on the cheek when we parted. Sean and I shook hands and wished each other well. I was glad that I got to spend time with Julie. She had been special for me years ago in high school. I was glad her life was working out for her and Sean.

The offense spent an hour and a half Friday evening reviewing our game plan and Nebraska's tendencies. The team took over Ballroom A after the work session was done for our game night. Quite a few guys joined poker or blackjack games. Matt Frye brought his Risk game. Half a dozen guys spent the rest of the evening playing Risk. Coach Burton ordered pizzas for the winning teams of yesterday's scrimmages.

I watched the local news at ten o'clock after I went back to my room. WJ Simpson's Islander team beat Lincoln Northeast 38-31. WJ was the game's hero, throwing two TDs and running for two more. I sent an e-mail to Julie asking her to send my congratulations on to her younger brother.

I checked on-line to find out how my high school team fared. They beat a talented LS team 27-24. They needed a TD drive in the last two minutes with Cody carrying the ball into the end zone. Central also won, keeping them tied for the lead in Lancaster-Lebanon League, District 2.

Trevor and I were in bed by our eleven o'clock curfew. We got to sleep late Saturday morning since we had a late game that day. Breakfast was served from eight to nine am and was optional. All team members had to be downstairs for an eleven am brunch. We took buses over to Nebraska's Memorial Stadium after brunch.

We put our things in the locker room and went out on the field to check it out and get used to this unfamiliar stadium. Even though it was empty, Memorial Stadium looked impressive. I knew 86,000 fans would crowd the stadium in a few hours.

The weather was beautiful that afternoon, sunny with a few scattered clouds. The on-field temperature was around eighty degrees. It would climb in the next couple hours before falling by game time. A light breeze blew from the southwest. Weather wouldn't be a big factor in the game.

We headed back inside to dress and prepare for the game. Damian, Trevor and I, along with the other team leaders, checked out our charges to make sure everyone was fired up and ready to play. We could hear the throngs of Huskers faithful outside our locker room as they filled the big stadium.

The sights in the stadium were amazing when we came out to warm-up. It was a sea of red. I think every single fan dressed in red. It reminded me of Beaver Stadium when we had our white outs. These people clearly loved their Cornhuskers.

We got ourselves ready to play. My teammates seemed loose and confident. That was excellent. The Huskers cheerleaders were out entertaining the crowd as the fans arrived. I got a couple minutes to talk with Julie before I had to go inside. She wished me a good and safe game. I wished her and Sean the best for their future. I received a hug and a kiss on the cheek for my politeness before I headed inside again.

My next view of the crowd in Memorial Stadium was while my team waited in the visitor's tunnel as their Cornhuskers took the field. The big crowd roared approval as the Huskers players and coaches stormed the field. We were introduced to polite applause from the crowd.

Coach Burton gave Trevor, Damian and me a quick briefing before we went to the middle of the field to meet the referee and the Nebraska captains. Damian, our spokesman for the day, called tails on the coin flip. The coin came up tails. We elected to receive the ball first.

Nebraska's kicker dropped the ball down around our 3 yard line. Tanner fielded it cleanly and advanced behind his blockers. The Huskers' cover team was well disciplined. They kept to their lanes, hemming Tanner in. He shot through a small crack before being downed at our 31 yard line.

Our team ran at the beginning of our first two games this season, so Coach Burton changed things up. We ran a play action pass for our first play. The cornerback covering me stayed about ten yards off the line of scrimmage. I streaked down the field, eating up his cushion in half a second. The free safety came over to help. I was clear of the cornerback by the time I got twenty yards downfield. I glanced back to see if Chip had thrown the ball my way.

I was in time to see him dump the ball to Bob out in the flat to avoid the two Husker linemen about to flatten him. Bob was tackled almost immediately for a two yard gain. We tried fooling them with a delay draw on second down. They weren't fooled. Damian was tackled after a one yard gain.

Brian Henson lined up in the slot on my side on third down and seven yards to go. He streaked deep, pulling a nickel back and free safety deep. I ran a slant underneath Brian's route. The big Husker ends pushed in towards Chip but he got the ball out to me before he was shoved to the ground. A linebacker helped the cornerback tackle me. I gained nine yards for a first down.

We ran off-tackle left for a couple yards. Damian feinted left and then cut back right. The middle linebacker (Mike) didn't buy the fake. He dropped Damian for no gain. On

third and eight, I lined up in the slot on the right side between Christian and Bob. Brian lined up in my normal split end spot on the left.

Brian and I sprinted deep on the snap. I drew the nickel back and strong safety my way. Christian did a ten yard out route against Nebraska's strong side linebacker (Sam). We expected Christian to be open as Brian and I took the d-backs deep. Linebackers shouldn't be able to get wide that fast. We were wrong. Chip drilled the ball to Christian, but the Sam linebacker knocked it away.

Mitch Jackson punted the ball back to Nebraska. He hit a boomer, flying the ball over the head of the returner and bouncing at the five yard line. Matt Frye batted the bouncing ball away from end zone and John Crosby downed it on Nebraska's 2 yard line. Our fired up defense congratulated the punt cover team as they exchanged places on the field.

Matt and John's brilliant play had put Nebraska in a big hole. The Huskers tried to get out of it simply – dive straight ahead and let their huge offensive line carve out space from our defense. Each of the five Huskers' offensive linemen was 6'-5" to 6'-7" tall and well over 300 pounds. Mike Pollard matched them in size at 6'-7" and 337 pounds. Normally Jerry Whitfield at 6'-2" and 305 pounds is larger than the lineman he faces. Not that day. We're used to Trevor and Bill Daugherty being slightly undersized. They make up for it with strength and quickness.

Nebraska gouged out three yards on first down. They grabbed three more on second down. They went right up the middle again on third down, their 255 fullback leading the way. He bulled his way between Trevor and Jerry, pushing Josh Bruno back. The 230 pound tailback smashed in behind his blocker. Jerry, Trevor, Josh, Jeff Knox, Tony King and Dave McCall all piled on to stop the tailback. When the refs unstacked the pile of bodies, they marked the ball midway between the hash marks, almost on the 12 yard line.

The refs brought the sticks in and measured. Nebraska made a first down by about two inches. The Huskers pounded ahead again, gaining two yards. Jeff Knox and Dave McCall had cheated forward a little to give more run support. Coach C screamed, "Watch the play action! Read your keys!" from the sidelines.

Coach C's instincts were perfect. Nebraska tried a play action pass next. Our d-backs ignored the fake to the tailback, saw the linemen pass blocking and covered the receivers instead of rushing forward for run support. Nebraska's QB, Chris Payne, tried to squeeze the ball in against Denzell Hunt. Denzell nearly intercepted the ball. Nebraska was forced to punt.

Brian Henson fielded the punt on our 44 yard line. He started forward, dodging to avoid the gunners. Nebraska's cover team converged on him. I expected to see a pile of Huskers flop on him around midfield. I didn't see how from my sideline vantage point, but Brian managed to dodge and weave through the scrum and pop out the other side. He juked away from one tackler, cut and dodged another and then kicked into high gear. One of Nebraska's gunners ran Brian down from behind at their 10 yard line.

We didn't get fancy. Chip threw a fade route to the corner of the end zone for me. I had three or four inches and 10-30 pounds on the three d-backs trying to cover me. I out jumped them, snagged the ball and clung to it as they tried to pry it loose before I hit the ground. TOUCHDOWN! Jared drilled the point after. Score: Penn State-7, Nebraska-0

Nebraska's game plan became brutally clear on their second possession. Pound the ball at our defense until we broke. Occasionally they ran wide, but mostly between the tackles. They made three or four yards on each run. The Huskers added just enough play action passes to keep our d-backs from cheating close to the line in run support. They shoved and bullied their way down the field for nine plays, down to our 42 yard line.

Trevor knifed between their tackle and guard on the tenth play, dropping the tailback in the backfield for a two yard loss. The next play the right tackle, jumpy from the previous play, was flagged for a false start. This threw the Big Red machine out of synch. We successfully defended two pass plays, forcing the Huskers to punt.

Their punter booted a beautiful punt, pushing it down to the corner at the goal zone as it sailed out of bounds. We waited with bated breath until the ref signaled touchback. Our offense jogged out and took the ball at our 20 yard line.

Coach Burton didn't call any deep pass plays on our drive. We mixed our runs and passes evenly to keep Nebraska guessing on each play. Our runs were mostly outside, Chip pitching out to Damian or to Charlie. The passes were kept to three step drops to keep pressure off Chip. We forced our way down the field, using twelve plays to move the ball into Husker territory. It got tougher when we pushed into their red zone. Our drive stalled at their 16 yard line. Jared Gray came in and kicked a field goal. Score: Penn State-10, Nebraska-0

Nebraska took the ball and pounded down the field against our defense again. They weren't flashy, simply efficient. Runs outnumbered passes two to one. Shawn, Jeff, Denzell, Dave and occasionally GJ kept any passing gains short. Our line and linebackers didn't yield... much. It took Nebraska thirteen plays but they pushed their way down into our red zone.

The compressed field allowed our safeties, Dave and Jeff, more opportunities to help with the run without sacrificing our pass defense. Nebraska had a third down and three yards to go play at our 17 yard line. They ran off tackle right. Trevor and Jerry held their ground on the line. Josh Bruno shoved the fullback aside and hit the tailback first, slowing his progress. Brendan Hayden hit the running back next stopping him. The running back kept driving, trying to break free. Their linemen struggled to push the pile forward as Trevor and Jerry fought to hold their ground.

Dave McCall came flying up from near the goal line and hammered into the tailback, shoving the pile backwards and popping the football loose. The ball bounced backwards

and rolled into the Huskers' backfield. Everyone scrambled for the loose ball. A Huskers lineman got it and held on in the struggle under the pile of bodies.

The referees unstacked the bodies and ruled the fumble Nebraska's ball on our 22 yard line. It was fourth down and eight yards to go. They sent the field goal unit in and kicked the three points. Score: Penn State-10, Nebraska-3

Nebraska kicked the ball back to us. Tanner made a good return, giving our offense the ball on our 38 yard line. We surprised the Huskers by starting with an option play. Chip played it well as the smart Sam linebacker strung Chip out. When the Sam committed, Chip flipped the ball wide to Charlie. Charlie took off, picking up eight yards before being tackled.

Coach Burton called for our wildcat formation next. Greg snapped the ball to me. I headed left. Elijah Berks took out the linebacker with contain responsibility. Chip took care of any pursuit from my backside. As I hit the corner, I scanned downfield. Nebraska's well coached players knew I was a passing threat. The cornerback had Jared well covered. I tucked the ball under my left arm and sprinted down the sideline, trying to get as much ground as I could. The cornerback that covered Jared shoved me out of bounds at Nebraska's 32 yard line.

We hit Nebraska with one of our best plays next. Brian lined up in the slot between me and our offensive line. At the snap I ran a slant across the middle while Brian ran an out route where our routes crossed and hopefully the d-backs get tangled with each other and one of us gets free. This time I got free. Chip, under heavy pressure, stood in and fired the ball to me in stride. I sprinted away from the slower cornerback, dodged a desperation lunge from the Mike (middle) linebacker and galloped for the end zone. Two d-backs caught me near the ten and tackled me. The pile came to a stop on Nebraska's 6 yard line.

I hopped up, tossed the ball to the ref and jogged back, only to find our team milling around looking disgusted. The ref blew his whistle and announced, "Holding by #63 – ten yard penalty on Penn State."

Elijah Berks, our right tackle and #63, apologized as we huddled. "Sorry, Coach... sorry, Chip. It was hold him or let him take Chip's head off."

"Shit happens," Chip commented. "Get him next time!" Chip called our next play. We expected a blitz from Nebraska with us needing twenty yards for a first down. Coach Burton called a tailback screen play.

Our execution was good. Damian got out in the flat. Elijah and Greg set up to block in front of him. Chip looped the ball over the pass rushers head. Unfortunately, the Will (weak side) linebacker didn't blitz like we expected. He made it out to the flat at the same time as Damian and the ball. He alertly let Damian catch it before drilling him for a four yard loss.

I picked a dozen yards on second and twenty-four yards to go. Chip had to bail out and throw the ball away on third and twelve. Coach Burton sent Jared Gray in on fourth down to try a fifty-three yard field goal. Jared's leg was strong enough but he misjudged the wind. He counted on the ten mile an hour wind blowing across the end zone to push the ball a little. The wind died just as he kicked the ball. The ball sailed by the right upright a couple yards wide.

The first half continued this way. Nebraska patiently pounded the ball down the field, grinding down our defense and our defense desperately slowing their advance. The Huskers were big, well coached and extremely well disciplined. It took everything we had to slow and stop them.

Coach C freely substituted players on the defensive line to keep everyone rested. Trevor, Bill, Jerry and Mike were exhausted each time they got a break on the sidelines. They also were determined that they would not be bullied by the big farm boys across the line from them.

We stopped a ten play drive. I caught a couple short passes on our next drive before they stopped us again. Mitch punted the ball back to the Huskers with about four and a half minutes left in the first half.

They came on inexorably as before. They pushed down the field, grinding out yards, taking time off the clock and closing on our end zone. Our defense resisted and kept the pressure on them. They crossed midfield and kept pushing. Trevor got excellent pressure on one of their passing plays. Chris Payne barely got the ball out before Trevor leveled him. Shawn Byrd alertly adjusted to the off balance throw, cutting off the Husker receiver and stealing the ball at our 27 yard line.

He took off for Nebraska's goal line, trailed by Dave McCall. Nebraska's offense had seen what happened last week against Kentucky. One of the Huskers stayed between Dave and Shawn to prevent any lateral from extending the INT runback. Nebraska's players hemmed Shawn in and finally pushed him out of bounds at their 47 yard line.

The clock read 2:11 as our offense took the field. Charlie took a pitchout to the right side, gained the corner and picked up nine yards before he was shoved out of bounds. Coach Burton sent the wildcat personnel out for the next play. This would be a repeat of my option run to the left from earlier in the game.

Greg snapped the ball to me and I started left. Elijah got his seal on the linebacker as I sprinted for the sideline. I purposely ran right up to the line of scrimmage before checking my read on the cornerback covering Jared. The cornerback hesitated when he saw me inches from the line of scrimmage. I took one step forward and he peeled away from Jared and started for me. Jared continued downfield uncovered. I launched my best spiral for him. I slightly overthrew Jared but my friend was able to run for it, catch it and

motor for the end zone. The free safety came over too late to catch Jared before he scored a touchdown.

Coach Pellini, head coach of Nebraska, immediately challenged the call, arguing that I had been across the line of scrimmage.

“Are you sure you were good on that pass?” Coach Caffrey asked as we waited along the sideline.

“Relax, I’m positive I was OK,” I replied. How could I not know? I had stopped a few feet from the paddle on the sideline marking the line of scrimmage. I knew I was good. The ref came back to the center of the field after a couple minutes under the hood and announced, “After further review, the quarterback was behind the line of scrimmage. The play stands as called.”

Our sideline broke into cheers as we celebrated our touchdown. Jared Cantrell and I both received the thanks and accolades of our teams for the play. Jared Gray booted the PAT to bring our lead to 17-3.

Our big plays finally rattled the Nebraska players’ composure. They were less sure as they tried to drive the ball and close the score in the 1:54 remaining. Coach C was able to blitz more as the Huskers ran their two minute drill. We easily turned them away as time ran out on the first half.

Our defensive and offensive lines got desperately needed rest while our coaches talked about what we needed to do to win. They reviewed a few adjustments they wanted, but mostly we would follow our game plan for another half. Our fourteen point lead never felt less comfortable than it did that evening.

Big Red took the second half kickoff. Their kick returner wasn’t real big, but we found out, the hard way, that he is real fast. He slipped past Matt Frye, who was to contain him, and skittered down the sidelines, pursued by our fastest players. John Crosby caught the kid just before he zoomed into the end zone. Nebraska started on our 6 yard line. They needed two plays to smash their way into the end zone. Score: Penn State-17, Nebraska-10

Jared Cantrell took the kickoff to give Brian a break. Jared made a good return, giving our offense the ball on our 32 yard line. Our offense went to work again, moving the ball carefully four or five yards a play. We pushed down into Big Red’s territory. The drive bogged down when a Husker defensive end broke loose and sacked Chip for an eight yard loss. Mitch came in and pooch punted the ball out of bounds at Nebraska’s 5 yard line.

Big Red came at us again, relentlessly beating against our tiring defense with a stable of tailbacks and fullbacks. Our defense bent but didn’t break. Still, they were pushed back

in an exhausting and bruising thirteen play drive. Big Red punched the ball across the goal line. Their successful extra point put the score 17-17.

Our team needed a big play to change the dynamic of the game. Coach Ferguson called for a reverse on the return, in hopes of putting Nebraska's cover men out of position. Tanner lined up to the left of the hash marks on the five yard line. John Crosby lined up to the right of the hash marks.

Tanner drifted back into the end zone to field the kickoff. John signaled for him to carry the ball out. Tanner started right with John on his right. As the Huskers converged towards Tanner, he flipped the ball out to John. Ideally John would have cut back around Tanner and headed for the left side of the field. Nebraska's gunner on that side wasn't fooled by our play. He dashed for John before John could get the ball settled, blasting John to the ground and spinning the ball backwards towards our goal. The Huskers' cover team had momentum on their side. Tanner was out-muscled by four Huskers in the scrum to retrieve the ball. The ref gave Big Red possession on our 8 yard line.

Nebraska ran a play action on first down. Josh Bruno bit on the run fake. Chris Payne drilled the ball to his tight end in the back of the end zone for the score. The kicker made the PAT. Score: Nebraska-24, Penn State 17.

"God damn it!" Tanner stormed on the sideline. "I should have seen the gunner was almost on John. It's my fault!" he growled.

"Get your head in the game," I demanded. "We need to focus on playing, not bitching about a bad break. Get ready for another kickoff."

Thankfully, Coach Ferguson chose this time to give Bruce MacCauley a kick to handle. Bruce did a decent job, giving us the ball on our 34 yard line.

Brian caught an eight yard pass over the middle on the first play. The Huskers players pawed at the ball as the tackled him, trying to pry it loose. Brian held on. The next play I lined up in the slot on the left side with Brian in my normal split end spot. I shifted across the formation. The cornerback on me shifted a few feet but didn't follow.

I knew immediately I was facing zone coverage this play not man-to-man. I switched from my planned out route behind Christian to a "find the seam behind the linebackers" route. I knew Chip would expect it. At the snap I ran downfield with the strong safety covering me initially. As expected he dropped off about eight yards downfield. I settled into the gap behind the short zones, and on the seam between the free safety and cornerback's deep zone.

Chip had rolled out to my side a few yards to get clear of pressure. He spotted me and rifled the ball into my chest. I sprinted down field, leaving the strong safety and middle linebacker in the dust. I headed for the center of the field and the free safety since I had

cornerbacks even with me on either side. I cut back as the free safety went for the tackle. He was ready for that. I went down on Nebraska's 27 yard line.

We ran an option with Chip handing the ball off to Damian for a dive. The play gained two yards. We tried a sweep left but the defense strung the play out and tackled Damian for a two yard gain. On third down and six to go, the pass rush forced Chip to throw the ball away before our routes had time to develop. Jared came in and kicked a 40 yard field goal. Score: Nebraska-24, Penn State-20

Nebraska took the kickoff and marched down the field again, pounding our defense and gaining yards in three or four yards a play. Our defense looked worn as they struggled against Big Red. On the seventh play, a false start penalty forced Huskers out of their game temporarily. Bill Daugherty broke loose on the following play and sacked Chris Payne. Nebraska was forced to punt.

I watched from the sideline as Brian fielded the Husker's punt. My protégé watched the coverage and his blocking as he started forward. I saw him spot the hole as it opened. Brian rocketed through the narrow gap, sidestepping one tackler before he burst free. The Husker punter frantically shifted to fill the hole and slow down Brian. Brian lowered his shoulder and blasted into the slight punter, knocking him on his ass. The little guy managed to cling to an ankle as Brian sprinted by. Help arrived for the punter before Brian could shake loose. They tackled him at Nebraska's 47 yard line.

Coach Burton tried a run behind Mahmoud Greene, our left big guard. Damian was stopped after a two yard gain. On the next play Charlie spelled Damian. Christian, Brian and I all sprinted deep at the snap, drawing six defenders with us. Chip dropped back in the pocket before stuffing the ball in Charlie's gut on a delay draw. Charlie scooted ahead into the middle of the line. The middle linebacker wasn't fooled. He blasted Charlie backwards. We lost a yard on the play.

It was third down and nine. We needed a score. We had Nebraska down early in the game and had let them come back and then allowed them to grab the lead. It was now or never! Coach Burton sent Brian and Christian deep. I ran a curl route from the slot.

The middle linebacker bit on Charlie's run fake, leaving me space in the middle. I shook loose from the nickel back. I checked towards our backfield. Chip was under pressure as he spotted me come open. He drilled the ball to me as a Husker lineman plowed into him. The ball was a little wide.

I stretched out and snagged the ball by my finger tips even though I knew what was coming next – the Sam (strong side) linebacker. I knew he'd be free since Bob had to stay in to help with protection. I pulled the ball into my body and tensed, waiting for the hit I knew would come.

WHOMP! Stars filled my eyes as the Sam dropped me to the ground. Every molecule of air was expelled from my lungs by the jarring hit and the crash into the turf. Somebody

pawed at the ball, trying to pry it from my hands. I wrapped it up with both arms and clung desperately to it. I knew I had made a first down and kept our drive alive.

“Coach!” a voice insisted. “You can give the ball to the referee.”

“Oooohh....” I moaned. No sounds came from my empty lungs. I shook my head to clear it as someone continued trying to pry the ball from my hands.

“You got the first down, Coach,” the voice said. “You can give the ball to the ref.” I let the ball go.

“Thank you, Kyle,” another voice said.

“Are you OK?” the first voice said. I recognized that it was Brian. “Do you need a trainer?”

I gulped half a lung full of air into my aching lungs. “I’m OK,” I said simply. As my eyes cleared I grabbed the hand Brian offered me. He helped me to my feet.

I took another lung full of air before saying, “Where’s the huddle? We got to keep this drive going.”

“Coach, the ref called an injury timeout,” Brian said. “You have to go to the sidelines.”

“Oh... OK,” I agreed. Jason Pennington met me part way and escorted me back to the sidelines. Doc Watson sat me down on the exam table.

“Remember these three words, Kyle,” Doc said as he started examining me. “Dog... Tree... Sandwich.”

“OK,” I agreed. ‘Dog... Tree... Sandwich’ I repeated silently as the exam continued.

“Where are you at?” he asked as he examined my eyes.

“Lincoln, Nebraska, Memorial Stadium,” I replied.

“What is today?”

“Saturday, September 15th,” I replied.

“What happened to you?” Doc asked.

“The Sam plastered me,” I said. “I’m OK. I just got the breath knocked out of me.”

“Were you unconscious, Kyle?” Doc asked.

“No, no I wasn’t,” I replied.

Doc tested my reflexes. He checked my eyes again. “Do you have a headache? Any nausea? Do you have ringing in your ears?” I answered negative to all three questions.

“What are the three words I asked you to remember?” Doc asked.

“Dog... Tree... Sandwich,” I answered.

Doc smiled, turned to Coach Caffrey and said, “Kyle seems fine. He can go in again.”

“You ready to go, Kyle?” Coach asked.

“Absolutely,” I agreed. “Where are we at?” I looked down the field and saw our team lined up at the Huskers’ 27 yard line. Damian did a dive into the middle, picking up five hard yards.

“Kyle, we’re doing a fade route,” Coach Caffrey said. “Are you ready?”

“Send me in, Coach,” I insisted. “I can do this.”

I jogged onto the field to the huddle.

“How the hell did you hang onto the ball, Coach?” Damian demanded. “I thought that linebacker was going to take your head off.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I just needed to hang onto it.”

Chip called the play. I lined up at split end when we broke the huddle. I drew double coverage as I sprinted down into the end zone. Chip lofted a perfect strike into the corner. I out jumped the two d-backs, snagged the ball and clasped it to my body. They pawed at me as I landed in bounds. TOUCHDOWN!

The small contingent of Penn Staters erupted in cheers as the Huskers fans moaned in despair. Jared Gray drilled the PAT to give us the lead, 27-24.

Nebraska took the ball and went on another long, bone bruising drive. The Big Red machine marched down the field inexorably. Coach C substituted linemen constantly but everyone could see our defense was sagging. Dave McCall and Jeff Knox hammered the running backs at the end of each run, but it isn’t good when your safeties have to make tackles.

Every third or fourth play their QB, Chris Payne, would hit us with a play action pass. Thank God they only sent two receivers out on those plays. Shawn and Denzell were able to cover their guys with minimal help from Dave and Jeff. My offensive teammates

and I watched Big Red's progress, frustrated and powerless on the sideline as the third quarter ended.

Coach Caffrey got Chip, Damian and me together at a bench behind the sideline as the teams shifted ends of the field. "OK, we've got the lead back, but we got a long quarter to go. They've been pounding at us on the line and everywhere else they can, trying to wear us down. I'd like to have them thinking about their own wear and tear and put them back on their heels. Think you can do that?"

I looked down in thought for a second, then looked up with a growing grin. "Coach, can you let me run a reverse option play to the strong side? I want to use their Sam as a practice dummy."

Coach Caffrey looked at me closely. "Are you sure you want to do that?" he asked.

I took a deep breath and nodded, still smiling. "I owe him one for that hit across the middle, and if I can put him on his back it might send their team and ours the right kind of message."

Coach Caffrey looked at me in doubt for a couple of seconds. "OK, I'll call up to the booth and get them to put it on the list. We'll try it if it's the right situation, after we get across our forty yard line."

Fortunately, the situation came up quick. On third and two Nebraska's big tailback forced his way ahead for five yards. Jeff Knox stood up the running back while Dave McCall punched the ball loose at our 41 yard line. It skittered backwards. Both teams scrambled for the ball. A Nebraska lineman recovered, but three yards behind the line of scrimmage.

Nebraska was forced to punt again, and Brian did a really good imitation of a jitterbug and got it to our 42 yard line before he was shoved out of bounds. In the huddle, Chip made no bones about it.

"All right guys, suck it up, we can make our reputation on this drive," he growled. "Hold your blocks, put a helmet on someone and make 'em know we own this field today!" He called the strong side reverse option, but as I broke the huddle I tapped Brian to get his attention.

"Make damn sure you knock the cornerback who's following me on his ass!" I insisted. "Set the tone. I don't want him screwing up this play from the backside."

"You got it, Coach," Brian agreed.

The play worked out just as I'd hoped. The guys held their blocks, and Brian handed the ball to me cleanly. Chip put a good cut block on their defensive end, and I scooted around the corner, seeing the Sam moving laterally behind his linemen, shadowing me. I

looked downfield, faked a pass, then tucked the ball in and ran right at him. He looked surprised when I didn't try to run around him. He had a couple inches and twenty or so pounds on me. I stooped low as I approached him, driving my shoulder into his midsection and thighs as I walloped him.

The Sam grunted in shock from the hit and tried to grasp me for the tackle. I drove up with my shoulder, taking his weight off his feet and ruining his traction. I kept pumping my legs, driving the startled linebacker backwards. After a few yards of frantic backpedalling, he lost his footing and started to fall.

I shoved him to the ground. He let out an audible "oooff" as he landed. I hopped over him and kept running. Two Big Red Huskers planted me to the ground before I got much farther.

After we unpiled, I handed the ball to the ref. He placed it on the field and then shockingly, signaled first down. I looked. I had gained twelve yards on the play. Better still, the Sam was lying on the turf. The refs called an injury timeout as Nebraska's trainers jogged onto the field to help him. I knew he'd be back, but it still felt really satisfying that I'd let him and his teammates know I was there with a vengeance, and wasn't going away.

Back in the huddle, Damian looked at me like I'd grown a new head. "Damn, you hit good for a skinny guy," he said, shaking his head. "Remind me never to get you really pissed off at me."

I looked back and said, so the others could hear, "I'm totally pissed off they're still hanging around. We need at least another insurance touchdown to put this game away! We need to let them know we're just as tough, well conditioned and mean as they are - more so!" I looked around at the rest of the guys. "Take it to them. They're standing between us and Phoenix!" I growled.

I got a few nods, and more than a few hard grins in response. The officials signaled an end to the time out, and Chip clapped his hands. "OK, ladies, let's show Coach and the rest of the world he isn't the only one who's got what it takes. J-right 42 blast on one!"

Greg Nowicki and his compatriots fired off the line, shoving Nebraska's big bruisers back. Damian plunged into the maelstrom and came out the other side. A linebacker took him down after he gained eight yards.

Coach Burton sent Damian straight into the gut of the Huskers' defense four more times pushing them back to their 22 yard line. We went play action on the sixth play, freezing their linebackers. Brian and I were double covered as we streaked for the end zone. Christian slipped past his cornerback, coming open in the center of the end zone. Chip drilled the ball to him. Touchdown! Jared blasted the extra point between the uprights, silencing the stadium. Penn State-34, Nebraska-24.

The small cadre of Penn Staters chanted “We are... Penn State” to the quiet stadium as Jared lined up to kick the ball back to them. Our defense took up the offense’s spirit, bedeviling the Husker quarterback as he tried to rally his men. Trevor sacked him on first down. Bill Daugherty nearly nailed him on second down as he forced the QB to throw the ball out of bounds. The offensive line collapsed around him on third and twenty-two as Bill, Mike, Jerry and Trevor all crashed together in the backfield.

The QB tried to get the ball out, but it fluttered to the ground a couple yards short of the line of scrimmage. Our sidelines celebrated as the official signaled “intentional grounding” and marched the ball back seven more yards. It was fourth down and 29 yards to go from their six yard line. Coach Ferguson sent Squirrel MacCauley out to field the punt.

Squirrel took their punt at midfield. He advanced carefully, picking up about six yards. Our offense returned to the field with the ball sitting on Nebraska’s 44 yard line. It was ball control time. 9:05 remained in the game.

Coach Burton called for nice safe runs between the tackles as our fired up offensive line dominated the dispirited Huskers. We made about four or five yards a carry as Damian drove us down the field. Two and a half minutes remained when Coach Burton mercifully kicked a field goal from their three yard line instead of going for a touchdown. Penn State-37, Nebraska-24.

Nebraska tried manfully to get something going against fierce defensive pressure. Their threat ended when Shawn picked off a wobbly desperation throw with thirty seconds left. Chip and the offense came out and ran the kneel-down play to run the clock out.

My teammates and I exchanged back slaps and hugs as we celebrated a fantastic win over an excellent opponent. To my surprise, Coach Caffrey spotted me and gave me a big hug.

“That was a hell of a display today, Coach,” Coach Caffrey gushed. “Receiver, captain, quarterback – you did it all today. Our team doesn’t win this game without you.”

“You’re giving me too much credit,” I countered. “I don’t know how Trevor, Jerry, Mike and Bill held those goliaths off for three hours. They deserve the credit.”

“They did a hell of a job too,” Coach Caffrey agreed. “Go spread that word to the rest of the team.”

Coach headed towards the bench. I wandered back on the field, looking for teammates to celebrate with. The first guy I ran into wasn’t who I expected.

“Hey Sam, you played a great game,” I said as I offered my hand to Nebraska’s strong side linebacker.

“You did too, Kyle,” the Sam replied. “How do you feel? I hope I didn’t hurt you too bad when I smacked you in the third quarter.”

“I’m OK,” I explained. “You knocked the breath out of me when you thumped me to the ground. How about you? Are you OK? I was looking for blood when I came after you later.”

“I’m fine,” the Sam replied. “I was more startled than anything. I never had a wide receiver try to take me out like that.”

“I’m glad you’re OK,” I said. “I needed to make a statement to my team.”

“They got the message,” the Sam replied.

“Kyle? How are you?” a female voice behind me demanded. I twirled around, smiling.

“Julie! I’m glad you stopped by to say good bye,” I said as I gave my ex-girlfriend a hug.

“Mike, are you giving Kyle trouble?” Julie asked, staring hard at the Sam.

“Mike?” I asked at the same time the linebacker protested, “No, of course not, Julie.”

“It’s my name,” the linebacker explained. “I’m Mike Kessler, by the way.”

“Kyle Martin,” I answered. “It’s nice to meet you, Mike.”

“Everybody in the stadium knows your name, Kyle,” Mike said.

“How do you know my ex-girlfriend?” I asked.

“Ex-girlfriend?” Mike asked, clearly confused. “Julie went to my high school.” I laughed.

“Only her junior and senior years,” I said. “She went to my high school back in Pennsylvania for ninth and tenth grades.”

“It’s a small world,” Mike commented. “Julie’s boyfriend and my neighbor.”

“It is,” I agreed. “Julie’s father Bill and my dad went to high school together. Bill played quarterback for my high school team back in the eighties.”

“Quarterback?” Mike asked. “Did you know Julie’s brother WJ is quarterbacking my high school team now? He’s doing pretty good too. He beat...”

“Lincoln Northeast last night,” I finished. “I saw it on the news before I went to bed. WJ is a good kid.” Mike laughed as I finished.

“It good to meet you, Kyle,” Mike said. “Be aware my team will be looking to kick your butts next season.”

“Next season?” I said. “I didn’t know your team was on our schedule next year, not that I paid much attention to that. This is my last season of college football.”

“Rumor has it that our teams will end up in the same division next season when we join the Big Ten,” Mike explained. “The Big Ten is supposed to announce the next two years’ schedule on Monday.”

“I hadn’t heard that,” I said. “Do you have more eligibility? I thought you said you and Julie were in eleventh and twelfth grade together.”

“We were,” Mike confirmed. “I red shirted my freshman year here. I plan to be back for another season with my Huskers. How about you? I suppose you’ll go on to the NFL.”

“Probably,” I said. “Good luck with your season, Mike. Julie, I wish you and Sean the best.”

Mike and Julie headed for the Nebraska side of the field. I headed for my side. A few reporters hit me up for interviews before I got off the field. Trevor, Damian and I wolfed down sandwiches in the locker room after our showers. We hurried over to the press area for the post-game press conference. Coach Burton fielded most of the questions.

Jeff Morgan, of the Philadelphia Inquirer, directed his question to me. “Coach Martin,” he asked. Jeff knew me well enough to know and use my nickname when he interviewed me. “What do you think were some of the keys to your team winning the game?”

“Our win began in the trenches,” I answered. “We lose this game if Trevor and his line mates hadn’t been able to hold the bigger Nebraska offensive line to a draw.” I tilted my head towards Trevor, sitting on my right. “I know my roommate is going to be sore tonight after the beating he took this evening.”

“Yeah, that’s for sure,” Trevor agreed. “I expect the Nebraska linemen we faced will be stiff and sore tonight too. Coach is being too modest. We don’t win without all the catches Coach made today. What were his stats?”

“Coach Martin made nine catches for 128 yards and two touchdowns,” Jeff Morgan added helpfully.

“Don’t forget Chip,” I said. “He played great today. He got the ball to the open receiver whenever he needed. Do you know Chip’s stats, Jeff?”

“Chip Brinton threw 25 completions for 304 yards and three TDs,” Jeff said. “He had a completion rate of 71.4%”

The athletic department PR guy picked a Pittsburgh reporter for the next question. “This question is for Kyle Martin, too,” the reporter said. “Can you tell us about the hit the Nebraska linebacker put on you in the third quarter.”

“Sure, it wasn’t a big deal,” I explained. “Chip was under pressure when he made the throw and I had to stretch out to get the ball. I knew when I did it that I was going to take a hit. The linebacker just knocked the breath out of me.”

“Any bad blood between you and him?” the reporter asked in follow-up. “You seemed to seek him out on your fourth quarter reverse play.”

“There’s no bad blood,” I said. “I met Mike Kessler after the game. We’re cool. He made a good, smart football play on me. Later I did the same on him.” I gave the crowd of reporters a grin. “I did seek him out on the reverse. I had a statement I wanted to make to my team and to Nebraska. I wanted everyone to know our team is tough and no one is going to run over us.”

“The team got Coach’s message,” Damian added. “His example fired everyone up. That’s why we surged ahead in the fourth quarter to take control of the game.”

The rest of the questions were directed to Coach Burton, which was fine with me. Coach Burton, my fellow captains and I finally escaped the press room around midnight. The team buses had hauled the rest of the team back to our hotel by then. An athletic department van took us back to the hotel.

Trevor and I went straight to bed. Our flight out of Lincoln was early on Sunday morning. I tossed and turned a bit. My mind was still alive with all the sights, sounds and strategies from the game.

“You still awake, Coach?” Trevor asked quietly about twenty minutes after we turned the lights out.

“Yeah,” I agreed.

“Do you see yourself marrying Penny?” Trevor asked. “I’ve been thinking a lot about my future and Steph’s”

“I hope Penny and I can make our relationship work this fall,” I answered. “We’ve talked about what happens next spring after graduation but we haven’t made definite plans.”

“Does the idea of getting married scare you?” Trevor asked. “It intimidates the hell out of me.”

“Do you love Steph?” I asked. “Can you see your life a year from now without her at your side?”

“I do love her,” Trevor replied. “Whatever city I end up in, I want Steph with me.”

“Does she love you?” I asked.

“Yes, she says she does,” Trevor agreed.

“It’s simple in my mind,” I said. “You love each other. You want to stay together after college. You get married.”

“But I’m twenty-one years old,” Trevor protested. “That’s really young to be getting married. Am I ready for that?”

“It’s worked out fine for a lot of couples we know,” I countered. “Zack and Leigh Ann, Aaron and Tania, Abby and my brother Will, Cuch and Gina, Tyler and Kayla... I could go on, you know.”

“Yeah... you’re right... I guess,” Trevor agreed. “I don’t know... marriage is so... so... permanent.”

“That’s part of the attraction to me,” I said. “I know Penny loves me for who I am. She isn’t some gold digger attracted to me because I’m a big football star. Do you want to spend your twenties hanging out in bars trying to pick up girls and wondering about that?”

“No, not really,” Trevor conceded. “That doesn’t sound like much fun.”

“You’ve found the right girl,” I said. “Sit down with her and talk over your future. The two of you are just about the perfect couple. You belong together.”

“I guess,” Trevor replied quietly. He was silent for a minute. “Kyle, do you really plan to marry Penny?”

“I do, assuming we are able to make our long distance relationship work,” I said. “You and Steph have an advantage over Penny and me. Steph can get a job in broadcasting where ever you end up after you get drafted. Penny has to stay in Philly, assuming she gets into veterinary school. We are looking at parts of four more years of long distance relationship until she finishes up her schooling.”

“You’ve given me a lot to think about,” Trevor said.

“I know,” I agreed. “It is.”

(To be continued)

Chapter 67

I grabbed a copy of the Lincoln Journal Star on my way out of the hotel Sunday morning. I read up on all the college football action Saturday on the bus to the airport. There weren't any upsets among the five teams above us in the national polls. Texas beat UCLA 31-28. That game was closer than expected. Mike Johanson's name didn't make it into the paper. Florida beat UCF easily 45-10. Ed completed 19 of 30 passes for 312 yards and three TDs before he turned the team over to his backup.

Oklahoma easily beat Tulsa. Alabama strangled usually high scoring Houston 35-24. USC did not play yesterday. Our game against Nebraska got prominent play in the paper. The writer praised both offensive and defensive performances of our team in beating a tough foe.

The teams after us in the polls didn't do as well. Boise State lost. Ohio State went down to Miami and laid an egg, losing 24-10 to the Hurricanes. Michigan hosted Oregon State. They lost a close game 30-27.

Notre Dame was the only other team below us in the top ten that won. They hosted Stanford. Jeremy's team beat the Stanford 34-30. Jeremy had six tackles. I was going to have to quiz him to see what was up. He usually did better than that from his position in the middle of the Irish's defense. Yesterday's results were going to rearrange the second half of the top ten in the polls.

Georgia Tech, last year's national champion, was off to a rough start. Last week they lost to the Fighting Irish. This week they went up to Virginia Tech and lost to Frank Beamer's Hokies. Three games into the season and their chance of repeating as national champions was done.

Drew McCormick and West Virginia stomped on Maryland yesterday afternoon. Jake Kring's Syracuse Orangemen didn't do as well against Iowa. Jake was sacked five times and threw two picks against a single touchdown. Syracuse lost 24-10 to the Hawkeyes. The talk I had last May with Jake about Iowa didn't seem to help.

The buses dropped us off at the airport. Our flight took off a little after nine am. I settled in an aisle seat. Trevor sat by the window. I started reading for my art history class so I would be ready for the next lecture. Anders Voight came back from the coaches' section up front after we reached altitude.

"Hey Trev, Doc Watson wants to see you up front," Anders explained. I got up to let Trevor get by so he could go see our team doctor. He returned a few minutes later.

"Coach, Doc Watson wants to see you," Trevor said as he arrived at our row of seats. I headed to the first class section of the plane where the coaching staff normally sat.

“AAaaayyee... What’s up, Doc?” I teased, imitating Bugs Bunny. Dr. Richard “Doc” Watson was well liked by me and my teammates. He took excellent care of us. He also didn’t mind a little joking either.

“Have a seat, Kyle,” Doc said. “I wanted to see how you are doing today.”

“OK,” I replied as I sat down.

“Have you had any headaches since the game, Kyle?” Doc asked.

“No.”

How about dizziness?” Doc asked. I replied in the negative. “How about nausea?”

“No, I had no problem keeping breakfast down,” I said.

“I have scheduled you for a neuropsychological exam at 8:00 am tomorrow at the Mt. Nittany Medical Center,” Doc said.

“Is that really necessary, Doc?” I asked. “I feel fine. I don’t see why this is needed.”

“One of the signs of a concussion is irritability,” Doc replied. He gave me a big grin to show he was teasing. “Humor me, Kyle. We want to take every possible precaution for your welfare. Yours will be the fourth neuro test we’ve done this season. Thank God, all the others have been negative. Go, take the tests and let us see that you match your baseline exam we did three years ago when you started here.”

“You’re the boss, Doc,” I agreed. “I’ll see you tomorrow morning.”

“You will see a neuropsychologist, not me,” Doc said. “Good luck on the test. Call the department if you have any concussion symptoms before tomorrow.”

“I’ll do that,” I agreed. I gave Doc a big grin. “By the way, the three words you wanted me to remember yesterday were Dog... Tree... and Sandwich.”

“Oh... right. Very good, Kyle,” Doc said. I could tell from the expression on his face that he no longer remembered the words he gave me yesterday. I headed back to my seat further back.

“You’re Doc’s spy, aren’t you?” I said as I sat down and looked over to Trevor.

“You betcha,” Trevor agreed.

“Thanks for having my back,” I replied. “I’ll do the same if you ever get your bell rung.”

“I’m counting on it,” Trevor said. The two of us went back to our reading.

Later Sunday evening I finally got to check out how my brother Andy and his Blue Hens did on Saturday. They beat Duquesne 28-24. Andy had seven catches for 160 yards and two TDs. Andy also had three kick returns for 76 yards.

We found the latest Top 25 polls after dinner. The top ten were: Texas, Florida, Oklahoma, Alabama, Penn State, USC, Miami, Notre Dame, Ohio State and Boise State. The poll voters jumped us ahead of idle USC, thanks to our strong victory over Nebraska. Miami leaped into the top ten with their victory over Ohio State. Notre Dame moved up a couple notches too.

Jeremy North e-mailed me Sunday evening to tease me about putting Mike Kessler on his back. Jeremy teased, “I know how that Nebraska ‘backer felt. I’m glad to know you put somebody else on his ass too.” He included congratulations on our victory to go with his jibe. I found out from Jeremy’s e-mail that he sprained his ankle in the first half of his game and had to sit out the second half. That was why his stats were down. He expected to be ready to go the next week when his team played Michigan State.

My neuropsychological and standardized balance tests were perfectly normal on Monday morning. I was cleared for classes, practice and to play football next Saturday. It was time to get ready for Kent State.

Kent State hadn’t had a winning season in the past four years. Our team had played them three times. They had never beaten us. Our challenge this week was to prepare hard and take the Golden Flashes seriously. Any FBS team could beat you if you didn’t pay attention to business.

After my history class I went to the Lasch Building to begin studying Kent State. Their stats looked pretty good. They ran a balanced attack, running and passing just about equally last season. Their QB completed 62% of his passes. He threw 14 TDs and 11 interceptions. Their primary running back averaged 4.5 yards a carry. They ranked near the top in the NCAA in rush defense, allowing only 61 yards a game. They also ranked quite low in pass defense. It wouldn’t take a genius to figure out our game plan for this week. Chip, Brian, Christian, Bob and I could have excellent days.

The Lasch Building was buzzing with excitement Monday afternoon when I arrived there after classes. The Big Ten announced the division lineup for future years. We were teamed up with Illinois, Indiana, Ohio State, Purdue and Wisconsin. The other division would include Iowa, Michigan, Michigan State, Minnesota, Nebraska and Northwestern. Our team would play each division rival every year along with two teams from the other division.

We would also have a permanent cross division rival we would play every year. Ohio State would play Michigan. We would play Nebraska every year. Oh boy, that would be fun. The other cross division rivals were: Michigan State-Indiana, Iowa-Purdue, Minnesota-Wisconsin and Illinois-Northwestern.

The inclusion of Penn State-Nebraska as one of the cross rivalries drew groans from nearly everyone who read or heard the new division lineup. It wasn't that Nebraska wasn't a worthy opponent. We felt down to our bones that they were. Every member of our team had bruises, scrapes and worse from our encounter with the Huskers two days earlier. It was hard to be enthusiastic that particular day about facing them annually. Our one balm was the knowledge that the Husker players certainly felt the same way as us, but without the comfort of a victory to show for their efforts. We gave as good as we got on Saturday night.

With everyone banged up and hurting, our coaches kept us inside to review and dissect our game against Nebraska. We had a lot of mistakes and miscues to correct before our next game. The coaches unveiled our game plan for Kent State at the end of the afternoon. There were no surprises in it for me. We would run enough to keep The Golden Flashes run defenders home at the line. We planned to bury them with an avalanche of passes to get an early lead.

Practices proceeded through the week with our coaches demanding that we improve our techniques. My teammates worked hard to satisfy the coaches. The drive for perfection was more than would be necessary to beat Kent State. I thought I understood Coach Burton's purpose that week. He wanted us sharp regardless of the quality of our opposition. It would prepare us better for future tough foes while guarding against complacency against Kent State. His attitude and demands made perfect sense to me.

Mom and Dad would be attending my game on Saturday. We made plans for dinner after the game. Andy's team was heading down to Richmond that weekend to play one of the better teams in the Colonial Athletic Association.

Jon Stafford had his first Thon meeting that week. He reported back that the Thon organizing committee would happily make an exception and allow me to dance at the Thon with Penny. I called Penny that evening after I got the word and explained about Thon. She was as dubious as me about how we could work out the logistics of getting us from Philly to State College by 4 pm on a Friday night, having us dance for 46 hours and then get back to Philly in shape for classes or to teach on Monday morning. The two of us would talk with Trevor, Chip and Damian about this when Penny came to visit in a couple weeks.

Coach Burton gave everyone an hour of free time after dinner on Friday night. Chip, Christian, Brian and I headed for the video room in the Lasch Building. We had worked this week indoctrinating Brian in the sight adjustment system that the rest of us had been

using since last September. Brian seemed to get the concept. We had a couple set up for him to try if the situation came up against Kent State tomorrow.

Our buses picked us up from the Lasch Building and delivered us to Toftrees a little after eight o'clock that evening. My friends and I gathered in Shawn's and Christian's room for our traditional night-before poker game.

I sent Penny a good night e-mail when Trevor and I got back to our room. My poor honey had an extremely stressful week. In addition to her full class load, she was finishing up her veterinary school application. The application was due in seven days. After that was turned in she had to study for the Graduate Record Examination (GRE). Her exam was scheduled for October 20th. Her entire future was riding on this exam and application. I wished I could have been there to soothe her and help her relax so she could do her best.

I checked out the Lancaster-Lebanon League results. My Wolverines beat Sadsbury 56-41. Our neighbors to the east had a good offense but no defense whatsoever. I sent off congratulations to Matt, Dave and Cody. I noticed Central won too, knocking off always tough Cornwall.

Saturday morning Trevor let me shower first. While he showered, I checked on the weather forecast for our game. They predicted a temperature of 82 at noon, rising to a high of 86 at mid-afternoon. The humidity shouldn't be too bad for the game, hovering in the forties. The weatherman said we could expect mid to late afternoon thunder showers.

The team breakfast was at 7:30 that morning. We headed over to the Lasch Building to get taped up, dressed and finish our preparations for battle. The athletic department had snacks available before we headed over to the stadium. A big, enthusiastic crowd of fans greeted us as we got off the buses at Beaver Stadium. Trevor, Chip, Damian and I worked the lines, signing autographs and shaking hands before we went inside to finish our preparations.

The stadium was filling up when we came out to warm up. It was pretty day with only a few clouds in the sky. Hopefully those thunderstorms would stay away for the game. A new sign popped up in the student section. It said "Coach Kyle's Krazies." I found it had been put up by Mike, Dan and Adam, the "East Hall guys" who had been flying a banner in my honor since my second game as a freshman. I thanked them for their support before I headed inside.

We finished up our preparations before coming back outside to the now full stadium. The Blue Band heralded our arrival. The big crowd cheered as we ran onto the field for our game. God, how I loved the pageantry of college football.

Trevor, Damian and I met the Kent State captains at midfield. Kent State won the coin toss and elected to receive the kickoff. Jared booted the ball deep. Kent State's returner

carried the ball out to their 19 yard line. Our defense dominated. Three plays later, after gaining only four yards, the Golden Flashes punted the ball back to us.

Our coaches' buzzword for the day was "execution." They demanded we run precise routes, that every block is done with proper technique and that we run the play exactly as drawn up.

Brian's 12 yard punt return gave us the ball at our 44 yard line. Kent State lined their d-backs up 12-15 yards off the line of scrimmage. They had the deep ball well covered but they left themselves vulnerable to short passes. We would be able to make 5-10 yards a catch without breaking a sweat. Our big offensive line dominated the smaller, slower Flashes. We needed six plays to score.

I ran a slant on the touchdown play. I beat the cornerback covering me easily. Chip hit me in stride. Brian and Christian tied up the d-backs on them. I sprinted downfield, making the free safety whiff badly when he tried to tackle me around the fifteen yard line. Jared made the extra point to give our team a 7-0 early lead.

Kent State's players worked gamely to keep up with us. They were simply over-matched. Bob Smith scored the next TD, to finish a drive that was started by a Dave McCall interception. Damian bulled his way into the end zone for a touchdown to cap a ten play, 80 yard drive near the end of the first quarter.

Christian scored too, turning a ten yard hitch into a forty-two yard run. Few people understood how fast Christian's initial burst was when he started running. The d-backs misjudged the tackle and Christian was gone. I understood. I had covered him in high school and also knew that Christian could keep up with me step for step on the first ten yards of a forty yard dash.

The coaches continued preaching about precise execution of the plays. Coach Burton didn't call any deep passes, wildcat plays or other exotic plays. We practiced good, basic, hardnosed football to take our 28-0 lead. We were bigger, faster and stronger than they were and we used that fact to establish our dominance.

The half was closing when the Golden Flashes adjusted their defense a little. They brought their d-backs up to challenge our short pass plays. This went on through half a dozen plays.

Coach Burton called for me to be primary receiver on a ten yard out route. Chip called the play and broke the huddle. I grabbed Chip's shoulder and said, "If the d-backs on me both cover me shallow, pump the ball. I'm going deep. We have to force these guys to respect the deep pass."

"OK, you're the captain," Chip said. I could see in his eyes he expected to get flak from the sidelines but was willing to follow me anyway.

The play worked exactly as I anticipated. The cornerback and free safety both came up shallow as I stutter stepped like I was doing a hitch. Chip's pump convinced them. Both guys broke towards the fake while I sprinted down the field. Chip hit me twenty-five yards downfield. I motored into the end zone untouched for a fifty-seven yard touchdown.

I jogged back to the sideline while the kicking team took the field for the PAT. "MARTIN! BRINTON! I want to see you NOW!" Coach Burton demanded.

"What's up, Coach?" I asked innocently as Chip and jogged over to our head coach. Chip didn't look as confident as I felt.

"I don't recall calling that particular play a moment ago," Coach said. "The watchword for today is execution."

"I understand, Coach," I said. "...but you have given Chip and me permission to adjust the plays at the line of scrimmage if we see a hole in a defense that we can exploit."

"Yeah, Coach," Chip agreed. "That's all we did."

"Kent State's defensive backs were cheating too far forward," I explained. "I thought it was important to make them cover the whole field, Coach."

"Let's not exploit these guys anymore," Coach replied. "I don't want to end up embarrassing them 72-0."

"You're the boss, Coach," Chip and I agreed almost simultaneously.

The point turned out to be moot. Kent State finally got untracked offensively. They managed to drive down the field in the remaining two minutes of the half. Our defense kept them out of the end zone. The Golden Flashes were forced to try a 49 yard field goal as the clock ran out. Their kicker hooked the ball and missed. We took a 35-0 lead into the locker room.

Our coaches informed the starters that they were done for the day. Our second and third teams proved up to the task of finishing the game. Jon Stafford hooked up twice with Bruce MacCauley in the second half. Both TDs were on plays designed as short passes. Charlie, Wyatt, ET and even Grant Turner carried most of the load. They ran through big holes gouged by the offensive line to control the clock.

Poor Kent State managed a single field goal in the second half. We won 49-3. I felt bad for the Golden Flashes. They played hard but simply were overmatched against us. Probably half a dozen of their players were up to playing on our level. Mostly likely they had been offered walk-on status at a major school but choose the scholarship at the smaller school instead.

Everyone got what they wanted that afternoon. Kent State got a few million dollars and a chance for their team to appear on TV. Our athletic department got a home game and 107,000 paying fans in the stadium. Our fans got to watch and enjoy our team winning a game. My teammates and I got practice to help us prepare for the coming Big Ten season, which started next week. We had a tune up against Purdue and then the Michigan Wolverines came to town.

My record was 1-2 against the Wolverines since I started college. I badly wanted to go out with a tie record against them before I graduated. Temple, Kentucky and Nebraska had provided excellent tests for our team. Kent State this week and Purdue next week would let us fine tune any difficulties. Our offense and defense should be firing on all cylinders on October 6th when Michigan arrived.

I gave Mom and Dad a call from the locker room after the game and let them know that I hoped to be done with the press conference around five o'clock. They met me inside the Lasch Building in the lobby.

Dark storm clouds had built up to the northwest beyond Bald Eagle Mountain throughout the second half of our game. Fortunately the thunderstorm held off until after the game. Big drops of rain were starting to fall when I met Mom and Dad after the post-game press conference. Mom, Dad and I jogged over to my apartment so I could pick up my raincoat before we headed back to Dad's car in the football parking area. By the time we got to my apartment, the rain had stopped. The big thunderstorm stayed to the north of us, sparing our part of Happy Valley from the deluge.

Since we were part way to downtown, I persuaded Mom and Dad to try one of the restaurants downtown to save us time. I took them to Spats. We had a wait a little for a table in the small restaurant but Mom and Dad agreed after we ate that the place was worth the wait.

I got to hear more about the Hunter and the twins' visit to Andy's football game two weeks ago. The three boys enjoyed the visit. Dad decided to see if he could talk Coach Burton into letting the boys come and see their uncle play one time in Beaver Stadium before I graduated.

Mom let me know that Will and Abby were using the family's tickets to my next home game, against Michigan. That worked out great. Penny might be able to get a ride to State College with Will and Abby. I wished Mom and Dad a safe drive home before they took off.

Trevor, Steph, Chip, Amanda, Damian, Billy, Melanie and Sarah had things set up for our party when I returned to the apartment. We had a good turnout of people at our party. Mike O'Keefe and Jim Hall dropped by. Jason Harting and Kevin Peachey, from my high school, dropped by.

Ashley Burton made it again. She hadn't missed one party since school started. I was starting to get comfortable with the whole concept until... Jon Stafford decided to make a play for Ashley. I never found a chance to warn Jon off before he escorted Ashley upstairs for a roll in the hay.

I didn't get a chance to talk with Jon again until around midnight after Ashley left with a couple girlfriends. I found him in the kitchen getting himself a celebratory drink.

"Jon, have you gone crazy?" I asked.

"What, Coach?" Jon asked innocently.

"What do you expect to happen when Coach Burton finds out that you slept with his precious daughter?" I demanded. "How do you think your career will go, playing for a head coach who would like to hang you by your balls?"

"That's not going to happen, Coach," Jon said. "Troy and Ian are right. Ashley's cool to partying. She won't say anything to her father." He gave me a wink. "She's a pretty good lay too."

"When you're standing in front of Coach's desk trying to explain yourself," I directed, "make damn sure you tell him I counseled you against what you're doing."

"I really like Ashley, Coach," Jon said. "She's a great girl. She's funny, sweet and good looking too. I don't think Coach Burton expects his daughter to be a nun while she's in college. This will be fine."

"How does your father react to boys dating your sister?" I asked.

"I have a younger brother," Jon answered. "I don't have any sisters."

"OK, how did fathers react when you took their daughters out on dates when you were in high school?" I asked. "Did they put you through an inquisition?"

"Well yeah, but that was high school," Jon said. "We're in college now. Things are different."

"Not to fathers," I replied. "Their daughters are always their precious little darlings. Be careful, Jon."

"I will," he agreed.

"Good," I replied. "I don't want anything to happen to you. You're too important to our team. You're an excellent backup for Chip now and will be a good quarterback in your own right when Chip graduates. Bob and Trey aren't ready to step in if anything happens to Chip this season."

“Things will be fine, Coach,” Jon promised.

I hoped he was right. I mentioned what had happened to Chip and Trevor later after the party. They weren’t quite as appalled as I was but agreed the situation needed monitoring.

After sleeping late, one of my Sunday morning joys was to peruse the sports pages and see how all the other college teams did yesterday. Texas handled a surprisingly tough Arkansas 34-31 yesterday. They were behind until Mike Johanson intercepted a pass late in the fourth quarter to set up their go ahead touchdown. My former teammate was starting to make a name for himself.

Ed and Florida wasted little Western Carolina 55-10. Ed’s stats made it look like my buddy probably played two quarters. Oklahoma surprised people by going down to Miami and thrashing the Hurricanes 38-20. #4 ranked Alabama beat Duke.

Our win over Kent State received a nice write up. Jeff Morgan always did a nice job. Our victory didn’t do anything to enhance our reputation among the poll voters.

USC beat Stanford in a close game, 24-23. They needed a last minute interception to seal their win. Notre Dame was shocked by Michigan State. Jeremy’s team lost 28-24 in spite of my buddy’s twelve tackles. I empathized with Jeremy. My teammates and I knew how dangerous Michigan State could be.

Ohio State and Michigan had no problems with their tune-up games. They beat Troy and Eastern Michigan handily. Nebraska bounced back from last week by pounding Southern Mississippi 42-17. Syracuse was off. Rutgers lost to North Carolina 24-15. Hal went 5-5 kicking field goals for his team.

West Virginia beat East Carolina. Drew McCormick carried 24 times for 156 yards and three touchdowns. It was his best game since he joined the Mountaineers three years ago. I wanted to read a write up for the Delaware-Richmond game. The only info I had was a text from Andy last night – “DE 31 RICH 28 KR 3/67 PR 4/102 RCV 6/98 2TD”

The newspaper article painted a more exciting picture than the modest text message. Richmond had led through three and a half quarters. Andy had run a punt return back for a TD early in the game. The Blue Hens were down 28-24 with two minutes to go in the game. They strung together a nice drive, capped off by my brother’s game winning TD with fifteen seconds left in the game. Andy was the game’s hero.

I found interesting news as I studied the paper further. Purdue, our next opponent, had beaten Toledo 31-20 yesterday, but it had been an expensive victory. They lost Dan

Butler, their fifth year senior quarterback. The paper reported it was likely he ruptured his ACL. I felt for the guy. I'd been there too.

Butler's injury left a big question in my mind. Who was going to QB the Boilermakers? Their red shirt sophomore had transferred last spring, dissatisfied waiting another year for Butler to leave. I had no idea who was next in line. I hadn't seen whoever it was on video last spring or this summer. The box score listed "Z Baker 3/5 48 yds 1 TD 0 INT" for whoever this kid was.

Later on Sunday I got to check the polls. The top ten were: Texas, Florida, Oklahoma, Alabama, Penn State, USC, Ohio State, Michigan, Miami and Notre Dame. We were set up pretty well in the polls, assuming we continued winning. Texas had to play Oklahoma and Florida had to play Alabama. We should be able to move up two more spots easily.

I got to find out who Z. Baker was after history on Monday when I went over to the Lasch Building to study for our game on Saturday. The young's man name was Zach Baker. He was a nineteen year old red-shirt freshman. He played in the final eight minutes of Purdue's game against Toledo, which was his first time on a collegiate football field.

I watched the kid's video, even though I don't normally watch our opponent's offense. He looked good playing in the final eight minutes in the fourth quarter, driving his team down the field against Toledo's prevent defense. Who knows how he will fare against our standard defense. I was certain Coach C had been up half the night devising new blitz packages to confuse the young man. That was a part of learning to play NCAA FBS football.

Monday's practice went as I expected. We practiced running and passing plays since our game plan called for a balanced attack against the Boilermakers. I noticed our defense spent a lot of the practice running blitzes against the scout or third team.

My teammates worked hard during the week. I was a little worried about their focus. Local home papers, the Daily Collegian and national papers and TV shows were promoting us as one of the best teams in the country after our beating a tough Kentucky team, an outstanding Nebraska team and then destroying Kent State.

We even were getting credit for the beating we put on Temple the first weekend. At the time pundits assumed the Owls were falling back into their old losing ways. The last three weeks disproved that thesis. The Owls were 3-1 now, having beaten Central Michigan 24-17, Villanova 31-24 and the Big East's Connecticut 35-10. This was the same Big East that kicked Temple out a few years earlier for losing too many games.

Trevor, Damian and I had to make sure our teammates didn't take the praise too seriously. We needed to work our asses off if we wanted to go to Phoenix in January.

Tuesday evening I got an unexpected and unwelcome phone call on the apartment phone. Chip happened to answer it. Chip called me over when the caller introduced himself.

“Hello, Kyle Martin,” I replied.

“Kyle, this is Scott Lehman from Empire Sports,” the voice said as he identified himself. “You’re off to an amazing start to the season, Kyle. On behalf of the Empire Sports Agency, I want to congratulate you. Empire Sports is a full service agency that can...”

“Stop!” I insisted as Lehman prattled on about his agency and what they could do to further my professional career. I warned him three times to stop talking so I could explain how I was handling agents but he ignored me. I finally hung up on the idiot.

The phone rang thirty seconds later. “Hello?” I asked tentatively. I knew who it would be.

“Kyle?” the agent said. “We seem to have been cut off somehow. As I was saying, Empire Sports is...”

“STOP!” I declared. “I WILL hang up if you don’t stop talking.”

“I’m sorry,” Lehman said after realizing I meant it. “What is wrong, Kyle?”

“I’m not sure how you got this phone number,” I began.

“A good agent is resourceful,” Lehman interjected. “That gives you an idea of how aggressively Empire Sports and I are prepared to work to repre...”

“STOP!” I growled. “I don’t want to hear your sales pitch. Have you called my home phone number?” I gave him my parents’ number.

“I’ve called there,” Lehman confirmed.

“Have you followed the directions and filled out my questionnaire?” I asked.

“I have,” Lehman replied. “It is an excellent questionnaire, Kyle. It also is so cold and impersonal. I wanted this opportunity for us to get to know each other...”

“STOP!” I interrupted as he started his pitch again. “What did you say your name is?”

“Scott Lehman with the Empire Sports Agency,” Lehman answered.

“Mr. Lehman, you heard my answering machine message at home, found my website and filled out the questionnaire. Presumably you read my directions too. I explicitly said I was NOT to be contacted at school. I need to concentrate on having a good senior

season. You ignored my directions. Mr. Lehman, you and the Empire Sports Agency are going on my ‘Do Not Consider’ list right now. Do not waste my time any further.”

“But... but...” Lehman sputtered as I hung up on him again.

“An agent?” Trevor asked as I slammed the phone down.

“An idiot!” I snapped. “In spite of all the directions I have put on my home answering machine and website, the guy has the nerve to bother me at school and think he can sell me on using his agency.”

“He smells a payday,” Trevor said. “It’s his nature. He’s a salesman and you’re a lucrative potential client.”

“Aren’t you being a tad over-critical, Coach?” Damian asked. “The ones that contacted me weren’t that bad.”

“I had fifteen to twenty call me last May before I set up my rules,” I explained. “My dad has had twenty-seven agents turn in questionnaires. If I let these guys call anytime they want, I’m not going to keep up with my school work and football.”

“Coach is right, Damian,” Trevor agreed. “I’ve had a few more contacts since Coach put me onto the website questionnaire idea last spring. These guys will drive you crazy if you let them.”

“My experience hasn’t been so bad,” Damian said. “I had eight or ten agents contact me. I guess that goes along with me not being a desirable high draft pick.”

“What? You’re crazy,” I said. “You’re going to be a prize for the NFL team that picks you in the draft. You’re the heart and soul of our running game. An NFL team will be lucky to get you.”

“I’m too short,” Damian said. “They say I’m too slow. Teams are not going to flock to me the way they will do for you and Trevor.”

“You’re crazy, man,” Trevor insisted. “A team will be lucky to have you.”

“We talked about this last spring, guys,” I added. “Maybe we should drop it. Agents, contracts and playing in the NFL don’t have a place on our To Do list yet. We don’t need to dwell on it. We need to focus on our studies and on Purdue. All the professional football stuff will take care of itself when we are finished in January.”

“Yeah,” “Yeah, you’re right, Coach,” my roommates agreed.

The week flew by, between classes, studies, football practices and football meetings. It was Friday morning before we knew it. Our flight took us out to Purdue's University Airport. The athletic department put us up in the Hilton Garden Inn, near the Wabash River and a couple blocks off of campus.

After dinner the team spent the rest of the evening in team meetings, playing poker or other games and then turning in. I hopped on-line to check out my high school team's results. Matt, Dave and Cody's Wolverines had beaten the Trojans handily, 44-28.

The team met Saturday morning at 7:30 for breakfast. Our game was being televised on ESPN2 at noon. We loaded our luggage on our buses and headed over to Ross-Ade Stadium after breakfast.

It had been cool, with temperatures around 69 when we arrived in Indiana on Friday. It was still in the forties when we hit the stadium. The temperature climbed quickly as we dressed and then went out to check out the stadium conditions. Just like two years ago, the field was in excellent shape.

We headed inside to finish dressing and make our final preparations. The stadium was filling with black and gold clad Boilermakers fans when we returned to the field for warm-ups. The temperature seemed to have increased about fifteen degrees as the sun rose above the top of the stadium. I estimated the temperature to be in the high sixties. We probably would hit 79 degrees the way the weatherman had predicted.

I spotted one of the Boilermakers players on crutches in civvies with a knee brace. I knew immediately who he was. I jogged over to offer my condolences.

“You’re Dan Butler, aren’t you?” I asked as I reached the injured quarterback.

“Yeah I am,” Dan agreed.

“Kyle Martin,” I said as I offered a handshake. “I wanted to stop by and offer my sympathies about your knee.” I pulled my left pant leg up over my knee, revealing three small scars. “I’ve been there and know what it feels like. The doctors today can fix you up as good as new. This happened five years ago. Look what I’ve been able to accomplish.”

“I know,” Dan answered. “My doctors have told me the same thing. It’s nice to see someone who actually went through reconstruction.”

“I’m curious about one thing, Dan,” I asked. “My doctor wanted me to get rid of the knee brace almost immediately. He wanted me to get my strength back before the reconstructed my ACL.”

“I blew out both my ACL and MCL,” Dan explained. “I don’t have any stability left in me knee. If I don’t have the brace, my knee collapses as soon as it gets weight.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” I replied.

“Thanks for stopping by to talk,” Dan responded. “You’re the second guy from your team to come over to pep me up about my knee. One of your younger coaches stopped by a couple minutes ago to talk.”

“That would probably be Yasin Clark, one of our defensive grad assistants,” I replied. “Yasin went through this two years ago.”

“Thanks for talking, Kyle,” Dan said. “It’s real classy.”

“No problem,” I responded. “We may be wearing different uniforms, but every athlete on this field goes through the same thing to play football at this level. We have more things in common than separate us. Good luck when they do your repair in a few weeks.”

“Thank, Kyle,” Dan replied. “Have a safe game.”

My teammates and I headed inside for our final preparations. The stadium was full and the Purdue band was playing to rev the crowd up for the game. The Boilermaker Special, their miniature “steam engine” was driving around. We ran onto the field after Purdue’s team was introduced.

Dan Butler hobbled out to the coin toss with the other Boilermaker captains. That was a bit of *déjà vu* for me. My friends had dragged me out for the coin toss the season I ripped up my knee.

Trevor, our spokesman for the week, called heads. The coin came up tails. With almost no wind, the Boilermakers chose to receive the first half kickoff. Jared Gray boomed the ball deep into the end zone, forcing a touchback.

The Boilermakers tried to trip up our defense on the first play by running a play action pass. Our guys knew better than to be fooled. Purdue passed on 54% of its plays last season. Dave McCall batted the ball away from the receiver. Purdue tried a draw on second down. Mike and Jerry stopped them with a two yard gain.

Zach Baker, the red shirt freshman QB, managed to squeeze in a ten yard pass to his tight end on third down and gain his team another set of downs. They managed to gain three yards on three shots. Purdue punted the ball away to Brian. He picked up a dozen yards against good coverage, delivering the ball to our team on our 35 yard line.

Damian picked up five yards on first down. Chip hit Bob coming across the middle for six more on second down. I was sent on a fifteen yard route on the next down. The cornerback left me a ten yard cushion. He had nickel back help deep. I gave the cornerback a fake as I ran my route, drawing him forward. I blew past him.

I wasn't the primary target on the play. Brian was, going deep on the other side of the field. Brian drew coverage from the safety and the other cornerback. An unlucky linebacker was trying to cover Christian on a shallow route. Chip had opportune targets galore.

When I got fifteen yards downfield, I checked back. The ball came flying into my arms. The nickel back charged me, trying to bring me down. He didn't wrap up properly. I spun loose from his tackle and sprinted downfield. No one touched me on the way to the end zone for my fifty-four yard touchdown. Jared Gray kicked the PAT to put us up 7-0.

Coach C unleashed our blitz package against Zach Baker on Purdue's second possession. Purdue gained a couple yards running on first down. Baker threw an incomplete on second down. Trevor sacked the young kid for an eight yard loss on third down. The Boilermakers punted back to us.

Things didn't go better for Purdue on our second possession. Christian hauled in a twenty-two yard touchdown on the seventh play of the drive. Our play calling continued to befuddle Purdue's young QB. Our offense was perfect, scoring five touchdowns on five possessions in the first half of the game. Christian scored, Bob scored, Damian scored and I picked up a second TD before halftime.

Zach Baker worked manfully under severe pressure. An excellent punt return gave Purdue a short field and allowed them to squeak a long field goal in early in the second quarter. The kid persevered and learned from his earlier errors. He ran a good two minute drill as the second quarter ended, throwing a TD against our prevent defense.

We took a 35-10 lead into the locker room. Both first string offense and defense were feeling great about our performance. The feeling reminded me of how things were in the locker room a couple years ago in Zack Hayes' last year when we kept blowing people out. Coach Burton announced that the first string was done. The backups would handle the rest of the workload.

I caught eight passes for 176 yards and two TDs. We didn't run any wildcat plays. They weren't necessary. I wished Jon Stafford, Jared Cantrell, Bruce MacCauley and Tanner Riggs good luck with the second half.

Jon and the second string team got a good start to the second half. They went on a twelve play drive. A couple excellent plays by Purdue in the red zone forced us to accept a field goal instead of a touchdown. Score: Penn State-38, Purdue-10

Purdue's kick returner made a brilliant play to start the next drive. He ran the ball back 53 yards, giving the Boilermakers the ball on our 48 yard line. Baker and his crew adjusted to our pressure at halftime. Their coach rolled him out away from pressure to

increase his completions. They used six plays to move the ball into our red zone. Coach Hope called the perfect play on our blitz – a tight end screen. The tight end rumbled into the end zone, dragging Marco Cuchiella and Matt Frye with him. Score: Penn State-38, Purdue-17

The Boilermaker kicker booted the ball deep into the end zone on the next kickoff. Jon's crew took possession on our 20 yard line. Jon turned and handed the ball off to Wyatt Smith on first down. Wyatt blasted into the middle of the line. The Boilermaker's defense stood him up as he struggled to move forward. Their free safety came flying in and blasted into Wyatt's ball side arm. The safety punched the ball loose, sending it backwards into our backfield. Their outside linebacker caught the ball on the bounce and ran for our end zone. Two linemen kept our would-be tacklers away as he ran across the goal line. Their kicker brought the score to an uncomfortable 38-24 lead.

I was standing near Coach Burton when the disaster happened. I asked, "Do you want the first string to get to ready to play again?"

"No, no I don't," Coach replied. "I want the second string to learn to clean up their own messes."

"OK, Coach," I agreed. My teammates and I did a little stretching on the sidelines anyway, just in case. There was no way we would let the Boilermakers back into the game and keep our best players on the sideline.

Wyatt Smith never touched the ball again that game. Charlie, ET and Grant Turner handled the tailback chores. I felt a little bad for Wyatt. He was a good guy. Two years ago Damian had outperformed him and passed him on the depth chart. This season Charlie passed him. The way ET and Grant played, Wyatt might stay buried.

Our team and Purdue traded field goals in the second half as we tried to run time off the clock and they tried to score. The final score ended up at Penn State-44, Purdue-33

The game was a closer call than it should have been. Zach Baker had improved as he had more time playing our defense. I bet he would be a tough competitor next season. Oh well, that was Chip and Dave's problem.

I did my usual battery of on-field interviews before heading inside. Trevor, Damian and I joined Coach Burton at the post-game press conference. Jeff Morgan asked me a question that halfway caught me by surprise.

"Coach Martin, any comments on breaking the NCAA all-purpose yardage career record?" Jeff asked.

"Did I?" I asked. "I knew I was getting close. What are my stats, Jeff?"

Unofficially, you are credited with 9799 yards, counting today,’ Jeff replied. “You beat Brian Westbrook for total yards and yards per game. Any thoughts or reflections?”

“It’s an honor to be mentioned in the same sentence as Brian Westbrook,” I replied. “He’s such a great running back. I don’t compare myself to him. I had so much help from my coaches and my teammates. Their blocking for me and Chip and Zack’s pinpoint passing helped me along with a big dose of luck. My success is really their success.”

“Do you see yourself passing 10,000 yards this season?” another reporter called out. I didn’t recognize him.

“I hope so,” I replied. “...assuming Chip and I stay healthy.”

“How many yards can you get?” a third reporter shouted out.

“It doesn’t matter,” I replied. “In the end they only count the wins and the losses. If we win, I don’t care if I get a hundred more or a thousand more yards this season.”

“Amen to what Coach says,” Trevor agreed.

The reporters’ questions moved onto other topics which Coach Burton handled. Coach Burton, Trevor, Damian and I were the last people to grab box dinners and board the bus for the airport. We had our dinners after our plane took off for State College. We touched down around 10:30 pm. The buses dropped us off at the Lasch Building around a quarter to twelve.

I was pleased and amazed at the turn out of students to welcome us home from Lafayette. Our campus is usually pretty focused on football during the season. This season’s 5-0 start, including the big games against Kentucky and Nebraska, had hyped up interest higher than I had ever seen. Over two thousand people crowded the parking lot and driveway where the buses parked.

Even though I was dead tired after being up eighteen hours, playing a football game and riding a jet for hours on the trip home, the big crowd was invigorating. My friends and I must have spent twenty minutes shaking hands, talking and celebrating our win with our fans. It was almost 12:15 when Damian, Billy, Trevor, Steph, Chip, Amanda and I trooped back to the apartment. I have no idea if the couples celebrated the victory in bed or not. I crashed the second I hit my sheets.

I had a grand night’s sleep. I didn’t wake up until a quarter to eleven on Sunday morning. Billy Robinson was in the living room watching TV when I came out of my room to go upstairs for my shower.

“Did you and Damian have a good reunion?” I teased.

“Oh yeah,” Billy agreed. He gave me a sly smile. “Most definitely a great reunion. He’s one sexy guy!”

“TMI, Billy,” I responded, my face displaying mock horror. “Way TOO much information.”

He gave me a wink and a laugh as I headed up the steps. I did not begrudge my friend his relationship with Billy. Still, I’d rather not have the image I’d seen a year ago of Billy on Damian fucking in my mind. Not that I was being homophobic. I didn’t want the mental image of Trevor on top of Stephanie when they made love either. Fortunately I had never walked in on the two of them.

Damian and Billy were gone when I went downstairs again. I headed over to the Mix to grab a breakfast sandwich and the Philadelphia Inquirer. I started the paper with the sport section so I could catch up on the other games from yesterday.

#1 Texas was off yesterday. #2 Florida went to Auburn. Ed’s team handily beat the Tigers 34-24. Ed had another excellent day, throwing four TDs, completing 63% of his passes and throwing for over 350 yards. #3 Oklahoma had no problems beating Kansas State. #4 Alabama beat the South Carolina Gamecocks easily in Tuscaloosa.

The phone interrupted my reading. Penny called to congratulate me on my team’s big victory over Purdue the day before. We talked for about forty-five minutes, updating each other about our classes, friends and the other happenings in our lives.

Penny turned her veterinary school application in last Tuesday. The next thing she needed to concentrate on was studying for the GREs – Graduate Record Exams. A good score was critical to having a chance at getting in to veterinary school. Her exams were scheduled for Saturday, October 20th.

We talked about her visit the next weekend to see me and Penn State play against Michigan. As I expected, she was riding up with Will and Abby. They would drop Rose off at Grandma Martin’s so she could spend time with her great grandchild that weekend. Will and Abby were getting a motel room. Penny was staying with Steph Friday night and then staying with me Saturday evening after the game. Both of us were looking forward to our reunion.

The call ended when Dave, Diane, Katie and Dakota came by to pick Penny up. They traditionally all went out on Sunday mornings for brunch together. I asked Penny to give her friends my regards. We exchanged “I love you,” before ending the call.

I went back to studying the sport section. The Inquirer did a nice feature article on our victory yesterday. After us in the polls, #6 USC was off yesterday. #7 Ohio State barely beat a tough Iowa team 17-13. The Buckeyes had needed a fourth quarter touchdown

drive to pull out the win. I knew how the Hawkeyes felt. I had been there two years ago when Ohio State did the same thing to us.

#8 Michigan beat Minnesota but struggled to do it. #9 Miami compounded last week's loss by losing to in state rival Florida State. I wouldn't be seeing them in the top ten anymore. #10 Notre Dame had a tough battle with Army, barely beating them 31-28. Jeremy had seven tackles but no sacks. That wasn't surprising. Army ran an option offense where they rarely passed the ball.

#14 Nebraska went down to Lubbock and played Texas Tech. The pundits expected the pass happy Red Raiders to dominate the Cornhuskers the same way we did two weeks ago. Instead the farm boys hog tied the Red Raiders, triumphing 24-17. The game was one of Texas Tech's lowest scoring games in half a decade.

LSU beat West Virginia 45-10. Drew McCormick had ten carries for 37 yards in the loss. Boise State trampled New Mexico State 72-0. Jake Kring earned his second win as starting QB when his Orangemen beat Louisville 24-20. Rutgers beat Tulane. Hal Long contributed three PATs and two field goals to the score.

My brother's team had the weekend off. My parents got a rare fall weekend at home. Normally both of my parents were either at my game, at Andy's or each caught one of the games.

Some real big games were on tap for next Saturday. Of course, #5 Penn State at 5-0 against #8 Michigan 4-1 would be one of the biggest. The LSU Fighting Tigers hosted Ed's Gators in Baton Rouge. Andy and Delaware would face James Madison University and Jay Nicholson next Saturday. I rooted for Jay to do well this season, except when he played my brother.

I worked on homework for a couple hours after lunch and then hung out with team members at the players' lounge in the Lasch Building. Coach Burton had a team meeting after dinner to dissect our win over Purdue. The first team drew the accolades. The second and third string were reminded repeatedly of what was expected when you played Penn State football.

Coach Burton went over the game plan for Michigan at practice on Monday. We would hit the Wolverines with our usual balanced attack. Last year when we lost we had trouble running thanks to their strong defensive line anchored by William Johnson. Their linebackers were fast to fill the gaps last year.

The Mike (middle) and Will (weak side) linebackers both graduated and moved on to the NFL. Their replacements were sophomores. They had been susceptible to misdirection plays so far this season. We planned to feature a lot of counters and delay draws with

line movement to simulate going one way while the running back went the opposite way. The coaches were confident we would be able to run on the Wolverines this year.

The Wolverine pass defense was just as able as last season. I would certainly be matched against my friend Terrell Ross again. Terrell was hands down their best cornerback. We expected that he would get help this year. Michigan couldn't afford to let me have 237 yards receiving again. When Terrell got help, Brian and Christian would be able to exploit one on one coverage. We knew we could move the ball through the air on Michigan.

Trevor, Damian and I expected that we would need to help our coaches keep guys focused during practices. We didn't. The older guys on the team understood how critical this game was to our team. They passed that knowledge on to the younger guys. The week's practices were the best I had seen all year.

Coach Burton called Trevor, Joe Ricci, Jon Stafford, Troy Davis, Dave McCall, Trey Connelly and me in Wednesday afternoon before practice. I knew what Coach wanted before he started talking. We would have a large group of recruits visiting to the biggest game that would be played in Beaver Stadium this season.

"Thank you for coming in, gentlemen," Coach Burton began. "I have called all of you together to help with the recruits who will be visiting this weekend." I noticed some of the guys looking around, a little confused by the large number of guides Coach Burton was lining up.

"We have an unusually large number of recruits that arranged to visit this particular weekend, no doubt to see our battle with Michigan. We have sixteen seniors who will visit this weekend. Our team had to turn away another six seniors and ten juniors who asked to visit. Trevor, you will take charge of the seven defensive recruits and the kicker this weekend. Coach, you will be in charge of the eight offensive players. Jon and Trey, you will assist Coach. Joe, you and Troy will assist Trevor.

"Jon, I need you to brief Trey and Troy on our program to entertain our guests while the team is preparing for the Saturday's contest. Coach and Trevor, you two will each get a department charge card to use when you take your group of recruits out to dinner.

"Here is the list of recruits visiting this weekend. On offense: Matthew Sauder, quarterback; wide receivers Devin Kerr, Joshua Hunsecker, Jeremy Carter and David Mitchell; and running backs Jacob Meyer, Cody Stevens and Marcus Thomas. On defense we have defensive linemen Mark Russo and Ben Wallace; linebackers Joe Radziwill and Seth Butler; defensive backs Brad Yeager, Elijah Gilbert and Timothy Atkins and kicker Ryan Dillard.

"One of the more interesting developments this year is how some of our early commits have been helping with recruiting," Coach said. "Sauder, Christian's younger brother Joshua, Radziwill and Carter have been actively lobbying their peers to come join them at

Penn State. It certainly makes the coaching staff's job easier. Let's make sure these young men enjoy themselves here and desire to attend this university.

"Do you gentlemen have any questions?" Coach asked. "If not, I will see you out on the practice field in fifteen minutes."

I stayed behind when the rest of the guys left. "Coach, do you have a minute for a personal question?" I asked. He nodded his agreement. "Do you have a problem if I miss the breakfast on Sunday morning? My girlfriend is coming to visit this weekend and I would like to have as much time with her as I can."

"Uh-huh," Coach acknowledged.

"Penny is leaving on Sunday morning around ten o'clock when my brother and sister-in-law head back to Philly," I said. "I was hoping to spend time with her in the morning since I know we won't have a lot of time Saturday night. The game is scheduled for prime time, isn't it?"

"No, Florida/LSU made prime time," Coach said. "We're playing at 3:30 on Saturday. I suppose you still want part of Sunday morning off?"

"If it's possible, Coach," I agreed.

"I think we can spare you from breakfast and the start of the workout session," Coach replied. "I didn't intend to use you to work out with the recruits anyway. I prefer to have younger players that will be teammates of theirs work out with them. Get over to the practice field as soon as you can on Sunday morning, after your girlfriend departs."

"Thanks, Coach. I really appreciate that," I replied.

The first of my mid-terms hit that week. Geography 160 had two mid-terms, one at the beginning of October and the second at the beginning of November. I put in some extra time preparing for the mid-term. It went well. I expected to ace the exam.

I also completed signing up for classes for the spring semester. It was the fastest that ever happened. I signed up for C I 495E for the student teaching session to be held in the Philadelphia area. It's hard to believe that I would have no more classes after that one. My senior status really hit home that evening.

I called Penny Thursday evening after my position meeting to talk about the weekend. Penny and Will both finished classes before lunch on Friday. Abby was done at about a quarter to one. Will and Penny were picking Abby up from campus and coming straight to State College.

My brother would drop Penny off at Steph's apartment before heading to his hotel. The girls planned to try to catch Trevor and me after practice and before dinner. Steph and Penny would get dinner on campus and then head for the pep rally at the Bryce Jordan Center.

I gave Steph Penny's ticket to the game on Saturday. I left Mrs. Caffrey's phone number with Penny too. Penny planned to call and talk with Mrs. Caffrey when we finished talking. We seemed to have everything ready for her visit the next day. We exchanged "I love you," before hanging up.

I gave Ed Fritz a call too. We talked football for a half hour. Ed faced one of his personal scourges – playing in LSU's Death Valley. Ed's first start was in relief of Elijah Carter in Baton Rouge two years ago. Ed was sacked ten times, threw four interceptions and completed 38% of his passes that evening. Ed expected to do better this year. The Gators were undefeated. LSU was 4-1. We wished each other luck when we finished our call.

I was on edge all day Friday, anticipating Penny's arrival on campus. Coach Burton had us do a walk through for practice. He wanted everyone well rested and feeling strong for tomorrow's showdown for dominance in the Big Ten. Practice ended a little early, around 4:45 pm. Trevor, Damian, Chip and I headed for our apartment to kill time. Trevor let Steph know our whereabouts.

A knock at the door announced the arrival of my sweetie a few minutes before 5:30 that evening. Chip, Damian and Trevor knew NOT to get between me and her. I dashed for the door, threw it open and gave Penny the biggest hug ever.

"God, I missed you!" I exclaimed between kisses.

"I did too," Penny answered. After a couple more kisses she added, "I've been waiting all month for this moment." We continued kissing, oblivious to everything else.

During a pause in kissing I heard Chip comment, "Do you think we'll have to hose them down or do you think we're trapped in here forever?"

The comment registered. Penny and I blushed when we realized we were in the doorway. Steph was waiting patiently outside while Damian, Chip and Trevor watched from inside. Penny and I came inside and took seats on the couch. Trevor, Steph, Damian and Chip gathered in the living room with us. We spent about fifteen minutes catching up with each other and talking about the plans for the weekend.

The six of us headed down to Pollock Commons around ten minutes of six. Steph and Penny decided to buy dinner at the regular dining hall while Trevor, Damian, Chip and I ate at the Training Table.

The team headed for the Lasch Building after dinner with our overnight bags and boarded the buses to the pep rally. The Bryce Jordan Center was packed to the rafters when we arrived. Our game against Michigan tomorrow was the biggest game to be played on campus this season.

The Blue Band, the cheerleaders, and the Nittany Lion entertained the crowd, pumping up the enthusiasm level. The team waited in the wings for our introductions. The starters were introduced, starting with the underclassmen, Brian Henson and Jeff Knox. The announcer worked through the juniors and then the seniors, saving Damian, Trevor and me for last.

Damian, Trevor and I drew sustained applause as we were introduced to the fans. The rest of the team stormed out onto the arena floor after us, drawing an equally enthusiastic response. We took our seats along the side of the floor while Coach Paterno took the stage. Our eighty-five year old coach emeritus still knew how to whip up a crowd. Coach Burton worked the crowd to a frenzy, eliciting deafening chants for our success. The Michigan Wolverines must have heard the noise from the arena at their hotel, half a mile away.

The game was declared a white-out. The atmosphere in the arena Friday night and in the stadium on Saturday was going to be raucous. The “We are... Penn State” chants were rattling the rafters as the team filed out for the buses.

Patrick Clark, aka the Nittany Lion, was walking out with team. We turned down the hallway for the door when I spotted Penny and Steph.

“Surprise!” the two girls shouted. Trevor and I hugged our girlfriends as teammates filed past us for the door.

“How did you...” I stammered.

“You’re not allowed back here,” Trevor managed.

“We are when a friend helps us,” Steph responded. She pointed to Patrick, the Lion, still standing beside us. “Patrick and I are in Comm together. He cooked up this idea when he heard how little time Penny would be spending with Kyle after class this afternoon.”

“Thanks Patrick,” I said giving the big cuddly lion a hand shake. “That was really nice. Let me introduce you to my girlfriend. Patrick, this is Penny Edwards.”

“It’s very nice to meet you,” Penny said.

“We met before,” Patrick responded as he shook Penny’s hand. “... at the party after Blue and White game last spring.”

“I don’t remember,” Penny said. “You weren’t in costume then.”

“No, I don’t go to many parties dressed as the Lion,” Patrick agreed.

“Thanks for arranging this, man,” I said. “This is really great.”

“No problem,” Patrick agreed. “Now that I put the lovebirds together, I’ve got to split. This suit is too hot, especially in a packed arena like this one. See you later, at your party tomorrow night, if you’re having one.”

“You know we are,” I responded.

“Score lots of touchdowns, Kyle,” Patrick added. “I expect to do a lot of pushups tomorrow.”

“I’ll do my best,” I said.

“Push-ups?” Penny asked.

“You’ll see tomorrow,” I explained.

“Patrick seems really nice,” Penny said. “I guess he...”

“TREVOR! KYLE!” Anders Voight yelled from the doorway outside. “Shag it! The bus is ready to leave.”

“I love you,” I said as I gave Penny a good night kiss.

“I love you too,” she responded.

“I’ll call you after the game,” I called as Trevor and I headed for the waiting buses.

“You WILL keep your head in the game tomorrow,” Trevor stated as we boarded.

“I will be ready,” I answered. “I’ve played games in front of Penny many times in my career.”

“Good, we’re counting on you.”

Our pre-game Friday night went as usual. We checked into our rooms and then my friends and I assembled for a poker game. We played and relaxed until 10:30 before heading to our rooms.

I checked out my high school Wolverines before bedtime. They trounced Coventry 56-3 in a non-league game. Matt, Dave, Cody and the others had a tough game next week

against Cornwall, an easy game against Eastern and then they faced off with Central for leadership of the league's Section 2 at the end of October.

I sent a quick e-mail off to Ed and wished him the best in Death Valley tomorrow night. He happened to be on-line when I sent the e-mail. We IMed for a few minutes. Ed told me to go kick some Wolverine ass tomorrow. I told him I expected him to redeem himself to make up for the poor showing two years ago in front of his uncle and cousin in Baton Rouge.

Saturday dawned as grim, damp and foreboding as the previous few mornings since the front moved in on State College on Wednesday. The overnight temperature was 48 degrees. The weatherman reported that the high was expected to hit 52. Drizzle and showers were possible throughout the day. At least the gusty winds we had yesterday had died overnight.

Trevor and I met the rest of the team for breakfast at 7:30 that morning. We packed our bags and took the buses back to the Lasch Building after breakfast. We dressed, got taped up and prepared for our foes. Some guys meditated. Others listened to music. Many studied the playbook and game plan. My teammates seemed focused on the task. No one seemed nervous six games into the season.

Trey Connelly and Troy Davis brought two of the recruits to the locker room to visit while we prepared. Seth Butler, from San Antonio, Texas, was comfortable in our locker room. His dad had coached at Penn State half a dozen years ago and he visited many times when he was younger. His dad was the defensive coordinator for the UT-San Antonio Road Runners. UT-SA was a new team in its second year of existence. They were doing two years in the FCS and if things went well, next season they would step up to the FBS.

Brad Yeager, a defensive back from Greensboro, North Carolina, was the second early arriving recruit. Brad, Seth, Brad's parents and Seth's mom had flown in late last night due to the length of the trip from their homes. The other recruits would join us around 11:00 am.

I headed out to the lobby fifteen minutes early so I could visit with the families coming up from Paradise that morning. Ryan Dillard, Joe Radziwill and Tim Atkins, along with their parents were in the lobby when I got out front. I introduced myself and talked with them as we waited for the other families.

The next recruit to arrive was Devin Kerr and his step-mom Taylor, Chase Utley's sister. Devin's dad was tied up, thanks to the Phillies annual playoff run. We talked for a few minutes until more recruits came. The Stevens family and the Mitchell family carpooled together. I greeted Dave's and Cody's parents warmly. I hadn't seen them since the start of camp last summer.

Matt Sauder and his dad came a couple minutes later, almost the same time as Jeremy Carter and his parents. Marcus Thomas and his mom were next. Josh, Randall and Evelyn Hunsecker walked in as I greeted the Thomases. Jacob Meyer and his parents completed my complement of recruits.

The interaction between the recruits was unusual. I knew that Matt, Josh, Dave and Cody knew Devin, Jeremy and Jacob from football camp and the Blue and White game. I was surprised to learn that they corresponded regularly with Joe Radziwill, Mark Russo and Ryan Dillard. They also actively sought out and recruited other top players to join them at Penn State. Their selling had convinced Tim Atkins, Marcus Thomas and Brad Yeager to check out Penn State.

This was certainly an unusual development, from my perspective. Choosing a college was mostly a solitary engagement when I was being recruited, except for Ed and me visiting Michigan and LSU together.

Trevor, Joe Ricci, Jon, Trey, Troy and the early arriving recruits joined us out front as the rest of the families arrived. Trevor and I let Ann Marie know when all the recruits were present. The whole gang was ushered down the hallway to one of our team's meeting rooms to meet Coach Burton, Coach C and Coach Adams. We guides stayed in back out of the way while Coach sold our program.

The guides took the recruits and their families to lunch with the team. Jon, Trey and I spread ourselves among the families and recruits while we ate. I enjoyed the teasing between Matt, Dave and Cody against Josh regarding their football matchup in three weeks. Matt boldly predicted a Wolverines win. Josh promised that the game wouldn't go the way Matt, Dave and Cody expected but stopped short of promising a Central victory.

Troy and Trey took the parents and recruits on a campus tour while the rest of us went back to the locker room to finish our preparations. The team boarded the buses about half an hour later. A quick rain shower had passed through just before we left, wetting the grass and streets.

A big crowd was assembled at the players' entrance when our buses dropped us off. Trevor, Damian and I along with other team leaders, took a couple minutes to shake hands and talk with our fans before ducking inside to finish dressing.

Our stadium field was well drained so it was puddle free and solid even though the grass was damp. We went through our routines. Coach Ferguson had me field a few kicks. I hadn't heard anything but I suspected I could get called in on kick returns if we fell behind early.

Michigan came out a couple minutes after our team. I watched as they practiced. Garrett Bradford was the first Wolverine to stop by and say hello.

“Hey Kyle, how’s it going?” Garrett asked as he jogged over after I finished my warm up.

“I’m good,” I responded. “How about you?”

“I’m good too.” Garrett gave me a wink and teased, “Beat up any more linebackers lately?”

“No… No, just the one,” I replied. “Sports Center did replay that clip a lot, didn’t they?”

“Can I ask one question?” Garrett asked. I nodded yes. “Why?”

“It wasn’t pay back,” I explained. “I needed to make a statement to my team. It got them fired up.”

“Yeah, it did that, didn’t it?” Garrett responded.

Garrett and I continued talking. Terrell Ross joined Brad a couple minutes later. Nick Wilson stopped to talk too. We wished each other a safe game.

I spent a few minutes talking with the recruits on the field. Even though some of them had experienced warm-ups on this field last spring before the Blue and White game, you can’t appreciate the atmosphere until you add those extra 40,000 fans. The stadium was crackling with energy as everyone got ready for the contest.

I stopped by to say hi to Mike, Dan and Adam when I finished on the field. The coaches’ family section where Penny, Mrs. Caffrey, Jonathan and Emily sat was too high for me to talk with my lover before the game. I settled for giving her a big wave and blowing her a kiss before I went inside.

Our team finished dressing for the game. The locker room was quiet, which is unusual for our team. Coach Burton walked to the center of the room and called for our attention. Everyone turned to hear our coach’s words.

“Gentlemen, this year our team agreed to a common vision for the season,” Coach began. He pointed over to the smudged poster hanging on the wall. “To storm out of the tunnel in Phoenix on January 7th and play for the national championship. You’ve worked your asses off this spring and summer to take steps toward that vision. We’ve played some excellent teams in the past five weeks, persevered and prevailed.

“Today we face the Michigan Wolverines, one of the best teams in our conference as well as in the country. They have gotten the better of us more often than not in the past three years. We have been playing them every year for almost two decades. They know our playbook. We know theirs.

“Our success today will depend, on large part, on each of you executing your assignments. Your drive, your heart, your will to win are going to determine whether our team or the Wolverines will win today’s contest.

“If you want to go to Phoenix,” Coach challenged, “You have to go take it from these guys!”

“Let’s huddle up, guys,” I shouted.

“Where are we going this year?” Damian demanded.

“ON TO PHOENIX!” a hundred and nine voices shouted in unison. We headed out to the tunnel, tapping our On to Phoenix poster for good luck on the way. Matt, Dave, Cody, Josh and Devin wished me luck as I passed them. Jon and Troy were taking the recruits to the stands as we lined up for our introductions.

The Blue Band serenaded our team before we stormed the field. The roar of the crowd was deafening as we ran from our tunnel to our bench area. Coach Burton briefed Damian, Trevor and me as we waited for Michigan to take the field.

The wind was blowing from the west southwest, the short way across the stadium. There was no particular advantage in wind direction so we were instructed to choose the Bald Eagle Mountain end of the stadium if we picked directions. That way Michigan would be driving towards the three tier, Mount Nittany end of the stadium. The student section was in that end, as well as the highest density of fans in the stadium. The sound would be deafening if Michigan had to drive for a go ahead TD before the half or to end the game.

We met the head referee and Michigan captains at centerfield. Nick Wilson was there with an offensive lineman and a linebacker I didn’t know. Nick called tails when the coin was flipped. It was heads. We chose to receive the ball. Nick chose to defend the Mount Nittany end of the stadium to start the game. That was OK. The rest of the fans in the stadium were loud too.

Tanner Riggs lined up at our 5 yard line, awaiting Michigan’s kickoff. Their kicker boomed the ball, driving Tanner deep into the end zone. John Crosby told Tanner to kneel down and take the touchback.

Chip assembled us in a huddle near the 20, calling our first play. Damian ran off tackle to our right side. Big William Johnson, Michigan’s right defensive tackle drove for Mahmoud Greene’s outside shoulder, muscling our big left guard away. Greg Nowicki, our center, was supposed to help with William but couldn’t get over in time. William nearly caught Damian as he engulfed our backfield. Damian made it to the hole but was stopped by two linebackers two yards down field.

On second down, Brian lined up in the slot between me and our offensive line. He went in motion to the opposite side of the field before the snap. Michigan’s defenders didn’t

move. They were playing zone coverage. Terrell Ross lined up ten yards away from me, giving him a cushion against my speed.

At the snap I drove downfield fifteen yards and went out for the sideline. Terrell shadowed me. My fake going inside before turning out forced Terrell inside of me. Chip fired the ball to me just before William drove Mahmoud, Greg and Damian into his face. I caught the ball and spun, hoping to get away from Terrell. I made about two yards before he caught me and allowed a safety to come up and help bring me to the ground.

Brian lined up in my split end spot on the next play. I started in the slot on the weak side. I went in motion across the backfield until I was four yards outside Bob. Terrell followed along with me. No other Wolverine moved. We now knew the defensive scheme – Cover 2 Zone with Terrell assigned to shadow me man to man.

The knowledge didn't help on this play. Christian went deep. I did an out route from the slot. I adjusted a little deeper than planned to get behind the underneath linebacker. He dropped deeper, helping Terrell cover me. William and his line mates broke down our offensive line. Chip was forced to scramble to the strong side, away from William. Bob broke off his curl route and drifted the same direction as Chip, finding an open space underneath the linebacker covering me. Chip fired the ball to Bob. The Mike and Sam linebackers converged on Bob, limiting Bob to a five yard gain.

"They're not hanging you out to dry like last year?" I teased Terrell as the play ended. I had caught eleven passes for 237 yards last year when Terrell was assigned to cover me one on one. Terrell didn't answer, he just gave me a smile.

Coach Burton had us try a quick out pass to Christian. Chip took the snap, dropped back a couple steps and fired the ball over to Christian. We were counting on the cornerback dropping back for deep coverage and the Sam linebacker not being able to get over to tackle Christian. That was a miscalculation. He dropped Christian before he got more than a couple yards downfield.

We tried a play action pass on third down and three yards to go. Bob stayed in to block. Christian, Brian and I went downfield, seeking the seams in the zone coverage. William broke free from Mahmoud and Greg. Chip fled towards the line of scrimmage. He spotted Brian and under armed the pass forward to Brian. The Mike linebacker was able to get a hand in and knock the ball out of Brian's outstretched hands.

On fourth down and three yards to go, Mitch punted a beautiful ball downfield. It bounced inside the five yard line. Michigan's returner vacated the vicinity. John Crosby, Kevin Giordano and Mark Markovich tried to down the ball but couldn't stop it from rolling across the goal line.

Michigan started on their 20 yard line. Coach C sent Josh Bruno on a run blitz on first down. The play was a play action pass. Josh's blitz blew the play up before it could get started. On second down and ten, Trevor and the rest of our pass rush cut loose. They

forced Nick to throw the ball away. Garrett Bradford sneaked out into the spot Tony King left when he blitzed on third down and ten yards to go. Nick hit him. Jeff Knox and Josh Bruno tackled Brad before he gained more yards.

Our fired up defense held on the next set of downs. The third and eight to go play was particularly instructive. Shawn Byrd seemed to slip as he started his backpedal. Nick spotted the “error” immediately. He stared momentarily as Shawn tried to recover and catch the Wolverine receiver. Nick turned away again and fired the ball to Garrett Bradford over the middle six yards downfield. Jeff Knox and Josh Bruno teamed up to stop Brad before he could pass the down marker.

A casual fan would never have seen what just happened. Shawn had baited a trap for Nick. Nick had studied the film enough to recognize Shawn’s “slip” for what it was. Shawn would have sprung in front of the receiver and picked off the football if Nick had thrown the ball to the apparently open receiver. Nick was mature enough as a QB to take the safe route instead of trying for the big fifteen yard play that would have turned into an interception.

Brian Henson lined up on our 25 yard line to await Michigan’s punt. He drifted back a couple yards to field the well kicked ball and started to his left. John Crosby had done an excellent job blocking the gunner on that side. Brian had gained six yards and had a head of steam by the time he met the gunner.

Brian juked one way as the gunner went for the tackle the other way. As the gunner fell, he twisted and managed to grab Brian’s left foot. Brian jerked and got loose, leaving his shoe behind. Brian managed to gain six more yards on one shoe before the coverage collapsed on him. It was a shame. If he had kept both shoes, the way was clear down the sideline to the goal.

Brian retrieved his shoe and scrambled off the field. Tanner Riggs took his spot temporarily. We had the ball at our 37 yard line. My team was upbeat as we took the field. We knew we could move the ball but we would need to be patient. Michigan’s fierce pass rush and Cover 2 defense would make deep passes difficult. We would have trouble running inside if the play came near William Johnson’s side of the line.

Damian would have to carry an extra load, helping Greg and Mahmoud when, not if, William Johnson broke free from their blocks. We had to stick to three and five step drop pass to the short and medium zone. Coach Burton gave Chip roll outs and some screen passes to reduce the impact of the Wolverine pass rush.

We stayed patient and disciplined. Damian ran to our right, away from William, and picked up good yardage. I caught a short pass in front of Terrell for eight yards. We did get a false start penalty but I made up for it the next play with a twelve yard catch to put us back on track.

Disaster struck Michigan on the eighth play of our drive. I was lined up in the slot between Bob and Christian. Brian was on the opposite side of the field in my split end spot. Coach Burton had Chip roll out to my side to make it harder for William to catch up. I ran a deep post route, drawing the deep cover cornerback, as well as Terrell with me.

Brian ran a medium route and did a hitch behind the short zones, drawing the other deep safety forward. Christian ran his route underneath me to the middle of the field. He got past the short zones and settled in on the seam between two deep zones. Chip fired the ball to him.

Michigan's strong safety backpedaled to try to cover Christian. The strong safety tried to tackle Christian when the ball arrived but my buddy twisted loose. Boom! Christian used his excellent initial burst to get free. Brian blocked his cover guy away. I took out Terrell, knocking him to the ground. I couldn't stop the other cornerback, but he had a bad angle and wasn't fast enough to catch Christian before he crossed the goal line. Jared Gray made the PAT easily. Score: Penn State-7, Michigan-0

Michigan's offense gave up little when compared to our team. They had a strong running game, a top quarterback, and excellent receivers. They protected Nick Wilson well, didn't turn the ball over and were ranked #11 in the FBS for penalties (4.4 penalties a game). Our team happened to be even better than them. We averaged 3.0 penalties a game, tying us for first in the NCAA FBS with Wisconsin.

Our defense stacked up well against the Wolverines. Our defensive tackles were hard to run against. Trevor and Bill Daugherty were quick to stop outside runs and were tops in rushing the passer. Josh Bruno, Brendan Hayden and Tony King, our linebackers, were fast, good tacklers and could shore up any run gap. They did a good job covering running backs and tight ends too.

Our secondary was one of the strengths of our defense. Shawn Byrd was in his third year as a starter and had developed a reputation around the FBS of being a shutdown cornerback. His four interceptions to date tied him with eight other guys for the lead in the FBS. Shawn invariably covered the opposition's best receiver. Teams threw against him less than previous years. He allowed less than half the balls thrown his direction to be completed and kept any gains short after completions. No one had caught a touchdown against Shawn this season... PERIOD.

Dave McCall was quickly demonstrating his elite status too. He had three interceptions so far. Dave provided good run support and could match up with nearly any receiver that came his way. It wasn't a huge surprise. Dave had done well the few games last season when he filled in for Tyler Madden.

Teams went after Denzell Hunt, Jeff Knox and GJ DeLuca more since they had little luck against Shawn and Dave. The three more than held their own, making our secondary the strongest part of our defense.

Nick Wilson's Wolverines patiently attacked our defense, exploiting parts of the field we weren't covering to move their team down the field on their third possession. Trevor managed a sack near midfield. Michigan made it up on the next play with a nice 18 yard gain on a tight end screen to Garrett Bradford.

They drove down to our twelve yard line as the second quarter started. Trevor got excellent pressure on Nick on the eighth play of their drive. Nick managed to escape as the right tackle dragged Trevor down. Nick spotted Garrett Bradford on the goal line and squeezed the ball between Josh Bruno and Jeff Knox. Brad fell backwards into the end zone as Josh and Jeff pounded into him, trying to shake the ball loose. The referees signaled touchdown.

Coach C was apoplectic on the sideline, ranting that Trevor had been held as Nick threw the ball for the score. The refs were slow but they saw Coach C's point. The flag was tossed. After a brief conference among the referees, Michigan was charged with holding and the touchdown was called back. The ball was spotted at our 22 yard line.

Trevor, Bill and company didn't leave Nick time to find another open receiver. On first and twenty he threw the ball through the end zone. Heavy pressure forced him to dump the ball off to his running back on second down. The RB picked up four yards before he was swarmed by our defenders. Bill Daugherty broke loose first on third down and sixteen yards to go. Bill chased Nick right into Trevor. Nick ducked forward and managed to get to the line of scrimmage before Trevor, Bill and Jerry Whitfield crushed him. Michigan settled for a 35 yard field goal to put the score to Penn State-7, Michigan-3.

Our closely matched teams sparred indecisively through the second quarter. Neither team managed gain a significant edge. We had our next drive stopped. Our defense forced them to punt the ball away when they took possession again.

We did well on the next drive, pushing 60 yards down the field before pressure on Chip forced a premature throw to Brian. The d-back picked the ball off. Brian and I minimized the damage by tackling the interceptor after gaining a few yards.

Michigan took over on their 25 yard line. Nine well executed plays pushed them across midfield and down close to our red zone. A timely blitz forced Nick Wilson to check down on a third and eight yards to go play. Josh Bruno and Brendan Hayden combined to drop the Wolverine running back half a yard short of the down marker. Coach Rodriguez decided to go for it. Michigan's kicker was sure inside forty yards but got shaky beyond that.

Trevor, Bill, Mike and Jerry stood off the Michigan line, not yielding an inch. Josh, Brendan and Tony King blasted through the gaps. Josh and Tony met the big Michigan fullback behind the line of scrimmage, crushing him to the ground a half a yard back. The Penn State crowd finally left their breath out, stood and cheered our defense. My

offensive teammates and I congratulated the defense for their excellent damage control after Chip's turnover.

I had picked up twenty-two yards on two catches during the two thwarted drives. Coach Burton and Coach Caffrey had called the offense together during the last drive to go over two special plays. They were the same deep pass play using different personnel packages. Chip would audible to one of them when the opportunity presented itself.

William Johnson had played havoc with our blocking all afternoon. He also played nearly every down for Michigan's defense. We knew he had to be getting tired. We would unleash our special plays when William took a breather.

Charlie Taylor was in to spell Damian. We ran wide left on a sweep to force William to help chase down Charlie. Chip rolled out to our right and hit Christian for a six yard gain on the second play. William was forced to chase down the quarterback.

Wes Kennedy, our fullback, came in with Damian on the next play. Greg and Mahmoud combined to block William on a dive play to the Three Hole (right at William). Wes blasted into the pile, forcing William back a few inches. Damian blasted in behind the pile, pushing it over. My roommate had gained two yards when the refs unstacked the pileup.

Chip rolled left and hit me in front of Terrell for seven yards on the next play. Once again William was forced to chase after Chip. William wasn't moving too quick when we huddled up.

Chip called another rollout play to the right. I spotted William lumbering off the field as we broke the huddle. I tapped Chip on the shoulder and pointed. He gave me a big smile. I recognized the number of the player trotting out to take William's spot on the line. He was a red shirt freshman.

Chip called the audible for the appropriate special play. Brian and I swapped spots. He lined up as the split end. I lined up in the slot left. Bob went in motion and joined us on the left side, taking his spot a couple yards outside our left tackle.

Chip took the ball at the snap and dropped back seven steps. Our offensive line held firm. Christian went deep on the right side. Brian and I went deep on the left. Bob followed, turning out in the seam between the short and deep zones on the left side. Damian followed into the short zone on the left side.

We had overloaded Michigan's defense. We had five receivers against four defenders. Somebody was guaranteed to be open. The deep safety hustled over to try to cover Brian as he ran downfield. I was one on one with Terrell, as expected. The Will linebacker dropped back to watch Bob. Damian was wide open.

I juked as if I was running a post route. Terrell bit. I sprinted downfield with Terrell trailing me a couple yards. Chip spotted the opening and heaved a beautiful forty yard pass to me. I ran under it, caught it and tucked it away. Brian and Christian blocked their safeties allowing me to sprint into the end zone untouched. It was a fifty-three yard touchdown.

The stadium broke into cheers as I was mobbed by Brian, Bob and Christian. Chip and Damian joined the celebration as we headed off the field. Jared drilled the PAT. Score: Penn State-14, Michigan-3

During the TV timeout while the kicking and return teams set up, the stadium announcer informed the crowd of this: "Our statistician informs us that wide receiver Kyle Martin's last catch put his career receiving yards past Jerry Rice's Division I record of 4,693 yards. Unofficially 'Coach' Martin has gained 4,735 yards. Come out and take a bow, Coach."

I didn't want to but the friends forced me. I stepped onto the field and waved. To my shock, nearly the entire crowd in the stadium stood and cheered my new record. I acknowledged them by thrusting my helmet in the air and waving some more.

Patrick, the Nittany Lion, came bounding over and hoisted my other arm up before he gave me a hug.

"A standing O... pretty fucking cool, Coach," Patrick said over the din in the stadium. "Congrats!"

"Thanks, Pat," I agreed. We had to hurry off the field as an official uncovered the ball and signaled that Jared could kick off.

Our good cheer didn't last. We had left about three minutes on the clock before half time. Our quick score didn't rattle Michigan. They came at us patiently, driving down the field three or four yards a play. A minute and a half remained when they crossed midfield. Michigan continued pecking away at our defense, executing near flawless football.

Coach C tried various gambits to break Michigan's offensive rhythm. None were successful. They pushed down closer to our red zone. Josh Bruno's well timed run blitz on second down and seven to go at our 27 yard line dropped the Wolverine tailback for a two yard loss.

Coach C blitzed Tony King on third down, gambling that the extra pressure would force an incompletion or an interception. Michigan had the perfect play called to counter our blitz. Tony King normally covers the left flat and watches for screens. He wasn't there when Nick lobbed the ball over the onrushing linemen and linebacker to Garrett Bradford. Brad's blockers cleared out our defenders and let Brad motor into the end zone. Michigan's kicker made the PAT to narrow our lead to 14-10.

0:37 remained in the first half. We took a couple shots downfield. Christian, Brian and I were blanketed deep. Bob caught a pass for a dozen yards. Damian took a dump off and rumbled down field fifteen yards before the defenders gang tackled him. Pressure from William and the Michigan line forced Chip to throw the ball away on the last two plays before the clock ran down.

The coaches went over some adjustments for the second half. Coach Burton and Coach Adams reviewed three more “William free” deep passes that we would try when William was off the field. Coach Burton asked Trevor, Damian and me if we wanted to address the team before we went back out. We took a couple minutes to prepare.

Trevor started. “Our defense was getting its tails kicked against Kentucky. We prevailed.”

“Those big Nebraska farm boys weren’t giving us an inch,” Damian announced in follow up. “We won that game.”

“We knew Michigan was as good as any team we would play all season,” I added. “We have a vision and these Wolverines are standing in our way. ARE WE GOING TO BACK DOWN?”

“NO!”

“WHERE ARE WE GOING?” Trevor demanded.

“ON TO PHOENIX!” our teammates yelled in reply. Damian, Trevor and I each slapped our “On to Phoenix” poster as we led the team out. We heard the sounds of our teammates tapping the glass as we filed out into the tunnel for the second half.

Jared Gray kicked the ball three yards into the end zone to open the second half. Michigan’s sophomore kick returner decided to bring the ball out. He headed left, meeting up with John Crosby and Matt Frye near the 20 yard line. He put a sweet fake on John, causing John to hesitate momentarily. The young kid squirted through the gap before John or Matt could tackle him. The kid scooted up the sideline until Ryan McGuire managed to catch him and shove him out of bounds.

Michigan’s offensive started on their 48 yard line. They patiently worked over our defense, keeping our guys guessing between passes or runs each down. Nine plays later Nick Wilson delivered a perfect lob into the corner of the end zone against Denzell Hunt. Their kicker put Michigan in front 17-14.

Tanner Riggs made a good return on the ensuing kickoff, putting us at our 39 yard line. William Johnson was well rested and totally disrupted our offense. On third and seven to go, Chip had to flee a sack and managed to slip past the first layer of tacklers to give us

another set of downs. William and the Michigan defense shut us down for the next three downs. Mitch Jackson punted the ball back to the Wolverines.

Trevor exhorted his line mates to stop Michigan's offense. He fired up the guys enough to stop the Wolverine tailback two plays in a row, leaving Nick Wilson third down and seven yards to go from their 28 yard line.

Shawn Byrd covered Michigan's top receiver one on one. Nick drilled the ball to his guy on an out route. Shawn cut the corner and picked off the pass one handed. He tucked the ball away and broke free from a desperate tackle by the receiver. The left tackle and Nick Wilson hemmed Shawn in and took him down at Michigan's 19 yard line.

Coach Burton had me line up in the wildcat to start our drive. We did an end around play with a passing option for me. Brian and Christian went deep while Chip led me to the strong side. Chip threw something resembling a cut block, taking the Sam linebacker out momentarily. I continued for the end of the line, watching the d-backs down field. I didn't cock my arm for the throw until I was on top of the line of scrimmage. The back covering Brian finally broke coverage and ran towards me. I uncorked a wobbly pass down the field to Brian. He managed to catch it and bull his way into the end zone as the free safety tried to take him down. Jared made the PAT. Score: Penn State-21, Michigan-17

Michigan made a long, ten play drive that broke down after a false start penalty and a sack by Trevor. Michigan tried a 49 yard field goal. They missed.

We took over at our 32 yard line. William Johnson broke loose on our first play, sacking Chip even though we called a quick, three step drop pass. William was fired up. He broke loose on the next play, forcing Mahmoud Greene to tackle him to save Chip's life. The referees flagged the obvious hold.

On second down and twenty-five, Charlie Taylor carried the ball wide to the right on a sweep to pick up six yards. Chip didn't have time to find anyone open twenty yards downfield so he dumped the ball off to Damian. My roommate picked up five yards before he was gang tackled. Mitch Jackson punted the ball down to Michigan's returner. He called for a fair catch at their 27 yard line.

Nick and Michigan's offense swaggered onto the field, confident they would put this game away on the next drive. Our team had done little in the third quarter except for the two big plays. Our fans were quiet as they waited.

Coach Rodriguez called a great drive, mixing seven runs and six completions on seven pass attempts. The Wolverines marched across midfield and down into our red zone. They punched the ball in on an off tackle run where they plowed over Bill Daugherty and Tony King. Their kicker booted the ball through the uprights to give the Wolverines the lead. Score: Michigan-24, Penn State-21

Tanner Riggs had a stinger from the last kick return. Jared Cantrell took the kickoff instead. Jared, at 6'-1" and 200 pounds, had a couple inches and thirty pounds on Tanner. He put the size and weight advantage to work.

Jared took the kickoff two yards deep in the end zone and followed the blockers up the field. Mark Markovich and Tom Kowalchuk split open a small seam. Jared went flying through the hole. He lowered his shoulder and bowled over the next tackler, a small linebacker. Jared tried to dodge the kicker, but got tangled up and knocked to the ground. He had moved the ball out to our 41 yard line.

"You're not the only one who can take out a linebacker," Jared teased as I congratulated him when we passed each other at the edge of the field.

"That's the way to set the tone," I agreed. "Good job!"

Damian went off tackle to the right on the first play. Jared's play seemed to inspire our offensive line. They opened a hole and let Damian get eight yards on the first play. Coach Burton called for the wildcat again. I did my end around play, same as the last time. The Wolverine d-backs stayed with their receivers, so I tucked the ball in and ran. I tried repeating my Nebraska hit on the linebacker in front of me. He wasn't surprised. He dug in and hit me hard as I tried blast through him. I had momentum. He had size. The two of us collided and went down together sideways. I gained 12 yards.

Coach Caffrey pulled me off the field after the play. "Let's not get too crazy, Coach," Coach Caffrey cautioned. "You would have picked up more yards if you had dodged him."

"Whatever you say, Coach," I agreed.

"We have something special for you soon," Coach added.

My teammates pushed the ball down to Michigan's 42 yard line while I watched from the sideline. Coach sent me in again. Brian took my split end spot. I lined up in the slot right between Bob and Christian.

At the snap Christian drove deep while Bob ran an out route and I crossed behind Bob on a slant. As we anticipated, I was open momentarily as Terrell dodged Bob and one of his linebackers. Damian stayed in to help with William, giving Chip time for me to hit the deep seam. He rifled the ball to me as I came clear of the short zone trailed by Terrell. Chip's pass was dead on target. I ran through it, turned and sprinted down the center of the field. Christian kept his d-back away but Brian couldn't. The safety took me down at their 8 yard line.

We tried a play action pass on first down. Everyone in the end zone was covered. The fade to the corner of the end zone was too deep and I couldn't reach the ball on second down. We tried a tight end screen on third down but Bob was tackled for a two yard loss.

The crowd called for us to go for it on fourth down but Coach Burton took the easy field goal. Score: Penn State-24, Michigan-24

Our nine play drive had given our defense a rest. They took the field fired up. Michigan hit us with a balanced attack, mixing runs and passes to keep our base defense on the field. Trevor, Jerry, Mike and Bill held their offensive line to a standoff. They still were able to advance the ball down the field.

We thought we had Michigan stopped seven plays into the drive, soon after they crossed midfield. Their right tackle got flagged for holding when he took down Trevor to protect Nick Wilson. Michigan didn't panic. Their first and twenty became second and fourteen and then third a seven. Nick completed a sweet, but disgusting pass to Garrett Bradford to keep their drive alive on third down.

The clock was down to 6:21. Michigan ran the ball twice, leaving themselves a third and two yards to go play at our 37 yard line. Nick Wilson faked a handoff to his tailback, who headed into the 3 Hole, between the left guard and center.

Our secondary didn't buy the fake and dropped back with the receivers as they started downfield. Trevor happened to have stunted to the tackle's inside shoulder this play. Josh Bruno was on a run blitz between the center and left guard. Trevor took an inside rush this play. He managed to get on the inside shoulder of the Wolverine right tackle. Normally Garrett Bradford would chip Trevor on the way out of the backfield or the right guard would double team Trevor.

With Josh blitzing, the left guard was forced to pick up Josh. Trevor used his speed and leverage to slide by the tackle and charge into the backfield. Trevor ignored the fake to the running back and went straight for Nick Wilson.

Nick scrambled away from Trevor, still looking for an open receiver downfield. He spotted his slot receiver on a curl route over the middle. Nick lobbed the ball to the slot receiver a split second before Trevor hit him. In his rush Nick hadn't lofted the ball enough. Mike Pollard lunged up and swatted the ball. The ball ricocheted off target directly into GJ DeLuca's hands.

GJ wasn't able to advance the ball since he was surrounded by Michigan players. The stadium seemed to vibrate as 100,000 white clad fans shook their white pom-poms and cheered GJ's feat. He flipped the ball to the referee and jogged to our sideline.

We congratulated GJ before Coach Caffrey hustled the first string offense out. We had possession at our 32 yard line. 5:28 remained in the game. Now we weren't reacting to their thrust. They had to react to ours.

Every play we ran had two purposes: first to gain yards and first downs and second, to make William Johnson run as far as possible to chase down our ball carrier or receiver. We used William's speed and athleticism against him. William was the Wolverines' big

playmaker and we made sure his chance to make the play was barely out of reach each down.

We worked our way methodically down the field. We didn't need to hurry. We had plenty of time for one score. As we had all day, we moved the ball down the field in small, four to five yard chunks.

I made a big play on the fifth play of the drive. I got half a step on Terrell Ross. Chip had rolled clear of the pressure and fired the ball to me between the short and deep zones. I broke Terrell's tackle and managed extra yards before the safeties took me down. My seventeen yard catch put us on Michigan's 30 yard line.

Coach Burton had a special play ready as soon as William took a breather on the sidelines. It didn't happen as quickly as we hoped. The play after my catch William burst through the line, nearly taking the handoff instead of Damian. The only thing that averted disaster was when Mahmoud horse collared William and took him down. The penalty forced us back to Michigan's 40 yard line.

An excellent sweep right by Charlie recovered ten yards on the next play. Bob caught a curl for another six. We kept waiting for William to leave the field but he didn't. We saw him across the line panting and resting by bracing himself with his hands on his knees.

Coach Burton got tired of waiting for William to leave. He called our special play on the ninth play of the drive. I lined up in the slot between Bob and Christian. Brian took my spot on the weak side. At the snap, Chip dropped back and pretended to stuff the ball in Damian's gut before drifting backwards. The fake handoff wasn't terribly convincing. I ran an end around route to intercept Chip as Damian fired into William to assist Greg and Mahmoud with our big "friend."

Chip stuffed the ball into my gut as I passed him. I wrapped my arms around a phantom ball as Chip pulled it away from me and pretended to look for someone to block. Brian was coming my way on a reverse route. I pantomimed handing the phantom ball to Brian.

Brian wrapped both arms around the "ball" and continued sprinting for the strong side sideline. I spun around after the "handoff" and blocked Terrell Ross, to keep him away from Brian.

Our multiple misdirections had Michigan's defense thoroughly confused. The middle linebacker went for Damian's fake. The other linebackers flowed my way to stop the end around before shifting back the other way to pursue Brian. The d-backs abandoned coverage when they saw Brian get the "ball." They knew he was no threat to throw like I was.

While all this is going on, Christian ran down the sideline, unnoticed by the time of our third fake handoff. Chip rifled the ball to Christian when he came open. Christian kicked in his afterburners and flew for the end zone. My buddy's initial burst was too much for the Michigan cornerback that should have covered him. Touchdown Penn State!

The stadium shook and vibrated and the crowd rose, stamped their feet, and gave full throated venting to their feelings of relief and delight. My friends and I sprinted down to the end zone to congratulate Christian on his score.

Jared Gray kicked the PAT to give us a 31-24 lead. A cheer went up from the crowd while we were doing another TV timeout before the kickoff. I looked around, expecting to see the Nittany Lion doing some stunt. Instead I found Patrick standing at centerfield and pointing towards the scoreboard.

It said: "Kyle 'Coach' Martin has passed 10,000 all purpose yards with the last catch." Patrick turned, snapped to attention and threw me a salute. I waved to Patrick and the crowd in acknowledgment. They cheered our exchange.

My teammates tried to congratulate me. "Focus, guys," I commanded. "Records are for after the game is over. We still have to hold Michigan to get this win!"

1:27 remained on the clock when Jared kicked the ball back to Michigan. They made no pretense of running the ball now. They had used up all their timeouts keeping time on the clock during our drive. Their only option was medium to deep passes to the sidelines. Almost anything else would waste too much time.

Coach C sent Matt Frye out as our sixth defensive back. Trevor, Jerry, Mike and Bill stayed on the field as our defensive line. Joe Ricci was our solitary linebacker. Dave McCall played deep shortstop, ready to tackle anybody coming down the middle of the field. The other d-backs made sure they guarded the sidelines, keeping any catches in the field of play and keeping the clock running.

Our pass rush was fierce. Nick Wilson was forced to dump off the ball for six and then eight yards on the first two plays. Our guys tackled them in bounds to keep the clock running. Nick hit Garrett Bradford across the middle for 17 yards on the next play. Nick hustled his team down the field and drilled the ball into the field to stop the clock.

Michigan was on our 49 yard line. The clock showed 0:34. Trevor sacked Nick on the next down, pushing Michigan back seven yards. Good coverage and our pass rush forced Nick to throw the ball away on third down and 18. Michigan lined up for the Hail Mary Pass, their only remaining chance of winning.

Nick lobbed the ball into the end zone on fourth down. Matt Frye out jumped the cluster of Wolverine receivers and batted the ball to Dave McCall. Dave hung on for his fourth interception of the season.

Our offense took the field with 0:29 on the clock. Chip kneeled down one time to run the clock out and give us the victory. The big crowd cheered in relief and delight at our escape from a very tough Michigan team.

I received congratulations from Garrett Bradford and Terrell Ross after the game. I wished them luck with the remainder of the season. Nick Wilson came over to talk for a moment.

“I guess this is it, Kyle,” Nick said as we shook hands. “We’re done playing head to head. I guess the next time we play will be in the Senior Bowl. We’ll probably be on the same team then, thank God!”

“I guess so, Nick,” I agreed. “Good luck with the rest of the season. Make damn sure you beat Ohio State.”

“You do the same,” Nick replied.

I did a lot of interviews after the game. Every reporter wanted to know how I felt about breaking Jerry Rice’s yards receiving record and about my passing the 10,000 yard milestone.

They all got the same answer. “Last year I had the best day of my career and we lost,” I explained. “That was a bad day for me. Today I had OK stats and we won. Winning makes this a good day. I’ll worry about my stats when I’m an old man. Right now all I care about is making sure my team keeps winning games.”

Jeff Morgan, the Penn State beat reporter for the Philadelphia Inquirer, replied, “You had ten catches for 182 yards and a touchdown. You ran for another twenty-one yards. You’re seriously calling that an OK day? Those stats are your best this season.”

“The only stat I care about is 6-0,” I countered. “We keep winning and I’ll be happy. Jeff, you can quote me on that. Please... quote me on that.”

“You got it, Coach,” Jeff agreed.

I called Will and Penny when I got in the locker room. I told Will to bring his car down to the parking lot nearest my apartment. The athletic department had arranged for the recruits to have dinner in a private room at Damon’s Grill.

Trevor, Damian and I accompanied Coach Burton to the post game press conference. I fielded more questions about my records. I gave the same reply. Winning was the only thing I was interested in.

Coach Adams, Coach C, Jon Stafford, Trey Connelly, Troy Davis and Dave McCall were entertaining recruits and their parents in the lobby when Coach, Trevor and I met them. Will, Abby, Penny, Steph, Christian and Bev were out there waiting for us too. Anders

Voight and Yasin Clark had department vans to help ferry everyone over to the restaurant. I drove Will, Abby, Penny and me to Damon's, since Will had no idea how to get there. A game-day Saturday night was a bad night to learn your way around State College.

I let the waitresses in our room know who was paying for the various meals. Will took care of his and Abby's. I would pay for Penny's. Christian would take care of Bev's meal. Trevor would get Steph's. Everything else went on the athletic department charge card I had.

We ordered appetizers and drinks. Some of the recruits asked questions about the game and our experiences at Penn State. This dinner was the easiest recruiting session I had ever had. Matt, Josh and Jeremy Carter did most of the selling, trying to convince the others to join them as Nittany Lions. Dave, Cody, Devin and Jake Meyer needed little convincing. Their fondest wish was to get a scholarship offer from Coach Burton. The six of them worked on convincing Marcus Thomas. Marcus was from Richmond, Virginia and was new to the group.

Trevor and the defensive players worked on their recruits over dinner too. Mark Russo, Joe Radziwill and Seth Butler were already committed to Penn State. They helped the same way Matt, Josh and Jeremy did with the offensive recruits.

Josh Hunsecker had a big announcement to his group of friends. "My dad and I finally convinced my mom to allow me to start college next semester. Isn't it great?"

"Super, Josh...just super," Matt agreed.

"My parents decided they'd rather have me start college early while Christian is still on campus than six months later after he graduates," Josh explained.

"That is fantastic," Dave agreed. Josh and Dave were best friends and tent mates at scout camp. "I just hope Coach Burton decides my 41 catches, ten touchdowns and almost seven hundred yards are worthy of a scholarship."

"Would you come here as a preferred walk-on?" Devin asked. "I hope Coach Burton decides to offer me a scholarship too. I'd rather be a walk-on here than go to some of the schools that are offering me a full ride."

"I don't know," Dave admitted. "I hope I don't have to decide that. I'd love to come here if I can. Working with Matt, Josh, Jeremy and you would be totally cool."

Everyone enjoyed the appetizers and meals as we talked. I told everyone to order desserts. The kids should enjoy their one official visit at Penn State.

Will, Abby, Penny and I agreed to meet for breakfast on Sunday morning at nine o'clock. Will and Abby headed back to their hotel room after dinner. Steph and Penny rode along

with us in the athletic department vans. They had to sit on our laps since the vans were full. Anders and Yasin dropped us off near our apartments.

“Call me when you’re ready to have me come back to pick up the recruits, Coach,” Anders said as he dropped us off.

“Why don’t you park the van and come in and relax at the party?” I asked. “I miss having you around here on Saturday nights.”

“I can’t,” Anders replied. “What would happen if word got out that a coach was at a beer party with his football players?”

“I guess that wouldn’t be good,” I answered.

“It’s better that I maintain plausible deniability,” Anders said. “If anyone asks, I can say, ‘I have absolutely no idea what is going on at the team’s parties.’”

“Yeah, you’re right,” I agreed. “Why don’t you come back at 11:30? That should give us enough time to get the recruits back to the Penn Stater Hotel by their curfew.”

Chip, his almost girlfriend Amanda, Austin, Damian, Billy, Melanie and Sarah had prepared our apartment for the party. Fifteen or twenty people were at the apartment when we got back a little before nine in the evening. I went over the ground rules with the recruits. They accepted my restrictions without complaint. They knew what would happen if they were drunk when they returned to their parents later that night.

My teammates made the recruits feel welcome. The apartment was crowded beyond normal thanks to the sixteen visitors. A few of the recruits did their best to convince a coed to join them in bed.

Matt Sauder had rather self centered pickup line. “Did you know I’m going to be a quarterback for our team?” he’d ask his female target. “I start classes in twelve weeks.”

I realized what he said was true. Of course, in twelve weeks I would be living in Philly, sharing an apartment with Penny.

Matt’s pickup line did work. Beth Naylor decided it wouldn’t hurt to bed one of the new kids on the team a few weeks before he was official. I didn’t ask about Matt’s girlfriend back home, Annie Stoltzfus. I knew the two of them planned to break up before Christmas. For all I knew, they already had.

We had the TV on but turned down during the party. We bounced back and forth between the Phillies-Cubs divisional playoff game 1 and Ed Fritz’s battle with the LSU Tigers.

Devin Kerr outed himself accidentally when he blurted out, "C'mon Uncle Chase. You can hit this guy." Chase unintentionally obliged his nephew by driving in two runs to put the Phillies up 3-2. Word that Devin was Chase Utley's nephew got around quickly. It also got the kid laid. One of the freshmen girls I didn't know scored a two'fer – sleep with a future Penn State Nittany Lion and sleep with a baseball star's nephew.

Ed's Gators were leading 14-10 by half time. Ed played much better than he had two years earlier, the last time he started a game in Baton Rouge. Ed broke things open in the third quarter, hitting his roommate Eric Peters twice with touchdown passes.

Penny and I noticed Trevor was a little out of sorts that evening. We bumped into him in the kitchen when Steph went to the bathroom. He was staring at the ceiling massaging something in his hands.

"Is something bothering you, Trevor?" Penny asked.

"Yeah, you've been very quiet," I added. "That's not like you... not like you at all."

"I'm just thinking, that's all," Trevor said.

"What is it?" I solicited. "We're all friends. You can tell us."

"Well... I guess..." Trevor allowed. Steph's return startled him. He slipped whatever he was holding into his pocket.

"Here you are," Steph said as she greeted her boyfriend. Trevor mouthed the word, "Later," as he followed Steph back to the living room.

Penny and I enjoyed the evening together. We danced a little. We didn't get overly physical during the party, just holding each other with a little kissing. The heavy duty fun would wait for later that night.

Trevor and I had all the recruits rounded up, cleaned up and ready for return to their parents a few minutes before Anders and Yasin called to let us know they were here with the vans. We took all the kids back down Park Avenue to the Penn Stater Hotel before their curfew.

The party was winding down when we returned. We found out that the Phillies beat the Cubs 4-2 to take a one game lead in the division playoffs. Chip reported that Ed and the Gators ended up beating LSU 38-20.

Penny and I got to quiz Trevor about his problem later in the evening when Steph went to change the sheets. "What has been bothering you?" I quizzed.

"You have been out of sorts for half the evening," Penny added.

Trevor blinked and shook his head. "What the hell," he said. He pulled something out of his pocket, opened his hand and showed it to us. It was a small black box.

"An engagement ring?" Penny gasped. "This is wonderful. I'm so happy for Steph."

"That's wonderful news," I added. "When are you going to propose to Steph?"

"I don't know," Trevor replied. "I got the ring on Tuesday. I had planned to take her out to a fancy restaurant for dinner tonight and pop the question. That was before Coach Burton asked us to help with the recruits." He stared at me plaintively. "Now what do I do? Am I doing the right thing? What if she says no?"

"She won't say no," Penny said.

"You love each other," I added. "Asking her to marry you is exactly the right thing to do. Why don't you take her to somewhere nice for brunch tomorrow? Don't you think that would work, honey?" Penny agreed.

"I guess," Trevor agreed. He hurriedly stuffed the box back in his pocket when Steph came out. She didn't understand all the smiles in the room. We kept Trevor's secret.

Penny and I headed to bed. As usual, our first time together was frantic. The second time was much nicer. Penny came twice before we shared a mutual climax. Penny and I cuddled together in the afterglow.

"You don't have one of those little boxes stashed away somewhere, do you?" Penny teased between kisses.

"I thought we were taking things slow," I countered. "Aren't we going to see how we fare doing a long distance relationship?"

"True," Penny agreed. "...but I don't want you to think I'm easy." She gave me a wink and a kiss. "I expect a guy to be serious if I am going to share an apartment with him."

"Don't you worry," I countered. "I am as serious as can be. You can count on it."

"I will," Penny said.

We cuddled together. Penny fell asleep quickly. I stayed awake for a bit, thinking about our future. I knew I couldn't do a proper proposal during the football season with us 200 miles apart. I needed to talk with Dad over Thanksgiving. I needed to get an engagement ring for the proper time. I also needed to make the proposal romantic. I fell asleep confident of one thing. Penny would say yes when that day came.

(To be continued)

Chapter 68

I woke up Sunday morning to the sound of banging on my bedroom door. “Coach, you got to get up,” Chip demanded. “You’re going to be late for the recruits’ breakfast.”

“I’m excused,” I called back. “Coach Burton is letting me skip the breakfast so I can spend time with Penny before she heads back to Philly.”

“That must be nice,” Chip responded. “I can’t see Coach doing that for me and Amanda.”

“You get to see Amanda all the time,” I replied. “Penny and I only have a few hours together once a month.”

Penny stirred beside me. “Did we wake you?” I asked. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s OK, Kyle,” Penny said as she stretched and opened her eyes. “What time is it?”

“7:30,” I answered.

“Goody!” Penny responded. “We have time for some fun before we meet Will and Abby for breakfast.”

“Ooooohhh... my honey is horny,” I answered. “I like it.” We exchanged a quick kiss.

“Eeewww, morning breath,” Penny exclaimed.

“You freshen up downstairs, I’ll use the upstairs bathroom,” I suggested. “Meet you back here in two minutes.”

Penny borrowed my robe. I threw on boxers and a T-shirt so I was decent. Trevor and Chip were ready to leave when Penny and I came out of my room. Penny thanked Steph for her hospitality. The girls hugged and agreed to exchange details later in this week for Penny’s next visit. Penny and I freshened up and returned to my bedroom.

Leisurely morning sex can be great. We made love on our sides, spooned together. It was unhurried and loving. We satisfied each other and still had plenty of time to shower and meet Will and Abby at the Diner.

I convinced Will, Abby and Penny to try my favorite breakfast from the menu – the Penn Stater combo. The combo featured a three cheese, bacon and mushroom omelet, home fries and a grilled sticky.

Everyone enjoyed the leisurely meal. Will gave Penny advice on the GRE exam she was doing in two weeks. My brother should know. Abby reported Will scored an other worldly 781 quantitative and 690 verbal when he took it four years ago. Abby and Will were going to quiz Penny on the drive back to Philly.

My niece Rose had learned to crawl. Will reported she was into absolutely everything now. Abby added that Rose detested staying in her crib. Now that she could get around, she wanted to see everything. I looked forward to January when I could spend more time with Will, Abby and Rose.

Will gave Penny and me a ride back to my apartment so Penny could pick up for overnight bag for the trip back to Philly.

“Good luck on the GRE,” I said when everything was loaded. “I can’t wait until you come back at the end of the month.”

“I can’t wait either,” Penny agreed. “Of course, one of the reasons I will be happy to be here is that I will be finished with the blasted GRE three weeks from now.”

“You’ll do well on the exam,” I said. “You will get into veterinary school and everything will work out the way you want. I know it.”

“You are so supportive,” Penny gushed as she gave me a hug. “Give me a call after you hear whether Trevor worked up the nerve to propose over lunch. I want to call Steph if he did.”

“I’ll let you know how things work out,” I promised. “I love you.”

“I love you, too,” Penny added. We exchanged good bye kisses and another hug before she climbed into the back of Will’s car. I waved as they drove away.

I got over to the practice fields a little after ten o’clock. Every one of our quarterbacks was out helping workout the offensive players we were recruiting. Interestingly, Coach Burton had Matt Sauder working with potential recruits. Normally a recruit quarterback worked with players from our team. We knew our players so how the recruit performed with our guys gave us a controlled look at his capabilities.

I was surprised to find Christian Hunsecker out there on a Sunday morning. Normally he and Bev would be at church now. I walked over and stood beside him.

“How’s Josh doing?” I inquired.

“He’s doing well,” Christian answered. “[Troy] Davis has knocked a couple balls away. Josh caught another eight. He’s running good routes.”

“Just like you and I have drilled him to do,” I replied.

“Yeah,” Christian agreed. “Thanks for all the work you have done with him over the past few summers. He comes home from camp each year a much better receiver than when camp started.”

“Your brother is a great student,” I replied. “I enjoy working with him and the other guys at camp.”

I watched Dave Mitchell work out with Trey Connelly against Ryan McGuire. Ryan gave Dave trouble, especially on the speed routes. I wasn’t totally surprised. Ryan runs the 40 in 4.29 seconds. Dave’s best time was around 4.39 seconds. Dave did better when he started working on shorter, possession routes.

I talked with Dave, Cody and Matt’s parents while we watched the boys demonstrate their skills. Matt’s dad was in seventh heaven. He was a Penn State grad. Having his youngest son come here and earn a scholarship was fantastic. He was happy to hear about the program the athletic department had to let parents get season tickets during their son’s time on the team. Mr. Sauders hadn’t attended a game since he graduated in 1986.

Everyone headed inside the Lasch Building about forty-five minutes after I arrived. Coach Burton broke up the sixteen recruits into three or four person groups. I took Matt, Cody, Dave and Josh in my group. We had forty-five minutes before we were due back at the reception desk so the kids could have their individual meetings with Coach Burton.

Christian came along as I took the kids and their parents on an extensive tour of the Lasch Building. I showed them the workout area, the training rooms, the team meeting rooms and the academic center. I paid particular attention to the academic support that our athletes had available. Penn State prides itself on our graduation rate.

We hung out in the player’s lounge when we finished the tour. Matt Sauder went in to see Coach Burton first. The meeting was short. Josh Hunsecker went next. Matt reported Coach Burton talked about Matt’s progress this season and reviewed some things he was to practice. They concluded the meeting with a review of Matt’s planned courses for the spring semester.

Josh’s meeting was quick too. Josh, Christian and their family took off when their meeting was done. Dave Mitchell went in next. Dave was in a bad mood when he came out again. Everyone overheard Dave snap, “Let’s just get the hell out of here!”

“We can’t leave, Dave,” Mr. Mitchell replied. “The Stevens’ rode with us. We have to wait until Cody is done with his interview.” Dave took a seat away from everyone. His parents tried to mollify their son. He calmed down a little after a couple minutes.

Dave came over and joined Matt and me. “I take it Coach Burton didn’t offer you a scholarship?” Matt asked.

“He offered me fucking preferred walk-on status,” Dave snapped. “I’m better than that.” Dave turned to me. “You agree, don’t you, Coach?”

“You don’t have elite college speed,” I answered. “You have been using the techniques we worked on this summer in your games, haven’t you?”

“I don’t need to,” Dave replied. “The d-backs I see in our games aren’t that good. I can usually blow by them and make the play.”

“You need to do what you can to help your team win,” I agreed. “You also need to demonstrate to college coaches that you possess the skills to play against superior players. Ryan McGuire was faster than you today. You handled that well. Demonstrate the skills I taught you this summer every week so college coaches have video showing what you are capable of.”

“Dave, why are you worrying about walk-on versus scholarship?” Matt asked. “You, Cody and me, we’ve been planning on this day since we were in seventh grade and decided we wanted to follow in Zack Hayes’, Coach’s, Ed’s and Jeremy’s footsteps in football. We’re here at Penn State like we planned. I’m on the team. Coach Burton wants you on the team. Presumably Cody will be welcomed too. What’s wrong with this?”

“They’re dissing me,” Dave answered. “I’m a good receiver and should be treated like one. I think I deserve a scholarship.”

“Remember what I told you before,” I replied. “...even Damian Thompson didn’t start out on scholarship. He’s a team captain now. Coach Burton isn’t disrespecting you. He offered you a spot on this team. That is a sign of high respect for you and your abilities.”

Matt and I continued reasoning with Dave, trying to convince him that today wasn’t the end of the world for him. We had a ten minute wait until Cody and his parents came back out from their interview. Cody didn’t look pleased when he left Coach Burton’s office either.

Mr. Stevens asked, “Is everybody ready to go?”

“Give me a minute with Matt, Dave and Coach,” Cody asked. Cody came over to where Matt, Dave and I were waiting.

“I take it that things didn’t go as well as you hoped?” I asked.

“No, they didn’t,” Cody agreed. “Coach Burton praised my football smarts. That really is a credit to you, Coach Caffrey, Coach Turner and Coach Baer. He also said I’m small

by Big Ten standards for my position and a little slow. The best Coach Burton can do is offer me a tryout as a walk-on next July.”

“I’m sorry, man,” Matt said. “I thought they were seriously interested in you.”

“They were,” Cody responded. “Coach Burton said he was expecting I’d hit a growth spurt and put on a couple inches this year. I guess 5’-11” and 170 pounds is it for me. Coach suggested I may want to consider an FCS school. He predicted I would do well at that level of competition.”

“What are you going to do?” Dave asked.

“Listen harder to the offers I’ve been getting from FCS schools,” Cody answered. “I have half a dozen that have been offering me places on their team. I’m going to take a close look at Villanova. I’m interested in majoring in engineering and I hear they have an excellent program.”

“That’s a good idea, Cody,” I agreed. “You know Kenny Weaver is on their team, don’t you?”

“I do,” Cody said. “I’ve got to give Kenny a call and have a talk with him.”

“Good luck, guys,” I said. “I’m sorry things didn’t work out as well as you hoped.”

“It’s not your fault, Coach,” Dave responded. “Thanks for all the help you’ve given us over the years.”

“Yeah, thanks, Coach,” Cody added.

The contingent from my hometown headed out. I stayed at the Lasch Building, talking with the other offensive recruits while we waited for all the interviews to finish.

Devin Kerr was on top of the world when his interview ended. He was offered and accepted a scholarship to play football at Penn State. I asked Taylor and Devin to extend my best wishes to Chase and the Phillies in the playoffs this season. I was going to be rooting for them.

Jake Meyer and Marcus Thomas were offered full scholarships too. Jake accepted his immediately. Marcus had two more official visits to go before he made a decision.

I grabbed a lunch sandwich, chips and a newspaper at the Mix before heading back to my apartment. Our team’s victory over Michigan was featured in a teaser over the masthead on the front page of the Inquirer. Jeff Morgan had an excellent write up of our victory on

page 1 of the sports section. I flipped to page 2 to see how the other top teams fared yesterday.

#1 Texas beat Colorado easily 38-17. I already knew Ed and the Gators beat LSU last night. #3 Oklahoma was idle. #4 Alabama demolished Vanderbilt 56-3. After us, #6 USC beat Washington 31-27. #7 Ohio State beat Indiana handily. #8 Boise State was upset at Utah. The boys in blue were finding life a little harder since they left the WAC.

Of course #9 Michigan went down, thanks to us. #10 LSU was going to drop in the polls, thanks to Ed and his buddies. Notre Dame beat Central Michigan 35-24. Jeremy had ten tackles and two sacks. Nebraska destroyed Baylor yesterday 49-10. That could help them move up in the polls from their #12 spot.

Rutgers lost to Connecticut 31-23. Hal Long made three field goals on four tries and made both extra point tries. Jake Kring and his Syracuse Orangemen squeaked out a victory over Coach Schroeder's Miami of Ohio yesterday. Drew McCormick's WV Mountaineers beat South Florida 27-21. Drew had fifteen carries for 74 yards and a TD. It wasn't one of Drew's better days.

I looked over at the next page to see how the local Philadelphia teams did. Andy's Blue Hens lost a close game to James Madison University yesterday in spite of Andy's seven catches for 102 yards and two TDs. Jay Nicholson led his team in a come from behind, last two minutes drive to beat Delaware 31-28.

Chip returned from lunch at the dining hall accompanied by his friend Austin Dilworth and ex-roommate Matt Frye. They settled in to watch the Steelers game on TV while I enjoyed my Sunday paper. Damian and Billy returned from brunch downtown a few minutes later. They joined the crew watching the Steelers play. Both Billy, from Upper St. Clair outside Pittsburgh, and Damian were huge Steelers fans.

Trevor and Steph returned from lunch about twenty minutes later. Both of my friends were glowing when they returned.

"Hey, everybody," Trevor announced. Chip turned the game down so we could hear.
"Steph and I are engaged!"

A cacophony of questions and congratulations erupted from the group. Steph proudly showed off the very nice diamond ring Trevor had given her. It looked like Trevor had spent a bundle on it. He set a standard I knew I would be held to when Penny saw Steph's ring and it was my turn to do the proposing.

After things calmed down a little, I called Penny on her cell phone. "Hey honey, Trevor went through with it," I announced when she answered the phone. "Of course, Steph said yes. They're engaged."

“That’s wonderful,” Penny gushed. “Is Steph there at the apartment? Can I talk with her?”

“Hey Steph, do you want to talk to Penny?” I called across the conversation occurring in the living room.

“Of course,” Steph gushed. She was delighted to share the good news with Penny. I handed over the phone. The girls talked excitedly for about five minutes before finishing the call.

While the girls were talking, Trevor commented, “Thanks for giving me a little push last night. I know I’m doing the right thing.”

“No problem, buddy,” I replied. “That’s what friends are for.”

“Do you need a little push to get moving with Penny?” Trevor countered. “It feels pretty good once you make the commitment.”

“No, I’m OK,” I answered. “I need to talk things over with my parents when I see them next. I’ll probably go shopping for a ring over Thanksgiving or Christmas. When I pop the question depends on our team’s holiday travel plans. I may have to wait until I’m living with Penny to actually propose. I want to make sure I have a proper romantic setting for the big question.”

“That sounds like a plan,” Trevor agreed. “You do have it hard, falling for a girl going to school in Philadelphia.”

“Penny is getting what she wants in school,” I answered. “I am getting to play and learn football at the level I want. We managed to find our way back together again. I have no complaints. I’m a very lucky guy.”

Sunday when dinner at the Training Table was over, Coach Burton called for quiet. “Each year Penn State nominates one senior for the National Football Foundation’s Scholar/Athlete Award program,” Coach explained. “The athlete must be a first teamer, maintain a minimum 3.2 GPA and demonstrate leadership on and off the field and provide community service. This year the academic support staff has chosen Kyle ‘Coach’ Martin to represent our university. Wish Coach the best, everyone. We will hear if he makes the final sixteen at the end of the month.”

I received congratulations and atta’boys from my teammates as we exited the dining hall and headed for the Lasch Building. We met to review the highlights and lowlights of our game against Michigan. Tomorrow we would start in earnest on our preparations to play Iowa. Our trip out to Iowa City was expected to be tough. The Hawkeyes featured their usual strong defense. They were 5-1, having lost only to Ohio State last weekend. We

were confident that we could handle them. We had already gone to Lincoln and beaten a higher ranked Cornhuskers team.

There were lots of shifts in the polls that came out that evening, at least after the top seven. Texas, Florida, Oklahoma, Alabama, Penn State, USC and Ohio State kept their spots. Nebraska rose to #8, thanks to their big win over Baylor. Notre Dame popped up to #9, replacing Boise State. Virginia Tech rounded out the top ten.

Anders Voight stopped by to talk just before practice started on Monday afternoon.
“You’ll never guess who I bumped into today.”

“OK, since I can’t guess it, tell me, who did you bump into?” I replied.

“Derek Whitaker,” Anders answered. Derek was the split end on our team when I was a freshman. His injury in the Rose Bowl against USC had given me a chance to play meaningful, full time football.

“Derek is auditing a couple courses this semester,” Ander explained. “He is going to do his masters in criminal justice. He made up his mind too late to register for fall semester. He will start classes officially with spring semester.”

“That’s cool,” I replied. “Maybe I will bump into him sometime.”

Surprisingly, I did the very next day. I was leaving Art History at the Forum around 2:15 when he hailed me.

“Hey Kyle, how’s it going?” Derek called out as I walked across the plaza in front of the building.

“Hey Derek, it’s good to see you,” I replied after I redirected my course to intercept him.
“It’s been a long time.”

“Yeah, it had been,” Derek agreed. “It’s been two and a half years.”

We talked for a couple minutes, catching up on each other’s lives. Derek confirmed much of what Anders had told me the previous day.

“You’ve certainly been holding down the split end position well,” Derek observed. “You were made to play it.”

“Thanks, I do what I can,” I replied modestly. Derek glanced at his watch.

“I got to get moving,” Derek said. “My Criminal Justice System course starts in a few minutes and I have to get down to Willard.”

“I’m glad we bumped into each other,” I replied. “It’s good to see you again. Stop by my apartment some Saturday night. The team parties are held there. I’m in #12 in the Nittany Apartments.”

“I’ll do that,” Derek agreed. “Of course, not this Saturday night. Good luck taking down Iowa.”

“Thanks, man,” I agreed. “Maybe I’ll see you the next Saturday.”

Trevor, Damian and I talked after practice on Tuesday. We had noticed a complacency developing as the guys went about their work. We talked about it and decided to have a brief team leader meeting after dinner that evening. The other leaders were aboard. We would make sure everyone turned up the intensity for Wednesday’s and Thursday’s practices. That was all the prep we had before flying out to Iowa Friday morning.

The next two days’ practices went much better. I was confident by the end of Thursday’s practice that our team was ready to play the Hawkeyes. We finished practice with our traditional “On to Phoenix” cheer.

State College was hit with a hell of a thunderstorm Thursday night. The storm passed by the time most of the team assembled at the Lasch Building around 8:30 am. It was a cold morning, the temperature barely above fifty.

The three hour flight to Iowa was routine. We had lunch aboard the plane before touching down in Cedar Rapids. Everyone pulled on sweatshirts or jackets when we left the plane, expecting to find cold weather similar to what we had left back in Pennsylvania. We got hit by a heat wave when we stepped out of the terminal to board our buses. The temperature was over eighty degrees. Our bus driver reported the temperature could hit the 86 degree record high for the day. Everyone shed their jackets and sweatshirts.

The scenery looked familiar on the half hour drive from Cedar Rapids down to Iowa City. We passed Kinnick Stadium as we drove into town to our hotel. We stayed at the Sheraton, across the river from campus, the same as two years ago.

We had position meetings to review our game plan after we got settled in our rooms. The coaches dismissed us around four o’clock. A large group of the team ended up at the indoor pool, cooling off and relaxing until dinner time.

A thunderstorm blew through Iowa City during dinner time, quickly ending the hot weather we had experienced that afternoon. The temperature dropped rapidly as it got dark and the cold front behind the storm moved in. We did more preparation after dinner before the coaches dismissed us for the evening.

My friends and I convened our traditional poker game in Shawn's and GJ's room. We spent the remainder of the evening talking, playing cards and enjoying each other's company.

I checked on-line for my high school team's results before Trevor and I went to bed. My Wolverines had beaten the normally tough Cornwall team 55-20. Matt and his crew were on a roll. They had two weeks until the showdown with Josh Hunsecker's Central team. The winner almost certainly would take the Lancaster-Lebanon League, Section 2 title.

Since ESPN was televising our game at 2:30 local time, the coaches gave us extra time to sleep in the morning. The team breakfast was scheduled for 9:30 am. I checked out the weather on TV when I got up around a quarter to nine. The temperature had dropped all night. It was 51 degrees outside. Game time temperatures weren't expected to top sixty degrees. That was more like the weather I expected in the middle of October in Iowa.

We packed our things, loaded our buses and headed for the stadium after breakfast. Damian, Trevor and I warned the younger guys on the team about the visitor's locker room in Kinnick Stadium. The Hawkeyes had painted it pink, to psych out the opposition. At Shawn Byrd's suggestion, our team decided to embrace the pink.

Every single player and coach showed up at the stadium wearing pink breast cancer awareness shirts. We got a few snide comments from the early arriving Hawkeye fans. We also got compliments from some of the lady fans for our attire.

The team leaders reminded our younger teammates how Iowa had dominated the series in the first decade of this century. It was a handed down memory, but none of us particularly cared for the Hawkeyes. Us seniors had always beaten this team and had no plans to change that streak.

We wore our pink outside for warm-ups, to the laughter of the fans in the rapidly filling stadium. The guys maintained their cool during the teasing. We leaders reminded everyone that the proper place to take out their frustrations was on the field by beating their Hawkeyes.

Coach Burton asked me to give the pre-game address to our team. I reminded everyone of the vision each person had accepted this year. I ticked off an impressive list of the goals we had accomplished so far. The game that day represented the midpoint of our season. Our team had demonstrated its talents and capabilities over the first six weeks. We needed to sustain the effort and dedication to carry our way through to Phoenix.

Trevor took the front, circled up the team and led them in our "On to Phoenix" chant before we took the field. Iowa called a "black out" for the game. Virtually every fan in the stadium was clothed in black to support their Hawkeyes. The effect was similar to our whiteouts, but darker. The Iowans knew how to support their team.

I stood on the sidelines as the opening ceremony went on. I stared down at the piece of duct tape in my helmet marked "82." I had placed it in my helmet at the start of this season. It was starting to fray. I said a silent prayer in Greg Harrison's memory. "I'll never forget you," I mouthed silently before taking the field.

Trevor, Damian and I met the Hawkeye captains at midfield with the head referee. We were the visitors and it was my turn to be the spokesman so I got to call the coin toss. I called tails. It was. Even though we had a fifteen to twenty mile an hour wind blowing from the north through the stadium, Coach Burton wanted the ball first. Our game plan called for us to get up on the score board early and force the Hawkeyes to chase us all day.

Tanner Riggs set up at the goal line for the kickoff. Iowa's kick, with a little aid from the wind, put the ball deep into the end zone. Tanner accepted a touchback. Our offense took the ball at our 20 yard line.

I was surprised when the Hawkeye cornerback lined up right on the line of scrimmage in front of me. I looked down the line and saw the other d-backs doing the same thing to Brian and Christian. Iowa had to be trying press coverage against our team. Chip saw the coverage too. He audibled from our planned run to a deep pass play.

I sidestepped at the snap as the cornerback lunged at me to give me a chuck. He brushed past me, missing badly as I started my sprint downfield. As expected the free safety was there to help deep. Chip liked my odds one on one and launched a ball deep on my outside shoulder. I sprinted under it, spun as the safety tried to tackle me and broke free. I sprinted into the end zone for a touchdown. Jared came in and made the PAT. Score: Penn State-7, Iowa-0

We were laughing and celebrating on the sideline as Jared kicked off to Iowa. "Did you see what I did to that nickel back?" Brian asked.

"I was a little busy scoring to notice," I responded, laughing.

"I clobbered him," Brian chortled. "I knocked him on his ass. He isn't going to be too enthusiastic next time he goes against me in press coverage."

"That's the way you do it, Brian," I said, giving him a congratulatory slap on the back. "Good job."

"Why would these guys think they can cover us with press coverage?" Brian asked. "I thought we showed the world what we could do against that last January."

"We did well against Tennessee," I agreed. "Probably Iowa figured since the last team to beat us used press coverage and Tennessee held our passing game to low yards passing, that they would have their best chance of winning this way. I'm sure they figure their line will get more pressure on Chip than Tennessee's did."

“Pressure?” Chip interjected into our conversation. “Did Iowa pressure me on that play? I didn’t notice.”

“Iowa knows how soft coverage worked for Michigan last week,” I speculated. “I guess this is their best guess on how to slow down our passing game.”

“It isn’t going to work,” Brian said decisively. “They’re going down if they keep this up.”

We glanced back at the field to see our kick cover team take down the Hawkeye returner at their 24 yard line. The Hawkeyes were a decent team. They managed to pick up twenty-seven yards before our defense forced them to punt the ball back to us.

Brian lined up at our 10 yard line. The Hawkeye punter boomed the ball down the field. Brian backed up three or four yards before he bailed out and ran for the sideline to avoid touching the ball. Three Hawkeye players chased after the ball as it hit at the four yard line and bounded towards the goal line. One of the players managed to bat the ball into the field of play where another downed it at our 2 yard line.

The referee blew the whistle and placed his hands on his shoulders. “Illegal touching by #29 of the kicking team. His foot was inside the end zone at the time of the touch. The ball will be spotted at the twenty yard line.”

We exchanged high fives as we trotted onto the field. Iowa backed off from the line of scrimmage so Chip stayed in our base offense. Damian carried the ball forward for six yards on first down. On the next play Iowa double covered Brian and me. Chip fired the ball out to Christian for a seven yard gain. Chip handed the ball off to Damian again. My roomie bulled ahead for five yards.

Bob went over the middle on a curl route on the next play. The Iowa left defensive end got loose, hurrying Chip’s throw slightly. He got the ball off before the end took him down. One of Iowa’s tackles swatted the ball as it flew over the line, tipping it away from Bob. Their strong safety, who had been pursuing Bob, snagged the misdirected ball.

The safety dodged Bob’s tackle attempt and tried to run around the end of his line. I had run a hitch route and wasn’t too deep down field. I took off in pursuit. I was pissed about the interception. The best way to fix this gaffe was to take the ball away.

When I hit the safety, I aimed for the ball instead of the man. I knew Damian and Elijah Berks were closing behind me and Bob was nearby too. I hit his right side directly on the ball, punching at it as I hit. Thank God the ball popped loose and bounced to the ground.

Half a dozen players dived for it. Bob was closest and landed almost on top of the ball, a split second before I landed on him. A couple linebackers, a defensive end and a

cornerback dived into the pile. I shoved the ball under Bob as he grasped for it. It isn't pretty at the bottom of the pile of bodies as everyone scrambles, punches and shoves to get to the ball.

One of my hands was extended away from my body and pinned under a linebacker. I used my other hand to help Bob get the ball tucked away under him. I felt good other than being crushed by eight to nine hundred pounds of football players until.... Somebody above me stomped hard on my left hand.

Pain shot through my hand as the player stepping on it twisted and scrambled to dig into the scrum of players. The refs blew the play dead and began unpiling the bodies, searching for the ball. I felt something warm running down my fingers as I waited for the refs to pull the bodies off me.

I hopped up when I was unpinned. When I was off the ground Bob rolled over and revealed that he had possession of the ball. The refs signaled that it was our ball and then signaled first down. Bob was seven yards downfield from the old line of scrimmage.

Bob and I headed back for the huddle. Bob noticed my hand first.

"Coach, you're really bleeding," Bob exclaimed.

"Oh, yeah," I agreed as I looked down at the back of my left hand. It was covered with blood that was dripping off my finger tips. I signaled for a substitution and trotted to the sideline. Our head trainer, Scott Burgess, met me as I got to the sideline. He squeezed a towel on the back of my hand as he led me to the training table. I winced from the pressure as he put pressure on my hand to stop the bleeding.

"Does that hurt, Kyle?" Mr. Burgess asked.

"Not too bad," I answered. "That idiot stomped my hand pretty good in the scramble for the ball."

Mr. Burgess had me lay down on the table while they examined my hand. "Do you have any light headedness?" Mr. Burgess asked.

"No, I'm not going into shock," I answered. That drew a chuckle from Mr. Burgess. "I forgot that you're an experienced rescuer."

"I learned enough in Boy Scouts," I replied as Mr. Burgess swabbed and cleaned my cut. Doc Watson came over to examine it.

"Hmmm...." Doc hummed. "You have a pretty deep laceration Kyle. That is going to need stitches. How exactly did this happen?"

“One of the linebackers or linemen stomped on my hand while I was trying to cover the fumble,” I explained.

“How does this feel?” Doc asked as he pressed hard against one of the bones in my hand. I winced as he hit a very sore spot. “How about this?” Doc asked as he probed another bone in my hand.

“It hurts,” I managed, trying to keep my voice even.

“Let’s take you inside, clean up your hand and see what we have,” Doc suggested. Jason Pennington accompanied Doc and me into the visitors’ locker room. We headed into the adjoining training room. Jason cleaned the cut and I got my first look at it. It was a deep slice on the back of my left hand, about an inch and a half long.

“I want to get an x-ray on your hand to ensure that no bones are broken,” Doc said.

“You’re the boss,” I agreed.

They x-rayed my hand, gave me a local anesthetic and stitched my hand up. Doc needed six stitches to close the wound. Doc bandaged my hand when he finished.

“Can Jason tape me back up now so I can get back in the game?” I asked politely.

“No, Kyle, you’re done for the day,” Doc replied. “I don’t want you taking any chance of tearing out your stitches. Anyway, you’re going to be hurting when the anesthetic wears off. I want you to take two of these now and two every six hours, as needed.” Doc handed me a bottle with pills in it. I took two as ordered.

Doc gave me an ice pack to help keep the swelling down. He also insisted that I wear a sling to help keep my injury elevated. That would also help with the swelling.

Jason Pennington helped me take off my pads and uniform. I put on sweats and my game jersey before I headed outside to watch the game from the sideline. One of the coaches must have warned my teammates about my condition. No one seemed surprised when I showed up in street clothes with my hand in a sling.

I checked out the scoreboard. It was 13:22 second quarter. We were leading Iowa 21-3. Iowa had the ball near midfield. I asked Jared Cantrell, “How’d things get this way?”

“Brian beat double coverage for one of the touchdowns,” Jared explained. “You should have seen Bob on the other TD. Iowa backed off the press coverage after Brian burnt them. Bob hit the deep seam and went forty-two yards for the other touchdown. That was a thing of beauty.”

Dave McCall punctuated our dominance a minute or so later when he picked off a pass by cutting in front of a Hawkeye receiver. Shawn Byrd was the first to congratulate his

friend and rival. The pick was Dave's fifth, matching Shawn's total. They had been competing all season for the lead in interceptions for the team.

I watched and enjoyed the show as our team extended our lead. We were ahead 24-10 at half time. Christian scored another touchdown early in the third quarter. Midway through the third quarter Coach Burton sent the second string in to finish the game. Jon Stafford and the second team added ten points. Mark Markovich intercepted a pass in the beginning of the fourth quarter, running the pick back for a touchdown. Iowa managed thirteen points in the second half. The final score was Penn State-41, Iowa-23.

I did almost as many interviews as I did when I played. I praised my teammates for the excellent job they did taking care of Iowa. It was a credit to the way our offense had developed. Brian Henson kept the Iowa defense stretched with the threat of deep catches. Tanner Riggs filled the slot position admirably. Christian... well Christian was his usual steady, professional self. He was an excellent possession receiver.

One question addressed to Coach Burton surprised me. He was asked when I would be ready to play again. "I haven't had time to address Kyle's case in detail with my medical staff," Coach replied. "I'm sure he will be held out of practice until his stitches are removed. Kyle's ability to play against Illinois next weekend is uncertain."

I knew better than to question Coach Burton about my injury. He would not differ with the medical staff. I hit Doc Watson up on the plane ride back to State College later that night.

"How long will it be until I get the stitches out?" I asked.

"Mr. Burgess and Mr. Pennington will monitor your recovery during the week," Doc replied. "Assuming everything heals well and there is no infection, I would expect them to remove your stitches by next weekend."

"So I will be able to play next Saturday?" I asked hopefully.

"That will be determined after we see how your laceration heals," Doc replied. I knew not to press further. "How is your pain?"

"It's not too bad," I replied. In truth, it was starting to throb. I didn't hide that fact well.

"Take the pain medication I gave you in another hour," Doc said. "That should help you get comfortable."

I did as the doctor ordered. Our plane landed at State College a little after eleven o'clock. The blue buses returned us to the Lasch Building just before midnight. A couple thousand fans met us. It was a great turnout for late on a Saturday night. It was nice to see that kind of turnout after a game against a good opponent. Trevor, Steph, Damian, Chip, Amanda and I headed back to the apartment and went straight to bed. I guess the

pain medication helped me sleep. I was dead to the world seconds after my head hit the pillow.

I slept late Sunday morning. My hand was throbbing when I woke up. I took more pain medication, showered and headed down to the Mix to get breakfast and my Sunday newspaper.

“Penn State routs Iowa 41-23, See C-1” made the teaser bar above the front page masthead. “Nittany Lions dominate Iowa” was the headline for Jeff Morgan’s story about our win. “Captain Kyle Martin electrified the Nittany Lions fans around the country with an eighty yard touchdown on the first play after the opening kickoff. Things did not improve for Iowa. In spite of ‘Coach’ Martin’s injury on the Lions’ next possession, the Lions were in control the entire afternoon.”

I continued reading Jeff’s well written description of our victory. He properly gave credit to Brian, Christian, Bob, Chip, Damian and our excellent defense for beating the Hawkeyes. I flipped over to page C-3 to finish the article.

My attention was diverted by the headlines on page C-2. Oklahoma had upset Texas yesterday afternoon, 31-30 in overtime. That was going to help our poll standings. Mike Johanson had an interception in his team’s loss.

Oklahoma’s victory over Texas wasn’t the only upset yesterday. Arizona knocked off USC 28-24. Florida had a bye week. Alabama struggled but managed to pull out a last second victory 27-24 over Ole Miss. Ohio State handled Minnesota easily, winning 35-21. Michigan downed Purdue 38-17.

Notre Dame beat Oregon State 38-27. Jeremy North was one of the Irish’s heroes. He snagged an interception that he returned for a touchdown. He also made ten tackles and had a sack. Jeremy was demonstrating what I already knew. He was one of the best middle linebackers in college football.

My other friends from high school didn’t do as well as Jeremy that weekend. Jake Kring’s Orangemen lost to West Virginia 24-17. Jake threw two interceptions to go with his two touchdowns. Drew McCormick was West Virginia’s hero, gaining 172 yards on twenty carries.

After I finished reading the rest of the article about our game, I flipped to the next page to see how the local (to Philly) teams had done. Hal Long made three of five field goals in Rutgers’ 24-9 loss to Navy. My brother Andy’s Delaware Blue Hens had hosted Maine, winning 28-24. Andy caught seven balls for 95 yards and a touchdown.

I sent off e-mails congratulating Jeremy and Drew extending my sympathy to Hal, Mike and Jake. I talked with Penny for about fifteen minutes Sunday. She was worried about

my cut. I reassured Penny that I was fine. I predicted I would be back on the field next Saturday. I wished her the best as she crammed for her GRE exam next Saturday.

My friends and I were upbeat that afternoon, confidently expecting the polls to boost us one place closer to the top of the list. Nearly the entire team waited in the player's lounge after dinner and our evening video review of our game to see where we stood when the polls were announced that evening.

Oklahoma jumped up to number one thanks to their victory over Texas. Florida stayed at #2. Cheers filled the room when they announced that we had jumped up to #3, hopping past Alabama. The rest of the top ten were: #4 Alabama, #5 Texas, #6 Ohio State, #7 USC, #8 Nebraska, #9 Notre Dame and #10 Virginia Tech.

Things were breaking perfectly for us. Florida faced Alabama next weekend. Oklahoma played Nebraska. Odds were good that we could advance another notch after next weekend. Someone above us was likely to stumble.

The pain and swelling in my hand was mostly gone by bedtime on Sunday. I did not use the rest of the pain medication Doc Watson gave me.

I arrived early for History. I sat in my usual seat in the aisle closest to the door, beside Cameron Miller. We were talking about our team's rise to #3 in the BCS standings when I noticed someone walk up to us. We both looked up. It was Kelly.

"How's your hand, Kyle?" my ex-girlfriend asked.

"It will be fine," I replied. "Doc needed six stitches to close the cut. I will be held out of practice for a few days."

"I was worried about you when you went out during the game and then came back in street clothes," Kelly said. "I tried to find out more from Steph yesterday afternoon. She didn't have much information when I talked with her."

"All of us crashed as soon as the bus got in Saturday night," I replied. "She and I didn't get much chance to talk."

"I'm not close to many people connected with the team anymore," Kelly said. "I just hoped everything was well. Are you going to play against Illinois next Saturday?"

"I expect to," I answered. "I don't think a cut is going to keep me on the sidelines long."

"That's good," Kelly said. "Good luck against the Illini. I still cheer for you even though we're not together anymore."

“Thanks, Kelly. I appreciate that,” I replied. She headed across the room and took a seat near the window the way she usually did. It was nice that Kelly and I could talk civilly again. I wondered if she was dating or had a boyfriend. It wasn’t my business so I didn’t ask.

Practice was weird for me. I wasn’t allowed to work out like the rest of the receivers. Mr. Burgess did allow me to run. I spent half of practice jogging around the three practice fields, trying to keep my edge while I couldn’t practice or lift the way I did normally. I spent the last half of practice at Coach Caffrey’s side, trying to help any way I could as the other receivers did their work.

I bumped into Derek Whitaker again as I was walking from my Education & Public Policy class at the Waring Building and heading for the Forum and Art History. I had half an hour between classes and we were in front of the Creamery. We decided to head inside for ice cream and to visit. I took my usual Mint Nittany (mint ice cream with crumbled Oreos). Derek tried the Black Cow (vanilla with root beer sherbet swirls). Derek offered to pay but I insisted on treating him.

I learned more about Derek’s life since he graduated from Penn State two and a half years ago. He had tried unsuccessfully to hook up with an NFL team the spring he graduated. When that didn’t work, he tried his luck in the CFL. He got a tryout with Saskatchewan but didn’t make the team. He did manage to get into the Arena Football League. He played two seasons with the Jacksonville Sharks.

Derek’s playing time had dwindled this past spring and he decided when the season was over it was time to move on from football. That’s why he was auditing classes this semester and starting on his masters in criminal justice next semester. I invited Derek to stop by the party on Saturday night so he could see his old friends. I wished him the best as we parted and I headed down Curtin Road to the Forum.

I studied video of Illinois assuming I would be able to play. The Illini weren’t the same team we barely beat last year in the wind and rain out in Champaign. Their quarterback graduated. They had a true sophomore lining up behind center now. Most of the defensive line and half the offensive line were new. The team showed flashes of competence during the season, but only flashes. They were 3-3, having lost to Missouri, Cincinnati and Purdue. They had beaten Illinois State, Southern Illinois and Indiana. I was confident that we would win.

I went in daily for Jason Pennington to check my cut and re-bandage it. Jason was pleased with my progress but wouldn’t commit to allowing me to play on Saturday. Thursday morning he decided to have Doc Watson come in on Friday to check my nearly healed cut and to remove the stitches.

I showed up at the training room, hopeful that I would get cleared to play. I greeted Dr. Watson with a cheerful “Aaahhh... What’s up Doc?” That drew a smile from our team physician

“Let’s see Kyle,” Doc answered. “Let’s get this bandage off.” I offered Doc my hand. He pulled the oversize band-aid off quickly and examined the thin scar with black threads binding it together. “This looks excellent, Kyle. Do you want a local to numb the skin before I pull the stitches?”

“I was a normal kid when I was growing up, Doc,” I replied. “I’ve had stitches pulled many times. Go ahead and get it done.” Doc snipped and yanked out the six stitches in no time at all. I barely felt the tug as they came out. Doc had me flex my hand. He felt the bones around the cut. When he was done he started making notes on my chart.

“Well Doc, what do you think?” I asked hopefully after too long a silence. “Can Jason tape me up and send me out to play tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow?” Doc pondered. “I think so. I want you to wear a glove on that hand in addition to taping it up.”

“O-Kay... OK, I can do that,” I agreed readily. “Can I practice today? I don’t know that Coach Burton will allow me to play tomorrow if I don’t get in some practice this week.”

“Hmmm...” Doc pondered. “OK, you can do a light practice. Tape it up and glove it. I don’t want you back in here tonight because you overdid it.”

“You got it, Doc,” I agreed easily. “I will be careful.”

I’m sure half the Lasch Building heard my Woo-Hoo as I left the training room. I stopped by Coach Burton’s office, but the door was closed. I went down the hall until I found a coach who was in. Coach Caffrey’s light was on and his door was open. I stuck my head in his office and gave him a big smile.

“Doc cleared me to practice today and play tomorrow,” I beamed.

“Excellent,” Coach said. “This is great news.”

“I have to wear a glove,” I added. “Do you have any recommendations?”

“See Mr. Fitzgerald,” Coach said. “He can let you try out some different types and see which suits you best.”

“OK, I’ll do that, Coach,” I agreed. I had never worn gloves in seven and a half years of playing football. I didn’t know how big an adjustment that might be. I stopped by to see Larry Fitzgerald, our equipment master. He gave me four different types of gloves to try out in the afternoon.

I wanted to be prepared before practice, so I got on the phone to track down a quarterback to help me choose the right gloves. I knew Chip had a class that ended immediately before our practice. I called Jon Stafford first. He was busy too. I couldn't reach Bob Smith. I did track down Trey Connelly, who was happy to play catch with me before practice started that afternoon.

I had Jason Pennington tape up my hand to protect it before Trey arrived. Trey and I spent half an hour throwing balls to me as I ran our route progressions. I settled on a pair of very light weight gloves that didn't interfere with my ability to catch the ball. They felt a little strange but I could adjust. It was only for one game.

My teammates were delighted to see me show up ready to play instead of to run circles around the team as they practiced. I thought I did well. Coach Burton, Coach Adams and Coach Caffrey huddled for a minute after practice was over. They were satisfied. I would start like normal as our split end.

After showering I called Penny to give her the good news. She was delighted. I wished her the best on her GRE the following morning. I assured my lady she would do great on the test. I had absolute confidence in her abilities. We wished each other luck before ending the call.

Weather had been nice most of the week. It had gotten into the seventies Tuesday and Wednesday before cooling a little. The high hit sixty degrees Friday afternoon. Clear weather, temperatures in the low sixties and clear skies were expected for Saturday's game.

The Big Ten Network was televising our game. It would start at noon. The team had a team meeting at the Lasch Building after dinner and then headed over to Toftees for the night. I checked out the high school football results before I went to bed. My Wolverines had pounded Eastern 72-0 that evening. The next team up against my Wolverines was big, bad Central. Christian and I would be worrying next Friday night. Anything could happen when our high school teams met.

Trevor and I were up bright and early. The weatherman promised us a clear, calm day for the game with a high temperature of 62 degrees at mid-game. We met the rest of the team for breakfast at 7:30 am. We headed for the Lasch Building after breakfast.

Josh Bruno, Greg Nowicki, Marco Cuchiella, Darius Moore, Trey Connelly and Troy Davis were hosting the recruits this week. Trey and Troy, being red-shirted, always assisted with these duties. Most of the recruits this week were offensive linemen, defensive linemen and linebackers. I tried to make the eight visitors feel welcome.

Mom and my sister Liz were coming to the game that day. I made arrangements to meet them after the game was over and take them downtown for a nice dinner before they headed back to Lancaster County.

Brian, Tanner and Squirrel all teased me about playing with gloves on. I didn't care. Doc was allowing me to play and that was all that was important. The team went about its preparations like usual. Some guys listened to music. Others studied the game plan. Some guys talked and worked to psych themselves into a frenzy before we took the field. However they prepared, everyone was ready when we came out into the tunnel for our introduction.

Illinois won the coin toss and elected to receive the kickoff to start the game. It didn't matter. Our fired up defense held them to a four yard gain on the first three plays. They punted the ball back to Brian. My protégé almost broke the return for a touchdown. The punter managed to slow Brian enough for help to come and bring down my friend. Our first possession started on Illinois' 42 yard line.

The Illini were not able to get pressure on Chip. He had all day to look for open receivers. I was double covered. So was Brian. It didn't matter. I beat the coverage on nearly every play. So did Brian. Chip could choose his target, deliver the ball and watch us make big gains. We needed four plays before Chip found me in the corner of the end zone for our first TD.

Illinois went three plays and punted again. Christian was the hero on our second drive. Chip hit him repeatedly while Brian and I were double covered. He pulled in a short pass, broke out of the tackle attempt and sprinted for the end zone on the seventh play of the drive.

Illinois managed one first down on their next possession before being forced to punt back to us. We attacked their defense mostly through the air even though we were gaining five to six yards a run. Why not? We gained ten or twelve yards a pass reception. Bob and Brian carried most of the load on this drive. Bob made a great move after catching a slant over the middle and gained twenty-seven yards to set us up on Illinois' 32 yard line.

Coach Burton had us go Wildcat. I did a simple sweep right after taking the snap. The Illini d-backs stayed with Jared, Christian, Bob and Brian. I tucked the ball under my right arm and sprinted down the side line. Christian and Bob blocked their men out of my way. I ran into the end zone untouched. We were now ahead 21-0 and the first quarter still had a minute to go.

Illinois managed to string together two first downs on their next possession. They still didn't get the ball across midfield before we forced them to punt. Brian was forced to let the ball bounce when it dropped inside the ten yard line. Illinois downed the ball on our 4 yard line.

Coach Burton didn't mind. Chip handed the ball off to Damian and let him bash the Illini until we had room for riskier plays. We used twelve plays to move our team down into their red zone. Chip hit me with a quick out play that was intended to pick up a few yards. The cornerback missed the tackle and I streaked for the end zone. The free safety caught me before I went in but I fought him off with a stiff arm to break loose and score.

I ran my score into the Mt. Nittany side of the stadium, right in front of the student section. The students were rollicking, egged on by the Nittany Lion. I gave Patrick a high five as we passed each other. He gave me a swat on the butt, to the delight of the students.

Illinois never crossed midfield in the first half. Coach Burton concentrated on running the ball to take time off the clock and to reduce any embarrassment the Illini might feel. We added a field goal before halftime to put the score to 31-0.

Jon Stafford and our second string offense took over after half time. Charlie, ET and Wyatt took care of running the ball and killing the clock. Jared, Tanner and Bruce handled what little receiving duties there were.

Tanner scored one touchdown when he took a short pass, slipped a couple tackles and scooted into the end zone. Charlie Taylor scored another after carrying the ball and our offense most of the length of the field in the third quarter.

The Illini offense did get untracked in the second half. They picked up one TD in the third quarter and scored ten points in the fourth quarter against our second and third string defense playing prevent. The final score of the game was 45-17, our favor.

I hauled in six passes for 137 yards and two touchdowns. I carried the ball twice for another 44 yards and a touchdown. This made my sixth game with three touchdowns in my college career.

Jeff Morgan hit me with another unexpected question about records. "How do you feel about taking Penn State's all time scoring record?"

"Did I?" I responded. "I didn't even know I was close."

"Your three touchdowns today give you 432 points in your career," Jeff explained. "The old record held by Kevin Kelly was 425 points." Kevin Kelly was the kicker before Cooper Barnes, the kicker for our team when I was a freshman.

"How do I feel?" I repeated. "I had no idea. The most points in my career wasn't something I was striving for but I am happy I got there. As I've said before, the only record I am interested in this season is this one – 8 and 0. I want us to keep winning and move that record to 13-0." I gave Jeff a wink. "I think 13-0 should be good enough to win us the national championship."

“That’s certainly an admirable goal,” Jeff said.

“By the way... anybody hear how Florida is doing against Alabama?” I added with a sly grin. “Don’t tell Ed Fritz but... Roll Tide, Roll!”

“The game isn’t until eight o’clock tonight,” Jeff replied. “I have never met Mr. Fritz but I will keep your rooting interest under my hat.”

“Ed already knows,” I replied. “We talked about it last night when we talked. I’m rooting for anyone playing against Oklahoma or Florida right now. I want our team to keep rising in the polls.”

“Are you rooting for Mike Kessler, the linebacker that you had trouble with when you were in Lincoln?” Jeff asked.

“Of course I am,” I agreed. “I hope the Huskers beat the Sooners and kick them the whole way back to Lincoln.”

“I saw on my cell that Nebraska is ahead 7-3 in the first quarter,” Jeff said.

“Good!” I agreed. “Go Huskers!”

I did more interviews, but no one else asked me about my latest record. It was nice and all to get recognized, but it was getting tiresome. I had to focus my time and energy on getting my team where we needed to go, not on my personal stats. They would take care of themselves the same way they did for the past three years.

I met up with Mom and Liz outside the Lasch Building around five o’clock, after showering and attending the post game press conference. I suggested we walk downtown to find dinner. We were walking down College Avenue and noticed that Herwig’s didn’t have a line. I talked my mother and sister into trying some of Herwig “Brandy” Brandstetter’s delicious fare.

“Hallo, schön Sie wieder einmal zu sehen,” Brandy exclaimed when he spotted me. [Hello, it’s nice to see you again.]

“I’m happy to see you too, Brandy,” I replied. “Ich habe meine Mutter und meine Schwester zum Essen mitgebracht. Das sind Sharon und Liz.” [I brought my mother and sister for dinner. This is Sharon and Liz.]

“Oh, das ist nett,” Brandy replied enthusiastically. “Sprechen sie auch Deutsch, Frau Martin?” Mom stared back blankly at Brandy. Liz giggled. [Excellent! Do you speak German, Mrs. Martin?]

“Mom doesn’t speak German, Brandy,” I interjected.

“Ich spreche ein bißchen,” Liz added. “Ich hatte zwei Jahren deutsche unterricht.” [I speak a little. I had two years of German class.]

“Liz, it is an honor,” he added as he bowed to Liz. Turning, he gave Mom a deep bow. “It is a great pleasure to meet you, Frau Martin.”

“It is nice to meet you, sir,” Mom replied.

“You had an excellent game today, Herr Martin,” Brandy added as he took us to a table in the small restaurant. “Truly excellent.”

Brandy recommended we try the Mariniertes Schweinesteak. It was a center cut pork chip marinated in rosemary, olive oil and garlic. It was one of his son Berndt’s specialties. Berndt did most of the cooking at the restaurant. We agreed to try it.

Brandy’s recommendation was excellent as usual. All three of us enjoyed the meal. I received a text message on my phone during the meal. “DE 35 ME 20 KR 2/55 PR 4/58 RCV 8/158 2 TD. HAH! BEAT YOU!”

“It’s news from Andy,” I explained when Mom wondered why my phone was vibrating. “Andy’s team won 35-20 over Maine. Andy is teasing me about having two more catches than me.”

“I’m glad they won,” Mom said.

I texted back to my brother, “3 TD’S TURKEY. BEAT THAT :-P”

I enjoyed talking with Mom and Liz. I found out Liz had a new boyfriend, Chris Zimmerman. I teased, “Are you slowly working your way through all the guys in my patrol back when I was a troop guide?”

“No, Kyle. I’m not,” Liz countered. “Chris is a hunk and he’s smart, funny and sweet to me. I’m dating Chris because I like him. He’s looking at the same colleges I am. That’s how we hooked up – at the guidance office. He is interested in being a lawyer too.”

I wished Mom and Liz a good week before they headed for home. I returned to my apartment to help Trevor, Steph, Damian, Billy, Sarah and Melanie set up for our party. Chip took Amanda out for a fancy dinner that evening. He planned to ask Amanda to make their relationship exclusive that evening. I expected Amanda would agree. She had been dating Chip since the start of school.

Derek Whitaker made it to the party. He spent most of his time talking with the seniors. He raved how great his agent, Todd Rosenbaum, was. Todd had helped him through the tryouts with the CFL and later with Arena League. Todd helped Derek manage his \$50,000 annual salary so he had some money put away for the end of his career.

When Derek was ready to leave the AFL, Todd helped Derek get his affairs together so he could return to school. I recognized Todd Rosenbaum's name. I was certain I had talked with him last May. I would need to ask Dad if Todd was on my short list of possible agents. It was nice of Derek to tell me about how well his agent had done for him.

I had my usual few drinks and visited with my friends during the party. I was getting used to spending my Saturday nights alone. At least next week Penny would be there to make the weekend more fun.

I stepped outside during the party and called to talk with Penny. I caught her at a party Dakota and Dave were throwing for their circle of friends. Penny stepped into the bedroom away from the music to talk. Penny was delighted. The GRE test wasn't nearly as bad as she expected. My girlfriend was confident she would get a good score on the test. Penny would find out in a few weeks what her score was. Sometime in December, Penn's Veterinary School would inform her if she was accepted or if she needed to make alternate plans for her future.

Trevor, Chip and I watched some of the Florida-Alabama game. Most of the partiers stopped by periodically to check out the score. I was torn. I wanted Ed to do well but I also wanted one of the teams ahead of us in the BCS standings to lose so we could get a shot at the national championship.

Ed Fritz was playing lights out that evening. Ed drove his team down the field in the third quarter, hitting Eric Peters for a TD to take a 31-28 lead. The Gator defense managed to shut down the Tide on the next possession.

A crawler rolled across the bottom of the screen "NEB 27 OKH 21 Final" as we were cheering on the Tide to knock the Gators down in the polls. Everyone let up a cheer. The Huskers had beaten the Sooners. The number one spot in the BCS standing was open now. Everyone's allegiance suddenly switched. Nearly everyone cheered for the Gators. We didn't mind sharing the top two spots on the BCS with the Ed's team.

Ed played brilliantly. The Crimson Tide blitzed Ed down after down. He stood in, scrambled or dodged tacklers, as needed. He completed nearly impossible passes under pressure. He scrambled a dozen yards for first down to keep the drive going. Ed drove his team down into the red zone. He fired two passes into the end zone, only to have them batted away. On third down he fired the ball into the corner of the end zone where Eric Peters out-jumped the d-backs and brought down a TD.

The score put Florida up 38-28. The Gator defense was up to the task of holding off the Tide. The final score was 41-31. Sunday night was going to be fun. The question was would our 45-17 victory overshadow Florida's 41-31 win and boost us past them to #1. Frankly it was for nothing more than bragging rights. #1 and #2 would play for the BCS championship. It really didn't matter which spot we got. Our destiny was entirely in our control now. We just needed to win the rest of the games.

I enjoyed the Sunday paper's description of our game against Illinois. They had a great article praising Florida's and Ed's performance against Alabama. I enjoyed reading about how Nebraska took down Oklahoma.

Jeremy and Notre Dame easily handled Navy's triple option offense. Jeremy's seven tackles were down from normal, but that was to be expected against the triple option. Jeremy was forced to stay home and watch the dive play. Navy didn't test the middle much with Jeremy waiting there.

Texas took out their frustrations from the previous week by beating up on Missouri. They won 34-20. Ohio State handled Michigan State easily. Michigan beat Iowa. USC had no trouble with Washington State. Virginia Tech lost a close game to Boston College.

Rutgers beat Syracuse 27-24. Hal Long hit on two of three field goals. Jake Kring nearly pulled off an upset but threw a key interception in the fourth quarter that set up Rutgers' game winning drive at the end of the game.

West Virginia hosted Mississippi State in a non-conference game. The Mountaineers won 28-21. Drew McCormick's carries were down from normal. He carried the ball thirteen times for 64 yards. The Mountaineers won by exploiting Mississippi State's sub-par secondary.

I worked on a term paper for Military History for most of the afternoon. Penny and I enjoyed a long chat in the afternoon. She felt like she was free now that the vet application and the GRE were done. We talked about her plans to join me the following weekend. Penny decided to come up Saturday morning instead of Friday night since she had to catch a ride with someone to Lancaster County so she could get her car for the rest of the trip. I had no objection. We really couldn't see each other Friday night. Both of us were excited for the chance to spend a night together.

Coach Burton had a team video review of our game against Illinois after dinner Sunday. The debriefing wasn't too tough. Our team was firing on all cylinders offensively and defensively. Coach knew everyone was interested in watching ESPN for the poll results after the meeting. He had our video people set up the projection system with the TV feed. Virtually the entire team stayed in the auditorium to watch and find out our standings in the BCS.

The results were a mixed bag for us and Florida. The Harris Poll had Florida #1 and us #2. The USA Today poll flopped us. Two of the six computer rankings had us placed first and Florida second. The other four had us flopped. The BCS rankings had Florida #1 and us #2. The minute difference in standings was thanks to a few extra #1 votes Florida received in the polls.

Trevor, Damian and I took the stage after the TV feed was turned off and reminded everyone that whether we were #1 or #2 didn't matter. We would settle that difference on the field on January 7th. Any bias the voters had for the stereotype of a swift, fast strike SEC team against the slow plodding Big Ten team wouldn't matter on the field. Our true talent would determine the victor.

The remainder of the top ten were: Alabama, Texas, Nebraska, Oklahoma, Ohio State, Notre Dame, USC and Virginia Tech.

We reminded everyone before they left that playing in the BCS championship game depended on us taking care of business. We had four games to go and everyone had to be prepared when Northwestern came to town this weekend. "On to Phoenix" echoed through the auditorium as our team filed out and headed back to their rooms or apartments.

I got a phone call Monday afternoon as I was walking from my English course in Willard up the hill to Chambers and my Military History class. I glanced at the name as I pulled out my phone. It said "Robert Burton."

"Hey Coach. What's up?" I asked as I answered the ringing.

"I'd like you to meet me at my office at 3:15 this afternoon," Coach explained.

"Sure, no problem," I agreed. "Is this anything I need to worry about?"

"No, not at all," Coach replied. "Something interesting has come up that I suspect you will be interested in doing. I'll explain when you get to my office."

"OK Coach, I'll see you at 3:15," I agreed. Coach Burton had my curiosity up but I had to wait three hours to find out what the meeting was about. I went over to the Lasch Building after history and lunch and studied video of Northwestern to help me prepare for Saturday's game. I did walk by Coach's office a couple times to see if I could get a hint at what this interesting thing was. Coach's door was shut every time I walked by.

I showed up at Coach's office five minutes early. Marie paged Coach, who asked me to come in immediately. A man I vaguely recognized was sitting on the couch in Coach's office. He and Coach Burton rose to greet me when I came in.

"Thanks for coming, Coach," Coach Burton said. "Do you know Mr. Jovanovich?"

"No, I don't think so," I replied. I suspected the gentleman worked for the athletic department PR staff but I wasn't sure.

“Coach, this is Peter Jovanovich, the department publications manager,” Coach Burton said. I shook his hand. “Peter, this is Kyle Martin.”

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Kyle,” Mr. Jovanovich said.

“It is nice to meet you too, Mr. Jovanovich,” I replied.

“Call me Pete,” he answered as Coach Burton offered us seats. “May I call you Kyle?”

“Certainly, Pete” I agreed.

“I am responsible for coordinating all requests from newspapers and magazines for our communications staff,” Pete explained. “I had an intriguing request from Sports Illustrated this morning that I want to share with you. They are interested in doing a feature article on you and Edward Fritz from Florida. I understand the two of you are friends.”

“Yes, Ed lives two doors down from me,” I agreed. “We’ve been friends since we were in diapers.”

“The chance that Florida and Penn State ended up ranked first and second plus the fact that the two of you are friends makes this a tremendous human interest story,” Pete explained. “The potential that best friends could face off in the BCS championship game has them keyed up. The communications staff thinks this is a tremendous opportunity for you too. We have been working every angle we can to expose the Heisman voters to you and your accomplishments.”

“That’s nice and everything,” I replied. “I don’t know if the Heisman is realistic. They almost never award it to a wide receiver.”

“Why isn’t it realistic?” Pete challenged. “You have broken nearly every record for receiving and all purpose yards of consequence. You’ve broken records held by Jerry Rice, a Collegiate and NFL Hall of Fame player, and Brian Westbrook, one of the most versatile running backs in football over the past decade. Those achievements deserve consideration for the most prestigious award in college football.”

“I believe what I’ve been telling the press all season,” I said. “I’m more interested in our team winning than I am in individual honors. A win each week is more important to me than any records I may break.”

“Your response to the reporters’ questions is pitch perfect,” Pete replied. “Humble and focusing on the team first. Let the communications staff handle publicizing your accomplishments. What do you say? Are you willing to sit down for the interview?”

“I guess I can,” I agreed, “...assuming Ed is OK with it too.”

“I’m sure Florida will be aboard,” Pete said. “They aren’t going to miss the opportunity to publicize their program.”

“What happens next?” I asked.

“A reporter and photographer will come Wednesday afternoon to get some photos before practice,” Pete explained. “They’ll stay through dinner and take an hour or two after dinner to conduct their interview.”

“I guess I can work that into my schedule,” I agreed. “Coach, will I have any meetings that night? I don’t know if Coach Adams or Coach Caffrey has anything planned.”

“They will make sure you are available, Coach,” Coach Burton replied.

“Thanks Coach, I appreciate that,” I said. I headed out to locker room to get ready for practice.

The team practiced well during the week. Coach Burton, Damian, Trevor and I used our #2 BCS ranking to keep everyone focused on the current task – beating Northwestern. Our poll standing would drop like a rock if we lost. Oklahoma was a great case in point. The Sooners dropped from first to sixth when they lost to Nebraska. Our team had to take the season one game at a time, prepare properly and beat each opponent, one at a time.

I bumped into Derek Whitaker again outside the Chambers Building Wednesday after my Military History class. “Hey Kyle, it’s good to see you,” Derek said in greeting as he walked up to me. “How are you?”

“I’m good,” I answered.

“What are you up to?” Derek asked. “I was about to head to lunch. Want to join me?”

“I was going to go back to my apartment for lunch,” I replied. “We could hit the Mix or the Onion and grab something.”

“No, why don’t we get something downtown,” Derek countered. “Burgers from Baby’s would be good. I’ll treat.”

“Sure, that sounds great,” I agreed.

We headed down the mall in front of Pattee Library for College Avenue. It was a couple block walk down College to Allen Street and Baby’s. The burgers, fries and shakes were as tasty as ever.

Derek and I talked about our plan to handle Northwestern. We talked about playing in Ohio State's Horseshoe. Derek had played there twice. He was a sophomore the first time and didn't get much playing time. The second time he had been Glenn Tucker's primary backup and had been on the field for about twenty plays. He caught a key third and long pass to extend a drive that proved decisive in the Lions' victory that afternoon. Beating Ohio State in the Horseshoe also pushed the team to the top of the BCS polls and gave them the chance to win the BCS championship – which of course Phil DiStefano, Glenn Tucker and company did that season.

Derek had some good suggestions that I would pass on to the younger receivers about playing in Columbus. Personally, I was comfortable playing in that hostile stadium. I had done fine two years ago when Zack and our team came within a second of upsetting the Buckeyes. Their successful Hail Mary pass still stuck in my craw.

Derek quizzed me if I had a chance to talk with my father about his agent, Todd Rosenbaum. I promised to talk with Dad when we went out to dinner after the game on Saturday. Derek extolled Mr. Rosenbaum's virtues. He gave me some insight into the sorts of things you could expect an agent to do for you.

When we finished eating the waitress brought the check and set it on the table nearer to me. I reached for it automatically.

“No... no... no... I have this, Kyle,” Derek said.

“Are you sure?” I replied. “I don't mind picking up the check.”

“No, you bought the ice cream last week,” Derek countered. “It's my turn. I'll get the check.”

“I won't argue with you,” I answered. “I have no job and no prospects for another eight months. Go ahead.”

Derek went ahead and paid for our lunch. “Thank you for picking the tab,” I said as we walked out of the restaurant.

“It's my pleasure,” Derek answered. “I know how poor college students are. I'm not rich but Todd helped me manage my money so I don't have to worry about it while I'm here in school doing my masters.” Derek looked me square in the eye. “Make sure you talk to your dad, Kyle. You really should look at what Todd can do for you. He's been a fantastic agent for me.”

“I will talk to Dad on Saturday and make sure he goes on my final list of agents to consider,” I agreed.

“You will not regret that,” Derek indicated. We headed back to campus. We split up at Pollock Road. Derek headed for the center of campus. I headed for the Lasch Building.

I met Mr. Andrew Russell, the reporter from Sports Illustrated, and his photographer Brad at the Lasch Building at three o'clock. Andrew insisted I use his first name. He had me change into a clean game uniform. We went outside and across the street to the grass area below the Bryce Jordan center. Brad wanted to take photos of me with Mount Nittany in the background.

Brad must have shot two rolls of film. Most of the shots were profiles from either side. My direction was to stare at Andrew, who was a few feet in front of me and look fierce. I wore my helmet for some shots and held it for others. Brad and Andrew were satisfied after about half an hour.

I had to hurry back to the Lasch Building to get changed into a normal practice uniform. I showed up a couple minutes late, expecting to get chewed out by Coach Burton. Coach noticed me staring his way and gave me a smile and small wave to indicate I could relax. I guess my photo session was considered team business and was an acceptable excuse for being late to practice.

Andrew took notes and Brad took lots of photos as we did our practice. I did notice that we didn't run any of our exotic plays while the reporter was present and photographing us. I guess Coach didn't want to give Ohio State or Wisconsin any help. We didn't have any special plays planned for Northwestern. We were confident we could handle them straight up without trickery.

I received some teasing from the other receivers about having my own personal photographer and reporter trailing me. What could I say? I would have teased them if the roles were reversed. Andrew and Brad came along and had dinner at the Training Table with us. They interviewed quite a few of my teammates.

Andrew and Brad followed us after dinner. They sat in on the wide receivers meeting with Coach Caffrey. They took some shots of us working with our coach. When the wide receivers meeting was over we collected Damian, Trevor and Chip. Andrew wanted to interview them in more depth. Pete Jovanovich and I sat in on that interview.

It was my turn to go solo after Andrew finished with my roommates. I sat in the interview room against a blue background covered with Penn State logos. I didn't have any problems handling Andrew's questions. I had been doing interviews for almost six years.

We talked about my childhood and what Ed and I liked to do when we played together. The answer was obvious. We played catch. It had been our favorite past time from the time we were big enough that we could handle a mini-football until we hit high school and started playing football for real.

I told Andrew about our experiences in Boy Scouts and how we worked out together every summer until this past one. Andrew was surprised to hear that Chip had spent a summer in the scout camp working out with the two of us. I explained how Christian Hunsecker worked with us a week each summer too.

My cell phone rang in the middle of the interview. I pulled it from my belt. It was Penny.

“Do you mind if I take this?” I asked. “It’s my girlfriend. She probably needs to talk about her visit this weekend.”

“Sure, no problem,” Andrew agreed.

“Hi, honey,” I said when I clicked the answer button on my phone. “Could I call you back? I’m in middle of an interview right now.”

“Oh... OK, I thought you would be done with football by now,” Penny said. “Make sure you call me back as soon as you’re done. It’s important.”

“I promise, I will,” I agreed. I clicked the phone off again.

“Sorry about the interruption,” I said. “You know how it is.”

“I do,” Andrew agreed. “Did I understand correctly? Your girlfriend is visiting this weekend? Isn’t she a student here?”

“No, Penny goes to the University of Pennsylvania,” I explained.

“How did you hook up with a girl from Philadelphia?” Andrew asked, “...if you don’t mind a personal question.”

“No, that’s fine,” I said. “Penny is Ed Fritz’s next door neighbor and my second oldest friend. We were high school sweethearts. I botched things in college when we tried a long distance relationship. Thank God, we managed to patch things up last spring. She’s a great lady.”

“Is this a serious relationship?” Andrew asked.

“We’re not engaged... yet,” I answered. “Don’t publish that last part. The two of us have to work out our future plans. She wants to go to veterinary school in Philadelphia next fall. I have no idea who will draft me or where I will be next summer. We have a lot of questions in our future but we are confident we will be able to figure them out.”

“You’re fortunate to be able to have someone that can work that out,” Andrew commented before returning to football topics. We talked for almost an hour. I enjoyed the experience. Andrew was an excellent interviewer.

“Thanks for taking the time to talk with us, Kyle,” Andrew said when he wrapped things up.

“No problem,” I said. “It was fun. Are you handling the interview with Ed too or is someone else doing that half of the story?”

“Brad and I are taking a red eye down to Florida tonight,” Andrew answered. “We are scheduled to interview Ed tomorrow afternoon and evening.”

“Tell him I said hi,” I said. I shook hands with Andrew and Brad before they left.

“That was well done, Kyle,” Pete said when Andrew and Brad left the room. “You are an excellent interview subject.”

“I’ve been doing this for six years,” I said. “Interestingly, my first interview was a joint interview with Ed Fritz. The local newspaper did a feature article on the two of us when our high school team started winning big.”

“Thanks for representing the university so well,” Pete responded.

I headed back to my apartment when I finished. I called Penny as soon as I got back.

“Hi, honey. What’s up?” I asked when Penny answered my call.

“Oh... I feel terrible, Kyle,” Penny began. “My vertebrate anatomy professor assigned a big term paper today. It’s due next Wednesday. My schedule is overloaded during the beginning of next week. The only time I can do this damn term paper is over the weekend.”

“Oh,” I commented.

“I’m so sorry, Kyle,” Penny explained. “I was looking forward to the game and spending Saturday night with you. My grades are too important for me to take chance of getting a bad grade, especially in an anatomy course.”

“No, you’re right,” I agreed. “School work has to come first. I was really looking forward to seeing you on Saturday.”

“I’ll make it up to you, Kyle,” Penny said. “I promise. You can count on that.”

“We’ll have Thanksgiving break,” I said. “It’s only four weeks away. We’ll survive.”

“Thank you for being so understanding, Kyle,” Penny said. “I love you.”

“I love you too, honey,” I answered. I was disappointed but I would survive.

I tried to interest Christian Hunsecker in another bet on the result of the Wolverines / Central game on Friday night. Christian had enough of betting with me. The only thing on the line would be bragging rights until our teams met again next month in the playoffs.

My teammates and I had a lot of confidence as we prepared for our game with Northwestern. They were a young team with a first year starting quarterback. We didn't expect them to match our speed or our size. They were 4-5, having lost to Duke, Michigan State, Purdue, Illinois and Ohio State. We had handled Purdue and Illinois so we thought we would be able to handle the Wildcats.

State College had experienced a week of Indian Summer as we prepared. We were supposed to barely hit the sixties in late October. Instead the high temperature each day was close to eighty. Nice weather certainly suited our offense.

Ed called Thursday evening after Andrew and Brad had finished interviewing and photographing him. Ed's impression of Andrew was similar to mine. Both of us enjoyed the experience and were anxious to see the Sports Illustrated issue when it came out the following week.

Coach Burton kept Friday's practice to a walk through. It was getting later in the season and everyone was dinged up a little. The break was appreciated. The team spent Friday evening at Toftrees. Penny called me before bedtime and wished me luck with my game.

Nothing was posted when Christian and I first went on-line to find out the result of our high school teams' game. I found the result on-line on Channel 8's website just before I went to bed. My Wolverines had pulled off an upset, beating Central in Manheim. The score was 31-30. Matt had led the team in a final drive to take the lead with three minutes left in the game. They needed to beat the Braves and Norlanco to finish the season. They would be heavily favored in both games. It would set them up for excellent spot in the playoffs.

The team was up early on Saturday. ABC was televising our game at noon. It was cloudy when the blue buses hauled us over to the Lasch Building to get dressed. We had another group of seven recruits visiting. Shawn Byrd and Joe Ricci took charge of them with assistance from Trey Connelly and Troy Davis.

Crowds of fans greeted us when we were dropped off at the stadium. The earlier overcast skies had broken up. The temperature was in the low sixties with the high expected to hit 72 during the game. The wind was a steady 12-15 miles an hour from the southwest. We had been blessed another fantastic fall day for football.

Many of Northwestern's starters were young players. They had some talent but didn't have much experience. Their best chance to defeat our team was to play error free football. They didn't.

They won the coin toss and elected to receive the football to start the game. Three plays into the game Josh Bruno put a devastating hit on the ball carrier and popped the ball loose. Brendan Hayden recovered the loose ball, giving us possession at Northwestern's 42 yard line.

Coach Burton tested the Wildcats defense on the first two plays with runs. Damian picked up five yards and then another three. On third down and two yards to go, we tested their pass defense. Brian lined up in the slot on the strong side and went in motion back to the weak side slot before the snap. Northwestern's defense didn't realign, so we knew they were in a zone defense. I was supposed to run a short route, but this formation was one of the keys Chip, Brian, Christian and I had worked out. I looked over at Christian as Chip gave him the high sign. I acknowledged to Christian that I saw the sign. Christian let Chip know the switch was on.

Chip pump faked as I pretended to stop in the short zone. The cornerback bit on the fake, trying for an interception. Brian ran an out in front of this cornerback while I took off deep. The cornerback in the short zone stayed on Brian. I sprinted down the field, looking for the d-back that should have the deep zone. I expected to be one on one against the free safety but he wasn't there. Chip launched the deep ball to me. All I had to do was run under it, catch it and sprint untouched into the end zone for our first score. Jared Gray booted the ball through the uprights for the PAT. Score: Penn State-7 Northwestern-0

The fumble and blown coverage were indicative of the kind of day the Wildcats had. They had good athletes that weren't experienced yet in big games. We were an excellent team that other top teams had trouble containing. An inexperienced team going against us was in trouble. We spread them out with our deep passing game, hit them hard with the running and kept them guessing all day. Our offensive and defensive lines dominated the line of scrimmage. All of that explains the score at half time.

Bob Smith, Damian and Christian all scored TDs. I added a second 55 yard TD in the second quarter. Coach Burton pulled the starters when the score reached 35-0 with about two minutes left before half time. Jon Stafford's crew went out and scored again. He hit Bruce MacCauley on a deep pattern. Bruce broke a couple of weak tackles and streaked down the field to the end zone.

We took a 42-0 lead into the locker room at half time. Coach Burton gave the Wildcats a strong dose of running in the second half. Charlie Taylor, ET LeBlanc and Wyatt Smith carried the load in the second half. Charlie scored two touchdowns. Ian Davis scored his first TD in the fourth quarter. Northwestern managed to score ten points in the second half.

The final score of 63-10 was the second highest score by our team in my time at Penn State. I knew Northwestern would be better prepared next season. They had good players who had just learned some big lessons about playing a top team.

My six catches for 162 yards and one wildcat carry for another 11 yards were a decent performance for the day. I did my usual interviews and joined Coach Burton, Trevor and Damian at the post game press conference. I joined Dad and one of his insurance clients for dinner that evening. Dad took us to the Boalsburg Steak House.

I talked to Dad about checking out Todd Rosenbaum. I told him about the high recommendation Derek Whitaker had given him. Dad didn't recognize the name but promised to give the agent a second look based on Derek's recommendation.

I was kind of down at the party that night. I missed Penny and was bummed out she couldn't make it. Trevor, Steph, Christian and Bev did their best to keep my spirits up. I didn't do anything crazy like get drunk and screw one of the babes that would have been happy to join me in my bed. I did have to relieve myself later that evening after the party. Trevor was in the next bedroom making love to his fiancée, the lucky guy.

I got up around 10:30 Sunday morning. I enjoyed a breakfast sandwich as I devoured the sports section of the paper. Ed Fritz and the Gators had no problem handling Georgia. #3 Alabama was off yesterday. #4 Texas handled Oklahoma State easily. #5 Ohio State dispatched Illinois as easily as we had a few weeks earlier. #6 Nebraska was off. #7 Oklahoma beat Baylor. #8 Notre Dame was off. #9 USC struggled but managed to win over Arizona State. #10 LSU destroyed Troy. The BCS standings probably would stay the same since there were no upsets.

My brother's Blue Hens beat William and Mary handily, 44-17. Andy had five catches for 122 yards and a touchdown. He also ran a punt return for a touchdown too. Jake Kring's difficulties as Syracuse's starting QB continued. His team lost to Buffalo, 27-24 on a last second field goal. Drew McCormick's Mountaineers beat Louisville. Hal Long kicked three PATs and a field goal to help Rutgers beat Army 24-14.

I spent a good part of Sunday afternoon studying. Penny and I talked for about half an hour. She was making good progress with the term paper that had ruined our weekend. She would have it wrapped up before bedtime.

I spent that later half of the afternoon over at the players' lounge, playing pool and foosball while watching the late NFL game. My childhood favorites, the Eagles were playing the San Francisco 49ers. My rooting interest for the Eagles wasn't as strong as it had been a couple years ago. My good friend Aaron Morano was the star cornerback for the 49ers. Another close friend, Dominic "Cuch" Cuchiella, was the starting strong safety for the Eagles. The 49ers were winning when we left for dinner, thanks to an Aaron Morano interception that he ran for a touchdown.

My friends and I noticed one thing unusual at dinner that evening. Coach Paterno was there. My friends and I speculated about the reason. Coach Paterno almost never ate with us. He always went home to eat with his wife Sue. We found out why after dinner.

Coach Burton stood and signaled for quiet in the room. "I believe most of you remember that the coaching staff and athletic department nominated one member of the team for the National Football Foundation's scholar/athlete award last month. Coach Paterno would like to tell you more about the award."

"Thanks Bob," Coach Paterno replied in his gravelly, nasal voice. "I am very pleased with the news of this award. I recruited this young man but never got the opportunity to coach him on the field. He has filled every expectation I had for him five years ago when I offered him a scholarship to play here at Penn State."

"It is my great honor to announce that the National Football Foundation honored Kyle David Martin with the William Pearce/Joseph V. Paterno Scholar/Athlete Award today. This award makes Kyle one of sixteen finalists for the Campbell Scholar/Athlete award, the award for the top scholar/athlete in the country. Nominees are required to exhibit superior skills and leadership as a starter on the football field, maintain a minimum 3.2 grade point average and provide service to their community."

"Kyle had exhibited all three required traits. He is a true leader for our team. He carries a 3.68 GPA and gives service to his community through his leadership of the team's Thon campaign and his time spent working with youth through the Boy Scouts. Congratulations Kyle," Coach Paterno said before sitting down.

Coach Burton added, "Stand up, Coach, so your peers can recognize your achievement."

I stood as Trevor led the team in three cheers for me, thoroughly embarrassing me. I had come a long way since freshman year when I was afraid I was going to get kicked off the team, flunk out and had lost my girlfriend Penny. I was truly blessed.

Chapter 69

Later after the team meeting on Sunday night, Coach Burton told me he wanted to meet with me before Monday's practice to give me information about the Pearce/Paterno Scholarship Award. I showed up promptly on Monday afternoon to find out what was up.

Coach Burton invited me into his office and offered me a seat on his couch when I arrived. The National Football Foundation gave \$18,000 post graduate fellowships to the recipients of the fifteen finalist awards.

"The Campbell Award for the nation's top scholar/athlete will be announced at the NFF's awards banquet on Tuesday, December 4th," Coach explained. "The banquet will be at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel in New York City. The NFF will pick up actual and necessary expenses for the evening, including transportation, lodging, meals and tux rental."

"Tux rental?" I asked.

"The banquet is black tie," Coach Burton explained. "The NFF will pay for your immediate family to attend the dinner too."

"How about my girlfriend Penny?" I asked. "I'd love to include her."

"That would be at your or her expense," Coach explained. "They don't cover girlfriend's or fiancée's expenses."

"I guess I would have to miss some classes if the banquet is on a Tuesday evening," I said. "It is going to take awhile to drive the whole way to New York City. Would they pay for me to fly?"

"They would," Coach Burton responded. "The athletic department has another idea. Mr. Hurley [our athletic director] and President Spanier want to see you and our university gets maximum exposure with this award. It vindicates everything we've been preaching for decades to have our top athlete honored as a top scholar too. Coach Paterno is presenting one of the finalist awards at the banquet. Coach, President Spanier, Mr. Hurley and I are flying up on a charter flight the afternoon of the banquet. We may be able to get you a seat on the plane with us. Your last course is over at 12:30, isn't it?"

"That is my Geography lecture," I explained. "I have Art History 10 from 1:00 to 2:15 pm."

"You have that course scheduled as pass/fail, don't you?" Coach asked. I nodded yes. "You can safely miss it, if you make arrangements with your professor. There is one more complication. The charter flight is more expensive than a commercial flight. You

would need to pick up the difference in cost between it and a regular commercial flight. I'm told the extra cost will be around \$500."

"Wow, that's a lot," I gasped.

"Remember, this flight will get you to most of your classes on Tuesday and Wednesday except one," Coach countered. "If you fly commercial, you will certainly miss all your classes on Tuesday and Wednesday. Which makes more sense?"

"Catching a ride with you and Coach Paterno," I answered. "I'll talk to my dad and see if he can front me for the extra cost for the flight."

"Good," Coach Burton said. "I will get the athletic department to work on getting you a waiver so you can catch a ride with us. It makes the most sense of any possible arrangement."

"I guess," I agreed. "I had no idea it was this complicated to win an award."

Coach let out a long chuckle. "You haven't seen anything yet, Coach. I expect ESPN is going to invite you to their awards show two days later. That is in New York too. You are a shoo-in for the Biletnikoff award."

"Best wide receiver?" I asked.

"That's the one," Coach Burton said. "It would be a travesty if anyone else won that award this year. Division I-A has never had a 5,000 yard receiver before."

"I never really thought about that," I said. "This is starting to feel a little overwhelming."

"Put it out of your head after you leave my office today," Coach Burton suggested. "We have three tough football games to concentrate on. We have got to take them if we want to achieve our goals this season."

"You're right, Coach," I replied. "Ohio State is going to be a pain in the butt from what I've seen on video so far today. I'll focus on that and forget about all these other details until after Thanksgiving."

"That's a good plan," Coach Burton said. "On to Phoenix."

"Yes, on to Phoenix," I agreed as I left.

My teammates did not need much encouragement to take practice seriously on Monday afternoon. They worked hard with little prompting from the coaches or team captains. Everyone understood we had reached the crossroad in our season. We would need to give our best effort to reach our goals. One smidgen less than our best and we would find ourselves in the same position as Texas and Oklahoma – thinking about what could have

been. The other seniors and I had been there two years ago. Settling for second place in the nation was no consolation.

If we beat Ohio State and then don't have a letdown against Wisconsin or Michigan State, our vision would be at hand. We would spend our holidays in Phoenix and play for the national championship.

I called home Monday evening and talked with Dad. He agreed to add the \$500 air fare to my tab. It was more important for me to make as many of my classes as possible, than to save a little money on the travel arrangements. I gave Penny a call next.

"Honey, how would you like to go to a fancy banquet at the Waldorf-Astoria on December 4th?" I asked when my sweetie answered the phone.

"What's the seventh?" she asked herself quietly as she searched for her calendar. "A Tuesday evening?" Penny asked when she located it. "I have classes until late in the afternoon. I can't miss them."

"I'm not surprised," I responded. "I knew it was a long shot but I was hoping you could come to see me get my award."

"I'll be there in spirit, honey," Penny said. "If it had been a weekend, I would be able to make time to go with you."

"Maybe the next award," I replied. The two of us continued talking about classes and what was happening in our lives for a few more minutes before ending the phone call. Being able to talk with Penny frequently helped me to stay sane.

The Sports Illustrated issue hit the newsstands on Tuesday. I headed down to the bookstore in the HUB on my way back to my apartment after my Art History class. I caused a stir in the store when I picked up two copies of the magazine. A couple guys were at the magazine rack looking at SI when I walked over. I autographed the cover for both of them.

Andrew and Brad did an excellent job on the cover. The cover was a split image. I was on the left side, with Mount Nittany in the background, staring at Ed. Ed was on the right half, glaring back at me. The effect was striking. The only beef I had with the cover was that Ed was positioned so he looked to be the same height as me. In real life I tower four inches over my buddy.

More people recognized me. Calls of "Beat Ohio State on Saturday," "I hope you get the Heisman," and "Way to go, Kyle," greeted me as I carried my two copies of the magazine up to the cash register. I thanked everyone for their kind support.

When I got back to the apartment I put one copy of the magazine in a gallon Zip-loc bag to protect it. Ed and I had agreed to autograph each other's copies of the magazine to increase its value for posterity. That would be something for my kids some day.

I read through the article quickly. Andrew had done a great job describing Ed and me and how we got into football, had improved our abilities and ended up with scholarships to a couple of the top colleges in the country. He made a case that the 10,438 yards I had gained since my 97 yard touchdown kick return started my college career did qualify me for the Heisman.

Andrew also made the case that Ed's play over the past eleven months had electrified his team and given them one shot at the national championship last January. He had his team in line for a second shot at the championship this season. I thought Ed's chances of getting the Heisman were higher than my own. I just wouldn't admit that to him.

Some of my teammates saw the Sports Illustrated article before practice. I got a lot of grief from them. That was a team tradition. It was our way to keep whoever had the favorable press from getting a swelled head and forgetting that football was a team game. We won as a team and we lost as a team – every one of us.

I was expecting an e-mail from the College of Education that week, letting me know which school I would be student teaching at. I knew I had to prepare a detailed study of the school similar to the one I had prepared last semester for Bellefonte High School. I would hear who my mentor teacher was within a few weeks. I needed to make arrangements to meet him or her and get to know them better before I showed up at their classroom in January.

Instead of an e-mail from the college, I got a curt e-mail Tuesday night from Dr. Henderson, my advisor. It said I had to call him during his office hours tomorrow to straighten out a difficulty with my schedule.

I gave Dr. Henderson a call in the morning before my first class. "Thank you for returning my phone call promptly, Mr. Martin," Dr. Henderson said as soon as I identified myself. My advisor wasn't one for small talk. He bulled straight to the problem. "You have failed your background check. You failed to disclose a drunk driving arrest last December when you were given clearance to work in the Bellefonte High School. Failure to disclose such incidents will force us to expel you from the degree program."

"What?" I exclaimed. "I told you about the drunk driving arrest a year ago. I gave you the letter from the DA and a copy of the BAC that showed I was sober. How could you kick me out if I was arrested falsely?"

“Not the first arrest on November 13th,” Dr. Henderson said. “You are clear on that one. I am talking about the second arrest on December 13th. The background check reports you were arrested on Beaver Avenue at 10:31 am by an Officer Michael Vaughn.”

“Second arrest?” I stammered. “I wasn’t arrested a second time. There must be an error in the records used for the background checks. I would remember if I saw Officer Vaughn again.”

“There wasn’t a second arrest?” Dr. Henderson said. He paused while he reassessed his plans. “Can you prove this?”

“How do I prove that something didn’t happen?” I asked rhetorically. “That was finals week last fall. I was busy studying then, not out partying in the middle of the morning.” I fired up my laptop while I was talking with Dr. Henderson. I finally got my calendar program open. “10:31 in the morning on December 13th?” I asked.

“That’s right,” Dr. Henderson agreed.

“I was in the middle of my History 161 final exam then,” I said triumphantly. “I couldn’t have been arrested for drunk driving. The exam started at 10:10 am and you have records showing I passed the exam. I could not have been at the location Officer Vaughn has placed me at.”

“You will have to provide me with documentation for that,” Dr. Henderson countered. “Your assigned school will see these reports too and won’t have access to university records the way I do. This must be cleared up or the College of Education will be forced to remove you from the program.”

“You’re going to kick me out of college?” I asked.

“No, but we must remove you from the College of Education if you are unable to pass the requirements for a degree,” Dr. Henderson replied. “Until we can get a proper clearance for you, you can not student teach and can not graduate. You will have to find a suitable alternate major.”

“I will get back to you as soon as I can,” I said. “Don’t start removing me from the college yet. Someone somewhere has made a big mistake.”

“I can give you until Friday,” Dr. Henderson said. “It will be too late to assign you to a school if we wait longer than that.”

“I will get you an answer well before that,” I promised. I was flabbergasted when I hung up the phone. How could this have happened? Was Officer Vaughn pulling a fast one in retaliation for the trouble I got him in last fall? Kicked out of the College of Education? Not graduate? The consequences were too horrible to contemplate.

I called Coach Burton first. I needed someone on my side. If I got kicked out of college I knew I wouldn't be much use to him. Coach would help me fix this miscarriage of justice and keep me in my major. I knew it!

Marie said Coach was out for the morning but she would give him my message that it was urgent that we speak. I went through my English course in a fog, dazed at the shocking turn my life had just taken. I stayed after my History class to talk with Dr. Brennan.

"Dr. Brennan, I ran into a difficulty with the College of Education," I explained after the room cleared. "They do a background check on anyone who will be student teaching the next semester. My background check came up with an incorrect report that I was arrested for drunk driving at 10:31 am on last December 13th. That was the exact time I was taking your final for History 161. Would you be willing to swear an affidavit stating those facts?"

"Certainly, Kyle," Dr. Brennan agreed. "What happens if you don't get this problem cleared up?"

"My advisor is threatening to kick me out of the College of Education," I explained. "I can't graduate without doing my student teaching."

"I would be happy to give you an affidavit if that will help," Dr. Brennan agreed. "Of course, if that doesn't work, I'm sure I could get the History Department to take you under its wing."

"I don't think that will be necessary," I said. I chuckled at Dr. Brennan's light hearted attempt to recruit me again. "Of course I would have someplace to use the fellowship I just received if I did switch over to history."

"Fellowship?" Dr. Brennan said. "What fellowship is that?"

"I was named the Pearce/Paterno Scholar/Athlete this year," I said. "The award comes with an \$18,000 fellowship to cover post graduate tuition."

"That is excellent news, Kyle," Dr. Brennan replied. "You let me know what help I can give you. Affidavit, new major – you name it and I'll help you make it happen."

"I'll stick with the affidavit," I said, "If I need it. Thanks for your help."

I headed back to my apartment for lunch before heading over to the Lasch Building. Coach Burton returned my call while I was eating lunch. Coach agreed to see me as soon as I could get over to his office. I gobbled down the rest of my sandwich as I jogged over. Marie sent me straight in to see Coach Burton.

“Coach, I have a serious problem,” I explained after he had me sit down with him on his couch. I outlined my call with Dr. Henderson, the purported arrest and Dr. Henderson’s threat to expel me from the College of Education.

“Henderson,” Coach Burton said as he shook his head when I finished my story. “You certainly get into some interesting pickles, don’t you, Coach?”

“Not by my doing,” I replied.

“I don’t think I will get anywhere trying to reason with Professor Henderson,” Coach said. He chuckled. “We’ve crossed swords before. You have a problem with the police records. Let’s work that angle. I doubt we will get anywhere calling the police department directly. I think we should jump up a couple rungs on the ladder.”

Coach walked over to his desk, motioning me to follow him. He sat down in his chair and dialed his phone.

“Hey Bill, it’s Bob Burton over at the university,” Coach said. “I’m sitting here with one of my players, Kyle Martin. Is it all right if I put you on speaker phone?” After a short pause, Coach pressed the button so I could hear the conversation too.

“Hello Kyle, this is Bill Herrington, the Centre County DA,” the voice on the speaker explained. “I loved that first touchdown of yours on Saturday. It was spectacular. I shouted myself hoarse at the game.”

“Thanks, sir,” I responded.

“Bill, Kyle and I are calling to see if you can help us straighten out a misunderstanding,” Coach Burton explained. “I’ll let Kyle fill you in on the details.”

I went ahead and described the predicament I found myself in to Mr. Herrington. He asked a few questions, which I answered as I told my story.

“Let me make sure I understand everything correctly, Kyle,” Mr. Herrington said when I finished. “Your background check reports you were arrested on December 13th at 10:31 am and charged with driving under the influence and underage drinking.”

“That’s what my advisor tells me,” I agreed.

“This should be easy to investigate,” Mr. Herrington said. “An arrest will leave a paper trail. Did the background check list a disposition for the case?”

“Not that I know of,” I replied.

“I will have one of my assistants check the criminal records database for this case,” Mr. Herrington said. “They will go over and examine the paper records at the borough police

station too and confirm the accuracy of the database. It shouldn't take more than a week."

"Sir, that's part of my problem," I replied. "The background check came when they did a clearance to allow me to do my student teaching next semester. I plan to become a high school history teacher after football. They are assigning student teachers to schools this week. If I don't get this cleared up by the end of this week, I don't get assigned a school. No school, no student teaching – no student teaching and I can't graduate. The upshot is that I will be expelled from the college if this isn't cleared up this week."

I purposely didn't tell Mr. Herrington that the college I would be expelled from was the College of Education, not Penn State University. I didn't mind if he, a big Penn State fan, felt some urgency helping me get this problem fixed.

"Expelled!" Mr. Herrington gasped. His shock was apparent over the phone. "That won't do at all. We're going to need you in the next three or four games. I will expedite the review. I'll get back to you tomorrow. Bob, should I get in touch with you when I know more?"

"You can talk directly with Kyle," Coach Burton replied. "He'll keep me informed."

"OK, that's fine, Bob," Mr. Herrington replied. "Where can I contact you, Kyle?"

I gave him my cell phone and apartment phone numbers.

"Don't worry, Kyle," Mr. Herrington promised. "We will get to the bottom of this quickly."

"I appreciate your help," I answered.

"Thanks, Bill, I owe you one," Coach Burton added before hanging up the call. "Expelled from college?" Coach laughingly added after the phone was off.

"I said, 'Expelled from THE college,'" I replied. "That is absolutely true. I will be expelled from the College of Education if this problem isn't fixed."

"...and you'll make a nice soft landing at the History Department if this isn't fixed," Coach replied. "You're going to make a hell of a football coach. You're already learning how to motivate people to get the job done."

"I don't want this hanging over me on Saturday," I replied. "I want to be able to concentrate on Ohio State."

"Absolutely, Coach," Coach Burton replied. "I want you concentrating on them too. Don't worry about this. I think Bill Herrington will get the problem fixed for you by Henderson's deadline. If not... well, I have some other avenues I can pursue to make

sure you complete your degree as planned.” He chuckled. “There is NO CHANCE that the university will allow the College of Education to expel you a week after the university trumpeted you being named a finalist for the national scholar/athlete award. We would not look good if that happened.”

“I appreciate your help, Coach,” I answered. “I feel a lot better now that you’re helping me fix this problem.”

I sent Dr. Henderson an e-mail updating him on my efforts to correct the records. I promised to let him know as soon as I heard back from the DA. My phone vibrated during my Art History lecture. I glanced at the number. It was the DA’s office. I hurried outside as soon as class was dismissed and called Mr. Herrington.

“Hello Kyle, I have excellent news for you,” Mr. Herrington said when his secretary transferred the call to his office. “The error was caused by a clerk inadvertently copying the record of the November arrest instead of purging it. The new date and time on the arrest report was the day and time the clerk made the error. I personally checked the criminal database myself. Your record is clear.”

“Thank you, Mr. Herrington,” I replied. “I appreciate all your help in getting this cleared up.”

“You owe me one, Kyle,” Mr. Herrington chuckled. “Pay me off by kicking Ohio State’s backside on Saturday.”

“I’ll do my best, sir,” I answered. The Forum is close to the Chambers Building, so I decided to head over there and see if Dr. Henderson was in. I wanted to make sure he got the message and nothing bad happened to my educational career because an e-mail got misplaced. I got lucky. He was in his office.

“Dr. Henderson, do you have a moment?” I asked politely after knocking at his door.

“Mr. Martin, are you here to fill out the paperwork to change your major?” the smug old bastard queried.

“No,” I answered quickly, struggling to suppress my anger with the idiot. “No, I’m not here for that,” I replied more evenly. “I just got off the phone with Centre County DA, William Herrington. He found that there was a clerical error in the police database. He personally checked and told me it has been corrected. You can have the people running the clearance check again. My name will be clear.”

“I BET,” Dr. Henderson harrumphed. “Typical athletic department response. Call in favors and give their athletes special treatment. I’ve seen it too...”

“SPECIAL TREATMENT!” I thundered. “You’ve got to be kidding. I was singled out for special treatment – false arrest and jailing when I was innocent. The police arrested me solely because I was a football player. I wouldn’t have a second drunk driving arrest in the records if I didn’t have the first. None of this would have happened if I was a normal student. Hell, I’d probably have been one of your pets if I didn’t play football. How many students do you advise with a higher GPA than me?”

“Um... one or two,” Dr. Henderson stammered.

“Stop denigrating me and give me a fair break,” I demanded. “I love football. I love history. I love teaching. I want to find a way to include all three in my life. What is wrong with that?” I didn’t stop to let my idiot advisor respond. “I expect you to do your job and have the clearance run. I expect to be assigned a school for my student teaching like every other student this semester.”

“I have to follow protocols,” Dr. Henderson snapped.

“Follow them,” I growled back. “I KNOW the administrators at this university would not look kindly if the person they nominated for the national scholar/athlete award was kicked out of his major a month before the awards banquet. By the way, I am one of sixteen finalists for the award, picked from 122 nominees.”

“I hadn’t heard that,” Dr. Henderson replied. I could see he was calculating what the higher ups could do to him if he continued opposing me.

“Do your job,” I snapped as I stood to leave. “Get me a school and let me do my student teaching. I will be out of your life in a few months if you do that.”

“I will tell the committee to run the clearance again,” Dr. Henderson said as I stalked out of his office.

I knew I probably shouldn’t have lost my temper with Dr. Henderson, but damn, that man made me boil. I would never have to deal with him again after he finished up my clearance. I had six more weeks of classes, finals week and then I was out of there. I would be safely out of Dr. Henderson’s reach when I did my student teaching down in Philadelphia. That couldn’t come too soon.

I didn’t hear anything back from Dr. Henderson that afternoon. I let Coach Burton know before practice that Mr. Herrington had cleared up my problem in the criminal database. Coach was glad to hear everything was coming out the way it should.

I was still in the dark when we loaded up in the buses and headed for the airport on Friday morning. Coach Burton called me forward when the plane reached altitude and we were allowed to move around.

“I checked before we left this morning, Coach,” Coach Burton said. “The College of Education has your clearance. You should hear shortly about the school you will student teach at.”

“Thanks, Coach,” I replied. “I appreciate all the help you have given me.”

“Did you really have to yell at Henderson?” Coach Burton asked. I didn’t manage to camouflage my surprise that he had heard about the argument.

“The S.O....” I said as my temper rose again. I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Sorry Coach. Dr. Henderson actually expected me to fill out paperwork changing my major when I showed up at his office yesterday. I kind of lost it after that.”

“One of the things I like about you is the way you deal with setbacks and adversity,” Coach answered. “You usually accept what is happening, deal with it and move on calmly. That is a good character trait.”

“I’ll try to do better, Coach,” I promised.

“Don’t let the Buckeyes get under your skin tomorrow,” Coach preached. “They would love nothing better than you losing your temper and playing poorly. Make sure that doesn’t happen, Coach.”

“I will,” I agreed. I headed back to my seat beside Trevor. I worked on some homework during the short flight out to Columbus.

We stayed in the University Plaza Hotel on the edge of the Ohio State campus. Trevor’s and my room faced the Olentangy River behind the hotel. Quite a few of the team members headed for the indoor pool to relax that afternoon. I checked my e-mails before I went. I found something much more interesting than a dip in a pool.

The College of Education sent me an e-mail informing me that I would be doing my student teaching at the Conestoga High School in Berwyn. The town was located in eastern Chester County near Route 30 on the Main Line into Philadelphia.

I went on-line for directions from the school to the apartment I would be sharing with Penny. The trip didn’t look too bad. I would go straight down Route 30 into the city and follow it as Lancaster Avenue into the city. The apartment was two blocks off Lancaster Avenue. The estimated travel time was 38 minutes.

I was pleased with the school assignment. I had worried that I might get sent to northeast Philly or Bucks County, far from the apartment Penny and I would share. Conestoga was convenient to Villanova University too. I could visit Kenny Weaver if I wanted to. I was going to drive past his school twice every day.

I spent an hour studying the school's website, getting familiar with the school, its curriculum and traditions. One surprise I found was the starting time. First period began at 7:20 am. I was going to have to get up even earlier than I did for polar bear swims at scout camp to be there on time after a forty minute drive.

I headed downstairs for dinner with my friends. We were waiting in line when Coach Burton, Coach Adams, Coach Peterson and Coach Curry came in and joined the serving line. I dropped back in line to talk with Coach Burton.

"Hey Coach, I got some great news from the College of Education," I said. "They have assigned me to do my student teaching at Conestoga High School in..."

"Berwyn," Coach added. "I know the school. They have a decent football team with a good winning percentage." He shook his head a little. "We haven't picked up any recruits from that school. They send guys to Division II and III regularly. Occasionally they have an FCS recruit. Dan Werley is a good football coach. I like him."

"I've met him too," Coach Caffrey added. "We attended a couple high school coaching clinics together. Dan's a good man."

Coach Adams teased, "How long do you think it will be before Werley recruits you to help train his football team?"

"I doubt that will happen," I replied. "I'm only going to be there for a few months. I don't think I would get involved in sports at all."

"Rrright... sure," Coach Burton agreed. "An All-American wide receiver drops into your lap and he starts teaching at your school. Would you ignore him if you were the head football coach?"

"Dan has heard about the off season program you put together at my school," Coach Caffrey added. "We talked about it over lunch a couple times. He will be interested, Coach. He was disappointed that he hasn't been able to get his kids to do more than lift a couple times a week to prepare during the off season."

"I guess I'll find out when I get there," I replied.

"I'm happy you can put the student teaching worry out of your head, Coach," Coach Burton replied. "I want your head in tomorrow's game."

"It is, Coach," I answered. "#27, Eldon Burkholder – right cornerback for the Ohio State Buckeyes – 6'-0" tall, 190 pounds. He runs a 4.3 40. He plays solid coverage, rarely gambling to get turnovers. He can be gotten with a pump fake." I gave him a big grin. "I'm ready, Coach."

All the coaches got a laugh from my performance. I went through the serving line with the coaching staff but joined my friends once I got my food. We laughed and joked as we ate dinner. The mood was upbeat. Every one of us was confident we could beat the Buckeyes here in front of their red coated, hyper-passionate fans.

Position coaches met with their charges for ninety minutes after dinner to review the game plan, the assignments and everyone's role in beating the Buckeyes. The coaches arranged for a movie to be shown in one of our meeting rooms. Another room was available for games, cards and relaxing.

My friends and I watched the movie and then went upstairs for our traditional poker game before bedtime. Everyone headed for their rooms around a quarter to eleven. I went on-line to see how my high school team had fared. They blew out the Braves 59-20.

Our game was scheduled for prime time on Saturday evening with an 8:00 pm start. LSU versus Alabama was also being played in prime time. The East and Midwest were getting our game on ABC while the South was getting LSU/Alabama. ESPN would carry the game that ABC didn't carry in each region. The West was getting PAC-10 games while we played.

Coach Burton allowed us to sleep late, if we desired. The hotel had breakfast available from 8:00 to 9:00 am. Attendance was optional. All team members were expected to be up and ready to leave for the stadium prior to our noon lunch at the hotel.

I flipped on the Weather Channel while Trevor was showering that morning. The nice weather we had yesterday when we arrived was gone. It dropped down to 26 degrees overnight. The weather lady said the temperature was expected to hit a mid-afternoon high of 57 degrees and drop to around 45 degrees for game time. We would have light winds from the south during the day. A storm front was coming in late that evening which might turn the second half of our game wet.

Our team seemed rested and relaxed during brunch. We gathered our gear together and took the buses over to the Horseshoe after brunch. We took the opportunity to walk over the field and check conditions. The stadium's field was in good condition. We headed inside to dress and prepare for our contest.

I spent my extra time studying our game plan. I checked out my teammates to make sure they weren't nervous. Brian was working though the game plan, same as me. Christian read his Bible and said prayers to himself. Chip was the epitome of confidence. He hadn't played in the Horseshoe but he stood on the sidelines two years ago and saw the passion and frenzy of these fans.

The stands were about half full and filling rapidly when our team took the field to warm up. We went through our drills to get ready. I talked with Eldon Burkholder a couple minutes as we finished. That led to teasing, of course.

“You guys can let us have the Rose Bowl, right Kyle?” Eldon joshed.

“Is that all you want?” I countered. “Of course, be our guests. Let us win today and you can have the Rose Bowl. We’re planning on a trip to Arizona for the holidays.

Coach Burton gave us a short speech before game time. He ticked off the list of goals we had accomplished so far this season and reviewed the short list of goals remaining. Our “On to Phoenix” vision would be closer to fruition if we left Columbus with a win. We responded enthusiastically when Damian came forward and led us in our chant before we headed to the tunnel to take the field.

We watched as the Buckeyes took their field to the thunderous cheers of 105,000 fans. It was much quieter when we took the field and charged to the visitor’s side of the field. Trevor, Damian and I trotted to the center of the field to meet Ohio State’s captains. I called heads when the referee flipped the coin. It was. We choose to receive the ball.

The Buckeyes covered the kickoff well, but Tanner Riggs managed to squeeze the ball out to our 33 yard line anyway. We hit Ohio State with a play action pass on first down. Chip made a nice fake to Damian. I went deep, covered by Eldon Burkholder and their free safety. They doubled Brian too. The Buckeyes put good pressure on Chip. He scrambled away and hit Christian for a six yard gain.

Damian blasted into the middle of the line on the next play. Greg and our offensive line pushed Ohio State’s line hard, but they held. Damian hit the hole between Greg and Mahmoud, his momentum pushing the pile of bodies forward a couple yards.

On third and two yards to go, Coach Burton called for another play action. This froze the linebackers as we anticipated. Brian ran a slant across the middle. Chip hit him for five yards. The nickel back and a linebacker blasted into Brian the second he had the ball. Brian held on but crumpled to the ground awkwardly. His left leg caught under his body as he fell.

Chip, Damian, Christian, Bob and I hurried over to our friend as he lay on the ground. Brian rolled over and tried to stand. Christian and I were in time to steady him as he tried putting weight on his left ankle. We supported him until the training staff got out. They helped Brian hobble to the sideline. Tanner Riggs came in to replace Brian.

We had first down at our 48 yard line. We tested Ohio State deep on the next play. Christian and I drew double coverage now that Brian was on the sideline. Pressure on Chip forced him to check down to Bob, coming across the middle. The strong safety caught Bob immediately after the catch but couldn’t take down our big tight end. The middle linebacker flew in and delivered a hellacious hit to drop Bob. Bob was slow to get up but he was OK.

On second down and five yards to go, Damian took the handoff and drove straight into the gut of the Buckeye defense. Their linebackers filled the hole and stopped him for no gain. I ran a hitch in front of Eldon and caught an eight yard pass to give us a new set of downs.

Christian and I both went deep on the next play, drawing four defenders with us. Tanner ran a slant over the middle. Chip had to dodge a defensive end, step up and deliver the ball. The hurried throw was slightly behind Tanner, who nonetheless caught it eight yards downfield. The nickel back nailed Tanner after he secured the ball and took a step, driving Tanner to the ground. The middle linebacker tackled Tanner a split second later, unfortunately nailing my falling teammate helmet to helmet. Both guys dropped like sacks of potatoes after the hit.

The ball bounded free of Tanner and rolled towards the line of scrimmage. Linemen scrambled madly to try to cover the ball. I couldn't see what was happening in the scrum when I turned back. Ohio State's strong safety was standing over the linebacker, peering down at him. Tanner was flat on the ground beside them.

The linebacker lay there for a second before grasping his head and wiggling. Tanner didn't move a muscle. The referees blew the whistle frantically, trying to get control of the ball and find out who had possession.

Damian and Bob weren't close to the ball when it fell. They headed over to Tanner since they couldn't do anything with the fumble. My friends waved frantically for Doc and the trainers. By the time I got there, Tanner was blinking his eyes and groaning.

A big cheer went up from the crowd as Doc Watson and Scott Burgess arrived.

I growled, "What the hell?" incensed that the fans would cheer an opponent's injury.

Damian pointed to the referees, who were signaling that Ohio State had recovered the fumble. My heart sank as I stared. We had lost the ball and lost our second slot receiver in the first six plays of the game. We tried to get closer to see how Tanner was but Doc and Mr. Burgess shooed us away.

The Ohio State linebacker was sitting up and answering questions from his trainers while our people worked on Tanner. The linebacker was a little wobbly as he was helped back to his sideline. Tanner's exam was much longer. Doc and Mr. Burgess finally helped Tanner to his feet and steadied him as he walked back to the sidelines slowly. The Buckeyes fans cheered and applauded Tanner as he left the field. It was a nice gesture by a hostile crowd.

The Buckeyes run a conservative but very balanced offense. They run slightly more than pass, but not so radically that a defense can concentrate on run only. Coach Caffrey huddled with the offensive first team while Ohio State worked the ball.

I would go to the middle and play slot receiver. Jared Cantrell would take my split end spot. Bruce MacCauley would be first in to spell Christian, Jared or me. John Crosby would provide depth. Since Ian Davis and Rodney Greer weren't in the traveling squad, we should expect to work with a small staff of wide receivers.

The Buckeyes used eight plays to push down the 47 yards to our end zone, keeping our defense off balance with a mix of straight runs, QB keepers, options plays and few passes. Their sure footed kicker drilled the PAT to give his team a 7-0 lead.

The Buckeye kicker booted the kickoff poorly. Jared Cantrell fielded the ball at our eight yard line and started forward. One of OSU's gunners knifed through the blockers and dropped Jared at our 24 yard line. The offense headed to the field, disappointed that our special teams didn't take advantage of the poor kick.

Coach Burton put us in the wildcat formation to start the drive. I carried the ball to the left. Bruce MacCauley lined up on the weak side slot. He made his block on the linebacker, letting me run for the corner. Eldon Burkholder had stayed on the weak side, covering Jared as he ran downfield. Eldon stayed with Jared so I turned the corner and sprinted down the field. I picked up a dozen yards before Eldon and the weak side linebacker pushed me out of bounds.

Jared, Christian and I went deep in the next play. Damian helped block a blitzing linebacker. Eldon covered me shallow while the free safety gave him deep help. Christian was doubled too. Chip dodged the blitzer and fired the ball to Jared, who was single covered. The cornerback knocked the ball away.

Damian forced his way off tackle for four yards on the next play. We hit OSU with a run fake while Christian and I ran deep. Bob ran a curl across the middle, beating the strong safety. Chip spotted him and fired the ball in. Bob nestled it into his gut a moment before the middle linebacker blasted into him. Bob held onto the ball but went down hard for a seven yard gain.

The Buckeyes certainly were hitting. Damian plowed into the line on our next play, pushing forward five yards. I gave Eldon Burkholder a good lick as I blocked him away from the run. On the next play Bob pulled the second guy on me with him when he ran a curl over middle. Christian went deep, leaving me one on one with Eldon as I ran a shallow out route. I picked up eight yards. We had first down on OSU's 40 yard line.

We gave each other smiles as we huddled. Now we had our offense going. Coach Burton called a play action pass. Damian would help block in the middle when he finished his fake. Bob stayed in too so Chip had strong protection. Christian and I streaked deep down the right side of the field, drawing most of the attention of the Buckeye secondary. Chip was under pressure and had to side step to his right. We were covered. He checked down and found Jared breaking free of his cornerback.

Chip rifled the ball into the narrow gap. OSU's right defensive tackle leaped and batted at the ball up as it went by his head. A linebacker dived for the ball, snagged it and headed down field to get more yards. Bob and Damian ran him down from the back. It was OSU's ball on our 42 yard line.

We hustled off the field to make room for our defense. Chip was livid.

"God damn it, Greene!" Chip snarled as he stepped face to chest to the towering 6'-8", 280 pound left guard. "Tie your man up when you block him. You CAN'T let him get his hands up and knock the ball down."

"Sorry, Chip," Mahmoud replied meekly. "I'll do better next series."

"Let's not start finger pointing," I added. "We have been moving the ball when we don't make mistakes. Keep to the game plan and play smart football."

"Yeah... yeah, you're right, Coach," Chip admitted.

"I can do better at keeping him away," Mahmoud added. "I'll make it happen next time, boss."

Meanwhile Ohio State did what they do best, play conservative, mistake free football. They ran the ball on us, mixing in enough passes to keep our secondary from jumping the run. Eight plays later their big fullback carried the ball across the goal line. They made the PAT. Score: Ohio State-14, Penn State-0

Jared Cantrell dropped back a couple yards to our 3 to take the kickoff. Our blocking looked good as he started forward. Things broke down on our left side as the gunner broke loose from John Crosby's block and sliced in after Jared. Jared was hit at our 18 but managed to squeeze out to our 24 yard line.

Damian and I preached that we needed to relax and follow our game plan. We had no reason to panic. Play smart football, cut out the mistakes and we would be fine. The Buckeyes weren't beating us, we were beating ourselves.

Coach Burton did his usual good job mixing runs and passes to keep the Buckeye defense guessing. We moved the ball down the field crisply. Damian and Charlie averaged between five and six yards a carry. Ohio State's cornerbacks played outside coverage, protecting the sidelines and forcing all our throws towards the middle of the field.

The first tackler to meet you in the middle wrapped you up and stopped you. The next guy, and the next... and the next hammered you with hard tackles.

Ohio State's plan was becoming clearer. They planned to make the middle of the field an inhospitable place that our receivers would shy away from thanks to the hard hits they were dealing out. I certainly would NOT be intimidated.

We needed six plays to get across midfield into OSU's territory. Coach Burton tried another wildcat play. I ran right, watching Christian and the cornerback covering him. The cornerback stayed on my friend, so I ran closer to the line of scrimmage. He finally abandoned Christian and turned towards me as my front foot crossed the line of scrimmage. I lobbed the ball over his head to Christian. My buddy turned and sprinted downfield. The safety providing deep help on Christian's side tackled him at OSU's 34 yard line.

An excellent play by the Buckeyes' big left end combined by a nice fill by their middle linebacker stuffed Damian's off tackle run on the next play. On second and eleven, OSU's pass rush flushed Chip out of the pocket. He overthrew me. We tried a tailback screen on third down. It didn't fool Ohio State. Damian was dropped after gaining two yards.

Jared Gray came in to try a 49 yard field goal. I saw the streamers at the top of the goal posts flutter just as Jared made his kick. An unexpected gust swirled through the more open southern end of the stadium and pushed ball left, bouncing it against the upright, where it bounced out. The referees swept their arms back and forth, signaling "No Good."

A collective groan went through the offensive team standing on the sidelines. Our tough, ten play, 44 yard drive was wasted. Coach Caffrey huddled with the offense and counseled patience.

"That was a good drive, guys," Coach preached. "You didn't make any mistakes. We'll tweak a few things on the play calling and get them next drive."

He reviewed photos of the defensive formations from the previous drives as we prepared for our next turn on the field. Coach Caffrey was right. We were down two scores but we needed to keep our cool. We COULD move the ball on Ohio State.

Unfortunately, they were able to move the ball on our defense too. Ohio State concentrated on running the ball this drive. They mixed in a few play action passes to keep our secondary back. Trevor and Bill never got the chance to harass the quarterback. They had to focus on the run.

By the tenth play of the drive, OSU had moved across midfield and down to our 21 yard line. They sent to receivers deep for the end zone on a play action run fake. Dave, Shawn, Jeff and Denzell had their men blanketed. The QB waited patiently as I counted off the seconds. Between four and five seconds, Trevor broke loose from the double-team and surged toward the QB. The third year sophomore quarterback finally lost his cool. He tossed the ball away a moment before Trevor collided with and leveled him.

The referee's flag flew out instantly as the whistle tweeted the play dead. The ref made the double handed slashing motion and announced "Intentional Grounding by # 10." They spotted the ball back eight yards behind the previous line of scrimmage.

It was much easier to call the defense now that it was second down and eighteen yards to go. Trevor and Bill's rush reached the QB before his receivers were ready. The ball flew incomplete. On third down, our team's pass rush forced him to dump the ball to their tailback in the flat. The tailback gained two yards before Brendan Hayden brought him down.

Coach Tressel wasn't gambler. He sent the field goal team out immediately. Their kicker had no problem connecting on the 46 yard field goal. Score: Ohio State-17, Penn State-0

"MARTIN, TAKE THE KICKOFF!" Coach Burton bellowed as I stood waiting for the offense to take the field.

"I haven't done this in a game since last year," I replied.

"You still know the plays?" Coach Burton demanded. I nodded yes. "You still know how to catch the ball?"

"I do," I agreed.

"Light a fire under this team, Coach," Coach Burton said. "We need a wake-up call!"

"I'll do my best," I called as I hustled to Coach Ferguson's briefing before the return team took the field. I listened as our special team coach called the play before I jogged out to our 5 yard line.

John Crosby lined up opposite me. He was my personal protector and my eyes while I watched the flight of the kickoff until I caught the ball. John's a smart kid and I'm sure he'd do fine but I would much rather have Dave McCall beside me. I was used to Dave and he knew my capabilities after a year of working together.

"If I end up in the end zone," I cautioned, "...give me five yards before you tell me to down the ball."

"Are you sure, Coach?" John asked. "Coach Ferguson allows Tanner two yards max before I am supposed to tell him to down it."

"Coach Burton wants us to light a fire under the team," I explained. "I'm out here because he is willing to gamble. He wants a big return."

“You’re the captain,” John agreed just before Ohio State’s kicker booted the ball down to me. It was a booming kick. I backpedalled into the end zone, expecting to hear John call the return off. He didn’t. I fielded the ball deep in the end zone.

“Left... Left... Left...” John shouted as he went after the gunner that ruined the last kickoff. I sprinted towards the opposite sideline as I headed up field. The sideline was clogged so I followed my blockers towards the middle of the field. Mark Markovich and Will Jones managed to open a crack between their men. I shot through the hole and kicked into high gear.

I dodged one tackler, juked past another and sprinted harder. The kicker tried to tackle me and never came close. I motored into the end zone, escorted by John Crosby and Ryan McGuire. Ryan and John gave me back slaps and high fives to congratulate me as we celebrated our score. We stopped short when a big cheer went up from the Ohio State crowd.

I looked up field and saw why. Marco Cuchiella was pleading with an official who was standing beside a yellow flag.

“Block in the back, Penn State #45,” the referee announced, ignoring Marco’s pleas. “Ten yards from the spot of the foul. Penn State’s ball at their 17 yard line.”

“Tough break, Coach,” and “Good return, Coach,” greeted me as I joined the offensive huddle. 2:57 remained in the first half. Damian preached that we had to keep our poise.

I blocked Eldon hard on the first play as Damian ran off tackle to my side. Damian picked up five yards and didn’t reach me so my block didn’t help – not yet. Eldon DID receive my message that we could and did hit just as hard as his team.

I ran a slant over the middle on the next play. Chip hit me for a seven yard gain. I dodged the linebacker’s hit after Eldon stopped my forward progress. On the next play Christian went deep and I ran an out underneath him. Eldon bit on my inside fake so I had no trouble catching the out for another eight yards. Eldon shoved me out of bounds.

Coach Burton sent Bruce MacCauley in with the next play. At the snap I sprinted from my strong side slot into the backfield and took the handoff from Chip. We heard the Buckeyes shouting “End around!” as I handed the ball to Bruce as he passed me on a reverse. Some of the Buckeyes continued following me as I faked carrying the ball for the weak side corner. Bruce picked up 27 yards before he was dropped in bounds.

We had the ball on OSU’s 36 yard line. We took a timeout with 2:11 remaining in the first half. Chip, Damian and I jogged over confer with Coach Burton and Coach Caffrey as our teammates rested a bit. Coach Burton gave us a good play to run next.

Chip called the play in the huddle and we were lined up before our timeout ran out. I took my normally split end spot on the weak side. Eldon Burkholder followed with me.

Jared lined up in the weak side slot. Christian was on the far side of the field in the flanker spot.

At the snap Christian and I sprinted deep, drawing our corners with us and attracting the safeties to the sidelines to help cover us. Jared ran a slant across the middle to pull the nickel back away. Bob chipped the defensive end before heading out for a pass. Bob ran straight down the middle, belatedly pursued by the middle linebacker. As anticipated, Bob beat him easily. Chip lobbed a deep pass to the middle of the field and Bob ran under it. The two safeties realized what was happening much too late. They caught Bob before he made the end zone and slowed him down. The middle linebacker put Bob down hard on the five yard line.

Christian, Jared and I mobbed Bob, congratulating him for his perfect execution of the play. Chip hustled the linemen down the field and reminded everyone the clock was running. Coach Burton sent in Wes Kennedy and Will Jones in place of Jared and Christian. Our big package couldn't budge Ohio State's line. Damian squirmed ahead for a one yard gain.

We kept the big guys in and tried a play fake next. I headed for the corner of the end zone. I jumped for Chip's lob but couldn't hang on as Eldon yanked the ball away and knocked it to the ground. The big guys left the field as Charlie, Christian, Jared and Bruce returned. We lined up spread out, with two receivers on each side and Charlie in the backfield. Charlie ran a play fake into the line. The receivers flooded the end zone, attracting most of the linebackers and secondary to us. Chip shoveled the ball forward to Charlie but the middle linebacker wasn't fooled. He dropped Charlie on the five yard line.

Coach Burton didn't hesitate in spite of our pleas to stay on the field for fourth down. Jared Gray and kicking team came out for the field goal. Jared made the chip shot cleanly. Score: Ohio State-17, Penn State-3

Jared boomed the kickoff down into the end zone. The return man caught it and kneeled down, accepting possession at their 20 yard line. Ohio State was satisfied with their lead, lined up and took a knee to let the clock run out on the first half.

Coach C and his assistants huddled with the defense in the locker room and discussed adjustments for the second half. Coach Burton, Coach Adams and the offensive assistants met with us. They preached that we should stick to the game plan. We were able to move the ball against Ohio State. We had to cut down on the mistakes then everything would be fine.

We found out about Brian and Tanner over halftime. Brian had a severe ankle sprain and would not play again that day. He might recover in time for next week's game. Brian had changed into street clothes and hung out with us in the locker room as we prepared for the second half.

Tanner had a severe concussion. The medical staff had taken him to the hospital for a neuro workup. Tanner was out indefinitely. The news about our teammates didn't sit well with any of us. We had to make Ohio State pay for those hard hits.

Ohio State took Jared Gray's second half kickoff. Our cover team did an excellent job, dropping their returner on their 18 yard line. Coach C's adjustments seemed to help. Josh Bruno went on a run blitz on first down, meeting the tailback in the backfield for a two yard loss. OSU tried running wide to our right, but Tony and Bill smelled out that play and stopped it for a two yard gain.

Trevor, Bill and their line mates turned up the heat on third down and ten. Tony King blitzed, forcing the QB to scramble. He tried to get the pass out to his split end. The pass was wobbly. Shawn Byrd undercut the receiver and snagged the ball. He gained a couple yards before he was tackled.

The offense scrambled out onto the field as the defenders celebrated on their way to the sidelines. We had the ball at Ohio State's 27 yard line. We had our first break of the evening.

Chip handed the ball off to Damian on the first play as Christian, Bruce and I ran down field on deep routes. None of us ran hard, trying to sell our routes as fakes. Damian turned just before he hit the line and pitched the ball back to Chip. I turned on the jets and sprinted for the end zone. Eldon had been lulled by my half speed route and didn't react fast enough. I was one on one with the free safety. Chip rifled the ball down the field to me on my outside shoulder. I caught the ball and sprinted into the end zone, dragging the light weight free safety with me. Touchdown! Jared drilled the PAT to bring the score to a more respectable 17-10.

Ohio State wasn't rattled by our score or the interception on the previous series. They methodically drove down the field on their next possession. We blitzed and stunted, we hammered the ball carriers on tackles and we hit the receivers hard after catches. Nothing stopped the Buckeyes. They pushed across midfield, down into our red zone, inexorably moving closer to the goal line.

Their drive finally stalled out at our 6 yard line. Our line stuffed two runs up the middle and then sniffed out the QB rollout and sacked him. Ohio State settled for a 28 yard field goal. Score: Ohio State-20, Penn State-10

I settled in at our 5 yard line and waited for the Buckeye's kickoff. Ohio State's kicker boomed the ball down into the end zone. I back pedaled to stay under the ball, wondering when John would call for me to kneel down. I settled down somewhere in the end zone and caught the ball cleanly.

John finally shouted, "Go! Go! Go! RIGHT!"

I headed the direction John indicated. I spotted Chris Richardson taking out the gunner that had been giving us so much trouble. My blockers were forming a wall to cut off the Buckeyes from the right sideline. I sprinted ahead. One would-be tackler managed to break through but I juked and dodged past him. The kicker got set to try to tackle me. I strong armed him aside and kept running. I knew someone was pursuing so I ran as hard as I could go. The guy dived in desperation and grabbed my heel. I went flying to the ground, skidding across the goal line.

The referee spotted the ball at the half yard line. Our offense muscled Ohio State's line back as Chip dove into the end zone.

"Fantastic return, Coach," Coach Burton gushed as we headed for the sideline. "Way to go O-line! Dominate them. "Good job, Brinton. Way to stick it in there!"

We congratulated each other as the kicking team assembled. Our confidence in the first half wasn't misplaced. We could win this game. We COULD take the Buckeyes. Every one of us knew it. Jared Gray booted the ball through the uprights for the PAT. Score: Ohio State-20, Penn State-17

We were confident and so were the Buckeyes. Their on-field performance reinforced their confidence. They marched the ball straight down the field on our defense again. Coach C called stunts and blitzes. Nothing stopped the Buckeyes' march. We made them pay for every yard they gained but they pushed on. Fourteen plays later their big fullback dove into the end zone. The Buckeye kicker banged the ball through the uprights for the PAT to increase their lead to 27-17.

Coach C and Coach Atkins worked on ways to counter Ohio State's half time adjustments. We needed the defense to come up with one or two stops if we were going to catch the Buckeyes. We were behind in a shoot-out. The offense could score touchdowns on every possession and we would lose if we didn't stop the Buckeyes.

Coach Ferguson gave me instructions for another special play on the kick return. The planning was unnecessary. I waited for the kickoff at our 5 yard line. Ohio State's kicker boomed the ball down field. I backpedalled and backpedalled until I was sure I was backing out of the end zone.

"Down it, Coach!" John finally shouted as I fielded the kick. "DOWN!" I kneeled down and looked. I was a yard in front of the back of the end zone. The ref signaled touchback. We would start work at our 20 yard line.

I stood at the 10 yard line as our offense gathered for the huddle. We started off basic. Damian ran off tackle to my side. I plowed into Eldon to keep him out of the play. Damian picked up six yards. We ran the play again and picked up five more yards. We went off tackle to the weak side for another seven yards. Our offensive line was starting to get a good push on the Buckeye defensive line.

Coach Burton sent Bruce MacCauley in with the next play. We had high expectations of this play even though we ran it in practice with Brian instead of Bruce. The team lined up in our normal three receiver set with me on the strong side between Bob and Christian. Bruce lined up on the opposite side as our split end.

Damian blocked Eldon as I ran into the backfield and took the handoff from Chip. The OSU players on our side of the field were screaming “End Around!” as they tried to adjust. As I sprinted for the far sideline I heard the players on that side screaming “REVERSE!” Bruce had circled into the backfield going the opposite way from me. I shoved the ball into his gut and he wrapped both hands around it to secure and hide it. I pulled my hands free and wrapped up the “ball” I was pretending to carry.

Bruce and I sprinted for opposite sidelines carrying our “balls.” I drew four or five Buckeyes after my fake as Bruce made the corner and turned down the field. Christian, Damian and Bob blocked for Bruce, clearing his way downfield. The free safety finally managed to break past the convoy of blockers and shoved Bruce out of bounds at OSU’s 23 yard line.

We tried flooding the end zone with receivers on the next play but Chip didn’t have enough time for the routes to develop. He threw the ball away. We went more conservative after that. I caught an eleven yard hitch in front of Eldon on the next play.

We had first down at OSU’s 12 yard line. We tried a fade route to the corner of the end zone but too many d-backs flocked to me for me to catch the ball. I went for the corner on the next play while the rest of our receivers spread out across the end zone, looking for an opening for Chip. He didn’t find one. He dumped the ball off to Damian at the 8 yard line.

Damian cradled the ball to his big body, locked it under his right arm and blasted forward. My buddy knocked over the middle linebacker as he rumbled forward. A strong safety and a cornerback tried to slow him down but he drove on. One of the defensive tackles brought my roomie down from behind as he reached the goal line. 105,000 fans and 22 men on the field held their breath while they waited for the signal.

Two referees ran in from opposite side of the field and raised their arms in the touchdown signal. The ten of us on the field flocked to Damian, congratulating him for the tough reception. Jared and the kicking team easily booted the PAT. The clock read 11:07, Fourth Quarter. Score: Ohio State-27, Penn State-24

“Get us a stop,” my offensive teammates and I exhorted our defense. “Get us a stop and we can win this thing!”

Trevor assured us, “We’ll hold’em. You guys get ready to get another score.”

Coach Valdez huddled with the offensive line. Coach Caffrey huddled with the rest of the offense. We reviewed photos of our last two drives to prepare ourselves for the next one.

Coach C made a significant change in the way our defensive secondary played. He ordered our d-backs to get on the line and press Ohio State's receivers. Normally our defensive philosophy called for us to be careful with coverage and keep the ball in front of us. Let our opponents make mistakes as we forced them into long drives down the field. I guess Coach C realized that Ohio State was capable of playing nearly mistake free football.

Press coverage also had the advantage of keeping our secondary closer to the line of scrimmage and able to assist with run defense more quickly. It helped, to an extent. Ohio State still managed to push down the field, albeit more slowly.

The Buckeyes tried a play action pass on second down and six yards to go on the sixth play of their drive. Our pressure discomfited their receivers' timing routes. The QB overthrew the man Denzell was covering. Dave McCall came within fractions of an inch of intercepting the ball.

Ohio State fooled Coach C on the next play when they did a play action pass again. Our linebackers were filling the runner's hole and were caught unprepared for the tight end's curl route. He picked up nine yards and put them on our 48 yard line.

Ohio State bashed ahead a couple more times on the ground, pushing across our 40. Six minutes and change remained in the game. The red clad Ohio State fans cheered every carry. Our players cheered our defense from the sidelines, admonishing our defense to make the stop.

The next play was another pass. Our defensive backs disrupted the receivers as they left the line of scrimmage. Trevor, Bill, Jerry and Mike pressed in to pressure the QB. Unfortunately the play was a middle screen to the tailback. He picked up fifteen yards before our defense could catch him.

Coach C gambled on the next play. He sent all our linebackers on run blitzes at the same time. If we guessed wrong, our secondary would be hung out to dry. No one on the sideline minded the gamble. Our trip to Phoenix depended on changing the momentum of the game and damn soon! The clock rolled down below five minutes as the ball was snapped.

The Buckeye offensive line was engulfed by an avalanche of Lion defenders. They held momentarily as the QB handed the ball to his tailback. The tailback was faced with seven rushing defenders and zero holes to run through. He tried to backpedal and run around the end of line. He didn't make it as Josh Bruno popped free and chased him down from behind. The play lost two yards.

The Buckeyes tried a tight end screen on second and twelve. Brendan Hayden wasn't fooled. He dropped the tight end for a two yard loss.

Ohio State faced third down and fourteen yards to go. Our defense was in its element now. Trevor, Bill, Mike and Jerry teed off at the snap. Shawn, Denzell and Jeff chucked the receivers and then backpedalled to keep them covered. The QB dropped back five steps and watched for someone to come open. No one did. He had to bail out after about five seconds. Bill chased him straight into Trevor, who dropped the QB for a five yard sack.

Ohio State was faced with fourth down and nineteen yards to go at our 32 yard line. 4:58 remained on the clock. Would they attempt a 49 yard field goal or would they try to go for first down? Coach Tressel called a time out to consider his options. It didn't take him long to decide his kicker's chances were better of making the field goal than his team's chances of making a first down.

The big stadium fell nearly silent as the Buckeyes lined up for field goal attempt. The snap was clean. The holder got the ball down on time. The kicker stepped forward and booted the ball with every ounce of leg strength. The ball arced down the field, drifting slightly to the left as it flew. Every fan exhaled when the ball sailed a couple feet above the cross bar and just inside the left upright. The referees signaled the field goal was good. Score: Ohio State-30, Penn State-24

No one our sideline was dismayed. Our defense came through and stopped the Buckeyes from going two scores up again. We had 4:52 left in the game. We could do this!

“Got get’em, offense,” Trevor called as we headed for the field. “Phoenix is in your hands now.”

“Get us a good spot, Coach,” more team members called as the kick return team took the field.

I lined up on the 5 yard line with John Crosby to my right. Ohio State’s kicker did another superb kick, forcing me to retreat into the end zone. I settled under the ball and waited as John called, “This is a return, Coach.”

“GO... GO... GO!” John screamed as I caught the ball. I tucked it against my side and sprinted forward, looking for a gap to exploit. Ohio State did an excellent job filling all the lanes. I picked the gap between Mark Markovich and Tom Kowalchuk. I had seen a lot of good returns go between them this season.

They split open a small crack. I hit it at top speed, flashing past the initial tacklers in a split second. I made about eight yards more before a crowd of Buckeyes converged on me and brought me down. The ref spotted the ball at our 32 yard line.

Our team huddled for to prepare for our first play.

“We worked for ten months for the chance to play for the national championship this season,” I intoned. “Hit them hard! Give everything you have in the next five minutes and we spend our holiday in Phoenix.”

“You heard, Coach,” Chip added before calling the play. We broke the huddle with an “On to Phoenix” chant.

We started many drives that afternoon by handing off to Damian. This time we gave Ohio State a taste of their own medicine. Damian’s run fake pulled the linebackers up to the line. Bob drifted behind them and caught a short pass. He carried it forward for another eight yards before the secondary tackled him.

Damian blasted into Ohio State’s middle on the next play, pushing the pile seven yards ahead and spotting us on their 47 yard line. That was a good result. We had over four and a half minutes left and all our timeouts. We were not in a hurry to score.

I was the primary target on the next play but it wasn’t supposed to go real deep. I ran ten yards deep at the snap and gave Eldon a serious fake like I was going out to the sideline. He bit hard as I reversed and slipped inside towards the middle of the field. Chip drilled the ball to me as I made my break. Eldon’s momentum was carrying him away from me and he couldn’t even try to tackle me.

The free safety had started up field to help when I made the break. His momentum was carrying him the wrong way too. I sprinted past his weak arm tackle attempt and headed down the field. The other safety managed to get a good angle on me. He caught me down at Ohio State’s 16 yard line.

4:03 remained on the clock as the referee’s spotted the ball. Coach Burton sent Damian straight up into the gut of the Buckeye defense on the next play. My roomie picked up seven yards. The clock continued running. Chip milked every second off it he could. We did not need to give Ohio State time to recover if we scored.

Charlie Taylor came in to relieve Damian for a play. Charlie ran wide to the right for four more yards, moving us down to OSU’s five yard line. Unfortunately, or maybe fortunately, we found a yellow flag in the backfield. The ten yard penalty for holding was on us. We now had second and fifteen from OSU’s 19 yard line.

Damian returned to the field. My buddy did his run fake again, pulling defenders into the line. Chip hit Christian for thirteen yards. Our o-line plunged ahead on third down and one, making room for Damian. He bulled ahead for two yards to give us a first down inside OSU’s 5 yard line. OSU called its first time out.

Our offensive line and Damian came through for us. Greg and our o-line shoved Ohio State’s smaller defensive line backwards. Damian picked up a yard on the first play and another yard and a half on the second. Ohio State called time out after each carry, trying

to preserve time on the clock for their final possession. Our fired up line shoved the Buckeyes back into the end zone on third down from their 1 yard line. Damian shoved the pile back further as he pounded across the goal line. We cheered and celebrated before the quiet red-clad crowd. Jared drilled the PAT to give us our first lead of the day. Score: Penn State-31, Ohio State-30

2:19 remained on the clock when Jared booted the ball down to Ohio State. Our strong legged kicker booted the ball through the end zone, forcing them to accept a touchback.

Coach C sent Trevor, Jerry and Bill out as a three man line. Shawn, Denzell, GJ, Dave, Jeff, Marco, Matt Frye and Chris Richardson flooded the field with pass defenders. Coach C doubled the sideline routes and left the middle routes with single coverage. Dave and Matt played deep short-stop, making sure no one got past them for an easy score.

Ohio State gained eight yards over the middle on the first play. The clock continued running. What the Buckeyes didn't count on from our prevent defense was blitzing defensive backs. Coach C sent Jeff and Marco after the QB on the next play. Marco took him down and stripped the ball away. The ref decided the QB's arm was going forward so we didn't get the sack or fumble.

Ohio State was faced with third down and two yards to go at their 28 yard line. We had all the deep receivers covered so the QB tried to check down to his tailback. GJ DeLuca batted the ball away. Ohio State was forced to run the ball ahead on fourth and two yards to go. They picked up five. The clock also continued running.

Denzell went in on a delay blitz on the next play. He hit the QB from behind, trying to strip the ball. The QB held on but lost seven yards on the play. The clock read 1:32 when the ref spotted the ball at OSU's 26 yard line. It was second and 17 to go.

Coach C sent Marco, Chris and GJ on the blitz this play. Marco flushed the QB forward where Trevor pounced and dropped him for a four yard loss. Coach C sent the same three blitzers on third down. All the QB could do was heave the ball towards the sidelines and pray he didn't get flagged for intentional grounding.

Ohio State faced fourth down 21 yards to go at their 22 yard line. 0:59 remained on the clock. Coach C sent eight men after the QB. Ohio State had plenty of open receivers, but their QB couldn't find them in the second and a half he had before he was inundated with Nittany Lions. He fell down protecting the ball as he was hit from three sides.

Our offense took the field with fifty-two seconds remaining in the game. We lined up in the victory formation. Chip took the snap, waited about ten seconds and then kneeled down. One more snap and the game was ours! We cheered and celebrated as the quiet Buckeye fans filed out of their stadium.

“On to Phoenix!” we shouted as we hugged, high fived and slapped each others’ backs. The younger guys held one finger aloft, signaling we were number one. The polls certainly wouldn’t dispute us now.

I went around the center of the field, shaking hands with the Ohio State players. They congratulated me on our victory. I wished them luck on their final two games this season.

“Damn, Kyle,” Eldon commented when I found him. “I thought we were going to pull this one out. You guys took it in the end.”

“Pay-back’s a bear, isn’t it?” I replied. “Now you know how we felt two years ago. Enjoy your trip out to sunny southern California. I loved both of my Rose Bowls.”

“If we beat Michigan,” Eldon said. “You are right, I enjoyed my trip there last year.” We shook hands. “Damn, it’s hard to see this rivalry end. You’ve been the toughest receiver to cover I’ve played against in the past four years.”

“You’re one of the top three DBs I’ve played,” I replied.

“Who are the others?” Eldon responded.

“Ross in Michigan,” I answered.

“And?”

I gave Eldon a big smile. “Shawn Byrd on my own team,” I added. “...and I have to go up against him every day.”

“That explains a lot,” Eldon said. “I might play at his level if I had to cover you in practice every day too.”

“Good luck, man,” I said as we shook hands one last time.

“You too, Kyle,” Eldon agreed.

It didn’t take the press long to find me. I did a few interviews on the field before escaping to the locker room. Trevor, Damian and I had to go to the post game press conference, which didn’t start until after midnight. We answered a few questions. Coach Burton fielded most of them.

An athletic department van took the four of us back to the hotel around one am. Trevor and I went straight to bed. I should have been exhausted by the game but I wasn’t. I laid in bed thinking through everything. My personal stats were good. I had three kick returns for 173 yards. It should have been 105 yards more with a touchdown if it weren’t for that penalty. I caught nine balls for 112 yards and a touchdown. I had one run for 12

yards. It wasn't my best game but it was pretty good. It probably was in my top ten of the forty-eight games I had played in college.

Trevor and I were up early on Sunday morning. We had breakfast at 7:30 am and then we hurried to the buses to catch our plane home. I grabbed a Columbus Dispatch on the way out of the hotel. It would give me news to read on the plane ride home.

The headlines on the front page screamed, "Epic 4th Q Collapse by OSU." I certainly didn't agree with that assessment. Two very good teams met and we won. We had to fight hard for every point we made. I moved on to the sport section.

The first couple pages covered our contest against Ohio State in great detail. I found big things had happened yesterday while we prepared for and played Ohio State. The biggest was with Ed's Gators. Kentucky unexpectedly upset the Gators 41-35. I warned Ed last week when we talked to be careful of the Wildcats.

Even more shocking was that #3 Alabama lost to #10 LSU in Tuscaloosa. #4 Texas beat Texas Tech in a wild shoot out 52-45. Of course #5 Ohio State lost. #6 Nebraska beat Iowa State easily, 52-17. The other big top ten game was #7 Oklahoma. They beat Jeremy and the #8 Fighting Irish 34-24. The paper reported Jeremy had ten tackles in the losing effort. #9 USC went up to Oregon State and beat them handily.

The Columbus paper did not have information on my brother's Delaware-Towson game. I would have to wait until I got home to find out how that contest went.

The results from yesterday certainly would rearrange the BCS standings. With #1 and #3 gone, we were virtually certain to be the top rated team in the country. Who would be #2 in the polls? Texas had a hard time with Texas Tech. Nebraska cruised and looked like a top team yesterday as they throttled Iowa State. We would find out that evening when the BCS standings were released.

Thankfully the flight home was short. That was one of the nice things about playing Ohio State. The travel wasn't brutal. The blue buses picked us up at the airport and hauled us back to campus.

Everyone was shocked when we drove past the Holuba Hall on University Drive. We could see crowds of people lining the road beside our practice field. The campus police had barricaded Hasting Road. They opened the barricades to let our buses in. The buses went about two hundred yards and turned into our driveway.

Campus police manned barricades across the street past our driveway to keep the crowds away. Fans waved signs proclaiming "We are... Penn State" and "#1 Penn State." It was the biggest crowd I had ever seen greet the team when we returned home. The guys who

expected to meet their girlfriends when we got home got on their cell phones to find out where their girlfriends were at in the huge crowd.

“I hope you’re ready to greet your adoring fans, guys,” Coach Burton announced as the bus came to a stop. A quick conference determined that Coach Burton would step off first, followed by Trevor, Damian and me. The rest of the team would let us be their spokesmen.

The three of us worked our way to the front of the bus to join our coach. “You ready?” Coach Burton asked.

“No!” Damian and I answered in unison.

“Go anyway,” Trevor said from the back of our line. “I’m not spending the afternoon sitting on this bus.”

Coach Burton chuckled and then stepped off the bus to face the crowd. Someone from the athletic department handed Coach a microphone. The crowd let out a deafening cheer. TV lights glared in our eyes as the cameras recorded our return.

“Thank you,” Coach announced. “Thank you so much. This is amazing.” Trevor, Damian and I waved to the crowd as Coach spoke.

“This is a fantastic way to welcome home your team,” Coach announced. “Captains, do you have anything you would like to say?”

Damian and Trevor turned to me expectantly. “OK,” I agreed. Coach Burton handed me the microphone. “I’ve waited four years to day to say this... WE ARE...”

“PENN STATE!” the huge crowd roared back on cue.

“We are number one,” I shouted. “WE ARE...”

“NUMBER ONE!” the crowd boomed back. I handed the microphone back to Coach Burton. One of the athletic department travel coordinators waved for Damian, Trevor and me to follow him. The rest of the team followed us. We were led inside the Lasch Building to get clear of the crowd. We ended up escaping through Holuba Hall, past the East Locker Room and on to our dorms or apartments.

I went on-line after I got back to the apartment. I found out Andy’s Blue Hens beat Towson 38-24 yesterday. Andy scored two of the touchdowns. He caught six passes for 131 yards. My brother was proving his worth to his team and increasing his chances of a professional football career.

It hadn't been a good day for my friends yesterday. In addition to Ed and Jeremy losing, I found out on-line that Pitt beat Hal's Rutgers team. Cincinnati beat Jake's Syracuse Orangemen. Drew McCormick was the only friend who didn't lose. His WV Mountaineers were off yesterday.

I sent off e-mails to friends commiserating with their losses. I talked with Penny later that afternoon. My lover was concerned. The newspapers told how Brian and Tanner were both knocked out of the game by hard hits. She watched the game last night with friends and saw how hard the Buckeyes were hitting. I assured Penny that I was fine. I was heading to the whirlpool for a good long soak after we finished our call.

Coach Burton assembled our team after dinner for a review of the Ohio State game. He had mostly good things to say about our offensive performance. Mitch Jackson got an incomplete for the game. He stood on the sidelines for three and half hours and watched the game. We never punted the ball during the course of the game.

The defense had more issues to work on. Coach Burton and Coach C were as hard on them as I expected. Our defense rarely got Ohio State off the field. Our coaches noted that we held OSU to 30 points. Their scoring average was 42 points a game.

Brian Henson still had a noticeable limp from his sprained ankle. Mr. Burgess and Doc Watson predicted he would be ready to practice by midweek and might play against Wisconsin. Tanner wasn't in as good a condition as that. Doc Watson would not allow him to attend meetings or practice. He was staying at the Mount Nittany Medical Center that evening for further observation. He would skip classes until his concussion symptoms improved. There was zero chance he would play against Wisconsin. He was questionable for our final game against Michigan State the following week.

The video crew set up a TV feed for our projection system. Nearly the entire team stayed after the team meeting to see ESPN's BCS standings show. Everyone cheered as they opened the show with our Nittany Lion logo in the background. They didn't keep us waiting. After the introductions were finished, they announced we were ranked #1 in all the polls and in the BCS standings. The auditorium filled with hollering and cheering as we celebrated.

The rest of the rankings were interesting. Texas edged out Nebraska for the number two spot. Oklahoma, Florida, Alabama, USC, Ohio State and LSU rounded out the top ten. Assuming we took care of our business, we would face either Texas or Nebraska. The two teams would probably face off in the Big 12's championship game. The winner would face us in Phoenix on January 8th.

Trevor, Damian and I invited our leadership group back to our apartment after the ESPN show was done. We reminded everyone over beers that we had to make sure everyone on the team kept their focus for the final two weeks. We avoided letdowns after we beat Nebraska and Michigan. We had to avoid that trap this week against Wisconsin. They were a good football team that could take us down if we played anything less than our

best. Everyone promised to pass that message on to the players they worked with. We were so close to achieving our vision that we couldn't afford any let up.

The team took our words to heart. They concentrated on our coaches' instructions as we prepared for Wisconsin and worked hard. The first three days of practice were as good as any during the fall. I was confident that we wouldn't fall into the trap and overlook the Badgers on Saturday.

Tanner Riggs' headaches continued through Wednesday. Getting free of them was the first test he needed to pass before he could be cleared for team meetings, practices or to play. He definitely would not play on Saturday in Wisconsin.

Brian Henson wore a boot on his sprained ankle and used crutches on Monday and Tuesday. The trainers let him use an ankle brace on Wednesday. He did not practice with the team during the week, but attended all the meetings. The trainers let him try out his ankle at Thursday's practice. Everyone could see he wasn't at 100%. Brian would stay on campus when we flew out to Wisconsin.

I practiced as the starting slot receiver during the week. Jared Cantrell and Bruce MacCauley split the time at split end 50-50. Coach Caffrey wanted to dress a seventh receiver, so Ian Davis got his first opportunity to travel and dress for an away game.

Bruce would handle punt returns. Jared would handle kick returns. I backed up Jared. Christian backed up Bruce.

I had midterms in English and Geography during the week. Classes, homework, studying and prep for Wisconsin filled my week completely. Right now it was good Penny was down in Philadelphia. I wouldn't have any time for her if she had been on campus.

I ran into Derek Whitaker outside the Chambers Building on Wednesday after History 454. I guess it shouldn't be a surprise. Our classes apparently ended at the same time in nearby buildings.

"Hey Kyle, do you want to catch some lunch together?" Derek called out when he spotted me.

"What the hell, why not?" I responded. "Where do you want to go?"

"How about the 'skeller?" Derek suggested.

"The Rathskeller?" I replied. "The bar under Spats? I have practice this afternoon. I can't go drinking. Coach would castrate me."

“They have excellent food,” Derek answered. “You can get a soda or iced tea. You don’t have to have a beer. Personally, I don’t have practice or any more classes today. I would enjoy a beer.”

“OK, we’ll give it a shot,” I agreed.

“You’ve really never been to the ‘skeller?” Derek asked as we headed across campus for College Avenue.

“I turned twenty-one four months ago and have been a little busy since then,” I answered. “A downtown bar isn’t a place I would go on a Saturday night after game.”

“You got a point there, Kyle,” Derek agreed. We HAVE to do the Rathskeller. You can’t be a student at Penn State and never have been there.”

We went around the Pattee Library and down the mall to College Avenue. Our destination was half a block down on College Avenue. It felt strange to go down the steps to the basement instead of climbing up to Spats.

“Are you sure you don’t want to try the food upstairs at Spats?” I asked as we descended the steps. “It’s my favorite restaurant. They have excellent Cajun’ food. They serve alcohol too. You can have a beer up there.”

“You have to experience the ‘skeller, Kyle,” Derek said, chuckling. “Anyway the food will be the same. The bar and the restaurant are owned by the same people. They share the kitchen.”

“I’m sold,” I agreed. I followed Derek down the steps and into the bar. It was dim inside. Frankly, it looked a little like a dive. The two of us took a table. The waitress appeared immediately. Derek ordered a beer. I asked for a Coke.

As soon as I looked over the menu I knew Derek was right. This was a Spats menu. I looked over the lunch offerings and decided on the crab cake sandwich. Derek decided to have the smoked turkey club wrap.

The two of us talked about how our football team was going. Derek had lots of questions about our victory out at Ohio State. I explained the strategy we had used to come back after falling behind early in the game. It was fun talking about it with someone who understood what had been necessary.

My sandwich and Derek’s wrap were excellent. We talked through most of our lunch about football before the topic changed to agents.

“Did you get a chance to talk to your dad about Todd yet, Kyle?” Derek asked during a lull in the conversation. “Make sure your dad puts him on your final list of agents to be interviewed.”

Derek’s nearly constant talk about his former agent set off alarm bells in my head. We had never met without him bringing up Todd Rosenbaum.

I stared hard at Derek and asked, “Why do you keep bringing up the name of your former agent?” Derek looked me straight in the eye as I asked. “Are you getting paid to talk with me about Rosenbaum?”

“Paid? Like a runner?” Derek gasped. His face displayed shock at my insinuation. “Oh, hell no!”

“This is the second time the two of us got together for lunch and talked about sports agents,” I said. I remembered the lunch we had two weeks ago. I fixed Derek in the cold, hard stare I learned from my Mom. “You bought me lunch two weeks ago. If you have any ties to Rosenbaum, you cost me my eligibility to play football. What are your ties with this damn agent?”

“Your eligibility?” Derek stammered. “No... oh God, no. I would NEVER do anything to cost you your eligibility. Never!”

“Why do you bring up this agent every time we talk if you don’t have ties with him?” I demanded.

“You do understand how cut throat the sports agent business is, don’t you?” Derek asked.

“I am beginning to see that,” I answered.

“I’m not sure you do, Kyle,” Derek replied. “I roomed with Glenn Tucker when he was a senior. The agents were bothering Glenn throughout the season. It got worse after we won the BCS championship. They wined and dined him. One of his final choices treated him to weekend in New York City. Another took out to LA for half a week to meet a bunch of stars.”

“How’d he keep up with his classes?” I asked.

“Glenn didn’t,” Derek explained. “When he finally picked C. Daryl Marshall to be his agent, the SOB convinced Glenn to drop his final semester, get an apartment near a pro trainer and spend the rest of his winter training for the Senior Bowl and the Combine.”

“Glenn didn’t graduate?” I asked.

“No, not with his class,” Derek explained. “He did go back a couple years later and finish at the University of Tennessee during the off season. Marshall convincing Glenn

to leave school wasn't the worst of it. That SOB lined up an expensive apartment for Glenn to live in. He loaned Glenn money to buy a fancy new car. Glenn owed the bastard \$200,000 before he was drafted."

"That's horrible," I responded. "There should be a law against that sort of thing."

"There ought to be, but there isn't," Derek said. "You're hotter now than Glenn was four years ago. Every low life agent around the country is drooling at the prospect of working for you. They can see the dollar signs."

"I'm trying to be very careful about the whole agent thing," I responded. "I don't want it be a distraction."

"It can be if you let it," Derek answered. I explained my plan for keeping the agents at bay and how I wouldn't even consider Rosenbaum unless he followed the directions on my website and returned the questionnaire. "That's a good plan, Kyle. Still, you will need to be extremely careful with the agent you pick."

"You say I would do well with Todd Rosenbaum," I said. Derek smiled and nodded yes. "Why are you touting Rosenbaum?"

"It hard to find a good agent," Derek replied. "I got lucky when I chose Todd. The first thing he did after I hired him was sit me down and talk about what I wanted to do with my life AFTER football. He helped me manage what little money I made from football carefully so I could afford to do my masters. He has helped me manage my life and get off on the right foot."

"That's why you are pushing him on me?" I asked.

"That's exactly why," Derek agreed. "There are precious few agents who work the way Todd does. I hope you can avoid some of the pitfalls that Glenn experienced when he chose his agent."

"You're not working for, or taking money from Rosenbaum, are you?" I asked pointedly.

"No.... oh, hell no," Derek responded. "That is NOT how Todd works. If you signed with him, you and he would be better off with you playing top level college football to highlight your talents. Having you sign early with an agent and lose your eligibility in college would damage your value to an NFL team."

I stared hard into Derek's eyes, trying to decide if he was a fantastic salesman working for Rosenbaum or was an ex-teammate simply trying to help me through the agent process. Derek looked back into my eyes without blinking. Finally he smiled and rolled up his left sleeve.

“I still bleed blue and white,” Derek said as he displayed the tattoo on his left arm. He had a bright blue Nittany Lion logo displayed on his light brown skin. The number 87 was tattooed below the logo. I laughed.

“That’s so sweet,” I teased. “You had my number tattooed on your arm.”

“Your number?” Derek countered. “You mean my number that I wore for four years and have been letting you borrow for the past three.” We both laughed at the joke. “It is pretty great walking around campus seeing all these students wearing Whitaker replica jerseys.”

“You keep thinking that, Derek,” I agreed. “You keep thinking that.”

“What do we do from here?” Derek asked when we stopped laughing.

“If you’re not working for an agent, what else is there to do?” I asked. “The lunch two weeks ago was just two friends having lunch. What’s the problem?”

“I have been running around campus telling football seniors about how great my agent is,” Derek answered. “I don’t want you, or any of the other guys, to get in trouble or lose your eligibility. Maybe I better come into the Lasch Building and sit down with our compliance people.”

“I guess that would be prudent,” I agreed. “Sorry for doubting you earlier today. The whole agent thing is making me a little crazy.”

“No need to apologize, Kyle,” Derek responded. “Frankly, you aren’t nearly paranoid enough to deal with all the low lifes in the agent business.”

I pulled a ten dollar bill out of my wallet. “You take this,” I said. “No one can say you bought me lunch... and I will buy lunch today. I plan to stay square with the NCAA.”

“OK,” Derek agreed. “Tell Coach Burton I will be visiting. You’ll see him sooner than I will.”

“I’ll do that,” I agreed. I paid the bill for our two lunches. Derek and I walked back to campus together. He headed west for the far end of campus and the White Apartments, where grad students had rooms. I headed for the Lasch Building.

The walk gave me time to think. I had been incredibly lucky that Derek didn’t work for Todd Rosenbaum. I could have lost my eligibility for the final three games of the season, cost our team our wins over Northwestern and Ohio State as well as our shot at the national championship. For the next two months, no one... NO ONE would buy me anything except for my parents.

Wednesday and Thursday's practices went well. Coach Burton kept the workouts light. That was good. Everyone was still recovering from the beating Ohio State put on us the previous Saturday. We could expect more of the same from Wisconsin. They always had a huge offensive line and big running backs that liked nothing more than to beat up on you until you yielded. We would be ready.

Dad let me know Thursday night that he and Mom were coming up the following Friday to spend the weekend for my last game at Beaver Stadium. They wanted time to enjoy Senior Day and what was likely to be their last game at Beaver Stadium for a long, long time.

The waiting list was such that Dad had a better chance of getting season tickets through Noah or Connor when they were eighteen than he did going in the normal pool of alumni and fans who waited decades for season tickets. Dad was well off, but not well off enough to donate the kind of money the Golden Lions Club members donated to go to the top of the preferred alumni list.

The travelling team met outside the Lasch Building at 9:30 am on Friday morning for our flight out to Madison, Wisconsin. About fifteen minutes after our plane leveled off at altitude, Anders Voight came back to the team section and asked me to come forward to see Coach Burton.

"What's up, Coach?" I asked as I sat down across the aisle from Coach Burton.

"I wanted to let you know where we're at with the Whitaker situation," Coach responded.

"OK," I agreed.

"Derek provided our compliance department with a complete financial report for the past three years," Coach explained. "He also signed two affidavits attesting that he has not taken nor is not anticipating payments from Todd Rosenbaum and detailing your lunches together. Everything he showed to us appears proper and above board. If Derek is accepting payments from Mr. Rosenbaum, it is well hidden. I talked at length with Derek. I believe his story."

"Will this be reported to the NCAA?" I asked.

"No, we have found no violation of the rules," Coach answered. "What are we to report? You had lunch with a friend and former teammate. He paid for the lunch. Later you reimbursed him."

"That's a relief," I responded as I stood. "Thanks for checking things out for me."

"We're not done talking, Coach," Coach Burton said. "Sit down."

Coach spent ten minutes lecturing me on my responsibilities to the coaches, the team and the university. He reminded me about the seventeen million dollars the athletic department expected to make from the BCS championship game. We would end up back at the Outback or Gator Bowl if my action had disqualified me and voided the final four games in our schedule. Those bowls paid out around three million dollars. The athletic department would have to substantially modify its sports schedule. Football money funded the rest of the sports at our school.

“Am I making myself perfectly clear, Coach?” Coach Burton said.

“Yes, Coach,” I agreed.

“You need to zealously protect yourself from involvement with agents and their employees,” Coach said. “You are going to be one of the most sought after draftees in football. Agents see you as being worth \$200,000-500,000. They will stop at NOTHING to get an in with you. How are you going to protect yourself?”

“I won’t be having lunch with anyone except family, my girlfriend or my teammates from here on out,” I responded. “I will not accept anything of value from anyone outside my immediate circle of family and friends.”

“That is the right idea,” Coach agreed. “You did not use good judgment. Until the department finishes determining if Derek should be considered a representative of an agent, you and the rest of the team should avoid contact with him. It shouldn’t take more than a week or two for us to complete that investigation.”

“OK, that’s fine,” I agreed. “Should I pass the word on to the rest of the seniors?”

“No,” Coach Burton replied. “I will have a conference with all the juniors and seniors when we get home from this game.”

“Anything else, Coach?” I asked.

“No, that will do, Coach,” Coach Burton answered. I headed back to my seat to get back to my reading for my Art History course. We had lunch on the plane. Our plane touched down in Madison around a quarter after two that afternoon.

We left State College bundled up against the chilly forty degree temps that overcast morning. Imagine our surprise when we landed to find Madison warm, sunny and inviting. Two years ago we arrived in a snow squall. This time the temperature when we exited the airport was seventy degrees. Our coats, hats and gloves got stashed in the overhead bins for the drive to our hotel. How had we gotten so lucky this season? We hadn’t played a single game where the temperature was below fifty degrees all season.

The athletic department put us up in the Doubletree Inn again, same as two years ago. The coaches gave us some free time after we settled in our hotel to relax or explore.

Shawn, Christian, GJ, Trevor and I decided to enjoy the great fall weather. We took a walk from our hotel up to the University of Wisconsin's campus, about a block away.

University Drive marked the south edge of campus near our hotel. The south side of the street was crowded with all manner of small shops and restaurants. The north side was campus. The street reminded me very much of College Avenue in our town. The streets were crowded with UW students. The campus looked nice.

The team had dinner back at our hotel. The coaches had us in meetings until 8:30 in the evening. My buddies and I convened our pre-game poker game when our meetings were over. The game broke up around a quarter to eleven, fifteen minutes before our curfew.

I found excellent news when I went on-line. My high school team had beaten Norlanco. Normally Norlanco wasn't tough competition, but not this year. The final score was 38-35. It took an overtime to settle the game. Matt "The Mad Bomber" Sauder had been busy that evening.

The box score told most of the story. Apparently Norlanco's run defense had improved since I saw them four years ago. Cody Stevens had 10 carries for 31 yards. Matt had completed 30 of his 42 pass attempts. Dave Mitchell, Garrett Houseman, Gary Harrison, along with backups Chris Gable, Tim Hoffman and Kyle Pratt, had made 452 yards in the contest. WGAL's website said the lead changed five times in the second half. Norlanco had been forced to take a field goal in overtime. Matt Sauder calmly passed his team into the end zone to clinch the victory.

The undefeated Wolverines would be the top ranked team in District 3's sixteen team AAA playoff bracket. Christian's Central team had won too, demolishing Eastern 49-0. They were 9-1. I expected to see them in the top half of the brackets. Hopefully the two teams wouldn't see each other too soon. I wanted Josh and Christian's team to have a good playoff run before my team sent them home.

Wisconsin was ranked #19 in the nation and our game was considered a feature regional game. We would start at 2:30 pm, local time. ABC would televise us on the east coast and Midwest. ESPN would carry us in the rest of the country. Oklahoma versus Texas A & M would be the second feature in the late afternoon.

Coach Burton required everyone to be down for breakfast by 8:30 on Saturday morning. We packed our things, checked out of the hotel and took buses across town to the stadium after breakfast.

Camp Randall Stadium looked just like I remembered it from two years ago. The artificial turf was still in good condition. We would have excellent traction on it. It was well padded so we wouldn't get dinged up too much when we went down.

I could see and feel the confidence as our team prepared for battle with the Badgers. I checked on Jared and Bruce. They were taking on larger roles than they were used to this weekend. Coach Burton's first series would use Bruce's speed, so he got the start. Both of my friends would see extensive time as our returners.

Bruce and Jared seemed comfortable as our team warmed up. I joked around with them. They seemed up to their responsibilities for the day.

"You ready for your big debut, Bruce?" I asked as he fielded his last kick from Ryan Dillard, out backup kicker.

"Yeah, I am," Bruce answered with a big grin. "I've been waiting for two and a half years for today. I'm ready. I just hope I can live up to the standards you and Christian have set for our team."

"It's your job in three more games," I added. "Christian, Tanner and I will be done. You'll be a starter..." I gave Bruce a wink. "...assuming you don't let the younger guys beat you out."

"Henson can't take all three starting spots," Bruce replied. "I know I can beat out John. The Davis twin and Rodney shouldn't be a problem. I should be able to hold off the new recruits Coach lined up this season. They aren't going to know shit in the playbook next season."

"Except three of those new wide receiver recruits are starting classes this January," I answered. "They ARE going to know which end is up on the field. They'll have a spring practice under their belt next fall when Coach determines his starters."

"I will be ready, Coach," Bruce replied. "...today and next September. Jared, Brian and I will make sure Penn State continues to be noted for its great receiving corps."

"You do that," I responded. Bruce and I headed back to the locker room to finish preparations.

Our team took the field about forty-five minutes later. The fans applauded politely when we took the field. I loved playing in the Midwestern stadiums. They had the nicest fans. Some away games, the fans treated us like Darth Vader and the Imperial Storm Troopers when we took the field. Here they treated us as respected opponents, not the mortal enemy.

It was 66 degrees. The sky was clear. There was a light wind from the south-southeast. We had a perfect afternoon for a football game. It was Trevor's turn to call the coin toss. He guessed tails correctly. We took the ball since there was no advantage to which end of the field we started on.

Bruce carried the opening kickoff out to Wisconsin's 31 yard line. Coach Burton tested the Badger's big defensive line on the first play. It was nothing special. Damian took the dive play straight up the middle. Our guards and tackles pushed the Badger linemen backwards. Greg Nowicki shot through the gap and took the middle linebacker out of the play. Damian followed Greg's lead. On the first Badger to hit him was their free safety. The little guy grabbed a leg and hung until help arrived. Half a dozen Badgers converged to bring Damian down. My roomie had gained twelve yards.

Our offensive line dominated the line of scrimmage. That was excellent for our team. Our next play had two purposes – first, it was intended to test the speed of Wisconsin's pass defense and second, it would loosen up their run coverage by forcing the d-backs to back away from the line of scrimmage.

Our team had a well established tendency to go deep on one of the first plays in every game. The whole country knew I was lightning quick. Most of the Big Ten knew how dangerous Christian's initial burst was. They didn't know much about Bruce... yet.

Christian and I would attract most of the attention to ourselves as we raced down the field. We expected Bruce to be covered one on one. We also expected he could beat that coverage and make a big play for us.

We weren't disappointed. Christian and I drew double coverage to the strong side of the field. Bob and Damian ran shallow routes to provide Chip outlets if the pass rush was too much. Bruce was covered by the Badger's nickel back without deep help.

The two falls and one spring of Chip and Bruce working together on second and third string paid off. So did last summer's passing drills. Bruce had no trouble faking out and out running the nickel back. All the safeties were covering Christian and me. Chip lobbed a thirty yard pass down the field to a wide open Bruce.

Bruce caught the ball smoothly, cradled it and jetted for the end zone. The nickel back and the safeties were over ten yards behind him. They never had a play. Christian, Bob and I mobbed Bruce in the end zone, celebrating the biggest touchdown of his career. Jared Gray kicked the PAT easily to put us out front.

Wisconsin wasn't bothered by our early score. They liked power running and they didn't care if you knew. Their quarterback was a fourth year junior who gave the Badgers a credible threat in the passing game.

Our defensive line had been pounded by Nebraska, Michigan and Ohio State already. Some of the best running games in the country had failed to dent them. The Badgers did not fare better. The Badgers gained a single yard on first down. They gained two more on second down. Trevor, Bill, Mike and Jerry collapsed the pocket on third down and long. The QB managed to gun the ball to the sideline before he was buried.

The Badgers punter out-did himself with his kick. The ball flew over Jared's head. Jared had no chance to get it so he let it go. The Wisconsin cover team downed the ball at our 19 yard line. Their defense came out fired up, their confidence buoyed by the fine special teams play.

Their confidence was misplaced. Damian and our offensive line hammered ahead twice, gouging out twelve yards. Their defense tightened up a little, to try to get support for the line and linebackers. That was all the opening our offense needed.

We hit them with a play action pass on the next play. I ran a slant. Damian's fake drew the linebackers up and also pulled the cornerback on me to the line. Chip drilled the ball to me as I crossed behind the line before the free safety could get up to interfere. I spun out of his tackle and sprinted down field. Bruce and Christian made good blocks to clear my way to the end zone. Jared finished the drive by booting the ball straight between the uprights for our PAT. Score: Penn State-14, Wisconsin-0

Wisconsin settled down on the next drive. They mixed in more passes than normal, keeping our run defense off guard a little. The Badgers used nine plays to move the ball across midfield and towards our red zone. Coach C made a couple adjustments as the field shrank and constricted their passing lanes. We finally got them stopped when they had a third down and three yards to go at our 25 yard line. Josh Bruno and Tony King stuffed the big Badger fullback for no gain. The Badgers tried a field goal.

Mark Markovich penetrated their line and smothered the ball as Wisconsin's kicker launched the ball towards the goalposts. Marco Cuchiella recovered the ball and ran for their end zone. Two Badgers took him down at our 37 yard line.

Wisconsin wasn't as spirited or talkative as they had been on the first two possessions. They seemed stunned to be down this much seven minutes into the game. Charlie Taylor broke an eighteen yard run to the strong side. Coach Burton lined us up in the wildcat on the next play.

I took the snap and ran an end around. I had the option to pass if the receivers were open. Wisconsin had Christian, Jared and John covered. I cleared Bob and Chip's blocks and sprinted into a big void left in the defense as their d-backs covered our sideline routes. I made it to the 10 yard line before the free safety caught me. I stiff armed him as he tried to tackle me. We made it to the 2 before he knocked me down. I fell with the ball stretched out. The referee signaled touchdown. My stretch had been enough to break the plane at the goal line.

Jared capped my forty-five yard run by making the PAT. The clock read 6:01 1Q. Score: Penn State-21, Wisconsin-0

Things never improved for Wisconsin. They were rightly paranoid about our deep threat. Our offensive line ripped huge holes in their defense, allowing Damian to romp in the

first half. Damian carried the ball over the goal line twice. Christian also caught a TD. We were ahead 35-3 with two minutes left in the first half.

Coach Burton mercifully sent our second string in to finish the first half. Kenyata Jackson ripped the ball out of the Badger tailback's hands on the first play. It was our ball on Wisconsin's 23 yard line. Jon Stafford and company had no trouble scoring another TD before the end of the half.

We were ahead 42-3 when we took the locker room. Shawn Byrd and Dave McCall were ecstatic. Both guys had intercepted passes in the first half. Shawn had eight for the season. Dave had seven. Shawn led the NCAA FBS. Dave was tied for second with guys from Alabama and Hawaii.

Coach Adams announced to the offense that Wisconsin would see a lot of Charlie Taylor, ET LeBlanc and Wyatt Smith in the second half. We would use just enough passing to keep the Badger defense loose.

There were no surprises as the starters relaxed and enjoyed the view from the sidelines. Jon's crew scored 10 more points in the second half while protecting our big lead. Our second string defense was more generous. Wisconsin managed to two TDs and a field goal before the end of the game.

I had a decent half of football. I scored my two touchdowns on five catches for 151 yards and ran for another 45 yards. I did a few on field interviews before heading inside to shower and dress. Trevor, Damian and I joined Coach Burton at the post game press conference.

We got a lot of questions about our holiday plans. We coyly indicated that we all hoped to go somewhere warm for New Year's. The press conference was over around 8:00 pm. We hopped aboard the first bus of our convoy for the trip to the airport. We had a box lunch on the bus on the way to the airport. The charter got our luggage loaded and got us off the ground as quickly as they could.

We turned the lights off in the cabin and slept for most of the flight back to Pennsylvania. The State College airport was nearly deserted when we arrived around one am. Our faithful blue university buses hauled us back to campus.

We weren't greeted by a big crowd like the previous weekend. There might have been a thousand fans cheering us as we debarked outside the Lasch Building. Amanda met up with Chip. Billy found Damian. Steph greeted her big hero when he stepped off the bus. The seven of us walked back to our apartment and turned in. This had been a successful trip.

Chapter 70

I woke up Sunday morning to the tantalizing smell of bacon and cinnamon. I pulled on my robe and stumbled out to the kitchen. I found Damian hard at work, assisted by Billy Robinson. Billy explained that the culinary bug bit his lover earlier that morning. He was preparing stuffed French toast, bacon, fresh squeezed orange juice and fresh fruit cup.

Trevor and Stephanie were relaxing at our table, waiting for Damian to complete the preparations for the meal. Chip and Amanda came downstairs to join us. We sat down together to enjoy our repast. Our resident gourmand had outdone himself.

The slices of French toast were stuffed with cream cheese mixed with diced banana and chocolate chips. He infused the maple syrup with cinnamon. The result was delicious. We devoured every bit of Damian's breakfast. We thanked him for his efforts.

I showered when the couples headed off for various afternoon pursuits. I went down to the Mix and picked up a copy of the Philadelphia Inquirer and settled in for my usual Sunday afternoon of reading.

#2 Texas beat Baylor 30-23. #3 Nebraska easily handled Kansas 38-21. #4 Oklahoma pulled out a late game win over Texas A & M 34-33 with a last second field goal. #5 Florida thrashed Vanderbilt 41-20. Ed threw for over 300 hundred yards again. #6 Alabama handled Mississippi State 31-24. #7 USC was upset by California 27-24. USC just wasn't the same team since Brady Rasmussen graduated two years ago. #8 Ohio State rebounded by destroying Northwestern 48-17. #9 LSU beat Tulane. #10 Virginia Tech lost to Florida State.

Jeremy and Notre Dame grounded Air Force. My friend had two sacks and eight tackles in the game. Jake Kring played well as Syracuse upset the Big East's leader, the Pittsburgh Panthers. Maybe Jake could help the Orangemen get out of their decade long slump. Rutgers upset Cincinnati that day too. Hal Long's contribution was four PATs. West Virginia destroyed Connecticut 34-10. Drew McCormick ran for 127 yards and two TDs.

Delaware went up to Amherst and beat Massachusetts 28-20. Andy caught six passes for 92 yards and scored one of the touchdowns. The Blue Hens were looking good for a spot in the FCS playoffs.

I spent time over at the Lasch Building Sunday afternoon caring for the various nicks, dings and aches accumulated from eleven football games this fall. Time in the whirlpool felt damn good.

Coach Burton held a post mortem of the Wisconsin game after dinner on Sunday night. The review was positive and upbeat. What else could it be after you demolish a good opponent 52-20? Both Bruce and Jared Cantrell drew praise for their play filling in for Brian and Tanner.

Tanner Riggs had cleared his second neuro test and was allowed to return to classes and to attend team meetings. There was no chance he would be cleared to play next weekend. Brian was doing better. His limp was gone. Doc had cleared him to practice this week and he was expected to play against Michigan State.

Coach Burton concluded the team meeting with an admonition.

“I am so proud of what this team has achieved so far this season. You collectively set a vision for your season. You set goals and systemically achieved those goals to further your vision of playing for the national championship this season. We have two opponents left.

“I am not talking about the Michigan State Spartans and whichever team we face in our bowl game. Our opponents are complacency and carelessness. Do not let the Spartans’ 6-5 record fool you. They are well coached and they won’t be handing us anything. We have to dig down and take this win from them!”

Coach Burton waited for the growl of approval to subside, and then went on.

“Something else all of you should keep in mind is that there are a lot of people, be they fans at another school, students at another school, gamblers, whoever, who would dearly love to see their schools slide into our spot. Some of them might just be fanatic enough that they’d do almost anything to make that happen. I know most people wouldn’t do anything shady to keep any of our players off the field, but sometimes it only takes just one person who isn’t so ethical to do just exactly that. Most of you remember Coach Martin not making the Michigan State game last year because a police officer arrested him for DUI. It turns out Coach’s blood alcohol content was 0.00% – he was stone cold sober, but he still missed that game because of the unethical actions of one person.

“There are also agents out there who would dearly love to make commissions off those of you who may go on to the NFL. These guys are willing to work long term, too, so underclassmen and freshmen aren’t immune from them. A lot of times they use runners or other people to get close to players, and a lot of them are willing to risk your eligibility by giving you gifts, buying you meals, etc. Yeah, they’ll be sad if you blow your eligibility your senior year, but they won’t be nearly as sad as you will be, nor will they be as totally pissed off at you as everyone at this school will be, if it happens, and especially if it costs us games we’ve already won. So don’t accept money, gifts or benefits from anyone, be wary if someone starts talking up some agent, and advise your family members of the same thing. This doesn’t mean such people are runners - but it might.”

“Some of you might think this sounds a bit paranoid, and it does. The question you have to ask yourselves, though, is ‘Am I being paranoid enough?’ Be very careful these next few weeks and over the holidays. Don’t get into fights, don’t get into situations where you could be caught drinking or be accused of inappropriate sexual contact, don’t accept anything like meals or other things from strangers, or even from people you know other than family, keep a paper trail of your purchases and keep your cool. I hate to say it, but sometimes you have to act like a preacher’s wife, and keep in mind that most bad things happen at bars and at parties after midnight. Finally, if you have any questions or any problems at all, come to see me or one of the other coaches first. I’d rather advise you not to do something than to tell you after the fact that you’ve blown your eligibility to play for Penn State, and I certainly don’t want to learn something bad about any of you from a reporter.”

Coach dismissed us, and leaving a sober and quiet bunch of players to find our way back to our dorms or apartments. Personally, I was relieved. I knew in my bones I’d dodged a very large bullet, and hopefully the other players had gotten the message and wouldn’t make the mistakes I had made with Derek.

Trevor, Damian, Chip and I caught the ESPN BCS rankings show back at our apartment. There weren’t many changes in the BCS top ten standings. USC’s loss dropped them down half a dozen spots. Georgia Tech crept up from #11 to #9. West Virginia cracked the top ten for the first time this season at #10. This week’s standings were: Penn State, Texas, Nebraska, Florida, Alabama, Oklahoma, Ohio State, LSU, Georgia Tech and West Virginia.

Michigan State was an up and down team this year. They upset Notre Dame in week three. They were undefeated when Wisconsin took them down in week six. They temporarily got their act together to beat Indiana. They lost to Ohio State, Michigan and Iowa on consecutive weekends. The Spartans were reeling, going from 6-1 and having BCS bowl hopes to 6-4. They went down to Purdue and were upset by the Boilermakers. They looked whipped at the end of that game.

None of us knew which Michigan State would show up on Saturday. Would we see the balanced, well run offense that had beaten a pretty good Notre Dame team or would it be the dispirited bunch upset by the young Boilermaker QB?

We prepared like we would see the good Spartans. Trevor, Damian and I helped the coaches keep everyone focused on the tasks necessary to win the contest. The coaches’ game plan didn’t feature anything unusual. We were confident our standard offense and defense would allow us to beat the Spartans. The practices were mostly walk throughs with no hitting.

Dave McCall, Matt Frye, Joe Ricci and Bruce MacCauley volunteered to host the next weekend’s party. Ostensibly it was so they got some experience hosting them so they

were ready for next year. All they wanted from Trevor, Damian and me was for one of us to do the beer run on Friday so they were stocked up for the party. It was kind of nice to not have to worry about throwing the weekend's party.

Tuesday evening after my receivers meeting, I checked my e-mails. I found two that were interesting. The first came in the morning and was from the College of Education. It informed me that my mentor teacher was named John Waters and gave me contact information for him. I was to contact and arrange to meet with Mr. Waters sometime before the start of next term.

The second e-mail was from Mr. Waters. It's simplest to show it.

2010-Nov-06 16:47:22

From: john.waters@epics.net

To: kyle.martin87@psu.edu

Subject: Student Teaching @ CHS

I'm delighted to hear we will be partnering next semester. I assume that you are THE Kyle Martin that the whole college football world is talking about. Who else would use his jersey number as a part of his e-mail address?

You can probably tell already that I am a Penn State fan. I graduated from West Chester University but enjoy following top notch football teams, especially when they do football right. Your team certainly does that.

I am delighted to find that you apparently share two of the three loves of my life - football and history. ;-) I want to warn you of this - I won't be sharing the third love of my life with you, my wife. You'll have to find your own girl.

Penn State's student teaching coordinator tells me that we must meet sometime between now and Christmas time. Give me a call at 610-555-1212 or reply to this e-mail to set up our meeting. I am looking forward to getting to know you better and collaborating.

Call anytime in the evening. Our youngest son is a senior at East Stroudsburg State, so my wife and I are empty-nesters and will likely to be home when you call.

Sincerely yours,

John L. Waters

p.s. If we don't connect before next Saturday, go beat those Spartans! I want a rooting interest in the championship game.

The e-mail made me smile. Mr. Waters sounded like a friendly, engaging sort of person. It was only 8:30, so I decided to give him a call.

The phone rang a couple times before a man picked it up. "Hello?"

"May I please speak with Mr. Waters?" I asked politely.

"Speaking," Mr. Waters replied.

"Mr. Waters, this is Kyle Martin, from Penn State University," I said. "I'm giving you a call to talk about my student teaching with you next semester."

"Kyle, it's good to hear from you," Mr. Waters said. "May I call you Kyle?"

"Certainly, Mr. Waters," I replied.

"Call me John," Mr. Waters answered. "We don't need to stand on formality when we aren't in the classroom. Are you the famous wide receiver, as I supposed?"

"Guilty," I responded. "You said in your e-mail that you love football – as a fan or more?"

"More," John answered. "I am on the Pioneers coaching staff. Um... the Pioneers are Conestoga High School's team."

"What do you coach?" I asked.

"I coordinate the defense and also coach the defensive backs," John explained.

"That's cool... very cool," I replied. "What courses do you teach?"

"I have two sections of AP European History, two sections of AP U. S. History, a section of Economics and a section of U. S. Government and Politics," John answered.

"That's excellent. I think I will be competent in the subjects you teach," I said. "I did some lectures on AP European History last spring when I did my student teaching practicum in Bellefonte. I've taken nearly every U. S. History course Penn State has. I'm well versed in that subject. I took two econ courses, but that isn't my strength. I can bone up on the topic and present competent lectures. I took two poly sci courses and read the newspapers assiduously to stay current with events."

"It sounds like you are as well prepared for the classroom as you are for the football field," John said. "That's excellent."

“How is your schedule towards the end of next week?” I asked. “I will be home for the Thanksgiving holiday. That is probably the best time for us to meet, if it suits your schedule.”

“It certainly will suit my schedule to meet you sometime next weekend, but I can’t say when,” John replied. “The Pioneers made the playoffs. If we win this Friday night, we will have a game either Friday night or Saturday. I won’t know if or when for another few days.”

“I understand,” I agreed. “I volunteer to help the football coaches at my high school during playoffs when I’m home. Assuming they win this Friday night, I will have a playoff game to assist with next weekend too.” I chuckled. “I expect my team will win too. They’re...”

“The Wolverines are ranked number one in their district,” John said. “I know who you played for when you were in high school.”

“Cool,” I replied. “Why don’t I call you Sunday afternoon or Monday evening so we can compare schedules again. Hopefully our teams have playoff games the same day. I can drive down to Berwyn easily from my house. It’s probably an hour’s drive from my home.”

“You can drive to Berwyn if you want,” John replied. “...but you won’t find me there. I live outside a small town called Parkesburg, off of Route 30.”

“That’s even easier,” I said. “I live off of Route 30 too, about ten miles west of you.”

“I suspected that, Kyle,” John replied. “The reason I knew you played for the Wolverines is that I have seen you play before. When my son Kurt was a senior I took a year off from coaching football. I wanted to be able to make it to his games. I was in the stands when your team demolished Sadsbury that evening.”

“Sorry about that,” I answered.

“Don’t apologize,” John said. “What you and your team did that evening was a thing of beauty, if you didn’t have a rooting interest. You scored three touchdowns. Your brother scored two more. It put a damper on my son’s school’s homecoming.”

“I wish I could say I remember the game, but I can’t,” I replied. “High school was awhile ago. How long ago was the game?”

“Four years,” John said. “I assume my son Kurt is the same age as you. He is a senior at East Stroudsburg now.”

“Good luck on Friday with your playoff game,” I said. “Who do you play?”

“Strath Haven,” John answered.

“Oh... you need a lot of luck,” I responded. “Are they as good as last year?”

“Maybe better,” Jon answered. “My Pioneers squeaked into the playoffs as the #16 seed. Strath Haven is undefeated and the #1 seed. We lost 36-7 when we played them earlier this season.”

“It sounds like your post Thanksgiving weekend may be free after all,” I replied. “The Wolverines are #1 seed, playing #16 Hamburg on Friday night. I expect that I will have a game to coach the following weekend. Our school has come to count on it. We haven’t lost an opening playoff game since before I was a freshman in high school.”

“A record I suspect you helped start,” John countered.

“Yes, I did,” I agreed. “I’ll let you get back to what you were doing before I called. I will be in touch when I hear about next weekend’s playoff schedule. I’m looking forward to working with you.”

“I am too, Kyle,” John replied. “Good luck on Saturday against Michigan State.”

“Thank you,” I responded. “Have a good evening, John.”

I barely knew John Waters, but I liked him already. I could see where he would be an excellent mentor teacher for me. I also suspected that Coach Burton and Coach Caffrey were right. I would be tapped to help with the Pioneers during their off season. That was fine. What kind of future coach would I be if I missed an opportunity to coach when it was offered to me?

I saw Derek Whitaker in the plaza near Chambers Building Wednesday after my history class. He gave me a wave from across the plaza, smiled and headed the other direction. That confirmed to me that Derek was on the up and up. If he was really working for Todd Rosenbaum, he would have carefully pursued me. I returned the smile and waved back before he departed.

Trevor, Chip, Damian, Christian and I met at the Lasch Building after lunch. We headed over to Paternoville by Beaver Stadium to visit with our student fans. Paternoville was a tent city that was erected outside the stadium before every home game. Student seating was general admission for games, so students lined up early to get the best seats for the game.

The five of us circulated through Paternoville, greeting our fans, talking with them and signing autographs. I worked my way from the back of the line to the front. I was surprised when I reached the first tent and greeted the inhabitant.

“Adam?” I stuttered. “I didn’t expect to see you here.” Adam was Adam Morretti, one of the East Hall guys that had been hanging the “Kyle’s Krazies” banner for the past four seasons.

“Why not?” Adam answered. “We’re always out here in Paternoville. How do you think we get the premium spot to hang your banner?”

“I hadn’t really thought about it,” I replied. “Where’s Mike and Dan?” They were the other two buddies who hung with Adam since they roomed on the same floor of Snyder Hall in East Halls as freshmen.

“They’re both at class right now,” Adam said. “I want to give you a preview, Kyle. We’re doing a new banner for Saturday.” Adam hopped out of his lawn chair and dived into his tent. He reappeared with the banner. Adam laid it over his tent so I could see it. It read: “Kyle’s Krazies – Thanks for the Incredible Four Years.” It wasn’t quite finished. The bottom line, “Incredible Four Years,” was penciled in but not painted.

“That’s a great sign, Adam,” I replied. “Thanks so much for your support over the years. I really appreciate it. I’ll let Mike and Dan know on Saturday after I finish warm-ups.”

“It’s been a pleasure watching you play, Kyle,” Adam responded. “You’ve been great to Mike, Dan and me. We wanted you to know how we feel.”

“What you got there?” Christian asked as he joined us and looked over the unfinished banner. Adam displayed the banner for Christian.

“Cool, I like that,” Christian commented. “Coach certainly deserves our thanks.”

“You’re a fantastic receiver too,” Adam countered. “The girls that fly your banner every game seem just as dedicated to you. Have you met them?”

Christian, Chip, who had joined us, and I all laughed. “The one is my fiancée and the other is her roommate.”

“I guess they know you,” Adam said.

“Thanks for your support, Adam,” I said as I shook his hand before we headed back to the Lasch Building to get ready for practice. Trevor and Damian joined Christian, Chip and me as we headed back.

“You know, I love the sentiment on that banner,” Christian commented. “Coach certainly has earned the fans’ thanks. I feel the same way. We seniors need to show our appreciation for all the support our fans have given us the past four years.”

“What do you suggest?” I responded. The five of us talked through ideas in the half a dozen minutes it took for us to return to the Lasch Building. By then we had an idea. The big question was could we pull off the logistics in two days? Damian would talk with Billy Robinson before we headed to dinner.

Damian reported back to us at dinner that Billy would be able to get everything done by 3:30 on Friday afternoon. Trevor, Damian, Christian and I circulated around the Training Table, asking all the graduating seniors to help with our thank you project. Everyone agreed.

Dad called after dinner on Wednesday to coordinate my plans with Mom’s and his trip.

“Did you and Mom find a hotel yet?” I asked when Dad explained the purpose of the call.

“We did,” Dad answered. He chuckled. “You know the place well. We are staying at Toftrees. You know how it is if you wait too long to look for a room on a game weekend.”

“I’ll take your word for that,” I replied. “I’ve never tried to get reservations downtown. If you and Mom stay at Toftrees, make sure you tell Mom I am expecting her to come down the hall to my room and tuck me in for bed that night.”

“I’ll pass that request on, Kyle,” Dad answered.

“You and Mom can’t go partying all night either,” I added. “We football players need a full night’s sleep.” Dad laughed hard at that one.

“I will inform your mother of that restriction on our fun,” Dad answered laconically.

“Seriously, Dad, if you and Mom are interested, I think I can get you in for a tour of the Lasch Building on Saturday morning,” I said. “I remember seniors bringing their families through for tours on Senior Day previous years.”

“That would be excellent, Kyle,” Dad said. “Your mother and I would enjoy that.”

“I don’t know if you’ll get to campus in time, but we’re having a big pep rally Friday night,” I suggested. “I think you’d enjoy seeing the whole college football experience.”

“What time is it?” Dad asked.

“7:30,” I replied.

“We’ll see what we can do, Kyle,” Dad said. “How are you coping with your final game at Beaver Stadium?”

“I’m ignoring that, Dad,” I replied. “If I spend time thinking about that, I won’t be my best against Michigan State. I have to focus on beating them. I’ll deal with everything else when the game is over.”

“Good luck with that, son,” Dad said. “We’ll be cheering for you from the stands. I’ll call you after dinner Friday and let you know our plans.”

“Do you have a place picked out for dinner Saturday night?” I asked.

“All set, son. Don’t worry about it,” Dad said. “You will enjoy dinner.”

“Love you, Dad,” I answered. “I’ll see you this weekend.”

“Love you too, son,” Dad agreed.

I headed out to the beer distributor Friday morning after my Geography lab to pick up beer for the party the following evening. I didn’t have time to drop it off at Dave’s apartment, so I left it in the car trunk until I had time to catch up with Dave. We effected the transfer before practice that afternoon.

The team went through its paces enthusiastically Friday afternoon. We ran the script for the first fifteen plays nearly perfectly. Coach Burton was pleased with the results. He dismissed everyone fifteen minutes early to recognize the effort.

I was drying from my post-practice shower when my phone rang. It was Dad.

“What’s up, Dad?” I asked as I answered the phone.

“We’re here in State College already,” Dad answered.

“Wow! You must have left early to be here already,” I commented.

“We did,” Dad answered. “We are going to have some dinner and then head over to the pep rally this evening. You said it is at 7:30 pm, correct? I assume it is in the stadium.”

“The time is 7:30 pm,” I replied. “...but it is at the Bryce Jordan Center. Do you know which one it is?”

“I will find it, Kyle,” Dad said.

“If you hang out near the entrance, you may be able to hook up with me when our buses bring the team over,” I added. “We can confer by phone if we miss each other there. We can meet over at the hotel.”

“Will you have time then, Kyle?” Dad asked.

“Sure, we don’t have any football meetings at Toftrees,” I answered. “Coach takes us there to get us away from the noise and partying on campus and make sure we get a good night’s sleep.”

“I’ll see you later tonight, son,” Dad said before ending the phone call.

My roommates and I headed to our apartment to pack our overnight bags before dinner. We ate at the Training Table and then headed back to the Lasch Building to load our bags and ride to the pep rally.

Crowds of students and fans met us outside the Bryce Jordan Center when our buses arrived. My friends and I worked the lines of fans, shaking hands and doing autographs as they wished us good luck and urged us to demolish Michigan State the next day.

The team waited off stage as the pep rally started. The seniors lined up in the front of the group since we were going to be introduced first. The Blue Band entertained the big crowd while we waited our turn. The cheerleaders and Nittany Lion were going out front when I heard three high pitched voices call, “Unka Ky! Unka Ky!” “Kyle!”

I spun around and saw Noah, Connor and Hunter weaving between the legs of my teammates, trying to get through the crowd to me.

“Holy Cow!” I said as I kneeled down to meet them. “What are you guys doing here?”

“Watch you p’ay foot-bah,” Noah said as he reached me first.

“Yeah, we watch you p’ay tomoh-whoa [tomorrow],” Connor agreed. I stooped down and gave Noah a hug and a kiss. I hugged Connor when Hunter wiggled through the legs of my teammates.

“Hi Kyle,” Hunter exclaimed as he hopped up and hugged me around the neck.

“Hey little bro,” I said after giving him a kiss.

“Yours?” Josh Bruno asked.

“This is Connor,” I said as I patted Connor on the head and as I stood. “This is Noah. They are my brother Andy’s boys.” I hoisted Hunter up to my side. He wrapped his arms around my neck again and gave me a kiss on the cheek. “This is my little brother Hunter.”

Josh, Christian, Trevor and Shawn greeted the boys. “How did you get here, Hunter?” I asked as I held him.

“Car,” Hunter answered with total seriousness.

“And a little help from their family,” Dad said. The team had parted to make room for Mom and Dad to join us. “Hi, son.”

“Hello, Kyle,” Mom said. I gave Mom a one armed hug with Hunter sandwiched between us. “Your father and I thought you should have everyone special to you here for your last game in Beaver Stadium.”

Mom and Dad stepped apart to reveal the biggest surprise.

“Holy shi...” I blurted before remembering I was holding Hunter. “Holy cow!” I managed. “Penny! How did you get here?”

“Car,” my lover teased as we embraced. I wrapped my free hand around Penny as she embraced Hunter and me. We kissed hungrily, our tongues twisting and searching until a squeal brought us back to reality

“Kyle, ‘mashing me,’ Hunter protested.

“Sorry little buddy,” I said as Penny pulled the arm on Hunter side away. Penny and I separated so we were standing side by side, but still together. I let Hunter drop down to the ground.

“I can’t believe you’re here,” I gasped after we hugged and kissed again.

“After your dad told me about the plans for Senior Day, I had to come,” Penny replied.

“Plans?” I asked.

“I’ll let your parents fill you in on that,” Penny said. “I hope you don’t mind my little white lie a few weeks ago. I could have come for the Northwestern weekend but then I couldn’t have come this weekend.”

“You’re here,” I replied. “That’s all I care about. I’m so happy to see you. Are you staying at Toftrees like the rest of my family?”

“No, I’m saving money,” Penny answered. “I’m staying with Steph tonight. I assume both of us will be staying at your apartment tomorrow night.”

“You bet’cha,” I agreed enthusiastically. “How in the heck did all of you get in here?”

“Inside help,” Dad teased. “Specifically, Anders Voight. Anders has been invaluable in setting up everything this weekend.”

“What exactly are the plans for this weekend?” I asked. Before Dad could answer, the music in the arena swelled and the announcer proclaimed, “Now, introducing the Nittany Lion seniors...”

Dad said, “Later.”

“From Rochester, Pennsylvania, #2, our punter, Mitchell Jackson, who majors in Electrical Engineering,” the speakers blared.

Mitch jogged out to the center of the stage and waved to the crowd as they cheered him. The announcer worked his way down through the list of twenty-two graduating seniors.

“From Unionville, Pennsylvania, #98, team captain and All Big Ten defensive end, Trevor Conwell, majoring in Business Marketing,” the announcer intoned. Trevor jogged onto the center of the stage, joining the other seniors. The applause swelled louder than any previous introduction.

“You’re next, roomie,” I said as tapped Damian on the back.

He turned back to face me and gave me a diffident smile. I could see his eyes were tearing. “This is going to be tougher than I thought.”

“From Erie, Pennsylvania, #34, team captain, All Big Ten running back and our starting tailback, Damian Thompson, majoring in Business Management.”

“Go get ‘em,” I said as I gave Damian a swat on the backside. Damian jogged onto the stage to resounding cheers and applause. Penny slipped her arm around my back and snuggled against me. I draped an arm over her shoulder.

“It’s your turn, honey,” Penny purred. “I love you, Kyle.”

“I love you too,” I agreed.

“From Paradise, Pennsylvania, #87, team captain, four time All-American and three year starter at wide receiver, Kyle ‘Coach’ Martin, majoring in secondary education.”

I leaned down and gave Penny a kiss before jogging out onto the stage. Connor, Noah and Hunter crowded the edge of the stage to get a better view.

“I’m proud of you, son,” Mom and Dad declared as I started out. The roar from the crowd of fans was ear-splitting. They cheered, stomped and yelled as I ran out. I batted my eyes to clear them and tried to smile as the emotion welled up inside me.

I exchanged high fives with half a dozen teammates as I arrived and joined the crowd of seniors on stage. The group parted and forced me to the front of the group. The big crowd cheered and yelled with renewed vigor. I expected the applause to die quickly. It

rose in volume until the cheers reverberated through the arena. I waved to the left side of the crowd, to the back of the arena and to the fans on the right side.

First a few, then more, and more, and finally almost everyone in the stadium rose to their feet and clapped and cheered me.

Damian leaned in close and shouted in my ear, "You earned this, buddy!"

"You did," Trevor screamed in my other ear. I smiled and nodded as I continued waving to acknowledge and thank my supporters.

I looked back at the hallway off stage. Penny smiled and blew me a kiss. Noah's and Connor's eyes were wide in disbelief as they stared at the big crowd and the reception I was receiving. Hunter had his hands over his ears, trying to protect them from the deafening cheers. The ovation continued for half a minute until the announcer introduced the remainder of the Nittany Lions Football team.

Connor, Noah and Hunter huddled with Penny and my parents as the other 87 team members charged out on stage and descended to the floor of the arena. All the seniors joined the team as we jogged across the floor to the area reserved for us along one side of the arena.

Coach Paterno took the stage to the cheers of the crowd. Coach gave a good speech to whip up the crowd's enthusiasm. JoePa turned the podium over to his successor, Coach Burton. Coach Burton gave a rousing speech that whipped the crowd to a higher frenzy. The Blue Band serenaded the crowd as the rally ended. Coach had the crowd so enthused that I think they would have tackled any Spartans, if they had happened upon them in the parking lot outside the arena. Thankfully our foes were safely tucked away downtown in their hotel.

The team filed out by way of the stage and backstage area while the arena emptied. My family and lover weren't backstage when we filed through. We boarded the buses and headed over to Toftrees.

I gave Penny a call on her cell phone as the team rode to the hotel. She had met up with Steph and the two of them were driving back to Steph's apartment. I wished her a good night. I called Dad's cell phone next, to find out what room they were staying in. Mom answered the phone. They were driving back to the hotel now and were going to get the boys to bed. All the excitement wasn't enough to overcome their tiredness. It was nearly bedtime and the boys needed their sleep so they would be awake enough to last through tomorrow's game.

Trevor and I were settled in our room and heading down the hall to Christian's and GJ's room for our traditional poker game when my cell phone rang. It was Dad. We agreed to meet in the lobby in a couple minutes. I wished Trevor luck at the game and went to meet my dad.

Dad and I headed for the bar of the hotel's Down Under Steakhouse. We sat down at the bar. The bartender stopped by almost immediately. "What can I get you to drink, sir?" he asked, staring pointedly at Dad.

"A Bud Light," Dad answered.

The bartender gave me a hard stare and asked, "What kind of pop would you like?"

"A Coke would be good," I replied. The bartender left to retrieve our drinks.

"Sorry about giving you my baby face," Dad said. "I had the same problem getting a drink until I was around twenty-five."

"It's not my baby face, Dad," I explained. "The bartenders here have orders not to serve alcohol to any of the football players, regardless of age."

"Ah, I see," Dad replied. "I guess that makes sense. You won't get in trouble seeing me here in the bar, will you?"

"No, the coaches will be fine..." I answered. "as long as I'm drinking soda. So... what is Mom going to say about you having a beer?" Mom was notoriously intolerant of drinking.

"We have a nice system worked out," Dad answered. "I have a beer every once in a while and she pretends I don't drink. It works for us."

"I guess," I said skeptically.

"You'll find out in a couple months, Kyle," Dad replied. "You and Penny will have your quirks and allowances. It's all a part of adjusting to living with someone."

"I guess I will find out soon," I agreed. "So... speaking of Penny, how in the heck did you convince her to come to campus so close to the end of the semester? I didn't even ask her to come up here this close to finals. What exactly are our families' plans for the weekend?"

"I'll answer the last question first," Dad said. "I got a call a month ago from the athletic department asking me how many extra tickets I wanted for family and friends for Senior Day. It turns out the department provides access to extra tickets to senior's families for their final game in Beaver Stadium. When your mother and I found that out, we started checking around to see who else would like to come see your final game here. Will and Abby are tied up this weekend and can't come. Liz and her boyfriend Chris will come up tomorrow morning. They're staying overnight tomorrow night with us."

“Chris? Chris Zimmerman?” I asked. “You know how often Liz changes boyfriends. I wasn’t sure if that was the Chris you meant.”

“Yes, Chris Zimmerman is still your sister’s boyfriend,” Dad answered. “They’re coming. Walt Caffrey arranged for us to get pre-game sideline passes so we can see the field and hang out with you when you warm up before the game.”

“That’s cool,” I said. “The twins and Hunter will love seeing the inside of Beaver Stadium.”

“As will I,” Dad added. “I’m also looking forward to the tour of the Lasch Building tomorrow morning. I also arranged with Trevor’s, Damian’s, Christian’s and Chip’s parents for all of us to enjoy a nice dinner at the Olde New York Tap Room. I thought it was appropriate for all of us to meet and get to know each other since our sons spent so much time together in the last four years.”

“Wow, that is cool,” I replied. I had never heard of the Olde New York Tap Room but I didn’t let Dad know that. “How did Penny get in on all this?”

“Once your mother and I decided to do something special for this game, she was our first phone call,” Dad explained. “She jumped at the chance to come for Senior Day.”

“How’d you get our team’s Saturday night get together moved to another apartment?” I asked. “You know my friends and I have hosted the team every Saturday night for the past year and a half.”

“That was easy,” Dad responded. “I called...”

“Penny,” I blurted out as I started to realize the full dimensions of this conspiracy. “Penny talked to Dave Hanson. Dave talked to Shawn Byrd, who talked to Dave McCall. Next thing I know, Dave is volunteering to take over tomorrow night’s party for us. That’s some good organizing, Dad.”

“It worked out,” Dad responded.

“Thanks for doing all this, Dad,” I said. “It means a lot to me to have all my family here for my final game at Beaver Stadium.”

Mom joined us a minute later. “The boys are sleeping,” she explained. “We probably have some quiet time before we have to get back to our room.”

Mom, Dad and I reminisced for half an hour. Mom pointedly ignored Dad’s beer, even though I knew she disapproved. Getting drunk at a party, getting screwed and getting pregnant weren’t on Mom’s life plans back when she was seventeen. I understood her feelings perfectly well. I had fought my battle with drinking too. I learned (hopefully

had learned?) that I needed to place strict limits on myself if I wanted to keep my sanity and sobriety.

We headed back to our rooms around a quarter to ten. I joined my friends at the poker game. I kibitzed, skipping playing that evening. I would make up for missing this game after Christmas, the night before the BCS championship game.

Trevor and I headed back to bed around a quarter to eleven. Both of us went on-line. Trevor found out Unionville lost their initial playoff game to Avon Grove. Jake Meyer, the future Nittany Lion tailback, had gone crazy. Jake had run for 243 yards for the Red Devils as they trashed Trevor's high school 49-24.

I checked my high school. My Wolverines had no problem at all with Hamburg. They dispatched them, 52-10. Central beat Gettysburg 34-31. That would give Christian some ammunition to tease Ian and Troy Davis. Both had played for Gettysburg High School last season. When I ran down the list of winners, I noticed a surprise.

The Braves, from our league, had squeezed into the playoffs in the #13 spot. They had upset West York. Their reward – playing Central a second time this year, next weekend. My top ranked Wolverines would face #8 ranked Conrad Weiser, from Berks County. The PIAA seeding chart listed the date and time of the game as “TBA” – to be announced.

I also checked Conestoga High School. They lost to Strath Haven 41-17. Hopefully Mr. Waters would recover his good humor by the time I met with him next week. Conestoga's loss did make it easier for us to schedule our meeting over the holiday weekend.

The gray clouds, drizzle and warm temperatures we had experienced over the past two days were still with us when Trevor and I got up Saturday morning. I flipped on the TV after I showered. The weatherman reported we would have temperatures in the low to mid fifties for the game. It would be windy with gusts approaching 35 miles an hour.

I was happy Brian and Jared had to deal with catching the kickoffs and punts. It wasn't going to be a day for great returns. We would need to be satisfied with catching the ball and putting it in play without any muffs.

Trevor and I headed down to join the team in one of the banquet rooms for breakfast. I wasn't surprised to see my family already standing in line to be served. Half a dozen other families were there too. Damian and Chip were sitting with Mr. and Mrs. Thompson already.

Mom, Dad, and the boys joined Chip, Damian and Damian's parents and younger brother Lucas. After we got our food, Trevor and I sat down with my family. I did introductions, so everyone knew everyone before we started eating.

After I sat down Noah asked, "Is good no cook, Unka Ky?"

"They make an excellent breakfast here, little buddy," I agreed. "I'm enjoying someone else's cooking for once." I explained to the rest of the group how I almost invariably made breakfast, or second breakfast in many cases, for my nephews and little brother.

"You cook for us at T'anksgivin'?" Connor asked.

"I probably will make you some breakfast next week," I agreed. I was a little surprised that the twins knew I would be home for Thanksgiving the next week. "I may be able to make you something really special. How does French Toast stuffed with cream cheese, banana bits and chocolate chips sound?"

"Good!" all three little boys responded enthusiastically.

"All you have to do is convince Damian to give me his recipe," I explained. "He made it for Chip, Trevor and me last weekend. It is real good." Chip and Trevor seconded my recommendation.

"P'ease, Damian," Connor begged. "Show Unka Ky how make... p'ease?"

"Yes, p'ease show," Noah agreed. "Sounds yummy."

"OK guys," Damian agreed. "I'll show your uncle how to make the stuffed toast before we go home for the holidays.

"Thanks, Damian," I responded.

"Yeah, t'anks, Damian," the twins and Hunter agreed.

Noah and Connor remembered Chip from visiting camp last summer. All three boys seemed to enjoy getting to know Trevor, Damian and Chip. I liked talking with Damian's parents. I barely knew them from the past four years. It was an enjoyable breakfast.

The team loaded up our gear and headed for the Lasch Building. Mom, Dad and the boys stayed at Toftrees for awhile. They would join us at the Lasch Building for their tour later in the morning.

Everyone went about their now familiar rituals to prepare for the game. Chip, Brian, Christian and I went to one of the cubicles for quiet and spent an hour reviewing the defensive formations and situations we were using for our silent play adjustments. Over

the course of this year Chip, Christian and I taught Brian what we had been doing to beat certain defenses. Coach Adams finally approved a couple plays for Brian using our silent signal system. He was excited to be trusted with this.

Marie paged me around 10:30 in the morning. I headed out to the lobby to meet everyone. Liz and Chris had joined the family. I gave them the grand tour of the building, from the weight room to the team meeting rooms, the auditorium and the academic center. I made a point of showing Mom the academic achievements board. My GPA of 3.68 was second from the top, behind Joe Ricci's 3.79.

I checked the locker room to make sure everyone was dressed before inviting my family inside to see where we spent our time prior to the start of a game. I led them over to my locker, waved my hand before it and announced, "This is it, my football home away from home."

"Is this your family, Coach?" Brian Henson asked. Brian was sitting at his locker, two stalls down from mine.

"Yes it is," I answered. "This is my dad Dan, my mom Sharon, my sister Liz and Liz's boyfriend Chris Zimmerman."

"It's nice to meet all of you," Brian responded. "Who are the little ones, Coach?"

"This is Noah," I said as the nephews stepped forward to shake hands with Brian.

"I'm Connor," his brother added.

"I'm Hunter," my little brother added.

"It's good to meet you, Brian," Mom said as Brian shook hands with the three boys.

"We've seen you playing beside our son," Dad added, "You are very good."

"Brian is going to be as big a star for our team next year as I have been," I said.

"You're exaggerating, Coach," Brian replied. "I'm doing OK but I'm not in the same class as you."

"Sure you are," I answered. "I watched Coach Burton nurse you along and give you more time on the field last year when you were a freshman. He made you a starter in the slot as a sophomore. All of this happened exactly the way it did for me. Brian, you have speed, you know the playbook cold, you've got size and you're learning how to beat coverage without a speed advantage. You WILL be Chip's go to guy next season."

"I don't know about that, Coach," Brian said.

“Listen to my son, Brian,” Dad interjected. “I’ve learned not to argue football with Kyle. He usually has it right.”

“I hope you are right, Coach,” Brian said. “I guess we’ll see next season. It’s nice to meet all of you.”

The boys ignored the exchange and swarmed around my locker to see what I had in it.

“What dis?” Connor asked as he pointed towards my shoulder pads.

“Shoulder pads,” I answered.

“What deh for?” Noah asked.

“They protect me when someone tackles me,” I explained. “You have seen on TV how hard football players hit each other. The pads keep me from getting hurt.”

“Can you show us?” Noah asked.

“Yeah, p’ease?” Connor agreed. I put on my pads and dropped down on my knees for the boys. The boys banged on my shoulders, surprised at how hard the pads were and how I didn’t feel anything.

“Can we twy? Noah asked. [try] “P’ease?” his twin begged.

“Sure guys,” I agreed. I pulled my pads off and placed them over Noah. His shoulders were too narrow for the pads to sit properly on him. He held them up with his hands and tried walking around in them. Connor waited patiently for his turn in my pads.

Hunter wasn’t as patient. He tugged at my pant leg and begged, “Try helmet, Kyle? Please?” I put my helmet on my little brother. The outside edge balanced on the outside of his shoulders, the helmet teetering precariously since Hunter’s head couldn’t come close to filling the helmet.

I switched my pads onto Connor, who took off and ran around the locker area chanting, “Me footbah p’ayer.”

When I turned back to Hunter, I found he had dumped my helmet on the floor and was studying something inside it. “What dis?” he asked as he pulled at something. Hunter’s question caught Noah’s attention and he came over to look too. Connor noticed and came running. He dropped to the floor and crawled out from under my pads.

I looked in the helmet with the three boys. Hunter was picking and pulling at the piece of duct tape I had placed in the crown of my helmet. “No... No... Hunter, don’t pull that off.”

“Why here?” Hunter asked.

“What it say?” both twins added together.

“It has the number 82 on it,” I explained. “It helps me remember a good friend who isn’t around anymore.”

“82 was Greg Harrison’s number,” Dad added for Mom, Liz and Chris, who most likely didn’t know that. “How long have you kept his number in your helmet?”

“Since I started here,” I answered simply.

“That’s a nice thing to do,” Mom said. “Do the Harrisons know?”

“I told Gary,” I answered. “I assume Gary told his parents.”

“Is this Gary’s older brother, the one that Harrison Field is named for?” Chris Zimmerman asked. “What happened to him and how does Coach know him?”

“I’ll explain later, sweetie,” Liz said.

“Hey, look who I found hanging out in the lobby,” Trevor boomed, interrupting our reverie. He came in the locker room with his arm around Steph, followed by his parents and... Penny!

“Hey sweetie, I caught up with you,” Penny exclaimed as she hurried across the locker room and gave me a big hug.

“I’m glad you got inside to see this place,” I said as I returned the hug and kiss.

“Penny!” all three small ones shouted with glee when they spotted her. Curiosity about my pads, helmet and anything else football related was forgotten while they greeted my girlfriend.

Trevor and I introduced his parents and Steph to my parents. Noah, Connor and Hunter took the opportunity to explore while the older folks greeted each other and talked. Chip came in with his parents and kid sister Alexandra and joined our group. Chip introduced his family to mine. I introduced Penny to the Conwells and the Brintons.

The three boys were welcomed by my teammates as they visited around the locker room. My teammates were patient with the inquisitive young boys. The boys peppered my friends with “What dis?” and “What dat do?” My little brother brought down the room with his innocent question, “What dis pwotec?” as he pointed towards Joe Ricci’s cup.

“What does your little brother want to know, Coach?” Joe called over to me. Hunter repeated his question.

“Hunter wants to know what your cup protects,” I explained.

“Nothing!” some joker down a few stalls down yelled back before Joe could respond.
“Absolutely nothing.”

Joe didn’t miss a beat from the ribbing. “It protects my jewels, Hunter,” he patiently explained.

“Jewels?” Hunter replied, completely perplexed how a protective cup could protect things like Mom’s ear rings or bracelets.

“You’ll figure it out soon enough, little man,” Joe added.

“How...” Hunter started to ask before Yasin Clark walked into the locker room and announced, “Time for lunch, ladies. Let’s go.”

“Are you and the family joining us for lunch?” I asked Dad.

“Yes,” Dad replied before chuckling. “My confederates have been very thorough with their assistance. We will be joining you for lunch.”

“Who exactly are your confederates?” I queried.

“Anders Voight was my main collaborator,” Dad answered, “but Walt Caffrey’s assistance was invaluable.”

“Coach is involved?” I replied. “I didn’t expect that. I’m not surprised at Anders or Shawn.” I turned to Penny and asked, “I’m assuming Shawn was involved in getting you here.”

“Yes, Dave did enlist Shawn’s help to set this up,” Penny admitted. “I knew we needed to move the party this evening if we were going to get everyone time to do a nice dinner tonight.”

“I’m glad all of you set this up,” I said. “This is a great way to finish my career here at Beaver Stadium, with everyone I care about being a part of it.”

My family followed Chip’s family and Trevor’s family through the line. We found an empty table beside the table where Damian’s family and Chip’s family were sitting. I enjoyed eating with everyone. Noah, Connor and Hunter ended up sitting on laps since the Training Table did not stock booster seats. Noah ended up on my lap. Connor sat with Dad. Hunter ate from Mom’s lap.

I didn't know Damian's 17 year old brother Lucas well, though I heard Damian talk about him all the time. I knew Lucas played middle linebacker for his Strong Vincent Colonels.

"How did your playoff game go last weekend?" I asked. "Your brother and I have been so busy, we never had a chance to talk about it."

"Damian probably didn't want to think about it," Lucas replied. "The damn State College..." He looked around and realized where he was. "Maybe I shouldn't say this here but... the damn State College Little Lions kicked our asses. We lost 35-7."

"I'm sorry to hear that," I replied. "Isn't State College a Quad-A team? I thought your team was in AAA?"

"We moved up a level two seasons ago," Lucas answered.

"Are you a senior this year, Lucas?" I asked. "Are you planning on playing ball in college?"

"I'm a junior," Lucas answered. "I doubt I will get any offers the way my brother did. I don't expect to play after high school."

"Enjoy it while you can," I replied. "Whatever level you are at, it goes quick."

"My brother has been telling me that too," Lucas answered. He gave me a sly grin. "Typical sentiment from old farts like you and my brother."

"You'll learn, kid," I countered. "Wisdom comes with age."

I enjoyed lunch with Penny. She helped me take care of Noah, who was well behaved, as long as the food lasted. I let him down to join his brother and his young uncle. The three boys went visiting around the cafeteria as the team ate. Lunch ended too quickly. I would not have minded spending more time with Penny. That would have to wait until after the game.

The visiting families headed for the stadium while the team went back to the Lasch Building to dress for the game. I got dressed quickly and buried myself in the game plan. I needed to get my head in the game against Michigan State. The buses took the team over to the stadium around 1:30 that afternoon. Any lingering concern I may have had about getting my focus back was lost by the reception we received as we filed off the bus and headed into the locker room at the stadium.

Our undefeated status and number 1 ranking had our fans ramped up to fever pitch. Most of the starters on the team took extra time to shake hands, talk with and sign autographs for our fans who were lining the fences at our entrance to the stadium. The crowd was jazzed and we fed off their energy.

When we were settled in the locker room, I asked Anders Voight, "Did you get everything set up for us at the end of warm-ups?"

"You'll see the box behind the benches," Anders replied. "I checked ten minutes ago, it is ready for your guys."

"Thanks, man," I said. "I appreciate all the help you've given us."

"I wish my class had thought of something like this," Anders added. "It is very gracious of you guys to thank the fans this way."

"They supported us for four years," I replied. "They deserve to know how much we appreciate them."

The team headed outside to warm-up and prepare for our 3:30 pm contest. I caught some passes as Chip warmed up his arm for the afternoon. I got loose and prepared too. Our script of plays called for me to go deep to start our first possession. It wouldn't do to blow a hamstring on the first play of my last game in the stadium.

Coach Burton had given the seniors' families pre-game sideline passes, so they joined us as we prepared for our game. Mom, Dad, Liz, Chris, Penny, Noah, Connor and Hunter came down near the end of warm-ups to see the field. Dad brought his camera so we could get plenty of pictures.

Anders graciously agreed to take pictures of me with my family. I posed with my parents, with Penny, with the whole family and kneeling with the twins and Hunter. I gave the boys a ball so they could play with it. I taught them how to wrap the ball up with two hands so they didn't fumble.

Coach Burton came by while the boys were playing.

"Hey Coach, I've lined up your first two recruits for the class of 2027," I teased.

"Are these Andy's boys?" Coach asked as he stopped and kneeled down to the boys' level.

"The twins are Andy's," I explained. "The youngest is my little brother Hunter."

"Do you boys like football?" Coach asked the three boys.

"Yeah, we w'ove [love] it!" Noah replied enthusiastically. Connor and Hunter both seconded his enthusiasm.

"Would you boys like to play for Penn State the way Kyle does?" Coach asked.

“Yeah!” “Yeah... yeah!” all three boys agreed.

“I can see the headlines tomorrow,” Coach teased. “Penn State recruits four year olds. Enjoy the game, boys. Cheer for your uncle or big brother. We need him to play his best today.”

“You know you can count on me,” I added as he stood and headed down the field to visit another senior’s family.

“I always do, Coach,” Coach Burton called back.

I gave everyone hugs and kisses (except Chris) before my family and girl headed back to the stands while I gathered with the other seniors for photos the athletic department wanted of our senior class. After half a dozen photographers took our pictures, the seniors trooped en masse, over to the benches. I pulled the box Anders stashed for us to the bench and handed out the contents. Everyone took one of the proffered white T-shirts and pulled it over their uniforms.

The twenty-two seniors lined up shoulder to shoulder down the middle of the field as I signaled Anders to cue our music. Ben Witte had arranged for his girlfriend, who was a trumpet player in the Blue Band, to play a trumpet fanfare to get the crowd’s attention.

Ben’s girlfriend blew the fanfare as we lined up and waved to the gathering crowd. Each white T-shirt had an 18 inch high blue letter on the front and the back. The twenty-two of us spelled out “THANKS FOR EVERYTHING!” for anyone viewing us from the front.

The crowd laughed and gave us cheers and some applause. We linked arms and did our best to execute a wheel so we faced the opposite side of the stadium. The Blue Band had nothing to fear from our marching prowess. The back of the T-shirts spelled out, “FROM THE SENIOR CLASS.”

The crowd cheered louder as we waved to them. We unscrambled our formation and jogged for the tunnel, after about a minute, continuing to wave to the crowd as we left.

“That was fantastic, Ben,” I said as we went in tunnel. “Give your girlfriend a big kiss for me. She did a great job.”

“That was fantastic, Coach,” Coach Burton commented as we passed him heading for the locker room. “Seniors, that was a fantastic way to say thanks to all your fans. Good job!”

Anders collected the T-shirts as we came into the locker room. The team went ahead and finished dressing and preparing for our contest. Tanner Riggs had not passed all his concussion tests, so he was not permitted to play. Trevor, Damian and I discussed it with him earlier in the week. We asked the team to elect him an honorary captain for the

game. We gave Tanner the honor of acting as our spokesman for the game. It was a small compensation for missing his final game in Beaver Stadium, but it was the best we could do.

A larger than normal crowd filled the area behind the barricades in the tunnel as we left the locker room to take the field. The cheered us wildly. I tried to remember every sight and sound of my final game in this stadium.

The seniors took the front of the column of players, lined up four across. The athletic department dictated the seniors' positions, to facilitate us getting onto the field as our names were announced to the fans.

Just like last night, Mitch Jackson, our punter, was introduced first. Mitch charged onto the field to polite applause from our big crowd of fans. One by one, the non-starters like Ben Witte, Wyatt Smith and Wes Kennedy were introduced to the crowd. Cheers got louder as they worked their way through the senior starters.

Christian Hunsecker drew a rousing cheer as he trotted onto the field. Josh Bruno, our stand out middle linebacker, came next to sustained cheers. Shawn Byrd followed him out, to boisterous cheers from our fans. Shawn, a three year starter, had become a fan favorite since he passed Pete Harris to take second place on career interception list for our school half a dozen games ago. Shawn matched Neal Smith's 54 year old Penn State career record of nineteen interceptions last week at Wisconsin. I think every fan in the stadium, as well as everyone on the team, hoped Shawn would pick off another ball or two against Michigan State.

Trevor, Damian and I discussed our introductions with Coach Burton a couple days earlier. All three of us wanted to be introduced the same way we ran the team – together.

The announcer proclaimed, "Your captains of the #1 ranked Nittany Lions, Tailback, #34 Damian Thompson, Right Defensive End #98 Trevor Conwell and Wide Receiver, #87, Kyle Martin."

We looked at each other, smiled, locked arms and marched onto the field. The volume from the huge crowd rose to an ear-splitting crescendo as we walked onto the field. Emotion welled up in me. I glanced over at Damian. I saw a tear roll down his cheek. Trevor was batting his eyes too, fighting his emotions.

We craned our necks, staring at the crowd as they stood and cheered. Trevor, Damian and I released each other's arms, separated a little and acknowledged the tribute with waves. After a few moments we jogged over to our sideline.

Coach Burton met us. "That was a beautiful tribute, guys," he said, "but it is time to focus on Michigan State. They are standing in our way and preventing us getting to Phoenix. What are you guys going to do about that?"

“Kick some ass!” Trevor growled.

“Hell yeah!” Damian agreed.

“You better call that first play we practiced all week, Coach,” I added. “I guarantee I will make the Spartans pay dearly with it.”

“I’m counting on it, Coach,” Coach Burton replied.

“You ready to go, Tanner?” I asked our honorary captain and spokesman.

“Let’s do this,” he agreed.

Trevor, Damian, Tanner and I trotted out to the middle of the field to meet Michigan State’s captains. The Spartan captain called tails for the coin toss. The coin landed on heads. Tanner told the ref we would like to receive the kickoff.

The sky was overcast and the temperature was around 50 degrees as we started the game. There was a strong 25-30 mile an hour wind was blowing from the west or southwest. The Spartans decided to defend the Mount Nittany end of the stadium so they could have the wind at their back in the second and fourth quarters.

“Take care of the ball,” I counseled Bruce MacCauley before he took the field to accept the kickoff. “We don’t need a big play from you. We need you to make sure that the Spartans don’t get a big play.”

“I know, Coach,” Bruce replied. “Coach Ferguson told me the same thing. Safety first.”

The Spartans kicker boomed the ball into the wind. The ball died and settled to earth well short of Bruce. John Crosby fielded the ball at our 17. He advanced a dozen yards before the Spartans tackled him.

Our offense huddled up. Coach Burton kept his resolve and called the deep pass we had practiced for our first play. I lined up in my normal split end spot. Damian and Bob stayed in for extra pass protection. Brian, Christian and I all ran deep routes. I faked a hitch a dozen yards down field as Chip pumped the ball. The cornerback bit hard on the fake. I streaked downfield as the safety hustled over to cover me.

The safety managed to stay with me as I streaked downfield. Chip knew I had a four inch height advantage on the safety, so he drilled the ball to me. The ball was a little long so I kicked into high gear and ran under it, grabbing it out of the air just out of reach of the safety.

The safety grabbed for me as I twisted and tried to break free from his tackle attempt. I slipped loose and ran for the end zone. The time I needed to get free let other Spartans catch up. They took me down about five yards shy of the goal line.

Chip lobbed the ball into my corner of the end zone on the next play. I out jumped the DBs and pulled down a touchdown. Jared came in and drilled the ball through the uprights. Score: Penn State-7, Michigan State-0

Jared Gray got some leg into the kickoff. It sailed through the end zone with the aid of the wind. Michigan State took the ball at their 20 yard line. Their tailback took the handoff and blasted off tackle to the strong side for a four yard gain. The Spartans tried to fool us on the next play.

They faked a dive up the middle while the QB dropped back to throw. Coach C had Josh Bruno coming on a run blitz. Josh blew up the running back and pushed him into the backfield, forcing the QB to scramble away. The QB was flushed straight into Trevor, who was looping wide on his pass rush. Trevor stripped at the ball as he dropped the quarterback. The QB kept possession but lost 9 yards.

Coach C turned our linemen loose on the third down and fifteen play. Trevor, Bill, Mahmoud and Mike collapsed the pocket, forcing the QB to throw the ball quickly to avoid another sack or worse. The QB put some velocity on the ball as he tried to throw it out of bounds. The wind caught it and let it hang. Shawn Byrd coolly judged the flight of the ball and snagged it. No Spartan was able to touch Shawn before he ran the ball back to the end zone.

The football savvy crowd didn't really need the announcer to tell them. "That was Senior Shawn Byrd's twentieth interception of his college career. This sets the career interception record for Penn State." They continued cheering after Shawn trotted off the field with the ball. They wouldn't stop until he stepped onto the field again and acknowledged their thanks.

Jared came out and hit the PAT. Score: Penn State-14, Michigan State-0

Our defense held Michigan State to three plays on their next drive. They punted the ball back to Brian. The wind killed the punt. Brian managed to run forward, field the ball on the run and pick up half a dozen yards before he was tackled.

Michigan State tried to help the two defensive backs covering me by adding a third guy deep on my side. That left Brian Henson one on one. Chip had no trouble exploiting the defense. We used six plays to move down the field. I caught a fifteen yarder early in the drive. Chip and Brian finished it off with a 37 yard catch and run for a TD.

Things did not improve for Michigan State. Our fired up defense stopped them cold and they were forced to punt the ball back to us after three plays. Our third drive was just as productive as the first two. I made a big play on the first play of the drive. I was in the slot, running a slant. Chip hit me in stride. I streaked 34 yards before a couple Spartans took me down. All our big pass plays forced the Spartans into a Cover-3 defense. Damian and Charlie exploited the weakened run defense.

We marched smartly down the field. By the eighth play, Michigan State cheated some defenders forward to help support the run defense. That was all we needed. This time Chip found Christian in single coverage and hit him for a long pass. Christian slipped free from a weak tackle and streaked into the end zone. Jared completed the PAT. Score: Penn State-28, Michigan State-0

We were ahead twenty-eight points and four minutes remained in the first quarter. Some of us from the offense were commenting on how soon Coach Burton would pull the first string. That had never happened in a first quarter in my memory.

Coach Caffrey overheard our conversation. "Relax, guys," Coach Caffrey told us. "It's Senior Day. Coach Burton is NOT going to sit the seniors down this soon." He chuckled. "He probably will call for a lot more running plays, but you guys will stay on the field."

"Thanks for the update, Coach," I replied.

Michigan State finally got a first down. They also fumbled the ball away two plays later. Our offense took the ball on the Spartans' 39 yard line. Coach Burton stuck almost entirely to running plays. Six plays later Damian pounded the ball into the end zone.

Michigan State probably hoped things would go better for them when the second quarter started now that they had the wind at their back. It didn't. They held the ball for eight plays, but didn't connect on any deep passes or manage to get the ball across midfield. They were forced to punt the ball back to us. Their punter boomed the ball down the field, forcing Brian to let the ball go. Michigan State downed the ball on our 9 yard line.

Our offensive line powered our drive away from danger at our end zone. Damian punished the Spartan defenders on every carry as he gouged out yards for us. Seven straight runs pushed us up near midfield. Michigan State adjusted by bringing their defenders in closer.

On first down and ten at our 49 yard line, Damian bulled ahead for three yards, brought down by half the Spartan defenders. Damian and Chip bobbled the handoff on the next play. The weak side linebacker sliced in, trying to strip the ball from my big roommate. Damian managed to get the ball under control and bull ahead towards the line of scrimmage. We lost two yards.

On third down and eight yards to go, Coach Burton called for a hitch route ten yards deep. The cornerback covering me was giving me that much of a cushion. We expected it to be an easy pitch and catch for a first down. The cornerback misjudged me when he went for the tackle and I broke loose. I streaked downfield, stiff arming the safety as I went. He didn't stop me but he slowed me down enough to allow the cornerback covering Christian to catch me before I ran into the end zone. He dropped me at Michigan State's 8 yard line.

The shortened field helped Michigan State's defense immensely. Damian and our offensive line pounded ahead for three yards. Wes Kennedy came in for Brian on the next play. The Spartans held Damian to a two yard gain.

Brian came back in. He took my split end spot. I lined up in the slot on the weak side beside Brian. At the snap, Brian ran a post route towards the middle of the back of the end zone. I ran for the flag, almost parallel to the goal line. Brian and his defender neatly brushed aside the cornerback assigned to me. I reached over my left shoulder, caught Chip's pass, and ducked into the end zone untouched.

Brian, Chip, Damian, Bob and Christian mobbed me to celebrate my touchdown. I knew then that it was probably my last TD in Beaver Stadium. Coach Burton hated to humiliate an opponent. We were ahead 41-0 with over ten minutes left in the first half. We would not be throwing much after this.

The Nittany Lion gave me a big hug as I trotted by back to our bench. "It's been real great, Kyle," Patrick whispered to me as we hugged. "It's been a real pleasure."

"Thanks for all you support, Patrick," I whispered back. Patrick held my hand aloft in triumph before letting me jog back to the bench. Jared Gray came in and booted the PAT cleanly. Score: Penn State-42, Michigan State-0

Michigan State managed a semblance of a drive, picking up two first downs and advancing almost to midfield before being stopped. They punted the ball back to us again. The wind aided punt rocketed into the end zone, giving us possession on our 20 yard line.

Wes Kennedy came in for Brian Henson. Everyone in the stadium knew what that meant. We were running the ball. It turned out, we ran exclusively. First and ten, second and long, second and short, even third and long – we ran it. Damian, Charlie and our offensive line strung together a twelve play drive, moving us down to Michigan State's 22 yard line, and using most of the remaining time in the first half. Damian was stopped on the final play of the drive when he gained six yards on third and seven to go. Jared Gray came in and kicked the field goal. Score: Penn State-45, Michigan State-0

Michigan State used the last two minutes to try to score, but our defense held them off. The team marched into the locker room buoyant at the prospect of playing for the national championship. Our berth in Phoenix was thirty minutes away.

Coach Burton announced, "The first string is done for now. Keep your equipment handy. You are likely to be called on to finish out the fourth quarter. Keep your mind on the game, Ones."

Jon Stafford, the second string and eventually Bob Huber and the third string did a decent job protecting our big lead in the second half. They added a touchdown and a field goal

to our total in the third quarter. Michigan State managed ten points against our second string. Jon unfortunately mishandled a snap at the start of the fourth quarter, giving Michigan State possession of the ball on our 22 yard line. They were able to stuff the ball in for another TD.

Bob Huber, ET LeBlanc and Grant Turner took our team on a long, time consuming drive after Michigan's TD. They scored a field goal on the drive, but more importantly they ran the clock down to 4:37. Score: Penn State-58, Michigan State-17

Coach Burton sent our first string defense out for their curtain call after we kicked off to the Spartans. Our guys played prevent defense, satisfied to slow down the Spartans' progress and to let the clock run. The Spartans were moving the ball, albeit slowly. On the seventh play of the drive, Trevor and Bill Daugherty broke loose and flushed the Michigan State QB from the pocket. The kid threw a wounded duck of a pass which sailed way past the intended receiver. Matt Frye snagged the ball and returned it a dozen yards before any Spartans could catch him.

Coach Caffrey shouted from the sideline, "First String Offense, take us home!" 1:27 was left on the clock and Michigan State had used all but one of their time outs.

Damian and Wes Kennedy took turns plowing the ball into the middle of Michigan State's tired defensive line. The Spartans burnt their last timeout after the first run. Wes carried the ball forward six yards to give us a new set of downs. I assisted as I could by blocking, not that it was really necessary on the outside.

With the clock at 0:47, Damian blasted ahead one more time for a couple yards. We finished the game with Chip doing a kneel down and let the clock run down to 0:00. My teammates and I milled around the center of the field congratulating each other and celebrating our victory.

I was surprised when the non-starter seniors and the defensive seniors joined us on the field. Anders Voight followed with a big box and an explanation.

"Coach Burton liked the seniors' tribute to the fans so much he wants you guys to do it again," Anders said.

Almost on cue, the stadium announcer asked, "On behalf of the university, I would like to thank everyone for attending today's game. Before you go, the Nittany Lions' senior class has something to say to everyone. Please direct your attention to the center of the field."

The non-seniors cleared out of the way. We seniors hurried to find our correct T-shirt and yank it over our uniforms and pads. One trumpet from the Blue Band played a fanfare to herald us as we formed into a ragged line. A second trumpet joined the first as the fanfare repeated. Anders looked our line over, discovering that GJ and Brendan were

swapped. We spelled out “THANK SFOR EVERYTHNG!” GJ and Brendan swapped spots as more horns joined the fanfare.

We were ready when the Blue Band broke into the Penn State Fight Song. The big crowd, which had been heading for exits, paused and turned back to the field. All of us waved as we displayed our T-shirts. After about thirty seconds, Trevor called for everyone to link arms and wheel around to display the other side of our shirts. The Nittany Lion, followed by a group of cheer leaders, joined us at the center of the field. The Lion went down the line, hugging each of us and handing us a bag of Tostitos chips.

The Fiesta Bowl and BCS Championship Game is sponsored by Tostitos. The cheerleaders came down the line, hugging and kissing our cheeks.

“On behalf of the athletic department, the university, the alumni and the fans, I want to thank each senior for his efforts over the last four or five years,” the stadium announcer proclaimed. “I have three more words for everyone... ON TO PHOENIX!”

That announcement drew a huge cheer from the crowd. My friends and I waved to the crowd and shook our bags of chips. We WERE going to Phoenix in January. No one could deny us now. We were ranked #1 and the only undefeated major college team in the country.

The cheering stopped as the Blue Band reached the end of their song. The crowd turned and headed for the exits again. My friends and I milled around for a minute or two, congratulating each other and celebrating. It didn’t take long for the finality of this to hit each of us. This was the last time we would ever be together on this field for a football game.

My emotions were a mess. I was ecstatic that we were reaching our vision of playing for the national championship. Realizing that my time playing in front of these wonderful fans was over produced a sense of melancholy. Thankfully Penny and my family rescued me before I could get too morose. Their sideline passes were good post-game as well as pre-game.

“That was wonderful, honey,” Penny exclaimed as she hugged me when we met along the side of the field. I couldn’t enjoy the sensations much, given that I was still suited up for football. Still, it was great to have her here. “You played a great game.”

“It was a very impressive victory, son,” Dad added. Mom congratulated me too. Noah, Connor and Hunter all demanded hugs from me. Liz and Chris offered congratulations too.

The twins and Hunter whined they couldn’t see anything as my family, my girlfriend and I conversed. I gave Connor a boost up on my shoulders. Dad picked up Hunter and perched him on his shoulders too. Chris gamely offered a seat to Noah. I doubt he realized how heavy my nephews were getting. Mom had reported via e-mail a couple

weeks ago that Connor weighed in at 40.5 pounds and Noah 42 pounds at their check-up a few weeks ago.

Mike Montgomery, from the Lancaster Intelligencer Journal/New Era, found me while I was relaxing with Penny and my family. “Kyle, would you and your family be willing to do a joint interview with Christian and his family this afternoon?” Mike asked politely after he greeted us. We readily agreed to the interview.

Christian, his mom Evelyn, his dad Randall and brother Josh were about twenty yards downfield on the same side of the field as us. I introduced Christian’s parents to my own. Surprisingly, they seemed to know each other already.

I enjoyed the interview with Mike, as always. He asked Christian and me about our prospects, which we liked. Why not? We had beaten every comer, including three top ten teams this season. Mike asked us about our plans for the future too. I told Mike about student teaching in Philly. Both Christian and I speculated about our chances in the NFL.

Mike was nice enough to include Josh in the discussion. “How do you like your team’s chances in the playoffs, Joshua?” Mike asked.

“We’re going all the way to the PIAA championship game,” Josh answered.

“Not if my Wolverines have anything to do with it,” I teased in response.

“I know, you’ll be on the sidelines coaching against us,” Josh countered. “We expect that. Don’t forget, I have been blabbing about everything I know about Dave and Matt. I learned some useful things working out with all of you in the summer.”

“I have confidence in my Wolverines, Josh,” I replied.

“We’ll see about that on the field,” I countered. “I haven’t looked at the playoff brackets. When do our teams meet if both keep winning?”

“The weekend of November 30th,” Josh answered.

“I’ll see you then,” I agreed. Mike Montgomery was furiously taking notes as Josh and I verbally sparred. “You aren’t going to quote us, are you, Mike?”

“Not word for word,” Mike said. “I just want to get the sense of your relationship – friendly, but definite rivals.” Mike directed his attention back to Josh. “What are your plans when your football season is done?”

“I graduate from high school on Dec 21st,” Josh replied. He smiled at me and added, “I plan to play for the state championship on the 22nd. After that, I get a holiday break and start classes here at Penn State on January 4th. I guess I will get to watch MY team play for the national championship after my first day of classes.”

“You are definitely signing your letter of intent to play for Penn State?” Mike asked.

“I’m registered for my spring classes already,” Josh replied. “I think it’s safe to say I will sign the letter of intent as soon as the NCAA allows me to.”

“Let me get a few photos of everyone for the article,” Mike asked. We posed for him – Christian and me, my family with me, Randall, Evelyn and Josh with Christian and finally a picture of everyone together. Christian headed for the locker room after Mike was done. His family headed back to their car.

My family stayed around as Jeff Morgan from the Inquirer interviewed me. ESPN and about four other news companies hit me up for interviews before I was able to head inside. Penny met up with Steph. The girls, along with my family, would meet us outside the Lasch Building after I was done. It was nearly eight o’clock by the time I got showered, changed and did my captain’s duties at the post game press conference.

One question from the press conference bothered me. A reporter I didn’t know asked me, “Do you think your down day will affect your chances for the Heisman?”

“Is six catches for 166 yards and two touchdowns in one half a down day?” I responded. “If Heisman voters think that is a down day, so be it. Our team’s goal was to win a football game, not help me impress the voters. We achieved our goal today, just like we did every other game this season. The result is that our team is likely to play in the BCS championship game in January. All honors and recognitions are secondary to my team reaching its goal.”

I was surprised when I met my family and the rest of our dinner group. Not only were my roommates and their families there, but Christian and his family and Coach Caffrey and his wife Karen and their children Jon and Emily were joining us. I guess I shouldn’t have been surprised. Dad had helped with the Wolverines Football Boosters occasionally and had known Coach back home.

Girlfriends were included in gathering. Steph was with Trevor, Penny was with me and Amanda was with Chip. I was surprised that the Thompsons’ invited Melanie to join Damian instead of Billy. I thought his parents knew about his sexual orientation.

Steph volunteered to drive Penny and me with her and Trevor since my families’ van was full. The caravan of cars pulled out of the lot at the Lasch Building and followed Coach Caffrey down to College Avenue and then north on Route 26.

The restaurant the group was heading for was the Olde New York Taproom. It was about three miles north of State College. I wasn’t familiar with the place. It was farther out of town than most college students went for food. There were so many good places in downtown State College that we didn’t need to venture that far normally.

The Olde New York Taproom had a long bar along one side of the room and a good sized dining area. Nearly half the dining room was marked as reserved for our group. The crowd was older, with few college age kids. The hostess, who turned out to be one of the owners, conducted us to our tables.

My family got one long table. We interspersed the young kids among the rest of us. I ended up with Hunter between me and Mom. Noah was between Liz and me. Dad sat across the table from Mom with Connor between him and Penny. Trevor, Steph and Trevor's parents sat at the table to our right. The Thompsons, the Brintons, and Caffreys took tables near ours.

A small cohort of waitresses joined us to take our drink orders and to distribute menus. Penny and I decided to try the day's special, a German dark lager. The waitress checked Penny's and my IDs to see that we were legal. Dad stayed out of Mom's doghouse by ordering a Coke. Mom and the younger kids had the same. Liz and Chris ordered iced tea. The waitress returned a few minutes later with our drinks and to take our orders.

The menu was an unusual mix of German and American food. I went with the Badischer Schnitzel. It was a breaded veal cutlet with a mushroom and sour cream sauce served over egg noodles. Penny ordered more conventionally – Chicken Florentine. The boys chose the hamburgers and fries. That was best. They could learn about German cooking later when their palates were more refined. Dad ordered the New York Strip Steak. Mom had Salmon over Linguine. Chris followed Dad's lead and ordered a steak too. My sister, Liz chose an unusual and intriguing sounding burger – a Hawaiian. It was a half pound burger topped with ham, a pineapple slice and duck sauce.

Dad ordered a variety of appetizers for our table – Käse und Wurst [cheese & bratwurst], Buffalo Wings, Potato Pancakes, Sausage Sampler and Curry Wurst. The Curry Wurst and my lager were a tasty combination. The twins were wild about the potato pancakes. The pancakes came with sour cream and apple sauce.

Jon Caffrey slipped over to my table after we finished our appetizers and before our entrees were served. Jon peppered me with questions about the game that afternoon. I answered his queries. I learned a little more about Jon. He proudly told me about his football season. He went out for middle school football this season. He won the quarterback spot for his team. He also played some defensive back too. I wished Jon luck with his football future. Jon headed back to his own table when our dinners arrived.

My Baden style schnitzel was quite good. Penny liked her chicken. The twins and Hunter liked their burgers, but they were too much for the young boys. Two and three year olds can't handle half pound burgers. Fortunately Mom and Dad understood that as soon the burgers were served. They cut the burgers in quarters and let the boys work their way through them a little at a time. Noah and Connor managed to down two quarters.

Hunter ran out of steam soon after he started his second quarter. Actually he completely ran down. He didn't have his normal nap in the afternoon. He was up a half hour past

his normal bed time. The tired little guy laid his head down on the table and fell asleep as the rest of us finished our dinner.

Mom and Dad had no problem getting rid of the extra hamburger quarters. That isn't surprising since we had eight big football layers present (or nine if you counted Jon Caffrey, who was starting to put the food away like a teenager, which he would be in a few months).

All the families agreed the Olde New York Taproom was an excellent choice for our dinner. I inquired to Dad, "How did you ever find this place from Lancaster County? I've never heard of it until this weekend."

"I had help," Dad replied. "Your coach... Walt over there, was kind enough to suggest this place and to make arrangements for our party tonight."

"Thanks, Coach, you recommended an excellent restaurant," I called across the aisle to Coach Caffrey's table. Trevor, Damian, Christian and Chip seconded my thanks.

The families lingered as we finished eating. The evening together was excellent. Eventually our dinner together had to end. Noah and Connor were fading. I ended up holding my sleeping little brother as the evening ended. Penny and I helped get the sleepy boys out to the car when we were finished.

The dinner was a fabulous success. Everyone thanked Coach Caffrey and Dad for organizing the evening. Damian headed back to Mel and Sara's apartment to catch up with Billy and Sara. Christian and Bev headed back to Christian's parents' hotel. The Conwells, Thompsons and my family headed back to Toftrees for the evening. Trevor, Steph, Chip, Amanda, Penny and I went back to campus

All of us made a pit stop at our apartment and then went over to the party at Dave McCall's place. Dave shared his townhouse style apartment with Matt Frye, Joe Ricci and Bruce MacCauley. The party had been rolling for an hour or so when we arrived. Dave, Matt, Joe and Bruce organized things pretty much the same as my roommates and I did other weekends.

Penny and I relaxed and talked with my friends. I had a couple more beers during the evening. Penny limited herself to one. The party was an enjoyable way to relax after a hard day's work. Penny and I left the party around 11:30 that evening and headed back to my apartment.

Penny grabbed a quick shower after we got back to freshen up. I was still clean from my post-game shower earlier in the evening. Penny and I cuddled and made out a bit before we got to the serious fun for the evening. Strangely, neither of us was as frantic as usual about our first coupling. It was wonderful, even if I didn't last as long as I wanted.

We cuddled in the afterglow. "God, I love you completely," I gasped between breaths.

“I love you totally, Kyle,” Penny agreed between small kisses.

“Fifty-six more days and we will be together all the time,” I added. “I can’t wait for this semester to be over and us to be together the way we belong.”

“We’ve made it through the hard part,” Penny responded. “I didn’t know if this could happen last spring when we ended up in bed together.” Penny gave me another, more passionate kiss. “I’m the luckiest girl in the world to have found you again.”

“No luckier than me,” I responded. I gave Penny my best, most searing kiss. She responded. Soon we were making love again, slower and with more passion than the first time. I truly was the luckiest guy on the face of the earth.

Penny and I woke up about eight o’clock on Sunday morning. We had time to make love one more time before we got showered and ready for the day. We met my family at the Waffle Shop downtown at 9:30 for breakfast. The twins and Hunter all had the strawberry waffles. The boys had whipped cream and strawberries spread from ear to ear. I ordered the steak and eggs breakfast. Penny had the Belgian waffle.

Chris Zimmerman was in a great mood. Last night was the first time he was permitted to have a sleep over with my sister. Knowing Liz’s ardor for sex, I was sure it wasn’t the first time the two had made love, but it most likely was the most extended time together they had since they started dating earlier in the fall.

Liz and Chris decided to walk back to campus with Penny and me while Mom and Dad drove the smaller kids over to my apartment so they could pick up Penny’s overnight bag. Chris was particularly anxious to see campus. He had been accepted by early decision by Penn State, but would start on our Altoona campus for his first year or two before he got onto main campus. Liz had sent in her college applications to Columbia, Princeton and Penn. She was hoping for a favorable reply from Princeton. That school was her first choice.

We met Mom, Dad and the kids at the front door to my apartment. This was the first time my parents had seen my abode. The other times my parents visited campus had been on Saturdays after games and my roommates had been getting ready for parties. That wasn’t the time to invite parents to see your apartment.

I invited my family inside. The apartment was deserted, as I expected. Damian was still at Billy’s. Trevor and Steph along with Chip and Amanda, were downtown getting breakfast. Mom was impressed.

“I’m surprised four boys can keep an apartment this well,” Mom commented as she looked around the downstairs.

“We’re not boys anymore,” I answered. “The apartment isn’t spotless, but we’re not slobs either. We can look after ourselves.”

“Have confidence in your son, Sharon,” Penny added. “I wouldn’t be sharing an apartment with your son unless he was housebroken.”

“Housebroken? I most certainly am housebroken,” I insisted. “Why don’t you show Mom and the rest of the family around, honey? I want to talk to Dad privately for a moment.”

“Sure, I can do that, sweetie,” Penny agreed.

Dad and I stepped outside on the porch while Penny led the tour.

“What’s up, son?” Dad asked.

“I wanted to warn you about a couple things,” I explained. “I will have some charges on my credit card for some other awards than the Campbell dinner that you’re coming to. Coach Burton gave me the heads up that I’m likely to have some other awards events to attend in the next few weeks.”

“Do you know any details yet?” Dad asked.

“Not yet,” I replied. “Coach tells me I will find out more next weekend, after ESPN announces the award finalists.”

“Should we be watching ESPN that evening?” Dad asked.

“Coach Burton thinks so,” I answered. “He expects me to be nominated for the Biletnikoff award, at minimum. That’s the one for...”

“I get that one, Kyle,” Dad said. “I remember seeing Biletnikoff on TV playing for John Madden’s Raiders when I was a kid. That’s the receiver’s award?”

“It is,” I agreed. “I’m on the watch list for a bunch of other awards, but I doubt I’ll get any of those.”

“I guess we’ll see how your chances are then,” Dad replied. “I’ll record the BCS Standings show. We can burn it to CD later. It will make a nice keepsake.”

“There is another thing,” I added. “I expect to have a large charge on my credit card soon. Can you and Mom talk about which jeweler would be best for me?”

“Jeweler? Are you certain, Kyle?” Dad asked, staring intensely into my eyes. I didn’t blink. “I’ve heard you say, ‘I want to spend the rest of my life with this girl,’ numerous times.”

“I’m as sure about this as when I chose my career path,” I replied. “I know I made the right choice there. I’m as certain as when I chose to play for Penn State. That was the right decision too. Penny is the right woman for me.”

“Does she feel the same way?” Dad asked.

“Yes, she does,” I answered. “She wouldn’t have considered us sharing an apartment if I wasn’t serious. Our biggest concern last spring was whether we could make it through this year of college doing a long distance relationship. We have. I know we will be compatible when we are sharing an apartment and can spend time together.”

“OK, I believe you,” Dad replied. “How soon do you plan to shop for a ring?”

“I might start after Thanksgiving, if I have time,” I replied. “More likely I will be looking over the Christmas holidays.”

“Do you know when you’ll be home for the holidays yet?” Dad asked.

“No, I’ll find out after we get our official invitation to the BCS Championship Game,” I explained. “Finals are over on the 21st. I expect to be home after they’re done until a day or two after Christmas. Coach Burton usually has us at our bowl game site about eight or nine days before the bowl. I remember Zack Hayes leaving for our team’s last championship game the day after Christmas.”

“It will be nice to have you home for Christmas,” Dad said. It’s been too long...”

Mom, Penny and the rest of the family came out the front door. Penny was carrying her overnight bag.

“Too long for what?” Mom inquired.

“... since Kyle was home for Christmas.” Dad finished.

“You’ll be home for Christmas?” Penny exclaimed before giving me a big hug. “That’s wonderful!”

“We need to get moving Dan,” Mom said. “We promised Jim that we would have Penny back to Paradise by noon. You know how traffic can get around Harrisburg.”

“Yes dear, you’re right,” Dad said.

“I’ll be home for dinner on Wednesday night,” I said. “My last class lets out at 2:15 pm. I should make it through rush hour traffic before dinner. Penny, what time are you getting home?”

“I’m getting a ride with Will and Abby,” Penny replied. “Your brother has to teach a late afternoon physics class, so we’re guessing we’ll be home later in the evening.”

“I can’t wait,” I declared. “I love you.”

“Love you too, Kyle,” Penny answered.

The rest of my family said good bye. I waved as Penny walked off with my family. Three more days and we would have four days to be together. Life is good!

(To be continued)