

Flagrant Foul

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Chapter 1

Opening Tip

Ever since he arrived last spring at the *Forester*, the student newspaper of Forest State University in Cleveland, Davis Brown was relegated to the minor sports beat, working everything from golf tournaments to women's track meets, which was ironic because the FSU women's track team was essentially just the cross country team training during the spring.

But he always held out hope for next year. The current sports editor, Steve Grissom, was on track to graduate at the end of the school year. Little did he know that the timetable was about to be pushed up a couple of months.

It happened on a Monday afternoon near the beginning of the October. Davis got a call at the house that the *Forester's* editor-in-chief, Brenda Alvarez, requested his presence. Brenda was a no-nonsense editor and had been since her two-year stint running the news section. So when she called, he knew it had to be serious.

As he entered the *Forester* office, located in the bowels of Forest State University's student center, Davis noticed that Steve's desk was uncharacteristically clean. It looked as if nobody had been there all year. Davis looked over his right shoulder, and Brenda spotted him from her office.

"Davis Brown," Brenda called to him. "Come on over."

He entered her office, and she asked him to shut the door, having no clue what this was all about.

"Davis, I need your help," Brenda said. "It appears that the good Mr. Grissom had himself a series of brain farts, starting with getting kicked out of school for not paying his tuition

and ending with the perpetual delusion that he's some sort of pro skateboarder, which led him to some extreme sports commune in Montana. So, that kind of leaves me in quite a pickle."

"What can I do to help?" he asked, knowing full well what the next words out of her mouth would be.

"Well, before Steve decided to hop into his Festiva and high-tail it out to the Wild West, he recommended you to take over his position as sports editor. I didn't have a lot of time to think about it, but as far as I've been able to gather, you'd be an excellent replacement for him. So, what do you think?"

"I think when do I start?"

As it turned out, Davis started that day. And after two weeks of having everything from fonts to graphics beaten into his head, Davis was ready to take over the sports section, which included taking over the men's basketball beat, the top prize for all of the writers on staff.

The new was especially pleasing to Davis' uncle, Phil Everly, who had attended Forest State in the 1980s, during which he experienced the Lumberjacks' only run to the NCAA Tournament. And as a current season ticket holder, Uncle Phil was very interested on getting some inside information he could use during games.

The team's Media Day was coming up on the Wednesday before Midnight Madness, and Davis thought that it was the perfect opportunity to get some photos and some information on this year's team to get him up to speed. Not like he didn't know that the team hasn't won anything in the last 15 years.

After their NCAA tournament run, which ended in the Sweet Sixteen at the hands of North Carolina, the Lumberjacks fell into a deep chasm of mediocrity. For the next 10 years, the

best the team would ever do under then-coach Mickey Billings was a second-place showing in 1995, when FSU finished the regular season record of 17-11.

With their post-season hopes on the line, the Jacks traveled to Michigan, where they pinned their hopes on a tournament sweep, topping things off with a showdown with the regular-season champs and the tourney host, the University of Michigan at Detroit.

But it was not to be that year. In the first round, FSU was shocked by the otherwise hapless St. Francis of Chicago, a team that had, in the regular season, flounder to a seventh-place finish. The final score reflected a dismal effort, with the Crusaders dispatching of the Lumberjacks 83-56.

And then, it all went downhill from there.

By 1997, Billings decided that he was done with coaching, retiring and leaving the team to his top assistant, Donovan “Tip” Woods, the hero of FSU’s tournament run. What remained a mystery were the circumstances in which Billings left the school.

As the media reported it at the time, Billings had decided it was time to go. However, Uncle Phil had a different theory about it, gathered from his fellow season ticket holders. His version essentially is summed up that the administration was tired of losing, and felt that putting Tip at the helm would not only inject some life into the team, but would also help ticket sales.

Not so, as it turned out. With this the fifth season in his contract, Tip had done no better than fourth in the conference, and last season, in which FSU was picked to win it all, the Lumberjacks finished a horrendous sixth.

And last season appeared to be the straw that broke the camel’s back for some, including Reggie McCaffrey. Reggie was the former sports editor at the *Forester* for the last two years of his collegiate career, which, as Davis was told, included a one-year gap to pursue a professional

journalism gig. Right before the start of the Midwest Conference schedule, he started a site to get rid of Tip, called TossTip.com.

Being an occasional visitor to the site, Davis found that Reggie's venom for Tip was matched only by his never-ending anecdotes about the team. Despite never meeting Reggie in person, Davis gathered that he was a brilliant sports editor, or at least that's what Brenda said. His section, as she put it, was "the standard in which all other editors should aspire to."

While it seemed like a relatively minor amount of pressure put upon him to try and make sense of this madness, Davis couldn't have been more nervous. He stopped by Uncle Phil's house in Lakewood after he got done with classes the Tuesday before Media Day.

At the time, Uncle Phil seemed a little out of it, but Davis figured that he was working too hard at the downtown accounting firm where he was employed and was getting a little burned out. However, despite the apparent fatigue, Uncle Phil warned Davis to tread lightly with Tip, as he had become rather aloof with the media for the past couple of years.

"Oh yeah," Uncle Phil said. "Tip has been one mean son of a bitch lately. I don't know what his deal has been. I mean, after all, he hasn't won a damn thing since taking over, and he took a decent team last year and ran them into the ground. It makes no sense to me."

"So, what should I ask him?" Davis replied.

"Well, since you're pretty new at this, you might want to leave the tough questions to the experts. There will no doubt be a couple of guys from the newspapers around town, and then there could be some TV and radio guys. If you're lucky, you shouldn't have to ask a single question."

It sounded like some good advice, but it really didn't make Davis any less nervous. But he figured that the rest of his writers were just as bad off, so it wasn't in his best interests to let the apprehension show the next day.

After Davis and a couple of his other reporters came up with a series of questions to ask the players, they made their way to FSU Arena, where there seemed to be only a handful of media outlets interested in this season's edition of Lumberjack basketball.

Like Uncle Phil had said, there were a couple of newspaper guys there. First, there was Jack Alps from the *Sentinel*, one of Cleveland's main newspapers, whose beat included both Forest State and horse racing. Every year, he had the distinct pleasure of covering all three Triple Crown events for the paper.

Albert Mines was also there. He worked for the *Medina County Times*, a paper that covered the southern suburbs. His stories ran in two other papers in Lake County and Lorain County, so Albert's pieces reached a pretty big audience. While he had this beat, he was also in charge of writing movie reviews, and was the paper's top entertainment reporter.

To Davis' surprise, none of the television stations had sent anyone down to the arena, though it made sense given that the past year or so, Forest State hoops was generally relegated to either a 15-second spot during home games and only a five-second mention of the score when they were on the road.

Only one television person was even there, Graham Holtz, the team's play-by-play guy for game broadcasts, which meant there would actually be some contests on the local cable sports channel, having gone dark last year. Holtz must have been happy. He had spent the bulk of last season working his side gig as a daily cable sports talk show host, which was pretty funny in spots.

There turned out to be a couple of radio guys in the building as well. The obvious figure was Dan Regan, the voice of the Lumberjacks on the radio. Last season, the team was on WOIZ, a small station that didn't have much of a range. This season, FSU was back on the biggest sports-radio station in town, WSPU.

Then there was Gary Winters, who hosted a radio show on WSPU from about 9:00 a.m. to 12:00 pm. Davis suspected that he was ready to hit Tip with both barrels, as a favorite guest of his was none other than Reggie McCaffrey.

Just as he walked into the practice gym, Davis caught a glimpse of the refreshment table. And standing by the table downing finger foods was the *Forester's* trusted photo editor, Wilt Wilkerson. In Davis' summation, Wilt had probably been at the paper forever. In fact, he was pretty sure that Uncle Phil may have mentioned him once or twice.

For the most part, though, Wilt was pretty good about keeping schedules and getting shots. In recent memory, he won a few local awards for his work. Not bad for a guy who spent most of his time in the dark room doing stuff that had nothing to do with developing photos.

It seemed that he had been at the gym for a while, so Davis approached him. When he was in the office, Davis had worried that Wilt might have forgotten that it was Media Day, which for him, wouldn't have been the worst thing in the world.

"Hey, Wilt," Davis called to him. "I thought you were meeting us in the office."

"No way, man," Wilt responded. "Do you see the spread here? I wasn't about to pass this up and let these other guys get all the good stuff."

From that, Davis assumed that Wilt had the munchies, which wasn't a big deal. The clock struck 4:00 with no sign of the team, however, and that kind of was a big deal.

“Did sports information say that the team was going to be late or something?” Davis asked Wilt.

“Sports information? Who are those guys?” Wilt said.

Normally, that would have been a rather odd response, but Davis understood. Sports information had historically been a never-ending change of names and faces. Even with his constant interaction, Davis couldn't recognize their names or faces.

Still, they made sure that this event went off without a hitch, placing a variety of promotional and informational material on a table on the sidelines of the gym, albeit with mostly black and white copies. Davis came to the conclusion that the color versions wouldn't be available to the media until about the middle of the season.

At about 4:15, some hip-hop music came over the gym's speakers, followed by Regan's voice, as if there was some real need for any fanfare.

“Members of the media and distinguished guests,” Regan said. “As the Voice of the Lumberjacks, I would like to welcome you to FSU's annual Media Day. And now, without further ado, here are your Forest State Lumberjacks!!!”

Members of the athletics department, to no surprise, started whooping and hollering for the team, while most of the guys in the media, with the exception of Wilt, stood silent.

Obviously, it was time to go to work. However, it appeared that the group was missing a person. All the players were making their rounds through the media, and Davis saw the assistant coaches, but no sign of Tip.

As for the interviews, while his fellow reporters struggled to get face time with the other players, Davis had relatively easy go of it. Miles Holcomb, the team's starting point guard, saw Davis and approached him.

“Davis, right?” Miles asked cordially as he shook Davis’ hand. “We had Public Speaking together last semester.”

“Oh yeah,” Davis nodded. “I thought you looked familiar. How are you?”

“Well, it’s the start of the season,” Miles shrugged. “We’ll see how it goes. You can quote me on that.”

Davis smiled. “Will do.”

Mile then looked around the gym and flagged down Jamaal Hooks, the team’s star forward, who had been speaking to Jack. “Yo, Jamaal, come and talk to my boy for a minute!”

“Thanks,” Davis gratefully said, “Man, I’ve gotta remember this!”

After finishing his thoughts with Jack, Jamaal, who stood 6-4, strolled over to Miles and Davis. “What’s up, Miles?”

“This is Davis Brown from the *Forester*,” Miles said. “He is definitely the guy to talk to.”

“What’s up, man?” Jamaal said to Davis. “I’ll be honest, I really don’t know what to tell you. I mean, basically, we’re planning to take it one game at a time. I think we have the chance to surprise a few people this season.”

“I think I can live with that,” Davis said. “Thanks a lot, Jamaal.”

About a half an hour later, Tip decided to grace the gym with his presence. Davis hid his impatience, as did Jack and Albert. However, Gary made it no secret he was not a happy camper.

Tip, of course, disregarded his nemesis. Dressed in Forest State sweats, he looked around the practice gym like he owned the place. Davis could see how Gary could mistake the coach’s confidence for abject arrogance. Of course, it would take him a little later to get that message. About five minutes later.

Tip gathered the members of the media in front of the table where sports information had laid out its various basketball wares. The coach took a seat behind the seat, as if the table was meant for him..

Attacking, it appeared, was the last thing anybody was planning to do. Jack and Albert, who clearly had better things to do with their days, decided grilling Tip just wasn't worth it, and lobbed him some of the biggest softball questions Davis had ever heard. Tip seemed pleased that he was off the hook.

Then Gary Winters got his two cents in.

“So coach, what are your thoughts on the trouble Jimmy and Ricky got into?”

Jimmy Oliver and Ricky Tallmadge were a pair of former Forest State basketball players. Ricky was back from a stint in Europe, and Jimmy had just graduated, ready for some overseas hoops himself. Then in early September, they decided to break into the Great Lakes Mall in nearby Mentor.

They told the cops they were trying to play a practical joke on a friend of theirs who worked at the Foot Locker. The police didn't buy it, and charged them with felony breaking and entering, which could land them in jail for about five years.

“They're grown men, Gary,” Tip brusquely replied. “I'm sure they'll be able to get out of this just fine.”

Gary wasn't finished.

“Any ideas as to how those new guys are going to respond to the college game?”

“I'm sure you know by now Gary, we have ourselves a decent development program. These guys we've brought in will fit into the squad just nicely.”

“Taking up some German?” Gary lightly asked.

Apparently, that question was not what Tip wanted to hear.

“What are you saying, Winters? That I suck so badly as a recruiter that I can’t get any goddamned kids from my own country? Well, you can kiss my ass, pal!”

With that, Tip pushed himself violently from the table, and flipped it over. Team information flew everywhere, and Tip blared out, “The interviews are over!”

He stormed out of the practice gym, leaving his assistants to sheepishly chase after him and a group of media scratching their heads.

“Well,” Gary blurted out, “that’s not exactly the answer I had in mind.”

While sports information glared angrily at him, Jack, Albert and Davis couldn’t help but crack a smile. After that, Davis kept thinking that this was going to make a decent front-page story for Thursday’s paper, if only...

“Hey, Davis,” Wilt said with crackers falling out of his mouth, “You won’t believe how many shots I got of Coach flipping that table over. It was awesome!!”

Davis and Wilt raced back to the *Forester* offices. While he had finished his section for the next day’s issue, something told him this little tirade would warrant the front page. Davis flagged down Brenda, who appeared to be in deep thought coming up with an editorial.

“What’s on the front page?” Davis inquired.

“We’re not sure,” Brenda said. “Something about the president’s house. Why? What’s up?”

Davis sat down at the computer next to her, typing madly as he explained what had happened at the practice gym. By the time the story was done, Brenda’s eyes lit up.

“Did Wilt get some shots?” Brenda asked excitedly.

At that moment, Wilt had just come from the dark room with negatives ready to scan. In all, he had about five or six good shots, almost like a frame-by-frame of Tip's meltdown. By the time, Wilt was done scanning all the pictures, and I had put the finishing touches on the story.

Brenda, of course, added the final touch: a headline that screamed "Tip Tosses Table," with the subhead, "FSU coach's verbal spat turns ugly."

"This is going to make you some friends in Athletics," Brenda said.

"No kidding."

Davis was about ready to call it a day around 9:30 that evening, but decided that had to call Uncle Phil first, sure he'd be rather interested in the mental state of his coach.

"Uncle Phil, you're not going to believe what happened today! Wait a sec... Mom?"

Davis' mother Marcia had forwarded Uncle Phil's phone to her cell, and told him she was at Lakewood Hospital. He rushed from downtown, only to find her sitting outside of the emergency room, crying softly.

She had only given Davis scant details: Coming around from his house from her insurance claims processor job in Westlake, she had brought Uncle Phil some things he had bought from a garage sale and had forgotten at their house. Within five minutes of his mom's arrival, Phil had collapsed on the kitchen floor. She had to call 911 because Uncle Phil was too big to drag into her car.

"It's terrible," His mother cried as she hugged him. "The doctors said it's pretty serious. They're doing some tests to make sure. Uncle Phil's up in a room on the third floor. He's been asking about you."

Davis crept his way towards the hospital elevator. By the time he found Uncle Phil's room, two grim-looking doctors were exiting out the door. When Davis entered the room, his uncle was staring out the window.

"What's going on?" Davis asked.

"Basically, I'm screwed," Uncle Phil responded. "Those two gentlemen you just saw leave informed me that I have a really nasty case of pancreatic cancer. I don't think I really need to say anything else."

The news was too much for Davis to handle. He sat in the chair next to the bed, put his face in his hands and started crying like a kid with a skinned knee. Surprisingly, Uncle Phil wasn't as upset, and weakly put his hand on Davis' shoulder.

"Listen, Davis, if it's my time to go, then it's my time to go," he said with a mild grin. "I know you and your mom won't agree, but you know what? It's not the worst thing that can happen to you."

Davis found very little comfort in his words, but Uncle Phil seemed rather intent on changing the subject.

"Besides," Uncle Phil said, "I want to hear all about this thing my nephew witnessed between Gary Winters and good ol' Tip Woods..."

Chapter 2

Madness Indeed

Davis had gotten about three hours of sleep that night. Between the excitement of catching Tip being an idiot and the misery of Uncle Phil's grim prognosis, he didn't know which way was up. The doctors said a round of chemotherapy might give Uncle Phil a better chance of survival, though he was rather cynical.

After slogging through morning classes that Thursday, Davis arrived at the *Forester* offices with great anticipation. Certainly he knew that there was going to be a response from all parties involved. And sure enough, the first response would come from Gary Winters, who was nice enough to call... while he was still on the air.

"Davis is the sports editor of Forest State's student newspaper," Gary relayed to his audience. *"Tell me, Davis, what kind of response have you gotten from your story about Tip's behavior?"*

"Well, uh," Davis responded nervously, "I just went by what I saw and, er, heard. I was quite a jolt for me, as I'm sure it was, um, for you."

"I'll say. By the way, Davis, how does it feel to be the only print media to have this story?"

Davis was a bit taken aback by that questions, but John Kramer, who was writing a swimming preview for him, pointed out that neither Jack Alps nor Albert Mines had mentioned it in their newspapers.

"I think, uh, I'll be getting some phone calls later today," he replied. "I'll bet that somebody's going to think that I made this up."

Gary assured Davis that there was no way that this could have been made up. As soon as he got off the phone with the show, Davis felt that this would be the start of a busy day. Jack Alps had also left a voicemail message congratulating Davis on the scoop. He thought that Albert Mines would also be making his acquaintance this day, but the call never came. The only other response was the obligatory e-mail from Reggie.

The story was a minor ego boost for Davis, but it was about the furthest thing from his mind. The next day, after getting a little more sleep than the previous night, he went to the hospital to visit Uncle Phil.

But rather than talk about the cancer that cast a pall on his future, Uncle Phil was way more interested in Davis' story and FSU basketball.

"You know Reggie McCaffrey called up right after Gary got off the phone with you, right?" he said, still sounding rather weak. "I'll bet the *Forester* office has a really crappy radio signal, so you didn't get to hear it. But Reggie just laid into Tip again."

"Yeah," Davis said. "Reggie really has it in for Tip. But I'm sure he's always been on the coach's ass, even when he was the sports editor."

"No way. Reggie was a huge Tip fan from way back. Check your archives. He didn't think there was anyone more perfect for the job when he was hired."

After talking with Uncle Phil some more, Davis headed back to the office. Midnight Madness was that night, which he begrudgingly thought would be a good idea to put in the next issue.

Since he had a little bit of time to kill, Davis rifled through the old *Forester* issues from previous years. It turned out that Uncle Phil was right. Reggie was way up on Tip. Davis can tell he left before Tip's teams took a turn for the worse.

When Davis finished, it was about nine o'clock. The doors of FSU Arena didn't open for another hour, so he strolled over The Crash, the bar across the street from school that, as legend had it, was named after the time 30 years ago when a tractor-trailer rammed into the vacant building the day after the owner bought it.

They might as well have had Midnight Madness at the bar, because it looked like the bulk of Lumberjack fans were packed in. Davis recalled getting completely plastered with Uncle Phil prior to the previous year's event. He also recalled it was the highlight of his evening.

Davis figured that even though he was going to cover a story, one beer wasn't going to kill him. He grabbed a Miller Lite from the bartender and looked around the bar. The DJ was playing some decent music, and everybody was having a good time. Davis thought that this is how it must have been on the Titanic before it crashed into the iceberg, though he doubted anyone on that tragic cruise was listening to Ludacris.

All of a sudden, Davis feel a tap on his shoulder. That was then followed by the next statement: "I was wondering when our paths would cross."

What Davis saw standing next to him was a lanky guy wearing a pair of black-framed glasses, He was wearing a Forest State jersey and baseball cap backwards, and it appeared that he was carrying a couple of 24-ounce Budweisers, which Davis took to be the house special for this occasion.

At that point, Davis knew he was in the presence of on Reggie McCaffrey.

"So, you're Reggie, eh?"

"The once and future. Davis, right? I knew your uncle. He sat behind me when I covered FSU. How's he doing?"

"He's pretty sick. Might not make it to the end of the season."

“Damn. That’s terrible. Send him my best wishes, will ya?”

“Can do. Listen, Reg, I was only going to be around for a little bit.”

“That’s cool, man. I know how it used to be. I was once in your shoes as the gung-ho guy getting the story. That was, of course, before I became an opinionated loudmouth exclusively. It’s strangely liberating.”

“So is Budweiser, I see.”

“Yeah, well, it’s Friday, and tonight, I celebrate the demise of Tip Woods.”

With that, seeing that Davis was a bit pre-occupied, Reggie bid him adieu and headed back into the crowd. Perhaps if it had been some other time, Davis would have been right over there with Reggie. Davis headed back to the office to grab his pen and pad. Surprisingly, Wilt was there to greet him, albeit with a six-pack of Natural Lights.

“Do we really have to go to this thing?” Wilt whined. “I mean, it’s Friday night, man. It sucks having to work on a Friday night.”

Wilt’s lamenting did ring a little true. Davis knew that he wanted to be somewhere else, even though it wasn’t the same place as Wilt wanted to be, which likely was knee-deep in a kegger with drunk co-eds young enough to be his daughter.

“Bummer about Phil, bro,” Wilt, in a rare moment of clarity and surprising sympathy, continued, “Is he gonna make it?”

“Probably not,” Davis answered, not really feeling in the mood to respond to questions.

Thankfully, the conversation was cut short. It was ten minutes to ten o’clock and time to go to the arena.

When they arrived at FSU Arena, they noticed a decided lack of enthusiasm. In years past, you could see at least 2,000 to 3,000 folks coming into the venue for Midnight Madness, a

modest crowd for the 12,000-seat arena. In the first years of Tip, as Davis heard and gathered from Uncle Phil, the arena was half-full with excited fans.

For this edition, if there were 500 in the stands, Davis would have been greatly surprised. It appeared that the only folks who really wanted to come were either old alumni who only bought season tickets as some sort of lame networking tool or drunken dorm kids who made a wrong turn at the dorm exit and thought they were at a really bad frat party.

And then there was Reggie. Davis couldn't tell if he was drunk or not, but he took his seat a few rows up in Section 133, which was on the left side of where the pep band was set up and on the right side of the opponent's entrance from the locker room.

He must have taken his basketball way too seriously, because there wasn't a soul within three rows of him. Of course, despite it being considered the student section, and aside from the passed-out dorm kids in the first couple of rows, Section 133 was eerily barren.

Davis figured that he wasn't going to see Tip until right before midnight with the rest of the squad, so Davis took in the show. First up, the promotional guys from the athletic department kicked things off with that silly game where you spin around a whiffleball bat and then try to make a basket. Some 50-year old guy with a receding hairline won. His lack of hair must have provided him minimal friction to win the game.

While he waited, Davis also tried to get some comments from students. He wanted to get down to the lower rows of Section 133, but before that, he was sidetracked by a couple of fellows he recognized from years past. They sat in Section 103, and one of the guys always wore his Florida Gators gear to games. Since Davis was the only guy walking around with a pen and paper, he stuck out like a sore thumb.

“Say, are you with a newspaper?” the Gator fan quizzed.

“Yeah,” Davis answered back. “The school paper, the *Forester*.”

“That was a great picture. You getting comments from students?”

“For the most part, though I doubt I’ll get too many good answers. I’m guessing most of these kids are from the dorms and they’re wasted.”

“Well, we’ve gotten a couple drinks in over here, too.”

“We?”

He pointed up, and there were a couple of his brethren. The first guy was a slim guy with glasses who was a Forest State alum from about a decade and a half ago, and told him trolled around the TossTip.com message boards under the moniker “Captain Cleveland.” Davis wondered if he knew Uncle Phil, but he didn’t want to explain his whereabouts. The other guy, who was introduced himself as Tim, was familiar to Davis as well, as he spent many years working with the Gator Guy to aggravate the opposing teams.

The trio, dubbed the “Holy Trinity of Heckling” by Reggie on his site, usually was around during the regular season taunting the opponents, as it is situated directly behind the visiting team’s bench. Gator Guy and Tim were generally the best at getting the other coach’s goat, and were even allegedly threatened by Max Hill, the long-time coach at Michigan-Detroit.

Still a bit pre-occupied, Davis exchanged pleasantries with the Section 103 gang, knowing that he would run into them again the entire season, and made it to the student section. There was no dispute that there were students everywhere in the arena, but he knew that he’d have to go to Section 133.

Finally, Davis had arrived at the front rows of the student section. Much to his non-surprise, he came across a dozen students from the dorms. And of course, they were the same dozen or so people he had spotted at The Crash earlier in the evening.

“Hey guys,” Davis said in order to get their attention. “I’m covering this thing for the *Forester*. Can I talk to some of you guys?”

Then from about three rows back, some girl who looked about 18 or 19 with some crazy green eyes and wild long brown hair stood up. She gave him the kind of look that made Davis think that she was some reformed ax-murderer from Kansas making a new life for herself.

“The *Forester*,” she replied. “I think I’ve talked to you sons of bitches enough to last me a lifetime!”

“I’m sorry,” Davis said, taken aback by her snide comment. “Have you been involved with the paper before?”

She spent the next five minutes rambling on about her distaste for the paper. While he didn’t immediately recognize her, Davis realized out during the tirade that it was Lanie Chapel, president of the student government.

As scary as she looked, the sound of her voice just made things worse. Davis tried to tell her that news wasn’t his beat, but it became very apparent that he was guilty by association. Then all of a sudden, he start hearing a voice louder than Lanie’s come from higher up in the section. It was Reggie coming to his defense.

“So, Lanie, are we done harassing the sports editor?” Reggie called from his seats a few rows up in a rather rude tone. “He probably has no idea what you’re screaming about, let alone who you are in the first place.”

“Well, if it isn’t Reggie McCaffrey,” Lanie shrilly replied. “Clearly nothing to do on a Friday night, eh?”

“I’ve done more with my evening than you’ve done all semester. Actually, that makes me curious. What have you done all semester?”

With that, Lanie became beet red and stormed out of the arena, with her drunken cronies following close behind as if they were her bodyguards. As they passed, they gave Reggie quite a few dirty looks, and Davis was sure he had seen a couple of middle fingers flashed in Reggie's general direction.

"Sorry about that, man," Reggie said. "That was the culmination of a lot of years crap that's gone down that you shouldn't have to deal with. Hell, I can remember when she was a brown-nosing freshman senator. I see things have just gotten worse."

Davis understood some of the general points of the feud. During the spring, he remembered a couple of shouting matches that Brenda had gotten into with Lanie, though he usually got this information second-hand.

"Say, Reg, was there anything going on between you and Brenda?" he asked.

"Nope," he responded. "Strictly professional."

Davis wasn't sure what to make of Reggie's response. Regardless, it mattered very little, since Brenda was going out with a junior business major named Kevin Brass, who was Brenda's math tutor when they met.

With all of that drama done, Reggie returned to his seat and Davis moved on, where he actually found some students who were willing to talk, though most of them were none too happy with the prospects of the team.

About a half a dozen student interviews and several more bad party games later, the clock hovered around midnight, and the hoops team was about to make their way onto the court. The pep band played the FSU fight song, and out came the Lumberjack basketball team. It took about five minutes after the players fumbled through their opening drill that Tip strolled out from the locker rooms.

The most apparent feature that adorned Tip was not the Armani suit, nor was it the shiny black patent leather shoes that looked like they cost a fortune. No, the most prominent feature on Tip was the horrid scowl on his face, which made him look like he had been kicked in the groin prior to entering the arena.

He folded his arms and walked onto the court to witness the train wreck that had become his squad. Tip could deny the rumors all he wanted, but there was no mistake that this team was atrocious both in their practice and in their attitude.

The lackadaisical manner in which the squad ran through its warm-up drills didn't exactly inspire awe in the miniscule crowd. The older gentlemen that graced the priciest seats in the arena just sat there in utter disbelief, and then whispered amongst themselves.

As for Davis, he just watched as the team acted as if they were a CYO squad that was thrown together at the last minute because two coaches had quit.

First was the alleged shoot-around. They went at least five times without anyone popping a shot in the basket, and on at least two occasions, a pass to the next player went errant and smacked into the announcer's table. Needless to say, the public address announcer, who has been around as long as Forest State, damn near had a heart attack.

But he regained his composure to make the following announcement: "Ladies and gentlemen, please put your hands together as we begin the opening round of the Slam Dunk contest!"

Knowing the winner was going to be Jamaal, Davis chuckled. Jamaal was clearly the most athletic on the team. It also helped that his competition was horrible.

First, there was the Otto. His lanky frame left a lot to be desired, as did his dunks. Two of his attempts sent the ball across the court. You could probably have heard the clangs to Otto's hometown in Berlin.

Next up was Jamaal, who threw down a beautiful tomahawk jam that got the small crowd in a minor stir. Davis was sure in the back of Jamaal's mind; he was kicking himself for transferring from Albrecht University, a smaller Connecticut school that has made the NCAA tourney twice since his departure.

The 6-6 walk-on Billy Locke was up next. Davis thought he was around to keep the team's GPA up to par, because he had very little game. His attempts left him a heap on the court, much to the crowd's amusement. Then there was the 5-11 Richard Jackson. For some reason, the back-up point guard was under the delusion that he was the second coming of Spud Webb. He had three attempts, but everybody in the arena knew exactly what was going to happen: Three attempts in which he came nowhere near the rim.

Finally, there was the big man, seven-footer Mike Phillips. Despite the fact he was, in the physical sense, a pure center; it was well known that he wasn't worth the recruiting effort. And his dunks pretty much proved that claim, clanking two of the three monster dunks he tried to throw down.

The dunk contest essentially set the tone for the rest of the evening. Next was the three-point contest, which should have been renamed the "First One to Hit a Trey Wins" contest. The winner turned out to be the obvious choice: starting senior shooting guard Dexter Hollis, who, if properly motivated, could drain threes at will.

With the three-point debacle over, the finale was set: a Green versus White scrimmage that would prove to be the final insult on what had become a gruesome spectacle. It didn't really

matter who won the scrimmage, because it was a horrendous affair. Despite the fact there was relatively little defense played, nobody, save for Jamaal and Miles, wanted to make a basket. The end result was a 55-38 win by the Green team that he led.

Davis understood why many in the crowd were bleary-eyed, as the crowd slowly drifted out of the arena. Most of the dorm kids had vacated Section 133 after Lanie's stormy departure, no doubt because Reggie willed it so.

As for him, Davis figured that he took some pleasure in watching the team fare so poorly on the first night. If he needed any spur to continue his cause to dump Tip, he needn't look any further.

Deciding he had seen enough and wanting to write the story and head home, Davis gathered Wilt, who had obviously made his way to the bar inside the arena, and went back to the *Forester* offices.

"Say Davis," Wilt uttered from his stupor. "Looks like you got in the middle of some nasty shit."

"Oh, that thing between me and Lanie? I guess so," Davis replied. "But it was nothing compared to the venom she had for Reggie."

"And Brenda. Man, you wouldn't believe how all this went down."

"I knew it! Reggie and Brenda did have something going on!"

"Had, actually. You know why him and Brenda broke up? She found out that he was cheating on her with Lanie."

After that revelation, they went their separate ways, Wilt to whatever keg party was happening and Davis to the office to write his story. As he entered the hall towards the *Forester* offices, Davis heard noises. He probably should have left well enough alone and gone home, but

instead, he unlocked the office doors only to walk in on Brenda and Kevin in a rather compromising position.

“Oh shit!” Davis exclaimed, mostly because that was the only thing he could think of to say. Embarrassed as hell, he shut the door abruptly and went home. Clearly, Davis had seen enough for one night.

And, as it turned out, this would pretty much represent a microcosm of the season.

Chapter 3

Preseason Jitters

It had been three weeks since Midnight Madness and the Lumberjacks were gearing up for their only exhibition game. Uncle Phil was doing a little better than he had been, even though the chemotherapy was making him sick as a dog.

By that time, all the college basketball experts had come out with their predictions. To nobody's surprise, FSU was ranked near the bottom of the Midwest Conference.

Meanwhile, Davis was caught in the crossfire of a war between Brenda and Lanie. A couple of days of getting over the shock of walking in on Brenda and Kevin, Davis mentioned the squabble he had with Lanie. That only prompted Brenda to lambaste her in the latest editorial, calling the student government president "too drunk to responsibly address the needs of the students."

Davis tried to focus attention on Saturday's exhibition game with a team called the Street Corp, which he guessed were a group of guys that rolled with Tip on the hardwood during the off-season and, as a favor to them, hooked them up with a warm-up game against the Lumberjack and the money that came with it.

Avoiding the Crash, Davis made it to FSU Arena in time for team introductions. The starting line-up for Forest State consisted of the predictable trio of Jamaal Hooks, Dexter Hollis and Miles Holcomb, plus Otto Braun and, in a surprising twist, Mike Phillips in the middle. Perhaps his parents were in the crowd.

Phillips grabbed the opening tip, probably because he was about six inches taller than the guy he faced. The first five minutes were excruciating, with the Lumberjacks holding a slim 10-8 margin over the Street Corps. Davis, bored at the sorry display, turned his attention to the crowd,

where much of the real action was going on. First, the gang from Section 103 appeared to be in mid-season form, led by boisterous heckling at the expense of the visiting coach.

Meanwhile, in Section 133, the dorm kids had their own issues, in all likelihood spurred by some pre-game libations. Lanie and her entourage of rejects were less than interested in the game and more interested in socializing with each other, much to his non-surprise.

Of course, no game would have been complete without Reggie who, between trading barbs with Lanie's crew a few rows down, was totally focused on the game and FSU's poor performance against a clearly inferior opponent that looks thrown together at the last minute.

During the time-outs were "performances" by the Forest State cheerleaders, a rag-tag bunch of degenerates who would have been laughed out of any other school, and a dance number by the Log Ladies, a horribly-named group of dancers whose lack of grace was the constant source of amusement by Brenda over the time Davis had known her.

While he thought of the last insult his boss had come up with, Davis noticed that Brenda and Kevin were perched in Section 109, across the arena from Reggie, ironically. They spent more time making out than watching the game. While Davis was sure that this was a blatant attempt to mess with Reggie, he should have considered himself lucky that he didn't witness what Davis had after Midnight Madness.

Needless to say, Davis was thrilled to see the game get to halftime. The Lumberjacks were trailing the Street Corp, 38-35. Jamaal led all scorers with 12 points, but FSU was hampered by 13 turnovers that led to 20 of the Street Corps' points.

While Davis sat down in the press room to read the halftime stats and eat a hot dog, a very grateful Jack Alps greeted him. Jack seemed rather pleasant to Davis, maybe because he could relate to the living hell Davis was enduring.

“There he is,” Jack opened. “My savior.”

“Thanks, Jack,” Davis said. “Hey, I forgot to mention. Great coverage of the Breeder’s Cup a couple of weeks ago.”

“I tell ya, it was great. I got three whole days at Santa Anita getting the full experience. It’s always great to witness a spectacle like this like that. This is the trade-off, though. The *Sentinel* sends me to heaven for a couple of days, then keeps me wallowing in crap for the entire winter.”

He was right. Davis could relate. Besides Uncle Phil’s health struggles, he was the sports editor of a newspaper that had the student government, not to mention an entire athletics department, on its back. Add to that a crappy hoops team that featured a coach that likely couldn’t stand him.

“Keep your head up, kid,” Jack said. “Things will come together for you soon enough.”

As luck would have it, something did come together a few seconds later, as cute girl in walked in. She had brown eyes and strawberry blonde hair in big curls. The second Davis saw her, his mouth dropped, which he quickly closed so she wouldn’t notice. She grabbed a Diet Pepsi, smiled at him, and left the room.

Jack laughed. “Looks like you found a bright spot. Too bad you have no idea who she is.”

It figured that Jack would be nice enough to tell him. Laura Bryce, in no shock to Davis, worked as Tip’s student assistant.

At that point, Davis was a little disgruntled. Tip was her boss, and Davis was certainly not in his good graces. But then again, seeing her was a nice diversion from everything else. Davis headed back to his seat on press row to witness the remainder of this exhibition disaster. Sadly, the second half was no better than the first half.

As was the case earlier in the game, Jamaal was the only offensive spark, rattling off six straight points during one stretch. Perhaps the most overrated guy on the floor was Otto, who lumbered about like a lost sheep.

Six minutes into the second half, Miles drove the ball down the court after a Hooks rebound. Miles thought he'd get flashy and dish a no-look pass to Otto. The problem was that somebody forgot to tell the lanky German. The end result was an errant pass that smacked Otto right in the head and bounced out of bounds.

The crowd in the arena was rather paltry for the tune-up. The announced attendance was 750, allegedly, to witness poor execution and ridiculously bad ball handling. By the time Otto was beamed by Miles, a good part of the crowd had exited the stands. Davis attributed this to the fact that some have a higher threshold of pain than others.

Thankfully, the pain subsided for the few and diehard. Despite the Jacks' poor performance, in the end, The Street Corps just ran out of gas and couldn't maintain their halftime edge. FSU was able to eke out a win against the makeshift squad, 60-57. Jamaal led the team with 18 points and nine rebounds, but the Lumberjacks had made 20 turnovers and committed a ton of personal fouls.

With the game over, it was time to head back to the pressroom and talk with Tip, yet another thing Davis wasn't looking forward to considering the acrimonious first impression he made on the man.

Tip walked into the room with his tie loosened and cost unbuttoned. He looks mildly pleased with the victory, though Davis couldn't understand why anyone would be happy about scratching out a win over some scrubs.

Davis was apprehensive at first, thinking the first question out of his mouth was going to be shouted down by Tip. But the reality turned out to be that Jack and Albert took the bulk of the questions Davis planned to ask. He was thankful to those two in a way, mostly because they unwittingly shielded him from the wrath of Tip.

“Coach, will the execution improve in the regular season?” Jack asked.

“Well, this was a warm-up,” Tip answered. “This was our first chance to knock off some of the rust from the off-season. We’ll get ourselves into a rhythm soon enough.”

Yeah, Davis thought, a rhythm of getting your ass kicked game in and game out.

“So, Coach, this means the large number of fouls and turnovers doesn’t bother you?” Albert added.

“Well, I don’t think we should read too much into the stat book tonight,” Tip replied. “The kids were out there to have some fun, and I think they’ll learn when to switch it on when the games count.”

Fun? Davis thought. Is that was getting yelled at for five minutes is? Because that’s what happened to Miles during the second half, and he didn’t look very happy to me.

“It seems that Otto Braun is still a little lost out there,” Albert asked. “What kind of timeline do you have for his development as a starting forward?”

“Well, we weren’t planning to throw basketballs at his head until after Thanksgiving,” Tip joked. Of course, the only ones laughing were his assistants and others in the athletics department.

“But seriously,” Tip continued, knowing he laid an egg, “Braun should be alright for the regular season. There’s no reason that we should have any problems this year.”

Rather than answer any other questions, Tip decided to excuse himself, much to the media's chagrin. Jack and Albert shook their heads as he left as if to collectively say, "Damn, what an asshole."

As for Davis, he clicked off his tape recorder and with final game stats in hand, he returned to the *Forester* offices, hoping, of course, that Kevin and Brenda had taken their show home this night. Davis still didn't understand why Brenda had shown up to the game. She never struck him as much of a basketball fan. In truth, he was still convinced that she went there with Kevin to taunt Reggie.

Thankfully, there were no surprises waiting for Davis when he opened the office door. In actuality, the office was tranquil, except for the cloud of smoke that billowed out of the dark room, telling him that Wilt was developing his shots for next issue.

But just as Davis turned on his computer, Brenda and Kevin came barging in. It was obvious that they had tanked up during the game, and he was afraid they had come back to the office for a little post-game action. And they looked surprised to see Davis, too.

"Sorry, Davis," Brenda slurred. "I didn't know anyone was going to be here."

"It's alright, Brenda," Davis said. "I wanted to knock this story out while it's still fresh in my head."

Brenda then waddled over to Kevin and muttered, "You see, Kevin? This is what I'm talking about: Dedication. I wish I had 10 people like him."

She looked down at Davis, and then whispered into Kevin's ear who let out a gasp.

"I guess this can wait," Davis snapped back. "I see I won't be getting any work done tonight."

"Really, Davis," Brenda slathered, "Or are you being fathe, fasse, err, funny?"

“Nah, I mean, it’s Saturday night. What the hell am I doing here? I guess I’m just trying to get my mind off things.”

“Well, I think Kevin and I have just the thing...”

Whatever they had planned, Davis knew he wasn’t going to let them drive.

So, it was off to the Warehouse District they went and a stop at the Velvet Dog, which, as Davis remembered, had some decent music and good drinks. After checking in with the bouncer, Brenda and Kevin magically disappeared to the crowded dance floor. This, of course, meant Davis was relegated to the bar, hoping for a bartender to notice him in a sea of humanity.

“He’ll take a Miller Lite,” an unknown figure in front of me called. The next thing Davis knew, he was presented with a free beer, compliments of Reggie McCaffrey.

“Taking a breather, I see,” said Reggie. “You know, long ago, I was like you: hardworking, dedicated and not opinionated. And then I started speaking out. You will too, one of these days.”

“You know I came here with Kevin and Brenda, right?” Davis replied.

“Something tells me they’ll be taking a separate cab home. It’s for the best, you know. I doubt you’d want to be sitting next to them on the way home. Lord knows what they’d do.”

“I can imagine. Say, I thought you might be working on your site or something.”

“Come on, even I’m not that big a geek. It’s Saturday night, pal! In fact, I was wondering if you’d be my wingman for a little mission.”

Davis has heard this before. Basically, he was to run interference for some boring or ugly chick while his friend got the hottie on the dance floor, kind of like that Coors Light commercial. As he predicted, Reggie made a play for some long-legged blonde in a tight mini-skirt, while Davis was relegated to entertaining her friend, who looked more like Harvey Keitel in a wig.

However, about five minutes later, he was back at the back, free from the Keitel look-a-like. No sooner than he grabbed his drink, Reggie amazingly reappeared, without blonde in hand. Davis was betting that she wasn't a fan of FSU basketball, which he guessed would have been Reggie's opening line.

"Not much of a hoops fan?" Davis asked.

"Please," Reggie retorted. "Basketball has nothing to do with making a play for the ladies. However, tall muscular boyfriends do, which is why I'm back here getting another beer. I see you weren't down with Harvey Keitel's sister, eh?"

"You caught the resemblance. I thought most people would be nice enough not to point that out in public."

"Come on. You're talking to the guy who's made sites to fire coaches popular. I have no shame."

"Clearly. But doesn't it bug you that Brenda's here and she didn't say anything to you?"

"Not really. I kind of left things a mess with us. You see, well, I think I'll leave it at that."

He didn't tell Davis, but he had already got the gist of the story from Wilt. He knew about Reggie and Brenda, then Reggie and Lanie, and how he lost them both. But Davis figured it was none of his business.

Just then, the look on Reggie's face turned from semi-jovial to sour.

"You might want to scatter," he blurted out. "No sense in getting you caught in the crossfire."

Before Davis could ask him what he was talking about, Reggie scurried into the crowd. Davis looked at the entrance, and there was Tip Woods. He understood why Reggie ran so fast.

Since Davis didn't feel like he was in any danger, and also since he was running low on alcohol, he decided to belly up to the bar for another.

"I thought journalists were vodka drinkers," a gruff voice behind Davis said as he order another beer. "At least that's what Jack and Albert drink."

Davis didn't have to turn around to see who it was. He knew it was Tip.

"Well, Coach, I'm also a college student, so I guess that cancels things out," Davis calmly replied. "We're still too poor to afford the top-shelf stuff."

"You're that kid from the *Forester*, right?" asked Tip. By then Davis realized Tip had no idea who he was. So, of course, Davis had to re-introduce himself.

"You got me pretty good after Media Day," Tip continued.

"Just doing my job, Coach," Davis responded.

"Yeah, I understand. It was my fault really. I did exactly what Gary Winters wanted me to do."

"So, Coach, what brings you out here tonight?"

"My goddaughter thought it would be a good idea." Tip then pointed out his goddaughter out on the dance floor. Davis should have known it was Laura.

"Her father was a trainer for the Clippers," Tip said. "Let's just say we spent a lot of time together, especially with these knees."

"Sounds like a beautiful friendship," Davis said.

"Kid, it seems like we got off on the wrong foot, with that tirade of mine and all."

"Coach, you know I've got a job to do, and that's the primary reason the picture got on the front page. In fact, the picture wasn't even my call."

“Alright, alright. I’ve already gotten enough flak from Winters and his horde of listeners. Look, I recognize I was a prick, but its all part of the gig. I’ve built a reputation on having the larger than life persona. And I intend to keep it up.”

“So, coach, what are you saying that things are going to get things worse?”

“Son, I’m just saying that if I were you, I’d stay above the fray.”

“Uncle Tip, are you talking basketball again?” a female voice called from behind him.

“Didn’t I bring you out not to talk about that?”

“Laura, have you met, Davis, is it?”

She smiled. “Not formally, but I think I’ve seen him down in the press room with the other guys.”

“Uh, yeah,” Davis uttered nervously, not knowing what else to say.

Tip just laughed at the reaction, and made his way to the VIP section. Apparently, he felt the best way to get back at Davis for the front page story was to leave him alone with his goddaughter.

“Uncle Tip?” Davis asked.

“Yeah. He grew up in Philadelphia when my dad was working on his Master’s degree in Sports Medicine at Temple. They met during my dad’s practicum. It’s a long story.”

“Sure, I can see that.”

“So, Davis, do you dance?”

Trying to be funny, he said, “Well, I won’t be getting into any MC Hammer videos, but yeah.”

She giggled, to his surprise, led him towards the dance floor. Just as Davis started to relax with Laura, he caught Reggie out of the corner of his eye, getting into it with Brenda and Kevin.

“Listen, I have to go. Gotta put out a fire.” Davis said into Laura’s ear and pointed to the argument behind her.

“Oh, a hero, too,” Laura said.

“Not really. I just want to keep my editor in one piece. I’ll see you around the arena, right?”

“Maybe even sooner.” She winked and left him to deal with the growing fight.

Just as Kevin and Reggie were coming to blows, Davis decided to intervene and pulled Reggie off the dance floor and out of the club.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Davis yelled.

“Damn it, this doesn’t concern you!” Reggie boomed, as he tried to push and shove past Davis to get back into the club.

“What are you, crazy? I know this none of my business, but would you like to spend a night in jail?”

With that, Reggie slumped and sat himself on the curb with his head in his hands.

“I screwed this up, man,” he whimpered.

“Screwed up what?” Davis asked, though he knew the answer.

“Me and Brenda. Hell, I drug you into this whole thing. Might as well give you the story. Kevin was Brenda’s math tutor. Me and her, well, were together for a while.”

“But you thought Brenda had a thing for Kevin.”

“Yeah. But she told me nothing was going on. That didn’t stop me, though. No way. One night, I got totally obliterated at The Crash.”

“And you ran into Lanie.”

“That’s right. How did you know?”

“Wilt told me. You’re just filling the blanks at this point.”

“Well, I filled something that night. The next morning, I told Brenda about it. She dumped me on the spot. Me and Lanie tried to make a go at it, but that chick’s just psycho! And you know the rest of the story. She got Kevin. I got nothing. It’s been almost a year, and it still hurts. I don’t get it.”

“Reg, you are asking the wrong guy,” Davis picked him up off the curb. “Come on, bud. I’ll take you home.”

After dropping off Reggie at his apartment complex somewhere in Cleveland Heights, Davis headed to Parma where he and his mother lived. While the next day would no doubt bring a ton of questions from Uncle Phil, Davis wished most of them would be about the game. However, he could take it to the bank Uncle was going to ask about the girl. Though Davis hadn’t told him about it, he had always had a way of knowing...

Chapter 4

Practice Makes Permanent

It had been about 10 days after the aberration that was the only exhibition game of the season. The doctors had given Uncle Phil a breather on the chemotherapy, and he had been feeling better the last three days.

However, he was still weak, and he took up residence at Davis and Marcia's house, meaning he was a couple of doors down from Davis. This, of course, gave him more opportunities to dig into Davis about Laura, the strawberry blonde who had the extra-added bonus of being Tip's goddaughter. While this, in all likelihood, meant Davis had no chance in hell, Uncle Phil was already making wedding arrangements.

The first game of the season was an away game in Pittsburgh against Duquense, a team without much of a punch. Brenda asked Davis if he wanted to make a road trip, but he declined. Since he'd probably have to foot the bill for transportation costs, it wasn't really worth it.

Instead, he decided to take to the practice gym to do a preview story on the team. Davis felt less apprehensive of going into enemy territory, as he thought he had been able to clear the air with Tip after out conversation at the club.

Getting into practice was the hard part. For whatever reason, sports information guarded Tip and the team like Fort Knox. All interviews went through them first. It was fine, though, because Davis had no intention of calling Tip's office with the off chance he'd get Laura on the line, thus making him so nervous he would probably have hung up the phone.

Davis thumbed through the newly-printed men's basketball media guide and grabbed the contact number.

"Sports Info," a growl on the other end of the phone answered.

“Yeah,” Davis responded. “This is Davis Brown from the *Forester*. I’d like to request an access pass to practice.”

“For what purpose?”

“Preview story for the Duquesne game.”

“Will you be sending over written confirmation?”

“Written?”

The voice sighed impatiently. “All verbal requests must be followed by a written confirmation on the letterhead of the media outlet.”

“Oh. Yeah. It’s coming.”

“This will be for what day?”

“Today.”

“OK. All requests must be made at least 24 hours before the day of the interview. But since I see you didn’t know or remember that, I’ll make an exception this one time.”

This is what Davis had to put up with. It may be a Division I squad, but it’s a team that hasn’t made it to an NCAA tournament since the coach was still playing. He didn’t bother to argue with sports information, though. They were just another hurdle in his way. But they did mention that the basketball office would call to confirm his appointment.

The funny part was that he knew that Jack and Albert were going to be at practice as well, and Davis knew they didn’t have to jump through the hoops, so to speak, that he was forced to. It was the price, Davis supposed, for not being considered a real news source.

As soon as he returned to the office after his noon Media Criticism class, he heard the phone ring.

“*Forester*,” Davis answered.

“Yes, I’m looking for Davis Brown,” the voice on the other line said.

“This is he.”

“Well, Davis, I thought you might be out breaking up another fight or something. This is Laura.”

She giggled, and Davis broke out in a cold sweat. He thanked God she was just on the phone.

“Oh, uh, hi,” he bleated. “I, er, take it you’re calling to, um, confirm my interview with Tip, err, Coach Woods?”

“Yes. You can come down to the practice gym any time after 3:30.”

“Right. Say, how come Sports Info said I needed get a confirmation from your office? I was pretty sure that the other guys didn’t have to, um, go through that.”

“Well, you didn’t. The guys from Sports Info are jerks, kind of.”

Davis laughed nervously. “I could, um, tell. So, how did you get picked to call me?”

“I volunteered.”

She laughed again, closed out the call and hung up. *This is getting interesting*, Davis thought to himself.

But before the color in his face came back, the news editor, Jerry Gruber, walked past him and asked, “Are you alright?”

Brenda looked over to Davis and responded for him. “He’s under a little stress. Someone from athletics is getting the better of him,” she said with a wink.

By about 3:30, Davis collected his gear and headed over the FSU Arena for the end of practice. The whole way there, he never saw any kind of security indicating that this was a tight-lipped operation. He took the elevator down to the basement where the practice gym was located.

At the elevator opened, the sports information guy, acting as if he was more important than Davis was, greeted him.

As he looked over the guy's shoulder, Davis saw Jack and Albert already in the gym. No doubt they never had to be subjected to these airport-like security tactics. Finally, after sports information's little Q & A session was over, Davis stepped into the practice gym, where he saw 12 guys on the court trying in vain to build a cohesive unit.

They were failing. Mostly, near as Davis could, tell, was about three guys who could have played anywhere in the country and nine others who should have considered themselves lucky that any college would take a look at them. But that didn't stop Tip, who looked over at Davis, Jack and Albert, from thinking that his kids could put on a show.

"Alright, gentlemen," Tip shouted to his players. "We have ourselves some guests. Let's show 'em what you got."

This couldn't have meant anything good. Tip grabbed the ball and put 10 minutes on the gym's game clock. Tip then put Otto and Mike in the middle, which in many parts of the world would have been considered a mismatch, and threw up the ball.

To Davis' surprise, Otto was able to out-jump Mike to tip the ball to his squad, not really a shock, considering that Mike Phillips probably hasn't let his feet leave the ground since about 1999. Otto sent the ball Jamaal's way, and he immediately dished it to Miles.

As the starting point guard, Miles seemed to be a decent court general. His efforts, unfortunately, tended to go for naught, as his lightning-quick passes took his own teammates off-guard. Davis was sure that Miles has regretted coming to FSU over plenty of other schools who recruited him. He shook off a defender and spun around another, but Richard Jackson wasn't

paying attention to the ball, and Miles' no-look pass attempt flew past Richard and slammed against the gym wall.

But rather than chide Richard for his inattentiveness, Tip went to Miles and ripped him a new asshole, resulting in Miles ending up on the sidelines. Davis didn't know much about coaching basketball, but he could say that sitting the starting point guard, even during practice, was not a good thing.

Predictably, the second team seemed terribly uncoordinated. The second team's point guard, Fred Roach, had a slew of problems, most prevalent being his penchant for coughing up the ball. While Miles caught most of his teammates off-guard with his passes, Fred usually caught himself off-guard.

And true to form, while Fred screwed around trying to make a pass, Dexter Hollis jumped in front of the lazy pass and sprinted down the floor for the easy basket, a modest lay-up. For the next five minutes, it was the same story. With Miles on the sidelines, it became Richard's show. It didn't help, however, that Richard was a major showboat and ball hog to boot.

During one series down the floor, Richard tried to shake and bake everyone on the floor, including his own teammates! In the end, he did one too many spin moves and had his pocket picked.

Throughout it all, Miles sat on the sidelines. Davis thought he might be injured, but Miles had that look of impatience in his eyes, much like a hockey player in the penalty box. There was something more to this. There had to be.

"I wonder what they're saying," Davis said to the other two reporters as the team huddled between halves.

"Probably a pep talk for them not to blow so bad," Jack chimed in. "Like that'll help."

“You guys heading to Pittsburgh?” Davis asked.

“No way,” Albert said. “In the first place, my paper is way too cheap to send me anywhere. And secondly, would you want to go see these guys?”

“Those are the reasons I’m not going,” Jack added. “Besides, I’ll be at Northfield Park covering some harness racing.”

As Jack went on about the dishes they served over at Northfield compared to the FSU pressroom, Davis could hear in the background, various loud noises in the background, obviously Tip screaming at the team. His anger was concentrated at Jamaal and Miles, strange because Jamaal was the only player making any kind of shot and Miles was on the sidelines for most of the half.

Tip broke up the huddle, and the scrimmage continued. Miles made his way back to the court, but he was put on the second squad that was unequipped to handle his ball-handling skills. Other than that, there was no change to the second squad. Miles decided that the best he could do for the team was nothing. So every time the put ball into play, Miles would dish it off, most likely to shield himself from any further criticism from Tip.

But that was to no avail. Halfway through the second half, Tip stopped the game and admonished Miles for not making any plays at point, which Davis couldn’t comprehend it at all. Did Tip have it out for his point guard? Was he trying to sabotage his own team?

By the time Tip had finished laying into Miles, the second five-minute set had expired. Tip finished things off by rallying the guys into a circle, undoubtedly to try and lift their spirits. Judging from a visibly perturbed Miles Holcomb, it appeared to be all for nothing.

As the team grumbled its way to the exit and towards the locker room, Tip had presented himself to the unimpressed media.

“Gentlemen, I will entertain any questions you may have,” Tip proclaimed.

The statement bewildered them for a moment, but Jack and Albert regrouped and lobbed up the usual travail of softball questions that two guys who’d rather be somewhere else would ask. As he finished answering Albert’s last question about using a starting lineup without Miles in it, his eyes slowly made their way towards Davis, as if he had a sense of sinister anticipation.

“So, kid,” Tip said to Davis, “you have anything else to add?”

“Actually, Coach, I do,” Davis replied, much to Tip’s surprise. “I noticed that Miles was spending some time on the sidelines during the scrimmage. Is he going to be ready to take on the Dukes?”

Tip stood there a bit dumbfounded, probably not expecting Davis to say anything. Tip might have thought Davis was setting him up, perhaps, for a follow-up question about all the verbal abuse directed at Miles. However, after a couple of seconds, Tip came back at Davis with the typical lame excuse for Miles not making a show during the scrimmage.

“He’s been working through a couple of things,” Tip stated. “Mostly, he’s been trying to get through some muscle spasms in his neck and back.”

That was rich, Davis thought. He had a pain in the neck. Funny, because I was just thinking the same thing.

“However,” Tip continued, “I figure if I give him some time, he’ll make a great impact off the bench. Gentlemen, I have to run. Got a game to prep for.”

With that, Tip disappeared out the door, leaving the media in the dust.

“Hey, kid, nice shot,” Jack said. “You knew he was going to come up with some pile of crap. Why do you think we quit asking him questions?”

“No kidding,” Albert chimed in. “The last time I zinged a hardball at him, I got sent to a television conference for two weeks.”

“Wait a minute,” Jack interjected. “Don’t you do that anyway?”

“Not to Minneapolis,” Albert retorted. “You ever been to Minnesota in the middle of winter? It’s goddamned brutal!”

When Davis arrived back at the office the next day, instead of finishing his section, the situation between Miles and Tip got him started on a whole other path, and he made a trip to the library to check the archives to see if there were any prior patterns between Tip and Miles or Tip and any other player.

Davis wasn’t sure what he’d find. But it became more evident that since the previous sports editor, Steve Grissom, was a flake, and Reggie spent a lot of time talking up Tip and the Lumberjacks, any relevant information that could be gathered from Miles’ first couple of years would not have come from the *Forester*.

After spending way too much time sifting through useless information, Davis found himself in a pinch, with his section sporting a hole where a basketball story was supposed to go. Quickly, Davis whipped out a schpiel with a stock photo of Jamaal making a lay-up. The piece also added in some quotes about the alleged injury to Miles relegating him to back-up detail.

Just as Davis finished hammering out his article, Brenda stormed into the office, then into her private office, slamming the door in the process. By no coincidence, her arrival to the office was, by all assumptions, near the same time as the end of the bi-weekly student government meeting. If this was true, then there was no doubt that yet another scathing article about Lanie and her minions were forthcoming.

About ten minutes later, Brenda skulked out of her office. She still didn’t look pleased.

“Folks, I need your attention for a couple of minutes,” Brenda grunted. “I know its production day, but there are some things I have to tell you.”

While Davis was done with his section and a copy editor’s thumbs-up away from heading home, he nevertheless turned his eyes to Brenda for her announcement.

“It appears that our glorious student government,” Brenda began, “has taken it upon themselves to lobby Student Affairs to have a say in how we run things around here. Tonight’s meeting was topped off by a resolution introduced by SG president Lanie Chapel and passed by the Senate to push for a media advisory committee.

“Let me just say that I am as outraged as you all must be at this moment. But I can assure you that this will, in no way shape or form, affect the way that we do business around here. There is no way in hell that the student government will EVER have a say at the *Forester*.”

Davis’ heart sank. While he knew this wouldn’t really affect him very much, being the sports editor and all, this would continue to put the *Forester* in the war zone against the student government. However, he knew all of the underlying issues behind this battle. As soon as his section was set up for printing, Davis made an effort to walk over to Brenda’s office.

“Can I talk to you for a sec?” he asked her.

“Sure,” she answered abruptly. “Be my guest, though I’m not surprised this conversation didn’t happen a little sooner.”

“Look, Brenda, I know the entire back story behind all of this.”

“Then, Mr. Brown, you also know about how much of a slut Lanie is, then?”

“Psycho, um, yeah. Slut? Well, I’ll have to take your word for it.”

“You know, that bitch actually thought she was in love with Reggie. They screwed one friggin’ time! One time! And she thought it was enough to warrant some sort of commitment from that jackass.”

“Uh, is there something I’m missing here?”

“Enough to fit in the Grand Canyon, Davis. I know Reggie’s got a big-ass mouth, but I’m real sure he left out the parts where Lanie was stalking me for about six months after he broke up with her.”

“Stalking? What?”

“Yeah, and I’ll bet Reggie forget to throw in the fact that I had to change my cell phone number four times because she had all of her little friends calling me all hours of the night.”

“I don’t get it. How does someone like that get into student government?”

“Like I said, Davis. Slut. That and nobody in this school could give a shit about who’s presiding over the student body.”

After that, Davis had nothing else to say. It was clear to him that Brenda and Lanie’s hatred of each other was going to spill into everything else, including, he feared, the basketball games. At this point, he was almost sorry to have gotten the entire story, the final chapter of which he was sure hadn’t been written.

Done with his section, Davis gathered his things and headed back to Parma, where Uncle Phil would be there looking for some more dirt on Tip and, more to the point, Laura. If he weren’t sick as hell, Davis would have seriously told him to get a life.

Arriving home, he walked past Uncle Phil’s room to get to his own. The chemotherapy had been taking its toll and he about a few weeks left. Despite looking pale and sickly, that didn’t stop him from flagging Davis down.

“Hey, Davis, you’re in college,” Uncle Phil muttered. “Could you see if you could hook up an old man with some, ahem, medical marijuana?”

“Good one, Uncle Phil,” Davis laughed. “Seriously, though, you were a season ticket holder. Did Tip ever have it in for any of his players?”

“You must be talking about him and Miles Holcomb. Listen, and this is very important. Tip has his favorites. And somewhere between his freshman and sophomore years, they got into it. I’ve got a couple of friends who talk to these guys all the time, and Miles and Tip’s relationship is combative at best.”

“Well, it’s getting worse. He just put Miles on the bench.”

“I’m not surprised. They looked like they were at each other’s throats last season. Ugly stuff, in fact.”

Uncle Phil confirmed what Davis had already suspected, but there was more. Apparently, Tip had a falling out with another player, Arthur Jenkins, back in the late 90s. Jenkins had been the starting power forward, but as his senior season wore on, he was sent to the bench, and eventually quit.

“Nobody knows what became of Arthur,” Uncle Phil added. “Some say he finished his last semester and went home to Chicago, I think. All I know is that I’ve never heard from him again.”

Davis could have gone on all night talking with him, but Uncle Phil needed his rest. Davis let him get some sleep and headed to his room, where he turned on his computer, where his e-mail was full of the usual notices from school and, of course, e-mail from Reggie telling him all the crazy theories he had about the basketball team. While checking the NBA scores on

Yahoo, Davis' instant messenger popped up with a note from a person with the handle FSUInfoPlease.

“R U Davis Brown?”

“Yeah. Who wants to know? And how did U get my ID?”

“How many people can possibly named GoFSUJacks?”

“Good point.”

“I know you want to know about the coach. Well, here's the scoop: Him and Miles Holcomb are at each other's throats, even worse than what you saw at practice. Miles is saying that if he's sitting on the bench for more than two games, he's quitting. Don't worry. I've already e-mailed Reggie this info. L8... :)”

“Wait. How do you know this?”

No answer. Davis tried again, to no avail. He checked TossTip.com after the brief conversation. Sure enough, news of a Miles Holcomb walk-out screamed on the page.

This is going to cause problems, Davis thought. But thankfully, not for me.