

SportsFan Chronicles™

The background of the cover features a blurred green football field with white yard lines, set against a blue sky. In the foreground, the silhouettes of four people are shown from the chest up, with their arms raised in celebration. The person on the far left has their right arm raised in a fist. The person next to them has both arms raised in fists. The person in the center has their right arm raised in a fist and their left hand in a 'V' for victory sign. The person on the far right is wearing a baseball cap and has their right hand raised in a 'V' sign.

KURT WEICHERT

SportsFan Chronicles™

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SportsFan Chronicles™

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*To all the avid sports fans in the world
and to their friends and family who lovingly tolerate them.*

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A Note to the Reader

SportsFan Chronicles[™] is the first book in a series of fictional comedies. The characters are friends who love watching sports—any and all sports. The stories are about their friendship and camaraderie.

The main character is a fictional version of me. As for my real-life friends, I left them out so as not to embarrass them. Instead each character is a composite of people I encountered through the years, and the situations are much the same—combined events. The fictional storyline is based on what my life could have been if I had moved back to Chicago after I started dating Darci, whom I met after I moved to South Bend, Indiana.

I came up with the idea for *SportsFan Chronicles*[™] when I wrote a series of scripts for television in the 1990s called *The Sportfan*. Despite the positive response to the project I decided to take a very long break from writing for personal reasons. Less than a year ago, with renewed interest and enthusiasm, I decided to convert my original scripts to manuscript form. Now the storyline commences in the late 1990s and then fast forwards to present day. The second book takes place shortly after this one ends.

I think everyone will recognize themselves or someone they know in each of these characters.

CHAPTER 1

The Game

Kurt Weichert watched as the endless suburbs surrounding Indianapolis zipped by at seventy-five miles per hour, the rows of white houses growing thicker as he approached the city proper. Kurt knew somewhere inside each white box was a sports fan just like him, gearing up for game four of the Eastern Conference Finals against his hometown Bulls—a game he and his friends would soon be watching from right behind the basket!

“Bernie, you really did it this time,” said Kurt, looking over at his friend, who was piloting the Ford Explorer. “You big, loveable son of gun, this is going to be the best trip ever.”

“Hear, hear!” came the chorus from the backseat, where Kurt’s friends Brian, Victor, and Chuck had been arguing over the Pacers’ chances against Michael Jordan’s Bulls. The consensus? They had none.

“The Pacers and the Bulls—could any two teams call two more different places home?” asked Bernie, his bulk filling the seat of his SUV. “I mean, this is like the country mouse against the city mouse except the city mouse brought his gun.”

“Just think,” said Brian, Kurt’s coworker and best friend, “we were going to spend tonight at some crappy bar, getting drunk and watching the game with a hundred other ticketless schmucks. Now we’re going to be getting drunk with twenty thousand dear, dear friends.”

“Okay, I was with you until the ‘dear friends’ part,” said Bernie. “These people are going to want to kill us.”

“Well, close enough,” said Brian. “Not even the venom of thousands of dairy farmers can make this night less than freakin’ awesome.”

After leaving the urban landscape of Chicago, Kurt and his friends watched as the cows replaced the skyscrapers. Kurt, twenty-five, squirmed in his seat like a five-year-old at the prospect of sitting so close to the action.

The friends were happy to get away from Chicago and work, where Kurt and Brian’s tyrannical boss, Frank, was still poring over phone messages and invoices, trying desperately to leave his mark on Pointy Foods Services. Kurt’s friends, Chuck, Victor, and Bernie, were prime customers. On nights like this one, Frank sat at his desk with a fifth of Jack Daniels and a to-do list a mile long.

“I feel good, I feel lucky. This is going to be one hell of a weekend,” said Chuck. “Did you really bet on the Pacers like Brian said you did,” asked Kurt. “They’re going to be decimated by Jordan. He always plays great against them.”

Chuck looked at Kurt, a quizzical expression on his face. “A: I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about because I know the Bulls are going to win big.” At this Kurt shot a look at Brian, who had clearly lied to him. “And B: I’m talking about being lucky with the ladies. I’ve got my laser pointer with me.” At this announcement, Chuck held out his arm as though wielding Excalibur and announced in his most regal voice, “Guaranteed hookup commenced!”

A collective groan filled the car as Victor, Kurt, Bernie, and Brian rolled their eyes.

“Chuck, did you bring the laser pointer because, even though you own a string of delis, the women of Chicago treat you like Jabba the Hutt?” asked Brian. “You bring that thing every time we go out and the only thing it guarantees is getting to third base with a bouncer or security guard.”

“Excuse you,” said Chuck. “It gets lots of women. I just point the laser at a babe at the bar and that gets her attention. Then I simply work my magic and she’s mine. Mwahahaha.”

“Yeah, then they smell you and they’re gone,” replied Brian.

“If the smell doesn’t scare them away, then your bell bottoms will,” said Kurt. “What the hell are you thinking wearing those? This isn’t the Age of Aquarius.”

Chuck looked down at his flared pants; he was slightly hurt, though catching hell from Brian and Kurt was nothing new. Despite his financial success, Chuck was a geek extraordinaire and, despite his protestations, he knew it. His fashion sense was erratic and guided mostly by MTV, though his Coke-bottle glasses and untamed hair were accessories he couldn’t shed.

“For your information, Kurt, fashion goes in cycles,” he replied. “For example, right now women appreciate men sporting the nineteen sixties look.”

From the driver’s seat, Bernie turned his head around to see the commotion up close. How the hell did his car get filled with these people? he wondered.

“Hate to break it to you, Chuck, but the only one sure to get a girl is Victor,” he said. “If you check the fact sheet you’ll see Victor is the one with a date tonight, an Indiana Pacers cheerleader no less. By the way, Victor, have I told you how much I hate you?”

Victor, sometimes called “the Italian Stallion,” looked the part. Six feet tall with black hair thicker than sagebrush, his conquests were made easier by an Italian accent and considerable personal wealth. At twenty-seven years old he was the owner of three Italian restaurants that, on many occasions, acted as his personal dating service.

“How do you say? It’s density,” said Victor, who couldn’t quite get English down pat despite having been in the country since the age of fifteen.

“*Destiny*, Victor. The word is *destiny*, not *density*.”

“Two years ago she was one of my waitresses,” continued Victor, oblivious to Brian’s input. “I nurtured her, usually in the stock room, and I always knew that woman would go on to bigger things.”

“Yeah, she went on to bigger things all right,” said Bernie, cupping his hands over his chest. “Did you finance those as an investment in your own love life?”

Bernie and Chuck both laughed at their fellow restaurateur. Bernie owned four comedy clubs, each called Bernie's Comedy Club, numbered one through four.

Brian, sitting in the middle of the backseat, squeezed between Victor and Chuck, tuned out the sounds Bernie was making and turned to Kurt. He'd been avoiding talking to him about the way they'd rushed out the door of Pointy Foods, Brian insisting their work for the day was done.

"That's enough talk about loose women," Brian said. "Kurt, remember how I told you we had no more customers left to service?"

"Oh, no, Brian, please don't tell me we weren't done with work today," responded Kurt, his face turning red from anger and from the knowledge that he would have to listen to Frank rant the following Monday morning about how "the customer is your life" and how "you never leave before the job is done."

"Brian, you're killing me," Kurt continued. "Frank is going to have a field day with this. Once he sobers up Monday morning he's going to call us into his office and go on for half an hour about how much we drag the company down and how irresponsible we are. I can't take that for another day, especially with his whiskey breath wafting across the desk at us."

Brian slumped down in his seat as though he were reclining and put his feet up on an imaginary desk. A grin spread across his face. "I swear, Nancy, seeing you flustered is always worth it. Relax. Four small customers we serviced earlier in the week called and said they need more product to get them through the weekend. That's all."

"That's all? Why didn't you say something?" asked Kurt, his voice rising in exasperation. "We could've fit them in before we left."

"Heck no, my friend. They were spread out all over town," Brian answered. "Screw it. Frank secretly checks our voicemails anyway, so let him go see what they need. Besides, he likes nothing more than playing the hero."



Back in the office, Frank's face was flush with anger as he held Brian's phone to his ear. One customer after another was complaining about running low on supplies and threatening to end their relationship with Pointy Foods. Frank stood up suddenly and threw Brian's receiver across the room. It took the phone base with it.

With sweat pouring from his forehead, Frank quickly sat down again. The alcohol was taking hold and he paid a physical penalty for his intense anger. The penalties were adding up.

At thirty-five Frank looked as if he were forty-five. A smoker since the age of twelve, when he had bummed a cigarette off his grandmother, Frank also had a strong relationship with many of the five-dollar whiskeys. He was just five feet, six inches tall with a round middle and disheveled hair.

The Pointy Foods sales office, where Frank spent most of his days and evenings and nights, was Frank's home away from home. The office had fewer than a dozen desks. Each was paired with another and home to a computer, a desktop calendar, a small lamp, and a phone. The phone was each salesman's best tool and the real heart of the enterprise.

Set apart from the clumped desks, which occupied what might have been the lowlands and consumed nearly a third of the room, was an office with a large window overlooking the sales floor. In this office prowled Frank, master of all he surveyed—at least when he hadn't drawn the shades in order to focus his energies on new sales strategies.

Each afternoon was grievance time as Frank slipped farther away from sobriety and reason. His door would fling open and he would make a beeline for whichever salesman was struggling that week.

Frank's speech, sometimes slurred, would always involve something about how Napoleon had lost at Waterloo because he hadn't followed up with his commanders and how if he'd just

called them back they would have ordered more bread and butter from their good friends at Pointy Foods.

After collecting himself and Brian's phone from the floor, Frank notified the warehouse he would be coming over to gather supplies for Brian's clients. He hustled out the door and into the night, swearing Napoleon would have his revenge.



“Brian, I swear, if Frank gives me the Napoleon speech when we get into the office you're buying me lunch for a week.” Kurt shook his head. It wasn't the first time Brian had flirted with disaster at their job. But he and Kurt were usually at the top of the sales charts, so it rarely led to any serious punishment, especially if they assuaged Frank with a bottle of his favorite liquor—whatever that happened to be that particular week.

After parking in the VIP lot at Market Square Arena, courtesy of Victor's girlfriend, the five friends poured out of Bernie's Explorer and walked through the stadium tunnels. Although Victor had come to the game with his friends and had secured their VIP parking, he had no intention of sitting with them.

“You gents enjoy the game,” said Victor as they approached the lower-level seating. “I have business to attention to.”

“That's business to *attend* to,” said Bernie. “Oh never mind. You're going to sit by the cheerleaders. Why am I helping you?”

Kurt, Brian, Bernie, and Chuck made their way to the seats behind one of the baskets.

“This is going to be so sweet,” said Kurt. “Can you imagine? We'll be able to grab Jordan's tongue when he dunks on that asshat Reggie Miller.”

Behind Kurt and his friends, the Pacers' faithful grumbled something about how Jordan wouldn't get close to the basket. A skinny, sixty-something woman dressed in a neon-yellow tank top, blue MC Hammer pants, and a blue-and-yellow feather boa leaned in close to Brian.

“Ya know, you boys are awfully out of place here. Wouldn’t ya be more at home in the losers’ lounge?”

The fans around Pacers Lady laughed at the joke, though Brian’s group couldn’t figure out why.

“Ma’am, I commend you,” said Brian.

“For what?” she asked.

“It takes great courage to be out in public with a face like that.”

Pacers Lady, whose face was indeed caked in clown-like make-up, shot back into her seat.

Kurt gave Brian a silent high five out of view of the Pacers fans and they both ordered several beers in preparation for the game.

Meanwhile, Victor was making his way across the court to where the Pacers cheerleaders were stationed. His girl, Candy with a y, was sitting on the floor near his seat. She waved a pom-pom at him and he winked.

In the first half the Bulls, who were the visiting team, were shooting at the basket where Kurt and his friends were stationed. Every time a Bull shot a free throw the home team fans tried to distract him by waving three-foot Styrofoam fingers in the air and screaming obscenities about the player’s wife. Kurt and his friends tried their best to overcome the droning noise by whistling and clapping their support.

In the second half the Bulls were leading by just two points, with Jordan putting on a show by bringing twenty-five first-half points with him. The teams, having switched directions, were now shooting their free throws at opposite ends, which gave Kurt, Brian, Bernie, and Chuck the chance to showcase their finely honed heckling.

Hardcore sports nuts, Kurt and Brian had grown up playing youth sports together and had learned to heckle everyone from opposing batters to referees. The section they were sitting in was a sea of Pacers blue that ebbed when the Pacers shot their free throws. The fans sat very quietly as their team’s players shot from the stripe. Instead of waving foam fingers or booing, Kurt and Brian took a different tactic.

“Your father never loved you and I’m pretty sure he resents your success!” screamed Kurt as Reggie Miller sank another free throw. “You have an underbite and it makes you socially awkward!” Again, no success as Miller sank his second free-throw attempt.

“Perhaps we should appeal to their sense of decency,” said Brian. “After all, nobody wants to see the Pacers in the finals.”

Overhearing Brian’s analysis, one Pacers fan, a mountain of a human being, expressed his disapproval. “Excuse me, but I think there are about twenty thousand people in this arena who’d like to see the Pacers in the finals.”

Brian turned and stared at the six foot, six inch, 350-pound man and said simply, “You know, you’re right. It would be great.”

With his presumed attacker confused and temporarily mollified, Brian rejoined the others in taunting Reggie Miller as he lined up for a one-and-one free throw. His frantic play was drawing foul after foul from the Bulls, including two from Jordan. Despite their suggestions that Miller might be better off living in hell, he made both free throws.

A true superstar, Miller didn’t miss often and seemed to have ice water in his veins. The friends harbored a secret admiration for his killer instinct, which was perhaps second in its ferocity only to Jordan’s.

Victor couldn’t have cared less about Reggie Miller’s free-throw percentage. His vision was consumed by Candy, a tall, artificially enhanced blonde. Sitting directly in front of her, Victor’s eyes glazed over as his mind wandered to a game where he was a male cheerleader and the lifts were less than family friendly. He saw himself holding Candy up in the air, his arms fully extended as she yelled, “Go, Victor, Go!”

From across the court Kurt saw Victor’s expression and laughed to himself. “I swear that guy has the libido of a rabbit and the strength of a rhinoceros.”



Back at Pointy Foods, Frank trundled through the front door after having rushed around town delivering the last of the bread and other supplies to Brian's angry customers. Betty, Pointy Foods' receptionist, was leaving just as he entered.

"Oh, hi, Frank. What are you doing here?"

"Kurt and Brian are going to get written up for this one," he huffed. "They didn't check their voicemails and blew off four stops. Four stops!"

"Were those the four calls Brian received earlier?" asked Betty. "I sent those directly to *his* voicemail." Her tone was suspicious. Frank shouldn't have known about the calls. Plus his breath stunk something awful. Her steps backward didn't go unnoticed.

"Yeah, I know you sent the calls Brian's way, Betty. I checked his voicemails and I check yours, too, so get over it. By the way, your husband is leaving you for Susan, your neighbor. Now, if you'll excuse me, I've gotta do Kurt's and Brian's closing paperwork all over again."

Betty, who was in her sixties, nearly fell backward out of the front door of the office. "How dare you!" She grabbed the stapler from her desk and threw it at Frank on her way out, nearly clipping his head.



Back in Indianapolis, Kurt and Brian had no clue about the disaster zone the office had become. When they returned on Monday they would find Betty had resigned and Frank was the subject of a harassment lawsuit.

The game was down to two seconds on the clock with the Bulls up by just two points. The crowd was tense and the players animated as they directed each other into position. Kurt and his friends were serenading the Indiana fans with the unfailingly annoying "Na Na Hey Hey Kiss Him Goodbye" when the unthinkable happened: Scottie Pippen inadvertently bumped Reggie Miller with no time left on the clock. The referee blew his

whistle and raised his hand, signaling for a foul. Miller, who had been in the act of shooting, got two free throws.

Kurt, Brian, and Bernie all had their hands in the air in disbelief.

“This can’t be happening!” screamed Brian. “Hey, ref, what kind of call was that?”

“They blew it. It’s over,” said Bernie.

“Listen, Bernie, it’s not over ’til it’s over,” said Kurt.

“We had to foul Mr. Clutch himself,” said Brian. He grimaced. “He’ll never miss these shots. Reggie, you suck! Your sister was better than you and always will be.” Miller’s sister, Cheryl, had been a world-class player for USC, and Brian was fond of reminding him.

Miller lined up for his free throws, oblivious to Brian’s taunts, so Chuck took things one step further. He quickly turned his back to the court and began to pull his pants down. His belt buckle undone, his boxers made their way south so his butt crack was partially exposed. As though guarding the president and taking a bullet for his charge, Kurt lunged in front of Chuck and started pulling frantically at his pants to keep them up.

“Stop it, Chuck! You’re going to get me arrested,” he screamed over the crowd as Miller sank his first shot. The crowd went ballistic. The score was now 99-98 Bulls.

“Great. Now after Reggie makes his next one we’re going to have to play them in overtime,” yelled Bernie.

Having had his pants forcibly put back on, Chuck began fumbling in his pocket and said almost imperceptibly, “He doesn’t have a chance.”

Recognizing the look on Chuck’s face, Kurt immediately moved into protective mode once again. He’d been in too many stadium holding tanks because of Chuck’s antics and didn’t want to go back. “Don’t do anything stupid, Chuck.”

Undeterred, Chuck pulled out his laser pointer and began pointing it at Reggie’s face. Fending off Kurt with his left arm, he aimed the laser pointer at Miller with his right. The red dot

danced around Miller's mouth and moved up toward the tip of his nose. Reggie now had the ball over his head, and just before he extended his arm to release it Chuck found his target and put the laser dot right into Reggie's eyes, which involuntarily closed as he released the ball.

"Direct hit!" yelled Chuck, seemingly unaware of the frothing-mad Pacers fans pointing him out to security.

Brian seemed not to notice them either, including the monolith he'd made friends with earlier.

"He missed it! He missed it! We win!" Brian screamed before being engulfed by Goliath's massive arms and dragged to the floor.

Bernie was jubilant. A big man, he was athletic for his size. Not noticing what had happened to Brian, he was jumping up and down in his seat, cheering the last-second escape by the Bulls (and Chuck). "He threw up a brick!"

"Hide your laser pointer, you idiot!" Kurt frantically tried to get his friend to understand the gravity of the situation. Brian indeed understood but mainly because of the gravity of the large Pacers fan who had him pinned to the stadium steps.

Chuck saw security coming and, noticing Brian was already in trouble, decided to make him the unwitting scapegoat. He reached down and put the pointer into Brian's shirt pocket.

Seeing an opportunity, Brian grabbed the pointer and poked his assailant in the eye. "Take that, King Kong!" Freeing himself from the giant's meaty paws, he leapt onto the court and fled.

As Pacers fans began screaming to security about the Bulls fan now running across the court, Victor, knocked from his day-dream, looked up to see Brian hurdling over security guards and heading straight for him. Brian was waving the laser pointer at his face, trying to get his attention. Victor shifted his gaze in time to see Kurt, Bernie, and Chuck being hauled away by security guards who hadn't been fooled by Chuck's ruse.

Victor, who wanted no part of the madness, quickly threw his hotel key card to Candy and made a break for the exit.

CHAPTER 2

The Punishment

Kurt stood up from the bench he'd been using as a cot and looked at Bernie, who was sharing a jail cell with him and ten other inmates. The prison guard, a relatively small man with piercing eyes and the sort of tired expression one gets from exercising constant vigilance, approached the bars of the cell.

"You, Weichert. You can make your call now."

"We're innocent," said Kurt. "We didn't start that riot."

"Well, you can tell that to the judge yourself...tomorrow morning," said the guard. "For your friend's sake I hope you can find someone to post bail tonight."

The guard pointed to Chuck in the other cell. He was pinned against the wall by an inmate, his underpants yanked up as high as his neck in the mother of all atomic wedgies. Chuck, his eyes crossed and his voice now two octaves higher, turned and looked to Kurt for help.

"Kurtis, you can't let this happen. You've got to stop it now," he said.

The guard, growing weary of the night's entertainment, offered some relief by yelling at the other inmates. "Okay you boobs, leave him alone. No funny stuff on my shift." He turned back to Kurt. "Listen, pal. He'll be safe enough on my shift but a word of caution: I get off in four hours and my relief is not going to be as sympathetic as I am. Those guards are diehard Pacers fans and word is getting out about what happened."

Kurt looked at the guard and then at Chuck, who was trying in vain to find the elastic that had once been attached to his underwear. “So what you’re saying is I better get someone to bail us out quickly or Chuck is going to be in trouble tonight?”

“Yup.”



Back at their hotel, Victor was alone with Candy but his usual moves weren’t working.

“I can’t believe we lost that game,” said Candy, her brown puppy-dog eyes welling with tears and her face flushing with anger. “I heard some guys distracted Reggie on his last shot with some kind of light.”

With that Victor jumped but didn’t let on what he had seen.

“I hope they catch the crazy men who did this,” he said, moving closer to Candy, who was sitting on the bed next to him. “I love Ronnie Mullin.”

“Miller. His name is Reggie Miller,” said Candy, who stopped fuming long enough to laugh in a high-pitched kind of snort.



Back at the arena, the drama was still unfolding. A two-hour manhunt for Brian, who had escaped the initial capture of the dangerous gang, was drawing to an end. Running through the halls of the nearly empty arena, Brian was trailed closely by twelve security officers. He hadn’t thought to toss the laser pointer still protruding from the top of his shirt pocket.

Cornered, Brian reached the edge of a balcony on the upper level of the arena and looked down. He looked back at the only security officer with him—the others had run out of breath—and thought of Harrison Ford in *The Fugitive*.

“Put the pointer down on the floor and turn around slowly,” said the security guard, playing the role of Tommy Lee Jones’ US Marshal in Brian’s mind.

“I’m innocent!” shouted Brian. “I did not point this thing. It was the one-armed man.”

“I don’t care.” With that the security guard began bounding toward Brian, his massive hump of a stomach jiggling rhythmically, nearly hypnotizing Brian. Snapping out of his slumber, Brian put his hands in the air as if he were going to surrender, but he decided instead to jump off the balcony. In midair he realized the fall was longer than he’d thought. He resigned himself to massive injuries.

“Bring it on.”

Instead of slamming into a railing or a hard, plastic chair, Brian landed on a janitor. The wizened old man whimpered as Brian brought him to the floor in a scene reminiscent of a Looney Tunes cartoon.

Brian quickly rolled the janitor over and checked for a pulse, but his efforts at lifesaving measures were interrupted by the janitor’s trying to punch him in the face and yelling, “Get the hell off me!”

Realizing his work was done, Brian fled down a tunnel and out of the arena.



Back at the jail, Kurt was mulling his options. He could call his fiancée, Darci, and get an earful about hanging out with idiots, or he could call...Frank. Picking up the phone in the security guard’s office, Kurt rang Darci only to get her answering machine. “Hey, Darci, this is Kurt. Um, just wanted to say hi and tell you I love you. We might be a bit late getting back to Chicago. Chuck is feeling ill.”

Realizing he couldn’t possibly explain in a message Chuck’s

instigating a riot, and not wanting to do so in front of the guards, Kurt had no other options.

“Pointy Foods, this is Frrrrank.”

Jesus, he’s drunk, thought Kurt. In his mind’s eye Kurt could see Frank sitting at his desk, shoulders slumped, his head a dead weight on the keyboard, with one hand on the phone, the other holding a glass that was most decidedly not half full.

“Frank, it’s Kurt. You’re still there—”

“Of course I’m still here, ya jackass,” Frank spat. He seemed to have found a moment of clarity through his anger. “You and Brian chose not to check your v-v-voicemail and I just f-f-finished servicing your customers. What the hell do you w-w-want?”

“Frank, my friend, we can talk about that later. It was all a misunderstanding,” Kurt said, doing his best to appeal to whatever friendship Frank might have thought they had. “We’re in jail in Indianapolis and we need you to bail us out.”

“Why, Kurt, I’m touched you called me,” replied Frank, the venom nearly dribbling down his chin. “This is wonderful. I hope you and Brian rot there.”

“Frank, this is not about Brian and me,” responded Kurt. “This is about saving the company’s bacon.”

“What—what are you talking about?”

“Brian is not in jail, Frank. Bernie Winslow and Chuck Jennings are in here with me. You remember them? Two of the company’s best customers?”

“What happened?” Frank was no longer smiling.

“Frank, I’m short on time. Just get in your car and get up here. We have to get bailed out tonight. My time is up. Goodbye.”

“You better have a good explanation when I get there! You son of a—”

Frank slammed the phone into his computer monitor, breaking it and spilling his drink on the floor at the same time. Looking down at the shattered glass and wasted booze, he almost cried. “Oh, my sweet nectar, what have I done to you?”



Back at the hotel, Victor was at DEFCON 3, pulling out all the stops to soothe Candy. He had explained to her he would do everything in his power to find and punish the men responsible, adding if it were up to him they would rot in jail forever.

“Oh, my sweet darling, we’re almost there. The bra, it no likes my fingers.” Victor struggled mightily against Candy’s bra, which had four clasps, indicative of her prodigious chest. He had to see them once more.

“Hurry up, Victor, I need you.”

“Don’t worry, my love. Victor is like a pick-the-locks guy.”

“A locksmith?” asked the cheerleader, thoroughly confused.

“Aha! Success!” Victor wasted no time enjoying the spoils of war, but just as he was about to head south a massive *clang* rang out in the hallway.

The lock to the door clicked open and Brian barged in, knocking the entryway table to the floor.

“Victor, I need you to go to the jail and bail the guys out. They were arrested when Chuck distracted Reggie Miller on his last shot,” said Brian.

“You! You were the guys who distracted Reggie and made him miss that last shot,” exclaimed the cheerleader. “Victor, I never want to see or hear from you again!”

“Wait, don’t go. I’ve never seen this man before in my life. It’s all a big mistake,” said Victor. “He’s an intruder doing a home inversion.”



The next day the friends, bailed out by Victor, sat around a table at Victor’s restaurant, Mama Mia.

“Thank God they never caught me with the laser pointer or else we’d be up a creek,” said Brian.

“So true,” said Kurt. “With no evidence the judge will have to dismiss the charges.”

“You guys ruined my chances with Candy,” said Victor, dejected.

Chuck couldn’t help himself. “I guess it wasn’t *density* after all, Victor.”

“Oh, look at Chuck getting brave,” said Kurt. “It looks as if the only person who had a partner last night was Chuck. What was his name?”

“Very funny, Kurt,” said Chuck. “Bubbles, by the way. His name was Bubbles. I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Have anything you want to tell us?” added Brian. “I heard some things, like maybe you guys are pen pals now.”

“Hey, knock it off, you guys,” insisted Chuck. “I almost had to kick that guy’s butt. He’s lucky we were bailed out when we were.”

“I think *you’re* the one who got lucky last night, Chuck,” responded Kurt. “Besides, I’m actually more curious about whether or not Frank ever made it up to Indianapolis.”



Sitting in a jail cell with Bubbles, Frank stared at the floor, so angry and so drunk his hands were shaking. Arrested for public intoxication upon entering the jail, he had tried calling Kurt’s house only to get an answering machine. The same for Brian’s house and for the office, where Kurt had promised Frank they would be making up for skipping out on customers.

“Don’t look so down, Frank,” said the prison guard, who had warned Kurt about sticking around for too long. “Bubbles looks lonely today. You just might make a friend while you’re in here.”

CHAPTER 3

Kurt's Backyard Barbeque

The Friday after they were all—including Frank—released from jail, the salesmen of Pointy Foods Services' regional office sat in silence and waited for Frank to introduce CEO Michael Sanders. Everyone was on his best behavior because the company CEO was a no-nonsense man, a stern-looking business type with white hair and a suit that seemed to be part of his genetic makeup.

This was a man who had earned his position through fear and respect in equal measure. He descended upon the regional office in order to hand out the quarterly sales awards. Kurt, who knew he would once again be in the lead, had a barbeque in his backyard planned for the following day.

Frank stood before the assembled crowd and, with his brow covered in the cold sweat of a daylong withdrawal, began the meeting.

“We posted some good numbers last quarter and Mr. Sanders would like to say a few words.” Frank kept his comments to a minimum because underneath the surface he was seething. He had been released from jail on Tuesday, his stay extended because Kurt and Brian had *forgotten* to pick him up despite repeated messages left on their work phones. Frank had returned to the office and proceeded to throw anything and everything he could get his hands on, but he'd refused to talk about what had happened to him while he was in jail.

“Of all my distribution plants across the country,” said the

CEO, “this is consistently the best. I always use the employees of this plant as examples of excellence. So go on, give yourselves a big hand.”

The salesmen gave themselves a rowdy round of applause, but there was still some tension in the room as each man wondered who might grab the top spot for the quarter.

“Now, I would like to give special recognition and thanks to Kurt Weichert,” continued the CEO. “Again Kurt led the quarter in sales and posted the largest sales gain. Kurt, come up here and get your quarterly bonus.”

Applause broke out once more as Kurt stood from his chair across the room and walked between the salesmen to the front. As he passed his fellow salesmen, he was pelted with under-the-breath insults, which were mostly in good fun.

“Congratulations,” said Dwayne, a veteran salesman and aspiring manager, who then whispered, “jackwagon.”

The only man in the room whose insults were more than jokes was Frank, whose face was scarlet with rage. He muttered something to himself that sounded like, “If it’s the last thing I do I’ll kill that SOB.”

The CEO handed Kurt a plaque and a check for \$8,500. Kurt blushed as he was handed his award. He had known he would receive a bonus for the quarter, but the amount was above and beyond what he had expected. “Thank you, Mr. Sanders.”

As everyone clapped, Brian stood up and yelled to the CEO, “Oh supreme leader, I have a request.” The room fell silent. This was like joking with Attila the Hun—he might have laughed or chopped off a head.

“Sit down and shut up, Brian!” bellowed Frank. “There will be time for questions later.”

The CEO was surprised by Frank’s angry reaction. “Easy does it, Frank,” he interjected. “Why don’t *you* sit down and shut up.”

Everyone in the room started to laugh. Everyone except Frank.

“Now, what did you want to say, Byron?” continued the CEO.

“The name is Brian, sir. Since we did so well and made you lots of money I think it would be a positive gesture if you would buy the steaks and beer for Kurt’s barbeque tomorrow.”

Frank, who had abstained from his daily self-medicating for this special meeting, was on edge and couldn’t tolerate Brian’s familiar tone toward Mr. Sanders.

Frank mindlessly disregarded the CEO’s order. “Brian, I think I’ve heard enough of this garbage,” he said. “I’ll be talking to you later about a formal reprimand.” He then turned to the CEO. “Sir, I am so sorry for this interruption. Please continue.”

“I believe I asked you to settle down, Frank. There’s no need for a reprimand. I think Byron has a great idea.”

Brian stood up again. “Brian, sir. My name is Brian.”

The CEO turned toward Frank. “Frank, give them anything they need to make Kurt’s barbeque something to remember. I’m feeling generous and it’s not often these guys really get to let their hair down.”

“Of course, sir,” said Frank, biting his lower lip so hard he drew blood.

After handing out the remaining awards, Mr. Sanders made an announcement that collapsed Kurt’s notions of what his barbeque would be like.

“I’ve decided since you guys are so keen for the company and have done such a good job, I’d like to join you at your celebration tomorrow. If that’s okay with you, Kurt?”

The salesmen in the room turned slowly to the back and looked squarely at Kurt, who was frozen in position, giving Brian a purple nurple. His eyes wide, he bolted straight upright and stammered, “Of course, s-s-sir. That would be my honor.”

After Sanders left the office, the salesmen let loose on Kurt and Brian.

“Good job, guys,” said Dwayne. “How am I supposed to get plastered and take my pants off if Sanders is going to be there? You just had to mention something about it, huh, Brian?”

“Dwayne, first of all, from the bottom of my heart, I never liked you,” said Brian. “Second, this barbeque is going to be so awesome, Mr. Sanders will want to take his own pants off, and he might even dance a jig for us.”



The next day, the entire sales force of Pointy Foods was in Kurt’s backyard. Brian was directing workers setting up the barbeque. He’d taken the CEO’s offer of support a little too seriously and arranged upgrades to the party worthy of Hugh Hefner.

Kurt looked over to see band members getting out of a van. “Brian, do we have to have a band play here today? What’s wrong with my radio?”

Brian smiled wide. “The company is paying for this barbeque and we are going to do it in style!”

Brian grabbed Kurt by the arm and guided him to the side of the house. He pointed to a large truck idling on the road in front. “Do you see that refrigerated truck parked on the street? It’s loaded with burger meat, bratwursts, chicken breasts, and the best steaks in town.” Brian then turned Kurt around and pointed to the men setting up a volleyball net. They had begun rolling in what appeared to be several tons of sand.

“I got Pointy Foods to buy you a professional volleyball net and five tons of premium-grade beach sand,” said Brian, his face beaming with pride.

“For God’s sake, Brian, how much did all of this cost?”

“Cost?” asked Brian, offended Kurt would ask. “Cost is not an object when someone else is paying.”

Brian wasn’t done with his tour. He pointed to the kegs of beer, the ice-filled coolers, and the other refreshments, nearly a dozen in all. “All the refreshments anyone could need,” he said. “Plus, we have three—not one, but three—gas grills to cook all that grade-A prime!”

Kurt was more embarrassed than excited. “Who’s going to

cook all this food? And who's going to eat it all? We'd need four hundred people here to eat this stuff. Oh, no—"

"I might have mentioned to a few friends and friends of friends that we're having a get-together," said Brian. "Oh, and I told Chuck last night he could be in charge of cooking all of the food."

"Not Chuck, Brian, the guy is a walking virus," said Kurt. "I don't care what he says about his restaurants, those places belong in a banana republic or something."

"He insists," said Brian. "He's the designated grill master."

"Fine, Brian, but you're in charge of making sure he washes his hands. I never eat at his restaurants. The guy should be reported to the CDC."

"I'm way ahead of you, buddy. I made him promise he would wear those surgical gloves."

Kurt turned and gasped to see three cartons of surgical gloves—of course, the highest-quality surgical gloves.



Two hours later Chuck was having a ball. Spinning and dancing in place, he stood amongst the billowing smoke of the three massive grills, all on high heat. Every few seconds he would throw a burnt steak or a hot dog on a plate and yell, "Order up!"

Running around the volleyball pit, Brian was hitting on every woman who ventured into the range of his voice. The backyard, which was a large one at fifty by fifty feet, was beginning to get crowded.

Wearing a light-cotton suit with a *Miami Vice*-style fluorescent-green T-shirt, Victor was camped out at one of the picnic tables, surrounded by women. His week had been considerably better than that of the others because he'd won back the affections of his Pacers cheerleader and was planning a rendezvous with her later in the evening.

The one man not taking part in the festivities was Kurt. Darci

forced him to stand with her by the backyard entrance to greet the arrivals. A slender blonde Kurt had begun dating in college, she was his equal in wit and even more ambitious when it came to her career. She kept Kurt on his toes and supported him after long days battling Frank. She was wearing a yellow sundress and a large-brimmed hat, and looked so much like a southern belle attending the Kentucky Derby that Kurt mentioned she might want to find herself a mint julep.

A longhaired man came to the gate. He was wearing flip-flops and swim trunks even though Kurt didn't have a pool. His eyes were glazed and his face was plastered with a permanent and stupid grin.

"Jon Berg, you made it to this one. How's it going?" Kurt's tone was flat with forced kindness. Under his breath he muttered, "Crap."

"Cool, dude," said Jon. "Who's the lovely lady?"

"Jon, this is my fiancée, Darci," said Kurt. "Darci, Jon Berg."

"Hello, Jon," said Darci, "lovely to have you here."

"I'm stoked, bro," he replied before heading for the volcanic eruptions of Chuck's grills.

"What's his deal?" asked Darci.

"That is *the* Jon Berg," answered Kurt. "I don't really know the guy but every time I've had a barbeque in the last couple of years he's shown up. I think he lives in the neighborhood and just heads this way when he sees smoke. God forbid I ever have a house fire—he'll show up with a fistful of joints to light up."

The next to arrive at the party was Bernie. On his arm was one of the most-stunning women Kurt had ever seen, and he secretly wondered how much Bernie was paying her. She was easily four inches taller than Bernie and had the build and face of a supermodel.

Bernie announced to anyone who would listen, "This is it. This is the love of my life."

An incredulous Darci whispered to Kurt, "She is magnificent. Good for Bernie."

“Yeah, good for him,” said Kurt. “It’s nice he found someone.”

Next to arrive was Pointy Foods’ CEO, Michael Sanders, along with his twelve-year-old son, Nick, with two of his friends in tow. The three boys, in their karate outfits, were chopping each other on the head all the way up the garden path to the backyard.

The CEO shook Darci’s hand. “This must be Darci,” he said, his tone still boardroom. “This is my son Nick and his two karate buddies. I brought them for protection. Actually, they’re here competing in a national karate tournament. Don’t let the size fool you—these guys are tough.”

“Oh, well, we sure will appreciate having guardians around to protect the place,” joked Darci. “It’s so wonderful to meet you finally, sir. Kurt has said wonderful things about your leadership of the company.”

“Ah, I see you’ve been angling for a bigger bonus, Kurt,” he laughed. “How much did you pay her?”

After the stiff, obligatory laughter that goes with meeting your boss in a social setting, Kurt led Sanders and his boys to a picnic table he’d set aside for them and headed back to the gate to continue his duties.

Darci jumped up and down when she saw Alice, her roommate, who arrived with a date. Kurt, on the other hand, wasn’t as ecstatic. His dislike of Alice was mutual and fierce, but was muted because of his love for Darci and the requirement that he be nice to the people she liked.

“Alice.”

“Kurt.”

After a brief introduction to Alice’s boyfriend, Kurt turned to Darci and whispered in her ear, “I think I know that guy. He used to work at Pointy Foods’ warehouse ’til he was fired for stealing.”

“What did he steal, a hamburger bun?” asked Darci. “You guys work for a food company. It’s not like he could take gold or something.”

“Actually, Darci, he stole anything and everything he could gets his hands on. Toilet paper, stamps, office chairs, a forklift—”

“A forklift?”

“A forklift. They found it in his garage when they arrested him. I think he must have brought in a flatbed or something. Actually, it *was* pretty incredible. Gotta give him props for that.”

“Well, this should be interesting,” said Darci, who was by then used to Alice’s tearing through a long list of wholly untrustworthy men. The speed with which she disposed of them was exceeded only by her self-pitying refrains of being “unlucky” in love.

“I don’t think anyone’s going to recognize him. He must have lost a lot of weight in jail,” said Kurt. “But just in case it is the guy, I’m going to keep my eye on him while he’s here.”

Just as Kurt was about to close the backyard gate, a disheveled-looking Frank stumbled out of the passenger seat of a rusted, 1970 Buick Skylark and walked up to the fence. Before Kurt could get a look at the driver, the car screeched off, leaving a long, billowing cloud of oil-filled smoke trailing behind it.

Kurt and Darci waved their hands in front of their faces, coughing away the fumes while Frank attempted a greeting, oblivious to the noxious assault of his mysterious ride. He was wearing the suit he had worn during the meeting, but since then the jacket had acquired a ketchup stain in addition to reeking of booze.

“Well-la, hello, ha, ha. Are we having a party?” he spat.

Kurt, protecting Frank for reasons he couldn’t comprehend, grabbed him by the arm and rushed him toward the house. “It’s time for you to get inside and take a nap before Sanders, your boss, sees you like this.”

“This is my barbeque, not yours,” slurred Frank. “I’m the boss and I want a drink.”

Kurt, not wanting to make a scene, let go of Frank. “Fine. The drinks are over there on the table. My God, you are one sad, little man.”

“By the way,” slurred Frank, who was seeing double and looking about two feet to the left of Darci, who had been trailing closely behind them, “you’re lovely and I’m sure you’ll make Kurt verrrry happy one day.”

“Thank you,” said Darci, shuffling sideways to stay in Frank’s shifting line of vision.



The party had been going strong for some two hours when things went horribly wrong. The guitarist for the band, a very Earth, Wind & Fire-looking man, approached Kurt in a rage.

“Hey, man, somebody stole my guitar.”

“Are you sure you didn’t misplace it?” asked Kurt, whose mind immediately flashed to his former coworker, Alice’s date.

“How do you misplace a guitar, man?” asked the band member. “I’m telling you it’s been stolen. We took a fifteen-minute break, came back, and it was gone, man.”

Just as Kurt was trying to think of another explanation, Bernie ran by at full speed, crying and yelling, “Isabella, my love, how could you?”

Darci, who had seen Kurt talking to the guitar player, rushed after him. She stopped when she got to Kurt. “Excuse me, Kurt, I think you need to see this.”

“What’s going on now?”

“Well, first of all, Bernie is climbing up your tree and I’m willing to bet he won’t come down.”

Kurt turned to see Bernie, dressed as impeccably as possible in European Capri pants, leather sandals, a pink polo shirt, and a Panama hat, doing his best to climb what amounted to a large sapling.

“Why?” asked Kurt before realizing the answer was something he most assuredly did not want to hear.

“Well,” said Darci, “Bernie caught Victor with his new girlfriend—you know, *the one*, the love of his life. Let’s just say they were becoming intimately acquainted in your bathroom.”

“My bathroom?” shrieked Kurt. “I just cleaned it. Now it’s going to have olive oil from his ass all over it. Besides, wasn’t Victor already macking on one of the neighborhood girls?”

“Yeah, um, she was with them,” answered Darci. “Victor apparently didn’t know the Italian supermodel was Bernie’s girlfriend and, well, you know Victor.”

“But in my bathroom—”

“Come on,” prodded Darci. “You need to fix this. I think Bernie believes he can kill himself by jumping from the tree.”

“That tree is only six feet high and he looks as if he’s only about halfway up it.”

“I know.”

As they started over to the tree, Kurt stopped by the grill because Chuck was lying on the ground in a fetal position with the three karate kids standing over him.

“What’s going on here, boys?” asked Kurt, trying not to be too angry with the CEO’s kids. “Why have you stolen Chuck’s manhood?”

“Hey,” said Chuck, “that’s a little rough.”

Nick spoke up. “He’s an ass, that’s one reason.”

“That I can agree with, but it’s no reason to beat on him,” said Kurt. “On the other hand—”

“That and he keeps burning all the food my father gave you,” added Nick. “We complained about his cooking and he pushed me. Then he told me to get lost or he was going to have to kick my little ass.”

“Chuck. Get up!” yelled Kurt. Chuck stood up slowly, his hands in a defensive position over his face.

“Kurt, these guys are tough,” he said, still shielding his face. “I even hit ‘em in the back when they weren’t looking. That’s when they really started to beat on me.”

Kurt, who wasn’t entirely surprised Chuck had hit a twelve-year-old in the back, was shocked to see how much burnt food was lying around the grills—presumably where guests had dropped it on the ground rather than eat it.

Kurt turned toward the boys. “Finish him.”

Chuck threw his tongs at the larger of Nick's friends and took off running across the yard. Before they could chase him, Kurt put his hands out in front of them.

"Red light, boys. Let the coward run and hide. I've got something else for you to do. Something way awesome."

The boys looked at one another and smiled, then huddled around Kurt conspiratorially.

"Somebody at this barbeque is a thief. I need you guys to investigate and find the person who stole the guitar player's guitar. Now, I'm not saying you can kill him on sight, but detain him with all necessary force. Got me?"

In unison, the karate kids replied, "Yeah!"

Kurt rejoined Darci by the tree. Jon Berg and Victor were already there, pleading with Bernie to come down.

"Hey, dude, come down," said Jon. "This is a radical gesture of love but you've made your point, bro."

Bernie quickly threw a small branch at him. "Who are you anyway? Leave me alone."

"He's hostile," said Jon. "I'm getting some bad vibes here, man."

"I'm sorry, Bernie, I didn't know you two were together. How could I know such a lovely woman was with you?"

Victor's backhanded insult was no consolation to Bernie. "Yeah, well, it still happened. I finally go out with a great-looking woman and it's over just like that. Over! Thanks, Victor. All these girls at the party and you end up with mine."

Kurt again tried to get Bernie to climb down the tree. "Come on, Bernie, you just met her last week. There are other fish in the sea."

"Yeah, well, all I ever get are dogs from the pound," said Bernie.

Kurt tried again. "Come on, Bernie, forget about it. You don't want to fall in love with women who are that easy. Besides, it's obvious her looks were hiding some pretty serious character flaws."

“Character flaws?” screeched Bernie. “Who cares about character flaws? Did you see her legs?”

Kurt thought to himself for a moment, trying carefully to avoid making the situation worse, but there was no way around it. “Yeah, you’re right. She could’ve been the devil incarnate and I’d still chase her. Sorry, man, you’re screwed.”

As Bernie sobbed and clung tightly to the tree, his Capri pants doing little for his grip, Alice shuffled up to Kurt, who joked with Darci that Alice walked that way because she was such a tight ass.

“Kurt, those karate kids are attacking my boyfriend,” said Alice, her shrill voice peeling bark from the tree.

“Oh, that’s a shame,” he said. “Victor, why don’t you help me out with this one?”

As Kurt and Victor walked slowly across the yard, Alice moved ahead of them, her legs never moving more than six inches at a time but carrying her with great speed nonetheless.

The boys were all in combat stance, looming over Roger, the convicted thief.

“Gee, boys, what’s the problem?” Kurt asked. He leaned in close to Nick. “Did you boys catch him stealing?”

“You better believe we did!” shouted Nick. “We followed him into your house and watched him steal the clothes off that drunk guy sleeping in the bedroom.”

At hearing Nick’s loud proclamation, the band stopped playing and joined everyone else looking on.

“Frank,” said Kurt and Darci in unison.

“He’s sick,” said Nick. “He took off everything but the guy’s underwear.”

Alice’s date looked at everybody around him, struggled to his feet, turned around, then jumped over the fence and ran away. Alice started crying.

“Kurt, I’m going to take Alice home,” said Darci.

“Fantastic,” said Kurt. “Alice, I’m sorry you’re such a loser. I mean your date. Darci, I’ll see you later.”

Alice was having none of it. “Oh, shut up, Kurt. All men are pigs. Let’s go, Darci.”

Kurt looked over the crowd and noticed Brian was having a great time. He was still playing volleyball and had no clue what had happened. Kurt suspected it was because Brian was three sheets to the wind and still pounding beer from his baseball hat, which had two beers attached to the sides and straws running down to the stupid grin on his face.

“This is just great,” said Kurt.

He ushered some of the guests out and ended his party early.



The guests had all left. Kurt and Brian were cleaning up by themselves and talking about the barbeque with Brian, who sported a wide grin.

“That was great—the best!” said Brian.

“What was great?” asked Kurt, wondering if they were talking about the same party. “The CEO had to leave so his pack of dogs wouldn’t kill someone else, and Frank vomited on the desserts. Just exactly what was great?”

From the back of the yard a sickening yelp rang out as Bernie fell from the tree.

“I rest my case,” said Kurt.

“I’m okay,” said Bernie, grabbing his knee. “Just a little sore. I think I’ve finally gotten over my broken heart.”

Kurt and Bernie were interrupted by Chuck, who was hiding in the bushes. He looked over his shoulder. “Are those karate kids gone?”

“Yeah, they’re gone, grill master.”

Kurt’s back door swung open to reveal Frank standing there in his underwear.

“Which one of you perverts undressed me?” demanded Frank. “Where did you idiots put my clothes?”

Trying and failing to stifle their laughter, Kurt's friends turned away.

“And why is Victor in the bathroom with that girl?” asked Frank, so frustrated he looked as though he were tearing up.

“Not again.” Kurt had had enough trouble for one day and couldn't tolerate anymore.

Bernie ran back to the tree as fresh tears ran down his face.

CHAPTER 4

The Firing

A few months after the disastrous barbeque things were back to normal at Pointy Foods. Kurt was once again in the lead as far as sales, and as winter set in he focused his energies on the NFL and his fantasy league. But it was hard to focus with Frank constantly screaming in his ear.

Frank stood stiff as a board in front of Kurt and Brian. He was in his General Patton mode—he was going to take Sicily if it killed him. Lording over the Pointy Foods conference room, he looked down at the salesmen and declared, “Gentlemen, we have a new customer. It’s go time and tomorrow is D-Day.”

Kurt and Brian looked at each other and braced for a hyperbolic hailstorm.

“As you may have heard, Best Burgers is opening two new restaurants in your area. My goal—nay, my mission in life is to become the supplier for the two new locations. If we do a good enough job for them, if our visions for a better and more-efficient business future meld, then we will try to get the rest of their restaurants. Gentlemen, I don’t think I exaggerate when I call this our Battle of the Bulge. We’re going to have resistance, fierce resistance—I mean *competition* from the Axis, the Germans, but if I can win and secure the freedom of Pointy Foods then it will mean a waterfall of money for the Allies. I mean you guys and a lot of money for the company.

“Since you’re each getting a store to target, I’ve set up a peace accord with Best Burgers’ purchasing manager, Linda Davis.

You're to meet her at her office at nine sharp tomorrow morning. Our fortunes are hinging on your efforts."

While their first urges were to laugh at Frank's World War II metaphor, Brian and Kurt instead stiffened at hearing the name Linda Davis. She was a wiry woman of thirty-five whose abrasive personality was notorious among the food-suppliers community, most of whom believed she hadn't been hugged enough as a child. Frank should have carried things a bit further rather than neglecting to mention they were meeting with the führer.

"Frank, I've heard this lady is tough," said Brian. "Most of our competition won't even do business with her and that's saying a lot because she has a lot to spend."

"I heard much the same thing—she's a real dragon," added Kurt. "I heard she once told a seller he should turn in his man card until he'd grown a spine and some genitalia."

"Those sellers are weak," yelled Frank, whose eyes were now fully engorged with the red mists of imagined battle. "You boys need to buck up, get into the trenches, and build some scar tissue on that thin skin of yours. There is no détente. This is not a negotiation. You have to be nice and give Best Burgers extra attention, but we have to hold the line." Finally, leaving the battlefield and coming back to the present, Frank said, "Kurt, I'll ride with you. Obviously you boys are in over your heads."

Kurt fumed at Frank's suggestion. "Frank, you can't ride with me. There's no room in the company car you assigned me."

"I don't want to hear it, Kurt," Frank shot back. "Nobody got a better fleet price than I did. Those Yugos are great little cars."

"I want my sedan back!"

"Not a chance!"

Sensing Kurt was about to clobber Frank, Brian intervened. "Frank, think about this: why is Yugoslavia in the midst of a civil war?"

"Who cares?" said Frank. "They made a great little car, and I'm not backing down on this. We'll save thousands in gas this year alone."

“If everybody in the United States were forced to drive one of those roller skates we’d be killing each other too,” said Brian.

“Enough!” screamed Frank. “I’m taking notes that you two ingrates are dissatisfied with the company cars. If anything happens to one of these cars, I will punish you severely. Also, I don’t want you two sports fanatics staying up too late watching Monday Night Football. I’ll meet you in the Best Burgers lobby tomorrow morning at eight forty-five sharp. I expect to see you dressed for success.”

“This from a man whose idea of sartorial splendor is mail-order jackets from Japan,” muttered Kurt.

Kurt rose from his seat, stepped toward Frank, and put his nose inches away from Frank’s. “*I. Want. My. Car. Back.*” He spun on his heels and stormed outside.

Frank pointed his entire arm to the door of the conference room and stood there shaking, his face turning red. Brian took the hint and headed for the parking lot, where Kurt was violently kicking his Yugo, a pea-green box of a car that looked no worse despite Kurt’s best efforts to destroy it. The fleet cars Frank had purchased were castoffs from rental companies and were already damaged.



Kurt arrived at the Best Burgers corporate headquarters to find Brian and Frank standing in the lobby, their heavy dress coats in their arms. A brutal winter had set in quickly in Chicago, and the days of playoff basketball and barbecues seemed years away. Frank, with the stench of whiskey oozing out of his pores and bearing an insufferable smile, stood close to Kurt.

“Good morning,” he said, his mouth not moving. “I expect you to behave in here.” Frank had tried his best to patch himself together following his night of heavy drinking. The dark-red spots on his face meant he had made an attempt to shave; his hair, while not entirely unkempt, suggested he’d taken his shower and prepared for work prior to drinking himself to sleep.

“Good morning?” huffed Kurt. “What’s so good about it, Frank? It’s thirty degrees outside with a wind chill factor off the charts, and the heater in the Yugo doesn’t work. Maybe riding with me won’t be such a bad idea after all.”

“You look exhausted,” said Frank, studiously ignoring Kurt’s complaint in order to focus on his appearance instead. “I told you not to stay up late watching Monday Night Football.”

“Of course I look exhausted,” said Kurt. “I *am* exhausted. I just woke up after only three hours of sleep because the car battery died six times yesterday, adding four long, cold hours to my commute!”

“Kurt, I do not want to hear any of this. You go to the bathroom and straighten yourself up. I don’t want you walking into this meeting looking like a drunk who just wandered in off the streets.”

“Pot calling the kettle—”

“Don’t say it, Kurt!” Brian grabbed Kurt’s arm and pulled him away from Frank, preventing a retort that would likely have him out on the street.

Brian then turned to Frank. “Come on, Frank, back off. Give the guy some breathing room.”

Frank, refusing to address Kurt directly, said, “I want Kurt’s attitude cleaned up before we meet with Linda Davis.”

Before their argument could escalate into a battle royale, a young woman wearing a business suit approached the trio. Her auburn hair was pulled into a tight bun and she wore eyeglasses an inch thick.

“Ms. Davis will see you now.”

Frank turned to the receptionist and said, “Thank you very much. I hope you have a fantastic day.”

Brian turned to Kurt and whispered in his ear, “Frank sure knows how to kiss ass. I just wonder if he knows his breath reeks of liquor.”

After gathering the materials for their presentation, Frank, Brian, and Kurt were led down a hallway that could easily have been mistaken for the sterile, cold, bereft-of-human-touch

surgical theater in a hospital. The walls and ceiling were bare and bright white; the floor was tiled in a light turquoise. The receptionist said nothing as she opened the door to Linda Davis' office, a modern steel-and-glass box with chairs that looked like they could double as torture devices.

Linda, who was on the phone, ignored Frank's handshake attempt and simply pointed to two empty chairs in front of her desk, leaving Brian to retrieve a chair from the hallway. The three men sat down and watched as she finished her phone call, ignoring them completely. Frank, unable or unwilling to take offense, sat in his chair, sporting his best "How do you do?" smile as Kurt and Brian looked incredulous.

"Do you see what's on her desk?" Kurt whispered to Brian, pointing to a book sitting alone next to her phone.

"What does that say?" asked Brian, trying to make out the title. "Holy cow, it's called *How to Run Your Business Like a Dictator*."

"*How to Run Your Business Like a Dictator*?" scoffed Kurt. "What does that even mean? I hate her already. My first impression is she's an uptight, power-hungry jackass and I guarantee she's going to be a nightmare to do business with."

"Geez, you're quick to judge someone you don't even know," said Frank, who was strangely turned on by Linda's forceful personality.

"I have prior knowledge of this lady," said Kurt. "You remember Jimmy Keller from Simply the Best Foods?"

"Yeah," said Brian. "Nice guy."

"Well, he said she was like Stalin in a skirt, and Jimmy is the nicest guy I've ever met," said Kurt. "I'm also going by my instincts, which, I may add, have served me well and rarely fail me. I live by my first impressions, Brian, and I can already see she's going to crap all over us."

"I concur, Captain," said Brian in his best impression of Scotty from *Star Trek*. "She obviously doesn't care about us. She knows how much Frank wants her business."

After what seemed like twenty minutes, Linda finished her

phone call with a curt “make it happen!” and immediately hung up. A petite woman, she had a Napoleonic air about her. Her business suit hugged her medium build; her shoulders were twice as wide as her narrow hips. Her hair was short and straight and seemingly unstyled save for a tight, black headband keeping it out of her face. Her skin was pale and her eyes were dark, almost black. When she looked up from her phone, Brian, Kurt, and Frank all got chills.

Frank, however, soldiered on. “Well, Linda, it’s certainly a pleasure to meet you finally.”

“Yes, of course,” she said. “Let’s get to it.”

“Well,” said Frank, “Pointy Foods Service has heard great things about your company. I think you picked two fabulous—”

In the middle of his sentence, Linda rose from her chair and walked out of the room. She went into the adjacent break room to refill her coffee mug.

Frank raised his voice and continued, “Locations for doing business in this region. And you know what they say—location, location, location.”

Deafening silence. Frank sat back in his chair, all smiles, and waited for Linda’s response.

“Where’d she go?” asked Brian. He stared at Frank, who was still sporting his stupid grin.

“What the hell is going on here?” demanded Kurt.

“What are you talking about?” whispered Frank, motioning for Kurt to be quiet.

“You know what I’m talking about, Frank. That lady is ignoring us and you keep kissing her ass.”

Frank turned to Kurt, his face a bright red again, with a look of murder. “I’m not here to be heard,” he sneered.

Just then Linda returned to the office holding a cup of coffee but still not looking at the three salesmen.

“So, Linda, I’m so glad—”

Before Frank could start selling again, the telephone rang and Linda raised her index finger, silencing him once more.

“Oh, hi, Carol,” she said in a perky tone that was entirely incongruous with her manner. “Yes, little David is so looking forward to our playdate.”

Kurt was about to explode in his chair. He leaned over to Brian. “This is ridiculous, and Frank still sits there grinning.” Kurt got up, opened the door, and told the receptionist to hold all calls at Ms. Davis’ request.

What’s a little lie between enemies? he thought.

After confirming her playdate and complimenting Carol on the chili she brought to their last party, Linda hung up and faced the flaccid leader of the Pointy Foods sales force.

Frank tried a more-direct approach. “Let’s get down to business. What kind of terms do you want from Pointy Foods? Do you—”

“Terms?” Linda spat. “What makes you think we should talk about terms?”

“Well, I—I just assumed you want to do business with us, you know, since other branches of our company service Best Burgers in other regions.”

Linda yanked open the top drawer of her gleaming desk and pulled out a notepad. “Assuming was your first mistake! Do you know what happens when people assume?” She hurriedly wrote on the pad and showed it to Frank, whose veneer of professionalism was quickly crumbling.

“When you assume you make an ASS out of U and ME. It looks to me that you guys don’t understand how things are done around here.”

Kurt could take no more. He stood and lorded over her desk, nearly foaming at the mouth. “Well, excuse me, Medusa. I think it’s time for you to start acting like a lady. We deserve some common courtesy while you crap in our laps.”

Frank jumped up from his seat and grabbed Kurt’s arm, pulling him back. “Kurt, sit down!”

Linda regained her ferocity and stood to wag her finger in Kurt’s face. “High on the horse, are you? Well, I’ll tell you how this is going to work from here on out.” She turned to Frank, reached

out and grabbed his hand in a vise-like handshake. “Frank, if you want my business, I need to respect you and your organization. I need to know you support my business first, above all else.”

“Uh, okay,” stammered Frank, who was trying to retrieve his hand from the crushing metatarsals of Linda Davis.

With her other hand, Linda pointed to Kurt. “He has to go.”

Like a drone, Frank turned to Kurt. “You’re fired.”

“What?” Kurt’s face was turning a light purplish blue. His tie was straining to contain the bulging veins in his neck.

“You heard me, Kurt, you’re fired,” said Frank, smiling now that his long-sought-after excuse to fire Kurt was in hand. “Now leave and don’t let the door hit you where the good Lord split you.”

“How can you do this to me, Frank? It’s not right. I’ve covered your drunken ass more times than I can count and now you throw me out? Who’s gonna cover for you now, Frank? Have you thought of that?”

“Just leave, Kurt. You’re a liability to this company. Go now. You’ll have all day to look for another job.”

Kurt reached into his pocket, grabbed the Yugo keys, and threw them in Frank’s face. He turned on his heels and stormed out the door. “You deserve each other, Frank!”

Frank turned back to Linda. “Now we can talk about terms.”

Brian stood and headed for the door.

“Where do you think you’re going, Brian? Let him go. He’s not coming back.”

“Neither am I, Frank. I quit!”

Frank tore his white-knuckled hand from Linda’s and turned to Brian. “You can’t quit because you’re fired!”

“No, Frank, too late. I already quit! I hope you’re happy with Medusa and your bottle of booze because that’s all you’re ever going to have.”

“You’re fired!”

Brian threw his hands in the air. “You do know what disgruntled postal workers do when they get fired, don’t you?”

“Are you threatening me with physical violence?”

“I don’t know yet!” screamed Brian. “It all depends on whether or not I find a decent job by the end of the day, but anything I get will be better than this!”

Brian threw his Yugo keys on the floor and, as he exited the office, asked the dumbstruck receptionist to call a cab. Kurt and Brian returned to Kurt’s house and began calling friends to look for work.

Meanwhile, after a grueling hour of negotiations that sounded more like demands and capitulations, Frank exited the Best Burgers headquarters to find two pea-green Yugos resting on their sides.

CHAPTER 5

Medusa's Spell

"Darci, it's Kurt."

"Oh, hey, sweetie, how are you? How'd your meeting with the evil witch go?"

"Let's just say not good. Things got a bit heated."

"Heated as in you didn't get the account or heated as in you said something you shouldn't have?" asked Darci, who was well aware Kurt's temper could get him in trouble.

"Well, you know the company Yugo Frank assigned me?"

"Yeah."

"It's on its side in the Best Burgers parking lot right now and I'm going to start next week as an announcer at Bernie's comedy club," said Kurt, hoping his segue would distract Darci from the Yugo.

"What!" yelled Darci, drawing the stares of her subordinates and nearly choking on her coffee. "Kurt, you were their best salesman. How did this happen?"

"I called their purchaser Medusa because she was being rude, and Frank didn't appreciate that. Oh, and Brian quit when Frank fired me."

"Kurt, what the heck? You said you're going to work for Bernie now? Doing what?"

"I'm going to be the announcer or emcee at his comedy club. But don't worry, I'm a funny guy so it should be a cinch until I can find another sales gig."

Darci paused before speaking. She wanted to be supportive of

Kurt but the idea that he could hold his own on a comedy stage was far-fetched to say the least. Always proper, Darci simply said, “I think you’ll do fine, sweetie. I want the best for you and I think working for Frank was bringing you down anyway. We’ll be fine.”

“Thanks, Darci. I knew I could count on you to be in my corner. I’ve gotta go help Brian find work now.”

“Okay. Tell him good luck for me and I’ll see you later tonight.”

Darci hung up the phone and looked around. Everyone was still gawking at their elegant and rarely upset boss. Consistently unflappable, Darci rarely lost control but now she definitely came close to doing just that—an almost-newsworthy event indeed.

“What?” said Darci. “A girl’s allowed to have a moment. Now shoo.”



As soon as he was done on the phone with Darci, Kurt handed it over to Brian, whose first call was to Chuck.

“Chuck, you old dog, how’s it going?”

“What do you need now, Brian?” asked Chuck.

“What?” asked Brian in mock surprise. “Chuckie, this is Brian. We’re like brothers. I just want to see how things are going for you...and to offer my services to your fine establishment.”

“I’m sorry. Can you repeat that?”

“Chuck, I have a skill set that is above reproach and beyond refute, and your delis are in need of a good manager. It’s a match made in heaven.”

“Brian, I *am* the manager.”

“Well, I certainly didn’t mean you aren’t a good manager, it’s just that I...” Brian, who was pacing back and forth by Kurt, looked at him for help.

Kurt whispered, “He needs help so he can enjoy the fruits of his entrepreneurial spirit.” He knew full well that Chuck prided himself on being industrious.

“I want you to be able to enjoy the fruits of your entrepreneurial spirit,” Brian continued.

“Well, I could use a vacation,” said Chuck. “Fine, you can explain all of this to me later. I don’t know how you got yourself fired or why Kurt wasn’t able to save your bacon this time but I’m sure you’re to blame.”

“What? Chuckie, babe, you have no idea of the half of it. I’ll explain it all to you as I’m overhauling your antiquated purchasing system and archaic management style.”

“You son of a—oh, forget it. I’ll see you at seven a.m. sharp on Monday.”

“You owe me big, Kurt. I had a good job at Pointy Foods and now I’m going to be making sandwiches at a deli. I can’t believe what you did,” said Brian.

“I owe you?” Kurt was laughing and could barely catch his breath to respond. “Brian, you’ve been on the brink of termination and homelessness for years. I’ve saved your ass so many times I was starting to think my helping you was like participating in the Big Brother program for disadvantaged kids. You didn’t have to quit.”

“I couldn’t exactly stay there and watch Frank lick Medusa’s feet!” exclaimed Brian. “Besides, if I had to drive that Yugo one more day I was going to flip out.”

“See, I freed you from your Yugo.” Kurt got up from the office chair beside his phone and ambled over to his couch, which sat directly across from his sixty-inch projector screen—his Taj Mahal and the center of his universe on Saturdays and Sundays, when sports, the only good thing he could rely on in this world besides Darci, would salve his wounds.



A little less than a week after the blowup, Brian and Kurt began their jobs with Bernie and Chuck.

Backstage at Bernie’s Comedy Club Number 4, Bernie’s least-popular comedy club, Darci held Kurt’s hand close, and together they looked in the vanity mirror at Kurt’s outfit for the night. Bernie thought it would be funny if the host of his nearly

empty Monday Night Extravaganza wore a clown costume. Kurt stared in the mirror, wondering how his life had gone so wrong in just one short week. His face painted white, he had the Ronald McDonald look down pat, with red make-up around his mouth and a bulbous, red-sponge nose glued to his own. A bright-red, curly wig topped off the humiliating ensemble.

“You’re going to be great at this, Kurt,” reassured Darci, who didn’t, for one minute, think he would be.

“I don’t know. I think I might have liked working at Victor’s Italian restaurant instead.”

“No way,” said Darci. “You might as well kiss our relationship goodbye if you do that. I am not going to be with a man who’s fooling around with other women.”

“What do you mean fooling around with other women? I would never do that and you know it.”

Darci persisted. “I also know Victor. He uses his restaurant as a dating service. I don’t need to be worrying about what he’s dragging you into, about what you two are doing all day.”

“I’m shocked you wouldn’t trust me.”

“Sometimes I think Alice is right when she says a man is a man and all men can be dogs.” Darci moved in front of him to look him in the eye. “You’re the best man I’ve met but I feel more comfortable with you not working with Victor. Okay?”

“First of all, you tell Alice if she wants to see a real dog she should look in the mirror, okay? I’m sick of that chick bringing all men down. Second, yes, Victor would throw women at me. Third, there’s only a six-percent chance I would go for one. So buck up, honey, I’m your man.”

“Uh, thanks, I guess.”



At Chuck’s deli, the man himself was watching the door, greeting customers as Brian ran the kitchen. Both wore headsets as Chuck showed Brian the ropes: which customers to shortchange, which ones to schmooze, and so on.

Chuck took this role seriously, using a code he devised for the customers. A “five-ten” was a good customer and the height Chuck liked his women to be. Anything under five was a bad customer and when Chuck blurted out “one” into his headset, Brian knew to tell the kitchen staff to make the crappiest, cheapest sandwiches possible.

A group of older women shuffled into the deli with thick prescription glasses and large, boxlike sunglasses covering their sunspots.

“Brian, one. I repeat one, a freakin’ one!”

Brian knew exactly what to do. “Harry, use the old bread and the cheap imitation cheese. Take down the specials sign while you’re at it. I can’t believe we’re doing this to these ladies. Chuck, are you sure this is what you want to do?”

“Yes. Oh, yeah, I forgot, you need to double charge them and don’t give them a receipt. I’ve been doing it for months.”

Brian did as he was told and then, without the women noticing, stuffed the extra cash back into their purses as they made their way to the bathroom. He couldn’t live with himself if he overcharged women who looked like his grandmother.

Back at Bernie’s Comedy Club Number 4, Kurt announced the lineup. The hot lights had already caused his make-up to run down his face in rivulets, and the crowd was visibly discomfited by the resulting serial-killer appearance and deadpan delivery.

“Hi, everybody, my name is Kurt Weichert and I am going to be your host tonight. I have to admit this is my first time onstage—”

“It sure is, pal. We can tell. Now get on with it. You’re not funny!” Bernie had told Kurt he might face hecklers, but Kurt had expected at least to get through the first sentence of his script before being attacked. Bernie, Victor, and Darci were sitting at a front-row table. Darci raised her hands and covered her eyes, unable to watch the exchange.

Kurt continued, “I would like to introduce you to a man who hails from St. Louis, Missouri. You know, the Show Me State—”

Again the drunken lout rose from the third table to Kurt’s left.

“The Show Me State, huh? Why don’t you show me how fast you can get off this stage?”

Kurt summoned his courage, hiked up his balloon pants, and looked directly at the heckler. “For years and years performers have said to look at the audience as if they were sitting in front of you naked. I am doing that now.”

“I bet you are, you queer. I bet you like looking at this!” said the heckler as he grabbed his crotch to drive the point home. He got a few laughs, and Kurt knew he had to nip this in the bud.

“After scanning the naked audience, I can confirm that, as suspected, this man has, indeed, the smallest penis in the room. In fact, even under these spotlights I’m having trouble confirming he has one, as small as it is!”

The heckler, whose size in the shadows Kurt could not discern, soon emerged into the light at full speed, a raging water buffalo of a man headed straight for him. Bernie’s Monday Night Extravaganza had lived for just four minutes and was now a bar-room brawl.



Back at Chuck’s deli, the dinner crowd was being subjected to every trick in Chuck’s dirty-tricks handbook. As some customers collected their sandwiches, Chuck pointed to a picture on the wall to their left as though it were a conversation piece of great historical importance. As soon as they averted their gazes as directed he went to work removing some of the meat from their sandwiches and putting it back on the meat tray.

“I cannot believe you just did that,” said Brian during a lull in the traffic. “What the hell are you doing?”

“Brian, you’re not an entrepreneur, okay?” said Chuck in his most condescending, supercilious voice. “You don’t know what it’s like when the tax bill comes, or when someone slips and falls in your establishment and sues you because when you helped her up you happened to grab both breasts.”

Brian shook his head and struggled through to the end of his shift. He drove straight to Kurt's house, where he found Darci holding an icepack over Kurt's swollen left eye.

"Kurt, I just can't work for Chuck anymore. The man is a cheat."

"And I can't work for Bernie anymore. My first night on the job I get a black eye and a loose tooth."

They both glumly stared at the TV, not really watching the rebroadcast of Saturday's Michigan-Notre Dame matchup that Kurt had recorded.

"Nice throw," said Kurt.

"Great catch," said Brian.

Darci looked at the two lost puppies. "I think you boys need new jobs. Hell, Brian's funny—maybe you could switch."

"Go for it, buddy," said Kurt. "As for me, I think I'm going to try to get my old job back."

"I know Frank will come to his senses, guys," added Darci in her most-hopeful voice. "He'll eventually realize Miss Davis is a bad person."



Darci couldn't have been more wrong. In a seedy motel at the far side of Chicago's dirtiest neighborhood, Linda rolled off her lover and lit a cigarette. At her side, a depleted, three-sheets-to-the-wind Frank sat up with a dopey smile plastered across his face.

"Well, uh... I am ready for a drink."

Linda, whose hair was as down as it ever was going to be, smiled. "I think we're going to make a great team, Frankie."

CHAPTER 6

Toga! Toga! Toga!

Kurt's basement was his own personal sports bar. He may have spent way too much money on it, but the results were like heaven to a sports junkie. Pool table? Check. Full wet bar? Check. Large projection screen? Check. Foosball? Check. Done and done. He had it all and he spent as much time there with Brian, Victor, Bernie, Chuck, and Darci as he could. But the two weeks since losing his job at Bernie's club had been a nightmare of Cheetos, soda, beer, and a newly sprouted depression that was driving him to madness.

On a cold, damp Thursday night, Kurt and Brian played pool in the basement and talked about their job prospects. Dressed in an old football jersey and shorts stained with Cheetos dust, Kurt looked every bit the unemployed salesman. Brian looked no better, wearing his sweatpants and his Bob's Big Boy T-shirt, each of which was crumpled and smudged with marinara sauce from Victor's restaurant, where he had been working part-time.

Darci, who looked like the high-fashion buyer she was, albeit one who had changed into casual clothing, sat at the bar nursing a beer, her sad eyes watching the man she loved regress into a frat-boy slob.

"So when are you going to look for a job?" asked Brian. "You look like hell."

"Monday, I guess," offered Kurt as he missed the eight ball Brian had left as a gift to lift his spirits.

"You look like crap. I mean, look at yourself. You need a shave,

your morale is low, and it looks as if you're losing confidence in yourself. You need to be energized."

"I couldn't agree with you more, but just how do I get the energy to get energized? Maybe a few years ago I would have been able to handle a crisis like this but now I can't stop thinking about it, and there's so much to think about. I put a lot of time and energy into Pointy Foods. I made a commitment to be the best salesman I could be, and I was good at it. I swear if I had had Frank's position I could have grown our region at least forty percent."

"Kurt, there isn't really anything to think about, and therein lies the solution. You need to put it behind you and get that winning attitude back. You need to get aggressive again. Remember, success is the best revenge."

Kurt took another shot at the eight ball; he hadn't yet noticed Brian was missing again and again on purpose to try to help him.

"Brian, you don't exactly look like Tony Robbins yourself, my friend. I mean, seriously, Brian? A busboy at Victor's restaurant? What are you trying to say?"

"What I'm saying is you have a lot of things going for you right now. You've been able to save a bunch from Pointy Foods and you've got no real responsibilities toward kids or anything. You aren't married."

"Uh...ahem. He's not married yet," Darci chimed in.

"Listen, all I'm trying to say is you're not on the verge of homelessness or anything. You can relax for a bit, take a step back and PAAARRRTYYYYY!"

"Party?"

"Yes. A party. A fabulous toga party tomorrow night."

"Toga party?" asked Darci. "Are we sure this is a good idea?"

"Yes. When we were roommates we had a toga party at least once a year. Do you remember the movie *Animal House*?"

"Yes, I remember the movie," said Darci, "and you are not doing that here."

"Do you remember when everybody dressed up in white

sheets and had a wild party?” asked Brian, ignoring Darci’s objection.

“Okay, slow your roll, sugar bear,” said Darci. “I don’t know if you guys remember the last time you had a party, but I do, and I’m not sure the neighbors have forgiven you yet, Kurt. I think you should really consider this before you commit. I don’t get paid until next Friday and I’m not sure I have enough to bail you guys out without touching my condo fund.”

“Sweetie, relax,” said Kurt. “I’m not thinking about partying right now.”

Kurt, Darci, and Brian sat in silence for a beat.

“So, you were thinking tomorrow night?” said Kurt.

“Whoa!” blurted Darci. “You’re actually going to do this?”

“Yes!” yelled Brian, pumping his fist in the air. “Lets do it! It’ll be just like old times.”

Kurt looked over at Darci for her approval, giving her his best puppy-dog eyes.

“Don’t look at me like that,” she scolded. “You’re a grown man and I don’t like seeing you so depressed. If this is what you need, fine, I’ll help get the refreshments together. But.” Darci put her finger up in front of Kurt’s face. “If so much as one police officer comes to the house, I’m running out the back and heading for the border. You’ll be on your own.”

Brian jumped up and down on the sofa, losing all composure. “Toga! Toga! Toga! Toga! Toga!”

“Let’s do it!” yelled Kurt as he jumped up from his seat and threw his Cheetos bag onto the floor.



The next night, party guests poured into Kurt’s basement draped in white sheets and wearing flip-flops. Guns N’ Roses blasted from two large speaker towers Kurt had for just such occasions, the bass from the twenty-four-inch woofers shaking the beer in his guests’ red Dixie cups.

Kurt and Brian held court at the bottom of the staircase and

greeted the guests individually as they descended into what Brian hoped would be a Bacchanalia to rival Nero's best. The guests were already armed with drinks—Darci was manning the door and serving Brian's best party punch, complete with a healthy dose of grain alcohol. "No sense in wasting any time," she was fond of saying about the famously potent drink.

Just as Axl Rose hit mid-scream in the opening of "Welcome to the Jungle," Kurt and Brian saw Victor's gold-sandal-clad feet coming down the stairs accompanied by two sets of high heels supporting two pairs of long, long legs. On each arm Victor had a woman who looked every part the supermodel. Each wore a two-piece sheet outfit that covered little more than a bikini might.

Kurt shook his head in disbelief and a little jealousy. "Victor, you look good, my friend. What kind of sheets are those?"

"Silk. Designer," said Victor, never taking his eyes off of the model on his left arm, blissfully unaware no one was really interested in the brand of his sheets. "Twelve-hundred-count Frettes, to be exact! You must excuse me, gentlemen, I'll get back to you later. I want to get my dates their drinks."

Victor strutted toward the bar, a proud peacock whose feathers were bright and garish so as to squash all competition. His two models held facial expressions of complete stone-like disinterest, just as all good models should.

After watching Victor's trophies floating through the room, Brian and Kurt looked at each other, each emitting a long, low whistle. Brian then returned his attention to the top of the stairs and burst into guttural laughter as he pointed with all his might.

"What's so funny?" asked Kurt before turning his attention up the staircase. He saw Chuck clomping down the stairs in a white, lacy nightgown.

"Chuck, what the hell are you wearing?" laughed Kurt.

"What?" asked Chuck, who didn't understand the ruckus. "This is my toga."

"So, how long have you been a cross-dresser, Chuck?" asked Brian.

Chuck reached the bottom stair and grabbed Brian's toga by

the top. "You guys didn't give me enough notice for this stupid gig and this is the only thing I could come up with."

Kurt ran his fingers over the back of Chuck's toga and recoiled. "Chuck, this looks like a lady's nightgown! Is that lace and silk?"

Chuck slowly turned to look into Kurt's eyes, his own filling with rage.

"Don't give us that look, Chuckles. What member of the female species gave you that?"

"Holy crap," Kurt said, "the sleeve is monogrammed. Come on, Chuck, let's have a look."

Chuck put up a valiant fight, flailing and squirming his way past his friends the sentries, but it was no use. Overpowered and outnumbered, he capitulated and let Brian read from the lower edge of the nightgown.

"Rose? That was your mother's name?"

Kurt was in disbelief. His friend Chuck, already a dubious social enigma, had now crossed the line. "Geez, Chuck, I can't believe you're wearing your mother's underwear."

"Lots of women are named Rose," spat Chuck. "I dare you to prove this is my mother's."

"Yeah, right, Chuck," said Brian. "I can see that trial now: 'Your honor, I present as my first witness Mrs. Rose Jennings. Mrs. Jennings, why are you crying?' 'Because my baby is a cross-dresser.'"

"Hey, you leave my mom out of this!"

Just as Chuck was stepping to the defense of his poor mother, Darci descended the stairs with her roommate, Alice, who was in casual business attire.

"What's in this punch?" asked Darci, her face nearly imploding from the strength of the alcohol.

"It's called whopatewy," answered Kurt.

"Whopatewy?" she asked. "I don't remember it being this strong. Tell me again what's in it."

"Ask Brian. It's his creation."

Brian, beaming with pride, turned to Darci and said, "You name it. Orange juice, pineapple juice, cranberry juice, apple juice, apples, oranges, pears, bananas, grapefruit, watermelon, and a little pure grain alcohol."

“Did you *have* to put it in a garbage bag?”

“Of course,” said Brian. “Everyone knows a garbage bag is the only way to serve whopatewy.”

“It’s really good, don’t you think?” asked Darci.

“How juvenile—and typical. Spiking the punch,” said Alice.

“Look, everybody loves it, Alice, so suck it up,” said Darci, emboldened by the effects of the punch. Alice, who’d never been spoken to like that by Darci, stood there slack-jawed with her eyes wide open.

“They always do love it,” added a beaming Brian.

Bernie, who had been upstairs refilling his cup, came down the stairs and joined the bickering group. He noticed immediately that Alice wasn’t in costume and yelled over both Guns N’ Roses and the strident arguing of his friends. “Why aren’t you togad?”

“Togad?” yelled Alice. “I don’t think so. Besides, that’s not even a word, you cretin.”

“You know what I mean,” said Bernie, ignoring the insult and not understanding Alice’s response. “Why aren’t you wearing a toga to our toga party?”

“Because, unlike you, I am in possession of some dignity,” responded Alice, offending everyone wearing a toga. “You people look like a bunch of clowns!”

Bernie, once again ignoring Alice’s venomous response, chanted, “Toga! Toga! Toga! Toga! Toga! Toga!”

As the stereo went quiet between songs, the rest of the partiers heard Bernie and, without knowing the situation, joined in the chant. Bernie, encouraged by the chanting mob, ran upstairs and tore down a white curtain from the nearest window. He stumbled down the stairs, his own toga showing the crowd more than they had bargained for, and wrapped it around Alice. Everyone clapped as Alice’s face turned a deep red with rash-like splotches; she ran upstairs and out the front door. Darci, who, under normal circumstances would have chased after her, simply sighed and took another swig of her whopatewy.

CHAPTER 7

For Frank the Bell Tolls

Kurt's party celebrating his independence coincided with a distant bell tolling for Frank, who was stuck at Pointy Foods headquarters being dressed down by company CEO Michael Sanders.

"Sir, I had no choice," said Frank. "They were uncontrollable. They thought they owned the company. Because of them we came close to not getting the Best Burgers account."

Sanders was livid that his good friend Kurt had been fired.

"You fired them over the Best Burgers account?" he yelled. "I bet Linda Davis was involved. That she-devil would drop you like a bag of hammers if she thought she could get a better price, and you're firing your best salesmen for her? Best Burgers needs us more than we need them. We have the best product, the best prices, and the best service, and that's why they use us in their other markets."

"Kurt and Brian were in the wrong, sir," answered Frank, who was now cowering behind his desk.

"I seriously doubt that, but even if... Oh, forget it. It's not about being right. It's about being productive and effective." Sanders changed direction. "What's really going on here, Frank? Are you sleeping with her? No, don't answer that. I don't want to hear it because I already know the answer. You fix this, you hear me? We picked up one new account because you're thinking with your wedding vegetables and in the process we lost ten big ones because Kurt and Brian are gone!"

Victor and Bernie had cancelled their accounts on hearing

the news, taking tens of thousands of dollars in business from Pointy Foods with them.

“Sir,” said Frank, “those ten accounts are friends of theirs.”

“I don’t care if they’re in a militia together. The fact remains we’ve been getting lots of complaints from customers they sold to, and I want that reversed.”

“Sir, the customers will eventually come back,” responded Frank. “They just resist change, that’s all. We’re the biggest company in the area and that’s where they will ultimately want to be.”

“If that’s what you believe then you don’t understand the business,” yelled Sanders, whose forehead was now home to several very visible veins fighting to get out. “I want them rehired tonight! Tonight! Oh, yeah, the alternative? Do you really need it spelled out? Do it!”



As Frank got his marching orders Kurt’s basement was pulsing to the sound of The Kingsmen’s “Louie Louie.” With hands in the air, the revelers jumped up and down and sang along. Chuck was in a circle by himself because his nightgown toga kept rising as he jumped, revealing what appeared to be women’s panties. Bernie and Victor, hoping for a more-attractive wardrobe malfunction, sat in a corner watching the girls in the crowd jump up and down.

“This is the best party I’ve been to in years,” Bernie yelled to Kurt and Brian, who were sitting across from him and Victor.

“Who needs Pointy Foods anyway?” added Kurt.

“Who needs Frank?” agreed Brian.

Victor, who had emerged earlier from an upstairs bedroom with his toga askew, leaned back and put his feet up on the arm of the couch. “I kicked those bastards out of my restaurants.”

“They don’t service my nightclubs anymore, either,” added Bernie. “I kicked them out, too. You should have seen the look on Frank’s face. He came to visit me personally, drunk of course, and couldn’t believe his company could be replaced.”

Brian leaned over to Chuck, who was now standing beside the group. “Chuckles, you stuck it to him, too, right?” Chuck didn’t answer. “Didn’t you?”

Chuck quietly turned around and tried to walk away, but Kurt grabbed him by his nightgown and turned him around for further interrogation.

“Chuck, answer the question,” he demanded, now deadly serious.

Brian was standing beside Chuck, flanking him as Kurt took a position on the other side. “Chuckles, you better have switched distributors.”

“Well, I was going to,” stammered Chuck, “but then I, ahh, ahh, then I really got busy and I, ahh, forgot, you see. Yeah, that’s what happened, I forgot.”

“Chuck, you’re a lowlife,” said Kurt. “Frank bought you off, didn’t he?”

“Chuckles, you’ve got to be the worst friend a guy could have,” yelled Brian. “The worst!”

“Come on, guys. Frank made me an offer I couldn’t refuse.”

“Don’t tell me, let me guess,” said Kurt. “Frank gave you ten free cases of sixteen-ounce foam cups.”

“How did you know?”

Brian had had enough. He turned Chuck toward the crowd and signaled Darci to turn the music down. “Everybody listen up. Our friend here, Chuck Jennings, is a ventriloquist.”

“What are you talking about?” said Chuck, who now truly felt under attack. “I’m not a ventriloquist.”

“Yes, you are,” said Brian. “Everybody can see you talking out of your ass.”

The guests erupted in laughter, and out of the back of the room Kurt’s neighbor Bruce yelled, “Chuck, your words smell like crap!” It wasn’t that funny but it had the room in stitches.

Out of the corner of her eye, Darci saw someone standing on the staircase. She could only see brown shoes and black polyester, but it was more than enough to identify the person. She knew what it meant and immediately ran across the room to Kurt.

“Hey, guys, Frank is here.”

“Where?” said Kurt, looking left and right.

“He’s here,” she said, pointing crazily toward the stairs. “He’s coming down the stairs now but I don’t know how long he was standing there. He might have heard your conversation with Chuck.”

“The nerve of this guy,” said Brian as Frank descended the last few steps into the party. All the guests were now looking toward the staircase, and the music was turned off.

“Booooo,” came the low, long jeer from the crowd as Frank stumbled toward Kurt and Brian.

“Oh, get over yourselves,” Frank slurred.

Kurt’s face was reddening, a sure sign of serious trouble. Darci grabbed his arm as he approached Frank, hoping she could keep him from doing something too rash.

“I cannot believe you have the colossal, monumental, unmitigated gall to show your face at our party,” fumed Kurt. “And you’re not even wearing a toga.”

“Listen up, you yahoos,” said Frank. “The CEO of Pointy Foods has *ordered* me to talk to you about your old jobs.”

“What’s to talk about, Frank?” asked Brian. “You fired us, remember?”

“Yeah!” yelled the mob that had gathered around the scene.

“Now wait a second,” said Frank, looking terrified. “Things got a little crazy that day, but I’m willing to give you guys another chance.”

“So you want us to come back and work for you?” asked Brian. “You’re kidding, right?”

“I’m not kidding,” insisted Frank, “but you’ll have to take smaller sales routes.”

“No way,” said Kurt. “Corporate must have noticed all of the customer complaints about our ouster. We must have you backed against the ropes, and I’m ready to deliver the knockout punch. When we’re done with you the only customers you’ll have left will be Best Burgers and Chuckles here.”

Frank rolled his eyes, incredulous that he was begging these

two asswipes to come back and work for him when they should have been put in shackles for their insubordination. “I can’t let you come back without being punished for that incident at Best Burgers.”

“Frank, you completely caved to Linda Davis when she was taking a dump on us. You left us standing in the wind with a monster.”

“Hey!” yelled Frank, lunging toward Brian. “You leave her out of this!”

Kurt stepped in front of Frank and grabbed him by the collar of his shirt. “Holy crap,” said Kurt. “You screwed her.”

“Hey... Hey... You... I love her!”

“Oh my God.” Brian rolled his eyes and shook his head. “I cannot believe you, Frank. This is low even for you! You sold us out because you were thinking with your pecker?”

“It was your fault,” yelled Frank, who was now crying. “Besides that, you turned your cars over in the parking lot. And—and I know it was you who threw eggs at my front door last week.”

“Eggs?” said Kurt. “Do you know anything about eggs, Brian?”

“Not a thing.”

“We want our old routes back,” said Kurt, his voice flat and even, “and we want our sedans back too.”

“You’ve got to be crazy if you think I’m going to do all that, especially after what you guys did to me last night!”

“What was last night?” asked an exasperated Darci.

“What was last night?” sobbed Frank. “I’ll tell you what was last night. Last night was a paper bag full of dog crap, on fire, on my front doorstep. That was last night! I got crap all over my new shoes. I saw you guys out there laughing as I stomped on the bag, trying to put out the damn fire.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, Frank. You didn’t see us because we weren’t there. You’re not worth the time or the energy,” said Kurt in history’s least-credible denial. “I was busy serving food to the homeless.”

“Yep,” agreed Brian. “Me too.”

“That’s it,” said Frank. “My original offer stands. Nothing more.”

Brian turned to the crowd, the hangman looking for guidance from the angry mob. “What should we do? Should we take Frank’s offer or should we throw Frank out on his ass?”

The entire party sang out in chorus, “Down with Frank. Down with Frank.”

Brian turned to Frank, who was now crying uncontrollably. “Jesus, Frank, did you piss yourself?”

Before Frank could answer, Brian, Kurt, Bernie, and Victor picked him up, one to a limb, and carried him upstairs and out the front door.

“One, two, three!” yelled Kurt as they swung Frank back and forth over the front stoop. “Now!”

As Frank sailed through the air screaming a falsetto yelp, Chuck yelled out to him, “Hey, Frank, when do I get those cups?”

Once Frank had thudded onto Kurt’s lawn, Brian grabbed Chuck and locked him in the coat closet near the front door.

“Hey guys?” Chuck knocked on the closet door with his fist and twisted the doorknob in vain. “Hey guys?” He could hear the music coming up from downstairs. It was the Isley Brothers’ “Shout” and as the chorus built—“Ahhh, ahhh, ahhhh, ahhhh”—the partiers below rose from their crouched positions and screamed along: “You know you make me wanna shout. Kick my heels up and shout!”

Chuck had no choice but to dance by himself in the closet. “Shout!”



“What was I supposed to say again?” cried Frank, who was bent over Linda Davis’ bed, his cuffed hands out in front of him, wearing only his tighty-whities.

“You know what to say!” demanded Linda. “You’re my slave, so say it.”

Frank stared straight ahead at the wall and realized his life was a complete and utter loss. “Oh well. Thank you, sir, may I have another?”

Linda reared back and swung the paddle. *Whack!* It found its mark, collided with Frank’s ass, and split the air like thunder.

“Say it again!” she yelled.

“Thank you, sir. May I have another?”

Frank thought of the party raging at Kurt’s house and wished more than anything that he was back there at the mercy of the angry mob.

CHAPTER 8

Licensed Miner in Canada

Kurt finished shoving his tent into his pack, then stowed his canteen along with the others before checking to make sure he'd remembered a poncho for the cold, driving rains of British Columbia. He turned to Brian, Chuck, Bernie, and Victor.

"Guys, I'm all for camping, but I have to admit this idea of investing in dormant mines is a bit harebrained, don't you think? I mean we're talking about eight thousand dollars apiece and I'm still unemployed. Besides, we don't know anything about mining."

"Kurt, relax," said Chuck. "We've got a great opportunity here. My uncle told me that in a few years we can turn around and sell these mines and make boatloads of cash. These mining companies are always coming up with new technology, and they revisit these old mines and find deposits they couldn't get to before. That's when they realize we're literally sitting on a gold mine. Our eight grand is going to be in the tens of thousands here. Besides, we're going fishing anyway. We might as well stop along the way and do this thing."

Kurt was still skeptical about their plans to stop in a virtually abandoned mining town on their way into Glacier National Park, where they would meet Kurt's longtime friend and guide, Monsieur Lafête, a grizzled bear of a man whose exploits in the wilderness intimidated all of them.

"What does this involve again?" asked Bernie. "I don't want to get caught up in some sort of Canadian mining dispute or something. Those people may be polite but those mines are way out there. They'll never find our bodies."

“We get our licenses as miners in Canada,” said Chuck, “then we pay the eight grand apiece to get the titles to a few mines. Then we sit on them. It’s really that simple.”

“And who came up with this hair-maimed scheme?” asked Victor, whose camping equipment included a generator and a hair dryer.

“That’s harebrained scheme, Victor. The brain of a hare,” clarified Kurt.

“My Uncle Walter,” said Chuck.

“Wait just a minute,” said Brian. “Are you talking about *the* Uncle Walter? The same Uncle Walter who lost all of your parents’ money in that Ponzi scheme? The Uncle Walter who scammed you, forcing you to mortgage your restaurants? And don’t forget the money *we* lost.”

“You have to be kidding me, Chuck,” said Kurt. “First the government throws Uncle Walter in federal prison and then the trustee sues all of us for those great returns we never made. I just finished paying mine off last year. I should’ve known it was too good to be true.”

“Guys, c’mon, let me explain.” Chuck tried to diffuse the situation before the guys remembered Uncle Walter had shown little remorse when his scheme was discovered. “Look, my uncle was greedy but he never wanted to hurt us. He just got caught up in something that went out of his control. Now he’s trying to make things right. You know the legitimate investments he made for himself always made him a lot of money, and we were all paid back our investment money.”

“We were paid back our investment monies,” said Victor, “but then we had to give these monies to the government. It was no good, yes?”

“Yes, it was no good,” said Bernie.

“Look, I’ve been doing some research into this,” said Chuck, lying through his teeth. “Last year the major mining companies bought back forty-five mines from private investors for a profit of sixty-two percent.”

“Sixty-two percent?” Kurt asked, then let out a long, low whistle. “That I could live with, especially since I booted Frank from my party. I probably shouldn’t have done that. Unemployment is a bitch.”

“I too could use the adventure,” said Victor, “though the money I don’t-a need.”

“Oh, well, that’s wonderful,” said Brian. “I could use the money too, and if this works I can live my dream of killing Frank and fleeing to Nepal.”

“I think we should do it,” said Bernie. “We’re all in, right?”

They all agreed they would go into mining as part of their trip, though Kurt still had reservations. Eight thousand dollars was a large portion of his savings, and he couldn’t afford to lose it all.

“Enough about the investment,” said Brian. “Let’s talk about fishing. Last trip was the best fishing Kurt and I have ever experienced! Our guide, Monsieur Lafête, is the man. He takes us out into the wilderness—and I do mean wilderness. Nothing out there but nature—”

“And Monsieur’s wife,” interrupted Kurt. “Yeesh.”

“What does this mean, *yeesh*?” asked Victor. “This woman, she is ugly?”

“Uh, not exactly,” said Brian. “Monsieur’s wife goes on these trips, and let me tell you something, you can take it to the bank when I say she is sex personified. Hips, thighs, breasts, hair, eyes... My God, she’s a magnificent creature. But last time we went, one of the guys in our group stayed behind while we went fishing, claiming he was sick. While he stayed back at camp, he slept with Monsieur’s wife.”

“What, is this Monsieur a real idiot?” asked Bernie. “Who falls for that?”

“Canadians,” said Kurt. Bernie conceded the point.

“No way he’s an idiot,” said Brian. “Monsieur is a great outdoorsman. He’s a rugged, handsome French Canadian who’s maybe six foot five and two hundred forty pounds of Grizzly Adams. But he’s a real sweetheart too. I feel bad for the guy.”

“I feel bad for the guy he catches sleeping with his wife,” said Kurt. “I’d rather piss off a grizzly than that guy. He’ll tear you apart!”

“That’ll be you, Victor,” said Bernie. “As for me, I’m bringing my best Canadian repellent.” Bernie reached into his nylon backpack and pulled out a pack of American-style bacon. “They can’t stand that our bacon is better,” he said, smiling.

“Uh, okay,” said Kurt.

“No, no, no,” Victor chimed in. “Victor does not like to sleep with married women—especially married women with dangerous husbands. This guy sounds like a real bad orange.”

“You mean bad apple,” said Bernie.

“No, uhhh, the bad donkey,” Victor corrected him.

“Ohhh, badass,” said Bernie. “I get it. As for me, I need to fool around with married women about as much as I need a hole in my head. It’s just not my style.”

“Kurt and I are going on this trip for some great fishing,” said Brian. “We’re not interested in messing around with Monsieur’s wife. Do you agree with me, Kurt?”

“You better believe it, buddy. We can be the first group to make this trip and not have somebody sleep with Monsieur’s wife. Right, Chuck?”

“What color are her eyes?” asked Chuck.

“Oh God,” Kurt murmured. “This is going to be bad.”



The day before their trip, Kurt’s phone rang. Thinking it was Brian, he picked up the receiver and said, “You ready for the big day, you salty SOB?”

“Uh, is this Kurt Weichert’s residence?” It was Michael Sanders, CEO of Pointy Foods.

“Yes, yes, this is he,” stammered Kurt. “I’m so sorry, Mr. Sanders, I didn’t realize it was you.”

“I should hope not,” replied Sanders in his gruffest voice. “Kurt, I need to meet with you. I’ve got a proposal.”

“Sure, when would you like to meet?” said Kurt, hoping above all else that Sanders was busy for the next week. No such luck.

“I’d like to meet you tomorrow at Bona Vita downtown, if you’ve got the time.”

Kurt paused. “I, uh... Yes, I’ll be there,” he said, suddenly losing all confidence in his mining-investment retirement plan.

“Good, see you then.”

Kurt hung up the phone and had to force himself to pick it right back up and call Brian. “Hey, Brian, it’s Kurt.”

“Oh, crap, I know that voice,” said Brian. “You better not be calling to cancel, you son of a bitch.”

“Brian, I think I might be able to get our jobs back and then some.”

“I retract my earlier statement,” said Brian. “Carry on.”

“I just got a call from Sanders. He wants to meet me tomorrow downtown.”

“Holy crap, do you think—”

“I don’t know,” said Kurt. “I really hope so because I’m not about to throw eight grand down an empty mine shaft on the advice of Uncle Walter.”

“Okay,” said Brian. “First of all, those mines might still work out. Second, I need you to get me my job, okay? I’m miserable.”

“I’ll do my best for both of us,” said Kurt. “Apologize to all the guys for me. Except Chuck. Screw that bastard.”

“Will do,” said Brian.

CHAPTER 9

Oh Canada

Victor emerged from the American Airlines gate in Vancouver dressed in a green-velour tracksuit. A porter pushed a cart behind him loaded with twelve bags. Following close behind were Brian, Bernie, and Chuck, each carrying just one bag.

“I swear, we have to stop including him in our activities,” said Chuck. “This is embarrassing.”

“No, Chuck, you’re embarrassing,” said Bernie. “I can’t believe you tried to use that laser pointer on the plane!”

“What?” said Chuck. “The stewardess was giving me the eye.”

“She was staring at you because you’re wearing waders, Chuck!” yelled Brian. “You look like a complete idiot.”

Chuck stopped and turned to Brian, looking him up and down. He wore jeans, a flannel shirt, and hiking boots. He looked every bit the camping tourist—and still normal. Chuck snorted. “So vanilla.” He hiked up his waders and continued walking through the terminal, the entire crowd of passengers staring at him.

Bernie and Brian looked at each other. Brian said what they were both thinking. “What have we gotten into?”

After picking up their Chevy Suburban—the only car that could fit all of Victor’s luggage—from the rental counter, the guys headed straight for Silver City, thirty miles northeast of Vancouver. It was on the way to Glacier National Park, and they expected a hotbed of investor activity. When they arrived they found an empty street that barely held on to three buildings.

Worn and tattered, the wooden structures were smaller than most of Chuck's delis, and most of the windows in each were broken or boarded over with plywood.

"Hey, look!" Chuck piped. "There's the office."

Thirty yards past a "Welcome to Silver City" sign that had been shot through at least a dozen times stood a small shack. A large awning above the front door declared, "Silver City's Revival Starts Here!"

"Right," said Bernie. "That place counts as a revival here."

As Bernie steered the truck toward the office, Chuck asked if there was street parking. Bernie, Chuck, and Victor all scanned the abandoned street before Brian hit Chuck on the back of the head. Bernie parked in front of the office and the new miners walked in.

"Sir, we'd like our licenses to mine," announced Chuck after plowing through the front door.

A blue-haired octogenarian stared back at him from behind the counter. "Twenty-five dollars," she said.

"Uh, okay," said Chuck. The group paid the money and planned to scope out the mines before deciding to buy the titles. What they were looking for they had no idea. They drove into the empty network of mines to the ones Uncle Walter had identified for them on a brochure.

Standing at the entrance to one particularly dangerous-looking shaft, Victor announced, "This is garbage. I'm not investing my hard-earned oysters in this piece of junk."

"That's clams, Victor," said Bernie. "And neither am I."

"Guys, c'mon," Chuck protested. "You have to be kidding me."

"Nope," said Brian. "I think we've pretty much made up our minds. We're not doing it. Now let's go camping and fishing."

Chuck stood by the mine entrance as his friends walked back to the car. "Another dream shattered," he mumbled to himself. "Typical."



Kurt sat across from Mr. Sanders, his feet tapping incessantly under the table. His suit was pressed and cleaned and his blue-and-white tie was immaculate. He wanted to look his professional best for Mr. Sanders.

“Kurt, I think—no, I know you were a genuine asset to my company,” Mr. Sanders announced. “What is it going to take to get you back?”

In the adjacent booth, a patron spat out his drink and started to cough. Kurt looked over at the man, who might have looked familiar if it weren't for the fedora covering his head and the collar of his trench coat turned up to his ears. Kurt couldn't place him.

“Kurt?”

“Sorry, Mr. Sanders,” said Kurt. “I was distracted. First of all, I would need a company car—a decent sedan.”

“Consider it done,” said Mr. Sanders. “But I don't think that's what it's all about, is it?”

“Well, sir, it's not that easy a situation to walk back into. There are a lot of hard feelings in that place between Frank and me. A lot of bad feelings in general, actually. I don't think I could work under him again.”

The booth next to them shook as the patron in the fedora slammed his fist on the table. Kurt quickly looked over but didn't want to lose his momentum, so he returned his attention to Mr. Sanders.

“As I said, sir, I have principles.”

“I've been thinking about that, and I believe I have the perfect solution. I'll promote you to sales manager. I'll divide the salesmen into two groups. Frank gets half and you get half.”

“I—I think that would be great,” said Kurt while stealing a glance at the booth behind him. “I would love that challenge. But how would it work?”

“The territories we service would be divided, with your friends and former accounts all falling under your authority,” said the CEO. “I believe you have about a dozen accounts of your own,

and those you would keep. The other salesmen under you would help with those and service their own.”

“What about Brian?” asked Kurt. “He’s the best salesman I’ve ever worked with.”

“Who?”

“You remember Brian, sir,” insisted Kurt. “The guy who got fired the same day I did.”

“Right,” said the CEO. “Of course. Tell Byron he can have his old route back.”

“Brian. You mean Brian, sir.”

“Of course.”

“You son of a... I can’t believe...”

Kurt and Mr. Sanders looked to the next booth to see Mr. Fedora berating the menu, cursing under his breath at no one in particular.

“I thought this place was classy,” said the CEO. “I didn’t realize they let loonies in here. Anyway, let’s order.”



Meanwhile, in Canada, Monsieur Lafête strode into camp and discovered three normal-sized tents next to what could only be described as a medium-sized circus tent. Victor had brought the monstrosity in pieces in six of his twelve bags. The rest of his clothing and supplies were set up on a foldout table next to a goose-down bed roll and a weighty Tempur-Pedic pillow with a custom-fitted, silk pillow case.

“Okay,” Lafête said. “Brian! Are you here?”

Brian tumbled out of his tent. “Monsieur, how are you, my friend?” Brian put his hand into Monsieur’s bear paw and immediately regretted it as his fingers were all but crushed in the vise-like grip. He shook his hand out and introduced the others. Just then, Mrs. Lafête entered the camp, sidling through the pine needles in six-inch wedge heels—the wedge being her personal

compromise to practicality. She was indeed magnificent, a raven-haired, full-figured woman whose eyes said she wanted just one thing.

“Bonjour, Brian,” she said. “*Où est Kurt?* Where is your friend Kurt?”

“He couldn’t make it, unfortunately,” said Brian, doing his best to avert his gaze. “Mrs. Lafête, this is Victor.”

“*Buongiorno*, Signora. I’m Victor and I have the AIDS.”

Lafête and his wife looked at each other in stunned silence.

“Um, how nice,” she said.

With a limp wrist in the air, Bernie said, “Hello, girlfriend, I’m Bernie and I’m fabulous!” He decided his defense mechanism would be to send a gay message as bluntly, as loudly, and as stereotypically as he could. “I don’t like attractive women like yourself. It was nice to meet you.”

Having little sense of self-preservation, Chuck felt no such compunction when Mrs. Lafête turned to shake his hand.

“Isn’t it a pretty night tonight?” she asked.

He pulled her hand to within an inch of his lips and feigned a kiss on the top of it. He lowered her hand but held it close in both of his. “Stunning,” he said. “Isn’t it beautiful how the moon sits behind the stars?”

“Oh, geez,” whispered Brian. “I hope he has life insurance.”



Back at the restaurant, Kurt was listening with interest as Mr. Sanders told him about his own path to the top.

“I believe I have good judgment. That’s what got me to where I am today. I know a good investment when I see one and you’re a good investment, Kurt. I worked hard to understand how best to manage the assets under my supervision, and it’s something I do well. Make no mistake, Kurt, people can be your greatest assets and should be respected, nurtured, and cared for. I want to do that for you.”

“I appreciate your point of view and your confidence,” said Kurt. “I too take pride in my performance, and I’m looking forward to helping the other salesmen improve their numbers.”

“I’m looking forward to the same,” said the CEO with a smile.

“I take it you don’t make bad investments,” said Kurt. “I admire your surefooted decisions.”

“Well, wisdom is often the byproduct of negative experience,” said the CEO. “When you invest you have to be prepared to lose what you put on the table. When I was younger I made a couple of bad investments, mostly in ex-wives.”

Kurt laughed louder than he’d intended, but when Sanders joined him, he raised his glass in a toast to bad decisions.

The CEO chuckled to himself. “You know, all of my bad decisions came down to one thing, and that was not bothering to find out what was beneath the surface. It was true for my wives and it was true for those damn mines.”

“Mines, sir?” said Kurt, not smiling anymore.

“About fifteen years ago I was dumb enough to invest money in abandoned mines,” said Sanders. “It was an impulse buy and it was stupid. What did I know about mining, right? Some smooth talker got me—a guy named Walter.”

Kurt swallowed his bread without chewing, nearly choking himself into unconsciousness. He recovered and looked at the CEO, hoping he hadn’t given himself away.

“Wow, that’s a bummer,” Kurt said finally. “Did you make any money? Were you able to recover any of your investment?”

“Of course not,” said the CEO. “As I said before, when you put that money down you have to be prepared to lose it. And boy, did I lose it!”

“Sir, I will take that job.”



Back at the campsite, things were going horribly wrong. The guys had decided to go fishing by moonlight—all of them except for

Chuck, who decided he wasn't feeling well and should stay back and rest.

"I can't believe that little weasel is back at the campsite nailing Monsieur's wife," Bernie whispered to Brian as they scanned the water for signs of rainbow trout.

"He has a lot of nerve," said Brian. "In some ways I admire that. I mean, he's going to lose his reproductive organs tonight so he might as well enjoy them with a woman like that."

Just then, Lafête put his hand on Brian's shoulder. "Sorry, guys, we won't be able to do any fishing tonight. I forgot to bring bait."

Brian looked at his lure. Sure enough, he had been casting for ten minutes without bait. "Oh, come on, Monsieur, we're doing fine without it."

"Have you gotten any bites?"

"No, but it's the camaraderie that counts, right?" Brian's mind was whirling, but the foremost thought was to delay the inevitable as long as possible.

"Relax, guys, we've got all day tomorrow to catch fish," said Lafête. "Let's pack up and head back."

As they approached the campsite, Brian pulled Victor and Bernie aside. "Bernie, you go one way. Victor, you go the other way. Find Chuck before Monsieur catches him with his wife. I'll stick with Monsieur and try to distract him."

It was too late. The moaning was audible at thirty yards outside of camp, and as Lafête ran toward the noise, Brian braced himself for what was surely going to be the digging of a shallow grave.

"What do you think you're doing?" Lafête's eyes were ablaze with fury, his fists clenched and his nostrils flaring. Bernie had a flashback to reading *The Sun Also Rises* and imagined what Chuck's death would feel like at the hands of a raging French-Canadian bull.

Chuck was up and dressed in thirty seconds. His clothes were rumpled, his shoes were on the wrong feet, and his shirt

was inside out. Everybody was speechless except for Chuck and Monsieur Lafête.

“So, Monsieur, catch any big fish?”

Monsieur spat, “*Salaud!*”

“What did that mean?” Bernie asked Victor.

“Bastard. It means bastard,” said Victor.

“You speak French, Victor?” Brian asked.

“No, but angry boyfriends have cursed at me in every language and I’ve come to know these words.”

“I am going to kill you!” Lafête screamed. A mass of fast, twitching muscles wrapped in French-Canadian anger charged at Chuck. Lafête’s wife ducked out of the way and ran into Victor’s tent, where she intended to stay until Lafête cooled off.

Chuck turned and took off running into the woods. “Ahhhh!” He ran screaming for two hundred yards before turning to see he was alone. “I’ve got to get out of here. When I get back I’ll write a book on how I survived the wilderness. I’ll be famous.”

Before Chuck could mentally organize his fictional book tour he rounded a tree and came face to face with a grizzly bear. The bear reared up and swung for Chuck’s head, missing and tearing bark from the tree beside him in the process. Chuck’s bowels emptied as he turned and ran in the opposite direction.

“That was big of you not to kill him, Monsieur,” said Bernie. “I’m glad you’re not going after Chuck.”

“The guy is an idiot,” said Monsieur. “I know my wife is this way, but it angers me still. She is more woman than one man can handle.”

Brian, Bernie, and Victor protested out of affection for Lafête. “No, not her,” said Victor.

“You’ve got to be kidding,” added Bernie.

What would make you say something like that?” asked Brian.

“*Quel dommage*, it is true, *mes amis*,” he said, hanging his head. “I’m her eighth husband. Before me she was married to her cousin.”

“They didn’t have kids, did they?” asked Bernie. Monsieur

looked at him and Bernie quickly changed the subject. “So what’s next—in English?”

“I stay,” he replied. “She’s always been like a bou—sorry, like a, how do you say, a doorknob. Everyone gets a turn.”

Wow, that’s brutal, thought Brian. He addressed Lafête: “So what do we do now?”

“Well, we must go our separate ways tomorrow morning,” answered Lafête as he sat on a log by the fire. “I must spend some time alone with my wife. I know what she’s like and I still love her. We must mend. Victor, you will stay in my tent until morning. My wife will stay in your tent if you agree.”

“I...” Victor looked at his palace of a tent and shed a single tear. His first camping trip was turning out to be a disaster.

“We understand,” said Brian.

“What about Chuck?” asked Bernie.

“If he is not back by morning, you should stop on the way out of town and notify the ranger. There are bears here, big bears,” said Lafête.

“Ahhhhh!” Chuck ran through the camp at high speed, his pants streaked with urine and crap. He didn’t stop but continued running right on into the woods once more.



Meanwhile, back at the restaurant, Frank sat by himself in his booth, pounding whiskeys. Kurt and the company CEO had already left. With their departure the restaurant was almost empty, and the busboys were wiping the tables. Frank’s fedora sat beside him on the bench and his trench coat was on the floor.

“Excuse me, honey, I need another drink.”

The waitress looked him over. “You’ve had more than enough to drink tonight. Finish what you’ve got. We have a taxi on its way to pick you up.”

“Hey, tootsie, I need another drink!”

“I already told you, no more!”

“Hey, my glass is empty, fill me up.”

The waitress was slack jawed at this exchange. “Your cab is here. Get out of here and go home!”

She grabbed his arm, guided him to the front door, put him in the cab, and closed the door. Frank slid to the far side of the seat, handed the driver some bills and change, and opened the opposite door.

“Thank you, my good sir, for a smooth ride,” slurred Frank as he exited the cab and reentered the restaurant.

“Excuse me, miss, may I have a drink, pleeeeeeze?”

“NO! You may not.”

“Whaaaa? Do you work in every bar in town?”



The next morning Brian, Victor, and Bernie drove down the trail, away from the campsite, and out of the wilderness. Just before they reached the highway Victor jumped in his seat. “Look!”

Bernie and Brian craned their necks and soon saw it: a crumpled pile of a human being on the side of the trail. Chuck was half naked, pants missing. He was in the fetal position, cradling a skunk and weeping softly.

“Oh my God, this is pathetic,” said Brian. He rolled down the passenger-side window. “Are you okay, Chuckles?”

“I think so,” said Chuck.

“Good.” Brian gunned it, pulling twenty feet ahead.

“Guys, c’mon,” yelled Chuck as he chased after the truck, dropping his skunk as he ran.

“Thanks for ruining our trip,” yelled Victor.

“Now guys, wait a minute, wait for me.”

Brian slowed just enough for Chuck to catch up with them before driving off again. This went on for a mile before he relented and allowed Chuck into the back compartment with the luggage.

Bernie shook his head. “What a mess. At least we didn’t invest in those stupid mines.”

“Uh, guys,” said Chuck, now in the not-distant-enough cargo area. “I may have to talk to you about that. I’m going to need some money from you guys to cover your end. I, uh, signed on the dotted line so to speak. Congratulations, we each own four abandoned mines.”

CHAPTER 10

Wake Up the Echoes

Part One

“Wake up the echoes!” yelled Brian. “This is going to be the trip to end all trips!”

“Cheer, cheer for old Notre Dame, wake up the echoes cheering her name!” sang Kurt, waving his favorite Notre Dame flag in front of Chuck and Bernie. They sat on the couch opposite Kurt and Brian in their Michigan jerseys. Their trip to Notre Dame was about to begin and everyone would be there, including Victor.

“Oh yeah?” said Chuck. “Boys, let’s do this.”

Chuck reached into his pocket and pulled out a pitch pipe and a metronome, then placed them on the table in front of the couch. He motioned for Bernie to stand with him and they lined up in military precision. Chuck hummed a low C to get them queued and in tune. “And a one, two, three.”

“Now for a cheer, they are here, triumphant! Here they come with banners flying...”

Dumbfounded, Brian and Kurt sat across from the impromptu chorus, looking at each other and then back to their friends, who were singing the entire Michigan fight song a cappella in perfect pitch.

“This isn’t real, is it?” asked Brian.

“I can’t say for sure,” said Kurt, “but either way this is just scary.”

The boys continued singing—“Hail! To the victors valiant.

Hail! To the conqu'ring heroes. Hail! Hail! To Michigan"—until they'd run through the entire song.

"Okay, you win," said Kurt. "What in the hell are you guys doing while we're not around?"

"Listen, Irish scum," said Bernie. "We're not going to have you flouting your favorite football program as though it's the be all and end all. The University of Michigan is a proud institution and, as a proud graduate, I am going to revel in the utter and complete destruction we bring down on your team in *your own* stadium."

"Get a life," spat Brian. "You losers are dreaming if you think you're going to come into our house and walk out with a win. You're going to experience a level of humiliation you haven't felt since prom night."

"Hey, she said it happens to lots of guys," screamed Chuck before running upstairs.

"It does not happen to lots of guys," said Victor, deadpan. "At least not to real men."

"Yes it does," yelled Chuck from upstairs.

"I can't believe Chuck hates Notre Dame this much," said Brian. "I know he went to Michigan, but his freakin' cousin was a leprechaun, for Pete's sake."

"Yeah, he went to Michigan to spite his family," said Bernie. "His entire family? All Notre Dame alums. Can you believe how awkward it must be this time of year? His entire clan sitting in the Notre Dame section while he's with us in the visitor's section, purging his hatred for his father? Ha!"

Brian and Kurt laughed harder than they should have. Chuck came stumbling down the stairs with rage in his eyes and, with one look, shut everyone up. "I'll have you know my family dramas are private, you douche bags. Now let's get ready to go to this game."

Kurt looked around the room, checking off their supplies. "Five cases of beer, fourteen bags of chips, three pounds of ground beef, three packs of hot dogs, buns, ribs, corn on the cob, chairs..." On he went, counting off rations that would make standing armies jealous, then he and his friends started the long

process of loading their RV with the supplies until the last bag of ice went into the cooler.



Meanwhile, back at her apartment, Darci and her roommate, Alice, planned to follow the guys to South Bend, Indiana. Alice believed they were going in order to spy on Kurt; she'd been trying to convince Darci that Kurt and his friends were no good and that Kurt would cheat on her if given the chance.

"Darci, you know any guy is only as loyal as his options," said Alice. "They get around those coeds all drunk and you know something is going to go down."

"Alice," said Darci, "let's just make this trip. If you're right, I'll buy you a sandwich." Darci had no reason to believe Kurt would cheat; she wanted to try to get tickets to the game and surprise Kurt by showing up with no purpose other than sharing the event with him.



Oblivious to Darci's secret plans, Kurt continued arguing with Chuck and Bernie as he steered the big RV toward South Bend. Part of his negotiations with the CEO of Pointy Foods had included some time off, effective immediately, and he planned to use it well.

"Notre Dame is underrated this year," said Kurt. "I know Michigan is supposed to be the big, bad team and all but our team is stacked with young, hungry talent!"

"Excuse me, my man," retorted Chuck. "Michigan is the top-rated team in the polls for a reason, and that's because Notre Dame simply can't run the ball!"

"My simple-minded friend," said Kurt, pity in his voice. "Notre Dame will not lose at home. There are too many ghosts inside Knute Rockne stadium for that to happen."

"Ghosts? Michigan's defense is going to shove the ball down

Notre Dame's throat and there isn't anything your ghosts can do about it."

"You guys don't believe in the ghosts?" asked Brian.

"No," said Bernie, "but we do believe in Michigan's high-powered running attack."

"High-powered?" laughed Kurt. "Your running attack is going to be about as high-powered as a wet piece of bread once our defense is through with it."

"Do you think there will be many beautiful women at this game?" asked Victor. "It seems that with the coldness they will be hidden behind scarves and jackets."

"Just think of it as more wrapping on the present," said Brian.

"Yes, wrapping on the presents," agreed Victor. "I like this. So there will be many presents at this game?"

"My friend, you have never seen so many beautiful, young women in one place," said Kurt wistfully. "And most of them will be partaking of that age-old social lubricant: drinking."

"This sounds like a wonderful place," said Victor with anticipation in his voice.

"You have no idea," said Bernie. "And it's just two hours from Chicago."

An hour into the drive Kurt's RV was boxed in by the train of cars moving along at a moderate speed toward Notre Dame. Flags attached to the cars' windows fluttered while the magnetic leprechauns and helmets remained static, advertising the allegiance of the drivers. "Go Irish" painted on rear windows showed the allegiance of the mostly Notre Dame crowd. Kurt breathed in deeply, taking in the scene and feeling more relaxed than he had in a month. He couldn't sense the plot against him building like a storm.



"They're all a bunch of jerks," Alice seethed, standing across from Darci in their kitchen. She was tossing a salad as part of the picnic

they were bringing to the game. “Kurt and his friends don’t care about the game. They just want to go and party with all of those drunk coed sluts.”

“Alice, you’re so wrong. Kurt and I are committed to each other and I trust him.”

“Then why are we going on this trip?”

“Because I’m not doing anything this weekend and I thought I’d surprise Kurt,” said Darci, annoyed by Alice’s incessant conspiracies. “I *like* spending time with my boyfriend, and just because you’ve had a string of bad boyfriends doesn’t mean you should target Kurt!”

Not to be deterred from her mean-spirited plan, she insisted, “You may say you’re only going on this trip to surprise Kurt, but I think the real reason we’re going is the simple fact that Kurt is a man and all men are dogs. Deep down inside you have doubts and you want to see if those doubts are justified.” With that, Alice slammed her Ginsu knife down, cutting a cucumber in half.



Blissfully unaware of the tension back in Chicago, Kurt was more excited with each passing mile. “You know, guys, this is the best thing we could’ve done,” he said, finally guiding the RV off the highway and toward the campus. “I swear, what I needed was some time away from Pointy Foods and Frank—not to mention Alice!”

“Hear, hear,” said Brian. “Ever since that toga party I’ve been wanting to punch that guy in the face.”

“Well, you’ll get your chance, Just cool your jets.”

Brian and Kurt turned to the back of the RV as though they had heard a ghost of their own. Chuck and the others swiveled in their captain’s chairs to see Frank stumbling out of the back bedroom toward the front of the RV, his suit and tie crumpled and stained.

Kurt slammed on the brakes, sending Frank tumbling toward

the front, past Chuck, Bernie, and Victor. His face slammed against the dash as Kurt pulled the RV to the side of the road just yards from the entrance to the campus.

“Ahhhh! My face!” yelled Frank, his nose bleeding from the impact.

Kurt grabbed him by his dingy collar and pushed him onto his ass. “Just how did you get into my RV?” he yelled.

“Ow, stop yelling,” said Frank. “I think I broke something.”

“I swear, Frank, if you don’t start talking I’m going to make sure something else is broken,” growled Kurt.

“I don’t know, okay?” insisted Frank, pushing at Kurt’s hands in an effort to free himself. “I just woke up like ten minutes ago.”

“Frank, you broke into my RV and I think, under the law, that means I can kill you,” said Kurt. “I need an explanation and I need it right now.”

Brian looked at Kurt’s eyes, which were wild with rage; the bulging veins on Kurt’s forehead prompted him to say, “I don’t think he’s kidding, Frank. If I were you, I’d start talking—double time.”

“Okay, okay,” said Frank. “Just let go of me.”

Kurt let go of Frank’s shirt. Frank scurried backward to distance himself from his former salesman and surveyed the situation. He was surrounded, with no chance of making it to the RV’s side door before the Italian sitting to his right could get him.

“I had a falling out and I didn’t know where else to go,” Frank said.

“A falling out with whom?” asked Bernie.

“W-w-with my lady.”

“You mean Linda Davis?” laughed Brian. “That ain’t no lady! Why didn’t you just go back home?”

“We were at my apartment,” said Frank. “She kicked me out.”

“She kicked you out of your own apartment?” said Chuck. “Dude, that’s just sad.”

“Hey, it’s not like you’re lining ’em up and knocking ’em down,

Chuckles,” spat Frank. “Besides, she’s very forceful when she wants to be.”

“So, the question remains, how did you end up in my RV?” asked Kurt, who looked down on Frank as he might a puppy who had been hit by a car. “Let me guess, you were drunk.”

“Hey!” Frank stood up but fell backwards just as quickly. “I—I may have had a few drinks, but who can blame a guy? Somehow I ended up in your driveway and then felt lightheaded so I tried the RV door and it was open.”

“Get out.”

“What?”

“Get out,” Kurt repeated. “Now!”

Frank scrambled for the door and stepped down onto the side of the road. As Kurt gunned the RV toward the campus, Frank got a face full of exhaust fumes from the big diesel engine. “Figures,” he said, then he turned toward the campus and began walking.



“Guys, we have some guests,” announced Bernie as he walked with five coeds toward the RV, which was in full tailgate mode. “These attractive ladies would like to join us for food and spirits this morning. Any objections?”

“Of course not,” said Brian. “Perhaps one of these fine gals can help me with the grill.” A young blond headed for the grill as the others hit the cooler and the bowls full of chips.

“They can join us as long as they throw in five bucks to help cover our costs,” said Chuck.

“You can forget that notion, Chuckles,” said Brian. “You’re a greedy SOB, you do know that, don’t you?”

“I’m always the businessman,” replied Chuck, “and a successful one at that. Ladies?”

The students looked at him briefly before rolling their eyes and turning back to the partygoers.

“You mean you’re always an idiot who can’t get a date from an actual breathing woman,” laughed Brian.

“Come on, Brian,” Chuck begged. “Don’t bring up the blow-up doll again. She wasn’t mine and you know it. It was one of you guys playing another prank on me.”

“Guys, enough fighting,” said Victor, who was eyeing the ladies as though they were prime rib. “How do you say in America... Let the good times flow?” The girls laughed, and one in particular looked at Victor in a not-so-subtle invitation to get to know her better.

“I think you mean *roll*,” she said sweetly.

“Guys, I would like to introduce you to the women,” said Bernie, who then rattled off names like Morgan, Tiffany, and Mindy before turning to the guys. “And girls, these are the men. They are all available except for Kurt over there. You’re not available, right, Kurt?”

“Correct. You are all single and I’m in a serious relationship,” Kurt announced, getting an “awww” from the girls in response. “In fact, I think Darci could be the one.”

“Whoa, what?” said Brian, scurrying over from the grill. “You haven’t asked her to marry you, have you?”

“No, but unlike most of you heathens I have never before been married in a drunken Vegas stupor. I plan to get it right the first time, and I think she’s it.”



As Kurt was professing his love for Darci, she was walking into the parking lot, looking for the RV.

“How are we going to find this motor home?” asked Alice. “There must be a million of them here.”

“It won’t be that hard. They have two flags hanging in the back window,” answered Darci. “One is a Notre Dame flag and the other is a Michigan flag. What are the odds?”



As Alice and Darci scanned the parking lot, another hunter of sorts was climbing onto the top of a car just thirty yards away. Frank spotted the RV instantly and jumped down from the roof of the silver Mercedes, not caring about the dent left in its expensive sheet metal. He marched straight toward the RV and announced his arrival by grabbing a beer from the cooler and putting his arm around Tiffany, who was talking to Bernie. “Hi, Ladies.”

Brian stepped in front of Kurt before he could kill Frank. He grabbed the interloper by his ear. “You come with me.” He pulled Frank into the RV and sat him down in front of the TV, which was showing the pregame programming on NBC. “Frank, I don’t know what your deal is, but you’re treading a very thin line.”

“Actually, I just need a ride home,” said Frank. “I’ll just stay in here and watch the game and then head back with you guys. I’ll even apologize to Kurt.”

“Fine,” said Brian, too pissed to keep fighting. “Just sit here and lay off the beers.”



“Hi. Are you ready for some food?” Kurt offered a cheeseburger to a tall, dark-haired Notre Dame student named Maria. Her hair was up in a bun and she had a small leprechaun sticker on each cheek. She set her pom-poms down on the chair next to the grill and held out her plate.

“So, your friend Brian is single now?” she asked.

“Brian broke up with his girlfriend a few months ago after she transferred to the East Coast,” answered Kurt. “She wasn’t interested in keeping up a long-distance thing.”

“Has he ever been married?”

“Maria, what’s with all the questions?” asked Kurt. “Do you want me to give him a note after class or something?”

Maria laughed and put her hand on Kurt’s shoulder—just as Alice and Darci rounded a nearby car.

“Do you see what I see?” asked Alice, grabbing Darci’s arm. “See him over there with that girl? That’s not just talking.”

Darci stood in place, stunned by what she was seeing. Kurt was now showing Maria how to barbeque, his hand guiding hers with the spatula. "How could he do this to me?"

"Be strong!" blazed Alice. "We're going to confront him right now."

Darci walked toward Kurt, who was turned away from her, facing the stadium. "Hi, Kurt."

Kurt turned to see Darci standing behind him, tears in her eyes. Maria shuffled away from the grill toward the RV.

"Darci, what are you doing here?" asked Kurt in his most-innocent sounding voice.

"I thought I would surprise you," she sobbed. "I brought a picnic basket and everything. You are surprised, aren't you?"

"Well of course I am, sweetheart, very pleasantly surprised."

"Alice was right about you, Kurt. You're just like all the other men I've dated. I can't believe you would do this."

"What are you talking about?" asked Kurt. "That girl? That girl is interested in Brian. I was just showing her how to grill so I could go and find him for her."

Darci grabbed the salt and pepper shakers and threw them at Kurt. Behind her, Alice was grinning from ear to ear. Darci turned around and headed for her car. Kurt tried to follow her but Alice cut him off.

"Stay where you are, user," she yelled. "I warned Darci about you. Now that she knows I was right, she'll listen to me."

"What are you talking about, you psycho?"

"The first thing I'm going to do is get her mind off you," said Alice. "We're going straight to a bar and we're going to tear this town up."

"You need to do us all a favor and take your medication," said Kurt, stepping around Alice. "Stay out of our business and quit putting these stupid ideas into Darci's head."

"You better not try to follow her or I'll zap you!" yelled Alice, running to stand in front of Kurt again. She pointed a can of pepper spray at him, a demonic smile on her face.

“Come on, give me a break,” said Kurt. “This is ridiculous.”

Kurt started to walk after Darci but made only two steps before his eyes were bombarded with savage, blinding pain. Alice emptied the pepper spray canister into his face and then took off running as Chuck and Bernie chased her through the parking lot.

“You’ll never catch me, pigs!” she yelled before disappearing into the crowd.

Darci ran back to Kurt to check on him. Once she realized he wasn’t going to lose his vision, she stormed off after Alice.

CHAPTER 11

Wake Up the Echoes

Part Two

Kurt, Brian, Bernie, and Victor sat quietly in their seats, stunned by the confrontation at the tailgate and by the score: 28-0 Michigan. Back in the RV, Chuck, who'd scalped his ticket for a tidy profit, stood watch over Frank, who was now seven beers into his afternoon and nodding off in the back bedroom.

"Brian, I've got to find Darci at halftime," said Kurt, his eyes still swollen and red. "She's going to be a mess. She thinks I was with that girl at the barbeque."

"It did look pretty bad," said Brian. "I stepped out of the RV and thought you'd decided to step out on her. The way Maria was touching your arm was a bit much."

"That chick was interested in you, dumbass," said Kurt. "I'm just worried Alice is going to get her to do something irrational. That chick is a loose cannon!"

"The four of us will go and find Darci," said Victor.

"We can go at halftime," agreed Brian.

"What about the game?" said Bernie. "This is the greatest thing I've ever seen."

"It's not much of a game," Brian countered. "Notre Dame is down by twenty-eight points."

"I know and I love it. I bet you guys can't handle watching these schmucks getting whipped."

Back at the RV, Chuck was laughing at the storied history of his family's alma mater. "Ghosts, ha ha! Where are your ghosts now, you idiots? You pathetic little people."

“Ghosts?” mumbled Frank. “I don’t think so, buddy. Not today.” He shut his eyes and fell back to sleep.



“Look at that hunk of a gorgeous man sitting over there,” said Alice, pointing across Shamrock’s sports bar toward a frat boy with his hat on backward and a beer in his hand. “He’s staring right at you, Darci.”

“I see that,” said Darci. “He’s very...obvious.”

“You go have yourself some fun,” said Alice. “I want you to forget about Kurt. You should be able to enjoy yourself just as much as he was.”

“I just don’t think I’m up for this right now,” said Darci. “I just want to go home.”



Kurt, Brian, Victor, and Bernie were frantically searching the crowded sidewalks outside the bars in South Bend.

“This is it,” said Kurt. “It’s gotta be.”

“Are you sure she’s in here?” asked Bernie.

“I’m positive! That bitch Alice is a big country-music lover. This is the only Irish/country-themed sports bar for miles.”

They walked through the front doors and into a different world.

“I’ve never been to a country-music place before,” said Victor. “It all seems so strange.”

Just as Victor was ready to dismiss the country-music scene as hick garbage, a group of young coeds wearing tight jeans, cowboy boots, and cowboy hats walked by, smiling, giggling, and waving at them.

“I love this place,” said Victor, biting his fist.

“Look over at the dance floor, Kurt,” said Brian. Darci was dancing with the frat boy who was trying his best to take

liberties with his hands. Darci, who was squirming away from him, searched for an exit.

“I see her,” said Kurt.

Bernie turned to look. “He’s big.”

“I know he is. Where’s the wicked witch of the Midwest?”

“She’s at the bar,” said Brian. “Look at her. She’s surrounded by all those washed-up cowboys. If they only knew.”

“We need a game plan,” Bernie insisted, still looking at the muscled frat boy draped over Darci.

“It looks like that guy has a lot of friends,” said Brian. “This could get messy.”

A group of guys who looked a lot like Darci’s frat boy were standing around the dance floor cheering him on. Alice soon moved from the bar to the dance floor to join them.

“You go, girl! Grab that butt, girl!” Alice’s crude manner was a sharp contrast to Darci’s refined ways.

As Bernie, Kurt, and Brian schemed, Victor approached, having slipped off earlier without anyone realizing it. He wore a cowboy hat and a red bandana and had two women, one under each arm.

“His name is Travis Jones,” he announced, pointing at the frat boy. “They call him T.J. These lovely ladies say he is a real horse’s ass. No girl in South Bend will go near him so he preys on the out-of-town...towners. Yes, the out-of-towners. This one, he has a temper.”

“This is just wonderful,” said Bernie. “Darci had to pick up the one psychopathic Neanderthal in town.”

“Excuse me, Sherlock,” said Kurt, “but it looks to me like she’s not exactly enjoying herself and if that a-hole doesn’t remove his mitts from her posthaste I’m going to have to do it for him.”



Back at the RV, Chuck was sweating bullets. Notre Dame had just scored their second touchdown of the third quarter and were now trailing only 28-14.

“How lucky can they get?” yelled Chuck. “Michigan is dominating every category of the game and these Jesus freaks are scoring on freaking kickoff returns and lucky interceptions. Michigan will win this game because there are no such things as ghosts!”

“Ghosts are awesome,” said Frank before passing out again.



Kurt's scheming was interrupted by a roar from the bar as Notre Dame picked off another errant pass for a pick six. He had to pull his gaze away from the big screen and back to Darci and her Neanderthal. He moved onto the dance floor with Victor, Bernie, and Brian flanking him to cut off T.J.'s friends.

“Darci, may I have this dance?”

“Kurt, thank God,” said Darci. “I'm so sorry about earlier. I didn't think.”

“She's with me,” T.J. interrupted, stepping in front of Kurt. “Get lost.”

“Darci, you weren't seeing things clearly,” Kurt continued. “That girl was interested in Brian, not me. I had nothing to do with those girls. Victor and Bernie brought them over, and that girl was asking questions about Brian.”

“I said get lost,” said T.J., who looked to see his friends moving toward the dance floor like a pack of hyenas. They never made it. Bernie, who was terrified, simply tripped his man. Pretending to be a drunk, Brian jumped on his mark's back, acting as though he were celebrating another touchdown and hoping to delay the behemoth long enough to give Kurt more time. Victor gave his man a chance to back off, stepping in front of him with a wag of his finger. His frat boy was particularly large, more than six feet and built like a brick house. He was quick-tempered too and made the mistake of swinging at Victor, who quickly dropped to one knee and sent his fist crashing into the man's groin, dropping him to the floor.

Seeing his friend drop, T.J. wasted no time in swinging at

Kurt, who didn't share Victor's practiced fury. The punch landed squarely on his jaw. Stars filled his vision as he reached out, grabbed his attacker by the collar, and pulled him to the ground, where he was able to gain control and began pummeling him.

"Kurt, stop it!" yelled Darci.

The scrap quickly spread to the entire bar. Patrons threw bottles and chairs at anyone wearing a Michigan jersey.

Before Kurt could finish T.J. off, the police were grabbing him by the ear and pulling him off of the floor. The bar was swarming with campus police but the crowd refused to disperse because Notre Dame now had the ball with two minutes left, down just seven points.

"Should've known it was you, T.J.," announced a burly sergeant as he cuffed the frat boy. "Come on. You know the routine."

Before the cop holding him could place him in cuffs, Kurt grabbed Darci and ran for the exit. The officer let him go, focusing instead on Brian, who was now chomping on the man's ear. The poor guy was screaming bloody murder.

"Hey, let him go," said the cop. "Geez, what is it with you people?"

"He said the Irish are the scum of the earth, Officer... O'Malley," said Brian.

The cop looked at the kid's bleeding ear. "Is that so?"

"I swear it, Officer," Brian insisted.

"What's your name, son?"

"Kowalski," the frat boy answered.

"You're coming with me."

Bernie and Victor were being pulled from the piles of combatants. Brian ran to them and led them to the bar's exit. They all ran for the RV, where they found Chuck shaking his head, dumbfounded. Notre Dame was driving and with just ten ticks on the clock, they were lined up for a last-chance Hail Mary.

"I can't believe this," he said when he saw them. "No way. It's not fair. At least the Irish are going to have to run the ball since Myers injured his arm. They haven't been able to run the ball all day. Michigan will stop the ghost and win this game."

Kurt and Darci crammed into the RV with the others and stared at the screen. The announcer set the scene:

“Here it is, folks. Notre Dame is set to bring this storied rivalry to new heights if they can pull this off. Myers is hurt but still in the game. Jefferson, the senior tailback, has put up big numbers this half and is still a threat. He’ll be running toward Touchdown Jesus if he gets the ball and he’ll be just ten yards from the promised land when he does. And here we go. Myers drops back and hands it to Jefferson... It’s a reverse. Jefferson gives the ball to Tompkins and he’s got room to run. He’s hit daylight, folks, and no one’s going to catch him. Touchdown Notre Dame.”

Kurt jumped up and down, hugging Darci and screaming his head off at Chuck and Bernie, who were downtrodden.

“They still have to tie the game, and then we’re going to crush you,” promised Chuck.

“Would you look at this!” said the TV announcer. “They’re going for two, folks. Coach Lou Holtz is going to try to win this game right now. And they’ve done it! Notre Dame scores on the quarterback keeper. Wake up the echoes!”

The RV rocked as Brian, Kurt, and Darci jumped up and down.

“You suck. In your face!” yelled Kurt, pointing his finger at Bernie and Chuck. “Ha! The ghosts have struck again.”



Back at Shamrocks, Victor, Brian, and Bernie, who had returned for some Western hospitality, were line dancing with the locals. Victor had rounded up some Indiana girls and was making arrangements for an after party at a local hotel where Kurt and Darci had booked a room.

Kurt was lying on the queen-size bed watching highlights of the day’s game as Darci changed in the bathroom. He heard a knock on the door. As soon as he opened it he regretted doing so.

“Oh, Kurt, I never should’ve gotten between you and Darci,” Alice blurted, tears running down her face. Without saying one

word, Kurt shut the door in her face and locked it, relishing the rare opportunity to best the witch. He walked over to the bed and lay down again. Darci came out of the bathroom and joined him.

“Was somebody at the door?”

“Yes, there was. Somebody was confused and came to the wrong room.” Kurt leaned over and turned out the lights.



In the fading daylight Alice made her way back to the RV, where Chuck was sitting outside swigging beer in a fold-out chair. Still sobbing, she approached him. “I need a ride home.”

Chuck, who had never spoken to Alice away from the others, looked up. Her make-up flowed down her cheeks and her cowboy hat was crushed and askew. Chuck’s heart skipped a beat. How had he not seen it before?

“Of course,” he said. “Whatever you need, sweetie.”



After returning home, Kurt began working as a sales manager and settled into his perfect life, spending time with Darci and his friends and planning a bright future.

CHAPTER 12

The Flying Hawaiians

Twelve Years Later

“This place is going crazy tonight!” yelled Kurt, his voice drowned out by the music and chatter in Bernie’s new restaurant, Flying Hawaiians.

“Crazy?” yelled Victor. “I don’t understand. Bernie brings the Hawaii to Chicago? For the American football games? It’s stirred up.”

“Mixed up, Victor, mixed up. It’s entertainment. Bernie went to Honolulu on vacation and came back with his newest act: The Flying Hawaiians’ Luau.”

Kurt sat in a booth with Brian and Victor while waiting for Chuck to arrive. He’d parked a mile away, at one of his delis, in order to save the \$5 valet parking fee. It was typical Chuck behavior, and it made Kurt feel right at home. Chuck’s antics were a part of their regular routine. Despite recent upheavals in his life, Kurt could at least count on Chuck to be unreasonable, unrealistic, and cheap.

It had been twelve years since the memorable Michigan-Notre Dame game. Kurt was still working for Pointy Foods and still a sales manager there. Michael Sanders had retired, and a more Frank-friendly CEO had come onboard, putting Kurt in an eternal holding pattern as far as promotions. He stayed because the money was good and life with Darci was darn near perfect.

The night of the Notre Dame game, he had proposed to Darci and she had accepted, but they had yet to marry. Why? Life was just too perfect.

Kurt still had his man-cave basement and Darci still had her condo, insisting she would never occupy a domicile that included a foosball table and life-sized posters of Dick Butkus. Kurt saw Darci's way of doing things as parallel to what he was doing: delaying the marriage because life before marriage seemed just right.

"We'll marry when we're ready," Darci would say to him whenever he was ribbed by his friends for being eternally engaged.

"Yeah, when we're ready," he would say. And so it went.

"This place has been packed every day since it opened last month," Brian yelled over the music, bringing Kurt back to the present.

"Why is there a window by the table?" asked Victor, looking at the opaque cutout beside the booth.

"Each of the VIP booths has a window to the kitchen," answered Brian. "When you need something you just flip the switch, the window opens, and somebody is there to serve you immediately."

Brian, like Kurt, was still employed at Pointy Foods. His life, though, had been anything but perfect in the years since the game. Married twice, both times to bimbos named Bambi, he was now back on the market and looking to score.

"I am going to flip the switch now," said Victor, leaning toward the window. With a satisfying hydraulic sound, the window rose and Bernie appeared on the other side, smiling with a tray of drinks in hand. Kurt, Brian, and Victor started laughing and clapping their hands.

"It's Bernie! I love this place," said Kurt.

Victor's life had changed little. He was still screwing his waitresses and still running his restaurants. A small hint of gray had invaded his Italian mane, but much to Brian's chagrin the girls seemed to like him more for it.

"Bernie, pass me one of those drinks and put it on our tab, bro," said Brian, reaching through the window.

"Brian, you're not allowed to call people 'bro' anymore," announced Kurt. "We're too old for that crap."

“What’s gotten into you?” asked Brian.

“Nothing. Just feeling old.”

“Bernardo, I’m confused by the Hawaii,” said Victor, “but I like your new place anyway.”

“I admit it’s odd in Chicago,” said Bernie, “but apparently sports and luaus mix. I have this place packed every night.”

“It sure is packed,” agreed Kurt, looking around the room. “Thanks for the VIP seats. I love this section. No waiting—just flip a switch and the window opens. Plus we can see all the HDTVs and the stage perfectly from here.”

“Yes!” yelled Brian. “This place is a utopia. And what a game it is tonight. Monday Night Football. The Bears are playing the Green Bay Packers.”

“I know,” said Bernie. “My place is full of cheeseheads. I’m selling the cheese hats at the hostess stand.”

“Oh, come on,” protested Kurt. “This is Chicago. Don’t help promote the Packers.”

“Oh, come on, Kurt! It’s fun. Look, I’ve sold a couple of hundred of the cheese hats already. Don’t worry. There are still more Bears fans here than Packers fans. Anyway, where’s the rest of the gang?”

“Chuck will be here shortly,” said Kurt. “He’s walking from his place so he doesn’t have to pay your valet fee.”

“My valet parking is only five dollars for the entire night. His closest deli is at least a mile away. What a cheap bastard!”

“Oh geez, here he comes,” said Kurt. “I swear that stupid Blue-tooth in his ear makes him look like such an idiot.”

“Oh man, I think he’s passing out coupons to my customers.” Bernie began pushing his way through the crowd toward Chuck.

Brian, who was still unafraid of attracting attention, stood and yelled across the bar. “Hey, Tron, we’re over here. Quit passing out coupons and come and sit down.”

Chuck, who was embracing as many new technologies as possible in a bid to hold on to his youth, had picked up the young lingo. “WTF? Are you guys crazy? You could have parked at my deli for free.”

“WTF? Chuck, you’re spending way too much time texting. I’m giving you free food and drinks and you still try to save five dollars on parking?”

“LOL. I do what I have to do to maintain my capital reserves, biotch. Now check yourself.” Chuck reached for his ear and pressed on the Bluetooth device. “Holler at me.”

Victor, Bernie, and Brian stared in silence. Kurt couldn’t hold his tongue.

“Chuck, please quit with the lingo,” he said. “I don’t want to hear WTF or LOL come out of your mouth again tonight.”

“Hold on a second, Jim,” Chuck said, putting his call on hold. “Why such a Debbie Downer, Kurtis? This is a new era of technology and you need to get with the times.”

“You mean we all have to start dressing like you?” asked Brian. “You want me to have gadgets hooked all over my body and skinny jeans hanging off my fat ass like you?”

“This is the era of communication, ladies,” Chuck shot back, pulling his jeans up. “Hey Kurtis, where is the lovely Darci tonight?”

“Why do you want to know where my fiancée is, Chuckles?”

“Fiancée? At this point I’m ready to call her your life partner.”

The guys started laughing at Kurt, especially Brian. “He makes the seven-year itch seem like a quick break!”

“Every one of you, with the exception of Victor, has been married at least once in these last twelve years, and you’re all divorced now. Right?”

Chuck looked at Bernie and Brian. He too had been married...for less than a year. His wife, a foreign woman named Camilla, had left him when he’d skipped their anniversary to go to a Bulls game with the guys.

“Darci and I like having our own separate places. We spend most nights together at her condo and, up until recently, we were still humping like single people. So suck on that.”

“What do you mean *until recently*?” asked Brian.

“Alice is back.”

Victor looked at Brian and Bernie. “Oh dear.”

“Since Alice moved back to Chicago a few months ago and bought a condo next to Darci it hasn’t been the same.”

“Is Alice coming tonight?” asked Chuck, who hadn’t told his friends about falling in love with their sworn enemy.

“I don’t think Bernie allows dogs in his restaurant.”

“Very funny, Kurt, but you need new jokes. She’s beautiful.” Chuck returned to his Bluetooth conversation. “You know what, Jim, I’m going to have to call you back.”

Kurt downed the last of his beer. “Chuck, what the hell is wrong with you tonight? She’s an ugly beast—and pure poison.”

“Kurt, you may not like her but everybody at this table knows she is beautiful. Right, guys?”

Brian and Victor looked at each other and shrugged their shoulders in agreement.

“What’s wrong with you people?” shot Kurt. “This is Alice we’re talking about. The wicked witch of the Midwest. Chuck, you don’t even know her.”

“Oh, I know her, Kurt,” said Chuck. “I spent time with her before.”

“When? And what kind of time?”

“Remember when you kicked her out of your room at the game? Well, she needed a place to stay.”

“Oh my God, you didn’t,” Kurt said incredulously. “I’m going to throw up in my mouth.”

“She also rode back with us from the game,” added Victor. “She was, how you say, clingy to Chuck.”

“Jesus, you have to be kidding me,” scoffed Kurt, who had ridden back to Chicago with Darci. “The day Alice moved was the greatest day of my life. She ran off to take some job in San Francisco because her mom was a hippie and told her how great it was.”

“Well, now that she’s back, I’d like to get to know her again.”

“I think we know what you mean by that,” joked Brian. “Know her in a biblical sense.”

“Very funny.”

Bernie stuck his head through the window and delivered some disappointing news to Chuck.

“You might be out of luck, Chuck. Alice has been hanging around the restaurant the last couple of weeks. I think one of my employees likes her.”

“What?”

“Yeah, you see the big guy over at the bar? That’s King Kamehameha VI. And he’s totally bangin’ her.”

“WTF? I don’t get it. She comes here to see that guy? A friggin’ bartender?”

“Actually,” said Bernie, “he’s just part-time at the bar. He runs the luau and his sister waits tables.”

Brian craned his leïd head around Kurt and saw Kamehameha standing at the bar. “Holy crap, that guy is huge.”

“He’s got nothing on me,” said Chuck. “Tonight I’m going to eliminate the competition.”

Brian and Kurt laughed. “Don’t do anything stupid, Chuck. That guy looks as if he could rip your limbs off.”

Just then, Kurt saw Alice and Darci walk into the bar. Darci was in jeans and a Bears jersey and Alice wore a tight, black dress.

“Kurt, I’m sitting next to Alice,” said Chuck.

“Hi, babe,” said Kurt as Darci sat down.

Chuck slid to his right to make room. “Alice, you look beautiful.”

“Hello. It’s been a long time, Chuck.”

“It’s been twelve years, two months, and six days since I last saw you,” announced Chuck. His friends looked away.

Victor put his palm to his forehead and muttered, “Oh Jesus.”

“What?” asked Alice over the music.

“Remember? That was when we drove you back in the RV,” Chuck replied.

“I do remember that, Chuck. You were very kind to me that day. Of course, I don’t really remember the night before. I’d had too many shots.”

“Right,” said Chuck. “Nothing happened.”

“Smooth,” said Brian.

Bernie popped his head through the window and started passing the ladies some drinks.

“I’ll have hot wings, nachos, and pizza out soon. And I’m adding pineapple and ham to the pizzas. This is supposed to be a Hawaiian luau.”

Brian took advantage of the interruption to change the subject. “Well, sorry to spoil your night, Kurt, but Frank might join us.”

Kurt slammed his beer on the table. “I swear to God this might just make me kill someone.”

“What’s the matter?” asked Darci. “Kurt, Frank is always a jerk, so what else is going on?”

“I just... We’ll talk about it later. I’m just tired of him and the whole work situation. Jesus, I’m almost forty and I’m still dealing with that asshat.”

“Okay, we’ll talk later,” said Darci. “I just don’t like seeing you this way.”

“Don’t worry, Kurt,” said Brian. “He’s going to let you play on the company basketball team again.”

“I knew that lush would come back crawling. He must be tired of losing to Detroit’s sales office every year.”

“Kurt, I’ve seen you ball,” said Victor. “You are not good.”

“What do you mean? We won every time I was playing.”

“But you do kind of suck at playing basketball,” said Brian. “It’s just that you’re hypercompetitive and no one else takes it that seriously. You become a psychopath during the game.”

“I like to win.”

“Your will is much stronger than your skill,” said Brian as he reached for the wings Bernie had brought them. “You can’t dribble at all with your left hand. You throw up bricks—”

“My bricks go inside the basket and your pretty shots don’t,” Kurt interrupted. “By the way, I don’t dribble with my left hand because my right is my strength.”

“So is cheating,” added Brian.

“How come you haven’t played on the team for so long?” asked Victor.

“Every year the top sales manager from each area gets to pick the team. Frank has been beating my numbers for the last six years because the new CEO, i.e. his drinking buddy, gave him all the best routes.”

“He must be desperate if he wants you back on the team,” said Brian.

“Hey now, my Kurt is a great competitor,” joked Darci. “It’s not his fault he gets the red mist.”

“Well, as long as that red mist beats Marcus Jones, we’re happy,” said Brian. “That jackwagon is intolerable.”

“You mean the sales manager from Detroit?” asked Darci. “He seemed nice enough.”

“But Frank really hates him,” Kurt explained. “Years ago Frank was promoted to regional manager and he was based out of Detroit. Marcus was his top sales manager and the two of them were also best friends. Marcus wanted Frank’s job, so he framed him for skimming. The company demoted Frank in the scandal. Marcus never got promoted, but Frank was never the same after that. He was transferred back to Chicago and he became our problem.”

“So that’s why Frank is the way he is,” said Chuck.

“That and Marcus was rumored to have slept with Frank’s girl at the time. Anyway, Frank still owes him money from betting on last year’s game.”

“Speak of the devil,” said Brian. “Look, he’s headed straight for the bathroom. He must already have ten beers in him. Did you ever see him use the bathroom at Pointy Foods? He pisses for five minutes.”



In the bathroom, Frank set up shop next to a Packers fan who was drunker than he was—if that were indeed possible. Wearing a

cheese hat, the man started to pass out but his headwear bounced off the tiled wall, waking him up enough to spin to his left.

“You’re pissing all over my pants, you stupid jerk,” yelled Frank, trying to duck the yellow stream.

“What did you call me?” the man slurred.

“You heard me!” Frank reared back and swung, but missed badly.



“Shhh, here he comes,” said Brian, quieting the Frank talk at the table. “Holy crap, what happened to you, Frank?”

Frank patted his bloody nose with his handkerchief and shoved his way into the booth. “When a guy pees on your leg you have little recourse but to fight,” he said.

“Why don’t I give you some room?” said Darci, squeezing herself into the other side of the booth by Alice.

“Are your pants wet?” Kurt recoiled as Frank’s leg touched his.

“Get me a drink,” demanded Frank.

“Hey, Frank, your usual?” asked Bernie.

“Bring me two and charge it to Pointy Foods’ account.”

“Bernie’s giving us free drinks, Frank,” said Chuck.

“That’s even better. Make it three whiskeys.”

Bernie passed the drinks down to Frank, but Kurt intercepted them.

“Don’t you think you’ve had enough tonight? Aren’t you tired of the same old routine? Look at yourself. You’re a mess. Your shirt’s untucked, your hair is a disaster, and you smell of urine. Did you piss in your pants, Frank?”

“No!” Frank ran his fingers through his hair. “I was assaulted by some Philistine wearing a cheese wedge on his head.”

Frank gestured to a table full of cheeseheads who were laughing and pointing at him. Frank reached in front of Alice and took her beer.

“I’m sure Brian filled you in on the basketball game. I’m tired of losing to those bastards in Detroit, and I’m pulling everything

out of our bag this year. Now, as a courtesy to you, I'll agree to let you play if you promise not to undermine my coaching."

"Whatever, Frank, but I want you to get Chuck on as referee. Chuck said he'll make sure all the calls go our way."

"I like that." Frank smiled. "You're always cheating."

"Well, cheating costs, so we'll owe him free cups for a month," said Kurt. "Who else from our company is on the team this year?"

"You, Brian, Dwayne, Leon, and Chico are the starters."

"Who the hell is Chico?"

"Well, we always refer to him as Chupacabra," said Frank. "You know, the freak who works in the warehouse?"

"Now that's just mean," said Darci. "You can't do that to someone."

"Sweetie, in this case it's warranted," said Kurt. "That guy is so ugly he's frightening. He scares the little kiddies. I didn't know he played, though."

"Chico was a former All-American at San Diego State," laughed Frank. "That was before the accident."

"What accident?" said Alice. "And what's a chupacabra?"

"*Chupacabra* is Spanish for *goat sucker*," said Brian. "In Mexico, the legend of the chupacabra is about a very ugly creature that sucks the blood out of goats' bodies. The chupacabra is the ugliest animal ever witnessed by the human eye."

"That's awful that you call him that," said Darci. "This is a person we're talking about. And what accident?"

"Well, he was fond of hookers during his playing days," said Frank. "Until one ran him over with her car."

"Oh my God. You guys have to be nicer to him."

"So, anyway," said Brian, "this guy works the night shift by himself at the Pointy Foods warehouse. Everybody calls him Chupacabra. In fact, he refers to himself as Chupacabra."

"Many times when I work late at night I watch him play basketball by himself in the warehouse," Said Frank.

"You mean you tell the cab driver to take you to Pointy Foods because you're really too drunk to remember your own address?" asked Kurt.

“Yes,” Frank answered in a rare moment of candor.

“I don’t care how good you say he is,” said Brian. “I can’t play with him.”

“He can’t be worse than your last blinded date,” said Victor, sending the table into uncontrollable laughter.

“Hey, she wasn’t my choice, okay? My freakin’ cousin had never seen her without his beer goggles on.”

“That’s it,” said Frank. “Enough joking. Do you want to play on this team, Kurt?”

“Yes, Frank, I want to play.”

“Then I want you and Brian to meet me back at the warehouse after the game. Chuck, will you come?”

“I don’t know, Frank. What’s in it for me?”

“The usual: free sixteen-ounce cups, as agreed with Kurt.”

“Okay, we will meet you later tonight,” said Kurt. “Now get out of here.”

“One more thing,” said Frank. “You will refer to me as the general.”

“Whatever. Now get lost and let us enjoy the rest of Monday Night Football.”

Frank guzzled the rest of Alice’s beer, grabbed Victor’s whiskey, and headed to the bar.

Darci looked at Kurt and signaled that she wanted to talk right away. He bowed his head and they made their way through the bar to a back room where Bernie said they could talk.

“What’s going on, Kurt?” Darci asked.

“I don’t know. I just got to thinking about my whole situation. Am I really working in the same place and still engaged?”

“Sweetie, we can get married whenever you want, but we both know we’re meant for something else. I’m regional head buyer now and I’m hardly ever home. The time we do spend together is great, and I wouldn’t have it any other way. Are you feeling pressured by someone?”

“The guys rag on me, and they have a point. We should just call off the engagement or get married.”

“Is this because of work and your feeling stilted there?”

“It’s that,” said Kurt, “but it’s also Alice. Her moving back just felt as if we were stuck in yesterday, in the past. I want to move on with my life.”

“Babe, whatever you want to do, I’m onboard. You just have to say the word and we can talk about it. Why don’t we just relax tonight, okay?”

“Okay.”

Back at the booth, events were set in motion—events that threatened to ruin the night.

CHAPTER 13

The Flying Hawaiians Meet Chuck

The booth window opened and King Kamehameha stuck his head out.

“Hello, everybody. Please stick around for my postgame show. Oh, hey, Alice.”

“Hi, King. How are you?”

“Wonderful. Will I see you after the show?”

“Yeah, I’ll come over to the bar.”

Kamehameha moved on to the next table.

“What a show off,” said Chuck.

“I don’t think so,” said Alice. “I can’t wait to see his show tonight.”

“Oh, I’m sure it will be great,” said Chuck. “Excuse me.”

Chuck headed to the bar and found Frank. “Frank, I think we can help each other tonight.”

“What are you talking about, Chuck?”

“We’re going to get the Green Bay Packers fan back *and* ruin King Kamehameha’s luau at the same time.”

“Why do you want to ruin Bernie’s luau? You guys are friends.”

“It has nothing to do with Bernie. That douche bag is playing Alice and I’m not having it.”

“What’s your plan?” asked Frank. “I’m always up for spreading some misery and making some bad decisions.”

“Follow me.”

Frank guzzled his drink and, as they got up to leave the bar area, turned back and grabbed Chuck’s glass, guzzling that too.

Chuck walked up to the table of Packers fans and looked directly at the guy who'd urinated on Frank.

"This is Bears territory, girls."

The Packers fan, who was easily six inches taller and thirty pounds heavier than Chuck, rose from his seat. "I know it is. We can tell by the stench in the air."

Without saying a word, Chuck grabbed the cheese hat off the guy's head and ran for the front door. The fan and his three friends pursued, but Chuck had disappeared.

"Where did he go?" yelled the fan. "If I see him I'm going to kick his ass."

Frank, who had been read into the plan, made his way through the restaurant, opened a side exit, and let Chuck in. They made their way to the dressing room for the luau dancers and began destroying the costumes.

"What are you doing to our stuff?"

Chuck stopped cold and turned toward the door. It was Kalia, the king's sister.

"Ahhh!" With a wild yell, Chuck grabbed the girl and shoved her into the walk-in closet, then wedged a chair against the door.

"That's not good," said Frank. "I think we just became kidnapers."

"Can it, Frank." Chuck put the cheesehead onto the pile of ruined outfits and made for the door.

"You know your role?" he asked Frank.

"Get the king."

"Good."

Chuck walked through the bar and back to the Packers fans he'd taunted earlier. "I'm back, bitches."

The chase was on, and soon Chuck was flying through the hallways in the back of the restaurant, headed for the dressing room. Meanwhile, Frank was at the bar trying to remember his lines.

"Bartender, a beer, please. Oh yeah, also, some jerks tore up your costumes."

"What?"

“You heard me, big boy. Get back to your dressing room, man.”

Just as Chuck hit the floor and fell under the rain of work boots, King Kamehameha rushed into the dressing room with three other flame dancers, all as big as he was.

“King, these men ruined your show,” said Chuck, rising from the floor. “And I can’t find your sister.”

“Mmmmmmm!” A muffled noise came from the closet. Chuck slipped by the Packers fans as one of the dancers rushed to open the door. Kalia came pouring out and soon the king and his men were pummeling the confused Packers fans.



Leaning through the window to replenish his friends’ drinks, Bernie was notified of the disturbance and ran back to the dressing room to break up the fight.

“What the hell’s going on here?” he asked.

“These men ruined our show,” said the king.

“No, it wasn’t them,” yelled Kalia. “I’ve been trying to tell you that the whole time, you Neanderthal.”

“What?” said the king. “Then who are these guys?”

“I don’t know! It was some drunk dude with a bloody nose and his friend!”

“Oh my God.” Bernie ran toward the bar and scanned the room.

“What’s going on?” asked Kurt, who was returning to the booth with Darci.

“Chuck and Frank ruined my freakin’ halftime show.”

“You mean the same Frank who’s at the bar trying to order another drink?” asked Brian.

“King,” said Bernie, “please escort our guest out of the restaurant.”

As Frank gulped his whiskey he felt two massive hands on his shoulders. He turned to see the king and his sister.

“Hi,” said the king.

Before the king could react, Frank hit the floor and began slithering toward the kitchen. He then ran through the cooks, throwing bowls at the king as he went.



“What the hell is going on back there?” asked Darci.

“Your island is nothing!” Frank yelled in the distance.

Victor leaned over and pushed the button to open the window just as Frank leaped for it from inside the kitchen. Frank started to make it through the window. Everything on the table flew everywhere. The girls jumped out of the booth and watched the chaos from the aisle.

“Kurt, grab my arms. He’s got me!” yelled Frank.

Kurt sat in silence. “I cannot believe this is who I work for.”

After kicking free, Frank rose from the floor. “Meet me later!” he yelled as he made for the door.



Chuck was almost back to his deli. With the cheese hat in one hand and his cell phone in the other, he called a cab for Frank, per their plan.

“Cancel that cab!” yelled Frank, who was running full speed toward Chuck. “Head for your car!”

Chuck turned to see King Kamehameha, his dancers, and the now-beaten Packers fans all sprinting down the sidewalk after Frank.

“I’m going to kill you!” yelled the king, his grass skirt flowing behind him as he powered through the air.

“Oh dear God.” Chuck ran for it and dove into his car. He peeled out of the parking lot with Frank hanging out the window.

Back at the bar, Bernie announced that the halftime show would be canceled, but few fans cared. The Bears were killing the Packers.

CHAPTER 14

Natural Selection

Kurt sat in his chair at the Pointy Foods sales office with his chin in his hand and his elbows on his knees, watching Bernie and Frank pace back and forth in Frank's office. His suit crumpled and his hair disheveled, Frank was still feeling the effects of the binge at Bernie's restaurant just hours before. But he wasn't about to give in without a fight.

"Listen, I know your show's on hold without the costumes, so I'll give the king and his sister jobs, and I'll pay you for any damage done. But I'm not apologizing for anything. This was Chuck's fault. He took advantage of me while I was drinking."

Bernie stopped pacing and sat down at Frank's desk. He put his face in his hands and let out a long, exasperated breath. "Frank, you're always drinking." He pulled open the top drawer to his right and, without looking, found and pulled out a half empty whiskey bottle and placed it on the desk.

"Listen, Bernie, you can throw stones when you become perfect, okay?"

Bernie leaned back in the office chair, a comfortable leather affair that Bernie decided was well above Frank's station in life. He looked down at his belly stretching the seams of his Bears jersey. "Frank, the next time you do something like that in my restaurant I'm going to kick you in the balls while wearing my steel-toed boots. Now please ask the king and his sister to come into the office."

Frank shuffled out to the sales floor, where King Kamehameha sat with Kalia, Victor, Kurt, and Brian.

“You two,” he said, pointing in their general direction. “I need you in my office.”

From inside the office Bernie yelled, “Nicer, Frank, or I up my damages and you get the kick!”

“Fine,” said Frank, straightening his tie. “May I please see you both in my office?”

The king lifted his massive frame out of his chair and guided his sister into the office, where they took seats opposite Bernie. Without a place to sit, Frank stood in the corner.

“Kalia, can you do anything besides shake your cakes in a hula skirt?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said, her eyes piercing and angry. “I am very good with computers and I can answer phones.”

“Okay. I guess we can fire that old windbag who’s been taking up space in the lobby. In fact, I’m not sure she’s even still alive. King, you can work in the warehouse.”

“You mean the sales office,” said the king. “I’m an artiste. I don’t do manual labor.”

Frank looked the king up and down. “I... Uh, you look like you’ve never done anything but manual labor. Geez, you’re the size of our forklifts.”

“No boxes,” said the king.

“Fine, you can send faxes or something.”

“Hey, guys.” It was Kurt. “Listen, I got a text from Chuck. He’s on his way to the office. He thinks he’s finally shaken those cheeseheads.”

“Crap, they were still chasing him?” asked Bernie. “Frank, I thought you two were in the car together.”

“We were, but I bailed on a slow turn, figuring my chances were better if I was on my own because they were gaining. I hid in a doorway and watched them fly past.”

“Great, Frank. As long as you saved your ass. Not that either of you deserved to dodge the bullet,” said Bernie.

“Get over it. It’s every man for himself. You’d have done the same.”

Just then Chuck pulled into the parking lot. Brian ran into the office. “Hey, Bernie, King, Kalia, you guys all hide in the closet. We’re gonna get Chuck back a little for you.”

Not thirty seconds after the jury crammed themselves into the supply closet, Chuck came barreling through the front door of the office.

“Frankie, you made it,” he said. “Did you tell the guys how we framed those idiots from Green Bay?”

“They know, Chuck.”

“Yeah, that was pretty smooth,” said Brian. “How’d you get away from those guys anyway?”

“Those bastards chased me through the whole city,” laughed Chuck. “I was LOL-ing the whole time.”

“Please quit saying ‘LOL,’ Chuck,” said Kurt. “You sound so stupid.”

“No, you sound stupid, Kurtis,” spat Chuck. “Besides, I can’t believe I got away with that! The Chuckster’s still got it! Did you keep everyone updated from my texts?”

“Oh yeah,” said Kurt. “Riveting.”

“And the part about the old couple?”

“What old couple?” asked Brian.

“Chuck here crawled through an open window in one of the row houses,” said Kurt. “Tell them what you saw there, Chuckster.”

“It was crazy. I stumbled into this room backward and all of a sudden some old guy in his boxers is yelling at me. Apparently I’d stumbled into his bedroom while he was trying to get it on with his lady friend. It was hilarious. I threw my cheesehead at him, yelled, ‘Go Packers,’ and took off.”

“That’s brilliant,” said Brian. “Real great.” He started laughing and soon Kurt joined in. Chuck had no idea King Kamehameha was standing directly behind him as he was fist pumping and dancing.

“Give us a spin, Chuckie,” said Kurt.

Chuck spun around and stopped in his tracks. King Kamehameha stood with his arms folded. Kurt, Brian, and Victor were on the floor laughing.

Chuck started stumbling backwards over the desks and chairs as Kalia and Bernie walked out of the closet.

“Back off, hula man, I’m an FBI agent,” yelled Chuck. He grabbed a chair and held it high above his head. The king moved toward him slowly.

“Don’t try anything, King, or else!”

“You can put the chair down,” said Frank. “We have an arrangement with them. We’re going to pay them back.”

“How much?”

“Don’t worry about it,” said Bernie. “You can afford it.”

“I’m calling my lawyer now,” said Chuck, reaching for a phone. Just as he put his hand on the receiver, a massive, tanned meat paw grabbed his wrist.

“I wouldn’t do that,” said the king.

“Okay,” said Chuck, rubbing his wrist after prying it free. “I will help pay for the damages, but only if King Kamehameha promises to stay away from Alice.”

“King Kamehameha also wants to play in the basketball game, and I want to referee with Chuck,” added Bernie.

“Uh, wait a minute,” said Kurt. “Do you know how to play basketball, King Kamehameha?”

“I love basketball.”

“Yes, that’s nice,” said Kurt. “But do you know how to play? We *must* win this game.”

“Don’t worry. I move well for a big man.”

Frank grabbed a clipboard and started taking notes. “Okay, let’s review this before I conduct our first informal practice.”

“It’s midnight,” said Brian. “It’s too late to practice.”

“I just want you guys to shoot some free throws before you leave,” said Frank.

“I’m with Frank—I mean the general—on this,” said Kurt.

Brian, Victor, and Bernie all turned to look at Kurt.

“Really?” asked Brian.

“Whatever it takes,” said Kurt.

“Now listen up, sports fans, here’s what I got so far. Kurt, Brian, Dwayne, Leon, King Kamehameha, Chupacabra, and Lloyd are going to be on the team.”

“What?” Kurt stood up from his chair. “Lloyd? You have to be kidding. Lloyd has got to be in his eighties by now.”

“This came directly from the company CEO. You know how they are about PR. They want to make Lloyd the honorary player of our team for all the years he’s worked for the company. Good press, human interest, I guess. Don’t worry, he’ll be on the bench, visible but inert...as usual.”

“I hope so. I don’t think they let walkers onto the court.”

“Bernie and Chuck will be our referees and will, of course, subtly call the game in our favor.”

Chuck, despite his skeletal looks, deemed himself a fitness buff. He looked over at Bernie in his stretch Bears jersey. “Are you going to be able to run up and down the court over the course of an hour?”

“Come on. I played college sports.”

“Coed softball doesn’t count, fat boy.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Bernie persisted.

“I’m worried about it,” said Kurt. “I can’t have my crooked referees collapsing and getting replaced by someone legit.”

Chuck turned to Bernie. “We can work out at my house.”

“No thanks. I’ll work out with Kurt and the team.”

“They’ll just make fun of you,” said Chuck.

“No, we only make fun of you,” said Kurt. “You were curling five pounds to European techno music and you couldn’t stop posing.”

“Okay, Kurt, enough with the slanderous comments. And you didn’t have to throw that water bottle at me.”

“I wanna see what *Arnold* has in store for me,” said Bernie, looking toward Chuck. “I think I’ll train with him. If nothing else it’ll be worth the entertainment value.”

“For the rest of you yahoos, we’ll be training nightly on the basketball court in the Pointy Foods warehouse,” announced Frank. “Chupacabra works at night after we close. We’ll be able to play with him there.”

“What about me?” asked Victor. “I cannot play the basketball.”

“Well, you’re Italian. Can’t all of you sing?” asked Frank.

“Oh say can you see—”

“Told ya. Okay. You can sing the national anthem.”

“Excuse me.” Kalia stepped forward from behind her massive brother. “This is a charity basketball game. Do you have a charity yet?”

“Yes,” said Kurt. “I believe Frank has found a group that can fix his liver.”

“Kurt, I hope you’re a better ball player than you are a comedian. Kalia, I haven’t chosen the charity yet.”

“I would like you to play for cancer awareness,” said Kalia.

Everyone agreed it was a great cause, and Frank put Kalia in charge of organizing it.

“I’m leaving now,” said Victor, yawning. “Kalia, would you like a ride home?”

“That would be great,” said Kalia. “Can you find a ride home?” she asked the king. He nodded in assent and pointedly eyed Victor.

Brian and Kurt looked at each other and shook their heads.

After Victor left with Kalia, the guys made their way to the warehouse a few blocks over. As they walked into the back they could hear a basketball bouncing on the concrete floor. There, shooting jumpers with the most fluid motion Kurt had ever seen, was Chupacabra.

“Geez, he’s like the Mexican Ray Allen,” said Kurt.

“Where the heck’s this guy been all these years?” asked Brian.

“Who knew such a monster could be this good at something?”

From a distance, Chico’s deformities weren’t visible, but as the group approached him they were all too evident.

Chuck groaned, “My God, look at that.”

Chico was playing in just sweatpants and a T-shirt. His face was contorted in a semi-permanent howling expression and his skin, thinly stretched over his bones, was a strange grayish color. He was bald except for a few abrasive-looking hairs sticking oddly out.

“Oh, hey, guys,” he said, turning toward them. “Let me get covered up.”

“It’s okay,” said Frank. “Your hideousness is going to be out there for all to see.”

“Gee, thanks,” he said.

“Wow, you look like a vampire,” said Chuck.

“Vampires don’t have webbed fingers,” said Chico.

Chuck looked down, “Oh my God, you weren’t joking.”

“This dude can seriously palm the ball,” said Frank.

“OMG,” said Chuck. “You are one ugly, magnificent beast.”

“Shut up, Chuck, and stop saying OMG,” said Kurt. “C’mon, we gotta assess you, King, and I’ve got some rust to shake off.”

Bernie and Chuck begged off, and Bernie gave Chuck a ride home. The others stayed behind to practice, and it was soon obvious not only did Kurt indeed have rust to shake off but he also had a lack of talent to shake off.

The king, fluid and graceful in his movement across the court, stopped at one point and looked at Kurt, who was lurching toward the basket. “Are you sure you’ve played before?”

“Hey, it ain’t pretty, but it works,” said Kurt.

“No, he’s right,” said Brian. “You look awful. When was the last time you played?”

“I dunno, six years ago? It’ll be fine. We’ve got a couple weeks and I’ll be good to go.”

For the next week, Kurt, Brian, Chico, Leon, and the king spent nights scrimmaging in the warehouse. Kurt was feeling his flow again, though Brian insisted Kurt’s only flow was the use of his elbows.



While Kurt and the others were attempting to transform themselves into a team, Bernie was lost in the bizarre world of Chuck's late mother, Rose. Tucked into the lower level of Rose's house, where Chuck still lived, was a gym replete with mirrored walls and a neon sign that announced it was "Rose's Gym."

Two Saturdays before the game, Bernie strapped himself into a contraption straight out of the 1920s. A large, white, domed apparatus, it had a wide, leather strap looping out of the front. Bernie placed it around his waist and hit the power button on the top of the machine. The strap started vibrating rapidly back and forth, shaking his midsection.

His voice vibrating as though he were speaking through a fan, he said, "I like this machine because it does all the work."

Meanwhile, Chuck was doing leg extensions on a machine adjacent to the jukebox.

"Hey," said Bernie, "is your Uncle Walter still in prison?"

"Yes."

"He killed your parents, right?"

"My uncle Walter did not kill my parents! He's in prison because of the Ponzi scheme he ran. I hate it when Kurt says Uncle Walter killed my parents."

"Sorry, that's just his sense of humor. But they did die suspiciously on your uncle Walter's boat."

"Yeah, they did, but Uncle Walter was with us at the Bulls game when they were boating."

"Your uncle Walter always did get us the best seats at the sporting events."

Chuck finished his set and walked to the jukebox. Bernie rolled his eyes at the forlorn expression on Chuck's face. It meant he was thinking of his beloved mother.

"This was my mother's favorite song," said Chuck as the strains of an old tune filled the room. "It's 'Rose's Turn' by Ethel Merman."

Chuck's eyes started welling with tears as he sang, "Everything's coming up roses," twirling perfectly.

“Dear God,” muttered Bernie. “Uh, Chuck, is there anything else we can listen to?”

Chuck wiped his eyes and bowed slowly to the mirror. “Of course,” he said softly. He plugged in his MP3 player to the newer sound system and started pumping his fist to the loud techno music blasting from the wall speakers.

“Wow, that’s great, Chuck.”

Chuck skipped to the aerobics area, a square floor covered in rubber mats, and started dancing like Jennifer Beals in *Flashdance*.

“Oh Chuck, that’s enough,” Bernie said, his voice still broken up by the vibrations running through his body. But Chuck continued dancing, and the dancing got more intense as the music played on.

“Actually, you’re really good,” yelled Bernie.

Before long Run-DMC was blasting over the speaker and Chuck was breakdancing like a pro.

Jesus. This is the most-bizarre thing I’ve ever seen, thought Bernie. A pasty-white beanpole of a man in his late thirties dancing like an urban pro. I swear if this were an episode of The Twilight Zone, I wouldn’t believe it.



Across town in the warehouse, Kurt and the guys were lifting weights to Metallica’s “Enter Sandman” when Frank walked in with four enormous men.

“Gentlemen, meet the Fab Four.”

“Frank, what the hell are you doing?” said Kurt.

“Gentlemen, my source at the Detroit sales office let me know Marcus is worried about our team this year. So worried he hired a bunch of great basketball players to work for him. So I’ve hired my own new employees. Meet Lionel, Reggie, Thomas, and Rasheed, our new telemarketers.”

“Frank, we don’t have a telemarketing department,” said Kurt. “Besides, we can beat these guys without ringers.”

“Ya know, Kurt, besides being stupid, you’re also uninformed. Marcus has hired three former All-Americans, so I’m not taking any chances. Besides, the stakes for winning have increased significantly. The CEO of our company is offering ten tickets for the nineteen eighty-five Bears’ twenty-fifth reunion.”

“I’m sorry, say that again,” said Brian, jumping off the treadmill.

“That’s right, boys, Iron Mike Ditka, Buddy Ryan, Refrigerator Perry, Samaria Mike, and the rest of the team are having a reunion, and we get to go if we win.”

“I still say we could win without them,” said Kurt. “Look, let me, Brian, the king, Chico, and Leon do battle with these guys and see what happens.”

“What about me?” said Lloyd, who was curling two-and-a-half-pound weights and struggling.

“We’ll take him,” said Lionel, a former strong forward for Marquette University and the tallest of the Fab Four.

What followed was a demonstration of the contrast between true athletes and the beleaguered, sloth-like men who follow them on television. In just seven minutes Kurt had committed six fouls and his team was thoroughly demolished, losing 21-6.

“Okay, so my guys beat you with a corpse on their team,” said Frank. “So the Fab Four and Chupacabra will be the starters. Kurt, you, Brian, Dwayne, Leon, and the king will be coming off the bench. Lloyd, if we take a huge lead I’ll let you come in for one quick play. Other than that, stay the hell off the court. Go home and get some sleep, ladies. Somebody help Lloyd up.”

“Frank, c’mon, you gotta give us a chance out there,” said Brian. “If we start losing you can put your guys in.”

“No go,” said Frank. “The general has spoken.”

With that, Frank retired to the sales office to gather the cash bonuses promised to the players because of their exemplary work in the telemarketing division. Kurt and Brian hopped in Kurt’s Ford Expedition and headed home. At a traffic light just outside of the warehouse parking lot, the Fab Four pulled up next to them

in a tricked-out Chevy Tahoe. Their speakers were thumping out Ice Cube.

“Time to get the Led Zeppelin out,” said Brian, jacking up the stereo in Kurt’s car so “Kashmir” was blasting through the street.

Lionel, who was driving the Tahoe, reached over and turned down his radio, then yelled, “Kurt, you are one crazy dude.”

Kurt kept his music blaring and smiled. The light turned green and he floored it, peeling away.

CHAPTER 15

Lunch and a Show

Two weeks later, Kurt sat in Darci's bedroom, at the desk in the corner, unable to sleep.

"Are you coming to bed soon?" Darci asked.

"Oh, sorry, sweetie. I didn't know you were still awake. I just want to draw up a couple of plays for the game tomorrow."

"You guys will be fine," said Darci, turning on her bedside lamp. "You've been practicing with the new guys every day for two weeks."

"Well, they've been practicing and we've been watching," huffed Kurt. "We actually have a really good team. Apparently Marcus is betting Frank a lot of money on the game, and I'm convinced Detroit has something up their sleeves."

"I can't believe you and Frank are getting along."

"I have to be nice to Frank or else he won't let me play. As soon as the game is over I'm going to tell the general he can stick his stupid clipboard up his ass."

"Well then, you're going to need your sleep," said Darci. "Forcing a clipboard up someone's ass is tiring, so come to bed."

Kurt laughed and started to undress for bed. Just then, a thumping started from next door in Alice's apartment, the bass beat of a techno song. Kurt put his pants back on. "What the hell is that?"

"It's just Alice," said Darci. "She has somebody with her."

"I've heard that music before," said Kurt. "No, no, no freakin' way. I can't believe it. He better not be over there."

Kurt ran to Darci's desk and started digging through drawers.

“What are you doing?”

“Where are Alice’s house keys?”

Darci leaped up from the bed. “Don’t you dare go barging into Alice’s condo.”

Kurt found the keys and headed for the door.

“Kurt, stop!”

It was too late. He was out the door and into Alice’s apartment before Darci could get dressed.

“Oh my God.” Kurt stood in the doorway to Alice’s bedroom. Chuck was dancing in his underwear as Alice watched and cheered—until she saw Kurt. She screamed bloody murder, and Chuck swiveled on his heels.

“Oh geez,” he said. “I thought you were some kind of intruder. How ya doin’, neighbor?”

“Chuck, I knew you were a scumbag, but this is unbelievable. You’re sleeping with the enemy, Chuck.”

“Hey, now,” said Chuck, who looked at Alice and saw she was crying. “Look what you’ve done.”

As soon as Chuck turned back to look at Kurt, Alice smiled and winked at Kurt and resumed her tearful lament.

“This is unbelievable,” Kurt said.

Before Kurt could cause any more damage, Darci ran into the room and to Alice’s side. “I am so sorry, Alice. I don’t know what’s gotten into Kurt.”

“Well, I know what just got into Alice,” said Kurt. “Chuck did.”

“Kurt, you need to grow up,” said Darci.

“It’s okay, Darci,” said Alice. “I know Kurt has this weird, immature hold over his friends. I just wish he would grow up.”

“Kurt, you should be happy for us,” added Chuck. “We can’t wait to double date with you two.”

“Chuck, I’ll be damned if I double date with Medusa over here. Just make sure you’re ready to referee tomorrow’s game. I’m going back to my house to get some sleep.”

Kurt walked to Darci, who was sitting on the bed, and kissed her on her forehead.

“I’ll see you at the game tomorrow,” he said.

“Not if you don’t apologize to Alice first.”

Kurt took a deep breath and looked over at Alice. “I apologize.”

Alice stayed in character, sniffing back her crocodile tears.

“I accept your apology, Kurt. I guess you’ll be seeing a lot of me now.”

Kurt pulled in a long breath and looked up at the ceiling as though asking God for help in keeping his restraint. “Lovely.”

“Kurtis, LOL. This is going to make a great story,” said Chuck.

“Chuck, stop saying LOL.”



Kurt woke with a start and looked at his bedside table. “Five thirty. I’ve gotta get ready.”

Kurt headed for the front door and out into the cool morning air of Chicago’s late summer. He ran two miles, returned to his house, and did fifty crunches. He showered, then sat down to diagram some new plays for his team, hoping for a short nap once he was finished. “Just a few more and we’ll be ready.”

Kurt didn’t get his nap; he was too pumped up even to sit still. Convinced that even without Frank’s ringers he and his friends could beat the Detroit office, he still wasn’t taking any chances. He had a plan, and he had Victor on his side to pull it off.

Ten o’clock rolled around and Kurt pulled up to Victor’s restaurant, where the CEO of Pointy Foods had arranged a pregame breakfast. The table was arranged so the players from each team were sitting directly across from each other, with the CEO of the company at the head of the table. Kurt walked around the back of the office and snuck into the kitchen, where Brian and Victor were waiting.

“Did you get the stuff into their food?” asked Kurt.

“Kurt, my good man, I make the food so delicious, but not good for the bowels, yes?”

“This is going to be so awesome,” said Brian. “But Victor, you must make sure the tainted plates go in front of *only* Marcus and his four starters.”

“Yes, I make the five plates for the big men and they shit the brains.”

“Hey, guys.”

“Geez, Dwayne, what are you, a ninja? Why are you always creeping around us?”

“What do you have up your sleeve? I know you, Kurt, and somehow you’re going to cheat.”

“What are you talking about, short-shorts? I play clean and I play to win.”

“First of all, this isn’t *Hoosiers*. I don’t need the pep talk. Secondly, you’ll be wearing those shorts today because Kalia asked me to order them for the entire team.”

“Awesome, Dwayne, now we can all look as dumb as you. Now get lost and leave us alone.”

“Uh, no can do. I heard everything you said and I want in or else.”

“Or else what?”

“Or else I will tell the CEO of our company what you’re planning. Listen, I just want to be part of the plot. Let me serve the plates to Marcus and his friends. Let me finally be part of one of your little plots.”

“Geez, you’re a swell guy, Dwayne. Listen, you better not screw this up.”

“Thanks, guys. Don’t worry.”

“Okay, Dwayne, this is the plan,” said Kurt. “We’re going to sit down, and Victor will hand you the plates, telling you who gets each plate.”

“Awesome. I got it. You guys go sit down and I’ll take care of the rest. I won’t let you down.”

Kurt paused and looked at Dwayne, who was simply beaming. He still didn’t trust the man, but he didn’t have a choice in letting him into the plot, either.

Kurt and Brian left the kitchen and joined the teams at the table. The CEO stood up.

“Please, everyone, have a seat. Come on, Dwayne, join your team and take a seat.”

“Sorry, sir, Victor is a little shorthanded. I’m helping him get these plates out and then I’m going to help Kalia pass out Chicago’s uniforms.”

“Understood. Everybody start eating because I have some news to share.”

After Dwayne sat down, Kurt leaned over to Brian. “Look at those idiots chow down that food.”

“Those dudes are going to have a bad day.”

The CEO continued, “The Detroit and Chicago regions are two of the most profitable and competitive groups in our company. Sometimes you push the envelope too far, but overall you guys are great at what you do. Because we’ve been so successful I thought it would only be fair to give back.”

“Today we’re playing for charity. I’m hoping for the best turnout ever, and it already looks as if the stands are going to be packed.”

Frank stood from his seat on the other side of the room and asked Kalia to come in.

“Kalia, tell the CEO what we’re playing for.”

“Hello, everybody,” she said. “Chicago will be raising money for cancer awareness. I know Detroit is playing for another charity but we would appreciate it if their players would wear these pink armbands as a sign of solidarity.”

Marcus, who sat across from Kurt, stood and accepted the armbands from Kalia. “We would be honored.”

“Thanks, Marcus,” said the CEO. “I know there’s been a lot of tension between your two divisions, but this charity is bigger than petty squabbles.”

Kalia continued, “Now for our team, our players will be wearing these custom shorts Dwayne helped me design.”

Kalia opened a box on the floor and pulled out shorts that would have made Richard Simmons proud—hot pink and short enough to show off a man’s bait and tackle. She then pulled out green shirts that said “Pink Leprechauns.”

“Kurt said he wanted to be called the Leprechauns because he loves Notre Dame so much,” said Kalia. “So Dwayne and I

decided to bring more awareness to our charity by having our players wear pink shorts.”

The Detroit players held their laughter as long as they could, but before long they were dying of laughter. The Chicago players were eloquent in their silence.

“That’s great. You guys are playing for a great cause,” the CEO announced.

“Gee, thanks Dwayne,” said Kurt, smiling to himself as he thought of the revenge being wrought on those smug sons of bitches. “Smile now, Marcus, smile.”

The CEO interrupted Kurt’s murderous fantasy. “I have one other announcement to make. We’re proud to promote Dwayne to sales manager in Detroit. Dwayne will now be working side by side with Marcus.”

Kurt’s jaw all but hit the floor as he looked at Marcus, who was glowing with pride. Marcus looked from the CEO to Kurt and winked. *You son of a bitch*, thought Kurt.

“Sir,” said Kurt, turning to the CEO, “how long has Dwayne known this?”

“Since yesterday, when I had a private meeting with him. Dwayne let me know how badly he wanted to work with Marcus.”

Kurt looked over at Frank’s players, their plates scraped clean of what had to be tainted food. “Crap.”

Brian raised his hand. “Sir, I believe Dwayne needs to play for Detroit.”

“You know, sir,” said Dwayne, “I think that would be a good idea.”

“Now guys, I want you to try to keep this clean. The goal here is to raise money for charity. We have a lot of important customers from both cities who will be sitting in the stands with their families. Also, I want to thank Victor for providing us with such a delicious meal. You’re a great customer. I look forward to hearing you sing the national anthem, and I understand two of our other great customers will also be participating in today’s event. Chuck Jennings will be officiating and Bernie Winslow will be our announcer and scorekeeper.”

Kurt turned to Brian. "I thought Bernie was going to be the other referee."

"No, Bernie will be scorekeeper." A very out-of-shape Bernie knew he had insufficient time to get into shape. Running back and forth, keeping up with the players, and pushing his body beyond its present limits was a prime formula for an aneurysm.

"Okay, but Chuck better get his part done."

"No worries, Kurt. Look at it this way: we have a crooked referee partnered with a crooked scorekeeper. How bad can it get?"

Everyone finished eating and soon the players were filing out the front door. Kurt couldn't let Dwayne's betrayal go unmentioned. He chased him down and grabbed him by the arm.

"What's going on?" Kurt asked.

"I don't know, friend. Oh, that's right, we've never been friends. This is what's going on. I'm part of Detroit's group and we're going to bury you."

"You're going to pay for this."

"No, Kurt, your Fab Four are going to pay for this."

"Wait a minute, who got the fifth plate?"

"Hmmm, should I tell you?"

"Dwayne."

"Fine. It's your good friend Frank. I'm taking revenge against that jerk—the revenge you never had the balls to take."

"Frank may be a jerk, but he's not a turncoat."

Kurt spun away from Dwayne and marched over to Victor. "We have a problem big time! Dwayne gave our team the bad food."

"Oh no. This is bad."

"Can we give these guys something to stop the diarrhea?"

"No, no," said Victor. "This is the level five stuff. These guys are going to..." Victor used both hands to simulate an explosion from his backside.

"Oh crap," said Kurt.

"Yes!" said Victor. "Exactly. Crap. Big ones."

Kurt exhaled an exhausted sigh and looked up at the ceiling.

“You should perhaps speak-a to your guys,” said Victor.

Kurt looked over at the table, but the Fab Four were already gone. “Brian, where did they go?”

“Last I knew Frank was driving the Fab Four straight to the stadium. Should we warn them?”

“No, it doesn’t matter. It’s too late to stop the bleeding or, in this case, the crapping. Where did Chupacabra go anyway? I didn’t see him here.”

“He went to the airport to pick up his parents. He flew them in from Mexico to watch the game.”

“Awesome. We’re screwed. At least he won’t be crapping.”

“Come on, stop worrying. We’re going to take over and just kick their asses ourselves.”

One hour later Kurt and Brian were driving toward the stadium. Brian was on his cell phone, calling Frank because he and Kurt had decided perhaps some warning was in order.

“Hey, Frank—I mean General. How’s it going?”



“What the hell happened to us?” cried Frank. “What the hell did Victor do to us? I’m never eating there again.”

Frank was in a stadium men’s room stall painfully and involuntarily expunging his body of the poison. Brian could hear the groans coming from the adjacent stalls and at that moment knew the Fab Four were no longer fabulous.

Had an innocent bystander wandered into the bathroom he would have seen five pairs of squirming feet protruding from the five bathroom stalls, with Frank’s in the last one. His screams echoed off the walls in the lavatory.



Brian pulled the phone from his ear and put it on speaker. “Frank, we were double-crossed. Dwayne switched the plates.”

“Great work, guys. Everything is screwed up.”

“No, we still have Chupacabra.”

“But what if he fouls out?”

“The only people who are going to foul out are the Detroit players. Remember, Chuck is the referee.”

“Great. We’re pegging our hopes on lover boy.”

“Frank, we have no other choice. Victor said nothing can stop the diarrhea. It must run its course.”

“Do you have any other news for me?”

“Kurt wants to say something.”

Kurt grabbed the phone. “Hey, General, make sure you wipe real good and wash your hands with plenty of soap.”

“Very funny. I’ll see you yahoos shortly.” Frank hung up his phone. He looked up at the ceiling of the bathroom. “Hold on, boys, this is going to be a long day for all of us.”

CHAPTER 16

The Game

Part One

Finally, the annual Pointy Foods charity basketball game was about to be played. The Chicago Pink Leprechauns lined up against the aptly named Detroit Bruisers.

Kurt and his original lineup were dressing in the locker room when reality hit. “I cannot believe how ridiculous we look,” he said as he caught sight of himself in the mirror. “I’m all for getting attention for the charity, but pink booty shorts are doing nothing for my figure.”

“Regrettably, it goes beyond ridiculous,” said Brian. “There is no, absolutely no intimidation factor in a pink world of tiny retro shorts! The best we can hope for is that some of their players like what they see and get distracted.”

“I’m not counting on a wolf in sheep’s clothing to save us,” said an annoyed Kurt. “My elbow in Dwayne’s face—if Detroit lets him play, and they will—is another matter. He got us good, and payback is hell!”

Punctuating the griping was Frank’s loud voice from behind the men’s bathroom door. “We got our work cut out for us, ladies.” The door opened and Frank limped out of the bathroom and into the locker room.

“What the hell, Frank! Shouldn’t you be sitting on the throne right now?” asked Kurt.

“In war you must learn how to adapt to the conditions,” said Frank, his shirt soaked in sweat. “You may not be able to control the conditions but you are most definitely in control of your actions,” he added, true to his Napoleonic form.

“Whoa, don’t tell me,” said Kurt. “You’re wearing one of Lloyd’s diapers.”

“Righto,” said Frank. “I’m a soldier to the end.”

“I gotta hand it to you, Frank, you certainly do adapt.”

“Yeah, well, there’s a reason for everything, I guess. Now I know why Lloyd was meant to be here on our team,” Frank went on, looking up to the sky. “Thank you.”

“I hate to admit it, but that was real problem solving on your part, Frank. What about the Fab Four?” said Kurt.

“They said they’re drawing the line at tiny, pink shorts and that diapers are just not going to happen even without pink shorts. They left.”

“Good. We can and will win without them!” said Kurt, actually believing what he said.

Frank took a drink from his pocket flask, reasoning that the alcohol would slow the flow. “We’re down to six men,” he said, then took another swig. “Confidence low.”

“More like five,” said Kurt. “Lloyd is more honorary. Where is he anyway?”

Frank unwittingly drove home the point that Lloyd wasn’t actually a player when he pointed to a slumped and sleeping Lloyd. He shook his head in disgust. “Unbelievable.”

“So I take it he doesn’t know you stole his diapers,” quipped Kurt. “Typical.”

“Come on. Lloyd is a team player. He wouldn’t mind. Besides, I’m not sure he even knows what year it is. It’s a moot discussion. Drop it,” said Frank just as Leon, King Kamehameha, and Chupacabra entered the locker room.

“I just brought Chupacabra up to date on the situation,” revealed Leon.

Chupacabra looked at Frank’s pallid face and thanked his stars he’d had to pick up his family at the airport.

“Chupaca—I mean Chico, why are you covered up, young man?” asked Frank as he noticed the player was still covered, head to toe, in his sweats. “This is your coming-out party.”

Chico was uncertain of what the crowd's reaction would be when they saw what he referred to as his "unique physicality" and reassured Frank he had the Pink Leprechaun shorts on under his sweat suit.

Frank couldn't help himself. "Chico, you'll scare the hell out of Detroit's basketball team. Hell, they won't even want to touch you."

Kurt whispered to Brian, "Frank looks like a carnival owner or a pitchman trying to bait the customers with one of his freak-show beasts. The sad thing is it doesn't surprise me in the least."

"Yeah, that's raw even for Frank."

"Listen up, ladies. We've got a game to play here," said Frank.

"Frank," said Kurt, "quit calling us ladies! How many times do I have to tell you?"

"What's the matter? Am I getting you mad, Nancy?"

"Okay, don't call me Nancy!"

"Okay, Nancy," said Frank, not to be deterred.

Kurt stepped in front of Frank and put his nose an inch from Frank's face. Frank's eyes widened, but like a snake he was practiced at finding a way to turn dangerous situations to his advantage, as if the insult were part of his plan.

"That's the fire you're going to need to play with for the entire game. Get mad. We can do this," said Frank. Even though his offensive behavior was a common occurrence, Kurt and Brian still wondered whether or not he had meant to anger Kurt. Frank was also an expert in turning a situation around to save face.

Either way, it worked—not that the guys didn't have fire in their bellies to begin with. Dwayne's betrayal had already loosed the killer instinct in them—a killer instinct fueled by revenge.

The Pink Leprechauns gathered in a circle around Frank and clapped their hands together in unison to build themselves up. Lloyd, who was sleeping in the corner, woke suddenly. "What's happening? Did I miss the game?"

Kurt and the others broke out laughing in a moment of levity they needed to loosen the tension.

Frank finished up with, “Let’s get out there and warm up. We still have a game to play!”

The Chicago Pink Leprechauns practiced layups on one side of the court and the Detroit Bruisers practiced jump shots on the other. Frank was holding his clipboard, taking notes as though his scouting report were going to change the outcome.

Marcus was by his bench, laughing at Lloyd trying to dribble the ball. The seats were quickly filling up. Marcus was more than ready to start his taunts. “Hey, Frank, where’s the rest of your team?”

Dwayne joined in. “Yeah, where’s the team? Are they sick or something?” He laughed. “Oh, that’s right, they’re probably crapping their brains out right about now.”

“Screw you guys!” answered Frank, who hadn’t yet completely lost his patience with Detroit. Dwayne made it clear the Leprechauns were the only ones getting screwed, to which Frank shouted, “Let’s double the bet.”

“Good idea,” said Marcus. “You’re on.”

Marcus and Dwayne continued laughing while Lloyd kept trying to dribble the ball.

Frank, studiously ignoring the spectacle that was Lloyd, said with more conviction than was warranted, “Detroit is the only team that needs to worry about players fouling out.”

Frank pointed to Chuck, who was leaving the hallway and walking onto the court completely decked out in his referee uniform, expensive sunglasses on his nose, Bluetooth device in his ear, and an eighteen-karat-gold whistle hanging from his neck.

“Oh no, Chuck Jennings is the referee,” said Dwayne.

Marcus was confused. “I don’t get it.”

“You don’t get it? Chuck just *happens*—and I use the word loosely—just happens to be one of Kurt’s best friends.”

“Oh. Well, that’s not going to fly with me! I’m going to have our CEO throw him out!”

Overhearing the exchange, Frank said, “Oh, do please try.”

“Meaning?” said Marcus suspiciously.

Dwayne answered, “You can try, but save your breath. Chuck

Jennings just happens to be one of our company's best customers—possibly *the* best.”

“Tell me you don't mean that's the Chuck of Chuckles' Delis.”

“Yup, regrettably, that is *the* Chuck Jennings in the flesh,” said Dwayne.

“Fine,” huffed Marcus. “It won't matter. We're going to rack up points quickly—so quickly that no matter how many fouls Chuck calls, they'll never be able to catch up, much less win the game. My ringers are good enough to take the game, plus they don't have diarrhea.”

“Hmmm, we shall see!” said Frank.

Marcus just smiled. “You don't think I have a plan of my own, Frank? Oh, look over there—it's my girlfriend.”

Frank turned toward the bleachers and saw Marcus pointing to two women walking to their seats. “Margaret?”

“You know her, Frank?” said Dwayne.

Frank felt as if a sledgehammer had just crashed into his gut. “Of course I know her. She used to be mine.”

“Yeah, she *used to be*,” said Marcus.

Kurt and Brian turned to see what had Frank's attention.

Brian said, “Is that who I think it is? Oh crap, it is. This can't be good. Oh wait!” He grabbed Kurt's arm. “After all, Frank keeps talking about fire and how we all need it. This'll give him fire all right.”

Kurt's reaction to seeing Margaret indicated he, unlike the others, thought nothing good was going to come of it. “Just great. Haven't seen her for about fifteen years. Frank never did talk too much about what happened with them, just that she left in a hurry and ended up with Marcus.”

Little did Kurt know the situation was about to get worse. He and Brian froze as a teenage girl ran up to Margaret. For Brian and Kurt, her approach resembled a movie scene in which the action is in slow motion. It took no time for Kurt to notice that the girl looked just like Frank; he began to tell Brian, but Brian had already noticed the likeness and knew that by now Frank too had noticed.

“Brian, this can’t be good on any level.”

The normal, work-related, daily bickering, the horrendous way Frank treated employees, and the insensitive words spewing from his mouth were suddenly insignificant in light of the scene unfolding before their eyes. This was personal. Kurt and Brian walked up to Frank as if to close ranks. They pretended not to see his eyes start to water. A tear threatened to escape.

“Hey, Frank, that’s my daughter over there,” said Marcus. “She doesn’t look much like me, but nobody’s perfect.” Marcus attempted a jumper but mid-shot was hit by what could only have been a missile.

“You son of a bitch!” screamed Frank. “You ruined my life!”

Kurt and Brian pulled him away from Marcus, who laughed at Frank.

“Come on, General. Bernie is getting ready to introduce us to the crowd. We’ll deal with this later in true Chicago fashion. C’mon,” said Kurt.

Frank, temporarily over his shock, was energized as never before when he delivered the last pep talk to the six Chicago players gathered in the locker room.

“Listen up, ladies. Today we can get back at those jerks from the Detroit office. I have lots of money riding on you guys because I know you’re going to deliver and...and, I might have a daughter I never knew watching this game. It’s payback, but I do have a special request. You leave Marcus’ ass for me!” He pulled out his flask and took a drink and, for once, no one batted an eye.

“Now, before we head out there to decimate Detroit I’m going to use the bathroom,” announced Frank.

“You mean you’re going to change your diaper.”

“Yeah, whatever, Kurt. It is what it is.”

With perfect timing Lloyd said, “Wait up, Frank, I might need some help with mine.”

CHAPTER 17

The Game

Part Two

Victor sauntered up to the microphone in the middle of the court to sing the national anthem as the teams finished their final preparations in the locker rooms.

“Oh say can you see by the dawn’s early light... Da da daaa ta da da la da... Whose broad stripes da la la ta da la...”

Kurt and Brian peeked out the door, not surprised to see that Victor clearly did not know the words to “The Star-Spangled Banner.”

“At least his voice sounds good,” said Brian.

The anthem ended and there was a profound silence, which Frank, still in the bathroom, broke with a really loud shart, sending the team into stitches. Not bothering with apologies, Frank announced, “That’s what I think of Victor screwing up our national anthem.”

Out on the court, an unabashed Victor walked up to a beautiful woman in the first row. “*Che bella donna*,” he said, kissing her hand. He then turned and took a bow and got a standing ovation from every woman in the crowd. The guys, on the other hand, remained seated, wondering why their girls were cheering.

“It’s typical Victor,” said Brian. “Leave it to him to screw up the national anthem and make the girls want him even more.”

Bernie stole a moment when the players were finally ready to come out. “Come on, everybody, let’s give it up for our home team, the Chicago Leprechauns.”

Upon hearing Bernie’s announcement, Frank came out of the

bathroom holding Lloyd up by the arm. “Okay, guys, let Lloyd lead you onto the court.”

Kalia and another Hawaiian girl were already on the court, holding the large, paper circle for the Chicago players to run through. No one counted on Lloyd to be too scared to jump through it—too scared and too slow. Frank, who still held him up by the arm, prompted him. “Come on, Lloyd, jump through it. It’s only paper.”

“You think I don’t know that?” said Lloyd as he proceeded to tear the paper membrane with his cane, totally ignoring Frank’s instructions. This caused the Detroit team to erupt in derisive laughter, and the crowd followed suit.

“Oh brother,” muttered Bernie. “This is going to be a long-ass day.”

The Leprechauns got a nice cheer when they finally ran around Lloyd, who was still caning the paper. Bernie continued with, “Let me introduce you to the Chicago Leprechaun starters.”

Frank was ready. “Okay, you guys, take off the sweats and run out when your name is called, and meet in the middle of the court. Look tough!”

“Really?” said Kurt. “In pink shorts?”

Bernie continued, “And the starters are Kurt ‘Killer’ Weichert!”

Kurt ran to the middle of the court. The crowd’s cheers turn to laughter when they saw the pink shorts. Chuck couldn’t help himself either.

“What are you laughing at, Chuckles?” asked Kurt.

“Playing forward is Big, Bad Brian!” Bernie announced. The crowd continued to laugh as Brian joined Kurt at midcourt. Chuck didn’t even try to contain himself. “OMG, look at you guys! LOL.”

It fell on deaf ears when Kurt said, “Quit saying LOL!”

The laughter continued unabated as Bernie announced each player. It came to a full stop only when Chupacabra made it to center court, even though he was still covered by his sweats and had towels wrapped around his head.

Frank called out, telling him to get in uniform, and, in turn,

Kurt reassured the reluctant Chico it would be okay. But it wasn't okay. The crowd's laughter was now silenced by the shock and horror of the sight of Chico without his sweats and towels at center court. A loud "wow" escaped Bernie's lips, and moans came from the crowd as each item was removed.

A little girl buried her head in her mother's arm. "Mommy, what is that thing? I want to go home."

Chuck walked up to Chupacabra and slowly extended his finger, pointing at some sort of pus oozing from his arm. "What the hell is that coming out of your arm?"

Chico explained stress sometimes caused his skin to erupt and reassured everyone in general and no one in particular the suppurating sore would not interfere with his play.

Bernie announced, "Here comes Coach Frank."

Frank ran out to boos and cheers in equal number. "Chupacabra, I want you to rub that pus across both your arms—that'll keep Detroit from defending against you."

Bernie continued once more, "Today Chicago honors one of its longest-tenured employees by making him an honorary player. Everybody, give it up for Lloyd Jones!"

This awakened Lloyd, who had fallen asleep on one of the chairs. "What? What? Did you say something?"

"Today's game will be officiated by Chuck Jennings. Give it up for the ref!"

As the crowd started to clap, Chuck posed. Looking directly at Alice, who was sitting in the crowd next to Darci, Chuck tilted his glasses down, pointed to Alice, and nodded his head. "This one's for you, babe."

Alice coyly blushed until Kurt snuck up behind Chuck and pulled his pants down to his ankles. The crowd was laughing once more.

"Got you, Mr. LOL!" Kurt said as Chuck bent over, frantically trying to pull up his pants.

It was no surprise that Alice stood up screaming, "Kurt, you're a real jerk!"

Chuck, used to Kurt's antics but not quite as angry as Alice, said, "You're lucky I don't give you a technical foul, Kurt."

Marcus approached Bernie, who had deliberately neglected to announce the Detroit team, and asked whether he intended to announce them at all.

Bernie yelled, "Oh yeah, everybody, Chicago will be playing the Detroit Bruisers. Let's play ball."

The first half played out as expected, with Detroit taking a twenty-point lead before Chuck could call enough fouls to foul out each of Detroit's best players. As the teams headed to the locker rooms for halftime—the Leprechauns staggering back—it was obvious Kurt's team could have used their ringers.

Frank never wavered in his confidence or his lust for vengeance, delivering a halftime pep talk that was more like a battle cry.

"We can do this, men. We *will* do this. All of their best players, their ringers, are out of the game."

Kalia passed each team member a bottle of water and they all, without plan, drank in unison—except Frank, who took a swig of whiskey from his flask.

"We will crush them in the third quarter!" screamed Frank. "Nancy, you look a little tired over there. Are you going to make it?"

Kurt, like a broken record, demanded Frank stop calling him Nancy. As if Kurt hadn't uttered a word, Frank demanded they proceed to regain those twenty points and then finish off Detroit in the fourth.

Chupacabra was unstoppable. With Detroit's best player out of the game they were unable to defend against him, and by the end of the third quarter Chicago had taken the lead. Marcus signaled Dwayne and they huddled for a talk.

"Dwayne, I need you to get into this game. Take down that beast the next time he goes for a basket."

"You want me to hurt Chupacabra?"

Marcus had no compunction about hurting anybody. "You heard me. Do you have a problem with that?"

“No, I don’t,” he said.

“Be sure, now. You take him out or I will take you out. If you want to work at Detroit you have to do this.”

Dwayne, annoyance in his voice, told Marcus he would, and he ran onto the court to do just that.

Kurt saw Dwayne coming onto the court. “Oh. Look who’s coming to play. This one’s mine. I’ll cover Dwayne.”

Kurt went to throw the ball in bounds while Dwayne jumped up and down. Instead of throwing the ball to a teammate, Kurt threw the ball hard into Dwayne’s crotch.

“Ahhhh! What the hell do you think you’re doing?” yelled Dwayne as the basketball bounced off of his crotch, allowing Kurt to pass it to Chupacabra for an easy layup.

“Dwayne, get your ass in gear!” yelled Marcus.

“What the hell is he doing?” yelled Kurt to no one in particular. After a quick steal, Chupacabra and Leon started charging toward their basket. As they passed the ball back and forth, Dwayne streaked between them and dove to the ground, grabbing their legs and bringing them down with a crash.

“My leg is hurt,” said Chupacabra as Kurt ran to his aid.

Leon, too, complained. “He really got us! Bad!”

Leon reached up his hand to Frank, who was running onto the court, but Frank ran past Leon to Chupacabra as if Leon were invisible.

Kurt said, “It looks bad, Chico.”

But Frank, not wanting to lose his prize player, disagreed and demanded he get up.

“I think it’s broken, General,” said Chico.

Frank’s universal cure-all was to “rub some dirt on it,” whatever *it* happened to be, and this injury was no exception.

“Come on, let’s go,” said Frank, not to be thwarted.

Chico’s parents, however, sensed the seriousness of the injury and walked onto the court giving a shriveling look to Frank—a look so stern it brooked no argument. A concerned Kurt agreed. The injury was bad, yet Chupacabra, the ultimate team player, apologized.

Frank, knowing when to change his stance, addressed the wounded player in true Frank fashion. “You did good, kid. Now crawl off the court. We have a game to finish.”

Marcus congratulated Dwayne. “Good job. I knew you could get it done.”

Kurt couldn’t let it go without at least saying something. “You suck, Dwayne. Always did, always will.”

“I may suck, but I have a full team. I guess that means the game is over.”

“What are you talking about, you cretin? This game is NOT over!”

“You’re the cretin—you can’t count. You don’t have enough players on the court, ergo game over,” said Marcus. “You forfeit.”

“That’s crap,” said Frank. “Something you should be very familiar with now that you have Dwayne boy on your team. Crap, Marcus, pure crap. We *do not* forfeit because we *do* have enough players! We still have Kurt, Brian, Kamehameha, Leon, and, hell, we can still put in Lloyd. That’s five.”

Marcus pointed out that Leon was incapacitated and still lying on the court.

“What are *you* lying on the floor for?” asked Frank, who had not noticed there were two injured players.

Getting more than a little annoyed with Frank at that point, Leon sarcastically answered, “Why am I lying here? Hmmm, could it be that my leg was injured too, but you were too focused on Chico to notice?”

“Oh, quit whining and get up!”

Leon, never a glutton for punishment, suggested Frank perform an anatomically awkward act on himself.

“Okay, okay, have it your way, but just shut up! Lie there for the rest of the game because you’re our fifth player. Hell, Lloyd can stand next to you on the court.”

Marcus got ahold of Frank after that exchange. “No way, Frankie boy. If your guy can’t stand then he can’t play. If he can’t play then he can’t be counted. It’s that simple. You forfeit.”

Marcus was insisting, loud and clear for all to hear, that he expected to have five physically functioning opponents on court. Leon crawled off the court in disgust, leaving Frank with only four.

Kurt got Bernie's attention and told him to get off the microphone and join the team. An eager, excited Bernie dropped the mic and started toward center court, confident he could easily handle the few remaining minutes of the game.

"No way," said Marcus. "He doesn't work for Pointy Foods. Nope, he has to work for Pointy Foods to play the game."

Frank could take no more and lunged at Marcus. "You're always ruining my life!"

Kurt and Brian knew Frank was badly outgunned and pinned Dwayne to the floor, hoping to even things out. Even Lloyd joined in by hugging a Detroit player. Chuck blew his gold whistle with all of his might, trying to stop the fight. The teams were finally separated and lined up directly in front of each other while Marcus chanted, "Four players, forfeit, four players, forfeit."

"A forfeit isn't a win, Marcus. Not to a real man!" yelled Kurt.

Frank, meanwhile, was stripping off his jacket and tie. "No forfeit! It's not over because I'm in."

"What?" screeched Brian. "Frank is backing his people against an outside force? I better get my rations ready for the end of the world."

"Now I've seen everything!" added Kurt.

Frank repeated, "I'm in!"

Marcus, not to be outdone, said, "Fine, but if you're playing then so am I!" He underscored his intentions by throwing down *his* clipboard and taking off his jacket.

Everyone turned when they heard Dwayne yell, "Get your man off me!"

Lloyd, thinking the fight had never ended, continued to punch Dwayne in the back. Most of the punches didn't land, and the ones that did had little impact, but it was a nuisance Dwayne wasn't willing to tolerate.

“Good job, Lloyd. Don’t worry,” said Kurt. “I’ll finish Dwayne off with an accidental elbow to his face on court. It’ll be my pleasure.” Kurt pointed to Dwayne’s face, then pointed to his own elbow.

Chuck called, “Let’s play ball!”

The following three minutes were bad for the Chicago Leprechauns as Detroit once again took the lead. Kurt, Brian, and Kamehameha were getting double-teamed because Lloyd and Frank weren’t given the ball. Seeing this wasn’t going to work, Frank called a time out.

“Listen up. You guys have to throw me the ball. Nobody is covering me because they’re too busy double-teaming you. I’m wide open, get it?”

“No way, Frank,” said Kurt. “You and Lloyd just stay out of our way.”

Lloyd was still in the middle of the court and hadn’t moved more than two feet since he was put in. By the time he would turn around to follow the flow of the ball, the teams would be heading in the opposite direction.

“I am not Lloyd. Damn it, Nancy, if you don’t throw me the ball we’re guaranteed to lose this game,” persisted Frank.

“Quit calling me Nancy.”

“All right, then throw me the ball. Brian, you look tired. Are you going to make it?”

“Of course I’m tired. They’re triple-teaming me.”

“Point taken,” said Frank. “Remember, if we win, you guys get those tickets to the nineteen eighty-five Bears’ reunion.”

Brian thought about the offer for a second. “Okay, you’re right! Let’s get ‘em!”

Not much changed despite Brian’s enthusiasm. Detroit kept double- and triple-teaming Kurt, Brian, and Kamehameha and the game slipped further away from Chicago. As soon as Kurt got the ball he was triple-teamed.

Frank, wide open as usual, yelled at Kurt, “Throw me the ball! I’m wide open!”

Kurt yelled, “No!”

“Throw the ball. I’m open, Nancy!”

“Quit calling me Nancy.”

“Throw me the ball, Nancy.”

Kurt finally gave in and threw the ball as hard as he could at Frank. Frank charged to the basket for an easy layup but instead stopped short of the basket and performed a sort of crazy hook shot. The ball went in and the crowd erupted in cheers.

Brian screamed, “You made it!” Kurt just stood there in shock.

Frank ran past yelling commands between coughs. “Kurt, get back on defense!”

“Fine, but next time take the easy layup.”

“No way,” said Frank. “I still have my sky hook.”

“Whatever.”

The lead switched four times in the last minute. Marcus covered Frank but just couldn’t stop Frank’s ugly but effective skyhook. Kurt was matched up with Dwayne and kept hitting Dwayne in the stomach with his elbows.

“C’mon, ref, you’re standing right there. Call the foul. You were standing right there when it happened,” whined Dwayne.

Chuck agreed, “You’re right. I was there when it happened.”

At that the crowd quieted until Chuck spoke again. “No foul. Play ball!”

The crowd started cheering again. Dwayne shook his head and held on to his stomach.

“There’s more where that came from, Dwayne,” taunted Kurt.

With twenty seconds left, the game was tied. Frank started up again: “We have to win. A tie is no good.”

CHAPTER 18

Lloyd

Marcus dribbled hard to the basket but missed when Frank jabbed his crotch. Frank grabbed the ball and, with only four seconds left on the clock, heaved it from half court. The ball bounced off the rim and landed between Lloyd's feet. Seeing an opportunity, Marcus and Dwayne dived for the ball, but because Lloyd was virtually immobile they knocked him over. With no time left on the clock Chuck called a legitimate foul on Detroit.

"Crap. If they make one of those foul shots we're done!" moaned Dwayne.

"Don't worry about it," said Marcus. "The old man won't even be able to get the ball to the rim."

Kurt's team gathered around Lloyd. "Come on, Lloyd, you can do this."

Lloyd responded, "Do what?"

"The free throws," said Kurt. "You're shooting two. Chuck said you were in the process of taking a shot. How, I don't know, but we'll roll with it."

Again Lloyd wasn't clear. "The what?"

Frank took over. "The penalty shot, Lloyd. They fouled you and you get to shoot the ball."

"Oh boy, I haven't made one of those since the nineteen fifties."

Marcus and Dwayne started laughing and high-fiving each other. Marcus said, "Why even waste the old man's time?"

Dwayne took it even further by suggesting, rather loudly, that somebody should get a body bag for the "old geezer."

Lloyd, not feeling his eighty-eight years, wasn't going to let an insult like that go by. "You want some more of me, Dwayne? Another word out of you and you'll be eating a knuckle sandwich."

Dwayne leaned forward, putting his face a foot away from Lloyd. "Go ahead, big man."

Lloyd, surprising everyone, took a swing at Dwayne. He unsurprisingly missed and was left bent over, holding his back in pain.

Marcus said, "Let the old man shoot."

Frank, never one to let an opportunity to wager go by, said, "Triple the bet."

"You're on, Frank," said Marcus. "I'll be owning your house after this game."

"Hey, Frank, are you crazy? Haven't you lost enough to this guy?" asked Brian.

Frank leaned over and whispered to Brian, "What difference does it make? I can't pay him anyway. I still owe him from last year."

"Come on, Lloyd, let's get this over with," said Kurt.

Lloyd was almost ready to take the shots. "Kurt, would you be kind enough to get my walker?"

That was enough to set Marcus and Dwayne off again.

Bernie got on the microphone and started readying the crowd for the end of the game. "Well, this is it, everybody. If Chicago makes one of these free throws they will win the game."

Meanwhile, Lloyd had already spent five minutes preparing for his shot at the foul line. He was slowed by Dwayne's incessant harassment and taunting. Marcus kept laughing while Dwayne harassed Lloyd.

Dwayne got impatient. "Come on, old man, we don't have all day. Mi-mi-mi-miss it."

Lloyd was swinging the ball forward and backward, up and down, between his knees, giving Kurt justifiable concern that he was attempting an underhand shot.

"And a one, and a two, and a three. And a one, and a two, and

a three. Not yet. And a one, and a two, and a three,” sang Lloyd. He continued to swing the ball with both hands.

When Lloyd finally did release the ball, Dwayne loudly yelled “boo” in the old man’s ear.

Lloyd threw the ball up but it landed two feet in front of him. He clutched his chest. “You rotten son of a bitch, Dwayne. You could’ve killed me.”

“What’s the matter, Grandpa? Did I scare you?”

Kurt, Brian, and Kamehameha joined Frank in a huddle around Lloyd. “Come on, Lloyd. You can make this shot,” said Brian.

“And I have a lot of money riding on this game,” said Frank.

“Guys, let’s keep Lloyd focused on working through the distractions, especially those from Dwayne,” said Kurt. “Listen, Lloyd, don’t let Dwayne distract you. Hold on a second.” Kurt took a step back toward Dwayne, who was standing behind the huddle taunting Lloyd, and rammed his elbow into his gut.

“Ouch!” Dwayne walked back to his spot on the foul line.

“Now Lloyd,” continued Kurt, “you can make this shot. You just have to focus and don’t be predictable. Do you have to count out loud?”

“It helps, but maybe I don’t have to.”

“Instead of throwing it on three, try throwing it on one,” whispered Kurt into Lloyd’s hearing aid.

“Okay, I’ll try.”

Bernie got on the microphone as the others lined up for the last shot of the game. “This is it, folks. If number eighty-eight, which is his actual age, makes this shot, Chicago will win this game.”

With that everyone was on their feet cheering. Chuck walked up to Lloyd and gave him the ball. Chuck blew his whistle and yelled, “Play ball!”

Kurt switched his position on the box so he could stand next to Dwayne, his elbows out and ready.

“I can handle one more elbow from you,” said Dwayne, not quite believing himself and hoping, at the same time, he sounded believable.

“Maybe so,” said Kurt, “but you can’t take one from him.” He pointed to the massive Kamehameha.

Dwayne’s face went pallid. “Okay, I won’t say a word,” he said, not entirely convincingly.

“Not good enough, Dwayne,” said Kurt. “Get off the court.”

“Fine.” Dwayne walked off the court but positioned himself under the basket.

Lloyd looked over at Dwayne, who was wordlessly making faces at him while holding his hand over his chest. An enraged Lloyd put the ball over his head and threw it at Dwayne but instead of hitting Dwayne, the ball went straight up in the air and landed in the basket.

Frank danced around, exclaiming, “He made it! He made it!” and then ran around the court just as the late Jimmy Valvano had done when he won the national championship in 1983.

Kurt was ecstatic. “You did it, Lloyd!”

“I did? I was trying to hit Dwayne in the face with the ball.”

Brian laughed. “Who cares? You made the basket instead.”

Bernie started blaring Chuck’s Euro-techno music and Chuck danced in front of the crowd. The place was one big party. Chuck, familiar with Kurt’s wild parties, pleaded, “Kurt, don’t throw anything at me.”

Bernie pointed out, “Chuck’s actually pretty good.”

Kurt, doubtful, responded with a perfunctory “I suppose.”

Frank was standing near Chuck on center court with both arms extended in the air in victory. All Frank could say was, “We did it! We did it!”

Kurt, feeling mischievous, snuck up behind Frank and pulled his pants down to his ankles, sending the crowd into a frenzy at the sight of his diaper. Frank barely moved, instead tracking Marcus as he tried to make his getaway.

“Yeah, whatever,” said Frank, not paying attention. “Kamehameha, stop Marcus. He owes me lots of money. Help me collect and I’ll give you ten percent.”

“You’re on. I’m on it!”

Before Frank could join in the pursuit he was accosted by Brian, who looked pissed. “I just thanked our CEO for the Bears’ reunion tickets but he had no idea what I was talking about.”

“Okay, I lied to you about the tickets,” admitted Frank. “I needed you motivated, and it worked. You played terrifically!”

“That’s really low, even for you, Frank. As always, for you, the end justifies the means. No, to be precise *your* end justifies any means, you self-serving SOB.”

“Frank, you’re a lying sack of crap,” added Kurt.

“Whatever. Grow up,” said Frank in his usual uncaring manner.

The crowd cheered Chuck as he danced, his shirt soon finding its way onto the court.

In the madness, Darci and Victor joined the players on the court and Alice joined Chuck in his forbidden (by common decency) dance on the court. Everybody was having a great time when Chuck abruptly stopped and stood, unmoving, staring at one of the entrances.

Alice noticed and asked, “What’s the matter?”

Kurt and Darci turned around to see who was coming in.

“Oh crap,” sighed Kurt. “Here we go.”

Darci looked over and said in disbelief, “Is that who I think it is?”

“Yeah,” said Kurt. “It’s Chuck’s ex-wife, Camilla.”

A tall, Amazonian woman marched onto the basketball court in her Jimmy Choo stilettos and tightly tailored suit, uncaringly destroying the floor’s finish as she strode. Walking behind her was a ten-year-old boy and two of the staff members she employed.

“Oh, great, that’s Chuck’s spoiled-rotten, pain-in-the-ass son.”

“Prince Charles,” said Kurt.

The boy was yelling at one of his mother’s staff members. “Careful with those bags! You almost hit the corner of the door!”

Alice stopped and looked at Chuck, who had been standing there speechless. “Who are they?”

“OMG, you don’t want to know. That’s my ex-wife, who doesn’t deserve to be on the same ground as you, and that is my son, Prince Charles.”

As the boy walked past Kurt and Darci, he slowed down and smiled. “Hello, Kurt. Did you miss me?”

“No, I did not. Indeed, you are the reason I don’t have children.”

“Yeah, right. You mean you can’t perform. Darci, why don’t you find a real man like me?”

Kurt elaborated on his prior comment. “You’re the poster child for government-mandated birth control.”

Chuck tilted to the side and extended his arms for a hug but instead of hugging him, Prince Charles kicked him in the leg. “Don’t ever make me wait again.”

“I had no idea you were coming, son.”

“Give me that gold whistle!”

“Sure, son,” said Chuck as he handed over the gold whistle.

“What did you call me?” the boy imperiously demanded, the words “thank you” not even in his lexicon.

“Oh, of course, I meant to say Prince Charles. Now can the king get a kiss from his prince?”

“Sure.” Chuck leaned over to kiss his son but instead of a kiss Prince Charles blew the gold whistle in his ear.

“Quit being so weak,” blurted the supposed prince. “Who’s the bed wench standing next to you?”

All Kurt could say was, “This is going to be a long week.”

CHAPTER 19

Frank in Charge

Kurt sat in Frank's office, staring at the ceiling. "What a hell of a way to start the week! Could we just have one Monday without this meeting? Have it on Tuesday instead? Or, better yet, Friday. Review the week while it's fresh instead of starting the week on a negative note. Frank, you are negativity personified!"

"Your point, lunkhead?" said Frank, basketball in one hand and lit cigar in the other. He was unusually well groomed for a Monday, wearing his best suit and sporting a clean shave. "Get off the soapbox, Kurt."

"Every Monday morning, without fail, we're beaten down—by my equal, I might add—"

"Not your equal, Kurt," interrupted Frank. "You're not my equal."

Brian, knowing this could go on for hours, tried to shift gears. "Listen, Frank, you were late enough without taking more time to hammer us. Let's get a move on."

"For your information, I was on the phone with corporate, so that doesn't count as late," said Frank with a vile smile, indicating he, as usual, had something up his sleeve.

"Well, let's indeed get started, Frank. Let's cover it all, point by excruciating point," said Kurt. "By the way, we're not ignoring the fact that you lied about the tickets. You aren't trustworthy, never have been, never will be. Say what you have to say and be done. No one's listening anyway."

Kalia chose that moment to bring in the pastries and coffee, hoping to diffuse the heated exchange. She quietly turned toward Kurt. “I thought you should know Dwayne is in the building, emptying his desk.”

“Thanks, Kalia, I hope he comes in here so we can let him know what we think of him. Keep me posted.”

Brian, trying to keep things moving forward, addressed Frank’s unusually combed, cleaned, and pressed appearance. “Frank, you really look different today.”

“Yeah Frank, looks like you brushed your hair,” added Kurt. “That has to be your least-wrinkled suit, and clearly you shaved while sober—there are no blood stains on your collar. Oh, can’t forget to mention you even splashed on your favorite drugstore-brand aftershave lotion. A red-letter day, Frank?”

The other salesmen in the room couldn’t help but chuckle.

“Laugh it up, gentlemen. This is indeed a great day!”

“Yeah, Frank? A great day! Did you and your ex, Margaret, hook up yesterday?” yelled Tim, one of the junior salesmen.

“I don’t kiss and tell—especially to *subordinates*,” Frank enunciated.

“Translated?” asked Kurt. “You mean *no* or *you were too drunk* to remember. And Frank, I am not your subordinate. We hold the same position!”

“Whatever,” said Frank as he strode to the podium and lifted the basketball in the air. “We did it, ladies! We beat Detroit’s office in basketball.” At that everybody cheered.

“Yeah, we did!” exclaimed Kurt.

At the same time, Kalia again poked her head into the room. “Frank, Dwayne collected his belongings and wants to see you before he leaves for Detroit.”

“I know he does. Send him in.”

“He asked to speak to you in private.”

“Dwayne can wait however long it takes us to finish our meeting, then.” Frank knew full well Dwayne didn’t want to wait.

“Frank, he made it clear he’s catching a ride with Marcus, who’s ready to leave now.”

“Listen up, sugar, he comes in now or he waits. I don’t care who he has a ride with. Now or wait!”

Kalia appeared to be more than eager to deliver the last word. Frank, at his best when opposing someone, lit his cigar and remained at the podium, smirking with an “it’s good to be king” stance. Dwayne had no choice but to enter carrying his possessions in a cardboard box. The inevitable heckling started, with no one passing up the chance to rub in the victory.

Kurt was first to make his voice heard. “Hey, Dwayne, how’s it feel to lose to the team and the office you betrayed?”

“Kurt, first and foremost in my mind, it’s soooo good not to have to work with you again.”

Frank, impatient to get this over with, asked Dwayne pointedly if he had something for him, knowing full well he did. Frank’s annoying way of wrapping a statement in a question irked Dwayne.

“You know I do, Frank. Marcus gave me the money to pay his debt. You’re not supposed to be smoking in the building, by the way.”

Frank leaned forward and blew a smoke ring into Dwayne’s face.

“Come on, Frank, stop it! I can’t breathe. Just take the envelope and let me get out of here.”

“Sure, Dwayne. Do I need to count this?”

“Geez, Frank, cut it out,” barked Dwayne. “It’s five thousand in cash and a seventy-five-hundred-dollar check. Just take it and let me get out of here. Marcus is ready to leave.”

“If that check doesn’t clear, King Kamehameha will be paying Marcus a visit. Got that?”

“Yeah, I got it. I’ll let Marcus know. Oh, by the way, did you tell Kamehameha he lost his job?”

“Lost my job! What’s he talking about, Frank?” exclaimed Kamehameha, already spoiling for a fight and finding a reason in Dwayne’s statement. Frank told Dwayne to get out, so he spun on his heels and winked at the king on his way out.

“Hey, Dwayne, catch,” yelled Kurt as he threw the basketball at Dwayne, who lifted his hand to shield his face. His box tumbled and spilled his belongings all over the floor, just as Kurt had hoped. Small pleasures!

“Ouch! What the hell, Kurt!”

Everyone in the room burst into scornful laughter, happy the traitor was leaving.

Frank took the opportunity to slam the door. “Hmmm, I guess you can say the door hit you on the ass on the way out,” he said, reveling in the resulting cheers.

“Hey, Frank,” said Kurt, not diverted by the horseplay, “what the hell was Dwayne talking about?”

“Yeah, he said I don’t have a job anymore,” said Kamehameha.

“He’s right, King, you don’t. You can thank Marcus and Dwayne for that. They filed a complaint with the CEO about nepotism in our office.”

“What do you mean? And how long have you known about this?”

“Brothers and sisters cannot work together in our office without corporate permission,” said Frank. “Don’t worry. I’ve got your cut for collecting my money.” Frank started counting out \$1,250.

“I’m not about to let this go,” Kamehameha persisted. “You promised me a job! King Kamehameha needs to work!”

“Calm down, King. Your little dresses are ready for you.”

“What did you just say, Frank?”

“Your little grass skirts and the rest of your frou-frou things are being shipped to Bernie’s restaurant next week. You can start performing your *show* again,” Frank blundered on, wiggling his fingers in air quotes, either not recognizing Kamehameha’s anger or deliberately baiting him.

Frank, treading where angels feared to tread as usual, was fortunate the king was more focused on this change of plans. “What about my sister?”

The assembled salesmen all perked up at this question and cheers erupted when Frank said, “Kalia wants to stay with us, and she can do so. Only one of you had to go.”

With the exception of Brian, everybody stopped cheering when Kamehameha turned to look at them. Kamehameha looked straight through him.

“What? I’m not good enough for your sister? You didn’t stop Victor when he gave Kalia a ride home a couple of weeks ago.”

“Brian, this would be a good time to change the subject,” whispered Kurt. “The last thing we need is to hand Kamehameha another reason to vent his frustrations.” Turning to Kamehameha, Kurt said, “We’ll see you at Bernie’s restaurant.”

Surprising everyone except Frank, Kamehameha grabbed his money and started toward the door. “Fine.”

Kurt wasn’t satisfied with the lack of information. “Frank, what else did the CEO have to say? Why didn’t I get to talk to him?”

Frank took a pull from his cigar. “It’s not all about you, Kurt. There are going to be a few changes around here and I have been given the authority to make these changes.”

“What are you talking about?”

“What I’m talking about, Kurt, is the fact that our CEO was so impressed with our company’s spirit he’s going to implement a sales competition between Detroit’s office and ours. The winner gets ten tickets to this year’s Super Bowl in Dallas, Texas.”

Whoops, hollers, and cheers erupted once more.

Brian interjected, “He lied to us before about the Bears’ reunion and I guarantee he’s lying again.”

“That’s not entirely true, Brian. You don’t have the facts. Actually, I *was* given four tickets to the Bears’ reunion event, but I was told to take our company’s best customer. I believe that would be Chuck Jennings of Chuckles’ Delis. I will be taking him.”

Brian, like a dog with a bone, heard only that there were two available tickets and Chuck had them. Frank smugly confirmed his guess and stated he was sure to be seeing him and his sidekick, Kurt, at the event.

“Oh yes. Hell yes. Isn’t that right?” Brian said as he high-fived Kurt.

“Yeah, Brian, exactly,” said Kurt, his mind already formulating plans to get the tickets.

As for the rest of the room, nothing had changed and there was no expectation anything would change, so they cleared out, leaving only Kurt, Brian, and Frank.

“Frank, don’t forget we’re equals in this company.”

“Not really, Mr. *Subordinate*. For the last six years my salesmen have outsold yours, so for the next thirty days I’m in charge of everybody—including you, *subordinate*. I plan to mix things up. Brian, you will work for me for the month, not for Kurt. Is that clear?”

“What? I don’t have a say in this, Frank? You’re taking Brian?”

Frank restated the unthinkable—he had been given complete control of the competition.

“Geez, Frank, give me a break!” said Brian. “I’ve been working for Kurt for the last ten years!”

“So true, but now you’re back under my control. Time for a change. I have spoken.”

Grabbing at straws, Brian spouted, “Only for thirty days.”

Frank ordered them to load up their customers with lots of product for the month and, brooking no resistance, told them to get out and make some money. Ever single-minded, Brian made it clear the first order of business was getting the tickets and stated he was off to Chuckles’ Deli to do just that.

Frank had no intention of letting anyone else call the shots. He made it clear Brian would hit the listed stops in their listed order and he himself would review Brian’s invoices at day’s end.

Kurt, who had remained quiet during the brief exchange, told Brian to go ahead with the stops and he would go over to Chuckles’ Deli himself. “I’ll make sure we have those tickets.”

Brian left and the room was empty except for Kurt and Frank.

“Frank, you are *not* in charge of me. Maybe my salesmen for the next thirty days, but not me.”

“Listen, Kurt, I have a chance to get my old position back. The Midwest regional manager spot is going to be available. The CEO said it’s between Marcus and me.”

“Quite *frankly*, Frank, I can’t think which would be worse—your becoming the Midwest regional manager or my having to take orders from that moron Marcus. Beyond that I do not care

about your chances for anything other than your disappearing from my life.”

“Better the devil you know, Kurt.”

“Don’t push me too far, Frank. Perhaps I’m not willing to settle for either. Have you thought about that?” Briefly—very, very briefly—it occurred to Kurt life would be just a bit duller in Frank’s absence. Soon he came to his senses and perished the thought.

As the possibilities of advancement floated through his mind, Frank put the cigar in his mouth and extended his hand to Kurt. “I’ll make it worth your while.”

“Here we go again, Frank. Did you not hear me? I’m not interested in having either one of you in charge.” Kurt grabbed Frank’s hand and squeezed it intolerably hard, then spun on his heels and headed for Chuck’s place.

CHAPTER 20

The Devil and Prince Charles

Chuck surveyed the Pointy Foods delivery and greeted Kurt, whose perfect timing had him pulling up just as the boxes were unloaded and the products were being counted.

“Hey, Kurtis.”

Kurt looked over and saw Chuck’s son, clipboard in hand, counting the boxes.

“Chuck, don’t you have a manager to do that?”

“Correction, I *had* a manager. I fired her this morning.”

Kurt, inured to the patterns of Chuck’s relationships, let him know it was obvious his ten-year-old son had fired Joanne.

Chuck’s son had no intention of being left out of the conversation and made sure everyone could hear him. “Yes, I did fire her, and I am eleven-and-a-half years old.”

“Which begs the question, shouldn’t you be in school today?”

“Genius IQ. Genius IQ. I can handle a few missed days of college. You, on the other hand... I would be surprised if you even made it out of high school.”

Ignoring the slight, Kurt focused on the fact that Prince Charles was in college.

“For real, Kurt, he’s a freshman and getting straight As,” said Chuck.

The Pointy Foods truck driver chose that moment to pull Kurt aside.

“Hey, Mugsy, what’s going on, old pal?” Kurt asked him.

“Listen, Kurt, I can’t handle that kid. I thought Chuck was

bad but this kid is worse—a royal pain in the butt. I'm late on my other deliveries, should've been outta here an hour ago but he's made me take everything out of every carton. He's counting them individually! This is ridiculous. It's not as if we wouldn't make good on a shortage—of course we would. But we've never had a shortage *in* the carton itself."

"It's okay, Mugsy. Leave the boxes. Give me the paperwork. Just go on to your next stop. I'll count the order with them—in fact, I look forward to it."

With a hasty thanks, Mugsy got out of there faster than he ever had. Figuring out how to avoid going there again would occupy his mind between every stop.

"Chuck, I sent our truck on to the next stop. I'll count the product with you."

"You mean with me," interjected Prince Charles. He ordered Kurt to open the boxes and count the cups—the dozens and dozens of cups.

"You've got to be kidding me. And what is it with the cups, Chuck? It's always the cups." Looking at the boy, he went on, "And it's obviously genetic!"

"While you're at it, I expect free cups in the next order."

"As I said, it's genetic! Look, kid, this is his order, not yours, and while we're on the subject, do not, I repeat do not, ever delay my driver again. He works for me! His job is to deliver the cartons and go, got it?"

"Watch your mouth, Kurt."

"What? Watch *my* mouth, you pipsqueak? Chuck, straighten your kid out."

Prince Charles imperiously demanded that Chuck get rid of Kurt, adding, "I never liked him anyway."

Prince Charles was momentarily taken aback when Chuck refused. "Son, I draw the line there. Kurt is like a brother to me and has been an important resource to my company."

Kurt expressed his thanks, fully understanding this was but one little battle in his favor.

Prince Charles, well practiced in adversarial relationships, knew when to retreat. “Gee, how touching. I guess that makes you my uncle. Uncle Loser. I’ll call you Uncle Loser.”

“Listen up, Chuck. I heard our company gave you three front-row tickets along with backstage passes for the eighty-five Bears’ reunion. Just letting you know Brian and I are really pumped up to go with you.”

“Tell Uncle Loser who you’re taking with you.”

“Kurt, I don’t get it. Frank said I could invite two other people to go with me to the event. I said it would be you and Brian but he said you guys already had tickets. What’s going on?”

“Chuck, let me state the obvious: Frank is a first-class ass. Why am I not surprised?”

“Here’s the thing. I asked Alice, so I do have one extra ticket.”

“Oh, come on, Chuck. Frank knew we didn’t have tickets. Couldn’t you tell he was lying? He’s predictable! He didn’t *want* us going. He always has to have that last little jab and you know that. Come on, call Alice and tell her to give up the ticket.”

When it came to Alice, Chuck was always in an odd place. “Kurt, I can’t do that. I just can’t. I just want to be with her all the time.”

“Okay, please don’t say that anymore,” said Kurt, mimicking nausea. “I guess Brian and I will have to flip a coin for that last, single, lonely, coveted ticket.”

It was no surprise Prince Charles would complicate the issue with his ever-present smirk. “I changed my mind, Father. I want to go with you and your bed wench, Alice.”

“Give me a break,” said Kurt. Could things get more contentious?

“Father, you better give me the ticket or I *shall* tell Mother and she *will* make your life miserable. It’s what she does best,” Prince Charles said, looking at Kurt. “Just wait ’til she finds out you never put my face on the napkins and signs.”

For the second time in one day, Chuck found himself digging his heels in. “Son, my face has been on the napkins and the signs

since I was a little kid,” he said, pointing to a napkin personalized with Chuck’s likeness and “Chuckles’ Deli” wrapped around the picture in a word-art frame. “This is not going to change. It’s still my company.”

Kurt pulled Chuck aside. “Chuck, you cannot—for your sake and for his—you cannot let your kid act like this. Bed wench? Where’s the respect? Tickets aside, this kid will never be able to function if someone doesn’t rein him in and that person is you.” While Kurt spoke the truth he did so with only the Bears’ reunion in mind.

“Kurt, you don’t understand. I have no choice,” said Chuck, enunciating each word. “My ex-wife, Camilla, has me by the balls. She’s taking me to the cleaners.”

“Chuck, you were married for only three months. Three months, for pity’s sake!”

“True, but since Uncle Walter has been in jail for that Ponzi scheme it’s been going from bad to worse—really worse. Uncle Walter kept her in line. He was the only person she was scared of. Her lawyers? Even they were scared, but not now. They’re constantly coming at me, and they charge in fifteen-minute increments. It costs just to answer the phone. And they call a lot!”

“It’s just not right, Chuck. That boy needs discipline.”

“Look, she only lets me see him a few times a year—when it’s convenient for her, of course. He’s a genius and, no argument, he is spoiled rotten. I have to give him what he wants or he gets *his* lawyers after me. Right now I have him for only a few more days.”

How poetic, Kurt thought. The kid would be here just long enough for Kurt and Brian to get stuck in the reunion’s nosebleed seats.

“I’m really sorry, Kurt.”

“Well, not as sorry as I am, Chuck, and you... You’ve got a mess on your hands.” With that Kurt left, saying Chuck could count the rest of the order himself.

“Where do you think you’re going, Uncle Loser? You get over here and count every piece of cheese in this order! Now!”

“Yeah, right. Have a nice day, you spoiled brat.”



By eight o'clock Kurt was settled into his basement, waiting for Brian. They planned to watch an old video of the '85 Bears' Super Bowl championship. Brian came down the stairs in his old Bears jersey, carrying a case of beer.

"There you are. It's about time."

"That dick reviewed every last ticket of the day, even complaining when one or another was out of order," spat Brian. "I couldn't get out of there until Frank had finished nearly every drop in his flask. I had to get out of there before he ran dry."

"Let me guess, he followed every ticket with, 'Is this the best you can do?'"

"Yeah, Kurt, he did, but by the time he was reaching the end of the ticket pile he was unintelligible. Man, can he drink! Before he got through half the flask he had abandoned his usual, hackneyed comments for 'you lazy, bum' or 'your best days are behind you' or 'you really suck.' He saved the best for last: 'Quit watching so much sports and focus on your sales or you'll be standing in the unemployment line.'"

"You're my best salesman."

"I know that, Kurt, but... But... He's so low."

"Okay, Brian, give it up. Forget the bastard. Let's get this show on the road."

Brian grabbed each of them a beer and they settled in for the "Super Bowl Shuffle" video.

"My God, this was the greatest team of all time," exclaimed Kurt. "It was almost a perfect year."

"Agreed and agreed again. Marino and the Dolphins gave us our only loss, making it almost—not quite, but almost—palatable," said Brian.

"True, that was painful, but I was referring to the fact that the great one, Walter Payton, didn't score a touchdown in the Super Bowl—nothing palatable about that, my friend."

They both looked to Kurt's wall, at the massive picture of Walter Payton.

“Geez, Kurt, I miss that man.”

“Me too, Brian, me too.”

Lifting their bottles and offering a toast to Walter Payton seemed to be the most natural thing to do, and so they did.

“Oh great one, Walter Payton, thank you for all the memories.”

“Right on, Brian. And thank you, Walter, for punishing all the NFL defenses.”

At that they both started singing along with the “Super Bowl Shuffle” music video.

“All right, fast forward to the game,” said Brian.

“No, wait, check out Iron Mike’s sweater vest!”

“I still have mine,” said Kurt.

“So do I. I still have mine too.”

Brian thought it would be a good idea to wear their sweater vests to the Bears’ reunion, thinking Mike Ditka might say something to them when he noticed. Kurt pointed out it was a great idea but they would be too far away for Ditka to see them.

“What? What are you talking about, Kurt? Frank said Chuck has front-row seats and backstage passes.”

“Oh yeah, but Chuck isn’t taking us. He’s taking Alice and his son, neither of whom have any appreciation of the event. What a freakin’ waste.”

“Kurt, tell me this is one of your dark jokes. No way Chuck isn’t taking *us*.”

“I’m afraid so, my friend. But Darci was able to find us two tickets all the way in the back.”

“Crap,” bellowed Brian. “I wanted to talk to—no, had planned to talk to Iron Mike Ditka, Refrigerator Perry—”

Kurt interrupted him to say the Fridge was recovering from an illness and would not be there in person.

“Well, what about Jim McMahon?” Brian continued. “Richard Dent, Dan ‘The Animal’ Hampton, and the rest of the Bears. What about them?”

“I believe they’re going to be there. Buddy Ryan and most of the defensive players will be there.”

“Yeah, well, we have to get back there and meet them!”

“You’re right, we do. It’ll be just like old times, when we jumped the seats at Soldier Field without getting caught. Who could forget those glory days?”

Brian got caught up in the nostalgia and momentarily forgot the upsetting turn of events. “Hell yes, Kurt. We started off in the nosebleed seats and by halftime we were sitting in the front row at the fifty-yard line.”

“Hold that thought! This is how it’s going down. Tomorrow night we kidnap the brat and Alice *and* their tickets!”

“Funny! Now that’s funny,” said Brian, thinking it was just a joke, just a dream.

“Not funny, Brian. Doable. Workable. Inevitable!”

Brian jumped up at the possibility, then shuddered at the thought of years in a federal prison. “Kurt, I know that look on your face, and it spells nothing but trouble. You’re not kidding, are you? You’re actually gonna try this?”

“Not try, buddy, not try but *do*! It will work.”

Familiar thoughts of jail flooded Brian’s mind and he made it clear they could go to jail for this.

Kurt disagreed. “I don’t think so, because these are our friends. They’ll be locked in the virtual luxury of my basement for just a few hours. When the reunion is over I’ll pacify Chuck with free boxes of cups for his restaurant.”

“Nope, won’t work.”

“Think about it, Brian. He’s fixated on free cups. But better than that, he’ll be with Alice. Hell, he’ll even thank us. Yeah, he’ll thank us.”

“Still risky, Kurt, still risky.”

Kurt replied that nothing good comes without risk. Brian still wasn’t sure.

“Leave it all to me,” Kurt told him. “Let me handle it, Brian. I won’t drag you into this one. Just make sure you’re at the Bears’ reunion on time. That’s all you have to do—be on time.”



The night of the Bears' reunion, Kurt stood in his basement in his Mike Ditka Bears sweater vest, talking on the phone to Darci, making sure she had told Alice to meet Chuck and his son at Kurt's house. "This way we all leave my place together."

"I told them, Kurt, but I'm guessing you have something in that head of yours. Why do you want to go with them so badly?"

"Sweetie, I'm not up to anything. I'm just excited at the prospect of meeting all the legends." Fingers crossed behind his back, Kurt added, "I wish I had a ticket for you."

Darci tried to cover her relief that he didn't have that extra ticket and reminded him she had lots of work to do. "Well, you guys will have fun and I'll be celebrating about my new find. It's a new fashion line no other stores have. Anyway, I'm telling you what you already know because I don't want to get a phone call from the holding tank. Really, Kurt. No mischief."

"It's okay, Darci. I just remembered you were working on that. You'll have more than enough quiet with all of us gone. Good luck, sweetie. We'll catch up later."

Kurt hoped he hadn't laid it on too thick. He did mean what he'd said to Darci, but his mind was on only two things: Iron Mike Ditka and his famed sweater vest.

Before hanging up, Darci added that Alice and Chuck both had just sent her funny texts. "How cute. I guess they're just around the corner from your place."

Kurt said he'd go to let them in, but Darci delayed hanging up long enough to repeat that she really needed to concentrate on her work. She pleaded with Kurt not to start trouble. He reassured her he would do nothing to cause a break in her concentration.

As expected, the door opened and Chuck, Alice, and Prince Charles walked in.

"What? You don't believe in knocking?" Kurt asked.

"LOL, Kurtis. I'll start knocking when you start texting. It's called *communicating*."

"Lay off the LOL, Chuck. Anyway, why don't we have a drink and watch 'The Super Bowl Shuffle' before we leave?"

Kurt nearly bowed his head in deference as Chuck and Alice headed for his basement.

Prince Charles was doubtful but accepted he had little choice in the matter. As he walked past Kurt, Kurt whispered to himself, “Come into my lair,” said the spider to the fly.”

After they’d made it to the basement, Kurt reminded them, “Guys, dump your stuff here so we don’t forget it when we leave. I don’t want to have to come back to the house because somebody forgot something.”

They all walked back to the home-theater room in Kurt’s man cave. This would be the first time Alice was there by invitation. Kurt had rather she’d never been there, but her presence was the means to his justifiable end.

Chuck mentioned the sweater vest Kurt was wearing and Kurt commented on Chuck’s Kevin Butler 1980s jersey.

“I love Kevin Butler, Chuck, but he was the kicker. Why aren’t you wearing a Walter Payton jersey instead?”

“Are you kidding me? I love the kicker—that’s my favorite position. Everyone likes the quarterbacks and the running backs, but me? I like the kicker. All the great ones were kickers.”

“Chuck, you are soooo not right.”

Kurt picked up the remote and started the “Super Bowl Shuffle” video, which was more than enough to get Chuck singing and dancing. Without missing a beat he beckoned Kurt to join in. Kurt joined in singing as he walked backward toward the door. Halfway through the song he shut and locked the door.

Prince Charles yelled out, “What are you doing?”

“Sorry, kid. I accidentally locked the door and can’t get it open because I broke the key in the lock. I’ll be right back. I’m going to run to the hardware store and I’ll be back to let you out.”

“Liar!”

“Seriously,” replied Kurt. “I’ll be right back to let you out.”

Kurt left, passed go, didn’t collect \$200, and headed straight to the event as planned. Halfway there, he realized he didn’t have the tickets.

“Damn it!” He turned the steering wheel hard and headed back toward his house.

In that time, Chuck found a crawlspace leading to the garage. When told about the discovery, Prince Charles insisted he enter first while Alice made it clear she wasn’t going in at all. Chuck made sure she intended to stay where she was before saying, “Fine, but I must go make sure my son doesn’t get hurt,” and with that they entered the crawlspace.

Kurt arrived to the impossible-to-ignore sight of the boy crawling out of the crawlspace and into his garage.

“Damn, I forgot about the crawlspace,” Kurt said.

“I bet you did,” said Charles just as Chuck’s head emerged.

“Hey, Kurtis, come over here.”

Kurt slinked over to his friend.

“Kurt, I know what you’re up to. You deliberately locked us in there to steal my first-row tickets.”

“Yeah, well, I guess I have some explaining to do.”

“No, you don’t. Forget that. Hear me out. I’m staying. I haven’t been alone with Alice since my son came to visit, and I’m going to take advantage of this situation. In return, you will take Prince Charles with you.”

“Deal,” Kurt agreed as he turned to go into the house. “I’ve gotta go into the house to grab your jacket. I assume that’s where the tickets are, right?”

Chuck reached for his wallet. “Your plan was destined to fail, Kurt. It never would have worked. I’ve got the tickets on me.”

“Damn, foiled again.”

“Prince Charles, you’re going with Kurt to the Chicago Bears’ reunion,” Chuck said as he started to wiggle backwards through the crawlspace, not mentioning his plan to be alone with Alice.

“Come on, Prince Charles, we’re going to meet some of my heroes.”

Charles shook his head and murmured under his breath, “Use a condom, Dad.”

CHAPTER 21

Da Bears' Reunion

Kurt and Prince Charles caught up with Brian and Victor outside. Brian didn't think he really wanted to know but asked anyway: "What's Chuck's kid doing with you?"

"It's a long story. The bottom line is we get two of the front-row seats if he comes with me."

"Okay, but what about Bernie's ticket?"

Kurt reminded him they still had the nosebleed seats.

Bernie, wearing his number seventy-two Refrigerator Perry jersey, said he would take the nosebleed seats but needed the extra ticket because Victor wanted to come.

"Bernie, does Victor even know anything about the eighty-five Bears?"

"No, Brian, he thinks it's an actual sporting event and to him that means lots of women."

Brian wondered out loud what exactly Victor would do when he saw there were no cheerleaders to hit on.

"He'll deal with it," said Brian. "He always does."

Kurt took a second look at Brian. "Hey, Brian, I thought you were going to wear your Ditka sweater vest. What's with the Jim McMahon jersey?"

"As usual, Kurt, you have a keen sense of the obvious," Brian said not unkindly. "I didn't forget the headband either." Brian put on a headband with the name Rozelle written on it.

"Nice, Brian, nice," said Kurt.

Victor, wearing a designer suit, finally showed up. “What’s-a this? A costume party?”

Brian, genuinely glad to see Victor, greeted him. “Hey, Victor, what’s happening, pal?”

“I come for the contest.”

“Victor,” said Kurt, “I don’t want to see you disappointed. This isn’t a game. There is no contest. Think more in terms of exhibition or show—but still lots of fun!”

“It’s-a okay, I come for the show.”

Brian and Victor made their way up to the nosebleed seats while Kurt, Brian, and Prince Charles made it to the front row, where Frank was already seated, still wearing his suit. His shirt, as usual, was not tucked in and the suit was noticeably wrinkled. Frank’s eyes were bloodshot though he didn’t seem drunk.

“What the...?” he said. “What the hell are you guys doing here? Where the hell are Chuck Jennings and his guests? And who’s the kid?”

“This is Prince Charles, Frank. Chuck and Alice couldn’t make it.”

“Prince Charles? What kind of screwed-up name is that?”

Kurt, in a quieter tone, said, “Frank, the boy is Chuck Jennings’ son.”

“Oh, it is. Chuck’s son. Okay, sure, all right then. I like that name. It makes sense now. How’re you doing, young man? I am a big fan of your father’s delis.”

“Who are you?” asked Prince Charles in his usual imperious tone. Frank started to tell him.

“Stop right there,” said Prince Charles. “Cram it! You’re just one of the vendors. You better be nice to me because I’m going to be running that company sooner than you know.”

“You are a funny young man,” said Frank.

“You think so? You won’t be laughing when I get rid of your company.”

Frank, not knowing quite how to react, asked if there were something he could do for the boy.

Kurt didn't have to listen to know what would be coming next.

"I want a carton of large cups for each deli next week, free of charge," said Prince Charles. "Free cups for each deli, got it?"

Frank, clearly unaware of whom he was dealing with, said he would see what he could do about the cups. He then leaned back in his chair, took a flask out of his pocket, and took a long drink.

"This is going to be awesome!" said Kurt, rubbing his hands together as he took his seat.

The reunion was everything Kurt and Brian had imagined it would be. After the public show ended Kurt, Brian, Prince Charles, and Frank stood in line for the private party that included only people who had backstage passes.

It would be a long time before Brian's feet were on the ground once more. "That was awesome. I loved it when the Refrigerator showed up on the giant screen."

Kurt agreed but said it was too bad the Fridge couldn't have been there in person. "It was good to see him anyway."

Brian was already in the "next star" frame of mind. "Now we get to meet Iron Mike Ditka."

"Oh yeah, I have an Iron Mike picture ready. All it needs is his signature and then it can be placed next to my Walter Payton picture," said Kurt in anticipation.

"I loved the note the great Walter Payton wrote on it!"

"I know," said Kurt. "He wrote, 'Please stop stalking me.' That was one great man. Such a funny guy!"

"Kurt, I don't think he was being funny. I think he was dead serious," said Brian.

"Whatever. I've been waiting for Ditka's autograph for quite some time."

Frank, in line with them, started mumbling that he had something to tell Mike Ditka himself.

"What are you talking about, Frank?" asked Kurt, sensing that whatever it was, it would not be good. It was enough to put him on alert—though for what he didn't know. He did know Frank was starting to get drunk.

Frank would only say Ditka's Bears had cost him a lot of money. His mounting anger was apparent to all.

Kurt, curious and alarmed, asked, "Frank, what are you talking about? How on earth did Ditka cost you any money?"

"I remember I had a lot of money riding on the Bears when they played the Dolphins," spat Frank. "They blew it! They lost one game the entire season and it had to be that game! Damn it! That forty-six defense should have shut down Marino!" Frank's voice rose with each exclamation, and spittle dripped down his chin.

Kurt tried to calm him down. "Oh, come on, Frank, get ahold of yourself. That was one of the greatest teams in the history of professional football and you know it!"

"Yeah, well, he's still going to get a piece of my mind."

Kurt told him to shut up. "You're making a scene."

Brian nudged Kurt. "Oh great, here comes security. The beginning of the end!"

Security arrived and told them they would have to leave. Kurt grabbed the security guard's shirt. "No friggin' way, dude. I've waited a long time for this."

"Get your hands off me," said the guard. "Get your hands off me and leave—now!"

Brian, trying to ignore the action, pleaded, "Come on. We're almost up there! Hey, Iron Mike, you're the best!"

The security guard said, "Out now!"

Kurt lowered his tone and approach. "Sir, please let the boy stay."

The guard looked over at Prince Charles and agreed to let him stay, adding that the men could wait outside for him.

Kurt's desperation was keen as he turned to the boy. "Prince Charles, please have Mike Ditka sign my picture."

"And why should I do that?"

"How about I make it worth your while?"

Prince Charles agreed and stated it would cost \$100. Kurt had only \$40 on him. Charles agreed to forty upfront and the rest later.

Frank went on with his rant, oblivious to security removing them from the area. “Hey, Ditka, what happened in the Miami game?”

Security was now on the verge of doing more than removing them from the area. “You guys get out of here now or else!”

Kurt blurted out, “Hey, Mike, don’t listen to him. We love you! Tell Chris Berman he’s doing a great job on SportsCenter.”

Brian added, “Yeah, tell Boomer to keep up the good work.”

Security had had enough. “Okay, boys, the door is over here.”

Kurt had the last word as he approached the exit. “Okay, Prince, don’t forget to get my autograph!”

Kurt and Brian waited outside for Prince Charles while Frank got himself into a cab, telling them not to be late for work the next day.

Brian, emboldened by Frank’s drunken, diminished capacity, answered for them: “Yeah, yeah. Whatever, Frank! Get out of here. You’ve caused enough trouble for one day.”

Frank heard none of it as he directed the cabbie to take him to Pointy Foods.

The cab left, and Kurt and Brian waited for Prince Charles. Brian, a little impatient, asked where the boy was.

Kurt saw him first. “There he is and it looks like he’s crying.”

Prince Charles walked up to Kurt and Brian, crying and holding a Bears duffel bag.

“Are you okay? What happened? Where’s my picture?” asked Kurt.

Still crying, he managed to talk. “Some mean, crazy fan stole it from me and ran out the door.”

“Geez, where’s that security guard when you really need him? Do you know what he looks like?”

Prince Charles said it happened so fast he didn’t get a good look at the guy.

Frustrated and angry, Kurt swore, “Damn it! What’s with the duffel bag?”

Prince Charles, hiccupping between sobs, stammered, “I-I-Iron man...”

“You mean Iron Mike,” said Kurt.

“Yes, Iron Mike felt bad so he gave me this duffel bag.”

“Did he sign it?”

Prince Charles answered that Ditka did not sign his duffel bag, adding that he was keeping Kurt’s money anyway.

“Fine,” answered Kurt, “but you are not getting the remaining sixty dollars.”

“Oh yeah, keep the sixty, but I’ll have the last laugh tonight.”



Kurt and Prince Charles pulled into the driveway and saw Darci’s car was there.

“What is she doing here?” Kurt asked.

“Darci must have checked her e-mail,” said Prince Charles.

“Oh no, what is that supposed to mean?”

“Well, when you locked us in your basement I hacked into your computer and found Darci’s e-mail address. So I sent her an e-mail and she must have just checked it.”

“Hacked into my... What else did you do on my computer and how did you know my password?”

“Get real. Your password was ‘85 Bears.’ You’re so predictable.”

Kurt demanded Prince Charles show him what he did. Prince Charles ran from the driveway, laughing hysterically, as Kurt chased him into the basement only to be stopped by Darci.

“Kurt, what do you think you were doing, locking them in the basement?” she asked.

“I needed their front-row seats.”

“Kurt, I made it very clear how much work I had to do tonight and yet here I am because of your antics. You need to explain yourself to Alice. I’m leaving now. I’m going to try to salvage what’s left of my waking hours and finish what I started! Please do not disturb me for the rest of the night. We’ll discuss this tomorrow!”

“It wasn’t me, it was this brat!”

“You expect me to believe a child did this?”

“Oh, never mind,” said Kurt. He then started toward his computer with the hope he could discover what damage Prince Charles had done to his files. Before he reached his target, Alice grabbed his arm, stopping him in his tracks.

“Where exactly do you think you’re going?” said Alice.

“Get your claws off me. I need to stop Chuck’s kid before he causes more damage to my computer.”

Not to be deterred, Alice stated what by then everyone knew: “You locked us in your basement. You know I’m claustrophobic. What do you have to say for yourself?”

“Move!”

“No. You have to pay for this.”

“Move now!”

“No, not until you explain yourself.”

Kurt was about to respond but caught sight of Chuck across the room, shaking his head and putting his index finger to his lips.

“Get out of my way, Alice.” Kurt pushed past her. “What? Are you going to pepper spray me again?”

“Nooooo.”

Missing the subtle warning of the long, drawn out “no,” Kurt started to walk away. He was literally floored by an indescribably sharp pain as Alice tasered him to the ground.

“Ahhhhh!” he yelled.

“Pepper spray, Kurt? That is so nineteen nineties. Nowadays strong, independent women use tasers to take down their perpetrators or, as in this case, their kidnappers.”

Kurt was lying on the floor, writhing in pain, as Alice, having done her duty, walked up the stairs.

A horrified Chuck walked over and knelt next to Kurt. “OMG, thanks for not giving me up to Alice. Dude, it was awesome being locked down here alone with her.”

As the pain wore off enough for Kurt to regain some movement, he asked himself if it wasn’t the right time to assess his relationships. He asked himself if he would sit by, not interfering, as a friend received thousands of volts through his body. In asking

himself, he discovered that under certain circumstances he might indeed stand by and let it happen. Having realized that, he put it past him and tried to get on his feet. Asked and answered, Chuck didn't react much different than he himself might have acted under similar circumstances.

Chuck barely got out words of thanks to Kurt before Alice bellowed down, "Chuck, let's go now!"

"Chuck, help me up. I have to stop your son."

Alice, not one to be ignored, ordered Chuck to leave Kurt on the floor so he could contemplate what he'd done. It became a virtual tug of war as Kurt in turn asked Chuck for a hand up.

"LOL, Kurt, LOL. You hear her—I can't help you up. I have to get out of here."

Kurt was determined to stop Prince Charles. "Quit saying LOL, Chuck, and help me up!"

But Chuck was already upstairs with Alice when he called down, "Come on, Prince Charles, we have to get out of here right now."

The boy walked over to Kurt and looked down to him. "I told you I would have the last laugh."

"Okay, I concede. Now tell me, what did you do?"

"It is with great pleasure I can tell you I sold your blue-chip stocks. Easily, too. All I needed was to change your password."

"Okay, okay. What is it?"

Prince Charles was one to tease and torture his victims before the kill. "You know, I actually like you, Kurt. I haven't had this much fun since I framed my chemistry professor. Here, I have a present for you." He unzipped the duffel bag, reached in, and pulled out the Mike Ditka picture.

"You lied? You had the picture the whole time?"

Kurt reached his hand out to grasp the picture but was still in too much pain to reach it, prompting Prince Charles to say, "You are such a mess." He placed the picture next to Kurt's head and ran up the stairs to join his father and Alice outside.

"What's it say?" Kurt lifted his head and read the inscription

on his prized picture: “To Uncle Loser, thanks for being a fan, Iron Mike.”

Kurt hugged the picture, leaving the pain far behind him. “I got it. I finally got it. You’re going up next to Walter’s picture.”

CHAPTER 22

Push Comes to Shove

Pointy Foods was twenty-one days into the sales competition. The promise of Super Bowl tickets had both districts, Chicago and Detroit, in a dead heat and going all out.

Frank, never satisfied, opened the Monday sales meeting with his usual: “Listen up, people, these numbers are good but not good enough. A tie is a loss. A win is more sales than the opposing team. It’s that simple, so I repeat: good numbers but not good enough.”

The men were bone tired, and tempers were close to flaring as Frank refused to acknowledge the men had reached numbers never before seen.

Brian was particularly irate. “Frank, you’ve got to be kidding us! I’ve been busting my ass, working a minimum of twelve hours a day for the past three weeks.”

“Hard work is good for you. It builds character. Besides, you owe a lot more hours than that. At least now you won’t feel guilty for cheating our company with years of laziness.”

“Frank, you are so full of crap! Brian is my top salesman!” yelled Kurt.

“May I remind you that for the next ten days he works for me, and I say he’s loafing.”

Brian was too angry—justifiably angry—to let this go. “Frank, all of us are busting our asses and for what? We don’t have any proof the winner is getting Super Bowl tickets. Hell, Frank, we have no proof there *are* any tickets!”

“Hold on there! Don’t even worry about the Super Bowl tickets. You should be happy with the fat checks you’re getting this month.”

“Well, think about this, Frank: those fat checks you mentioned don’t mean squat. You think we don’t know fat checks this month mean very skinny checks next month? Do you think we don’t know our customers don’t have a sudden need for more product? Well, we get it. To make matters worse, the increased product—more than they need, I remind you—is going to spoil and we’ll be left with pissed-off customers. Excess product equals spoilage. Do you get that?”

“Come on, Brian, our customers are enjoying the volume discounts. Let me rephrase that: *most* of our customers are enjoying those volume discounts.”

“Most of our customers? Okay, you’re referring to Bernie’s and Victor’s restaurants, right? Yeah, you’re probably referring to them. Well, Frank, I’m sorry they refuse to buy extra product they don’t need.”

Frank listened with a smirk on his face while leaning back in his chair with his feet on the conference table—a sure sign something was up.

“These are two seasoned restaurant owners. I’m surprised they aren’t insulted, because they sure as hell must know we just want to win Super Bowl tickets. Tickets that don’t even exist, right Kurt?”

Kurt nodded. Brian went on: “What’s with you, Kurt? You haven’t said much this morning.”

“Guess I’m just tired.”

Brian sensed there was more to it.

Frank confirmed his suspicions when he let it be known Kurt had been reprimanded by the CEO during that morning’s conference call.

“You really enjoyed that, didn’t you, Frank?”

“Yeah, why not? You brought it on yourself. I guess your days of being the golden boy are over,” said Frank. “Those days, by

the way, actually ended about six years ago when the new CEO arrived.”

More annoyed than embarrassed, Kurt said, “Okay, Frank, there’s no need to share. Stick to the program, if that’s at all possible. You’re wasting time.”

“No, you stick to the program or else you’re going to find yourself demoted. Pay attention, everyone, our CEO made it very clear to Kurt that I am in charge right now.”

“Really?” responded Brian, more to Kurt than Frank.

“I guess,” Kurt answered, clearly having no intention of elaborating.

“Kalia, be a darling and bring me that file,” said Frank, pointing to his desk.

Kalia walked up to the podium and handed him a coffee-stained folder, catching Brian’s eye on the way. Frank didn’t notice the winks and their conspiratorial smiles.

“Okay,” Frank blustered. “I know everybody has worked fairly hard over the past few weeks. Fairly hard doesn’t cut it! You can do better, and if this is what you need to hear, then listen. Brian, get your ass up here and read this company memo.”

Brian walked up to the podium and read the memo. “If it’s legit, and it looks like it is, the company is going to give the winners ten free tickets to this year’s Super Bowl. Kurt, take a look. See if this memo looks legit to you.”

Kurt’s sad look was replaced by a huge smile as he slowly read the memo. “It looks legit. Too legit to quit. It’s the real deal. Let’s win this thing!”

The words were barely out of Kurt’s mouth before Frank charged between Brian and Kurt and grabbed the microphone and the memo. “Now get out there and sell some product!”

Fully invigorated with renewed purpose, the salesmen gathered their belongings and headed out the door with visions of front-row Super Bowl seats fueling their energy.

Frank watched them leave. “After I’m promoted I’m going to make Marcus’ life a living nightmare... A never-ending, living nightmare!”

Brian pulled Kurt aside on the way out to tell him they needed a favor from Bernie and Victor—namely to buy extra product. Kurt said he planned to hit them up later in the day.

A proactive Brian was already planning an order. “Bernie will probably give in because his Hawaiian luaus are now back at his busiest restaurant. I’m writing up an order for tons of pineapples and ham as we speak.”

“Good idea. What about Victor?”

“I haven’t been able to find him. Every time I enter his restaurant, his pretty little assistant says he must have stepped out and then hands me an illegible, handwritten order. It’s really weird, Kurt.”

“It is a little weird. Are you sure he wasn’t at one of his other restaurants? Did you check?”

“I tried them all—believe me, I tried. Even though he spends most of his time at the one on Lake Shore Drive, I checked each and every other one.”

“Brian, he’s at one of them—most likely the Lake Shore Drive one. He’s hiding from you. Plain and simple, he’s hiding. He’s trying to avoid the pressure.”

“What pressure?”

“Come on, Brian, you know exactly what I’m talking about. We’re pressuring him to buy extra product—more than he wants, more than he needs, and probably more than he can store. He’s there, Brian, you can count on it.”

Brian said he suspected as much but had dismissed the idea when he couldn’t figure out how Victor was disappearing just as he entered the restaurant.

“Victor is brilliantly well practiced at hiding. Think about all the times he’s had to duck away from angry boyfriends. Believe me, Brian, he’s got it down to a science. Take my word, he’s there.”

“Yeah, he’s in there hiding, but where?”

“Let’s switch. I’ll take care of Victor and you can tackle Bernie’s. On another note, how did you get Chuck to put in that huge order last week?”

Brian, surprised Kurt didn’t know, said, “I didn’t. I had nothing

to do with it. Frank told me he would be taking Chuck's order for the rest of the month himself. In fact, he let me know this week's deli order will be even bigger than it was last week. Go figure."

"Impossible! Something smells rotten in Denmark."

As the day progressed Kurt was more and more preoccupied by the fact that Chuck had placed his order through Frank. He couldn't get past it. *I need to pay Chuck a visit*, he thought, but when he showed up at Chuck's deli, he was told Chuck had taken the morning off.

Kurt was on Chuck's street, approaching the house, when a small, old, beat-up rental truck driven by a man wearing sunglasses and a hat as old as the truck passed him.

"What the hell? That guy looked like Frank! In fact, I know it was Frank!" he said while looking at the now-speeding truck getting smaller and smaller in the rearview mirror. "Yeah, that was Frank!"

Pulling into Chuck's driveway, Kurt had that infallible instinct something was not right as he rang the doorbell.

"What's up, Frankie? You forget something?" said Chuck, his surprise visible when he saw not Frank but his friend Kurt. "Oh hi, Kurtis. What's going on?"

"I don't know. Why don't you tell me?"

Chuck stepped outside, closing his door behind him. "So, Frank hasn't told you anything?"

"Nothing. But I know something's going on and it has everything to do with that huge order you placed, Chuckie."

"Well, sure it does, Kurt. Anything I can do to help you guys out. LOL, you know you're my BFF"

"Oh my God, Chuck, stop the lingo or at least get it straight. Chicks have BFFs, not guys."

"Okay, but you know I'm here for you guys."

"Yeah right, Chuck. *You guys?* You mean you and Frank, if that was Frank driving away, and I know it was. Why was he here, Chuckie? Why was he driving that truck down your street?"

Chuck tried putting Kurt off by saying he had no idea who it was.

“Let me in, Chuck.”

“I can’t. Alice is getting dressed.”

“No, she isn’t. I saw her going to work this morning when I left Darci’s.”

“LOL, Kurtis, I have your surprise present inside and I haven’t wrapped it yet.”

“Stop with the LOL! My birthday is in April. Nice try. Now let me inside.” Kurt charged into the house. “What the hell is this?”

The house was packed with thousands and thousands of sixteen-ounce Styrofoam cups.

“I cannot believe my eyes. Do you have anything to say? Anything at all, Chuck?”

“Isn’t it beautiful?”

“There were no cup sales listed on his last delivery receipt!”

“Of course you didn’t see cup sales. Frank *gave* them to me,” said Chuck.

“And just how, exactly, did he do that?”

“Oh, that’s easy to answer. He stole them from Detroit’s warehouse. I guess he’s got somebody there who hates that Marcus guy, and he helped him pull it off.”

“So that’s where Frank disappeared to last weekend.”

Chuck, now on a roll, continued: “He said I get the cups free but I have to order a ton of food for my delis.”

“That’s great, Chuck, but have you thought about the food that doesn’t sell? What are you planning to do with that?”

“No problem. I return it. I have to wait a few weeks but he said I can return it.”

“Just so I understand everything, you bought a ton of food you can’t use, you store the excess until you can return it—if ever—and, to top it off, you’re in possession of stolen goods. Do I have that right?”

Chuck raised his hand to speak but Kurt cut him off. “No,

no, don't say anything. I'm not through. You bought the food, accepted the cups, will return the food, and Brian and I will pay. Not yet, let me finish. Brian and I will pay through our paychecks, which will be next to nothing because the spoiled, returned food directly affects our paychecks. Do I have that right?"

"Well, almost. The paycheck thing—that's between you and Frank. Oh yeah, I almost forgot. Frank also said he'd throw in a couple of Super Bowl tickets."

Holding his rage as well as he could, Kurt thought it would have been cheaper just to buy Chuck the damn cups, but fat chance in hell that was ever happening.

"Something is not adding up here, Chuck," he said as he turned to leave for Victor's restaurant, not bothering to say goodbye.



Kurt pulled up to Victor's restaurant on Lake Shore and walked in. He greeted the assistant manager and asked where Victor was, mentioning only that he wanted to talk about his order.

The assistant manager said he had just seen Victor heading toward the office. "Let's head back there," he said. The man couldn't hide his surprise to see Victor was not in the office. "I must be going crazy. I could have sworn I just saw him back here."

"I can tell you that you are not crazy because I saw his Ferrari parked outside. What Victor did was leave when he saw me coming," said Kurt as he pointed to the video monitor.

"No way. You guys are good friends, plus I would have seen him leave. He's obviously not here yet. He probably left his car here overnight."

Kurt said he would just hang out in Victor's office for a while.

"That's fine. I know you guys are tight," said the assistant manager, then he left and returned to the floor.

Kurt shut the office door behind the man, walked over to the desk and peeked under it. "Well, you're not hiding here."

Kurt then walked over to the pictures on Victor's shelves and reached for one particular photo of Victor with his arms around

the band Il Divo. Victor, with his urbane good looks and operatic voice, could easily have passed for a fifth member of the group. He looked over the many pictures of Victor with beautiful women. Kurt was thinking out loud when he said, "Victor, you certainly are one smooth son of a gun."

Kurt heard "thank you" in Victor's voice from behind the bookshelf.

Kurt, startled by the unexpected response, uttered, "Where the hell did that come from?" Kurt then heard Victor laughing behind the wall.

When Kurt turned toward the sound of the laughter he saw only an oil portrait of Victor, unique in that the eyes were actually moving in tandem with Kurt's movements.

"Where are you, Victor?" asked Kurt of the disembodied voice.

The bookshelf moved as if in answer, and a laughing Victor poked his head around the corner. "What's-a matta, did I scare you? Come-a back here."

Kurt went back to the security room full of surveillance monitors, most of which were pointed toward the bar—the most profitable element of any restaurant. "Geez, Victor, this looks like the audio-video center of a TV-production studio. What the hell is all this for? You're like Tony Montana at the end of *Scarface*."

"I like to know what's-a going on in my *ristorante*."

"You mean you like spying on the beautiful women at the bar?"

"And the tables," Victor admitted, pointing to a monitor showing a group of businesswomen enjoying a late lunch at one of the tables. "The beautiful lady on the right, she is a single." Victor turned the volume up and they listened to about thirty seconds of conversation before turning it back down.

"Victor, I am speechless."

"What-a you expect? When I walk-a out a here I wanna know what a say."

"Victor, that gives new meaning to getting a leg up on the competition." Kurt briefly raised his hand. "No, Victor, don't ask. It's just a figure of speech."

All Victor cared about was that Kurt would not mention the cameras to anyone, and Kurt assured him he wouldn't say anything, adding, "Nobody would believe it anyway."

"Okay, now it's time for business. I no need-a extra supplies, so please don't ask."

"I understand, Victor, but you don't have to hide from your friends. Just say 'no' to the extra products."

"Sorry, Kurt, but I no like to poop on the party."

"You mean you don't like to be a party pooper."

"That's-a what-a I said."

CHAPTER 23

A Fateful Decision

To Kurt's surprise, he and Brian survived another stressful workweek with Frank in charge. So grueling was the week that Saturday, when awakened by the aromatic fragrance of rich coffee from Darci's kitchen, Kurt momentarily forgot where he was and nearly jumped up to head for work. Breathing in the welcomed smell, he took a look at his surroundings, breathed a sigh of relief, and settled back into Darci's comfortable bed, miles away from Pointy Foods.

"Good morning, sweetie. That sure smells good," he said.

"Good morning back at you, Kurt. How'd you sleep?"

"Well enough for me to get the newspaper." Kurt put on his robe, went to the door, full coffee mug in hand, and, expertly not losing a drop of coffee, bent over to pick up the newspaper. Sensing he was not alone, he looked to his side and was surprised to see Chuck in Alice's robe outside Alice's door.

"Nice robe, Chuck."

"LOL, Kurtis, LOL! I just threw on Alice's robe to grab the newspaper. Wanna come over?"

"Nope."

"Okay. Later, dude," Chuck replied to empty air, as Kurt was already back inside, heading toward the bedroom, where he got back in bed next to Darci.

"I've said it before and I'll say it again: the only thing separating us from Alice and Chuck right now is a thin piece of drywall. I can't believe it. Just a thin piece of drywall!"

“Kurt, get over it. It’s not that bad.”

“Yeah, easy for you to say. Here’s the newspaper. Just leave me the sports section.”

“Of course. That goes without saying.”

“When I woke up, I forgot it was Saturday and nearly got ready for work, but what I really forgot is that I *do* have to go to work today. Can you believe it? Saturday and I have to go to work! And Sunday!”

“Don’t you think it’s strange you’re complaining about working the weekend when you have the opportunity to win Super Bowl tickets? It’s not like you.”

“You’re right, it’s not. The problem is I have serious doubts there are Super Bowl tickets. Yeah, I know I saw the company memo, but nothing is adding up. Frank even promised Chuck a couple of tickets, but the memo clearly stated the tickets were for employees only.”

“Ask someone from the corporate office.”

“I might have done just that in the past, but this is a Frank-friendly CEO who doesn’t like me one little bit. Don’t forget I was verbally spanked this week during the company conference call. The worst parts were hearing Dwayne and Marcus laughing in the background and seeing Frank gloating through the whole call. He didn’t even bother to hide it. It was appalling, even for Frank.”

“Okay, I get that, but what are you saying?”

“I’m saying I’m now like every other working stiff in America in that I don’t enjoy my job. I used to. I think I did as well as I did because I loved my job. Past tense! Darci, try to think about getting up every morning to go to a job you hate, to satisfy unrealistic expectations, to put up with an irrational boss. A miserable boss who thrives on spreading misery all around him.”

“I can’t imagine, but come on, sweetie, surely it isn’t that bad.”

“Darci, this excuse for a man is so perverse he’s abusing the customers’ trust now, knowing he’ll have to pay later. We all pay.”

“Considering all you’re saying, maybe it’s time for you to move on. I know you’ve worked there for more years than you can count, but is staying worth this?”

“No, it isn’t and yes, I have put in a lot of years, but I have a lot to consider. I think I can’t be too hasty. Maybe I’ll feel better if I win those Super Bowl tickets.”

“Okay, that I get,” said Darci, thinking but not saying, *If there are Super Bowl tickets*, because she too had some doubt. She said instead, “What would be your dream job?”

Kurt, dismissing the question, said, “My dream job? Working with you, of course.”

“Kurt, relax. That was not a trick question.”

“Now are we talking about a dream job or are we talking about a dream-job business?”

“Either one.”

“Well, ideally speaking, Brian and I always felt we should own a professional ball team—a football team. Other than that, whatever the business, it would have to be sports-related.”

“Well, I guess if you’re going to dream, you might as well dream big,” said Darci, pointing to a newspaper headline announcing nobody had won the largest lottery prize in history.

“All I ever hear about lately is this lottery. Just how big is it? I don’t know how big because I don’t play those things often. I never win anything.”

“I think it’s more than five hundred million. Besides, buying one ticket wouldn’t be a big deal. Keep in mind you’re guaranteed not to win if you don’t buy a ticket.”

“It doesn’t matter. I’m not going to win.”

Darci persisted. “Well, think of it this way: it’s as much of a dream as those Super Bowl tickets. I want you to buy a lottery ticket.”

And with that Kurt agreed.



Saturday turned out to be a very tough workday for Kurt and Brian because most of the restaurants were tapped out. Chicago had a large lead over Detroit, and Frank didn’t want to take a chance things would change. He called Kurt and Brian repeatedly all day, wanting sales updates.

Brian looked at his ringing phone. "Oh no, it's Frank again. Should I get it?"

"Answer and put it on speaker mode."

Brian answered the call. "Hey, Frank, what's up?"

"I'll tell you what better be up. Today's numbers better be up! What do you have for me?" barked Frank, ignoring the fact he'd called just an hour earlier with the same question.

"Frank, nothing has changed since the last time you called, which was about an hour ago."

Kurt added, "Frank, all the restaurants are full of product. Nobody is buying anymore."

"Not all. What about that Thai restaurant?"

"Yeah, well, funny you should ask," said Kurt. "They complained you sold them way too much curry powder. They want to return some of it."

"No way! No returns. Not yet, at least. They can wait a little longer. Just don't call them back for another week or so."

"Whatever, Frank," replied Kurt. "You get that we're done now."

"No, you're not done! There's still one more."

"It's not going to happen," said Kurt, well aware to whom Frank was referring. "Victor is adamant. He's not going to give in. He made that absolutely clear."

"We'll see. I'm heading over there after I personally drop off these ten thousand sausages to Chuckles' Delis."

"What? Chuck doesn't even sell sausages at his delis."

"I know, but this week he does."

"Let me guess. You're going to load up that beat-up rental truck and drop it off at one off his places and then he's going to return everything in a month, after they spoil. Right, Frank?"

"No comment."

"That tells me volumes. That truck? Shouldn't it be refrigerated?"

"Last time I heard, Kurt, you work in sales, not the health department. A couple of bags of ice and it's good to go."

"I don't think so." Kurt was appalled Frank might even believe

what he was saying. How could Frank, even with all his deficits in reasoning, not grasp the enormity of the situation?

“Again, I don’t think so—not for ten thousand sausages. Sausages, for God’s sake! Frank, consider this advice, this warning, my gift to you: you are going to get yourself, not to mention the rest of us, in trouble with the health department. And the customers! You’ve got refrigerated trucks. Use one of them.”

“Whatever,” said Frank, hanging up the phone, leaving Kurt to wonder whether or not Frank had simply forgotten they had refrigerated trucks.

Kurt turned to Brian, giving him the thumbs-up sign. “Brian, by the time he checks out a refrigerated truck from the warehouse—assuming he will—by the time he checks it out and tends to the product the day should be over. Let’s slip back into the office and find out what’s really going on. And, more importantly, what he’s not telling us.”

“Good idea. I know the place is empty and no one’s there because Kalia is performing at Bernie’s luau tonight—not that she’d say anything anyway.”

Kurt and Brian made their way back to Pointy Foods, planning to pick Frank’s office lock. As they entered they couldn’t avoid the permeating smell of Frank everywhere. No corner was free of his odor.

“Kurt, have you noticed it smells like Frank in here?” said Brian, causing both of them to laugh.

“Yeah, the odor is almost unidentifiable, almost... I’d say it’s a cocktail, no pun intended, of spilled booze, stale smoke, and body odor sprinkled with his cheap aftershave.”

“Right on. Hey, there’s the ripped hat and the dollar-store sunglasses he wore to Chuck’s place this week.”

Brian donned the hat and sunglasses and they both broke out laughing.

“Ugh, you actually put that thing on your head?” said Kurt.

Brian whipped off the hat and threw it on the floor. “Can’t believe I did that. Well, let’s get to the good stuff.”

“That would be in his bottom drawer. It’s the only locked one.”

“Hmmm, indeed it is, Watson. A crappy lock at that. I can pop this thing open in no time.” Brian proceeded to open the drawer by unscrewing the lock from underneath with only his hands. “That was easy!”

“I wonder how many Pointy Foods secrets are in here,” said Kurt as he took a few small bottles of whiskey off the pile of paperwork. “Look what I found. An old picture of Frank.”

“Wow, you’re right, it is Frank. I can’t believe my eyes, and I hate to admit it but he really looks good here. What happened to him, other than age?”

“Some old timers here said before our time Frank was a pretty sharp guy.”

“Yeah, I suppose. I’ve heard the legend of Frank. That is, Frank before Marcus set him up for skimming. They say before the scandal Frank was normal,” said Brian, “but I find it hard to believe.”

“I think when his girlfriend—now ex-girlfriend—left him for Marcus, that was when he had his mental breakdown.”

“And then,” Brian went on, “corporate sent his majesty’s reign of terror to Chicago. What we really got was a washed-up, demoted manager. In corporate parlance he got a last-chance mercy position. From that point on, with that downward kick, he became our problem and an added footnote to Pointy Foods’ history.”

“Whatever actually went down,” said Kurt, wanting to put the legend of Frank to rest, “he will do anything to get his old job back, and Marcus will do anything to finally get that promotion. Listen, I don’t believe there are Super Bowl tickets for us.”

“Oh no, Kurt, hear me loud and clear: there better be Super Bowl tickets or Frank’s going to get his ass royally kicked.”

“Look, here’s the memo from the other day. It looks legit but I’m convinced he forged it. Wouldn’t be surprised,” said Kurt, digging into the files. “Oooh, here’s something. I’ve never seen this memo before. It’s dated and time-stamped identically to the one we saw, but it looks different.”

“What does this one say?”

“Once again it’s typical Frank. It mentions two tickets, not the ten tickets he promised. It’s two tickets to the Super Bowl and not even for us. They’re for our best customer.”

Brian uttered just one word—“Chuck”—and started trashing Frank’s office, turning over the lamps and chairs as Kurt continued to read the rest of the memo.

“Hold on, Brian, more bad news.”

“More? What more bad news can there be? We’re not going to the Super Bowl and everything has been a lie.”

“The reason I never saw this letter is because I’m going to be demoted back to salesman.”

“Geez, Kurt, are you sure you’re reading that right?”

“Oh yeah, I’m reading it right. They’re downsizing and there’ll be only one sales manager for each location, and it’s not going to be me.”

“Geez, Kurt, you’re getting screwed with the rest of us. That’s it. I’m quitting.”

“I already had this discussion with Darci. Just this morning, strangely enough.”

“You did? What was her take on it?”

“She wants me to buy a lottery ticket and win that big jackpot. Then, she said, we can buy a professional—”

Brian jumped in to complete the thought: “Football team. Yeah! It’s a brilliant idea.”

“No, Brian, it’s not. Think about it. Who wins those things? Nobody.”

“Kurt, listen, it’s not silly. Let’s buy just one ticket. No, hear me out. We buy one ticket because we can’t win unless we buy at least one ticket. Get it?”

“Fine. What numbers would we use?” Kurt picked up a Post-it notepad from the desk.

“Easy. We play our birthdays, yours and mine. Our birthdays’ months and days. Mine are May and twenty-two, so that’s five twenty-two. Yours is in April?”

Not conscious of actually going ahead with this, Kurt nonetheless stated, "April twenty-third."

"Okay, that's a four and a twenty-three. We're both thirty-eight years old, so we can use that. That leaves the super number."

"Okay how about number thirty-four?" offered Kurt.

"Oh yeah! Walter Payton's number. I'm loving it!"

"Okay, so it's agreed. We're playing four, five, twenty-two, twenty-three, thirty-eight, and our super number will be thirty-four."

"Come on, Kurt, let's make a pact right now that if we win we'll use all the net proceeds to try to buy a professional football team."

"You got it. Let's go to the supermarket right now and buy our ticket."

"We're gonna win this baby!"

They left Frank's office in shambles and purchased the lottery ticket, then signed the back together.

Kurt then went to Victor's restaurant, where he saw Frank sitting at the bar by himself. He snuck past Frank and headed straight to Victor's office.

"Hey, Victor, I know you're back in your secret room. Let me in."

Once again Kurt heard the familiar sound of Victor's laughing. "Okay, Kurt, the jag is up."

"No, Victor, the jig is up."

"That's-a what I said."

"Look, Victor, I know you're trying to avoid Frank. Justifiably. How long has he been sitting at your bar?"

"How long? Three bottles of wine long."

"Noooo, he just sat there and drank three bottles of wine?"

"He won't leave."

"It's okay, Victor. This is what I want you to do. Go down and talk to him. Tell him you'll talk business only in your office. Then get him up here so I can see his reaction when you tell him you're not going to order anything from him for a while. Would you do that for me?"

“Sure, Kurt, that’s-a easy.”

Victor closed the bookshelf that hid the secret room while Kurt focused on the video monitor showing the bar.

“Hey, Franklin, whatcha doing at my bar tonight?” Victor asked.

Frank answered that they needed to talk, and Victor suggested they talk in his office. Frank grabbed the bottle of wine to take with him to Victor’s office.

“Letta me getta glass. You forgot to bring yours,” Said Victor.

Frank told Victor to forget the glass, having every intention of drinking straight from his bottle. “You want a swig?” he slurred.

“No thanks, not now.”

Frank came straight to the point. “Listen, Victor, I need your help. I need a big order from you on Monday or else I might not win my company’s sales contest.”

“Frank, that’s-a your problem, not mine. No. No extra product on Monday.”

“Let me make it your problem. I’ve got an offer you can’t refuse.”

“Hmmm, that’s-a sound familiar somehow. What’s-a that supposed to mean?”

“It’s a Sicilian message. It means Luca Brasi sleeps with the fishes.”

“Funny man. You no Sicilian. You no Italian and you no connected, either. Who is Luca Brasi?”

Abandoning his failed scenario, Frank moved on. “Okay, how about this?” A drunken Frank jumped up and reached for the antique gun mounted on Victor’s wall. “Now are you ready to place the order?”

Victor knew the gun didn’t work and was nothing more than a piece of wall art. “No, no order.”

Frank was startled and distracted when he noticed the blue eyes of Victor’s portrait move. “Sorry, Victor, I think I might have had a few too many drinks tonight.” Frank stared at Victor’s eyes and noticed they were brown. “Let me get myself together here. I have a new proposal for you. One I think you’ll like.”

“What now, Franklin?”

“I have a great-looking cousin who lives in Chicago.” Frank pulled a picture out of his wallet and showed it to Victor.

“You no lie. She is beautiful.”

“Victor, give me a good order and I’ll bring her to your restaurant for dinner.”

“Okay. She is beautiful.”

Kurt came out from behind the bookshelf, unable to take anymore.

When the bookshelf opened, a startled Frank yelled, “What the hell is going on?”

Kurt emerged completely, grabbed Frank’s collar with both hands, and shoved him against the wall. “Enough is enough, Frank. What? You’re pimping out your cousin, you sick bastard.”

“No, no, I’m just introducing her to Victor.” Frank then managed to turn his head over Kurt’s clenched fists so he could look directly at Victor to say, “But I did hear she’s pretty easy.”

“You’re sick. Let me see your wallet.” Kurt grabbed the wallet and looked at the picture and said, “Just what I thought. This isn’t his cousin. This is a picture of a supermodel.”

“What can I say? I’m desperate.”

“You sure are. Desperate enough to actually use quotes from *The Godfather*? Desperate enough to grab a fake gun and threaten Victor? I do not understand why Marcus found it necessary to frame you. You do enough on your own to get yourself fired or even arrested! He should’ve just sat back and waited and let you do the job for him! But then again, he’s as stupid as you are.”

“Oh yeah, Kurt? What about you hiding in a secret room spying on me, huh? What about that?”

“No argument, Frank. I spied on you. You made up that company letter. There are no tickets! You’re going to give Chuck the only tickets that are available.”

“I had to motivate you guys. I knew if you thought you could win Super Bowl tickets you would be unstoppable.”

“But there are no tickets!”

“I know that and I apologize for that.”

“Apology not accepted. For countless reasons, I might add. Just exactly when were you planning to let me know that I was getting demoted? When was that going to be, Frank?”

“Hey, it is what it is.” Kurt let go of Frank.

“Hold that thought, Frank, because you’ve got some problems. Brian knows there are no Super Bowl tickets and he’s telling all the salesmen and anyone else who’ll listen.”

“No, you’ve got to stop him. If I win this contest I’ll be the regional manager and you can be my sales manager. That means you’d keep your position, Kurt.”

“I can’t trust you. As you’re so fond of saying, it is what it is, Frank.”

“Think about this: if Marcus wins he’ll get the regional manager spot and I’ll get the only sales-manager spot left in Chicago. So you need me as much as I need you.”

“I don’t care anymore. You and Marcus are a couple of the biggest jerks I have ever met. Just get out of here.”

“Well at least tell Brian the predicament you’re in.”

“I’ll talk to him but I don’t care that much anymore. Here’s another line from *The Godfather* for you: ‘Leave the gun and take the cannoli.’”

Victor got Frank into a cab and sent him back to Pointy Foods along with the bottle of wine in his hands. Frank was royally pissed when he saw his office had been ransacked. “What the hell happened here?” He stumbled to his desk and saw there was no place to sit down, so he stood while he hit the speed dial to get a taxi. He stared at the Post-it note with the lottery numbers.

“Lottery numbers? What? Lottery numbers?” Frank took the paper and stuck it in his wallet and then took the cab to his favorite liquor store.

“You want the usual?” queried the clerk.

“What? Oh yeah, the usual.”

“Now you have to pay me.”

“Wait, I need to pick my numbers.”

The clerk handed him a form. "Here, fill this out."

Frank filled in the numbers from the piece of paper and, when he received his ticket, signed his name and shoved it into his jacket pocket. And, of course, Frank being Frank, he remembered only his bottle and forgot he'd ever bought a lottery ticket.

CHAPTER 24

Lottery Winners

The Sunday morning after the sales contest ended, Kurt awoke still feeling the effects of the month's chaos at Pointy Foods.

"Darci, I gotta tell you, it's getting harder to get out of bed in the morning."

"Then don't get up. You should sleep in this morning. You probably can use the extra rest anyway."

"No can do, babe. Today's the day I wire my new surround sound and mount the new HDTV at my place."

Darci reminded him he at least had gotten something out of the sales-contest madness.

"So true. I can't wait to watch the games in my man cave. That's what it's all about!"

"There you go. Life isn't so bad after all."

"Actually, Darci, you know I love my life with you. I can't wait until we finally tie the knot. That's how good it is! Eh, that is, when we finally set the date."

"I'm with you, but we need to plan. We'll need a house big enough to have a section to keep all your sports paraphernalia. That way it won't overtake the rest of the house, and we'll both be happy."

Kurt mulled that over a minute. "I think what you're saying is I need the ultimate man cave. I mean, we do have enough money saved for a nicer pad, but I kinda like the way things are now. Life is perfect. Well, minus Alice living next to you and minus my job becoming so stressful lately. Both wear me out."

“Kurt, you don’t like change. You don’t want your perfect world punctuated by the unpredictable.”

“Speaking of predictable, I’m going to get the newspaper.”

“Way to dodge the discussion, dear. I’m proud of you.”

“Thanks, hon.”

Kurt opened the front door and saw Chuck, in one of Alice’s robes, bent over to grab Darci’s newspaper.

“Chuck, WTF?”

“Hey, good morning, Kurtis. LOL! I was just borrowing your newspaper,” he replied as if this were just business as usual.

“So what happened to Alice’s and why do you think it’s okay to take Darci’s?”

“Alice ticked off the paperboy and he refused—well, to be precise, he refuses—to deliver to *her* condo. The Chinese-food guy refuses to deliver too. And the dry cleaners. I think these guys all know each other.”

“Geez, Chuck, what a surprise. Name one person she doesn’t tick off?”

“Me. She doesn’t tick me off.”

“Besides you.”

“Can I have half the paper?” asked Chuck.

Kurt grabbed Darci’s newspaper out of his hand. “No. Go steal someone else’s newspaper or enroll Alice in a personal-skills course. Why don’t you do that?”

“Funny, Kurt, funny. Always the kidder.” Chuck could still be heard laughing as Kurt shut the door behind him.

Kurt understood Chuck and accepted his skilled ways of deflecting issues he didn’t want to deal with. Alice was his counterpart. He passively avoided with an abundance of filters and she, like a Sherman tank, harshly advanced feet first with no filters at all.

“I can’t believe Chuck,” said Kurt as he wiggled himself back under the bed covers with the coveted newspaper.

“What did he do now?”

“He tried to steal your newspaper.”

Darci laughed and said, “I imagined something more dramatic because you stood at the door so long. Were you thinking something?”

“Thinking? I’m always thinking... Mainly about how to replace that wall with studio-grade soundproofing. You laugh, Darci, but those two never cease to amaze me. That’s all.”

“Why steal my news—oh, wait, I remember why. Alice got into a really loud argument with the paperboy last week. Just let it go. It’s just a newspaper.”

“I’m beyond glad Alice has no paper delivery ‘cause now Chuck can get himself dressed, drive to the store, and *buy* himself a paper and I won’t have to see him in the morning wearing one of Alice’s robes.”

Kurt’s peace was short-lived. Chuck started pounding on the wall just behind their bed.

“What now? What the hell is he doing now?”

Chuck started yelling through the wall as he and Alice laughed hysterically. “LOL, Kurtis, LOL. After you’re done with the paper can you set it outside your front door? That way I won’t bother you two lovebirds. One more thing, Kurtis. Just knock on the wall twice right after you set it outside.”

Kurt, seeing only red mist, turned to look at Darci. She was unsuccessfully trying to keep a straight face in deference to Kurt’s annoyance. It was only seconds before she joined in the laughter.

“Kurt, they’re just messing with you.”

“Darci, with your permission, I’m going over to their condo with an axe and I’m going to kill them both. Then I’m going back to my place so I can read your newspaper in peace. You’re welcome to join me if you wish.”

“In the killing or the going back to your place part?”

“Both.”

“Okay. I don’t have an axe, so you’ll have to skip the killing part and go back to your place. I’m going to work out, so I’ll catch up with you later.”

“Fine.”



Kurt made it to his place in minutes. Still wearing his robe, he went down his quiet stairs and sat on his quiet couch in his quiet room. When he quietly started flipping through the sections, the quiet was abruptly interrupted by the jarring headline announcing the largest lottery prize had been won. The only other thing he read was the winning tickets were purchased in Chicago.

He reread the headline and wondered what the odds were that they could have won. He decided not to even look. He went straight to the sports section. He tried to read but was paralyzed by the possibilities...and hope.

“This is silly. I’m just going to put the paper down. Let Brian waste his time checking the numbers. I’ve got man-cave business to attend to.”

Kurt took out the cables and wires he would need to upgrade his audio-video system—something he had wanted to do for a long time. But he couldn’t help it. He had to look.

“This is just ridiculous. Nobody ever wins these things. But I won’t get anything done until I check.” Even though Kurt knew the numbers they’d played he grabbed his ticket anyway. “Okay, let’s get this over with.”

Kurt reached for the local entertainment section, where the weekly lottery column was located. He did so with the nauseating feeling of anxiety commonly associated with cliffhanging moments...or was it unfamiliar hope for the impossible?

Kurt was a realistic man who didn’t waste time hoping for the impossible. The what-if moments with his friends were just for fun. Or were they?

Kurt nearly fainted as he matched the numbers one by one. “This can’t be.” He read them over and over again, reading each number aloud as he matched it on the ticket. “We won! I think I’m gonna...”

Kurt leaned over and vomited onto his carpet. He sat on the couch for a half hour, then started cleaning the carpet. He was almost finished when Darci finally arrived a few hours later.

“Hey, what happened?” she asked.

“Will you move in with me?”

“Chuck and Alice must have really gotten to you this morning.”

“I suppose. It’s not just that. I think it’s time we finally tie the knot.”

“You mean you want me to put my fine crystal next to your signed Chicago Bears football in the china cabinet?” teased Darci.

“It will be an eclectic look.”

“And my dresses will be hanging next to your sports jerseys in the master closet? Seriously, Kurt, what happened to your carpet?”

“You can have your own closet—your own walk-in closet. You can have your own section of the house.”

“Ah, I see. And when are we actually ever going to own a new place?”

“Now, Darci. Right now. Thanks to you, Brian and I won the lottery.”

“Funny, Kurt. Now you’re pulling my leg. No way you actually won. You didn’t win, did you? Oh my goodness, you won!”

Kurt grabbed Darci and hugged her. “Yes, yes, yes!”

Darci screamed. “Does Brian know yet?”

“No, not yet. He should be here soon to watch the NASCAR race on my new HD system. That was the plan. I threw up when I read the numbers.”

“Kurt, how do you know he doesn’t know? Isn’t it possible he too saw the announcement?”

“No, not really. Not a chance, actually, since Brian doesn’t read the newspaper and the only thing he watches on TV is sports. And I haven’t told anyone.”

“This is a lot to absorb. Your dream has now become a reality. You can buy that professional football team now.”

“Not so fast. We don’t have enough because there were two winning tickets. Even if we had won the whole thing, we would still need loans.”

As if on cue, Brian opened the front door and started down the stairs.

“Doesn’t anyone believe in knocking or ringing my doorbell?” asked Kurt.

“After all these years, why start now?” Brian replied.

“Come here, Brian.”

Kurt and Brian stared at each other eye to eye for about ten seconds before they burst out laughing.

“You son of a bitch, Brian, you already know.”

“And so do you.”

They were both hugging each other and jumping up and down, chanting, “NFL! NFL!” Brian picked Darci up over his shoulders as they all laughed.

“Careful, Brian, you’re going to hurt my fiancée,” said Kurt.

Brian put Darci back down. “No more excuses. You two are going to get married now and I’m going to be best man.” Brian assumed his most-formal stance and tone. “Darci, rest assured I will take my duties as best man very seriously.”

Kurt came back down to earth. “What about the football team?”

“Hell yes, we made a pact. How much do you think we’ll get after taxes?”

“Well, two winners cuts it in half. Lump sum? Halved once more. I figure after taxes we’ll split close to a hundred and fifty million. Around four hundred twenty thousand in tax on a million leaves us five hundred eighty thousand on each million won.”

“Okay, okay, that’s seventy-five million apiece. Hello, football team!”

“Not quite, Brian. We’ll be short. We’ll have to get loans.”

“Okay, how about this? We made a pact that if we won we would try to buy a football team. That hasn’t changed, right?”

Kurt nodded in agreement.

“So why don’t we each throw in fifty million and start a new company with a hundred million? We’ll earn our way to a team sooner or later.”

“That leaves us with twenty-five million each. We each throw in five mil to a charity,” Kurt cut in, “and that leaves us twenty mil each to spend any way we want.”

“Yeah, then we can spend the last twenty million any way we want.”

“Hello, Super Bowl tickets.” Kurt turned to Darci. “We’re going to have one great wedding—maybe in Dallas during Super Bowl week. We can buy a really cool house with the ultimate man cave. Don’t worry, Darci, it’ll be more than big enough for your own space or getaway. And you don’t have to work again.”

“That sounds good, Kurt, but I love my job.”

“Oh I know you do, sweetie, but you’ll be working because you want to.”

“Hey, Brian, what are you going to do with your twenty million?”

“I’m going to get myself a house just like yours in your new neighborhood, and...and we are never, ever going to miss a sporting event ever again!”

They high-fived each other, then Kurt asked, “What about Pointy Foods and Frank?”

“I was quitting whether I won or not. Make no mistake! That’s a fact, Kurt.”

“Okay, okay, I get that. I hear you loud and clear. Now hear me out. Tomorrow morning, before we go public, we should go to the Monday-morning sales meeting as usual and pretend we never won the lottery.”

“This is gonna be fun! No two ways about it.”

CHAPTER 25

The Fruitful Bounty

Kurt and Brian arrived at Pointy Foods for the Monday-morning meeting dressed up like Jake and Elwood in *The Blues Brothers*. The other salesmen just stared at them. Kurt joined Brian and sat with the salesmen. Kalia asked Kurt to come up and sit in the front of the room where he belonged.

“Good morning, Kalia. I’m going to sit with the salesmen today.”

Frank entered the room visibly shaking from all the wine he’d drunk the night before. He didn’t fail to notice Kurt and Brian were wearing the Blues Brothers suits.

“Who do you two think you are, Jake and Elwood?” he asked.

“Yes,” said Kurt.

Frank knew they were up to something but hadn’t a clue what it could be; all he knew was his trouble radar was beeping. “Kurt, if you want to sit with your peers, then be my guest. In fact, you might want to get used to sitting there.”

Frank changed the subject when he didn’t get a reaction from Kurt—further confirmation in his mind that something was up. “All right, gentlemen, Kurt and I want to thank you for your efforts in the sales contest. It is now officially over and it looks as if we are so far ahead we’re going to win this one.”

“Oh, good. I guess we get our Super Bowl tickets,” said Brian sarcastically.

Frank tersely replied they’d get to that later, but Brian insisted, “No, we’ll get to that now!”

“Okay, Brian. I know you know I received some misinformation, but I’m working on a resolution to the problem.”

“Translated, you lied again about having tickets available for us. Again, Frank! You lied again. It’s the Super Bowl you lied to us about this time.”

The salesmen immediately rose from their seats and advanced on Frank, pens in hand.

“Okay, settle down now. I’m not going to tolerate any of this. We won the competition and I’m going to be the next Midwest regional manager for Pointy Foods. So settle down or else!”

The men quieted down when they heard Frank announce his promotion. “Now, to make up for this mistake—”

Brian cut Frank off with a loud, “Quit saying ‘mistake.’ It was a deliberate lie! You knowingly forged a company memo, Frank.”

“Brian, you settle down or else. It was a motivational experiment that worked. Now listen, it’s time for you people to grow up. You’ve made nice bonuses this month and I have my eyes on a few of you people for possible promotions. I’m quite sure there will be at least two management positions available in Detroit in a couple of weeks.”

With the possibility of company advancement, most of the salesmen remained quiet and stilled their mouths...to better kiss Frank’s ass with.

“Now that we’ve cleared the air, you guys go on out there and remember, no returns for a couple of weeks.”

Brian blocked the door when everyone started to leave. “You suck, Frank!”

Frank looked at Kurt. “Kurt, thank you for keeping your mouth shut during the meeting. I will remember that when I’m deciding whether or not to leave you as the Chicago district sales manager. Now, get Brian out of here before I transfer him to the janitorial department.”

“I repeat: you suck, Frank!” said Brian.

“Kurt, get him out of here!”

Kurt walked up to Frank and grabbed him by the jacket, and pulled him up to his face. “FRANK. YOU. SUCK. And we QUIT!”

Kurt let go of Frank, put on his sunglasses and hat, and strutted out the front door with all the salesmen laughing.

More ineffectual than he'd ever been before, Frank yelled, “You leave now. Don't bother coming back. I'll replace you two with a couple of monkeys from the Lincoln Park Zoo.”

Kurt and Brian dropped their pants and bent over.

“Kiss our asses!”



The next day Brian and Kurt stood on a stage behind a podium and answered questions from the media. Darci, Chuck, Alice, Bernie, and Victor were all standing behind them.

A reporter started the Q&A session. “You guys have just won half of the largest jackpot in the history of the lottery. What are you planning to do with all this money?”

Brian announced their plan for a \$5 million donation to charity from each of them. He continued that they would use the remainder to try to purchase a professional football team.

“But you guys don't have nearly enough,” said another reporter.

“We've thought of that, and we've spoken not only with lenders but also with interested silent investors.”

“Are either of you guys married?”

“You mean to each other?” Brian and Kurt answered simultaneously, their deadpan delivery getting a laugh.

Kurt added, “I've been engaged for a little while to this beautiful woman standing behind me.”

True to form, Chuck piped up, “LOL, Kurtis. Engaged for a little while? LOL.”

“Okay, it's true,” said Kurt. “We've been engaged for over ten years.” The reporters were all laughing. It was obvious Kurt and Brian were fast becoming media darlings.

The reporter asked Kurt, “What does your fiancée think about your spending most of the money on a football team?”

“Good question. Actually, I’m giving her ten million dollars because it was her idea for us to buy the ticket in the first place. It was her idea for us to try to fulfill our dream—the dream of owning a professional football team.”

Alice’s face lit up when she heard her best friend was coming into \$10 million.

“Of course, we have to ask,” said another reporter, “are you guys planning on keeping your jobs at Pointy Foods?”

Kurt’s one-word answer was a resounding “no.”

Brian added, “We quit this morning.” And looking directly into a TV camera, he said, “By the way, Frank, you suck. You suck and you lie. And you suck at lying.”

Kurt, Brian, Darci, and the rest of the gang gathered around the giant check for a picture. On the bottom left of the check, on the memo line, Brian wrote, “You suck, Frank!”



Back at Pointy Foods, Kalia told Frank that Kurt and Brian were on the news. After the news conference ended, Frank turned off the television and told Kalia to get back to work.

As Kurt and Darci were leaving the news conference a reporter ran up to them. “One more question. What do you think of the fact the other winner bought his ticket around the corner from your place of purchase?”

“Hmmm, I think that sounds really odd. Did he pick his numbers or did the computer pick for him?”

The reporter looked down to double-check his notes and said, “According to lottery officials the other winner picked his own numbers at the liquor store.”

Kurt faced the reporter and looked him directly in the eyes. “Let me ask you, seriously, what are the chances that, across the entire country, the two winning tickets were purchased a few

blocks from each other? Not to mention neither set of numbers was computer-generated?”

The reporter answered, “Slim to none. That’s why I’m asking whether or not you know anything about the other winner.”

“I’m sorry to say I do not, but I would have loved to see his face,” said Kurt.

“I can do better than that. Look at my monitor. I’m gonna run the surveillance footage from the liquor store. The manager let us have it.”

“Brian, come here a minute. Check this out.”

“Check what out?”

Pointing at the reporter, Kurt said, “He’s got video of the other winner purchasing his ticket.”

The reporter ran the video while the horrified Kurt, Brian, and Darci stood there and watched drunken Frank stumbling around the liquor store, trying to fill out a lottery ticket.

Kurt was the first to speak. “Oh my God, please, no. It can’t be.”

Brian almost cut him off, saying, “What is this? This can’t be happening.”

Kurt sprang to action. “Let’s go find out from him.” This compelled Darci to caution them not to do anything stupid.

The momentarily forgotten reporter said, “So, you know him?”

“Unfortunately we do.”

Kurt and Brian, in tandem, jogged to their cars.

CHAPTER 26

The Wrench in the Works

Back at Pointy Foods, Frank was on his knees, scraping the last of the gum off his desk. “Oh, I will get you, Kurt. You mark my words.” Frank knew once he got his promotion to regional manager he could rain terror down on Kurt and Brian.

Kurt and Brian, no longer wearing their hats and sunglasses, burst through the front doors of the office and walked straight through the lobby without stopping, heading directly for Frank’s office.

A surprised Kalia saw them. “Hey, what are *you* guys doing here?”

Kurt turned to look at her. “We have a meeting with Frank.”

“Does he know?” she yelled after them.

“Not likely.”

They barged into Frank’s office without knocking. “Frank!”

Frank jolted upward, slamming his head on his desk. “What the hell are you two ingrates doing here?”

“You know exactly what,” said Kurt, too angry to be repelled by Frank’s whiskey-saturated breath.

“Obviously you’re not coming to beg for your jobs back, but I bet you would’ve if you hadn’t won all that money.”

“Just to avoid any confusion on your part, Frank,” continued Kurt, “we are here ABOUT the TICKET!”

“Listen, I already told you yahoos I’m sorry about the Super

Bowl tickets. But it doesn't really matter. You have enough money to buy a suite at the Super Bowl."

Brian, about to add something, paused and looked at Kurt. "I don't think he knows."

"This is so typical," Kurt said shaking his head. "Frank here was too drunk to remember anything. Isn't that right, Frank?"

"What are you yahoos talking about?"

"Jeez, Frank, you haven't changed since Saturday night, have you?"

Kurt and Brian walked slowly toward Frank. Still clueless to the fact he had won the other half of the lottery, Frank jumped up from his chair and slowly walked backward, never taking his eyes off the two men.

"Back down, gentlemen. You don't want me to call security." Frank continued his slow, backward retreat until he was pushed against the bookshelf. Kurt and Brian reached into his pockets, one to a side, while Frank pushed back unsuccessfully, trying to get their hands away. "Get away from me!"

The much-sought-after slip of paper, the paper with the winning number written in Kurt's hand, fell to the floor from Frank's pocket.

Kurt picked it up. "Well, we now know how he got our numbers, because I freaking wrote them down and left them in here!"

"What are you talking about?"

"Frank, you played our birthdays and Walter's jersey number because I accidentally left this piece of paper on your desk."

"Again, what the hell are you talking about?"

Kurt and Brian went back to digging through Frank's jacket pockets as Frank yelled at them to stop. They were interrupted by Kalia walking in accompanied by the same reporter who had showed them the video footage of Frank at the liquor store.

"Hey, guys, what's going on here?" asked the reporter.

"What's going on here is I'm being roughed up," Frank whined.

"Roughed up?" asked the reporter. "Mr. Weichert, I thought you knew this man."

“Kalia, get them out of here! And who is that?” Frank cried, pointing to the reporter.

“Frank, calm down,” said Kalia, “This is the—”

Kurt cut her off. “He’s a reporter.”

“I didn’t do it and I regret nothing!” yelled Frank.

The reporter looked Frank up and down. Frank’s crumpled suit and five o’clock shadow told the story for him.

“Do what?” the reporter asked.

“Whatever! I do know I am being framed by these two men.”

Kurt shook his head. “He has no clue. He really has no clue.”

Frank reached into his pockets to see what they had been looking for and pulled out the winning lottery ticket.

“Give me that,” said Kurt as he grabbed it out of Frank’s hand. “I knew it. I didn’t want to believe it. He has the other ticket.”

Brian asked, hope against hope, “See if he signed the back.”

“Son of a bitch, he did. You thieving bastard!”

“You give me back that ticket, Kurt.” Frank stopped and stared at the prized ticket. “This must be a winning ticket.”

“Yes, Frank, it is,” sighed Kurt.

“It’s mine?”

Kurt backed up a step. “Even this reporter knew before you.” Turning to the reporter, he added, “How did you figure out he was the winner? Just asking.”

“Easy. You said the guy we saw bumbling around the liquor store was named Frank. All we heard today was how you told your ex-boss Frank to stick it. I put two and two together.”

Frank’s look of surprise changed to a big smile. “So, what you’re saying is I just won half of the biggest, the largest jackpot in the history of the lottery.”

“Yes. You stole our numbers to do it.”

“No, Kurt, I didn’t steal any numbers.”

“Oh yeah, you love us so much you just happened to play my birthday and—no, no, let me finish—my birthday and Brian’s birthday, not to mention the jersey number of one of my favorite sports figures. Right, Frank. You thief!”

“Whatever. It’s my ticket. I paid for it, I signed it, and it’s mine.” Brian threw in, “Crook!” for good measure.

Kalia, sensing the damage this story could do to her employer, tried to escort everybody out of his office and off the premises.

“No way,” said the reporter. “I’ve got questions.”

“Well, since you said ‘please,’ yeah, you can ask, but not here,” said Frank. “I want a press conference and I want to stand behind the same podium Kurt and Brian were just behind.”

Frank looked over at Kurt and Brian and smiled.

The reporter responded, “I will make it happen.”

Frank turned to Kalia and told her to start making some calls.

“Who do you want me to call?” she asked.

“Let’s start with Marcus and Dwayne. Tell them you’ll be e-mailing them the press conference. I can’t wait to see their faces when they find out I won the lottery and got promoted. Double whammy!”

Kurt smiled a jaded smile. “You really are something, Frank.”

“Get out of here—the both of you. You don’t work here anymore. Get out! I have to call my accountant.”

Kurt and Brian exited the building more for their own comfort than Frank’s satisfaction.



A few hours later Kurt, Darci, and Brian were watching Frank’s news conference from Kurt’s man cave. Kurt was trying to calm down, taking deep breaths as Frank mounted the podium.

“Thanks to Frank it’s going to be more difficult to purchase a professional football team,” Kurt said.

“He stole half our money,” said Brian, “so yeah, I’d say so.”

“Legally stole, Brian. Is that an oxymoron? Anyway, he stole it, and because there’s nothing actionable in what he did, there’s nothing we can do about it. I should never have left the handwritten numbers on the desk, but I honestly thought we had no chance of picking the exact numbers—the winning numbers.

Actually I didn't think at all. I never thought we'd win. Who would've?"

"I'm with you on that. The sad part is drunken Frank never knew he even purchased a ticket."

Darci, listening to the lamentations, said, "It's been a couple of crazy days. I never could have imagined this in my wildest dreams. I don't like the word *surreal* but it fits. This is surreal!"

Kurt put his hand up. "Here. Here it is. The bastard thief's news conference. Oh my God. He's still in the same suit. From Saturday. That guy's got no self-respect."

Darci looked at Kurt with a look that said "let it go." Kurt turned up the volume in order to hear every painful word.

The reporter who had tracked him down opened the questioning with, "Frank, tell us, how did you and your two former employees end up with the same hand-picked numbers?"

"I guess it really doesn't matter. The ticket was filled out and purchased by me and I won. End of story."

"Frank, they claim you copied their numbers and, I might mention, have offered proof you did so."

"So what?"

Getting nowhere with that line of questioning, the reporter asked if Frank planned to keep his job.

"Are you kidding me? Of course I'm keeping my job. I work for the greatest company in the country. I've worked for Pointy Foods since I graduated from college. It's all I know and it's all I want to know."

"Most people would take the money and run. In fact, Kurt and Brian are going to try to buy a professional football team."

Frank sneered, "That figures. No surprise with those two. They'll blow all their money then come crawling back for their old jobs."

"So you guys didn't get along?"

Frank cleared his throat and leaned in to the microphone, his breath audible to the assembled reporters. "They were my subordinates."

Kurt jumped up from the couch and yelled at his TV, “You were not my boss! We were both managers!”

Brian had to add, “Yeah, but you were going to get demoted.”

“Beside the point, Brian, that’s beside the point. Frank is a lying sack of crap. Correction, a lying-sack-of-crap thieving bastard.”

“I’ve answered enough questions. It’s now time for me to celebrate,” Frank told the reporter as a means to end the interview.



The following morning Frank was walking to work. It was a rare day in that Frank was not hung over and was feeling good about his promotion.

Kalia greeted him with a coldly polite “good morning” along with congratulations on winning half of the lottery.

Frank had been difficult to tolerate before the lottery. Now there was every expectation he would be unbearably full of himself.

“You should be congratulating me on my promotion, not winning all that money,” he said. “Winning the money was luck but getting the promotion took hard work and a brilliant strategy.”

“Well, Frank,” she said, “you look terrific. I’ve never seen you look this good before.”

“Of course. I’m back! I’m back on the fast track at Pointy Foods.”

“Oh well, I guess that’s why our CEO is here in person,” said Kalia, enjoying the possibility Frank did not know about his visit.

“He’s here? He’s here right now? This minute? On the premises?” said Frank, primping and straightening his tie, using the blade of Kalia’s scissors to gaze at his reflection.

“Yes, Frank, yes, he is here now. He’s sitting in your office waiting for you.”

Frank, confidently expecting kudos and accolades, sauntered into his office and joined the CEO of Pointy Foods. He took the initiative by saying, “It’s great to see you, sir.”

“Frank, good to see you too. Please, take a seat.”

Frank, with a huge smile plastered across his face, did so. “Sir, I have to say, this is a great moment in my life and I’m touched you saw fit to join me and share the moment.”

The CEO, belying no emotion, offered, “I’m sure you’re very happy you won all that lottery money.”

“Oh sir, that’s not what I was talking about. I’m back climbing the corporate ladder again. After all these years I’m back on the fast track. I know you’re going to promote me to regional manager. I did earn it and I’m glad you see I deserve it. I will make the Midwest region the best and the most-profitable in the country quickly because my goal is to be divisional vice president within the next two years and then—”

The unsmiling CEO put his hand up. “Frank, stop. Stop, please. Stop,” he said as another man walked into the office.

“Oh, okay,” said Frank. “What’s going on?”

“This is—”

The CEO was stopped by Frank’s sudden interruption. “I know who it is. He’s from the corporate office. He’s the human-resources director.”

“Correct. You have a problem, Frank.”

“Problem? What problem?” asked Frank, racking his brain.

“Frank, this video was sent to us last night.” The CEO hit the “play” button on the DVD player in Frank’s office. Frank’s mind was scrambling as he saw himself on the video stealing thousands and thousands of cups from Detroit’s warehouse.

All that came to mind was, “I was set up.” He realized his secret insider in Detroit was double-crossing him and he had probably been working with Marcus the whole time. “Marcus set me up, sir.”

“Frank, please just stop. We have the recording. Set up or not, that is undeniably you on the screen.”

“You don’t get it. Marcus is setting me up again. But don’t worry about the cups because I have money. Lots and lots of money. I will replace all of the cups, sir.”

“Frank, it’s over.”

“What does that mean? You can’t be firing me. Not after twenty years. I’ve been waiting for this promotion for years.”

“This goes beyond the value of the stolen goods. This speaks to trust. I have no recourse.” The CEO paused ever so briefly. “Frank, Marcus has the position. He got the promotion this morning. Come on, Frank, you’re filthy rich. You don’t need this job anymore. Who in his right mind would win all that money and want to keep his job?”

“Who’s going to run Chicago?”

“This might make you feel a little better. We’re well aware of how much you dislike Kurt, and we also know how much Kurt dislikes Dwayne. Well, Dwayne will be running Chicago from now on. He’s a lot better than Kurt and Brian anyway.”

Frank’s chin quivered and tears ran down his cheeks. “No, he’s not.”

“What did you say? Frank, you’re mumbling and we can’t understand you.”

“I said no, he’s not! That dimwit Dwayne isn’t half the salesman Kurt or Brian is and he never will be.”



Meanwhile, Marcus and Dwayne were in the lobby, having just arrived at Pointy Foods. Dwayne walked up to Kalia and leaned across the desk.

“Hey, Kalia, I guess you’ll be working for me now. Expect a lot of late nights with me in my office doing, um, paperwork.”

“Oh, thank you. I’ll be sure to tell my brother what you said.”

Dwayne, remembering Kamehameha’s massive size, back-pedaled. “Okay, Kalia, I take that back. But just make sure you have my coffee freshly brewed and hot when I arrive for work every morning.”

“Of course, Dwayne. I’ll also share that with my brother.”

“Okay, okay, Kalia, you don’t have to share everything with your brother. Just remember I am your boss!”

Marcus walked into Frank's office with empty boxes in his arms. "Hey, Frank, I brought you a couple of boxes to hold your belongings. Just helping." He smirked. "I know you have only ten minutes or so to pack before security escorts you out of here."

Two security guards walked in behind Marcus. "I tried to put in a good word for you, old friend," said Marcus, "I really did." He finished with a huge smile on his face.

"You son of a bitch!" Frank began swinging wildly at Marcus and smacked the CEO right in the forehead with a surprisingly effective overhand right, knocking him to the floor. The security guards descended on Frank.

"You'll never get me, coppers!" screamed Frank as he was dragged kicking and screaming from the building.

CHAPTER 27

The Spider and the Fly

Just two weeks after winning the lottery, Kurt and Brian were already comfortable with their new status as wealthy men—wealthy men with a plan.

Their intention to purchase a professional football team hadn't changed, and creating a holding company was their first order of business. Kurt and Brian rented an office and invited Bernie, Victor, and Chuck to their first official meeting.

Chuck, never one to hold back, voiced his approval of the new surroundings. "LOL, Kurt, this place is sweet. I always wanted an awesome office."

"Chuck, you own a bunch of restaurants. You could get yourself any office you want."

"LOL, oh right."

"Anyway, we invited you guys here because we want you to be minority owners in whatever team we buy."

"Uh, for which team we are owning?" asked Victor.

"Whichever one we decide to buy," said Brian. "Don't worry, we'll let you know. It's just that you have to get in on the holding company now."

"Ah, yes," said Victor. "This team, it will have the cheering girls?"

"You mean cheerleaders? Yes."

"Good. I am in."

"Me too," said Bernie. "I might even sell my restaurants and retire as an owner."

“Good,” said Kurt. “Now that you guys are going to be minority owners of our new company, you can have your own offices, Chuck. You’re planning on investing, right?”

“Yeah, we’re just trying to figure out how many shares we’ll own,” said Bernie as he looked at Kurt, whose skill set in finance was acknowledged without question.

“It’s simple, very simple,” explained Kurt. “Brian and I contributed one hundred million total. Right now, Brian owns fifty percent and I own fifty percent. You guys contribute a combined one million and you should own one percent, but Brian and I decided we’ll give you each a two-percent stake.”

“Bottom line it, Kurt,” said Bernie.

“It’s simple, Bernie. You three split six percent, Brian and I own ninety-four percent.”

“That’s-a good-a with me,” said Victor. “But Chuck...”

Kurt and Brian looked at Chuck, who had yet to agree to the terms.

Bernie interrupted Victor to state what everyone already knew: “Chuck is being a tightwad as usual. He’s got more money than Victor and me combined yet he’s the one reluctant to dole out the cash.”

No one was surprised by Chuck’s response. For him, things were always an issue. “Look, guys, it’s not that I don’t want to, but things got a little tight lately. Actually, I’m shopping for a lawyer so I can sue Pointy Foods. If you can believe it, they’re trying to make me pay for all of those cups Frank gave me. And adding insult to injury, they refuse to allow me to return the ten thousand sausages Frank—as a representative of Pointy Foods, I remind you—promised I could return after the end of the contest. I have to come up with funds to pay the damn lawyer to sue.”

“I get that,” Kurt replied. “What I don’t get is your surprise. Did you not think about this before you accepted the cups? You knew they were stolen—you told me so. You shouldn’t have accepted them and you should make Frank pay for them anyway.”

“Easy for you to say, Kurt. Pointy Foods is trying to make him

pay but they can't find him. As far as the sausages go, I'm trying to push them on everyone who walks through my doors!"

"Can't find him? Frank is probably out spending his money. I still can't believe they fired him."

"That's not all, guys," said Chuck. "To top things off my ex-wife is at it again. The only good news is that Uncle Walter told me he's made a deal with the victims of his Ponzi scheme. Apparently he remembered he has additional funds in an offshore account."

Kurt was incredulous. "You're kidding me, right? How's he going to beat that rap?"

"From what I understand, they have no choice but to release him since the Supreme Court, in essence, overturned his conviction. The way it stands now is if Uncle Walter pays the victims back and pays a big fine, the government will consider the case closed, over, and done with. Anyway, he always maintained it was the CFO who did it."

Kurt was still skeptical. "I guess we'll never know since the CFO had a heart attack before sentencing. Look, it's up to you, Chuck. You're in or you're out. Uncle Walter, as interesting as he is, has nothing to do with this."

"LOL, Kurt. You know I'm in. Of course I'm in."

"Good, now let's get to it."

The group brainstormed, trying to come up with a name for their new holding company. Bernie chimed in first.

"We should do initials, like BKBVC—for Bernie, Kurt, Brian, Victor, and Chuck—LLC."

"Yeah, Bernie first," said Brian. "Figures."

As the group worked through more names, they were interrupted by someone humming a song outside the door.

"What's that humming?" asked Kurt.

Chuck answered, "It's *Jurassic Park*." Seconds later he added, "Two."

"What did you say?"

"Kurt, you know what it is. He's humming the theme to *Jurassic Park Two: The Lost World*."

Kurt just stared.

“You know, the sequel to *Jurassic Park*. My uncle is here.”

With flawless timing, the conference room door opened and Uncle Walter himself entered the room. “Hello, Chuckles. Did I surprise you?”

“Hey, Walt, long time no see.” Kurt, not one to mince words, found his voice. “Shouldn’t you be in prison or something? And what’s with the humming?”

“Ever since Chuck was a little kid I would hum a theme song and he would have to guess which movie it was from.”

Brian wanted to stick to business and that did not include Uncle Walter.

“Sorry, Walt, we can’t bring you into this deal. In fact, you shouldn’t be seen here in this meeting. Everybody we bring in has to have a clean record. Well, clean excluding a few minor public intoxications. Your being here can be construed as your being part of this.”

Kurt’s visions of success didn’t include the FBI barging through the doors and seizing computers. “Let me add, only verifiable funds and no offshore banking crap. The slightest hint of impropriety, of noncompliance, and we’re done. Not to mention losing what we have to enormous fines.”

“It’s all right, Kurt, I understand completely,” Walter agreed. “Gentlemen, it’s all fine and good, but I would like to give you some advice. I’ve looked into the amount of funding required to purchase a professional football team. You’re short. You’re going to need a lot more than one hundred million to buy a team.”

“Walt, we know that. That’s why we’re here discussing our approach to private lenders and banks. That’s why we’re discussing possible investors. With clean money, of course.”

“Okay, that’s good. May I ask, notwithstanding your passion for sports, why a professional football team? It’s the Mount Everest of investments. Okay, I understand, and me of all people? I understand thinking big, going for the brass ring. So, to the point, have you approached Frank?”

“Oh my God, no!” Kurt blurted out. “Are you kidding me? He took half of our jackpot. He STOLE half of our jackpot!”

“Well, son, all the more reason to approach him, don’t you think? You won’t get it back any other way.”

Kurt was still having trouble letting it go. “Walt, Frank is such a schmuck.”

Victor, fairly quiet until now, was confused. “What is this *schmuck*? What does it mean? It is bad, yes?”

Chuck, too, wanted to move on. “Victor, just so you don’t use it all over the place, I’ll explain, then we’re back to business. Okay?” Chuck went on in his most-professorial tone. “Victor, the word *schmuck* is an archaic term for the male penis.”

“What other kind is there? I still-a don’t get it.”

“Boys, boys, that’s enough! It’s time to start acting like men. Think with your heads, not your hearts,” insisted Walter. “Like it or not, Frank has lots of money to invest. Bring him in and then it gets serious. Really serious! Hell, I’ve been trying to get ahold of him myself. I’ve got some promising land deals going in Florida and I’m looking for investors.”

Brian whispered to Kurt, “He’s actually going to try to sell Frank some swampland in Florida?”

“Walt, all we want from you are those amazing tickets you get for all the sporting events,” said Kurt, wondering why they were even discussing business with Chuck’s uncle Walter, considering his track record and his present swampland deal.

“No problem. You got it, guys. Chuck, I think it’s time to pay your ex-wife a visit in person. It’s time for the queen to stop ripping off my nephew.”

“LOL, Uncle Walt, I can’t wait to see the look on her face when she sees that you’re back.”

Uncle Walter and Chuck got up and left together, with Uncle Walter’s arm around Chuck and both of them humming the theme song from *Jurassic Park*.

“What a pair!” said Kurt, shaking his head.

“You know, Kurt, Walt always did have connections.”

“Yeah, most criminals do.”

“Eh, Kurt, I meant the sporting events.”

“Oh, right.”

Victor and Bernie stood up together. “We’re leaving,” said Bernie. “Victor’s promised me some time with one of his waitresses.”

“We need to look into some adventure capital, that’s-a what we gotta do, Bernardo.”

“You mean *venture* capital, that’s what you meant to say, and of course that’s what we’re going to do. I was just joking about the waitress! But she is gonna be there, right?”

Victor grabbed Bernie by the arm and they left Brian and Kurt alone with their plan. As they were leaving, Kalia showed up with a video in her hand. She was radiant as usual, her long, black hair billowing in the autumn breeze. She stopped and gave Victor a very long hug as they passed each other in the hallway.

“Kalia, what are you doing here?” asked Kurt. “Are you looking for a job?”

“Well, maybe I will be. Dwayne has become very creepy since he became the boss. That’s not exactly why I’m here.”

“Hi, Kalia.” Brian winked at the Hawaiian beauty, still thinking he had a shot with her. Kurt rolled his eyes.

“Uh, Brian, can you take a break from that for two seconds? She’s here for a reason, right Kalia?”

“Well, I’m worried about Frank.”

“Kalia, don’t bring his name up, please?” said Kurt.

“Yeah, Kalia, Kurt’s right. He stole our birthdays!”

She looked confused. “What?”

“What Brian meant was our lottery numbers. We used our birthdays.”

“Oh, I guess I forgot the numbers were your birthdays. That’s why the reporter was acting like he was on to something.”

“It is what it is, unfortunately, but let me guess: you haven’t heard from Frank in the last couple of weeks?”

Kalia took a chair across from the friends. “Nobody has, Kurt.”

“That’s because he doesn’t have any friends—or acquaintances, unless you want to count the liquor-store manager.”

“He hasn’t seen him either. Not since Frank went in and bought three cases of Jack Daniels and ordered a humidifier for his Hemingways, which he hasn’t picked up. Listen, guys, I think he’s in trouble. In fact, I know so. I have a sixth sense about these things.”

Kurt muttered that Frank probably deserved whatever he got.

“You’ll think differently once you see this.” Kalia handed Kurt the DVD.

Kurt put the recording into his computer to broadcast on the large screen in the conference room.

“Marcus made Frank leave so abruptly he didn’t have time to take anything. At least the CEO pushed back on Marcus and prevented that final indignity by allowing me to clean out his belongings. It was during the packing I found a secret video camera hidden on the bookshelf.”

“Let me guess, it was hidden in a bottle of whiskey,” said Brian as he high-fived Kurt.

“Brian, he was just like Nixon with the secret taping in his office,” said Kurt.

“Who’s Nixon?”

Kurt was pressing the “play” button as he said, “Forget about it, Kalia. Let’s get this over with.”

Kurt and Brian were hysterical as they watched Frank get fired. “He actually thought he was being promoted. Oh, Brian, how the mighty have fallen, yeah, yeah, yeah!”

They continued laughing until a rapt Kalia turned and said, “Watch this part—watch and listen. Some of it’s hard to understand because he’s mumbling at them.”

The two men watched as Frank stuck up for them. Their laughter stopped as Frank made it very clear, through his anguish and tears, that they, Kurt and Brian, were great salesmen and unequaled in the company.

“Gee, Kalia, thanks for showing us that. You just had to, didn’t you? Now I almost feel sorry for the guy. You, Brian?”

“Yeah, Kurt, me too.”

“Down deep inside he really liked you guys. A little jealous at times, maybe. You have the free spirit he doesn’t. I think you’re all he has left.”

“Then he is in trouble,” said Brian, raising his hand for a high-five that didn’t come.

“Okay, Kalia, tell you what we’re going to do,” said Kurt, drawing a deep breath and letting it out slowly. “Geez, I can’t believe I’m saying this. Okay, Brian and I will go to his house and check on him.”

Brian couldn’t believe what he was hearing. “You have to be kidding me. That douche bag has spent the last twelve years making our lives hell and you’re going to help him now?”

“I can’t help it, Brian. He’s a jerk but I can’t just let him die alone or whatever he has planned. That sorry excuse for a human would just haunt my dreams and make me feel guilty. Kalia, Brian or I will call and let you know if we find him. Not making any promises we will find him.”

“Thank you. I’m deeply worried and I knew you could be counted on to do the right thing. Thank you.”

CHAPTER 28

The Cleanup

As promised, Kurt and Brian drove over to Frank's house and saw that whatever grass he had left in his yard was a foot high and browning on the tips. There were more weeds than grass.

"Why does this not even surprise me?" asked Kurt.

"Because Frank is a barely functioning drunk who ruined our lives?" asked Brian sarcastically.

"Oh, right, that's why."

"Okay, what next, Kurtis?"

"Let's work a plan. First we knock on the door, see if he answers. If he doesn't, then we tried and we leave."

"No, Kurt, we promised Kalia. We knock on the door and if there's no answer, then we try something else."

"I swear to God, you're really trying to impress Kalia. Ten minutes ago you were ready to let him die in his house and now you're willing to break down his front door."

They knocked, then pounded on Frank's door.

"Okay, he's not here, let's go," said Kurt.

"No, let's not. At least not yet. You're the one who mentioned promising Kalia. We better go around back and look through the windows."

The lack of response was beginning to bother Kurt. "We better try something else."

"Look, I can get in here," said Brian, pointing to the door. "Look how beat up this lock is. This will be a cinch." Brian yanked

the door hard but was still surprised to see it open up. “See, I told you it was easy.”

Brian and Kurt walked slowly through Frank’s kitchen, picking up things and moving items aside as they made their way toward the living room.

“God, Brian, what a mess!”

“Yeah, a disgusting mess.”

“Oh my God, look, the iron—it’s still on.”

“Kurt, this is just a little weird. That iron looks as if it’s been on for a long time. Don’t these things have auto shutoff or something?”

“Supposed to.” Kurt lifted the iron off the board.

“Kurt, stop, stop! You’re bringing everything up with it. Everything’s stuck. Wow, it burned a hole right through one of his cheap sports jackets.”

“Look, there he is. Frank’s here.”

And there they found him, lying on the floor in the same jacket he’d worn the day he was fired. He clutched tightly a very old plaque imprinted with “Employee of the Year” followed by a far distant year. There they saw a very old picture of him with Margaret, his former girlfriend, who was maybe the only shot he’d had at true love.

“Frank?” said Brian as quietly as possible. “Kurt, this is too weird. Do you think he is still alive?”

Kurt crouched down next to him. “Yeah, looks like it. He’s still breathing. Bring me a glass of water.”

“Hey, Kurt, you can’t feed water to an unconscious man. It’s dangerous.”

Kurt poured the water onto Frank’s face. “I’m not feeding him, but I am enjoying it.”

Frank jumped up, still in a daze; as soon as he saw Kurt and Brian standing in his living room he swung and missed. When he missed, he spun to the floor and just stayed there, his face pressed against the carpet.

“Sorry,” he mumbled, still unmoving. “Force of habit. I’ve

had some nasty creditors over the years. What are you two doing here?”

“Look at you, Frank. You’re pathetic.”

“It’s comforting to hear you singing the same old song, Kurt. I wasn’t expecting visitors, especially you two. Help me up.”

Kurt and Brian looked at each other and shook their heads.

“Come on, Brian, grab his arm.”

“Okay, but God, you smell awful, Frank.”

“Yeah, I know.”

Kurt was more concerned than he revealed. “Frank, listen, we have to get you to a doctor.”

“No doctors!”

“Frank, we have to.”

“Please, no doctors. I have nothing left, nothing! Nothing now that Pointy Foods fired me.”

“Come on, Frank, get it together. You’re worth a freaking fortune.”

“Money is nothing. Why should I care about anything now? Why?”

Brian thought he’d try to reason with Frank. “I don’t know why, but you can’t stay like this. You just can’t, Frank. Am I right, Kurt?”

Kurt called Darci and Kalia and enlisted their help. Over the next couple of weeks the girls took turns watching over Frank and nursing him back to health. Kurt and Brian devoted all of their time to cleaning up Frank’s house and repairing the damage caused by years of neglect.

Two weeks later, Frank felt strong enough to have a serious discussion with Kurt and Brian in his living room.

“So let me get this right,” he said. “You guys have created a hundred-million-dollar holding company with the sole purpose of purchasing a professional football team?”

Brian amended, “Actually, a hundred and three million dollars is invested.”

“We’re going to need a lot more money,” added Kurt, “and

we're actively seeking investors. We're interviewing some well-known consultants we'll hire to make sure we're doing this right."

"Well-known consultants, huh? I suppose, Kurt, you want me to invest?"

"Yes, that's about it."

"Well, I'm not looking just to sit around and do nothing. I need to get back in the game."

"The game?"

"Yeah, Kurt, I need to manage again. It's all I know how to do."

"Frank, we're looking for investors only—think of them like silent partners. Like, really silent in your case. We're offering a nice return for the money invested—not work hours. Too many chiefs and all that."

"I'm rich! I don't care about the return. I want ownership and I want to help build this company up."

Kurt was exasperated and getting that familiar so-close-and-yet-so-far feeling. "No way, Frank. The best I'd be willing to do is take a ten-million-dollar investment for a minority interest in the company. Besides, help implies teamwork. You're not exactly a team player. A dictator, maybe."

"Well, think about this. Here's my offer: one hundred three million for half the company, and I want a nice office."

Kurt and Brian looked at each other. Kurt turned to Frank. "We'll give you forty-nine percent for a hundred and one million."

"Come on, guys, if I put in a hundred and three million on top of the hundred and three million you invested, we would be a very powerful company. I would do that only if I got half the shares. Please, guys, I need to be part of this. I promise I'll work really hard for us."

Kurt leaned back on the couch and stared at the ceiling. "I cannot believe I'm even considering this."

"We don't really have a choice if we wanna buy a team, Kurt. As much as I don't like it, we need a lot more than we thought."

"It's up to Brian, but no matter what, we choose the name of the team."

Brian showed his hand when he said, “Frank, don’t let us down.”

“I promise I will help make this a great company, and you can name the team. The only other thing is I still want to get Marcus and Dwayne back.”

It wasn’t far from Kurt’s mind that the ink was not yet on the paper and Frank was already issuing conditions. Nonetheless, he said, “Okay, it’s a deal, but Chuck is going to want those thousands of cups paid for as well as compensation for the unsold sausages.”

“We should make Marcus and Dwayne pay for them after what they did to me at my house a few weeks ago.”

“Wait a minute,” said Brian. “Back up a second. What are you taking about? Marcus and Dwayne came to your house after you were fired?”

“Yeah, about a week before you guys came in and helped me.”

“More like saved you,” said Kurt, still questioning his decision.

“Anyway, I walked up to my door—”

“You mean crawled to your door.”

“Okay, yes, Kurt, I was in pretty bad shape. They asked me to let them in because they said they would be able to get me back my job. So I let them in.”

“You believed them?” asked Kurt, now wondering if they needed this much stupidity onboard.

“Yes, I did believe them. So I let them in and they said all I would have to do was sign this piece of paper and I would get my old job back. I signed it.”

“Without reading it?”

“Yes, Kurt, without reading it. But as soon as I signed it, Marcus and Dwayne started laughing at me and then they called me a sucker. Not only was I not getting my job back but if I entered the Pointy Foods premises they would have me thrown in jail for trespassing.”

“Let me guess. You took a swing at them and missed.”

“I tried to punch Marcus but I missed him and fell back to the floor. When they started laughing again I reached up and grabbed

the paper I'd signed from that dimwit Dwayne and I wouldn't let go. They gave up trying to take it from me. Marcus then poured a bottle of bourbon over my head while I was lying on the floor. They laughed at me again and left, but without the paper."

"Whoa, Frank, do you still have the paper?"

"Yeah, here, I'll get it."

Frank handed Kurt a partially torn, crumpled form.

"This little gem is an admission of crimes against Pointy Foods, Frank."

"Yes, it is, Kurt, I know that. Don't tell me the obvious! I should have known better. Years ago I taught Marcus how effective this form can be in ruining your company's enemies. Hell, I invented this technique at Pointy Foods."

"It figures that you would have invented such a letter."

"And I perfected the art of getting my enemies to sign it."

"Well," said Brian, "you should have taken a page out of our handbook. Kurt and Brian's handbook. We don't get mad, but we do get even!"

"Even? How can I get even? Should I hire a bunch of attorneys and start lawsuits against them?"

"That's too easy," said Brian, Kurt's longtime partner in crime. "Don't forget they have video footage of you stealing those damn cups."

"Yeah," Kurt agreed. "First of all, too many rules in taking the legal route. Forget attorneys. The satisfaction of revenge is usually enhanced by some creativity behind the plan. Real revenge is almost poetic. That's where the real satisfaction lies. And, on that note, I think I have a plan."

"Oh boy, here it comes. Kurt has that look on his face," said Brian.

"Trust me, I know," said Frank. "I've seen it before and I usually end up with one of my prize possessions destroyed."

"Yeah, Frank, *revenge* is the operative word," said Kurt. "There wouldn't have been plans of revenge if we hadn't first been your victims. Did you think of that? You deserved it every time."

“Probably. Probably so.”

“Frank, if you’re going to be part of our quest to buy a professional football team then we’re going to need you to put this Marcus crap behind you. I don’t want our energies diluted by petty squabbles and resulting paybacks. We’ll get payback but only when we’re ready, and then it’s over.”

Frank agreed and asked what the plan was.

“Brian, call all your old customers and tell them to start complaining about Pointy Foods’ bad customer service. See if you can get them all to say most of their orders are screwed up. Frank, you call Kalia and have her give us updates on Marcus and Dwayne.”



Ten days had passed since Kurt had hatched his plan to disrupt Pointy Foods’ supply chain. Kurt and Brian were at Frank’s house, working out the next move in Operation Disrupt, when Brian let it be known all his old customers were making life at Pointy Foods a nightmare.

Kurt was pleased to know corporate would be receiving an unwelcome wakeup call leaving them to second-guess the recent restructuring of the Chicago office.

Frank had just finished a phone conversation with Kalia, who said Dwayne was in way over his head and Marcus was flying in from Detroit that morning.

“Marcus is convinced you two are behind this, but they have no idea I’m in cahoots with you two,” said Frank.

“Good,” said Kurt. “Nobody at Pointy Foods would ever believe Frank is in on this prank with us, or that Frank would become a partner in our football-franchise business.”

“Yeah, Kurt.,” said Brian, “Frank is our wild card.”

He added, “Kalia also said Marcus wants her to set them up in meetings with Victor, Bernie, and Chuck.”

“Okay, Frank, this is what you do. Have her spread out those meetings tomorrow. Have her set up Victor’s restaurant for eight

a.m., then Bernie's restaurant at eleven a.m. We'll finish them off at Chuck's largest deli at three p.m."

"Excellent! Oh yeah, on another note, Chuck wants to name our professional football team the Warriors, but I want to name it the Gladiators."

"The Warriors. From the movie?"

"Warriors, come out to play-ay!"

Kurt and Brian laughed at their own obscure reference.

"God, I loved that movie," said Brian.

"Well, as far as team names go, I like the Terminators," said Kurt.

"That's a good one, and also one of my favorite movies," said Brian, adding he thought the Terminators was a far-better name than Bernie's suggestions. Kurt asked what Bernie was coming up with.

"Really stupid names, like the Illusionists or the Rudys."

"The Rudys?" said Kurt.

"Yeah, you remember that movie. That one about the little guy who wanted to play football for Notre Dame but he was—"

"Yeah, I know the movie, Brian. You made me watch it ten times."

"Oh, right. Well, we'll figure something out for the name."

CHAPTER 29

The Sting

At eight o'clock the following morning, Kurt, Brian, and Frank were up in Victor's secret video-monitoring room. Victor was standing behind his bar, waiting for Marcus and Dwayne to arrive. His hidden earpiece was in place so he could hear instructions from Kurt, Brian, and Frank.

Kurt had some concerns about Victor's delivery, but he also knew Victor was capable of repeating what he was told as long as he didn't translate their lines.

"Victor, can you hear me okay?"

Victor turned and gave the thumbs-up sign to the camera.

"Victor, don't look at the camera again. Pretend it's not there and just repeat what we say, please."

Victor, of course, exhibited his sense of humor by turning once more with another thumbs-up.

"Victor!"

"Just-a joking wid you. I understand."

"Enough, Victor. Turn around. Here come Marcus and Dwayne."

"I know, Kurt, I saw them."

"Victor!"

Marcus and Dwayne, only a minute late, walked up to the bar.

"Hello, Victor. You remember my boss, Marcus." Dwayne extended his hand but Kurt advised Victor not to shake.

"I no shake-a your hand. You screw my orders."

"Well, that's why I'm here, Victor. I believe there's more to this than meets the eye."

“Whatcha talkin’ about, eyeball? It’s-a my meatballs you screw up. I run out last night. You make-a me look like I going outta business.”

“Victor—”

“Yeah, Dwayne, you talkin’ to Victor, angry Victor.”

“Victor, I checked your order before it was sent out. All your product was there.”

“Yeah, you say. What are you saying?”

“What Dwayne is saying is we think Kurt and Brian are behind this.”

“You call-a me a liar!” Victor removed his jacket and they saw a side to him that scared them enough to give pause. “Si, si, you call-a me a liar! Nobody call-a Victor liar.”

“Victor,” whispered Kurt, “tell them they’re going to pay for this.”

“You, and you. You gonna pay for this!”

Dwayne asked, “What is that supposed to mean?”

Frank grabbed the mic. “Tell them they’re going to sleep with the fishes.”

“That-a mean, Mr. Dwayne, you gonna sleep wid the fishes.”

Marcus, now a little nervous, tried to smooth things over. “Okay, okay, I’m sorry, Victor.”

“Not good enough.”

“Victor, what do you want to make this right?”

Frank spoke to Victor again. “Tell them you have an offer they can’t refuse.”

“I, Victor, have an offering you can’t diffuse.”

“What?”

Dwayne, more used to Victor’s misnomers than Marcus, said, “I think he meant to say he has an offer we can’t refuse.”

“That’s-a what I said. You makin’ fun wid me?”

Marcus ignored the wordplay and told Victor Pointy Foods was prepared to give him ten percent off his next order.

“Tell them today you settle all family business,” said Frank.

“Today I settles all family business, *capice?*”

“Now say, ‘Don’t tell me you’re innocent, Marcus.’”

“Don’t-a tell me you’re innocent, Marcus. Don’t-a do that.”

“Okay, what do you want?”

“You gimme fifty percent off next five orders.”

Marcus turned to Dwayne. “Make it happen.”

“And ten boxes free cannolis or else.”

“Marcus, come on, he’s being ridiculous, that’s too much.”

“Make it happen and let’s get out of here.”

Kurt, Brian, and Frank, in the video room, started laughing.

“Brian, Frank, good job. Now let’s get over to Bernie’s,” said

Kurt.



Determined not to be bested by another client, Marcus walked into Bernie’s restaurant with Dwayne only one reluctant step behind him.

Dwayne was annoyed with his boss. “I can’t believe you caved to the Italian. We’re being played.”

What Dwayne didn’t get was Marcus was also well aware Victor’s performance was staged.

Walking away with no damage was the only outcome for Dwayne. Marcus accepted that sometimes plan B—walking away with just a little damage—was the only resolution. After all, this was business. Win some, lose some.

The hostess escorted the two men to one of the VIP booths. Dwayne fully intended to navigate this confrontation and not let Marcus cave in. Putting Bernie in his place and denying service would be a good start. This was personal. Win some, win some.

“Marcus, I don’t get it. I thought we were collecting money, not giving it away.”

“We are. First of all, that guy scares me. You have to know when to quit. This isn’t Victor. Maybe we’ll do better with this guy.”

Bernie walked over to the men and sat at the end of the booth. Dwayne got off to a good start by inviting the man to have a seat. He extended his hand and again received no handshake.

"I'm not shaking your hand. Why would I? You guys have been screwing up my orders. I ran out of pineapples and ham at my last luau."

"Well, about the orders. According to Dwayne here, your orders have been complete and given to you properly."

"I believe you just called me a liar. Are you calling me a liar, Dwayne? I want to be compensated for my losses."

"Yes, I am calling you a liar and no, you are not being compensated for anything!"

"Hey, Kamehameha, come here. I think I have a situation."

King Kamehameha, flanked by two other enormous Hawaiians, joined Bernie and blocked Marcus and Dwayne from exiting the booth.

"These two guys," said Bernie, pointing to Marcus and Dwayne, "are trying to shake me down."

Kamehameha turned toward Marcus. "I think these two guys have a problem."

"Remember, Kamehameha, your sister works for me. Maybe she's not sharp enough to stay at Pointy Foods, or maybe she is. I don't know. You might want to think twice before you mess with us."

Marcus leaned toward Dwayne. "I think you said the wrong thing." Turning toward Kamehameha, he went on, "Okay, calm down, big guy. I think we may have made a mistake."

Bernie took the floor. "You made a couple of mistakes. First you called me a liar, then you insulted the little sister of my employee of the month, who, I might add, has the ability, and, in this case, the inclination to tear you apart with his bare hands."

Marcus was aware this was an exercise in futility and decided to settle, or at least get out of there alive. "Okay, no reason to threaten us with physical violence. I have the authority to make

this right. How about a twenty-percent discount on your next order?”

“No, that will not do. I want fifty percent off my next five orders.”

“Wow, that sounds familiar,” said Dwayne, who echoed Marcus’ thinking.

Ignoring Dwayne, Bernie looked at Marcus. “Is it a deal or should I have you guys escorted outside?”

“No, no, that won’t be necessary,” said Marcus, looking squarely at Dwayne. “I think your offer is quite fair. I’ll discount your next five orders by fifty percent. Consider it done.”

“That’s fine, but I want you to throw in a few hundred pineapples.”

“Again, consider it done.”

A relieved Marcus and an angry Dwayne squeezed past Kamehameha and his friends and headed out the door with the same number of limbs they’d had when they entered.

As soon as the two men were well on their way to the safety of the car, the booth window opened and Kurt, Brian, and Frank stuck out their heads, all talking at once with Kurt’s voice the loudest.

“Great job, guys! Now it’s time to finish them off at Chuck’s Deli.”



Chuck, who had been apprised of the action at Bernie’s, was waiting for Marcus and Dwayne in the back of his largest deli. There was nothing unusual about the Bluetooth in Chuck’s ear. He was rarely without it and in his deli, never. He wore a Chuckles’ Deli T-shirt with a large, imposing picture of himself on the front.

As they made their way toward the storage area in the back of the deli, Marcus made it clear to Dwayne he had neither the intention nor the desire to lose any more to these customers. “We have to draw the line with Chuck!”

“Don’t worry, Marcus, this guy is a pushover. Keep this in mind: he’s our largest customer in volume, but he’s not our most profitable, not by any means.”

“Good point. Our margins with this chain are terrible. Why should we even *want* to service this customer—any customer—with profit margins this low?”

“Precisely. It hasn’t gone unnoticed the profits from this chain are terrible—definitely the lowest in the company. Why should we even service his places? We’re in business. Period!”

“Wait, so are you giving me the go-ahead, even at the risk of losing the customer?” asked Dwayne.

“Maybe. I’ll signal you if you can go ahead.”

As they turned the corner they met Chuck standing there with folded arms.

“Hello, Chuck, how are you?” said Marcus.

“How am I? You have the nerve to ask that? I was doing great until you two idiots took over my product deliveries.”

Dwayne made it clear they were well aware Chuck was a close friend of Kurt and Brian while, in return, Chuck made it clear he didn’t care.

“Of course we’re friends. People in the same business usually do know each other. Networking, Dwayne, you know what that means, don’t you? Word gets around. It didn’t take too many words to find out my deliveries weren’t the only screwed-up mess. Word has it two idiots are running this division.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. You hear this,” said Marcus. “Dwayne’s numbers show you get better deals than the rest of our customers. In fact, your discounts eliminate any profit at all. No profits, Chuck. That doesn’t sit well with me.”

“That’s your problem. Yours and Dwayne’s.”

“Well, I’m making it your problem. Starting right now! No distributor, not one distributor is going to give you a deal like the one you’re getting from us. It’s a joke! From now on you’ll be paying five percent more. You still can’t do any better even with the increase.”

Chuck's opinion of the deal was evident when a large number of sausages suddenly rained down on top of Marcus' and Dwayne's heads. The onslaught drove the two men to their knees, their raised arms doing little to shield their heads.

"Oh my God, Marcus, tell him to stop! Stop it! Stop it, Chuck. Stop what you're doing."

With no action from Chuck, the hail of sausages lessened and came to a slow stop, and the men stood. Again, with no action from Chuck, each was hit with a single sausage just as they started to speak.

"Ouch!" was all that came from Dwayne, but it spoke volumes.

"Shut up, Dwayne. Chuck, you can forget about dropping more sausages on us. We're not taking them back. That deal wasn't ours. That was between you and Frank. It was criminal collusion."

"Be careful about threatening me, Marcus!"

"I didn't threaten anyone, and I'm not through. On top of everything you're going to pay for all the stolen cups."

"Nope, I'm not paying for anything. Besides, you're already collecting for the so-called stolen cups. You think I don't know Frank is already paying you, you schmuck?"

Not to be sidetracked, Marcus chose to ignore Chuck's response. "Our truck is waiting outside with your next delivery. If you don't sign this new contract with us, the truck leaves and you run out of inventory this week."

"I'm ready for some backup," said Chuck.

Marcus stared at Chuck, unsure if he was bluffing.

The answer appeared in the forms of Kurt and Brian coming forward, outfitted in their Chicago Cubs uniforms, with baseball bats in hand.

Dwayne looked at Marcus. "I should have known these two clowns were behind all this."

Kurt and Brian stood behind Chuck, tapping their bats on the ground.

"Shut up, Dwayne! It's not going to work. Chuck, I know exactly what you need to make your sandwiches, and you need to

know exactly what you'll pay for that product. In case you didn't hear me, that's five percent more. Get used to it!"

Kurt made his own counteroffer. "How about this, you guys. How about a Louisville Slugger sandwich! It's free. No charge at all."

"Not this time, Kurt. Marcus and I are drawing the line. End of discussion."

"Fine, no more discussion," said Walter, rounding the corner with Frank. Walter held a contract and Frank held a pen.

An incredulous Marcus said, "Frank?"

Frank, completely sober, completely in command of himself, had never looked better.

"Hello, boys. Did you miss me?"

"A couple of weeks ago you couldn't get off your living-room floor."

"So true, Marcus, so true. I know you enjoyed that, but now it's my turn. It's payback time."

"Hey, wait a minute," said Dwayne, pointing at Walter. "Aren't you that Ponzi scheme guy who's been on TV a lot?"

"My record is cleared and clean! I'm back and I'm not going to let you two scumbags walk in here and rip off my nephew."

Dwayne walked up and started tapping his finger on Walter's chest. "We're shaking in our boots, aren't we Marcus? You're nothing more than a washed-up, old businessman."

Frank stopped in front of Marcus and proceeded to read aloud from a piece of paper.

"What do you want, you washed-up piece of crap?"

"Oh, Marcus, will you never learn? After all these years? You, Marcus, might win some battles, but you will never win the war. Therein lies the difference between us. I always win the war, and this is no exception. See, Marcus, what you don't understand is that corporate will have your head if you lose the Chuckles' Delis' accounts. Mark my words, you know it's true."

"I don't think so, Frankie boy. He's getting too good of a deal. Losing Chuckles is losing nothing."

"I already have two other distributors willing to give Chuck the same deal for all the delis. Of course, corporate will know about that before day's end. Marcussssss."

"Get away from me, you Bernie Madoff wannabe," said Dwayne. "Marcus, screw the delis, let's get out of here."

"What do you say, Marcussss? Walk out these doors without securing the delis and you walk out of Pointy Foods. You can kiss your career goodbye."

"What? Do you want your old job back?"

"My old job? What a joke! I have a career—a new career that, thank God, doesn't involve you, you slime."

"What's that, a rich drunk?"

"Noooo. Rich, yes, but no to your question. I work with Kurt and Brian now and we're going to buy a professional football team. Yeah, I'm rich. Rich enough to spend a lot of money making your life miserable. Come to think of it, Marcus, I look forward to this aspect of wealth."

"Okay, okay, okay. You win. Now what?"

"You're going to give Chuck all of those cups I stole, and you are going to pay for all the rotten sausages you refused to take back." Frank looked at all the putrefying sausages lying on the ground. "Oh, how convenient, here they are. Just pick 'em up and take them away. By the way, I don't care if you and Dwayne have to pay for them out of your own pockets."

"Fine."

"Oh, not so fast. You didn't actually think I was through, did you, Marcus? How about you, Dwayne? You think I'm through? Didn't think so. Next! You're going to clear my name at Pointy Foods. Completely! That includes the first frame-up. Got it? I think *expunge* is the word."

"Consider it done."

"Gee, thanks, Frank," added Chuck, pressing the advantage. "I want an additional five percent off the rest of my order and free sixteen-ounce cups."

"Fine, but that's it."

"I have it in writing, all of it. That includes the deals you made

with Victor and Bernie. Sorta gives new meaning to *all-inclusive*, doesn't it, boys?" Uncle Walter handed the contract to Marcus.

Marcus took it, neither agreeing nor disagreeing. "I have to read it."

"Of course, be my guest. It's only a few pages."

"Yeah, right! Dwayne, get your driver to back up. He needs to unload the deli products. Now! Or do I have to do that too? A twelve-year-old could figure it out."

"This twelve-year-old already figured you two morons out," said Prince Charles as he approached the men. "Do as the grouch said. Unload and count. I'll be counting right behind you. Everything had better be there. Oh, yeah, one more thing. This twelve-year-old ass is for kissing, and that's what you'd better be doing, 'cause I'm going to be running these delis one day!"

Marcus looked at Walter and seriously considered walking away from this deal with the devil. Self-preservation won out and he said nothing about the unexpected appearance of the heir apparent.

"Sorry, did I neglect to mention Chuck flew his son in for a few weeks? Chuck felt this would be a good time to have him down here while his mother reevaluates some of the recent decisions she's made. Better get used to dealing with him. He knows the business better than you do."

Marcus, no longer surprised by anything, resolved to have as little contact as possible with these people. He told Dwayne to count the order with the boy.

"Really, Marcus? Really? You want me to take orders from this kid?"

"Just do it and let's get out of here."

"Not so fast. You've got a lot of counting to do. Each piece of cheese in these cartons has to be counted individually—one by one," said Prince Charles, seeing no reason to slack off now.

Marcus signed the contract and left without a fight.

Frank couldn't have been happier. "You did good, kid. That was fun."

Kurt agreed and asked if they were through with Marcus.

Prince Charles and Frank answered in unison: “Yeah. For now.”

“Good, we have to get back to business and focus on buying a team.”

Frank suggested they get together around ten on Monday morning. “Even though Victor, Bernie, and Chuck are minority partners, I think they should be there too.”

CHAPTER 30

The New Beginning

Every new beginning comes from some other beginning's end.

—Seneca, Roman philosopher, mid-first century AD

Monday morning's first surprise for Kurt and Brian was seeing Kalia in the office making coffee.

"Kalia, what are you doing here?"

"Good morning to you too, Kurt," she said. "Frank hired me as the receptionist. Is that okay with you?"

"Only if I can hear you say 'aloha.'"

"Aloha, Brian."

"You're hired."

Victor and Bernie walked in and Kurt asked why Chuck wasn't with them. Kalia, who seemed to know what was going on, explained Chuck was back in his new office tending to a large delivery of electronics he'd received earlier. "Watch my monitor."

Chuck's face appeared on her screen as she pushed the power button. "Mr. Jennings, everyone has arrived."

Kurt and Brian took her place in front of the screen and looked into the camera.

"Mr. Jennings, my ass," said Brian. "Chuck, what's with the video monitor?"

"Come on, guys, somebody has to get this place hip to the technology."

Brian pointed out his office was only ten feet from where they stood. "We can hear your voice very clearly through the door, Chuck."

"LOL, guys, I'm walking out the door to meet you."

They watched Chuck as he exited his office and walked into theirs, taking no more than five seconds to do so.

“Chuck, seriously, you’ve got to lay off the LOL.”

“LMAO, Kurt, LMAO.”

“Oh my God, nothing changes. Kalia, where’s Frank?”

“Kurt, I gave you a memo with your coffee. Frank’s in the conference room waiting for everybody.”

“Yeah, you did. I just now figured out what Frank’s up to.”

Kurt opened the conference-room door and everyone walked in and stopped short. Frank was standing behind the podium holding a football in one hand and a microphone in the other.

“Come on, ladies, have a seat. We’re getting a late start.”

Brian was the first to speak. “Oh no, not one of Frank’s Monday-morning meetings.”

“That’s right, ladies. We have work to do. Remember, I own fifty percent of this company. We have to develop a better game plan.”

Kurt was focused on the podium, thinking it looked suspiciously like the one at Pointy Foods and said as much.

“One and the same,” said Frank. He had added it and its delivery to the contract that Marcus had signed.

“Come on, Frank, is this necessary? Really, the Pointy Foods lectern? In our new conference room along with all the old vibes of Pointy Foods’ history? We have a great podium right here. That, that... That’s your miserable, little lectern, Frank. What a waste of time!”

“You think Lou Holtz, Vince Lombardi, or General Patton didn’t plan for their successes? I have a history of success behind this thing. Now take a seat!”

“Great, Frank. What you remember as historical success I remember as weekly verbal browbeatings. This is the last thing you should be focused on. It reeks of bad karma.”

Victor, too, was distressed. “You Frankie, you don’t-a make a me mad. Like-a Kurt say, youz go back to old ways! This Shakespeare, he right, this pasta is-a ante-pasta. Yes, past and after past.”

Brian never failed to figure out Victor’s meanings. “You mean ‘what’s past is prologue,’ Victor. *Ante* means *before*, not *after*.”

“That’s-a what I said. You, Frank, you? Kurt’s right to say you back to old-a ways. And I no like it. Not-a then, not-a now. And I no forget you threaten me wid deep fishing.”

Brian let it go. Sleeping with the fishes or deep fishing—either way, everyone knew what Victor was getting at.

Little bits of the old Frank were showing up here and there. “Don’t worry, Kurt, I can’t fire you anymore. But I sure can motivate you. Kalia, you take notes—omit nothing. We need to start with a name for our company.”

“The more things change, the more they stay the same,” sighed Kurt.

Brian, Chuck, and Bernie called their prospective names in turn.

“Terminators.”

“Warriors.”

“The Rudys.”

They all stopped when Frank asked, “Why the Rudys?”

“Because all my life people said I’m not good enough, not smart enough, not big enough. Just like in the movie *Rudy*.”

Chuck found it hard to be serious about this. “Bernie, old pal, you’re definitely big enough—maybe too big.” Everyone else thought it was funny too.

Kalia asked if she should write down *Rudys*, to which everyone yelled a resounding “no!” Everyone with the exception of Bernie, of course.

Kurt was a little distracted by the familiar odor of Frank’s pores oozing alcohol. “Frank, smells like you had a few drinks this morning. I stress *this morning*.”

“Nah, Kurt, not to worry. Last night. Last night I downed some. Don’t worry, I took a taxi here last night.”

“Oh, brother, here we go again. Old habits die hard. I’m surprised you didn’t tell the driver to take you to Pointy Foods.”

“I did. How’d you know?”

Kurt shook his head. He had heard, once too often, the more things change, the more they stay the same, but to him it was a

comforting notion. He knew exactly where he was and where he was going. Better yet, he knew who would be with him on the journey.

Things are exactly as they're meant to be, he thought as he looked around and took comfort in being surrounded by the most-important people in his life. He couldn't imagine this next stage of his life without them.

He and Darci, after all those years, were soon to be married. He had never envisioned his life without her but the formality of marriage put him on edge. His life was perfect and, nothing being neutral, he knew marriage would alter the texture of his perfect existence.

His life had already changed when he'd won the largest lottery prize in history, yet there he stood—different place, same people, just as he'd always wanted. It had eluded him that while change never stood alone, it wasn't always coupled with misery. *Enhance* had never once entered his cautious mind.

He and Darci would marry, and he and Brian would have their professional football team. Well, he and Brian finally had their *chance* to buy a professional football team because Darci had unwittingly made this possible by urging Kurt to purchase a ticket—the winning ticket.

His good friends Bernie, Victor, and Chuck would continue to have business relationships with him for sure now they were onboard to be part of the venture. Even Chuck's uncle Walter was on the sidelines to share his financial strategies, including, of course, his gift of "friendly persuasions" when needed.

As a major investor, Frank was a reality Kurt couldn't ignore; they would be working together on a daily basis. Truth be known, Frank had been part of Kurt's life for so many years that while Kurt had misgivings, he knew Frank had more than money to offer the venture. Defining Frank's role and keeping him on task might be another matter. Kurt never had unrealistic expectations about anyone and Frank was no exception. He knew Frank would not really change much.

Kurt reluctantly acknowledged that Alice was an integral part of the scenery. Darci's decades-strong friendship with Alice, coupled with Chuck's dating the woman, was clear evidence she wasn't going away either. Kurt had no intention of interfering with Darci's happiness and had no inclination to disrupt anyone's "mojo," as Chuck like to put it.

Kurt closed his eyes and took a deep breath and listened to his friends talk about football and strategy and the future—a future he knew would be bright.

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ENTOURAGE MEETS ANIMAL HOUSE

Kurt and Brian are the Windy City's coolest salesmen and best friends with a shared dream: NFL ownership. When they're not making huge deals, they find themselves disrupting NBA playoff games, flipping their company cars, throwing wild toga parties, and investing in defunct gold mines with their group of rowdy friends.

The two have everything they want in life: great jobs, great friends, and, for Kurt, an accomplished, beautiful businesswoman who views him with love and humor. The only thing that would make life better would be quitting their jobs and realizing their dream of buying a team—maybe even their beloved Chicago Bears.

Everything changes when good fortune smiles on Kurt and Brian. Following an offhand suggestion from Kurt's girlfriend, they play their lucky numbers and win the biggest lottery in history... half of it, anyway. The windfall allows them to quit their jobs. It also puts them one step closer to realizing their once-impossible dream of becoming owners in the greatest league in the world.

But they can only buy a professional football team if they can persuade the other lottery-ticket holder to combine his fortune with theirs. The catch? He happens to be their hated ex-boss.

About the Author

Kurt Weichert is a private investor and writer. A former real-estate broker, he lives in Florida with his wife.

