

THE
COACH'S WIFE
BARBARA CASEY



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By

Barbara Casey

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A Novel By

Barbara Casey

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this book to my parents,
George and Charlotte Woods,
who shared in the joy of winning the
NCAA National Basketball Championship;

and to all the loyal fans who have
yet to experience that joy.

FOREWORD

There has probably never been a time when I didn't enjoy sports on some level. As a young child it was with the innocence and wide-eyed excitement that goes hand-in-hand with competing and winning a prize. Later, the rewards were less material and somehow more spiritual in nature. When I married Willis Casey, however, my enjoyment and appreciation of sports—especially collegiate sports—took on a totally new and deeper meaning. I could no longer be satisfied to just sit on the sidelines and cheer. I quickly became aware that

there were other factors involved in the so-called game of sports—factors that played a critical role in the overall scheme of things as they existed within a university.

Willis was the director of athletics at North Carolina State University in Raleigh. It was through his eyes I learned that collegiate sports was not “just a game,” and that a winning athletics program was much more far-reaching than I had ever imagined. It influenced things like student enrollment, scholarships, donations, accreditations, standing within the community, and even the personal development of young men and women.

As I became more involved, I began to experience the ever-changing and often volatile emotions that existed with each game played, or each event. If a team won, the exhilaration was unreal; but if it lost, there was only the feeling of despair. With time I adjusted. I allowed myself to be interested, but not so emotionally involved that it spilled into all the other areas of my life. I thought I was in control. Nothing, however, prepared me for that season when the men’s basketball team went to Albuquerque and won the NCAA National Championship.

Under the direction of a highly emotional, super-charged Italian coach by the

name of Jim Valvano, this team game after game seemed to almost lose, only to pull out a win in the last seconds of regular play or in overtime. It managed to survive the regular season; and as underdog, the Wolfpack team took not only its fans but the entire country by storm and marched into "The Pit" as it was called at the University of Nevada to pull off one of the biggest upsets in the history of collegiate basketball. It is still talked about today as though it just happened.

Willis and I were sitting in the stands at center court that final game as we watched the winning dunk shot. The entire coliseum exploded. Willis pulled me through masses of cheering fans, past the security guards and onto the court. The Wolfpack players were laughing and crying and piling on top of each other in a heap. Coach V, as he was affectionately called, was running around wild-eyed, flailing his arms, searching for someone to hug. He found Willis. Then he found me. The overwhelming joy of the Wolfpack fans was so strong that time seemed to momentarily stop so that the enormity of what had just occurred could catch up with reality.

The Coach's Wife is not reality. Nor is it a replay of an unbelievably thrilling event that took place during Willis's tenure as

athletics director. It is a story that is simply the product of my imagination brought to life on a printed page. Within that story, however, is a spirit that reflects something that is real—that one glorious moment when winning the NCAA Basketball National Championship became a reality for the Wolfpack.

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*Everything you can imagine is
real.*

Pablo Picasso

Prologue

Marla Connors wrapped her full-length, black mink coat tightly around her and sat back in the rich brocade chair—one of a matching pair—that faced the ivory damask sofa. She had chosen this particular chair in the lobby because it allowed her full view of the front entrance of the hotel, as well as the bank of brass-framed elevators located off to the right. She watched a group of noisy Coyote supporters get off one of the elevators, all of them wearing red and white and carrying an assortment of pompoms, banners, and other displays of school spirit to wave during the basketball game. Several other people, also Coyote fans who had waited to see if State would make it to the NCAA semifinals, were trying to check in at the hotel desk.

Even though Marla could easily see anyone coming

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into or leaving the lobby of the hotel through the massive glass doors, as well as anyone using the elevators, she for the most part was hidden from view by a tall palm and several smaller potted plants placed around the seating area. And even if someone did notice her sitting there, no one would recognize her—not with the wig. The shoulder-length blond hair and heavy makeup, as well as the coat, made her look older than her thirty-three years.

Another group of loud fans clamored out of an elevator. Charlie Morgan, the new athletics director, and his assistant, Ray Knox, were among them, as well as Stuart Simmons, one of the assistant coaches. The State University Coyote team was scheduled for the first game of the semifinals in the NCAA National Championship basketball playoffs, and many of the fans had already started drinking. Their boisterous and obnoxious behavior was only a mild indication of what they would be like during and after the game.

He entered through the glass doors and stood for a moment in the sunlight that was scattered on the thick maroon carpet. Tall, muscular, erect, his sixty-year-old body looked like a poster ad expounding the benefits of keeping in shape. He had probably been doing a pre-game interview outside for one of the television networks. His thick graying hair was slightly wind-blown giving him a boyish look, and he still had on the sweats he had worn to practice that morning. Marla crossed her legs and when she did the coat opened slightly, exposing her bare leg and thigh. She smoothed the blond hair with her hand and licked her lips. Other than that, she

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made no movement.

He would see her. He always did.

She watched him as he glanced around the different seating areas in the lobby while retorting with his famous one-liners to the team's well-wishers who were waiting to board the buses that would take them to the coliseum.

"How'd practice go, Coach?"

"Too bad it wasn't the finals. We would have won."

Everyone laughed. He kept moving forward toward the elevators, all the while glancing around, searching.

"Hello, Coach." A heavy-set woman wearing bright pink lipstick and dark blue eye shadow came out of the crowd and kissed him on the mouth. The fans nearby hooted and did various imitations of the coyote howl.

"How are you, Jean?" He pulled away from her, not waiting for an answer.

Someone yelled from the crowd, "Hey, Jean, how about spreading some of that over here." There were more coyote howls.

"Coach, is Miller going to be able to play with that groin pull?"

"If Doc says he can. If Doc says he can't, we'll get a new Doc."

Again, laughter from the crowd. They loved him—even when he didn't win. But especially when he did. The Co-Yotes, that loyal, obsessed group of fans who followed and supported the university's basketball team, couldn't seem to get enough of his New York sense of humor and street-smart style—and the fact that he not only was a winner, he was a flashy winner. Now, after

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twenty years as head basketball coach at State, he was still winning. And as far as the fans were concerned, Neal Connors was a water-walker.

And then he saw her.

His eyes lingered for a moment on her exposed leg and followed it up to where the coat once again concealed her bare skin. Slowly she stood up, deliberately readjusted her coat, and walked toward the elevators.

Neal tossed out several more wisecracks as he made his way through the crowd. He reached the private elevator just as the doors were closing. He shoved his hand between the doors, and they reopened.

“Going up?”

She was alone.

“Yes, but this is a private elevator. It only stops at the Presidential suite.”

He entered and the doors quietly closed behind him.

“I don't mind if the President doesn't.”

He moved toward her until she was pressed against the reflective glass wall of the elevator. Then he gently cupped her face in his hands and kissed her fully on the lips. As his tongue explored the depths of her mouth, his hands slowly moved from her face and down her neck, parting the folds of the coat. His hands continued searching, caressing her soft skin. He pushed the coat off her shoulders and onto the floor, fully exposing her naked body. His face burned with excitement and desire. He kissed her throat and breasts, and as he did, his fingers stroked her clitoris, at first tentatively, and then, when he felt the warm wetness, with more urgency, thrusting them deep into her vagina.

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She untied the single drawstring holding up his sweat pants and slipped her hand inside, feeling his stomach and thigh and then the penis she knew and loved. He was hard—aroused for her. The elevator stopped, but before the doors opened, Neal reached over and held the “close door” button. With his other hand he pushed his penis into her warm vagina, groaning in ecstasy.

Marla began biting and sucking his neck, his shoulder, his arm to keep from screaming with pleasure. And then she felt the explosion of warm liquid blending with her own. She threw back her head, unable to control her emotions. Neal immediately covered her mouth with his own, stifling her scream, and thrust forcefully the last of his pleasure into her body.

The buzzer sounded.

Someone else was wanting to use the private elevator.

Carefully Neal pulled out and yanked up his sweat pants. Then he picked up the coat and put it back on Marla. The elevator doors opened. Neal and Marla got off and walked to their suite, one of three on the fifteenth floor that had been reserved for State University’s dignitaries. The school’s chancellor and the athletics director were staying in the other two suites. Neither Marla nor Neal spoke. That wasn’t part of the ritual. They would shower and dress in silence, and then Neal would leave to ride with his team on the charter bus to the coliseum. Marla would follow on another bus carrying Coyote officials and the wives of the players and coaches.

Before Neal left their suite, he looked over the

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clothes Marla had picked out to wear to the game. The gold pin shaped in the image of a coyote, the team's mascot, was already fastened to her red dress. At the door he paused in front of the beveled, gold-framed mirror and adjusted his red and white striped tie. Then he felt for the rock inside his right pants pocket.

It was there.

He fastened the top button of his gray pinstripe suit jacket. This was the semifinal game, which meant he had to wear the gray pinstripe. He had worn the brown suit in the quarterfinals. He would wear his navy blue suit to the finals; that is, if they made it that far. And considering how they had been playing since the first round in the Regionals, they stood a good chance.

Neal believed he would keep on winning just so long as no one interfered with his pre-game rituals. Wearing the brown suit, followed by the gray pinstripe, and then the navy blue was part of the ritual. Getting all of the team to rub a rock his father had given him before he died was also part of it.

And fucking his wife in the elevator.

The gold pin was Marla's own superstition, but he didn't make fun of it. As long as he continued to win, he wasn't going to give up any of it.

Reaching the lobby, Neal confidently stepped off the elevator, and pushed his way through the noisy Co-Yotes to the waiting bus.

Chapter 1

Another deafening roar exploded from the coliseum, and when it did, Marla threw down her partially smoked cigarette and ground it into the polished tile floor with the toe of her shoe. Quickly she reached for another cigarette from the opened pack in her small red handbag. She lit it, sucked the smoke into her mouth, held her breath, coughed, and then slowly released it. Marla didn't smoke, but when she paced up and down the hallways of basketball coliseums, puffing on cigarettes seemed appropriate. It gave her something to do with her hands, and it helped keep her sane.

“God, how I hate this.” Gale Simmons, the gray-haired woman pacing in the same direction as Marla, was married to one of the assistant coaches at State University.

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Gale, along with several other women—also wives of coaches, some of them wives of players—were known as the hall walkers. They were the women who met on a regular, but unscheduled, basis the last two minutes of every game, pacing the halls, smoking, or pretending to in Marla's case, and trying to give each other encouragement. Unable to watch the most crucial time of the game—those last two minutes—they paced in heart-pounding agony, listening to the fans erupt in cheers or boos, and to the announcer scream out the play-by-play over the public address system.

It didn't matter which team they supported. The bond they shared went beyond the game and winning or losing. It was after the game that most mattered. If their team won, it meant going through the torture one more time, but at least their husbands would be happy. If their team lost, it meant their husbands would go through weeks of depression, and as their wives, they would have to put up with an impenetrable wall of silence broken only by an occasional negative outburst—usually directed toward them. Each of the hall walkers had experienced it. And it was that experience, more than any other, that cemented the friendship between them.

With thirty seconds to go, the score is seventy-six all. This is a hot one, folks. Let's see what the Coyotes are going to do. Sydney Rob makes an inbound pass into the back court to Jerry March—the clock is moving, folks. Jerry lobs the ball back over to Rob. Rob passes it over to Miller in the right court.

Interception by Darrell Washington! Holy cow,

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sports fans! The Coyotes' Sydney Rob loses the ball to the Demon Deacons. Wake Forest has the ball. Washington bringing it down court. Fifteen seconds on the clock.

Marla stopped pacing. Her whole body was trembling. Lydia Rob, Sydney's wife, rushed over to Marla and began frantically rubbing the gold pin on her dress. The other women just stood frozen in disbelief.

Gale Simmons, the assistant coach's wife who had been pacing with Marla earlier, glared at Lydia as though she had been the one to lose the ball to the opposing team, not her husband.

"Son of a bitch," she muttered.

Deacons have the ball. Washington over to Moser. Now Moser back over to Washington, and Washington wants a time out. Ten seconds left to play in the NCAA National semifinal ball game. The score is tied at seventy-six, and the Wake Forest Demon Deacons call time out.

The eight women supporting the Coyote team huddled together in the hall, not daring to say anything. A long ash fell unnoticed from Marla's cigarette. Her head was pounding so hard she thought she was suffering an aneurysm.

Lydia stopped rubbing Marla's gold pin and wrapped her hand around it instead. "Oh, please, Lord, don't let it end like this—not with Sydney throwing the ball away."

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The noise erupting from the vomitoriums of the coliseum and into the hallway was ear shattering. Marla could imagine what Neal was doing. Squatting on the floor with the players hunched around him, he would be scribbling plays and moves on a pad of yellow paper, giving each member of the team a position to play, an order to focus on, a magical move that would somehow win the game for them. She had seen him do it so many times.

She doubted if the players even knew or understood what he was telling them. Even if they were able to understand him, they couldn't possibly hear him over the noise of the screaming fans. But they went through the motions, nodding, grabbing hands in a sweaty, spoke-wheel fashion, and doing some high-fives with the bench-warmers before rushing back out onto the court. They believed in Coach. He had told them this was their year to win. They were the Cinderella Team, the Team of Destiny. They were the Dream Team, and he wouldn't lie to them. He loved them. For many of the players, Coach was the only father-figure they had ever known. They wouldn't let him down. They couldn't.

Deacons in the backcourt. Ronald Carrie with the ball. Seven seconds. And he's fouled. Coyote Derrick White has fouled Deacon Ronald Carrie. Seven seconds to go, and Carrie will go to the free-throw line.

Deacons call a time-out. Seven seconds left. Coyotes with seventy-six. Demon Deacons with seventy-six. Hold on to your seats, folks. It ain't over yet.

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The women stood in the middle of the hall, clutching hands, unable to speak. Sue Trepak, the girlfriend of Stilt, the Coyotes' big center, came rushing out of the stands past the group of women toward the restroom. Marla knew that kind of fear. To be so afraid of losing that it made you vomit. Marla had done it in the beginning. Before she became a hall walker. Sue would learn—that is, if she stayed around the team any length of time. She would become a hall walker too.

Carrie of the Wake Forest Deacons to the free-throw line. Two shots coming to Carrie. Seven seconds left, 76-76 the score. The first one from Carrie hits the back of the rim, rolls around the rim, and out. One more coming now. A little more important. Seventy-six apiece. Carrie throws it up—and misses! Seven seconds to go and the Coyotes have the ball!

“I think I’m going to pass out,” Gale said to no one in particular. Marla dropped her burned-out cigarette and crushed it with her shoe. She heard one of the other women scream the word “shit,” but the noise level around them was so great, Marla didn’t know who screamed it.

Delaney Miller will put it inbounds for the Coyotes. Stanley Bentley at six-foot, eleven-inches for the Deacons is right in front of him. Deacons straight up, man-to-man. Delaney has to throw it over six feet, eleven inches, and Bentley isn’t going to make it easy. Miller gets it in to Derrick White.

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Seven seconds, six.

White has to hurry. Time's running out. He gets the ball across center court.

Four seconds, three.

He has to hurry. White gets the shot off.

Two seconds, one—and he scores! Derrick White scores, and there's no time left on the clock! Coach Neal Connors and the Coyotes have won it! They will be playing in the NCAA Championship game. The final score, State University Coyotes, seventy-eight, Wake Forest Demon Deacons, seventy-six.

“One more time, girls.” Tears were running down Lydia's face from the relief she felt—not because the Coyotes had won the game, but because her husband hadn't lost it on an intercepted pass.

The women who had been supporting Wake Forest quickly offered their congratulations. Several of the women hugged each other. A few of them cried. Then they disappeared into the crowd of people that was rapidly filling the hall. For them, the season was over until next year.

“Let's get out of here.” Marla walked quickly toward the nearest exit to find the bus that would take the women back to their hotel.

Neal would return later, after talking to his players and after the press conferences. Probably after the second semifinal game between Purdue and Houston. Maybe this night they could have a late, quiet dinner in their room—just the two of them—without the constant interruptions from inebriated fans and insensitive report-

ers.

People poured out of the stands and pushed their way through the halls. Marla felt someone yank on her arm.

“Hey, aren’t you the coach’s wife?”

Marla turned around and faced a small birdlike woman, arms and elbows protruding like wings, accompanied by a tall, overweight man. Both were wearing red tee-shirts with a picture of State’s mascot, the Snarling Coyote, sprawled across their chests in black.

Someone else bumped Marla from behind.

“Hey, little lady.” It was another Coyote fan. Marla remembered seeing him hanging around the basketball office. He had a beer in one hand and a red cardboard sign with the words GO STATE! in the other. He put his arm around Marla, spilling beer on her hair and dress. “Whatever you’re doing for Coach, keep it up. You give him anything he wants, ya hear? We don’t want to lose now.” He winked and tightened his grip around her. She could smell the foul odor of beer on his breath.

Gale pulled Marla away from him. As they squeezed through the crowd toward the exit Marla heard the bird-like woman screech, “She only married him for his money, you know. He’s old enough to be her father.”

Once outside, the two women walked around the coliseum passing several chartered buses until they found the one that would take them back to the hotel. It was parked in a reserved area close to the building. Several of the other wives were already on board.

Gale sat down next to Marla. “Are you OK?”

Marla nodded. “I’m just so drained.”

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“Don’t worry about what those idiots said back there. You know how the Co-Yotes love to talk.”

Marla found a tissue in her purse and tried to wipe the beer out of her hair. The smell of it was making her feel sick. It wasn’t just the rude comments or what the Co-Yotes thought of her. She had been feeling tired a lot lately, and as before, whenever she got tired, it caused her to remember the things she was trying so hard to forget.

Her marriage to Martin, and the eight long years of abuse she suffered, had been a living hell; fighting for her divorce—for her life; and the nightmares—so real and so terrifying that the images of them stayed with her for days afterwards. She thought she had gotten over all of that when she married Neal, that it was all buried in the past. But lately she had started remembering. The rawness she associated with Martin still hurt. And the nightmares—they hadn’t stopped. Maybe it was the tension surrounding the games. Or because she had been away from home for so long. She didn’t know.

Marla closed her eyes and rubbed her forehead, trying to erase the headache. The smell of stale beer wasn’t helping any. There was something else as well, another fear quite apart from her ex-husband. She first became aware of it right after she divorced Martin. She believed at the time that it was her fear of him that caused it. Then it went away. Lately, though, she had been feeling it again. Even though she couldn’t identify it, she knew it was there. It was something dark and evil, just under the surface where she couldn’t see it or touch it, and it gave her a terrible sense of danger.

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A couple more wives got on the bus and sat down near the back. Marla could feel Gale watching her.

“Gale, do you ever think something bad is going to happen to you, but you don’t know what?”

Gale laughed. “All the time, honey, all the time. Why? Is that what you are thinking now?”

Marla nodded. “Once when I was in college I was chosen along with one other art student to exhibit one of my paintings in the school’s private gallery. It was a tremendous honor, for it meant that my painting would be on display with several world-famous works that the college had acquired over the years.” Marla smoothed the tissue on her lap and refolded it. “I was married at the time, living off campus, and attending classes as a day student. I wasn’t even an art major, but the faculty on the jury who evaluated the submissions felt that ‘my artistic ability was noteworthy’. That’s academic jargon for ‘they thought my picture was pretty’.” Marla wiggled her fingers in the air indicating imaginary quotation marks.

Gale nodded her head and grinned. “I can color inside the lines. And I did a paint-by-number painting on velvet one time. I bet they would have loved my stuff.”

“I had chosen a nightscape, something that had been extremely difficult to execute because of its unusual composition and delicate coloring. I put a lot of thought into my decision to submit this particular painting because of the importance of the event. I called it *Moonset*. It was my best work.”

Marla twisted the tissue in her fingers as she recalled her painting. All of her other paintings had been done

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simply to fulfill class assignments. But *Moonset* was different. It was the first work she had gotten emotionally involved in. She had spent weeks on it, trying to create the exact image she wanted—a luminescent moon illuminating russet tones muted by the dark, wind-swept clouds of a threatening night storm. It wasn't just the amount of time and work she had put into it. It became an extension of herself—something she was able to project from her own imagination and actually bring to life. Finding out that there were professional artists who saw beauty and merit in it as well made her love *Moonset* that much more.

“Go on,” Gale prompted.

“The day before my painting was to be taken to the gallery, someone broke into the room on campus where it was being kept. Nothing else in the room was disturbed except for my painting. It had been ripped and slashed to pieces. It was so brutal. At first I didn't even realize that it was my painting, *Moonset*, until I saw a small piece of the canvass with that russet color on it. Other than that, nothing was left of it that could even be identified.”

“My god,” Gale shook her head. “Did you find out who did it?”

“No. At the time, some people blamed another student who had been invited to the exhibit. They theorized that when he saw my painting, he didn't feel that his own work was good enough, and the fear of ridicule and failure was more than he could stand. Apparently he had a history of emotional problems. But it could never be proved.”

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Marla looked away. She couldn't bring herself to tell Gale that it had been her own husband who had destroyed her painting. He admitted it to her several months later. But by then it was too late to tell anyone. The other art student had already graduated, and another student's painting had been selected to replace *Moonset*. She wouldn't have told anyone anyway, she was so terrified of Martin.

"How awful," said Gale. "That must have been a huge disappointment for you."

"It took me a long time to get over it. It was almost as though I was being suffocated. Finding my painting so horribly mutilated and not knowing why, I felt like I was the one who had been mutilated. I felt violated and frightened that something else bad would happen to me." Marla took a deep sigh and looked down at the twisted tissue in her hands. "It was terrible. I wondered if I was an unwilling pawn in some wicked game that I had no control over. I lost my sense of direction and proportion. I had nothing on which I could anchor. And there were moments when I even felt guilty that maybe I had done something to make someone hate me so much."

"And that's the way you feel now?"

Marla nodded and looked out the window at all of the cars starting to exit the parking lot. That was what she was feeling now, only this time it was worse. She would wake up during the night trembling and overcome with a heightened awareness that something terrible was about to happen. Like before, she couldn't see it or touch it, but she knew there was something evil

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getting closer to her, surrounding her, and eventually there would be some horrible evidence of it—just like her painting. She hadn't even been able to talk to Neal about it. How could she, when she didn't know what it was? Yet, she knew it was near her, and she felt helpless to do anything about it.

"I guess I'm just being silly." Marla smiled at Gale wanting to change the subject. She wished she hadn't even said anything. It was her problem, after all, and she knew no one could help her with it—just like before.

"No. You're not being silly at all. It's just these damn basketball games. They make us all a little crazy. But it'll soon be over now." Gale reached over and patted Marla's hand. "And then we can go home. Thank god."

Of all the wives Gale was the oldest, and had been a coach's wife the longest. She knew all of the ups and downs of being a coach's wife. Her husband was the assistant coach Neal most relied on. In fact, Stu Simmons was an assistant coach before Neal came to State, and had also applied for the job of head coach when it came open. But he was passed over along with about thirty other candidates wanting to head up State's basketball team.

"I've been following that shit'n basketball around the country for thirty-five years," Gale announced to everyone on the bus, "and I still hate it."

"Come on, girl." Lydia Rob yelled back. She was stretched out on the back seat of the bus, her arm resting across her eyes, completely exhausted. "You know you don't."

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Marla shuddered. She couldn't imagine being the wife of a basketball coach for that long.

"If you start complaining again about Stu being only an assistant coach, I'm going to make you get off the bus," one of the other wives said.

Marla glanced over at Gale to see if she was going to respond. Everyone was feeling the stress that comes with the end of the season. But she knew what the woman meant. When Marla first started traveling with the team right after she and Neal got married, she felt uncomfortable around Gale. Gale had brought up the fact that Stu was just an assistant coach so often that Marla wondered if she somehow blamed Neal for being head coach, even after so many years. But now that she knew Gale better, she was used to her outspokenness.

Whatever Gale's feelings were, she apparently managed to put them aside as far as her friendship with Marla was concerned, which was more than anyone else associated with the athletics department had done. Like those fans who had grabbed Marla when she was leaving the coliseum, they all seemed convinced that Marla was only interested in Neal's wealth and a good time. After all, who wouldn't like to travel all over the country and occasionally out of the country with one of the top-ranked college basketball teams in the nation? But if she took care of Neal's sexual needs, and didn't cause any problems, then they would put up with her.

What they didn't understand was that in the short time she had been married to Neal, Marla had grown to hate being the coach's wife: the constant disruption of her life, living out of suitcases, hotel food, hours spent

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on airplanes, and the head-throbbing emotions experienced in each game—and the seemingly unending social obligations she and Neal simply couldn't avoid, even though neither of them liked parties of any kind. The only reason she went along was so she could be with Neal. Because as much as she hated all of it, to be separated from him would be even worse.

“Remember the Carolina game last year in the Dean Dome, Marla?” Gale rummaged through her purse until she found the pill bottle she was looking for. She opened the cap, dumped out a bilious green capsule, and swallowed it.

“I will never forget it.” Marla grimaced. “I was so nervous I was sick.” She watched Gale swallow a couple of more times. She looked pale. “How can you take that thing without water or something to wash it down? What is it, anyway?”

“Just something to settle my stomach. It's nothing.” Gale took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “The score was tied at eighty-nine, all with fifteen seconds left on the clock. Remember? It was in overtime, and it was Carolina's ball. Of course I was walking the hall, and you came running past me, your face about the same shade as oatmeal, and into the ladies' room.”

“You followed me in and held my hair back while I threw up.” Marla shook her head in dismay at the memory. “I knew then that you and I were going to be friends.”

“That was when I told you about the hall walkers.”

“I don't know which gave me more relief—throwing up or finding out that I wasn't the only one who

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couldn't take the pressure of losing a silly basketball game."

Gale smiled. "Up until then you had been hanging in there until the end of all of the games. We had a bet on as to when you would start joining us, you know."

"You mean you and the other hall walkers?"

"That's right."

"My gosh." Marla glanced around at the other women on the bus and then back at Gale. "So who won?"

"I did, of course. I figured that if you cared anything about State's basketball team at all, you wouldn't be able to take the stress of the Carolina game. It was a good thing you did join us. It sort of humanized you. Up until then, the other wives thought of you as some sort of prima donna."

"Who married Neal only for his money, and so I could go with him around the country having heart attacks and migraines at all of these basketball games."

"People do get wild notions about what fun is, don't they?" Gale laughed and looked out of the bus window. It was starting to snow. "Do you think we will ever play a game that doesn't go down to the wire on some last second, shit-ass shot or into fucking overtime?" Gale sighed deeply and leaned her head against the back of the seat.

Cheering fans could still be heard from inside the coliseum. Others were pouring out of the exits, eager to get back to the hotel where they could start partying. Only in the bus was it eerily quiet as it slowly maneuvered out of the gigantic filled parking lot toward the

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highway leading back to the hotel.

“Well, we’re in the finals, girls,” Gale added. “Either against Houston, with its seven-foot-four-inch giant disguised as a center, or Purdue, with the two fastest forwards in the country. Shit!”

Marla watched the snow as it gradually started covering the ground. She didn’t even want to think about it. At least the finals were going to be played in the same coliseum. They wouldn’t have to pack up and travel to another state. And all things considered, the hotel where they were staying was pretty nice. The management had done everything possible to insure their comfort. But she missed home. She had been traveling with the team on and off since the beginning of March when she went to Charlotte for the Southern Atlantic Conference Championship.

Spring was such a beautiful time of the year in North Carolina. The dogwoods and red bud were in bloom, and all of the azaleas she had planted last fall had been ready to open when she left. They would probably still be in bloom by the time she got home, but she had already missed the best part—when they first started showing their colors.

Just two more days.

After having Sunday off, State would play in the Championship game on Monday night.

And then they could go home.

Chapter 2

“Coach, we might have a problem.”

Neal carefully pulled his arm out from under Marla to keep from waking her, and turned closer toward the telephone. The clock next to it showed 2:13 AM in glaring blue. He had just barely fallen asleep. He watched Houston pound the shit out of Purdue in the other semi-final game, and didn't get back to the hotel until after midnight. Marla had waited up for him so they could order room service.

“Is it serious?” Neal didn't have to ask. For Stu to be calling at this hour, it had to be.

Stuart Simmons was the most laid-back, understated human being he had ever known. That was why he was such a great assistant coach. He was a perfect stabilizer to Neal's volatility, and he was good around the players.

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If they felt Neal was being too hard on them, they would go to Stu. He could always smooth things over. If they were having girlfriend problems, grade problems, or money problems, Stu would take care of it. But that was also why as long as Neal was around, he would never be head coach. Neal could excite his players and energize them to a playing level that no other coach could. But Stu didn't have the balls it took to be head coach. When it came to making the difficult decisions or acting under pressure, he couldn't do it.

"It might be." The answer was casually spoken, indicating no hint of urgency. But Neal knew better.

"You'd better come to the suite rather than discuss it on the phone."

Marla raised up when Neal got out of the bed. "Is anything wrong?"

"Nothing to worry about. Stu just wants to go over some new play or something."

There was no need to upset her until he knew what it was all about. Neal leaned over and kissed Marla. He smelled the sweetness of her hair and body and immediately felt a tingling sensation in the pit of his stomach, and a surge of heat through the shaft of his penis. He wanted to make love to her, but it would have to wait.

"You go back to sleep."

"I love you." Marla reached out from under the sheet and tenderly touched his face and then turned over on her side, exposing the bare skin of her back.

Neal hesitated a moment, wanting her, loving her, and then gently covered her with the sheet. He grabbed the sweat suit off the chair where he had thrown it ear-

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lier and went into the living room, quietly closing the bedroom door behind him. A few minutes later he heard a light knock. Stu came in carrying two cups of coffee.

“I got these from the coffee shop downstairs. It stays open all night.”

Stu waited as Neal dumped two sugar packets and three artificial creams into his cup. He knew Neal didn't like coffee. But he enjoyed the ritual of drinking it. And the only way he could do that was to kill the coffee taste with sugar and cream.

“What's up?” Neal finally asked after he had finished stirring the muddy white mixture.

“I caught Stilt doing drugs.” One thing about Stu, he didn't try to gloss over the facts. If he had something to say, he came right out with it.

“Holy shit. When?”

“About an hour ago. The night watchman was walking his rounds and heard a woman screaming. He went to investigate, and it was Stilt's girlfriend. Apparently he had gotten high and started punching her around.”

“Of all the stupid, fuck'n...” Neal was out of his chair. “Why?”

“Who knows. He said he was under a lot of stress. The tournament. And knowing he's got final exams facing him when he gets back on campus.”

“My god! That's what a student athlete does, for crissake. He plays in tournaments—if he's *lucky*—and takes exams.” Neal ran his hand through his hair. “I don't believe this. You know we can't play him in the final game. Not with the NCAA doing drug tests on the players. So we have a fuck'n team without a center to

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play the most important game in our lives.”

“I know.”

Neal sat down and immediately jumped back up again. “My god. You don’t think he took some before the Wake Forest game? Because if he did, we will be disqualified.”

“No. He said this was his first time.”

Neal grabbed a fringed cushion off the sofa and slammed it to the floor. “Yea, but do we know that for sure?”

“All the drug tests came out negative. His was one of them.”

“Goddamn it! What could he have been thinking? Where in the hell did he get it?” Neal knew it was a stupid question. There was always someone around willing to “help out” an athlete. Neal sat back down and stared at Stu. Then he remembered what else Stu had told him.

“What about his girlfriend? Is she all right?”

“Doc took care of her. Some bruises and a cut under one eye.”

“Is she going to file a complaint?”

“I don’t think so. She really loves the guy, and apparently he’s never done this kind of thing before.”

“Thank god for that. All we need is to have the press pick it up, and State’s so-called Dream Team will take on a whole new meaning.”

Neal swallowed some coffee and grimaced. “Shit. I can’t believe this. Does anyone else know about it?”

“No. Only the night watchman, and I don’t think he’s going to say anything. I gave him two tickets to the finals.” Stu watched Neal take another gulp of coffee,

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then asked, “Are you going to tell Morgan?”

Charlie Morgan had been athletics director for only a few months. Against all the advice from Neal and the Athletics Council, the chancellor had hired an old classmate from his alma mater in New Hampshire to replace the former director of athletics, retired after twenty-five years at State. Morgan didn’t have a background in athletics, and knew absolutely nothing about what it took to run a successful program. In the short time Morgan had been on campus the head football coach had already quit, and several of the other coaches were talking about leaving. Neal just tried to avoid him.

“No.”

Stu nodded. He didn’t say anything else. Of all the things that could happen to the team, short of a mass outbreak of the flu, this was about the worst. One game away from the NCAA Championship, and they lose their center.

“OK. Here’s what we’ll do.” Neal leaned forward. As always, he had a plan just as Stu knew he would. “Get Stilt on the next flight back to Raleigh. I don’t want anyone talking to him. I want him checked into the college infirmary when he gets there. Send one of the assistant trainers—Hoskins will be good—along with him to make sure nothing else gets fucked up. When the press start asking questions, tell them he’s sick and we felt it was necessary to send him back to Raleigh where he could be properly taken care of. It will probably be best if his girlfriend goes back with him. I don’t want anyone asking her any questions either.”

“I’ll take care of it.”

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“Now all I have to do is figure out how to win a basketball game against Houston without a center.”

When Stu left, Neal was sitting on the glass-enclosed balcony off from the living room scribbling on his pad of yellow paper.



Ray Knox pulled the collar on his coat up tighter around his neck and ears and shoved his hands deep into his pockets. He cursed under his breath when he saw a group of drunks, probably Coyote fans, coming his way. It was too dark to see who they were, but if they were Co-Yotes he was sure they would recognize him if they saw him. And even if they were blind drunk, they would wonder what in the hell he was doing hanging out in a service entrance doorway of the coliseum at three o'clock in the morning.

Christ. That's all I need.

He pushed his back against the cold metal door as far as he could hoping he wouldn't be seen. The five men burst into an off-key rendition of the State University Fight Song as they staggered past the doorway, oblivious of the cold and of him. One of the men tossed an empty beer can onto the pavement, creating even more racket. Knox listened to it roll several yards until it finally stopped, then heard the pop and hiss of a fresh can being opened.

Christ it's cold.

A blast of frigid air whistled around the door frame. Knox cursed again: at Morgan for getting him into this

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situation, and at himself for doing it. This had to be the low point in Knox's career. Hanging out in darkened doorways in the middle of the night waiting to make a pay-off. To make it even worse, the guy he was supposed to meet was late. He had told Knox 2:30. Unless Knox got the directions mixed up. But the guy had said the service entrance on the east side of the coliseum. And that's where the hell he was. Freezing his ass off and dodging drunken Coyote fans so he wouldn't be seen.

Knox pulled out a wadded up handkerchief from his hip pocket and wiped his nose. He was probably getting sick. Morgan was going to make up for this big time if he expected Knox to keep doing his dirty work for him. No more cheap presents or token salary increases. *Shit*, he had enough TVs and cameras and electronic gadgets. Cheap toys from Morgan. He wanted some big money—security for when he decided to retire. And the way he was feeling now, he was ready to retire.

Knox heard footsteps, the empty beer can being kicked, and someone, a man, cuss. Knox leaned out slightly from the doorway and peered into the darkness. He smelled him—the rancid odor of nervous sweat—before he saw him.

“You got something for me, heh?”

Startled that the man was so close, Knox stepped out of the doorway wanting to get more space between them. Pressed into the doorway like that, he felt trapped. Like some kind of shit'n rat. The man was wearing a long heavy black coat. A scarf covered most of his face. What it didn't hide, the knit cap did.

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“It’s about time you got here. Is it taken care of?” Knox asked. He realized much to his irritation that he was shaking, and it wasn’t just from the cold. His voice sounded soft and weak.

“It’s taken care of, heh.”

Knox reached into his breast pocket and pulled out an envelope. “This is what we agreed on. If State loses the game, you’ll get the other half.”

The man didn’t take the envelope. Instead, he pulled out a cigarette lighter and lit it. “Open it,” he said.

Knox tried to pry the sealed flap on the envelope open, but it was difficult since he was wearing gloves, and besides that his hands were trembling. He yanked one glove off with his teeth and ripped the envelope open. The man held the lighter next to the envelope so he could see its contents. Satisfied, he took the envelope and moved the lighter closer to Knox’s face. “You Houston fans must have a real hard-on about winning the National Championship, heh.”

Knox took a step back, wishing he had thought to wear some sort of disguise. He didn’t say anything. If the guy thought he was some half-crazed Houston supporter, so much the better.

“Tomorrow night. Same time, same place.” The guy flicked off his lighter and shoved it back into his pocket along with the envelope.

Knox stood in the doorway until he was sure the man was gone. After checking to see that no one else was around, he walked briskly back toward the hotel. He was sweating in spite of the cold, and he had to take a crap. He always had to crap when he got nervous.

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Maybe the guy hadn't been able to get a good look at him. After all it was pretty dark. He probably couldn't see that much with just his lighter. Knox quickened his pace when he felt his lower intestines start to cramp. Morgan owed him big time for this. Otherwise he was getting the hell away. He wasn't cut out for this kind of shit. Morgan could just do his own goddamn dirty work.



“You messed up, Stilt. Now you have to take responsibility for it like a man.”

Stu had been talking to Stilt while Hoskins called the airlines to make plane reservations for himself, Stilt, and Sue Trepak, Stilt's girl friend. It would take time for all of the effects of the drugs to wear off. Whatever drugs were left in Stilt's stomach he vomited up when Stu told him he wouldn't be playing in the final game. After that he got angry; then he begged. Now he was just sitting on the sofa crying. Sue sat next to him with her arm around him. Considering what Stilt had just put her through, she was holding up remarkably well.

“Is Coach really mad at me?” he asked, not looking up.

“I don't think he's mad. Just disappointed. He was counting on you. After all, you are one of his key players. All of his plays were designed with you playing center position. Now he'll have to figure out something else. You put him in a hell of a spot, Stilt.”

Stilt rubbed his head. “Oh, god. I didn't mean it. I swear I didn't mean it.”

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Sue looked at Stilt and rubbed his back. There was a bandage under one eye, and her left cheek was bruised and swollen.

“Well, we’re all set.” Hoskins put the phone down and walked over to where the three were sitting. “We need to leave now, though, so we can get our luggage checked in.”

“You know what to do when you get back to Raleigh,” said Stu. “Take Stilt directly to the infirmary. I have already talked to Dr. Courin. He will be there to check him in and take care of him. If anyone asks you any questions, tell them they will have to wait until Coach gets back in town. All you know is that Stilt is sick.”

Hoskins nodded.

Stu watched them get into the taxi that would take them to the airport, then went to the elevator to go up to his room. He looked at his watch. It was 4:37 AM. He hadn’t even been to bed yet. It had been one hell of a night, finding Stilt like that. He still didn’t know who had given him the stuff. Normally Stilt was such a gentle guy. But drugs had a way of changing people. They sure had changed Stilt. No telling what would have happened if the night watchman hadn’t come around when he did.

Stu pushed the card into the door lock until the little light turned green and quietly opened the door to his room. He hoped Gale was sleeping. She had been getting up during the night a lot lately. She said it was just indigestion, but he had made her promise him she would go for a physical as soon as they got home. If it

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was an ulcer or something like that starting to act up, he wanted her to get it taken care of. There was no sense in putting it off. After all, at this stage in their lives, they couldn't be too careful.

During all the years they had been married, he was the one who had always gotten sick with colds, or hay fever, or the flu, or some goddamn thing. Gale had taken care of him, clucking over him like a mother hen. And those times when she couldn't, she insisted on taking him to the doctor. So now he was doing the insisting. Just as soon as this tournament was over, he was going to take her to the doctor.

Gale was in bed, apparently asleep. Stu tiptoed into the bathroom and shut the door. Neal had told the team and coaching staff that he wanted them downstairs for breakfast at seven o'clock. They would go to the coliseum afterwards for their morning warm-ups and practice session. Stu debated whether he should even go to bed; he knew Neal wouldn't. After thinking about it, he decided to undress and try to get some sleep. A little would be better than none at all. And at the rate things were going, he might be up another night if anything else went wrong.

Afraid he might disturb Gale, he carefully lifted the pillow from the bed and grabbed an extra blanket off the top shelf in the closet. Then he lay down on the small love seat that was positioned in front of the single window in the room with his legs hanging off the end. He felt so tired, but his mind wouldn't turn off. It had been such a long season.

How in the world Neal had managed to accomplish

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what he had with these players, Stu didn't know. Even at the beginning, they had been a lackluster team at best. Totally unmotivated. Plagued with injuries and illness. Coach even had to get fulltime tutors for several of the players to help them make the grades in order to stay in school. On top of everything else, their star forward came down with mono three weeks into the season. They finished the regular season last in the Conference, which was no big surprise. But then something happened. Slowly they began to peak. They wound up winning the Southern Atlantic Conference Tournament which gave them an automatic invitation to the Nationals.

Still it was a struggle. Every game ended in an overtime or double-overtime, or on some last-second shot. But somehow they managed to win. He doubted if they would ever have another year as exciting as this one had been. He was glad he had been a part of it, even with all the problems that had arisen. Stu sat up and rubbed his legs. They felt numb because the circulation had been cut off, dangling off the sofa like that. He turned over on his side and drew his knees up toward his chest.

A couple of the players, Derrick and Sydney, told him their mothers wouldn't be able to come to the game; they couldn't afford the air fare. But they would be watching it on television. Stu would get them to call their mothers after the game. Win or lose. It was always good to keep the mothers happy. And it would make Derrick and Sydney feel good.

He hoped Neal was doing the right thing by not telling Morgan about Stilt—not that he blamed him.

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Morgan was such an unpredictable son of a bitch. It would be just like him to forfeit the game if he was told. In the long run, it probably wouldn't matter anyway. They didn't stand a chance of winning. Not with Stilt out. Stu sighed and closed his eyes. In a few minutes, he was asleep.

Chapter 3

Marla ran her hand across the bed, and when she didn't feel anything she opened her eyes.

Neal wasn't there.

The sun was just starting to filter through the window overlooking downtown Albuquerque. Outside everything was blanketed in white. She put on her robe and wandered into the living room. Neal was sitting on the balcony. Prisms of light reflected from the many panes of glass enclosing the area. The noises from outside were muffled by the late-night dusting of snow. She went up behind him and put her arms around him, kissing his ear and neck.

"Good morning," she whispered, licking his ear and gently blowing in it. Neal tossed the pad down and reached around for his wife, pulling her onto his lap. She

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kissed him on his mouth and then pulled back to look at him. “Did you get any sleep at all?” She stroked the stubble of beard on his face with the tips of her fingers. His face felt warm.

“Enough,” he answered.

She continued looking at him. “Can you tell me what’s wrong?”

Neal gave her a quick account of what had happened. He had never been able to keep anything from her. Besides, it always made him feel better when he told her what was going on. She had a remarkable way of putting things in their proper perspective. That, and her belief in him to always do what was right, gave him added confidence to work through his problems, which seemed to have tripled since Morgan became athletics director.

Before he met Marla, he hadn’t given a shit whether anyone agreed with what he did or not. And he certainly hadn’t needed anyone. Basketball was his life, and there simply wasn’t room for anyone or anything else. There had been the usual casual involvements, of course. Being such a popular figure, there were always women coming on to him. Most just wanted sex. Others wanted more. That woman, Jean, in particular had been difficult, calling him at home and at his office all the time, showing up in his hotel room when the team was playing a game out of town. But he had finally convinced her he wasn’t interested. Basketball was his only interest in life. The women were just occasional, temporary distractions. But that was all before he met Marla. And now facing his sixty-first birthday in a couple of months,

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he found he needed her support, her strength, and her love more than he ever needed anything in his life.

“Oh, Neal. I am so sorry. I know how important this game is to you.” Marla held Neal closer to her. “No one believed you would be able to bring the team this far, and you did. I’m sure you’ll be able to come up with something, whether Stilt plays or not.”

“I’m afraid that means I won’t be able to spend much time with you today. With the game being tomorrow night, I was hoping we could do some sightseeing. But now...”

“Don’t even give it a thought. I’m sure Gale and I can find something to do. All you need to do is concentrate on the game tomorrow night. Right? We’ll have our time together later.”

Neal buried his face in Marla’s hair. “What do you remember most about the first time we met?”

“I remember how intense you were. You had nothing on your mind but that unfortunate loss to William and Mary.” Marla gently rubbed her finger across Neal’s bottom lip and smiled. “And I remember noticing your tie and thinking it was the sexiest red and white tie I had ever seen.”

Neal laughed and thought back to that night. He had just watched his team lose, a rare occurrence for the Coyotes, to a non-conference school out of Virginia. Losing the game to a weak team had been bad enough, but it was the way they lost it that tore Neal up—on a free throw for a technical foul that shouldn’t have been called in the first place. The Coyote fans had been ruthless, saying that the Coyotes played William all right,

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but couldn't handle Mary. That loss knocked them out of the number one seed going into the SAC Tournament.

Marla had been in her car waiting in a long line of cars to exit the parking lot. Neal was so disgusted about the way the officials had called the game, he didn't bother looking before he backed out of his reserved parking space. He rammed into her car causing a rather loud noise, and put a big dent in the left rear door panel of her car. Normally, he would have merely exchanged insurance information and forgotten about it. But she was so damned beautiful. For some reason she was also very frightened, so he insisted on following her home to make sure she arrived safely. Two cups of coffee and a hefty slice of lemon pound cake later he found out she had been working on campus for only a short while in the chancellor's office. She had moved from Red Oak, a small town fifty or so miles east of Raleigh. The next day Neal found out with the help of someone who worked in personnel that Marla was thirty-three years old and recently divorced.

"What do you remember about our first meeting?" Marla asked.

"Thinking that you were the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. And there was a certain vulnerability about you."

"I should think so. You had just crashed into my car," Marla teased.

"No, it was more than that. All I know is, from the moment I first saw you, I wanted to protect you and love you...forever."

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The night of the accident Neal thought he was the reason that Marla was so frightened, stupidly crashing into her car the way he did. It was only after he got to know her that he realized she was still carrying the emotional scars from her first marriage. More than anything, he wanted to help her forget all of the ugliness from her past. He loved her so much. If there was any possible way to do it, he would.

Marla rested her head on Neal's shoulder. "I was so happy when you followed me home that night, and then called me the next day to ask me out."

Neal grunted. "I thought I was being clever, taking you to all of the out-of-the-way places so we wouldn't be recognized."

"I think everyone knew." Marla kissed the top of Neal's head and gently curled a lock of his hair around her finger. "That's all right though. We had a good time."

Neal's infatuation with the chancellor's new administrative assistant had been the main topic of conversation around campus and everywhere else. All of the sports bars near campus had bets on as to how long it would last. Those who knew Neal figured it wouldn't. After all, here was a man who had never been married, who was obviously set in his ways, and whose only interest in life was winning basketball games. Besides that, he was almost twice her age.

Only Stuart Simmons recognized the situation for what it was. Neal was a man totally and completely in love. When Neal and Marla were married six months later, no one quite believed it, or wanted to. At least

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none of the Co-Yotes. Neal was the *Coach* after all. They didn't want him to have anyone or anything else in his life that could distract him from winning basketball games. Stu believed it though. He had seen the change in Coach. Basketball was no longer Neal's first priority. It had been replaced by something else, and that something else was named Marla.

"I only wish I had met you sooner. Not now when I'm already an old man."

Marla took Neal's face in her hands. "Hush. You aren't even close to being an old man. Besides, basketball means so much to you, I doubt if you would have given me a second look a few years ago. It's all I can do to get your attention away from it now." She pouted at him, teasingly and gently rubbing her hand between his legs.

Neal's reaction was immediate.

Never had anyone given him so much pleasure and happiness. Marla had become such a big part of him that even basketball had lost its supreme importance. The amazing thing was that he didn't particularly care. Things were changing in collegiate sports. Basketball was no longer just a game, and it was no longer particularly fun.

Proposition 48, pushed through by the NCAA, was making it impossible to get the good players out of high school if they had poor grades. Unless they carried a 'C' average and scored a minimum of 700 on the SATs, even if a sliding scale was used, they could forget college basketball. That and the financial incentive to be on national television just added to the stress of winning.

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Having to work for an athletics director with a background in animal husbandry or some goddamn thing that had nothing to do with college sports didn't help either. Not only that, Neal simply didn't like the bastard. And now with the worry of a drug scandal—Neal sighed heavily and stroked Marla's long, dark hair, feeling its silkiness and smelling the sweet scent of her body. If he could just get this Championship. He would take some time off, and he and Marla could go to the Cottage.

Damn, how long has it been since I've even seen the ocean?

He was feeling depressed, and that was the last thing he needed if he was going to make the team believe they could do the impossible—win the NCAA National Championship without a center.

Marla slipped off his lap. "Come on, I'll cook you some breakfast."

"We don't have a kitchen."

"I'll improvise." She pulled him to his feet and led him back to the bedroom.



"Marla, I didn't wake you, did I?" It was Gale. Marla knew she would probably call, and had showered and dressed as soon as Neal left to meet with the team.

"Hi, Gale. No, of course you didn't. I was hoping you'd call. Neal isn't here, and I am up and dressed with absolutely nothing to do. You want to go shopping or something?" Marla carried the phone over to the window. "I see cars moving on the streets so I guess it didn't snow enough to make it too slippery. I really would like

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to get out of here for a while.”

Marla had given up her job at the university when she married Neal so she would be able to travel with him. But between the practice sessions, coaches meetings, team meetings, press conferences, and spending the necessary quality time with each of the players, Neal had to be gone a lot, leaving Marla alone. And now that this problem with Stilt had come up, Marla didn't know when he would get back. He told her before he left that morning not to expect him until she saw him.

“I figured you were probably on your own. Stu was already gone when I woke up this morning. Isn't this thing with Stilt a bunch of shit? I was still up when the night watchman called Stu about it. I sure hope the press doesn't get hold of it.”

“I know. Gosh I'll be glad when this tournament is over. Neal looked so tired this morning when he left.”

Gale was a lot older than Marla, but Marla felt closer to her than to many of the other younger wives she had met. They all seemed to be busy having babies or involved in their own careers. Gale didn't have either. She had focused her entire married life on Stu and his interest in collegiate athletics. She knew what it was like to spend long empty hours in some hotel room miles from home with nothing to do but wait until the next basketball game. Now that Marla was married to Neal and traveling with him, Gale had become a good friend and was someone she could do things with. Since Neal and Stu were usually tied up with the team, Marla and Gale would take off on their own, touring whatever town it was where they were staying, shopping at another mall,

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eating their meals together, and just killing time between basketball games. Gale was also someone Marla could confide in.

“Gale, I didn’t want to ask Neal since he is already so upset, but has anything like this ever happened before? I mean, a problem with drugs?”

“Never with drugs. There have been other problems, of course, like when Coach got a couple of the players, both of them starters, thrown out of school because they broke into some of the dorm rooms and stole some stuff. He really caught hell from the Co-Yotes for that one.”

“You mean because he had them expelled from school?”

“That’s right. The Co-Yotes were afraid that by losing two of our starters, we would lose the SAC Tournament. It was going on at the time. Neal was right, of course. Those boys didn’t have any business being on the team, or in school. And there have been players suspended from the team because of bad grades. But there’s never been anything involving drugs.”

“I find it so hard to believe that it was Stilt caught using the drugs. He is so religious.”

“Yea, I know. A Born-Again-Christian. A member of the Christian Athletes of America. All of that. I find it hard to believe too. But it happened. Probably someone got to him and convinced him that he needed it to win. There’s nothing we can do about it now. Look, we don’t need to be brooding about this. How about if I meet you down in the lobby in ten minutes. We can get a taxi and go over to the historical part of Albuquerque if you like. I understand there are a lot of unusual things to see

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there—museums, wampum venders on every corner, Indian boutiques. *Are* there such things? Oh well, and some great restaurants. A guy down at the front desk told me about some place that serves homemade pumpkin bread baked in a clay flower pot. We certainly don't want to leave Albuquerque without eating some of that."

After Marla hung up the phone she checked her purse to make sure she had everything she needed, then put on a red leather jacket that matched her skirt. She always wore red and white—the school colors—for their tournaments. The gold coyote pin was attached to her white pullover sweater.

She was just about to leave when someone knocked on the door. She tried looking through the peephole, but she couldn't see anything. Whoever it was had covered the hole. There was another knock.

"Who is it?" she asked. Maybe Gale had decided to meet her at the suite instead of the lobby. Or it could be an overly zealous fan wanting to tell Neal how to win the game.

"It's Charlie. Charlie Morgan."

Marla hesitated. She didn't like the new AD, the way he looked at her, and the way he always seemed to find a reason to touch her.

"Neal has already left to meet with the team," she said without opening the door.

"I know. I want to talk to you. May I come in?"

Marla glanced around the room. From where she was standing she could see the rumpled bed where she and Neal had made love a short while earlier. She

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walked over and pulled the bedroom door closed.

“What can I do for you, Mr. Morgan?” Marla stood in the doorway, blocking his entrance.

He pushed past her, stroking her arm with his hand as he did.

“Call me Charlie, please. And I hate carrying on conversations in hotel hallways. You never know who might be listening.”

Marla watched him cross the room, and for a moment, she thought he was going into the bedroom. He hesitated just outside the closed door, then walked back to where she was standing.

“Red suits you.” His eyes wandered up and down her body. “It compliments your blue eyes and brown hair.”

He reached out and touched Marla's hair, tracing a lock of it down her shoulder to where it stopped on her breast. “I bet you would look good as a blond too.”

Marla stepped back, away from his hand. So that was it. He must have seen her in the lobby waiting for Neal and recognized her.

“If you are so interested in women's hair, why don't you discuss it with your wife?”

Charlie laughed and moved closer. “My wife wouldn't understand. I think you would though.”

He grabbed Marla's shoulders and roughly pulled her to him, forcing his mouth on hers. Marla struggled to free herself from his hold, and when she finally did, she slapped him across the face as hard as she could. The force of it stung her hand and brought tears to her eyes. He smiled cockily.

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“Marla?”

Charlie turned quickly. The door was partially open, and Gale was standing in the hallway.

“I thought I would come to your suite so we could go down to the lobby together. I mean you never know who or what might be lurking around in the hallways.” She paused and looked at Charlie standing off to one side still holding his face.

“Well, I won’t detain you two ladies. I’ll catch up with Neal later, Mrs. Connors.” He walked past Gale and down the hall.

“My god.” Gale handed Marla a glass of water along with a valium she retrieved from one of the bottles of pills in her purse. “Stu told me Morgan is a bastard. I can see why.”

Marla tried to drink the water, but she was shaking so much most of it spilled on her leather outfit. And her lips felt bruised. Gale took the glass out of Marla’s hands and held it to her mouth so she could drink it. “That son of a bitch. But what can you expect from someone who gets a Master’s degree in watching animals screw.”

“Promise you won’t say anything, Gale, to Stu or anyone. I’d just as soon Neal not know about this—not yet—with the big game tomorrow night and with everything that’s happened.”

“I know, honey. I know. Don’t worry. I’m not going to say anything.” She took some tissue from her purse and mopped the water off Marla’s suit. “I think you’d better tell Neal as soon as you can, though. I have a feeling that piece of shit will try something like that again.”

Marla looked at Gale in horror.

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Gale put her arms around Marla and held her. "We'll deal with it. Don't worry. I've learned a lot more than defensive and offensive moves on the basketball court these past thirty-five years. Being in such close proximity to men's locker rooms all the time, you tend to get educated. And believe me, if that bastard thinks he can get away with crap like this, he'll soon find out otherwise."

Gale picked up Marla's purse from the nearby table and handed it to her. "Are you all right now?"

"Yes. I'm fine."

"Maybe we can find a tomahawk for you from one of those wampum dealers. That would slow him down."

Marla stood up and walked to the door. Gale didn't know all of the reasons she had divorced her first husband. Whenever Gale asked her about it, Marla just said that she and Martin had simply grown apart. Only Neal knew of the mental and physical abuse she suffered, the terror she had lived in, the long struggle to get her divorce, and, of course, the nightmares.

She had wanted so much to make the marriage work. Martin had been thorough in making her believe that she was to blame for his violent outbursts and bizarre behavior. She thought she just needed to try harder. Maybe if she dressed differently, or cooked better, she would somehow be a better wife. And then he would be happy.

She remembered reading in the newspaper about a young woman who was gunned down by her husband in the hospital parking lot where she worked as a volunteer. Everyone who knew her said the exact same thing:

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this woman was the most loving and unselfish person they had ever known. Even as she was being rushed into surgery, with blood streaming out of her body, dying, she thanked the doctors who were trying to save her life, and told them that she loved them. And yet, only a few moments earlier, the man she had been married to for ten years just filled her body with bullets, all the while yelling and ranting that she was incapable of loving anyone.

For Marla, it wasn't the constant threat of death that made her finally leave. It was the undermining of her self confidence. Martin always questioned and ridiculed her motives about everything she said and did. Ultimately, for her, it all came down to the realization that if she continued to stay with Martin, she would lose all of her own identity and self respect—what little there was left. That, and knowing that if Martin physically hurt her one more time, she would kill him.

When Gale jokingly mentioned the tomahawk, it spun her back once again into those buried memories: the image of a knife, the feel of the smooth wooden handle and the long, cold shining blade; Martin laughing, the fear that she wouldn't be able to use it to defend herself—or worse, the fear that she would.



“Just remember. This is our tournament. We are champions, and we are going to play that game tomorrow night like champions. Nothing is going to stop us from winning. And if I hear anyone on the team say

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otherwise, he'll be sent back to Raleigh on the first available flight. We aren't going to quit! Do I make myself clear?"

Neal had been talking to his players for the past hour. Stilt had gotten sick and wouldn't be able to play. That was all that was said. It would be up to them to make up for Stilt's absence on the basketball court, and he knew without any doubt whatsoever that they could do it—and he told them so.

He had arranged for his players to practice in the coliseum first thing that morning, and again later on in the afternoon. He looked at his watch. They still had two and a half hours court time before Houston was scheduled for practice.

"All right, let's get out on the court, and I want to see some sweat."

Dejectedly the players moved toward the basket at the far end of the court, talking among themselves. Neal had decided to alternate between two players—Allen Chapman and Ron Mashburn—in the center position. Chapman, or Chappy as he was called, was a freshman and inexperienced. Mashburn was a transfer student from a junior college and also inexperienced. But both of them were big and strong. And that's what Neal needed—strength in the center post.

"I said I want to see some sweat," yelled Neal.

A couple of the assistants began running the players through their warm-up drills.

"What do you think?" Neal asked Stu. "Did I sound convincing?"

"You convinced me," said Stu. "In fact, I am so

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convinced we're going to win this Championship, I'm ready to go in and play center for you."

Neal watched his players move listlessly up and down the court. He would talk to them after practice, and then again later that afternoon. Somehow he would have to make them believe that they could win. After all, they had the talent to win. They had already proved that. But they needed to believe it, or all the talent in the world wouldn't get them a win.

A loose ball came bouncing toward Neal.

"Derrick, what in the hell do you think you're doing? The idea is to catch the ball and pass it to either Sydney or Jerry. You don't turn your back on the ball. You think you can remember that? Because if you can't, I'm sure I can find someone who can." Neal was being deliberately hard on his players. But he needed to do something to shake them out of their lethargy, even if it meant getting them angry at him. "Miller, I've seen little old ladies out-hustle their blind, three-legged dogs better than you're out-hustling Chappy. Now get with it."

Miller muttered something under his breath and glared at Neal.

"Take the bench, Miller. Mash! Replace Miller."

One of the trainers ran up and tossed Miller a towel, even though he didn't need it. Miller grabbed it and stalked off to the sideline.

"Does anyone else have a problem?" Neal's expression dared anyone else to say a word.

No one answered.

"Then let me see some action."

For the next two and a half hours Neal drove his

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players hard. He ridiculed them and belittled them to the point where he knew they were ready to fight him. Then he praised them, only to start tearing them down again. After five minutes on the bench, he let Miller back on the court, and immediately the pace picked up. If Neal's instincts were right, and they usually were, Miller would be the one to lead the team in the final game. He had the nerves of steel. That was why the other players called him "Steel Man." If he could get Miller to believe, the rest of the team would follow suit.



Marla stripped off her red leather skirt and jacket and white sweater and pulled the soft doeskin dress over her head. Then she hooked the silver and turquoise belt around her waist.

"OK, I'm ready to come out now. How about you?" Marla could hear Gale grunting from the dressing room next to hers.

"I swear. It's a good thing this tournament is almost over. Many more meals on the road, and I'll never get back down to my normal size."

Marla giggled.

Gale was determined that they were going to have a good time, and had insisted that they try on some hand-sewn Indian clothes in one of the small boutiques before having lunch.

"We still need to buy something to take home with us as a reminder of Albuquerque. Besides, trying on clothes is the best thing in the world for getting our

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minds off assholes like Charlie Morgan,” Gale said.

She was right. Marla had almost forgotten about Charlie Morgan. Almost. She came out of her dressing room and stood in front of the full-length mirror. Gale vocalized a little bump and grind music and sashayed up beside her wearing a fringed, tan leather pair of pants and matching jacket. In spite of what Gale said about gaining weight, the outfit hung loosely on her. The two women stared at themselves in the mirror not saying anything. Just then Marla saw the reflection of a man pass behind her causing her to jump with fright. She quickly turned around, but no one was there.

“Hey, Marla. Are you all right? I mean we don’t look that bad.” Gale held Marla by the arm, then gazed back into the mirror. “Or do we?”

“It’s these red high heels,” said Marla after a while. “I don’t think they really add anything to the Native American look. Do you?” She smiled at Gale in an attempt to force the image she had just seen out of her mind. But it had looked so much like her ex-husband. “You, on the other hand, can carry it off,” she said lightly. “That fringed leather looks great on you.” Marla took a deep breath trying to steady the panic she felt.

Gale made a face in the mirror, obviously not convinced. “I don’t think so.”

Gale finally settled on a Western hat, and Marla bought the silver and turquoise belt. Once outside they wandered around Old Town Square until they found the restaurant that had been recommended to Gale by the hotel desk clerk. It was a large, stucco adobe-style building, beautifully landscaped with cactus plants and other

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desert flowers. Apparently the hotel desk clerk had recommended it to everyone else who was staying at the hotel as well. It was full of Coyote fans.

They were eventually seated and given menus as large as coffee table books and just as heavy. "I think I'm hungry for chicken salad...and maybe a bowl of hot soup," Marla said as she flipped through the menu. "And a nice glass of wine."

Now that they were surrounded by a lot of people, she felt better. It had just been her imagination. That's all. Martin wouldn't have had any reason to be in Albuquerque. He had never been interested in sports of any kind.

"That sounds good," said Gale looking over the top of her menu, and then she nudged Marla. "Uh-oh," she whispered under her breath. "Don't look now."

"Well, hello Marla. Where have you been hiding?"

It was Anne Morgan, Charlie's wife. Several women Marla recognized as wives of employees in the athletics department were with her.

"Hello, Anne." Marla waited for her to speak to Gale, but when she didn't, "You know Gale Simmons, I believe?"

Anne glanced at Gale without saying anything, then turned her attention back to Marla. "I'm afraid you let us down, Marla."

The waiter, probably a college student working part-time, came up to the table to take their order, and Gale disappeared behind her menu. Anne continued to ignore Gale as well as the young man as he began rattling off a memorized list of daily luncheon specials while impa-

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tiently drumming his pencil against the order pad.

“Salmon croquettes cooked Cajun style on a bed of black beans and yellow rice...”

“How did I let you down, Anne?” Marla asked.

“Coach didn’t come to the party last night in our suite. All of the major contributors were there.” Marla watched Anne’s nostrils flare when she said the word “major.”

“There is also blackened tuna with creamed spinach wrapped in filo dough, fried chicken gizzards in a special garlic...”

“Everyone was expecting to see Coach there. Charlie was especially disappointed. And quite frankly, it put me in a rather awkward position. I mean, anyone else would have felt privileged to even be invited.” Anne seemed totally unconcerned that she was interrupting anything, or that several people sitting nearby were listening.

“Yes. I’m sure it was a lot of fun.” Marla noticed that Anne didn’t mention the fact that she hadn’t gone either.

Marla had always detested parties of any kind, but especially ones that were simply an excuse for people to get drunk together. Fortunately, Neal felt the same way. The thing at Morgan’s suite had been nothing more than a gathering of wealthy Co-Yotes who had paid, mostly through large contributions, for the privilege of getting drunk with the athletics director.

Some privilege, Marla thought.

“Or for a lighter fare we are offering a delicious lobster bisque cooked in a creamy golden sherry or

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homemade vegetable soup..."

"Look, do you mind?" Anne glared at the waiter. "We are trying to carry on a conversation here."

"Now is that a golden sherry or a red sherry?" interrupted Gale as though she hadn't heard Anne's rude remark to the waiter. She surfaced from behind the menu smiling and fluffed her short, gray hair with a flip of her fingers.

The waiter looked at Gale appreciatively. "It's a delicious golden sherry. Or if you are hungry for pasta, there is a wonderful veal marsala in a light tomato sauce," the waiter continued enthusiastically, ignoring Anne's hostile glare. "And we also have chili, if you'd like something hot and spicy."

Anne turned her back to the waiter and continued talking to Marla. "You really ought to do something about socializing that husband of yours." Her tone was icy. "After all, you are the coach's wife now, and you should act like it. You need to make sure he attends these important functions since it is the Co-Yotes who support the program."

Marla looked at Anne in disbelief. If it weren't for the fact that Anne was practically in tears with anger, she would have passed the entire conversation off as some sort of tasteless joke.

"I'm sorry, Anne, but I don't tell my husband what he has to do or where he has to go."

Gale closed the gigantic menu. "He does have other things on his mind right now other than carrying on small talk with a bunch of drunk fans. There is, after all, the National Championship to think about. Why, I'm

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sure *even* you and Charlie can understand that. Certainly, as the lowly wife of a lowly assistant coach, I do.” Gale looked up at the waiter and winked. “I mean, that is the reason why we are all here now, isn’t it?”

The waiter who had finally finished his recitation took the menu from Gale and smiled. “Go Coyotes!” he said in open admiration for Gale.

Anne continued to ignore Gale and the waiter. The other women with her all seemed to find something fascinating to stare at in the vicinity of their feet.

“Yes, of course. Well, we’ll see you tomorrow evening at The Pit.” The Pit was the University of New Mexico’s adobe arena where the NCAA Championship games were being played. “By the way, Charlie and I will be hosting another little get-together, hopefully a celebration of our win, in our suite following the Championship game. I expect to see you and Coach there.”

“I expect to see you and Coach there,” Gale said mockingly after Anne and her entourage left.

“What in the world do you suppose brought that on?” asked Marla. “I haven’t done anything to that woman that I know of.”

“It isn’t you, Marla. It’s because she’s married to that bastard. It makes her mean and ugly. The only women she can get to hang around with her are wives of some of the staff who work for Charlie. And that’s only because they are afraid if they don’t do things with her when she calls them, their husbands will lose their jobs. I should have told her she needs to do something about castrating that horny husband of hers instead of worrying about whether Coach attends her stupid parties or

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not. Can you imagine the nerve of some people?" Gale smiled at the young man who was still waiting to take their order. "Bring my friend and me two glasses of Merlot, your chicken salad plate, lobster bisque, and that pumpkin bread that's baked in a clay flower pot you are so famous for. Is that all right with you, Marla? All of a sudden I feel hungry."

Gale didn't eat much of her lunch. Mostly she just picked at the bread, and that was because it was such a novelty.

"I'm just getting a head start on the diet I know I'll have to go on when we get home," she said when Marla asked her about it.

Marla didn't eat much either, partly because of being nervous about the upcoming game between State and Houston, and partly because the sense of danger she had been feeling seemed closer than ever. It made her jittery. Like thinking she had seen Martin standing behind her in the dress shop. It had just been some man walking past the window outside the shop. That's all. And his image had somehow been reflected in the mirror. She tried to shrug it off, blaming it on the unpleasant encounter first with Morgan, and then with his wife, as well as her over-active imagination. But just like before, she knew it was more than that, and it frightened her.

When they got back to the hotel, it seemed like every Co-Yote who had made it to Albuquerque was in the lobby. And they were all talking about the same thing—the State University basketball team had lost its center. Marla saw Neal off in one corner answering questions from several reporters. She pulled Gale over closer to

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where they could hear.

“So just how important is winning the NCAA National Championship, Coach?” a reporter asked.

“I would be lying if I said it’s just another game,” Neal answered. “The truth is, winning the NCAA Division One Basketball Championship has been my dream ever since I got my first coaching job thirty-five years ago. I was at Elsworth College then, a small, no-account school in up-state New York, fifty miles from where I was born. In three years I was able to build the Elsworth basketball program to its first winning season. When I did, I immediately accepted an offer to coach at a larger school, also with a losing record, and also in New York.”

“Wasn’t it easier back then, Coach, being that they were smaller schools, and not so many NCAA rules to worry about?” another reporter asked.

“Not at all. It was tremendously difficult. Recruiting was impossible with a next to non-existent budget. And no one wanted to play on a losing team—no one who was any good, that is. The players who were already there had such a poor attitude, I could barely get them down the floor in a practice game, let alone in a game on their schedule.”

Marla glanced around at the reporters. They were eating it up. They knew they could trust Neal to be up front with them. Many of them had been following the team ever since Neal was first named head coach at State. And besides that, everything he told them made good copy.

“So what did you do?” the same reporter asked.

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“I signed up Rick Lacombe. I’m sure most of you have heard of him. He was a six-foot-seven-inch guard out of Bunting, Georgia. He had been named All American, was MVP of the prestigious McDonald’s High School All-Star Game, and was rated among the top ten prospects in the nation. Rick had such an uncanny shooting eye that he was being recruited by Duke, Carolina, Houston, and Kentucky—all basketball powerhouses.” Neal looked around at the reporters and smiled. “But he signed with me. Lacombe was just the first of several after that, and eventually I was able to turn a losing program around to a twenty and nine record. It also got us an invitation to the NCAAs, the school’s first in twenty-five years. We didn’t win the Championship title, but at least we got to play in the NCAAs. After that was when State University offered me a job to head up the Coyotes, and you know the rest of the story.”

One reporter who hadn’t said anything spoke up. “You said that you sent Stilt back to Raleigh because of illness. Isn’t it true that he isn’t sick at all, but that he failed the drug test required by the NCAA, and that’s why he’s not playing in the game tomorrow night?”

The hotel lobby suddenly got quiet. Everyone had heard the rumors, but no one had dared to ask Coach.

“Oh, no,” Marla whispered squeezing Gale’s hand.

Neal looked directly at the reporter. “I can honestly say that Stilt has passed every drug test he has been given.” Neal paused and looked around at the other reporters. “He was caught violating the drug rule, however, which, as you know, goes against the NCAA

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zero tolerance policy, as well as my own. It was my decision to suspend him from the team, and send him back to Raleigh where he could receive medical treatment. Does that answer your question?" Neal asked, looking back at the reporter.

Embarrassed, the reporter looked down at his empty notepad. He had asked what he wanted to ask. Now he could report back to whatever rag sheet he worked for.

"Last question, guys. I have had a full day today and expect to have another one tomorrow in order to get ready for the game."

Neal glanced around the room. He was angry. His team was demoralized enough knowing that Stilt wouldn't be playing in the game. But when they found out it was because Stilt was caught using drugs, it would make it even worse. Someone had somehow found out about it, and passed the information on to that half-assed reporter. Neal wanted to know who.

"Do you really think there is any chance that you can win the game against Houston without Stilt?" someone asked from the back.

Neal clenched his fists and started to walk away without answering the question. Then he stopped. "The other schools where I coached I managed to build into winning programs. At State, not only have I managed to build a winning program that has put us in the NCAAs every year, twelve times in the Sweet Sixteen and ten times in the Final Eight, this year we have a chance to go all the way. I didn't come this far to lose it all now. So why don't you just stick around until tomorrow night and find out."

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After the group of reporters broke up, Neal took Stu aside. "I want you to find out the name of that reporter who knew about Stilt, and where he works. And I want to know where he got his information."

"You got it," said Stu.

Gale looked at Marla and let out a deep, shaky breath. "It's going to be a long night."

