

## Chapter One

**Staggering** toward the stone fireplace—Kenneth's trembling hand grasped the old rifle from its resting place above the wooden mantle. His other hand found the brass casing at the bottom of the tattered pocket of his blue flannel shirt. He pulled back the bolt and inserted the bullet. There was a deafening thump as the butt of the rifle made contact with the dusty wood plank floor. Twisting his broad shoulders to the right, he rested his head against the barrel—the cold steel pushed into his temple. The alcohol had helped build the needed courage, or at least lessen the anxiety. *I give up... My family will be much better off... I just have to do this... I need to end this hell. I miss Billy... Jesus, please show your mercy on my soul.* Kenneth had run these thoughts over and over many times. He drew one long final breath.

The precise moment his finger found the trigger a loud squawk rang from outside. The squawk passed in and through the stale air of the cabin. The ear-piercing squawk rang out two more times. The loud noise forced Kenneth to unclench his eyes and take his mutilated finger off the trigger. Everything seemed to be out of focus and surrounded in a dark purple haze. The screaming squawk had come from the front deck of the A-frame cabin. Ken's eyes slowly scanned up and down the thirty-foot bank of floor to ceiling French-pane windows. Pushed up against wall of glass was an old pine table, the table his father and he had built. Above the table, on a crossbeam hung a six-foot bucksaw, one of the tools his grandfather had used to build this very cabin. The crossbeams displayed deer and elk racks, trophies from three generations of hunters. The eyeful of past memories were draining Kenneth—weakening him from this last concluding act.

With his finger back on the trigger, Kenneth gritted his teeth and for the second time closed his eyes. The squawking penetrated through the cabin again. This time Kenneth yielded to the distraction; he slowly straightened up, his lower back was worn out from all the years of logging. The wooden planked floor creaked as he crept toward the fading yellow light. At the window, Kenneth wiped a swatch through a decade of dust. The long brilliant rays of the low setting sun penetrated his bloodshot eyes. Temporarily blinded by the sun, he laid the rifle against the green painted pine table; he pulled a chair and plopped down. It took at least a minute for his vision to clear and his sore back to loosen up.

The whisky bottle and official letter lying on the table was the first thing to come back into focus. For the hundredth time Kenneth picked up the official looking letter with the State of Oregon seal. The bold red word '**DENIED**' across the page was all that he stared at. Kenneth was not able to read any of the other words. It didn't matter. For the last six months, he knew that eventually the unemployment checks would cease—there were no more benefits to be had.

Four more drinks and with only a few drops of brown whisky left in the bottle,

Kenneth's journey had been extended forty more minutes into dusk. Now too drunk to stand, he fumbled with the rifle. The wooden stock made the same deafening thud as before when it struck the floor. Again, Kenneth turned his head and rested his temple on the cold steel barrel. And again the loud squawking rang out! The sun was now behind the mountains and Kenneth could see out through the glass into the fading light. His eyes locked on the old gray snag, once a live green Douglas fir tree. The tree he had climbed and explored in as a child. How he longed for those carefree days—so long ago.

Suddenly, from out of nowhere a giant Bald Eagle swooped down and landed on the front deck railing. The Eagle canted its white head to stare back in through the bank of windows, its bright orange eye locked onto Kenneth. For the longest time the staring went on, neither would flinch. Kenneth now had an audience; something he planned so carefully to avoid. But this was a bird, not his wife or daughter. Kenneth's finger reached for the trigger—there was only one way to end this stare down.

Just as he started to apply pressure, the Eagle turned its head, as to look away. It was what Kenneth did not see, that caught his attention. He slowly straightened up from the chair and peered out through the window into the oncoming night. The eagle had no eye on this side of its head. There was just a dark hole where an orange eye should have been. Kenneth tapped at the glass trying to get the giant bird to twist his head back around. The eagle would not budge—no eye to eye contact was to be.

Kenneth tapped and then banged on the glass, trying to make the giant bird turn its head back to the good eye side. Strangely, in some sort of telepathy message Kenneth could still feel the Eagle's gaze. The blank stare from that blind side of the eagle's head seemed more intense than that from the good eye. "Quit looking at me!" Kenneth yelled out.

Kenneth stood, staggered, stepped back and without a second thought pointed the rifle toward the Eagle—in a rage he pulled the trigger. Glass exploded outward! The gunshot seemed muffled, almost silent; everything seemed to have slowed including the bullet as it exited the rifle. The smoke rolling out the end of the barrel had a dark purple haze and slowly started to be pulled out of the cabin through the small shot-out glass pane. The trail of purple smoke quickly floated upward into the darkening night.

With the grace of a lofting angel, the eagle spread its wings and with two giant swoops, flew to the top of the old snag. That once, green Douglas fir tree that Kenneth had climbed and explored as a young boy. The lone bullet was gone and so was Kenneth's strength, he plopped down on the wooden floor, leaned his head against the leg of the green pine table and gazed out through the glass.

Lastly, the Bald Eagle turned its head back toward the cabin and spread its giant wings. The white tipped feathers from wing to wing spanned at least seven feet. The

one eyed eagle turned back one last time and gazed just before it flew off toward the fading light in the western sky.

The smoke that had exited through the rifle balled up around the top of the stone chimney up on the roof, waiting to be sucked back in. But, the dark moment had passed when the lone bullet was angrily shot through the glass. Like a vapor trail of a jet, the purple haze wisped off; not toward the light in the west or the darkening eastern sky. The hazy cloud was headed 966 miles due south—looking for another weak and willing soul.

Ironically, Richard Johnson was also at a small table, drinking whiskey and staring blindly out through glass. His gazing was not into the massive forest of the Pacific Northwest; he was looking down onto the concrete jungle of Los Angeles. From the tenth floor of the Holiday Inn, he gazed upon asphalt, parked cars, two swimming pools and the endless motion of all the busy people. Richard kept telling himself: *I give up... My family will be better off. I just have to do this. I need to end this. I so want to see my boy... Allah, I beg you to releases me of this continuation of torment.*

The sound of the bathroom door broke Richard's alcohol diluted thought process. A half dressed blond, young enough to be his daughter, walked over between the two queen size beds to gather up her things. "It's okay Mr. Johnson," Cindy offered, as she hooked her bra behind her back, then slipped into her white blouse.

Disgusted with himself Richard did not turn away from the glass door; he slowly closed his eyes. Twenty-six years of marriage and he had never been unfaithful—being with a white woman, somehow made it worse. *This tenth floor balcony is more than high enough to end it all...* Richard told himself.

"Hey, they say it happens to the best of men," Cindy said, now walking toward the motel room door. She paused, picked up her blazer and the attaché case from the one undisturbed bed.

"Yeah, whatever... I just have so much on my mind," muttered Richard as he opened his eyes; not turning from the sliding glass door.

"I understand, with the loss of Jabbar and all." Cindy picked up her pace toward the door.

Richard's head jerked around toward Cindy! "How do you know my son's name?"

"Oh. A . . . Condi in the Trask corporate offices told me about the shooting." Cindy's hand found the door knob. "Or, maybe it was someone on the assembly line or one of the workers building trailers. I don't recall, but I'm so very sorry. I was hoping I could make you feel better and ..." Cindy's half hearted sincerity was cut off as the heavy steel motel room door slammed closed.

Richard listened to her high heels clicking down the hallway followed by the *ding* of

the elevator. In the silence, a purple haze started filling the room. Richard drank more whiskey, all the time gazing at the wrought iron railing. The balcony railing was covered with pigeon droppings and was too high for even a six foot three man to climb over. *I will need to stand on a chair. But, I can do this.*

After twenty minutes of the gray solitude; along with four more ounces of whiskey, Richard fumbled with the metal lock on the sliding glass door. The door only opened about a foot before a metal security pin snapped into place. The whiskey was rapidly working on his senses; it took a couple of minutes before Richard spotted the spring-loaded pin at the bottom of the aluminum door track. The moment he bent over a flow of nausea rushed into his now spinning skull. His fingers finally found the pin; he pulled it back and slid the glass door all the way open. He stood back up and steadied himself.

Out of nowhere, three pigeons flew and landed on the railing as to protect their tenth floor coup. Their heads bobbed as they moved back and forth on the metal railing making a low pitch cooing noises in a territorial chant. Richard noticed the birds and listened through the screen as he picked up the whiskey bottle from the round table. The last few ounces of whiskey would give him the needed will power. With his mouth over the opening and head tilted back the last few ounces of brown liquid felt warm as it went down his throat.

Richard slid open the screen about six inches and waved the empty whiskey bottle by its neck, trying to scare off the birds. The largest pigeon flew on to his arm, then jumped onto the screen door and used its claws to hold on! The short hop from railing, to arm to screen door caused Richard to swiftly react. He smacked the gray bird with the whiskey bottle then slammed the screen shut. The gray pigeon's claws got hooked into the screen and it clung there motionless. From inside Richard batted at the screen and the limp bird fell from the screen to the concrete deck with a soft thud. The two other birds started strutting, cooing and moving back and forth on the railing. Their deep red colored eyes focused on Richard standing there, protected behind the screen.

Richard turned away from the glaring and surveyed the motel room. Even drunk, he reasoned that a whiskey bottle thrown from ten floors up could kill someone in the parking lot below. *. A broom will work or a yardstick... I need something to swing or poke at those two other birds...* Richard's bloodshot eyes searched the room.

Staggering away from the sliding door... Richard quickly steadied himself against the wall. His mind stutter, it eliminated the broom or yardstick; items a motel room would not have. He very slowly scanned the room for a long stick or something. *There's the ironing board... That won't work... My belt lying over there on the bed will work. I'll use it to swing at those damn birds. Then I'll move a chair next to the railing and...*

The sound of fluttering feathers through the screen pulled Richard's head back around. The two pigeons had flown down from the railing to the deck and they were dragging their tail feathers on the concrete; circling their fallen brethren. When Richard's eyes focused down at the birds, a reflection off something in the parking lot flashed up through the lower section of the railing. The wrought iron pickets were blocking off most of Richard's view; he moved closer to the door and rose up on his toes so to see over the top of the railing. *That's Cindy down there... What is she doing talking to two men? Wait... I've seen those Asian men around the corporate offices...*

Ten floors down in the far corner of the motel parking lot those three people were opening and closing the doors on a brand new convertible sports car. Cindy was talking to the Asian men while rubbing her hand on the chrome windshield trim and admiring the well known Mercedes hood emblem. One of the men sat down behind the steering wheel and then a retractable roll bar slowly came up from behind the seat.

*I've seen that roll bar go up and down before... That's the model and special import to the United States. That's the car Mr. Trask gave to Kevin at the graduation party last week.* Richard lost balance standing up on his toes; he canted sideways and had to brace himself with the back of a chair. The pigeons were still down by his feet, only separated by the screen.

Richard rose back up on his toes again, to see over the railing. Cindy was checking out all the features of the car. She started walking around rubbing her hand along the ruby red paint; the same color her fingernails were. This car was now hers and it was her favorite color. She did not even have to prostitute herself, she would have, but Richard Johnson has issues. All her acting classes had paid off; she knew all about camera angle and how to play to the camera. The two men were happy with her performance; even without a closing finality. They had the entire night on video tape.

From ten floors above, Richard canted sideways from his tip toed vantage point. He looked back over his shoulder and steadied himself, with both hands locked on the back of the heavy motel room chair. *I'll use my belt over on the bed to whip at the birds... I need to get a better look from out on the deck. I've been setup... I need to get the belt off the bed... That's Kevin's new car down there.* Richard drew a deep breath, steadied himself, let loose of the chair and staggered toward the far bed. On his third wavering step, his right foot came down on a huge mass of glass; an ashtray that Cindy had left on the floor at the foot of the first bed. Richard's ankle twisted and his alcohol-bloated body gave way. Fortunately he fell forward and collapsed onto the first bed. The pain in his ankle was dull and throbbing. Richard rolled on to his back and tried to pull his leg up so to massage his ankle. Now, flat on his back, the motel room ceiling started to spin.

Below, Cindy was leaving the Holiday Inn parking lot in her new status symbol. Her bleached blond hair whipped in the wind as she sat tall. The 1994 concept sport model Mercedes SL600 would be her edge, her agent told her she needed something to be noticed by. With a car that wouldn't be released in the United States for at least another year. She could park in any spot at any Hollywood studio parking lot. She would wait for some famous director to pull in, and then swing open the door. Her legs, a short skirt, tight blouse and nothing underneath would get her noticed—finally her acting career would be launched.

Keeping his eyes closed was the only way to keep the unwanted merry-go-round ride at rest. An entire fifth of bourbon, on top of three martinis, plus a lobster dinner wanted to explode from Richards's stomach. Last night's room service and all the liquor was building with vengeance. The thought of jumping from the balcony was being pushed aside. Richard now wanted to know who had set him up. *I just need to lay here for a few more minutes... I need to get my head straight for just a few more minutes... Just a few more...* Ten minutes of repeating the same words only resulted in a faster spinning room and now every sound seemed like it was coming from a megaphone placed against his ears. The early Saturday morning buzz of neighborhood lawnmowers and leaf blowers was overcome by sirens out through the partially opened sliding glass door.

Only a few minutes ago the brake pedal on the Mercedes SL600 went all the way to the floor. The prototype sports car plowed under the rear trailer of a semi truck on Interstate 5. Cindy's life ended instantly. Her flawless decapitate body had the weekend Los Angeles traffic backed up to the Holiday Inn freeway on-ramp. This day the rubber-neck-gawkers got their fix—her beautiful head and blood soaked blond hair lay on the hot black asphalt in the truck lane of Interstate 5.

Richard pushed two pillows up to both sides of his head hoping to drown out the bullhorns of the emergency equipment trying to navigate through traffic. He gradually rolled onto his side and then sat up on the edge of the bed; his legs felt like rubber when he tried to stand. The sirens were echoing around the motel room and penetrating his skull. Richard needed to slide the glass door closed...

A deep breath and half attempt at standing immediately sent him to the floor, just inches from the bathroom door. His eyes were level with the tile floor and a pile of wet towels that Cindy had dried off with. It looked as though the bathroom was still steamed up. A gray mist was still hanging like a fog in the bathroom. Richard's eyes tilted up—the mirror had no mist on it.

Slowly the fog started spinning. The gray steam turned into a purplish colored funnel cloud and its tail touched down on top of the pile of wet towels. The very tip of the funnel danced around on the wet towels extracting Cindy's scent. Richard closed his eyes—his drunkenness was causing him to hallucinate. With all his strength he got up on to his hands and knees into a dog like position. As he opened his eyes the

funnel cloud now looked like a full blown tornado. As the tornado violently exited the bathroom it knocked Richard off of his hands and knees, back to the floor.

The purple tornado violently tore across the motel room and out through the sliding glass door. It paused on the deck, the tip of the funnel extended down to the motionless gray pigeon on its back. The pigeon was sucked up into the whirlwind; as it spun upward, the grey feathers turned to a brilliant white. The gray pigeon morphed into a white dove. In the silence the violent whirlwind ceased—a white dove flew off into the early morning sky.

Thirty-three miles northeast of the Holiday Inn another concept model Mercedes SL600 brake lights were flashing on and off—this brake pedal was still solid. Tina was sitting in the leather driver seat looking at her blond hair in the rearview mirror then watching down the long brick driveway in the side mirrors. The six-speaker sound system blared out music as she tapped her red manicured fingernails on the walnut shift knob and tapped the brake pedal to the beat of the music. The custom prototype Mercedes was stationary—only one life would end this day due to faulty brakes.

The six coats of lacquer protected the wooden shift knob but Tina's red nail polish was not that resilient; small red pieces of fingernail paint flaked off onto the center console. Finally, in the passenger side mirror Kevin's brawny physique appeared through the iron pickets at the beginning of the long private brick driveway. His gray athletic shirt displayed a Blue Devil mascot, and the words **Duke University Basketball**. Kevin stop, punched in four numbers on a security pad and the ten-by-ten foot iron gate started to move. Tina anxiously watched Kevin slip between the metal before the gate opened a little more than a foot. She hastily opened the car door, twisted in the leather seat and deliberately let the white cotton dress hike up while extending her shapely legs on to the driveway. Her legs were long and tanned.

Tina strolled down the driver side of the silver sport car like a model on a runway and positioned herself just so against the trunk. One heel rested on the bumper, the other foot on the ground, she put both her hands behind on the trunk. The wind caught the white dress and exposed most of her thighs. She slightly arched her back, the perfectly shaped artificial breasts pushed up and outward. The pose would make a great photo—maybe Miss June for an automotive shop calendar.

As Kevin jogged up the cobblestone driveway, his muscular legs flexed with every stride, sweat dripped off his face onto the **Duke Basketball** jersey. A few feet from Tina he stopped, bent over, put his hands on his knees and drew in a few deep breaths. "I wish you wouldn't," Kevin drew another deep breath, "sit on my car." A few more breaths, "You could scratch the paint."

"Kevin, you worry too much," Tina quipped. "Like, I would purposely scratch your precious car," As she slid off the trunk the white cotton dress stayed put, Tina noticed Kevin eyes looking at her tanned thighs and smiled. "Besides, your Dad can

always buy you another sports car."

Kevin's eyes moved up; he was still drawing in gallons of air. "I earned this car by keeping up my grades and playing basketball. I attended Duke on an academic scholarship. My Dad didn't pay one penny toward my tuition."

"Like Trask Inc. couldn't afford this car or to pay for a college education? Like the Trask family needed a scholarship?" Tina moved completely away from the car using her right hand to push down her skimpy dress. Her left hand ran across the back of Kevin's lowered head then down the back of his neck. "Whatever Kevin, so let's take your new car up to the lake."

Kevin straightened up and looked deep into Tina's large green eyes. "Do not ever say anything about my Dad buying me this car," Kevin warned. "I earned it!" Kevin drew another deep breath and pulled Tina's hand off his neck. "If you think different; you don't know what I'm about."

"Sorry Kevin! Don't be so defensive. Like... It was the wrong thing for me to say. Like... I know how hard you worked at college. I suffered too." Tina moved toward Kevin. "Remember, I had to fly coach to some of your games."

Kevin's concentration got drawn toward a noisy motor sound. The groundskeeper just started trimming Ivy from the tall stone wall that surrounded the five-acre Trask estate. In a loud voice Kevin rambled, "You know, I really don't want this car. I'd be happy to keep the Land Rover that I drove at college. Plus, I am sure that my Dad cut some sort of a deal for the car; he's always working an angle."

"Like, just forget about the car," replied Tina in a sultry tone and stepping into Kevin. "Why don't I show you how glad that I am, now that you are home to stay?" Tina slipped her arms around Kevin's waist and pulled herself so that the white cotton dress pressed hard against the thin running shorts.

"Hey, I'm all sweaty," Kevin said as he pressed his shorts hard against the dress.

"I like my men sweaty," Tina replied in a sexy tone.

The sound of a door opening caused Tina and Kevin to look up the white marble stairs. The left side of the glass double doors swung open. A tanned, fit woman in stylish blue tennis shorts walked out onto the porch. "Good morning," Linda said as her eyes focused toward the noise from the motorized trimmer. "Kevin, your Father would like to speak to you." Linda now looked down at Kevin and Tina, "Don't keep him waiting!"

"Good morning, Linda," Tina butted into the family conversation. "Are you playing tennis this morning?" Tina asked while easing her seductive strong hold from Kevin's waist.

"I'm not sure. Robert and I were supposed to play some of his new business associates." Mrs. Trask looked back at the groundskeeper. "But there has been a change of plans." "Something about a Chinese custom of women not playing tennis."

"Like, what's that all about; are those associates living in the stone age?" Tina asked

"I'm not exactly sure," replied Mrs. Trask.

"Well, good luck if you do get to play," said Tina while letting her arms completely slip from Kevin's waist.

"Thanks," replied Linda with a strained smile. "Kevin, your Father is going to ask you to take my place in the match down at the club."

"Okay, I'll be right there." Kevin wiped at sweat on his forehead.

Linda vanished through the ten-foot double glass door into the Trask mansion.

"The club, like that is so boring. Are you going to go?" Tina asked Kevin.

"I wasn't planning on it. But, before I left to go on a run this morning, Robert did mention something about not getting too tired. That I might have to fill in for Linda."

"That sucks, your Mom loves tennis."

"I know, but it's something about women against women in Asia. That it's not their custom to let women play against men." Kevin took a deep breath. "And yes, I'm going to try to get out of it."

"Men against men, that's corny. Moreover, like what kind of sexist pig says women can't play against men? I know how competitive your Mom is. She could probably beat both their asses."

"Tina, basketball is men against men, so is football. And yes, Linda can beat most any man. Hell, she was ranked in the U.S. Top Ten Women Singles for four years in a row.

"I didn't know that. Like, your Mom is that good?" Tina asked.

"Yes, she was that good before she married Robert," Kevin answered.

"Then what happened?" asked Tina.

"It's my Mom's story, ask her about it." Kevin reached out and grabbed Tina's hand. "I'm going to try to get out of going down to the club." Kevin looked directly into Tina's eyes and in a drawn out, apologetic tone said. "I was planning to hang around here today, maybe pack a few things... I've been thinking about doing some backpacking before I have to start work next month."

"Backpacking! What about the Lake Shasta party?" Tina asked in a panic.

"Tina, can't we pass on the Lake Shasta thing."

"Kevin, everyone is going to be there. Like, they've rented four houseboats."

"Everyone? Four houseboats!" Kevin threw Tina's hand down. "I thought it was only going to be a few couples."

"Well... Tim got involved," Tina sheepishly replied. "And you know Tim..."

Kevin's throat was tightening. "You told me maybe three graduating seniors from the Duke Basketball team and their girlfriends. You told me just the girls you hung with at the games!"

"That was the plan, but you know Tim Baylor. Being the captain and all... He felt like he had to invite everyone on the team," replied Tina in a defensive tone. "Tim asked me to invite some of the volleyball squad from Pepperdine also," Tina added.

"And they'll invite their friends, great!" Kevin put his hand on his forehead and started rubbing it in a circular motion. After a long pause Kevin continued. "Tina, I told you I'm tired of all the partying. Since graduation it's been almost a month of nonstop, excessive, loud celebrating."

"Kevin, you're such a party stiff. Like, you did promise me that we would go." Tina batted her eyes. "We can always rent our own private houseboat." Tina moved in closer to Kevin and arched her back; her dress was again pushed against Kevin's running shorts. "Then we can drift off, be alone and have our own private party."

Kevin put his hands on Tina's shoulders, pushed her away and then darted for the marble stairs. From the third stair, Kevin looked back over his shoulder and shouted, "Tina, I'll call you later!"

Just inside the Italian etched glass double doors a full sized Latino woman greeted Kevin. "Did you have a good run sir?"

Kevin slipped off his running shoes and exchanged them for a big white towel that the maid had on her arm. "Come on Maria, I asked you to call me Kevin. You've known me since fourth grade." Kevin started wiping the sweat off his face.

"Okay Kevin," Maria replied. "It will be hard, being that you've been away at college for four years."

"Maria why should that change things? You're the one that was always here when I got home from school. Remember how we would shoot hoops out back?"

"I remember..." Marie paused and looked down. "That is when I was still a teenager and when I was a few less pounds." What Marie was really remembering about

Kevin's school years was when they got caught skinny-dipping in the pool by Grandpa Trask. An event that Kevin was still paying mental anguish for...

"Maria, please call me Kevin. We're childhood friends. Do you want me to call you Ms. Gomez, since you're a few years older than me?"

"Okay, Kevin. But, it just feels weird." Maria looked up, taking note how distinguished and handsome Kevin had become. "Soon you will be Vice President at Trask Enterprises; I can't treat you like my teenage amigo. It would show disrespect."

"Granted Maria, things change but our friendship is one thing that will always stay the same," Kevin reached over and put his hand on Maria's shoulder "Remember what Grandpa Trask made us do?"

Maria glanced down again, her face was turning red. It was Grandpa Trask that had made a secret pact with both of them after he had caught them naked in the pool. Something she had hoped Kevin would never mention.

Kevin moved his hand from Maria's shoulder and lifted her chin. "And, who told you that I'm going to be the VP at Trask Corporation?"

"I've listened to your Padre talking about it all the years you've been away at college. Please do not say anything to Mr. Trask. I should not have said anything to you." Maria's voice took on a worried tone. "Senior Trask is waiting for you. Don't keep him waiting."

"Don't worry about it Maria. I might not even go to work at the family business," Kevin replied, while handing the towel back to Maria.

Maria got a surprised look on her face. "Well this is not my dealings. You better not keep your Padre waiting."

"Okay Maria." Kevin looked back over his shoulder. "Where is my Father?"

"He's having breakfast out by the pool."

"Gracias," Kevin replied. In his stocking feet, he walked across the large black and white square Italian floor tiles. He went through the study, pushed open the French glass door onto the private three-acre back yard. Mr. Trask was at the pool sitting under a shade umbrella reading the morning newspaper. When Kevin approached the table Trask senior did not look up, he was deep into the business section of the Wall Street Journal. Kevin hated the game—he could also play.

Less than ten seconds passed... Kevin pulled off his shirt, tossed it on to the white patio chair, walked to the edge of the pool and dove in. He swam the entire length under water; something he had done thousands of times as a boy. At the far end of the pool, Kevin held onto the chrome pool ladder and looked back over his shoulder. Mr. Trask was now looking at some photos that had just arrived in a brown manila

envelope.

After five laps Kevin got out of the pool, casually walked over to the table and leaned in. The water dripped and splashed off the glass table top onto the re-sealed brown envelope; some water also splashed on to Mr. Trask's arm.

"You should have showered before you used the pool," Mr. Trask said, flipping over the now soggy folded newspaper.

"Oh, sorry," replied Kevin taking the towel from the back of the chair. "Anyway, what's the deal with needing a tennis partner? Why don't you stand your ground and have Mom play?"

"Mr. Hung Meng and Kang Chan won't play against a woman! It's something they don't do in Asia."

"You should remind Mr. Hung Meng and his partner that they're not in their country. Have Mom on the court and if they forfeit that's their problem."

"Kevin, I don't feel like an argument. I need you to play this morning and that is that!"

"Okay, but I don't get it. You're treating this Mr. Hung Meng as if he's God. Is it really that important to open a manufacturing facility overseas? Is that why you're kissing his butt?"

"Kevin, you don't know the whole picture. In the next couple of weeks after you get settled in to your office, I'll bring you up to speed."

"Dad, we've had this discussion before. I do not want to start off with my own office. I'm starting on the assembly line or the loading dock."

"Kevin, I'm not in the mood, to listen to your working yourself up through the ranks crap. Save that socialistic college rhetoric for your professors."

"Who's talking?" Kevin blurted out. "I'm not the one trying to cut a deal with a communist. I'm sure Mr. Meng pays top dollars to all the workers in the plants in Korea or China; where ever he can find cheap or free labor." Kevin swallowed hard. "Socialism beats communism any day of the week!"

Mr. Trask dropped the wet newspaper on to the table and picked up the large manila envelope and stood up. Although, he was a head shorter than Kevin his dominance was over bearing. "Be at the club by nine! We will be playing on the inside courts. I expect you to show Mr. Meng and Kang Chan respect!"

Kevin tossed the wet towel onto the table, walked to the edge of the pool and dove in. He swam to the deep end and let himself sink to the bottom. The bright early morning sun was magnified and reflected off the aqua sidewalls like flashing mirrors. The weightlessness and the silence made for a mere thirty seconds of peace and

tranquility. Kevin pushed off the bottom of the pool, when he surfaced Mr. Trask was hastily walking across the lush green lawn toward the six-car garage. There was a set of stairs on the outside of the garage, up to the guest house, where Kevin had moved into since coming home from college. Kevin wanted privacy; so did Tina, she was up in the shower waiting...

Chlorine pool water was still dripping when Kevin scrambled up the stairs, two at a time. As soon as he opened the guestroom door steam rolled out into the cool morning air. Tina stuck her head out and around the bathroom door. "Kevin I hope you don't mind. You got me all dirty so I'm using your shower."

"No, not a problem," Kevin said as he stepped inside the guestroom. "Throw me a dry towel from the rack." Kevin said, as he started pulling clothes out of an athletic bag that was on the floor.

"Come over here Kevin and I will dry you off," Tina replied as she stood in the bathroom door with a towel only wrapped around her waist.

From his squatted position Kevin turned and looked back over his shoulder at Tina. Her skin was flawless; the white towel contrasted with her dark tan. There was no tan line over her perfect large breasts; thanks to umpteen tanning sessions and the best elected surgery money could buy. Kevin took in an extended look and smiled. This fun sensual moment seemed harmless and inviting. But then... Kevin flashed back to the skinny-dipping and what Grandpa Trask did to him so many years ago. "I need to find my tennis racket!" Kevin quickly turned his head away and started digging around in the closet...

The prototype Mercedes SL600 fit in with all the other high-end luxury cars in the parking lot of the Pasadena Country Club. Kevin's baggy sweats and grubby athletic shirt did not. The receptionist at the front counter gave Kevin the up and down while he signed in. If it were anyone else, she would have reminded them of the dress code. It was the **Trask** name on the tennis court reservation list that kept her lips sealed.

The last time Kevin had signed in at the club he was a sophomore at Duke; he glanced around, nothing had changed. The open-air lounge was filled with all the privileged people of the world. Next to the Grecian fountains sat three synthetic women sitting on the edge of their chairs picking at Caesar salads and fresh fruit. They looked like mannequins, sitting tall with their chests pushed up and out by Victoria Secrets. Other members were displaying the latest trends in sportswear and designer sunglasses. The din of conversations rarely drifted outside the world of who was who—or who was doing who.

To the right behind a Plexiglas wall were rows of machines filled with the elite members. Some were reading books and some were watching CNN on the overhead monitors. In the back corner a vigorous runner was clipping at full speed

on one of the treadmills; hoping to reach some inner self-utopia-high so to be temporarily released from his demanding multi tasking lifestyle.

Kevin felt a few eyes following him as he walked toward the locker room. His grubbiness was his statement, meaningless yet somewhat important. It did not matter what Kevin did or was wearing; his family's status would let him get away with anything—probably even murder. The Trask family was one of the founders and wealthiest members of the Pasadena Country Club. They had earned their personal pedestal among the most-high in the place once known as the town of the Queen of the Angels.

Inside the locker room Kevin pulled off his baggy sweats and retrieved white tennis shorts from the sports bag. The wrinkled polo shirt was a private label that would get him onto the tennis courts without any whispered complaints from the style conscience members. Sitting on the oak bench, he rubbed at the dried out leather of his two hundred dollar court shoes. *Boy these are stiff. How long has it been, since I've played? Let's see... Last summer ... No, it must have been the summer before? No couldn't have been that summer either, I went to a basketball camp in Europe... Oh well, I just want to get this match over with...*

Pulling his racket from the side pouch of the sports bag Kevin gave it a few swings through the balm scented air of the locker room. The stiffness in his elbow immediately flared from all the years of adolescence tennis lessons, which was before basketball became the number one sport in his life. Kevin hustled up to the inside courts and checked a clipboard hanging on the fence. **Mr. Robert Trask** was typed in the reservation spot for court three. Kevin looked across the inside facility; court three was empty. *Good they're not here yet. It'll give me a chance to warm up.*

Kevin grabbed a bucket of yellow tennis balls from a rack next to a ball machine and headed to the court. He slipped through the green canvas curtains that separated each court and went to the severing line to practice. After half of the balls were gone his arm was loose and his bullet like serve was falling into a groove. From the second floor bleachers, the club pro was observing and recalling all the lessons he had given to Kevin years ago. Kevin noticed Derrick Agisee and pointed with the tennis racket. The seasoned veteran gave Kevin the thumbs up.

Kevin was picking up the balls from the far side of the court when the green canvas curtains parted. Mr. Trask escorted two Asian men onto the center of the court. "Kevin I'd like you to come over and meet Mr. Hung Meng and Kang Chan."

Kevin trotted over to the net. "Good morning," Kevin quipped and then gave a strong psychological intimidating glare at the elder Asian.

"And this is Kang Chan." Mr. Trask now motioned toward a much younger and taller man standing behind the group. Kang Chan instinctively offered the customary Korean bow.

"Nice to meet you two guys," replied Kevin while mentally sizing up the competition. "Do you guys need to warm up? I've already had a chance to hit half a bucket."

"No, thank you... Mr. Junior, Kevin Trask," replied Mr. Meng in broken words, followed by a returned intimidating glare before he turned and spoke in Chinese to his partner.

Kang Chan looked toward Kevin and Robert. "Mr. Meng says may the best side or country win. Whatever that American saying is?" They both bowed in unison.

"May the best team win, is the saying. Good luck you guys" Kevin replied, standing tall and not yielding to an uncustomary bowing.

Robert Trask returned the gesture of bowing to Mr. Meng and to the younger Mr. Kang Chan. "Yes, may the best team win." Mr. Trask said with false respect.

Kevin still refused to bow; he just turned and walked over to the side of the court. While he was digging through his athletic bag for a sweatband Mr. Trask came over to him. "Kevin you don't call these men, 'guys.' You call them by their last names."

Kevin looked up. "What's with you, with the bowing and all? What do you want me to do? Kiss ass like you are doing?"

"Kevin, just do this," Robert Trask replied in a low, stern voice. "While you have been away at college, the business climate has changed. We have to take on overseas partners if we want to stay competitive. Outsourcing is the business model for all future manufacturing plants in the US."

"Overseas partners, outsourcings! What, are you talking about?" Kevin looked up. "Grandpa would roll over in his grave." Kevin turned his attention away from digging around in the bag to Mr. Chan and Mr. Meng now on the court swinging their rackets and loosing up.

"Kevin, lower your voice. Times are different; it's not like when your Grandfather was in business. I will fill you in when you start work. Let's just play tennis." Mr. Trask replied in a rigid tone as he walked off.

Mr. Meng and Mr. Chan had already started to volley to each other. Mr. Meng was older than everyone, he was stocky, had a strong forehand and his black hair was cut in the flattop military style. Kang Chan was older and taller than Kevin. He had a powerful tennis swing and his natural athleticism was apparent. Moreover, he was a skilled competitor that would do anything to win...

Kevin sized up the opposition. *Mr. Meng is about as good as Dad. But, Kang is quick and lanky. His serve is strong but his backhand is weak.*

Robert Trask had gone to the back of the court and was doing deep knee bends and squats. His focus was not on the game. It was about building a partnership and

securing a sixty-six million dollar partnership.

After about five minutes of swinging rackets, loosening up and mentally sizing up each other it was time. The Trask team lost the coin toss. Mr. Meng spoke in Chinese to Kang Chan as they took their positions. Mr. Meng was to serve first.

Kevin switched position with his father so that it would be the older men serving to each other. Mr. Meng's first serve was out of bounds. The second serve was an ace! The next two serves were returned long and out of bounds by Mr. Trask. Mr. Meng served another ace. The first game went to the Asian team. Kevin had yet to touch the ball. Robert Trask was a poor server. They also lost the second game.

Now, Kang Chan was serving to Kevin, his first serve was like a bullet; Kevin returned it almost as hard. The Trask's had their first point. Kevin returned the next two serves for points; the score was one game to two. Mr. Hung Meng looked back over his shoulder and yelled something at Kang Chan in Chinese. Kang Chan made an adjustment; he started returning everything to Trask senior. Kevin was being kept out of the game. The strategy worked, they won the first set...

When it was Kevin's turn to serve; he slammed two aces to Kang Chan. The third serve got returned so Kevin volleyed the ball back to Mr. Meng. There was a slight cheer from some gathering spectators. Kevin fired the next point directly at Mr. Meng ankles and smirked when Mr. Meng had to jump out of the way. Redemption was all over Kevin's face as he gave a 'two-can- play-your-game' stare toward Kang Chan.

Mr. Trask walked toward Kevin and with his back to the opponents said, "This is supposed to be a friendly match. Don't turn it into a battle."

"Tell that to Kang Chan!" Kevin said while pointing with his racquet across the court. "He's the one that started playing to you. I only hit the ball four times the first three games."

"Kevin back off and show some respect!" Mr. Trask demanded.

The veins bulged in Kevin's neck; he started tapping his tennis racquet on the green court floor. Mr. Trask turned, waved across the court then took up his position. Kevin served the first ball long—intentionally. Mr. Trask glanced back over his shoulder with a sign of approval. After a few deep breaths, Kevin tossed the ball high...

*Twang* echoed off the racket strings, his second serve was an ace! More spectators started to gather as the intensity heated up. The club pro had come down stairs and slipped through the green canvas on to the side court. About five minutes later Mrs. Trask appeared and stood next to the club pro.

It took almost an hour for Kevin to work them back to a tie at one game apiece. Several times Mr. Meng and Kang Chan would converse in Chinese switching their game strategies. Mr. Meng called for a time out and huddled with Kang Chan at the back of their court.

Mr. Trask walked back to Kevin. "What is your problem? You are acting like this is for the Olympic gold."

"Those guys cheat, two of their serves were foot faults in the last set. Kang Chan plays to you constantly, he will not hit to me after the third or fourth volley. But I've found my groove. If we . . ."

Mr. Trask interrupted by putting his hand on Kevin's sweaty shoulder and squeezing hard. "You are making this out to be more than a game. Lighten up, Kevin!"

"It is more than a game and we can win! It's my turn to serve. I can tie it up. Then we'll..."

Mr. Trask squeezed Kevin's shoulder harder. "Kevin, if you would have played this hard on the basketball court you would have been a MVP. This is not the time to grow a set of balls."

Kevin twisted his shoulder away from under Mr. Trask hand. "Get off my case! We're playing tennis, not basketball." Kevin stomped off toward the opening in the green canvas court curtains. A hush fell over the entire indoor tennis facility. The intensity was huge. The club pro leaned over and whispered to Mrs. Trask, "Do you think your son will forfeit the game?"

All her years on the pro-circuit and Linda never-ever forfeited a tennis match! She rushed through the court curtains and caught up to Kevin. The spectators from the bleachers above could see that they were having an intense conversation. Mrs. Trask returned to her position standing silent next to the club pro. It seemed like an eternity—Kevin finally returned.

The battle continued and it was five sets to four of the final game; Kevin was serving. By now everyone, even the players on the other courts had stopped playing and went up to the spectators seats. Kevin threw the ball high and his racquet whizzed as it cut through the air; there was that all-telling *twang* of hitting the sweet spot of the racquet. The ball rocketed toward Kang Chan's feet. It was an ace! Three more points and they would win the match. Kevin raised his racket and let out a deep victory yelp, "Yes!" Clapping filled the indoor courts.

The celebration was short lived...Mr. Meng was pointing just past the line indicating the serve was long. Kang Chan said something to him in Chinese and shook his head. Mr. Meng was now pointing to a spot even further past the line rubbing his racquet on the court so to make a mark. "Far long, far long, far long, he yelled in broken English."

Kang Chan spoke again in Chinese and then Mr. Meng started yelling, "Out long, out long. We win point!"

Kevin sprinted from the back of the court, jumped the net and pointed to a spot on

the court were the ball had actually hit. "The ball was inside the line! It hit right here!"

Kevin turned toward the Club Pro. "You saw it... That was an Ace!"

From the get-go the club-pro could tell that Robert Trask was not interested in winning. In fact, it seemed as Mr. Trask was throwing the game. "I really didn't see if the ball was in or out."

The crowd started to chant, "In...In...In."

"I think it was out," yelled Mr. Trask over the noise of the crowd.

Mrs. Trask head immediately jerked toward Mr. Trask. She knew that he knew that the ball was in. The adrenaline was rushing but it was not worth the abuse if she went against her husband. Every ounce of her competitive body was flexed and ready to jump like a lioness ready to protect—it took everything for her to hold back.

"Okay, we'll play the point over." Kevin offered. Confident that they could win. Kevin served then rushed the net, he return the ball right at Mr. Meng's feet. "Fifteen love!" Kevin quipped.

The next serve was in; on his third stride toward the net Kevin felt a blast above his left eye. He fell to his knees; his racket slid across the court and blood immediately gushed from his forehead. There where ooh's and awe's from the crowd—then silence. The club pro rushed to Kevin's aid. Mrs. Trask glared at Mr. Trask she knew the back hand was intentional. His swing of choice—during his fits of anger.

"We winner... Our victory." Mr. Meng chanted in broken English.

Mr. Trask walked to the net. "Good match," he said extending his hand to Mr. Meng.

"Good game! What are you talking about?" Kevin protested. "I can still play."

"I don't think so," the club pro said to Kevin while holding the gash above his eye closed. "I hope you don't have HIV," the pro whispered to Kevin.

"What..." Kevin took his one good eye off of his father and looked directly at the club-pro.

"You know, with the Arthur Ashe story all over the news and all."

"Kevin's mind jumped from Arthur Ashe to Magic Johnson and his recent announcement that he was quitting basketball because he was HIV positive. So little was known about this horrific virus but most athletic programs already had adopted new rules about blood.

"Kang Chan spoke to Mr. Meng in Chinese and Mr. Meng angrily yelled back. Kang Chan hesitated, and then spoke, "It is a forfeit. Those are the international rules." He then extended a handshake to Kevin.

Kevin twisted away from the pro and the blood started to flow again. "I can still play." We only need to finish this set."

Mr. Meng pointed at the blood now dripping onto Kevin's shirt and backed up. The crowd was still in a hush. "No play. No play... We win!"

Mrs. Trask grabbed a white athletic towel and rushed to Kevin. "Here, apply pressure to the cut."

"Thanks Mom." Kevin put the towel to his forehead. "We only need two more points to win the set. Then it's my serve."

"Kevin, I can't let the game go on. The blood and the liability." The club-pro was now staring at his own hands.

Kevin stomped off! Linda Trask looked over at Robert and then down at Kevin's racket lying by the net. She went over; bent down picked up the racket and said, "I'll finish the game!"

Mr. Trask replied, "No. That wouldn't be fair."

The applause from the crowd drowned out Robert's words to forfeit the game, and then the clapping was overcome by the chant. "Let her play! Let her play! Let her play..."

Across the net Mr. Meng and Kang Chan were having a heated discussion in Chinese. Mr. Meng wanted to accept the forfeit but Kang Chan explained that American's never forfeit. The elder Mr. Meng didn't care and wouldn't hear of it.

Mrs. Trask had walked to the serving line and was bouncing the ball ready to resume that set. Most of the spectators were now yelling, "Let Linda play! Let Linda play..."

The club-pro was giving thumbs up to the crowd, inciting them on. Kevin had come back through the court curtains. Kang Chan moved in position to receive the serve.

A hush of silence fell over the court... Linda tossed the tennis ball high and hit it with her near 100mph serve it went long. The silence continued. Her second serve was even harder and right at Kang Chan's feet.

"Ace!" someone yelled from the crowd.

The Club-Pro rolled a ball to Linda. She nodded at Kang Chan. Her serve was hard and again right at his feet. Another Ace! The crowd went wild. The next serve Kang Chan was able to get a soft return. Linda charged the net and swung overhead, the ball bounced in front of Mr. Meng and then high over his head, he didn't even swing. The match was all tied up...

The crowd was ecstatic. Mr. Meng stood rigid. Kang Chan was dazed and Kevin smiled from the side of the court while holding a white towel to the gash on his forehead.

Mr. Trask walked back to the serving line. "Throw the game. Let them win," he demanded with a solid glare into Linda's eyes.

Across the net Mr. Meng was demanding the opposite from Kang Chan, in Chinese he demanded. "Win this match or your family will be exiled! Do not let the Mother Country be disgraced by a woman."

It was game-on! There was more electricity in the air than when Linda was captain of the US team and played for the **Federation Cup** in South Africa. Information that neither Asian was privy to...

"Play the game! Play the game! Play the game..." The crowd yelled in unison.

Kang Chan took the serving position—the threat to win was real. He slammed the first serve hard. Linda returned the serve as hard and the ball hit Chun Meng in the leg and dropped to the ground. The crowd was untamed! All the tennis lesson and all those games Kevin had lost to his mother, now fit into the big scheme. The few games that he did win were only about a mother building her child's self esteem.

Mr. Meng ignored the crowd, *no more than worthless peasants* he thought. He looked directly across the court toward Mr. Trask and in broken English said, "We can't play woman. Females not allowed."

Mr. Trask quickly walked around the net and held his hand out to Chun Meng. "Good game. I understand." There was silence; nobody could believe what was happening. Robert preformed a half bow toward Mr. Hung Meng.

Kevin felt as though he had been punched in the gut. The crowd jeered in disbelief. The club-pro shook his head and left the court with his hand on Kevin's shoulder. Hissing turned to booing! Mr. Meng turned toward Linda anticipating her to bow in defeat. The booing and shouting grew louder! Someone in the crowd threw a knotted up towel onto the court, a crumpled up paper cup followed and then a water bottle.

Kang Chan walked over to Mrs. Trask took her hand and shook it. "Good game." Then he whispered, "I know that you could have defeated us." He stepped back and gave a respectable bow to Linda. This simple gesture could cost Mr. Kang the very hand that he held the tennis racket with—if he were back home in North Korea.

Inside the locker room Kevin yanked off his wet sweaty shirt and threw it up against the lockers. It stuck there for a moment and then hit the floor with a spat. He plopped down on one of the oak benches, bent over and started untying his shoe.

Mr. Trask burst through the heavy locker room door! "What the hell were you and

your Mother trying to do?" Robert Trask yelled.

"What were we doing?" Kevin yelled back. "The tie breaker should have been played. But you let them win by some disgusting made-up forfeit!

"Kevin, it was just supposed to be a friendly a game. Good sportsmanship was the objective... You need to go tell Mr. Chun Meng and Kang that they played a good game." Mr. Trask moved across the locker room toward Kevin.

"I'm not going back out there and kiss their ass like you just did. That bowing thing almost made me puke!"

With one swift motion, Mr. Trask backhanded Kevin. Blood immediately started pouring from Kevin lip! "Kevin, you need to grow up!"

Caught off guard, Kevin jumped up and doubled up his fist. *I should kick his ass, just for Mom's sake...* Kevin headed toward a stack of towels—knowing not to push Robert any further.

"Kevin, I'm sorry! It's just so much is happening at work. I need Mr. Meng's financial backing..." Robert Trask took a deep breath. "I'm probably going to have to terminate Richard Johnson on Monday!" Another deep breath. "Plus we have the law suit and the union wants more. There might be a strike." Mr. Trask was rambling as he looked at Kevin's blood on his knuckles.

Kevin was looking in the mirror while dabbing at the blood on his swelling lip. He immediately turned and prepared for a real battle. "Terminate Richard Johnson? What the hell are you talking about?"

Mr. Trask looked up. "Richard has been having an affair. I just got proof this morning. Photographs from a security camera at Holiday Inn."

"So what, if Richard is having an affair! What business is it of Trask Enterprise? You don't know what he's been going through since Jabbar got shot and all."

Richard is having an affair with the internal auditor that they hired to look over the Trask corporate records. He might divulge the pending lawsuit to her, or let her know about the pending employee buy-out. I just can't take the risk...."

"What lawsuit? What employee buy-out? Who are they?" Kevin wanted answers.

"Hung Meng and his investors." Mr. Trask took a long deep breath and gathered his composure. "Kevin, I will fill you in later. Take your three weeks off, have fun with Tina and your friends. This doesn't involve you. Richard will be gone before you get back."

"What do you mean, it doesn't involve me? If Richard is terminated, I'm not coming to work! Sure he might not be up to speed since Jabbar's murder... But fire him at

this time in his life. Who knows what he would do to himself? He might jump off a building or something..."

"Kevin granted things are a mess for the Johnson's. But life goes on." Robert replied with a stone cold tone. "That's the reasons that I need you to buck up and act like a king of commerce. It's like a civil war down in the plant. It has always been the affluent, against the working class, family against family or religion against religion. A perfect example is that after Condi converted the Johnson family is history."

"Converted?" What's do you mean?" Kevin asked while checking to see if the blood from his lip had stopped.

"It's that Muslim against Christian doctrine that Richard started preaching after Jabbar died." Robert paused. "Take your three weeks off and we'll talk when you come on board with the new team."

"On board, with the new team?" Kevin put the towel back up to his split lip. "I'm afraid to ask who the new players are."

"At least they're neither Christian's nor Muslim's"

"Dad, it sounds like you are crawling down into a dark deep hole." Kevin's tone turned from disagreement to concern.

"Kevin, this isn't college or some abstract belief system. This is business in the real world. It's about money and world power." Mr. Trask spoke as though he was giving a pep talk. "Wait until you study Mr. Meng business plan. He knows how to get the working class to become productive again. He is a king at commerce..."

"What the hell is Mr. Meng to the Trask Corporation business plan? Dad you are scaring me." Kevin voice was somewhat shaky.

"Well his business plan includes sixty-six million dollars for us!"

The door to the locker room opened and Kang Chan entered. "Mr. Meng would like to buy the two of you a victory drink. How long should I tell him?" Kang Chan took a few steps forward and the heavy door closed. "It is a custom in our countries that the winner pays for the victory drink."

Something came over Kevin that sent a cold chill up his spine. Like a soldier ready to go into battle, Kevin walked over and stood face to face with Kang Chan. "Tell Mr. Hung Meng that he is not in his country. Tell him that he is in the United States of America--the nation under God..."

Expressionless and on notice, Kang Chan turned and left the locker room.

"Damn you Kevin!" yelled Robert Trask as he rushed out of the locker room.

