

COLUMBUS ROCKERS

1.

Marla Dawkins, the owner of Columbus Voice, one of the most successful Black owned newspapers in the Midwest, chronicled the recent journey of the Columbus Rockers, one of the two most recent NFL expansion teams.

“When the Rockers came to Columbus three years ago, there was excitement about the prospect of an NFL version of the perennial powerhouse and beloved Ohio State Buckeyes. The outcry rang in other parts of America—how could Ohio have 3 NFL teams? A State much bigger, New York only has one (although the Jersey Jets and Giants are scheduled to go back to the Apple next year). The whining just fired up enthusiasm that much more of the Columbus football fanatics. After all, Columbus well into Century 21 now, passed one million people in population, more than the cities of Cleveland and Cincinnati combined—and a fan base inspired by the phenomenal success of the Buckeyes a few miles North on the Olentangy River; perennial national championship contenders taking the sting from Rockers fans seeing just ten wins in three years.”

Carl Bedrosian, the Rockers owner, brought that football moniker down from Cleveland—the Rock n Roll Hall of fame. This Cleveland IT baron couldn’t care less that people called him a carpetbagger for stealing the name belonging to another city. Carl was never phased by all the Twitter and Lighthouse social media negativity, and that just fed into the Columbus Rockers’ calling card of “I don’t give a crap about the naysayers.” Carl once referenced the bullet train connecting Cleveland to Columbus in an hour, and called them twin cities.

Yes, the Browns were better. But cautious optimism reigned in Rockertown, starting with the hiring of head coach Rene Delepenso, former Eagles all-Pro receiver who was Offensive Coordinator for the Tampa Bay Bucs during four successful seasons, including a Super Bowl ring two seasons ago. Then there was the excitement about slotback standout Tyler Kyochevia—one of the two former Buckeye “Dreadlocks Brothers,” who gave Rockers fans consolation joy during

two losing seasons, by scorching defenses for over 2,000 all-purpose yards (rushing and receiving) in both of his seasons. The second “Dreadlock Brother”, defensive back Augustus Eja Jr. was the Rockers’ first round draft pick out of OSU, after shattering the all-time single season NCAA interception record with 23, including seven pick-sixes. Sports pundits called him an absolute beast, and the Rockers were able to get him as the #3 overall pick only because the 2 teams ahead of them desperately needed Quarterbacks in the draft. The Rockers’ third year starting Quarterback, Vic Rendon, showed promise and the flair for the spectacular by throwing 30 touchdown passes. The problem: Rendon last season broke the all-time NFL record with 33 Int’s, including 5 touchdown passes to the wrong team. Signing 3 defensive free agents also gave the Rockers hope, as last year’s D was a dumpster fire.

2.

Four days before kickoff of the NFL season, in Rockers’ corporate headquarters in Downtown Columbus: Carl Bedrosian sat at a large roundtable with members of his leadership team. Rockers stadium would be rockin’ on Sunday. Their opponent was the other recent NFL expansion team, the Utah Salt. Unlike the Rockers, the Salt showed steady improvement, including an 11-6 record last season and a Wild Card playoff berth. The Rockers started as a good nine-point underdog for Sunday.

A brisk anticipatory buzz that only football fanatics could experience filled the plush room. Also, there was an underlying heaviness due to two unwelcome distractions. Owner Carl held court as the consummate White corporate baron with his perfectly-matted gray hair, tan skin and ample jewelry. His open silk shirt displayed the Catholic cross. Next to him sat Vice President for Player Personnel Shirley Marcus, a fifty-ish woman with short brown hair and a Star of David necklace, and a mock scowl that often preceded a funny quip that the team enjoyed. To Carl’s left was Clint Duffie, distinguished Black General Manager with salty hair, sharp black suit and tie, and an air of confidence. Most people knew him from three successful coaching stints. Across from Carl sat the Head Coach-find, Rene Delepenso. With his body ruggedness everywhere, a vaguely Mediterranean air, and women-appealing shaggy black hair, he once landed a photo on GQ magazine. To many womens’

regret, he was already married with two precious young daughters. Delepenso's large Christian crucifix was ubiquitous.

“Is there a such thing as football dyslexia, regarding Vic Rendon?” Shirley quipped. “I mean, those stupid contacts he wears carry color kaleioscopes?”

“Rene and I discussed keeping Vic on a short leash, as Ron is a capable backup,” Carl said.

Rene added in his slow voice, “Shirley, we’ll make sure he has no chance, with playing time, to break his own interception record.”

“The players love him and respond to him because of his quiet sense of assurance,” Clint Duffie said. “We are retooling him, and he will be fine.”

“Now, before we tackle the obvious elephant in the room, let’s deal with this pesky aardvark,” Carl said. Pulling out a newspaper, he said, “I’m sure we have all read the multiple reports of Utah Salt Owner Mike Denoreth, thinking he was on a private line, using the N-word describing his conflict with the head of the Players Association. Once his words were exposed, he issued a public apology—of sorts: Sorry to all those who may be offended.”

“Oh, and we shouldn’t be offended?” Rene said strongly.

In walked Marisol Lezcano, the team’s thirty-ish Latino communication leader. Elegant with thick reddish-brown hair, she always made a little tail in the back with her patented red ribbon. She normally wore long colorful gowns, and her Christian cross matched Delepenso’s. As a tradition, Marisol always brought treats for these meetings. Today it was homemade brownies that she joyously deposited in front of every participant.

Shirley said, “Beneath that smile I see a sad puppy. How about I get you someone? Very rich and of course with swingin’ dancin’ hips.” Smiles all around, Marisol graciously kissed Shirley’s temple.

Carl looked sternly at Marisol: “Didn’t I tell you to put the title Rockers Vice President for Communications on your calling card and desk plate?”

Marisol took a seat between Carl and Clint, and said quietly, “Respectfully, sir, I prefer to be called Team Coordinator for Communications.”

“And that was her idea, not her staff’s,” Rene said. “And they love her for it.”

Clint said, “The tabloid sports news says that the only reason Vic Rendon is still with the Rockers is because of this high-connected, influential management official named Marisol Lezcano, who shares Rendon’s loyalty to their University of Arizona roots. You got something to say about that, my sister?”

“I don’t care,” Marisol shrugged. Then with a smile and a wink, “Even if it’s true.” Then she whispered, “The Tucson Illuminati.”

“Rene and I will jointly address the team about Mike D’s racism remark,” Carl said. “The dynamics are especially sensitive with the Salt coming to our house.”

Clint added, “Those dynamics include White Nationalist Websites extolling their hero, White QB Todd Devlin, to show up our minority-dominated team. Their great White hope! Mike D’s half-apology, combined with an eerie silence from other Salt sources, just prompted two Salt standout Black players to claim sickness right before the opening game.”

“Well, in addition to a racist-run team challenging us, the Vegas line fell just one lousy point from 9 to 8,” Rene said, eyes furrowed. “If those twin punches don’t get the Rockers fired up---I will plaster the locker room walls with both Mike D’s outrage and the Vegas line.”

“Racism and anti-semitism are like a bad flu,” Shirley said. “Some hurt us visible in our faces. Others you cannot see.”

“Mr. Denoreth may be an RR,” Marisol said.

“A What?” Carl asked.

“It’s a term Tyler Kyochevia uses,” Marisol said. “Red racist: Racism not exposed until you are caught red handed. Then you crawl away and apologize. How many invisible red racists are there out there? And the caught red racists: are their acts of repentance real, or just to try to save face?”

“I just learned, Carl, how we’ve already been impacted,” Rene said. “Did you read the recent Twitter and Lighthouse posting from our puffed-up Linebacker Jerome Washington?”

“What did our prima donna say this time?” Carl asked dubiously.

“Here’s the quote: ‘That crackerhead Todd Devlin will be picking his Salt expletive head off the ground.’”

Marisol tried some levity: “I get called a cookie a lot. Never a cracker.”

Clint stood in anger. “Well, racism is justifiably attributed mostly to one race. But then we get these rude reminders that in the final analysis racism knows no color boundary.”

“You think?!” Carl exploded, rising. “We just lost our high ground on this issue!”

Marisol slowly rose and reached over to lightly touch Carl’s hand. “Sir, I just drafted a press release where I think we can regain the higher ground. We won’t mention any Salt person by name, but we will extol our uniqueness in embracing ethnic synergy and openly welcoming people of all backgrounds with love.”

Carl pointed at Marisol. “No, Marisol, there will be a name in your release. Jerome Washington. I am ready to throw his big mouth and the rest of his body under the bus. When I say zero tolerance, some people need translation.”

“I will have Jerome in my office before the end of the day,” Rene said.

Carl's hotline phone buzzed. "It's Tyler Kyochevia. Hmmm," Carl said, quietly answering it.---"Yes I did, Ty"---a minute of silence. "Yes, I was, you know me too well----okay----okay---good."

Carl disconnected. "Tyler called me about Jerome. Ty suggested that he would be the best person to handle it."

Shirley laughed, "What kind of fairy dust did Tyler Kyochevia throw in your face to calm you, Carl? I want some of that!" People laughed.

"Wait, wait," Carl said. "Rene, this was your idea?"

"Innocent as charged," Rene answered, palms upward.

"A providential act of God maybe?" Marisol posited. No one laughed.

Rene said, "That was the elephant in the room and we will tame it. The next problem methinks is the aardvark."

"Diana Bennett? An aardvark? How about a wrecking ball with teeth!" Carl was again agitated.

"Who's that?" Marisol asked.

"Self-Appointed Head Honcho for the Atheist Movement of America. I just got a letter from her, co-signed by some attack dog lawyers, threatening to sue us for establishment of religion. She got hold of some of Coach Rene's Christian postings, and some faith references by Marisol in her releases."

"Guilty as charged," Marisol said.

"Wait. I am a trained lawyer," Shirley said. "They have no jurisdiction. We are an independent corporation, not some public high school."

Carl replied, "Diana is spinning it that the Rockers received seed moneys from the City of Columbus and the State of Ohio. By her reasoning we are bound by the separation of church and state."

Clint said, “There is good news. That atheist group made the same threat at Ohio State last year when they claim they saw Assistant Coach Davidson leading a team prayer before the Iowa game. Several of the OSU players went public, saying the prayer was their initiative. Diana went away after that.”

“Shirley, I’ve asked you this before, and I will ask you again since this issue is hot,” Carl said. “Have you ever felt mistreated by anyone in this organization?”

“Never,” Shirley answered. “Not unless there is an insinuation that Jewish people are any less concerned about this so-called wrecking ball against moral authority in America than Christians are.”

Carl stood again. “The only communication that we will have with Ms. Bennett and her atheist yahoos is that they are persona non grata at any Rucker facility. She wants a meeting with me to discuss this issue. That will never happen.”

“Let me quote my Carolina Uncle,” Clint said. “If you see a cockroach and you let it go, you will have ten cockroaches very soon. If you step on it right away, problem is solved.”

“Wow, Clint, bring on the nuclear option!” Shirley crowed, to laughter.

“I am referring to a situation, not a person,” Clint clarified.

“Clint is right on,” Rene said, eyes wide. “Bring her in. I will meet with Diana this week. Give her 30 minutes.”

“Excuse me, Coach, don’t you have a game to prepare for?” Carl said with an edge. “You want that kind of distraction?”

Rene answered, “When I am doing my job, talking about Jesus is always an encouragement and inspiration for me. Never a distraction.”

3.

Friday afternoon, 5:00. The meeting with Diana Bennett was scheduled in Carl’s cavernous office, but with Rene taking charge. He was seated

in his normal seat at the roundtable, with Shirley on his left and Marisol on his right. Rene and Shirley were casually dressed, with no need to impress anyone. Marisol’s gown carried a red and white floral design. Behind Rene, seated at a smaller table were two Black Rockers players. One was a Dreadlocks Brother with his dreads tied together in a thick tail. The other player, much larger, wore close cropped hair.

Rene handed a printed paper to Marisol and commented, “This is why we didn’t need to mention Jerome in your press release.”

Marisol read a Twitter message from Augustus Eja Jr. to Jerome Washington: “Yo, J. Open your game and shut your mouth.”

Rene said, “Jerome’s Twitter heartfelt apology came an hour later. Just in time, as Carl was going to body slam Jerome publicly before the game.”

Marisol said smiling, “Mr. Eja is a man of few words, and every word counts.”

Marisol handed the paper to Shirley, who broke into song: “Rockin robin, tweet! tweet! tweet! Rockin robin, tweet! tweet! tweet! Go Columbus Rockers cause we’re really gonna rock tonight. Tweet! tweet! tweet!—A variation on a real song—decades before I was born.”

“Hey, I like it,” Rene said. “Give it to our band and cheerleaders.”

There was a knock on Carl’s door, and Donna, Carl’s slightly plump Black secretary, peeked in. In walked a reedy, athletic young woman with short blonde hair and green spandex. There were multiple necklaces carrying pagan images. At Rene’s hand invitation, she sat down in the gold-plated chair normally reserved for Carl.

Rene Introduced, “I am Coach Rene Delepenso, sitting in for Mr. Bedrosian—and I have been looking forward to this meeting, knowing how competently you represent your organization.”

“Ms. Bennett, I am Marisol Lezcano from Communications, and I am very honored and pleased to meet you—recognizing your strong

advocacy against modern slavery.” Marisol extended her hand and Diana wiggled Marisol’s fingers for a second.

“And I am Shirley Marcus from Player Personnel. My dog Garfunkel thanks you from the bottom of his bleeding heart for the work your nonprofit does to stop animal abuse. I thank you, too.”

Diana warily looked at her charges, and then said, “No introductions are needed, given that two of the people on the American Atheist Movement’s top ten wanted list are seated in front of me.”

Marisol excused herself and went to a nearby rectangular table filled with snacks. She brought back cherry cheesecake along with paper plates and utensils. With a wide smile she cut a piece and handed it to Diana. “I made it myself. You will love it,” Marisol said. Diana glared at it like it was a dead rat.

Rene said, “One of my closest classmates at UPenn Chad Merriman approached me about starting a Foundation for food distribution to those in need. I am the co-owner with Chad, who is gay. We partner with different organizations—gay, straight, and diverse religious faiths. Marisol, Clint Duffie and Carl Bedrosian are on the Board. We have all learned that we can hold firm to our beliefs while at the same time seeking common ground with people we honestly disagree with, rather than dwelling on our differences.”

“That was a nice try at a distraction, Coach Delepenso,” Diana said. She leaned forward with determination. “Let’s deal with the issue at hand. You and Ms. Lezcano have made numerous public pro-Christian statements, with at least the tacit approval of the owner Bedrosian, also a Christian. I cannot image how many lower management officials have been pressured into following this cultist management coercion lockstep, and how many of your employees who don’t believe your fairy tale sputum are terrorized into silence about how they feel oppressed. I have photos of prayer gatherings at your summer training facilities, and you are right in the middle of them, Coach. Offensive Coordinator Rodney Hall is also there, perhaps as a crew leader enforcer, and it’s an open question where Mr. Hall was there voluntarily. You and Miss Hot Shot Lawyer Shirley should know better about trying to establish a religion via management actions, when the Rockers organization is neck

deep in government money, including Federal financial assistance from the State of Ohio and the City of Columbus. I have in my briefcase printed copies of the Delepenso and Lezcano faith advocacy comments, and photos of the numerous training camp prayer photos.”

“That won’t be necessary—uh, may I call you Diana?” Rene said.

“If you insist.”

“Thank you for your insights, Diana,” Rene continued. “We want to give you ample time as you are our honored guest, and we are interested in learning more about the philosophical underpinnings of your belief system. Marisol has graciously agreed to take notes.”

Marisol smiled behind her laptop. “Yes. I would be honored to hear your perspective too, Diana.”

Shirley rolled her eyes almost involuntarily, and Rene noticing, cracked a little smile.

Rene continued, “And we want to be especially responsive to your concerns. And it follows this framework: The latest Supreme Court decision, *Lewis v. Johnson*, says that management officials have the right under the Free Exercise of Religion Clause of the Constitution, to freely express their religious beliefs, either in a government setting or a private sector setting, as long as there is no evidence of coercion or abuse of power from a management perspective. The US Supreme Court gave further guidance of what constitutes legal coercion: a pattern of raised concerns by subordinates, where the pattern shows a hostile working environment on the basis of religion----Now Diana. I am sure you would not be here unless you had sworn statements from Rockers employees including players, accusing our management team of coercion. I promise, once I see those statements, and speaking for Carl, we will approach those employees about what we can do better.”

Diana just stared at him.

“While you are searching your records,” Marisol said, “Let me offer you some herbal tea.” Marisol brought Diana some hot water, and a

basket full of different brands. Diana, body trembling slightly, took the tea, taking sips in between deep breaths.

Rene continued, “There is another matter where we may have to respectfully agree to disagree. Our legal staff informed me that, in some of your lawsuits, the American Church of Satan partnered with you. So you will attack one religion while partnering with another?”

“The ACS does not believe in a spiritual Satan. They are just using the name as a symbol to make a case for a religiously neutral and secular America when applied to power alignments.”

“They call themselves a church,” Rene said. “Would that not meet the legal definition of a religion?”

“Let me get this straight, Ms. Bennett,” Shirley said strongly. “You actually believe that imposing a societal standard in conjunction with a Satanic movement, over the Constitutional right of Americans to express their religious preference, is something any sane Court in America would buy off on?”

Diana was breathing harder. “You all disgust me. And Ms. Lezcano, your condescending and insulting pose as some secretary when you are the third or fourth most powerful official in this organization. You are a joke!”

“Thank you. I enjoy good jokes,” Marisol said with a flat smile. “And you’re right, I am a joke at times. Very flawed.”

“Don’t you understand how your religion is an offense to so many millions of people?” Diana challenged.

“You are right, Diana,” Rene said quietly. “Christianity is an offense. That is because the documented truth, even with the compelling evidence, yes including science, and with all the love that comes with the Christian spirit, are all blind to people gripped sadly with strongholds.”

“Let me ask you, Ms. Bennett,” Shirley said, stroking the Star of David. “Is my religion an offense?”

“To be honest, sometimes the Jewish people can act worse than Christians. Just look at all these fanatical Orthodox Jewish cults in places like Brooklyn, and the chilling impact they have on whole communities.” Diana’s eyes rose. “Wait. Is that a camera up there?”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Rene said. “We have blanket legal clearance to record every meeting in Carl’s office, for security reasons.”

Diana’s eyes were lasers—until they gravitated to the right. One of the Dreadlocks Brothers was ambling her way, carrying a briefcase. He stopped above her chair. Diana slowly rose.

“Hello, Ms. Bennett. Just wanted to stop over and say hi. And say how much I appreciated your friendly debate.”

“Wow, Augustus Eja. You’re here....and you actually took time to greet me.”

Rene’s facial expression reflected Diana’s wide-eyed change of demeanor.

“No, Ms. Bennett. I am Tyler Kyochevia. People get us confused sometimes because of our similar do’s.” Pointing to his head. “But I take that as a compliment, to be linked with the best defensive back in the world. Thank you.” Tyler opened the briefcase. “And here are copies of the e-mails I sent out organizing those prayer meetings you referenced. They were my idea. I have no management authority here. I apologize for the misunderstanding.”

The second large bulky player approached the table from the other side. “Diana Bennett, meet our best offensive lineman Chester Mohammed. Chester, tell her about our special facilities.”

“Yes sir. The Coach has created space for Muslims, for prayer, and just to hang out. There are three of us on the team, and sometimes we pray on the field, too. The Coach, he sent out a memo to everyone, asking if there are any additional religious accommodations that need to be made. This all I know: These players, everyone here is just family. They got my back.”

Rene said, “Diana, that’s one of your witnesses at the potential trial---uh, not.”

“Do you have more nice recommendations for us?” Marisol happily asked.

“If not,” Rene said, taking a ticket from his pocket. “For your interest in the Rockers, and for this enjoyable discourse, here is a free ticket to this Sunday’s Rockers game. It is on the 50-yard line. It is a special ticket: It has a First Amendment stamp on the back. Also, you have my number if you want a personal tour of the facilities. We can also arrange a meeting with Augustus Eja Jr. I’m sure he would be happy speak to you.”

“Thank you for this nice gesture. You didn’t have to do it,” Diana said. “Sorry I came on so strong.”

They all stood up and shook hands with cordial farewells.

Marisol said, beaming, “Augustus Eja will make some nice plays for you on Sunday. Enjoy the game. I wish you well. I really mean it.”

“One more thing before you leave, Diana,” Rene said. “We can agree that both Atheist and Christian historians verify that Jesus Christ was a real person, and really died on the cross. Given that reality, where was his dead body? I mean, both the Jewish and Roman authorities were determined to expose Jesus as fraud. So if Christianity was a trick, you mean they could never find a dead Jesus? Ever?”

“Please don’t proselytize me, Coach.”

“Just a question. And when Genesis said that humans were made in the image of God and said that humans would subject all other species to their control, do we have evidence to refute it? Name one animal that has come close to dominating the human race, or possessing the obvious souls that we possess? And Isaiah in the Bible predicted the crucifixion of Jesus Christ 700 years before it happened—and crucifixion did not even exist in Isaiah’s time—and non-Christian archaeologists verified that Isaiah actually did write that prophecy 700 years before Jesus—how could that be possible without a miracle from God?”

“Goodbye Coach,” Diana said without hostility.

As Diana reached the door, Rene called to her one last time. “Next time you come, Diana, please bring your 58% gorilla and 42% human, or 60% human and 40% monkey, or any other transitional evolutionary species, that even Darwin called a theory and not an absolute fact—in your zeal to disprove the Bible.”

Then she was gone.

Marisol looked at Rene. “We likely will never see her again.”

“Too bad. I wanted one more shot at dropping a few more spiritual seeds, and then let God work on her.”

4.

GAME TIME

1:00 PM Sunday. Rockers stadium was full; a low roar of anticipation; 78 degrees and Sunny; early September in Columbus. Every seat was taken. Fans mostly wore the blue and white colors of the Rockers while a few fans displayed the red/scarlet of OSU. From above, the blended colors gave the stadium an American flag look; no accident when Carl Bedrosian chose the uniform colors.

In a glass booth high above the field, sat play by play announcer Phil Kenny--middle aged, basketball tall with thick blonde hair, tinted shades and Hollywood face. Next to him, African American Barbara Rennie, also middle aged, thin, jet glasses, with severely pulled back brown hair, came across as a personal trainer. They were the voice of the Rockers; the Kenny and Rennie show.

A cascade of boos greeted the orange and silver Utah Salt as they sprinted onto the field. Then the fans erupted at the sight of their beloved blue and white Rockers; Tyler Kyochevia leading the way waving an American flag in one hand and the Ohio State flag in the other.

The Salt won the toss and deferred. Blood pressures rose as the teams lined up; the Rockers set to receive.

Phil Kenny spoke up. “Augustus Eja, number 36, and Larry Herndon, number 37, both defensive backs doubling as returners. In addition to his spectacular DB exploits, Eja ripped off 813 return yards at OSU last year. Here’s the kick, right to left—and it looks like its coming down to AEJ; his first touch as an NFL Rookie! Okay, the 5, 10, 15, shakes a tackle at the 18—breaks to the sideline! Does he have the edge? No, pushed out at the 38.”

“Still a nice return,” Barbara said in an alto voice. “And a little glimpse of what makes Augustus Eja Jr. such a special multi-faceted player.”

Phil summarized during a break: “The crowd is Death Valley. The Rockers first possession was 3 and out, with Kyochevia stuffed twice. On the Salt’s possession, 2 of the Rockers’ defensive linemen left with injuries. The Salt marched right down, and QB Todd Devlin hit WR Bryant at the pylon for a 7-0 Salt lead.”

“Three and out again for the Rockers, and the Salt took the rest of the First Quarter to slowly march down the field in chunks, with RB Pittsburgh Brown diving over the goal line,” Phil moaned at another break. “That was 14-0—also with 2 starting Rockers linebackers also leaving the field with injuries, leaving Jerome Washington on a starter’s island.

“This quiet crowd is growing restless,” Phil Kenney said, late in the Second Quarter. “The Rockers are down, 21-3. Our only score came after a Pittsburgh Brown fumble on their own 20, and we couldn’t convert even a first down. Hooker barely made the short field goal. What’s Vic Rendon’s numbers?”

“4 for 12, 63 yards one interception,” Barbara said. “Not helpful with a wounded warrior defense. The Salt offense has been staying away from Augustus Eja. That’s easy for them, when they are gashing our line, and turning Larry Herndon around. Our linebackers are no match for the hitch passes to Pittsburgh Brown.”

“Okay here’s the kickoff,” Phil narrated. “Out of bounds! Good field position for a change-----Okay, Vic Rendon is clapping, spurring his teammates on. A real cucumber; nothing phases him, even with the wall against his back.”

“I think the expression is, back against the wall, Phil.”

“You heard me, Barb-----okay, Rendon back to throw, down the right sideline. Willie’s got it! Willie Wideout Williams touches both toes! What a throw by Vic! We are on the Salt 36. Okay, we have a shot at making this a game.”

“Third and five at the Salt 31. Rendon back. All-out blitz. Intercepted.” Phil’s voice was a dying quail. “Salt’s Lawrence has it. Down the sideline. 40. 30. Tyler’s gonna have to catch him. Down at the Rockers 22. That’s Rendon’s second pick and it’s not even halftime.”

“It would be a pick 6 if not for Tyler,” Barbara added.

Coach Rene Delepenso slammed down his headset in front of national TV cameras.

“Third and 8 for the Salt at the Rockers’ 20. Devlin back, no he breaks to the right. Quarterback draw. Spins out of Jerome’s tackle; dives, down at the 9. First down.”

“Okay, Devlin back to throw. A zinger in traffic in the back of the end zone. Threading between Herndon and 2 safeties. Bodies, where is the ball? Bryant’s got it. Touchdown. Oh my.”

Barbara said, “Devlin is doing that little arm pushup move. It’s very subtle, but with the events over the past few days, any hint of taunting is going to enrage this crowd. I see some debris in the end zone. The game will be delayed.”

Rene eyed the Rockers’ bald and Black Offensive Coordinator, Rodney Hall. Rodney used to be a big Tight End for the Giants, and now heavier as a coach. Rene and Rodney tilted their heads back and forth, and then Rene yanked his thumb. “Ron’s been warming up for 10 minutes.”

The crowd loudly rose to their feet when Larry Herndon broke free on the kickoff; he was tackled from behind at the Salt 39.

Phil narrated, “Great field position again, and we can’t pass up this opportunity. Wait, that’s number 8, not number 10. It looks like Coach Delepenso made a change at QB. That is Ron Thibodeaux, our third-year backup out of LSU.”

Ron was a strapping 220-pound White guy with some attempt at dreads down his jersey back.

“Tyler’s got it on a jet sweep,” Phil said. “Gang tackled after a 1- yard gain.”

“They are keying on Tyler, not respecting our passing or offensive line,” Barbara said. “And it’s been worse for our tailback Montez: 6 carries, 7 yards.”

“Thibodeaux back to pass. Buried! Oh my, third and 18----Ron back again, he’s got Willie at the 20! No! Overthrew him by 3 yards. The beat goes on, that’s all I can say, fans.”

“Hooker, going both ways as field goal kicker and punter, buried the Salt inside the 10,” Phil continued.

“Third down and 6 at the 12. We need a stop. Big rush, uh-oh, draw. Pittsburgh breaks through the line. 20, 30—AEJ shoves him out of bounds at the 41.”

Phil continued, “Pittsburgh is making brushing motions on the back of his jersey, mocking Tyler’s dreadlocks and putting him down.”

Barbara said, “Well, if you have 123 rushing yards to Tyler’s 41 all purpose yards, you can probably get away with it.”

A Referee was picking up a red flag and hitting his microphone. “During the run offensive holding, offense number 62. Half the distance to the goal.”

“Okay, stuff-em! Give us one more shot before halftime.”

“I’d like to see what would happen if they decide to challenge Eja right now,” Barbara said.

“Screen pass to Brown. They swarmed him! Fourth and 6. Alright. Let’s go.”

“The Salt angled the punt away from returner Eja. It bounced out of bounds at the Salt 42-yard line.”

Barbara said, “It is telling how much they disrespect our offense when they are willing to give up that much field position just to avoid an unproven college rookie.”

“Yes, but a rookie that is getting many quiet bows today,” Phil said.

“Third and 10. Thibodeaux has not completed a pass yet---now he has, no it’s off Willie’s fingers, and the Salt’s Craig has it! Down the sidelines. Willie’s gonna have to catch him. Okay, He’s down at the Rockers 19.”

Barbara said, “It was just too hard and high. A good pass, and Willie rips off 20 yards at least.”

“That’s the problem with these backups, Barb. They don’t get the same kind of reps in practice. Timing. Sheez!”

“This could be the game,” Phil said. “Fourth and 1 at the Rockers’ 10. Without the D stepping up, it’s either 35 or 31 to 3—okay, Devlin hands it off, and Jerome jackknives in and nails Brown at the 12! We stopped them! Yes!”

“Pushed that button one too many times, Phil.”

Rene Delepenso and the entire Rockers sideline pumped their fists and jumped up and down, as if they had just won the game. Rene and Defensive Coordinator Blade Bower patted the pads of each player as they ran off.

Phil said, “First and 10, Rockers deep their territory, with 31 seconds left. Thibodeaux is going to take a knee. 28-3 Salt at halftime.”

Barbara quipped: “You would think a racist comment by an opponent would fire up your team. That works only if you have the talent. Right now I don’t see it. Coach Delepenso needs an equalizer.”

After the halftime gun, Rene called up to the VIP box. “Clint, I need you to visit Vic Rendon in the locker room, take him aside. Those mountain stories and Carolina tales touch him somehow. He adores you, a favorite Uncle or something---I don’t expect miracles, but I just took him out and he’s going back in during Quarter Three, and I want to take away the sting of him just being benched. Give him some positivity; uplift.” Rene gave a little laugh, “I know, I should have called you sooner.”

During halftime, Marisol and Shirley sat with Carl Bedrosian and family in the VIP Box, as Clint Duffie was going down to meet with Rendon. An usher knocked outside and was let in.

“A box for Ms. Lezcano, just delivered. It’s already gone through security screening.”

Marisol took it with a puzzled look. She pried open the square box and beheld inside a rich round carrot cake. There was a card taped to the inside flap. Marisol opened it and read the handwritten note:

“I want to thank you for your kindness—and that kindness is especially noteworthy after my insults. I don’t want to disrupt Coach D during the game, but could you share this note and cake with that nice man? Shirley, too, along with Garfunkel. Thank you again.” (Signed) Diana.

Marisol, deeply moved, covered her face.

Right before the teams were set to line up for second half kickoff, Coach Rene beckoned to Augustus Eja, hovering near the bench.

“E! Want your insight on something.” Rene hugged Augustus’ shoulder pad. “Walter is more than a capable Cornerback. I want him in your spot and make you a slot safety; turn you loose like a rover.

Just follow your nose; your instincts. I am setting up a 5-1-5 defensive alignment. Risky, but with 28-3 and a defense that can't stop Mary Poppins, risky is a viable alternative. Blade is okay with the change. Are you okay with that?"

"Anything to win," Augustus replied lowly.

"E. We need a play."

Kickoff time; Rockers to Salt right to left. Phil said, "Hooker pooches it about 20 yards to the right, a semi line drive—and wait, Tyler's got it! They nail him out of bounds at the Salt 41! Whew! Perfectly executed onside kick!"

Barbara added, "Coach Delepenso needed something dramatic to fire up the team. That was it. I wonder if Salt Coach Spaulding was caught sleeping, not seeing Tyler Kyochevia on the wing."

Rockers fans were on their feet, as their team was driving. Phil said, "Rendon seems to have a little fire now. Those 4 quick passes, three to Tyler, have the Salt on their heels. First and 10 on the Salt's 12—okay, Tyler on a fake reverse; what a move, he's down to the Salt 4! No it's coming back. Oh my Gosh."

The Ref tapped the mic. "Tripping, number 72, offense, 10-yard penalty."

"First and 20 at the 22. We need at least 3 to make it a 3-score game—Okay Rendon back, deep in the left corner—Mark Hunston's got it! Touchdown Rockers! A beautiful back shoulder pass from Vic! Bang, Boom, Bong!"

"Some of the Black players call Mark Hunston the Red Burner as a joke, because of all his red freckles," Barbara said. "He apparently doesn't mind the name. He was Rendon's most trusted possession receiver last year."

Midway through the Third Quarter, and the Salt offense is ripping holes through the Rockers' line, and with counter plays," Phil

murmured. “First and 10 Salt, on the Rockers’ 20. Rene just called a timeout and beckoned to Defensive Coordinator Blade Bower.”

Blade Bower was a wiry Black man with colorful hair similar to that of the great WR Beckham. Blade was a teammate of OBJ back when.

Rene said, “We need to go third string with these backups. Greener, but maybe hungrier. We can’t let the Salt answer our score and break our momentum. 35-10 won’t cut it.”

Blade nodded and sent in four subs. Some players on the bench heard Blade mouth, “Jailbreak!”

Phil narrated, “Devlin is back, and we’re charging! All-out blitz! He spins away from our safety blitz. Running to the left, squaring his body, pressure on him, looking toward Bryant at the pylon with Herndon turned around. He fires a bullet and—Intercepted! Eja just stepped in front of Bryant and is racing down the sideline! Devlin giving chase, no angle! AEJ at the 40, 50—he’s gone, baby! 100-yard pick 6! Welcome to the NFL, Augustus Eja Jr.! Bang, Boom, Bong!” Phil and Barbara whooped it up.

Barbara said, “Devlin squaring up wasn’t looking Bryant off. Eja just read his eyes and made a break like a bat out of hell.”

“28-17, and Rockers Stadium is shaking!” Phil yelled. “Bower’s greenies and creative stunts just forced a Salt 3 and out.

“Disaster,” Phil moaned. “Fake punt, as the punter threw a sideline pass to the backup tight end. First and 10, at the Salt 40.”

“They got me back,” Rene said, gesturing toward the Salt sideline. “My fault.”

Blade was clapping, hollering at his defensive. “We’ll do it again. Rock em! We’re the Rockers.”

Phil said, “Blade has our D dancing, stunting. Okay, Devlin goes back, no, a Quarterback draw. Jerome’s got him for a 3-yard gain. Devlin is slow to get up. Now he collapses back down.”

“He’s hurt bad,” Barbara said. “When he was going down his leg was pinned against his own lineman.”

A hush fell over Rockers Stadium. Several minutes went by with the Salt bench attending to their starting Quarterback. There were thousands of looks of genuine concern, but also a deep-down human instinct of hope that Columbus may have a better chance with Devlin out.

The stretcher came out. The Columbus fans cheered loudly as the vehicle started in motion. Augustus Eja led the Rockers in giving Devlin a sympathetic pat on the way out.

Austin “Tattoo” Jones came out as Devlin’s QB replacement. With so much dark ink on both arms, it was hard to tell that Jones was White.

The Columbus roar rose again as the Salt Offense had a hard time adjusting to the new QB; 2 motion penalties. After 2 short passes that were played well, the Salt lined up at their own 35 to punt.

Phil said, “With Rendon showing life, they are not giving up those yards anymore, as this punt is a boomer! Eja may have a chance at the 15. No, he waves his arm for fair catch, surrounded. What a kick!”

“Loud fan chants of encouragement, as Rendon continued his quick pass mastery with 3 hookups for 23 yards!” Phil said excitedly.

“First and 10 Rockers at the 38. You can feel the energy. Rendon drops back, hands off to Tyler on a counter—breaks a tackle at the 45, cuts back, Salt 40, 30, 20, down at the 18!”

Phil leaned forward in the booth as Rendon took the snap. “Pressure, Rendon breaking for the sideline, got him at the 16. Oh no, he’s limping. Now he’s down. Oh no, the trainers are out there.”

Hardly a sound could be heard in the stadium as minutes went by with Vic Rendon on the turf. Finally, he was helped off.

Barbara said, “That had better been a clean hit or there will be a riot.”

The boos cascaded down. They showed the replay on the big screen. Phil narrated, “The safety Collins appeared to be going for the shins, but Vic was trying to spin away and had the ankle twisted. I think it was clean. Coach Delepenso and his staff don’t seem too angry.”

Under the consternation of fans, Ron Thibodeaux was being prompted by Rodney. Rene said to him, “Careful Ron. No turnover. Either way, we need this to be 1 score game.”

Phil said, “Ron hit Willie with a quick out. Great play by DB Collins. Willie is down at the 10. Third and 2---Handoff to Montez, he leaps but he’s not going to get there. Fourth and 1, and here comes Hooker.”

“Down 8 won’t be bad given how the game started,” Barbara said.

“Hooker lining up for what is a chip shot field goal,” Phil said. “Here’s the snap. Oh no it’s blocked! The ball lands harmlessly in the end zone. Oh my Gosh.”

“If Columbus was a balloon, all the air just came out,” Barbara said.

And a flat stadium such I’ve never seen continued as the game played on; just worried look,” Phil said later. “In the Fourth Quarter, and neither backup Quarterback is unable to cross into the other team’s territory. Still 28-17. Time is pushing Columbus toward an opening home loss, as we need 2 scores--7:15 left in the game, the Rockers have the ball on their own 22, First down, moving left to right.”

Rene beckoned to Rodney, “We may only have 2 more possessions. The Nuclear option?” Rodney nodded. “You call it, Rod.”

Phil said, “Blitz on Ron, but he steps away from it, breaks to left, 30, hit out of bounds at the 35. I mean, way out of bounds. And here comes the flag!”

Fans were simultaneously booing the hit and cheering the penalty as the Referee marched off yards to the 50.

Phil said, “Somehow we’ve got to at least give Hooker another shot to make this 1 score.”

“Pray for another penalty,” Barbara said with a little laugh.

“Ron to Montez, and Montez flips it quickly to Willie breaking to the right—now stops, gonna throw, looking for Hunston at the 10, but he’s covered—now he zings it to Tyler at the 40. Tyler spins, breaks out of Collins’ tackle, now cuts back to the left—it’s a footrace! 20, 10, touchdown Tyler Kyochevia! Touchdown, Rockers! Whew! Bang, Boom, Bong!”

**“Hunston was just a decoy, as most times this play goes for the bomb. But they had Tyler tagged from the beginning,” Barbara said.
“Brilliant.”**

In front of the delirious fans, Tyler Kyochevia knelt down for a prayer, and then pointed his fingers toward heaven; his familiar touchdown celebration gesture.

**“Extra point. Thibodeaux just stood and flicked a quick pass to Chester Mohammed, wide open in the end zone! Tackle eligible!” Phil crowed.
“Rockets from 11 down to 3.”**

“That may be the closest we’ll see Thibodeaux to throwing a touchdown pass,” Barbara quipped.

Phil recapped: “The fan delirium continued as the Salt went 3 and out again. But the hand-wringing tension returned when the Rockers also went 3 and out.”

“Hooker just nailed a nice punt and pinned the Salt down at their own 15.”

“Okay, we need Rene and Blade’s revitalized lockdown defense now more than ever,” Barbara commented.

Phil recapped: “Jones hit Bryant for a 20-yard pass, to the 35. But then the Rockers stuffed Pittsburgh Brown, and sacked Jones twice. Raw

gizzard from Rene’s and Blade’s young warriors. The fans are on their feet now. Fourth and 25 for the Salt at their own 20.”

“Salt punter Johnson hasn’t been afraid of Eja lately, as he hit punts high in the sky and forced fair catches,” Barbara commented.

“Okay, this one is angled to the near sideline, more of line drive,” Phil said. “Eja running full speed catches it. Breaks to the left with traffic, wow, he just did a 360 to juke two tacklers, now cuts inside another tackler at the 50, the 40, they chase him toward the sideline—another amazing spin move—he breaks free, 30, 20, 10, touchdown! Touchdown Augustus Eja Jr., and the Rockets have the lead! Bang, Boom, Bong!”

“That last spin of Eja was a carbon copy of the famous Braxton Miller spin against Va-Tech way back in ’15,” Barbara said. “Sensational.”

Eja’s end zone celebration: drop the football, bow backwards then bow forward.

“I have been calling football for 20 years and I cannot remember a sports arena being this loud,” Phil said. “32 to 28 now. The Salt anemic offense needs a touchdown.”

“Wow, great throw and catch, Jones to the tight end, up to the Salt 45,” Phil said.

“Jones back—here comes Herndon on a Corner blitz! He nails Jones for a 10-yard loss!”

Barbara added, “When we have 5 DBs, we can afford to turn 1 loose.”

“Second and 20. Jones pitches it back to Brown, sprints to the right, now stops, wants to throw. Uh-oh, Bryant has 2 steps on Walter, but Eja is deep, breaks and steps in front of Bryant for another INT! He dances around, but then slides down as he is surrounded—Barbara, you can take the number 36 off of Augustus Eja Jr.’s jersey and put on a big S.”

“With all the crappy things in the world, Columbus and America could use another sports superstar,” Barbara added.

“The jubilant fans are smelling it now. Tyler just broke off another 20-yard gain from a jet sweep.

“The Rockets masterfully used the clock and forced Utah to use their timeouts. 4th and 2.

“The fans seem about ready to charge the field as Hooker just pinned the Salt on their own 13. 1 minute 7 seconds, no timeouts.”

Phil continued to narrate: “A quick throw, hook and lateral—and Herndon knocks the ball loose! Jerome Washington picks it up, slides down, and gets up dancing on field. Now he is running toward the Salt sideline, and he just waved the magic finger. Coach Delepenso will have something to say about that.”

“The Rockets win! The Rockets win!” Phil shouted. Fans poured onto the field. The Coaches Delepenso and Spaulding exchanged apologies: Spaulding for Owner Mike and Rene for Jerome Washington.

The post-game interviews in the clubhouse: Behind the table facing the reporters sat Coach Rene, flanked by Tyler and Augustus, with Vic Rendon on the end.

“Vic should be ready for the Patriots next Sunday,” Rene announced. “Who you will not see is Jerome Washington. I am suspending him for 3 games for a pattern of behavior that does not live up to the high moral standards we expect of this Rockets team.”

“This question is for Augustus Eja,” a male reporter called from the back. “How do you feel stealing the superstar mantle from Tyler Kyochevia in this game?”

“What?!” Augustus glared. “He’s my Bro so ask questions about the team. I’m outta here.” He stood up and quietly left.

Tyler also stood up. “I’m out too. He’s my Bro.”

That night, Carl Bedrosian took a call in his office from Utah Salt owner Mike Denoreth. “Mike, thank you for your congratulatory call.

I thank you for something else. Those two Black Salt players who didn't suit up today. Last time I checked they will be free agents at the end of this season. Don't get excited, Mike. No, I don't have their phone numbers."

5.

BREAKING NEWS! The camera zeroed in on a nice three-story brick home. Then came a woman's alto voice in the background: "You see communist hammer and sickle graffiti on the side of the home of Columbus Rockers Chief Strategy Officer Jerry Chan. We just learned that the inside of his house was severely vandalized by unknown masked perpetrators; anti-Asian racist slurs smeared all over with yellow paint. This despicable act has put a sour note in Columbus, just 1 day after the Rockers' exciting come from behind win against the Utah Salt."

The camera switched back to Channel 8 anchor, Miles Waverly, an older White man with white hair. "The name Jianming Yang was sprayed on the wall inside Chan's Hilliard house. That is a reference to these wild conspiracy theories circulating on the Net, that the Rockers' Chinese American official Jerry Chan is really Jianming Yang, biological warfare criminal who escaped from China right before he was to be turned over to the Lausanne Tribunal. These attacks against various Asian Americans has proliferated in recent weeks, following reports that several of the escaped biological war criminals have undergone advanced, sophisticated identity changes and have burrowed themselves into high level American positions. This has reopened the wound that the USA had with China many years ago due to the actions of the now discredited Communist Party government. Though Jerry Chan has a wife and teenage daughter, he is refusing to leave his house, declaring that he will never run from evil. Rockers Owner Carl Bedrosian released a statement that the Rockers are working with law enforcement and promised that the criminals will be brought to justice."

6.

Tuesday early morning in Carl Bedrosian's office: Carl, Clint, Marisol, Coach Rene and Shirley were seated in their normal chairs at the roundtable—in that order. The Black receptionist Donna opened the

door, and in strolled a 50-ish man with spiky black hair over an athletic body. His green Khaki shirt wore the printed monogram, “Tito Guevara, Vice President, Security Operations.”

Guevara handed blown-up photos to everyone. In each photo there were two middle aged Chinese men side by side. Both men were a little heavy with full faces and mixed black and gray skimpy hair. “You can see a little bit of resemblance,” Tito said in a mild Spanish dialect. “The left is of course the shot of our own Jerry Chan. The photo on the right is of Jianming Yang, the former Chinese Communist Party official, and for years now a biological war criminal fugitive. You can see some resemblance.”

Tito then handed a different photo of the same two men, side by side. The resemblance was even more noticeable. “A photoshopped version of Jerry, flying all over social media. Yes, there is a small percentage of Americana who believe that Jerry Chan is a reinvented Comrade Yang, and no amount of evidence or common sense, or even DNA, will persuade them otherwise. The malicious social media-driven fake news has been an American epidemic for as long as I can remember.”

Rene said, “Mass character destruction by these crazy conspiracy theorists.”

“Actually, the fraudulent photos came off of White Nationalist Websites, trying to stir up hatred and attacks against the Asian American community. A mud race, by their sick definition. The conspiracy theorists take this crap and run with it,” Tito said.

“Tito, please sit down and join us,” Carl said, reaching for a chair at another table. Meanwhile Marisol, with her flowing orange and white flower print dress, excused herself and quickly returned with cinnamon rolls.

“I’m a little dusty on history, Carl,” Rene said. “What is this all about?”

“You mean, that Communist Party SARS virus?” Marisol asked, wide-eyed. And every else’s eyes grew wider.

Carl said soberly, “That pandemic is visceral history for me. My businesses were neck deep trying to provide relief to countless millions ravaged by that virus. It took a couple years, but the International community of nations finally took action against the Chinese Communist government for their responsibility for spreading this virus around the world—and the hundreds of thousands of deaths and trillions of dollars in economic damage. The Lausanne Tribunal placed so much pressure on China that the Chinese military intervened and deposed most of the high-level Communists, and constituted a government more palatable to civilized democracies. There are more religious liberties in China now, if for no other reason than the Lausanne Tribunal also looked at severe religious persecution by the Communists. The Chinese Communist leaders who were turned over to Lausanne and found guilty are still in jail. The problem that is fanning racist paranoia against Asian Americans is that many of these Communist offenders hid behind their economic plunder, went underground, slickly changed their identities given the amazing technology we have now, and then re-emerged in positions of power in the US and West.”

“Where have we heard that before?” Shirley exclaimed. “The Jews, you know, are supposed to be in control of everything. Now in the eyes of these conspirators, you have these invisible former Communists boring into the US Government, connecting with the Deep State. The Jews and the Chinese! This pukathon we deal with daily.”

Carl continued, “The new Chinese government apologized back then, reformed, embraced indirect reparations in trade, manufacturing, IT and intellectual property adjustments. Now the new Chinese government is on good terms with the US Government and most of the world. Ironically, that just feeds into the wackos more, by claiming a conspiracy by the US leaders and the new Chinese leaders to protect and hide the Communist biological criminal fugitives. That the FBI nailed two of these fugitives, one at Yale and the other in the State Department in June, really sparked this symbiotic frenzy between the conspiracy nuts and racists.”

Shirley said, “In the eyes of these hatemongers, every Chinese person—or Asian they see—is a quiet agent of China, or disloyal to the United States, or responsible for the death or mayhem of an ancestor or relative

from the Communist Party SARS virus.—Do you know there have been hundreds of racist incidents targeting Asian Americans since those Yale and State Department arrests in June? Have we done a good enough job speaking out against these racists attacks?”

“Guilty,” Rene said.

“Guilty too,” Marisol added.

“Guilty three,” Carl said. “Guilty three times more because I have been a part of it.”

“And the new elephant in the room is—” Clint paused for effect. “Chinese American IT baron Sally Liu took ownership of the New England Patriots last year. I stay away from negative headlines when I can, but I couldn’t miss reports that Sally Liu has received countless death threats, some maybe even from the Foxborough Faithful.”

Marisol said with a little laugh, “Why do we have to face these elephants when the elephant owners are next on our schedule? God in His wisdom, but for our growth acceleration, just happens to give us the New England Patriots in 5 days.”

“Hey!” Tito said loudly to get everyone’s attention. “At least you face this turmoil with a team that went 2-15 last year and doesn’t even have a functioning Quarterback except a rookie draft pick from last year.”

“Tito, come over here,” Rene beckoned. Tito moved his chair closer. “You trying to get us killed?” Rene said without humor. “Every NFL game is a war. The term any given Sunday was not pulled out of the air. No team, not matter how good, is immune to a loss if they are not 110% prepared. Your kind of talk is what gets good teams upset, and I won’t hear of it again. Capiche?” Tito nodded soberly. “Now I’ve got to go join my field family for war prep and get ready for our trip to the Northeast tomorrow.”

Rene stood to leave, but then touched Tito’s face above the eye. “Where’d you get that ugly bruise?”

Tito said, “Some racist goomba threw a bottle at me when I was with my darling in Goodale Park. The jackass was so dumb he thought I was Asian. He yelled ‘Go home yellow Commie!’ He started running, but he was dealing with a former trackster. I tackled him from behind and cocked my fist to slam him good. Then I thought better of it. Thought about my job and rep. He was covering his face and whimpering like the wuss he is. Amazing how these bold and tough racists can fold when confronted with a stronger power of accountability.”

“Must be Marisol’s influence on you,” Clint deadpanned.

Marisol playfully flexed the bicep of her right arm. “My parents are immigrants from Nicaragua. Native blood. Makes me mistaken for Asian too, sometimes. No slurs yet, though.”

Rene gave Tito a long hug before leaving.

After Rene left, Clint said to a burst of laughter, “Y’all think I’m so young and stupid that I don’t know what happened in that pandemic? I got some old video on my phone you should see. Let’s go into Carl’s conference room and put it on the screen.”

Carl, Tito, Shirley and Marisol followed Clint into the large conference room with the large screen in the wall. Carl beckoned his receptionist Donna to join them, too. Clint, wearing a black Italian silk suit, played with the video and zeroed in on the short section he wanted to show.

“This was filmed right after that terrible pandemic,” Clint said.

A middle-aged White man with short brown hair stood between two flip charts. “As my UN colleagues suggested, I am standing between these two stands because they should never meet,” he said in a British accent. “To my left, an abusive Communist government whose neglect and thuggery unleashed a horror on the world. To my right are the Chinese people who were victimized by the hundreds of millions; had nothing to do with evil policies of their government. To my left is a small number of people whose world view of atheism and unfettered power terrorized their own people, and ultimately the rest of the world. To my right are innocent, countless millions of Chinese people of different faiths imprisoned by the small percentage of abusers because no one held the

abusers accountable. To my left are the small percentage of high-level criminals who gave their people unjustly a bad name. To my right are Chinese Americans, and Chinese-name-your-other-nationality, who have nothing to do with the abusers, but are mostly wonderful people, family people, model citizens and contributing positively to the social and economic order of many free nations.

“The chart on my left is a pebble in comparison to the mountain on the chart on my right. Don’t you ever comingle the pads on my left or right—lest you fall and keep falling into relevant and moral oblivion.”

Clint turned off the video.

“Send that to network TV, Clint,” Shirley said. “Alive and kicking like a tortured fox today.”

Marisol raised her hand as if she were a student in a class. “We are in a fallen and sinful world, so I question whether we will ever get rid of racism. Including my own and my own blind neglect.”

“Yes, Marisol. But that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t go to the max to fight with God’s help, what God hates and put this monster down as far as we can—including our own internal demons.”

“Yes sir,” Marisol said respectfully.

7.

The same day, Tuesday, right before dusk: Virtually the entire Columbus Rockers team was positioned in the front of Jerry Chan’s opulent three-story home in Hilliard. The police had cordoned off the block, but a few news reporters were let in. With vans and video cameras rolling, the media focused on the line of African-American players and coaches standing military-style, and each person carrying a baseball bat. Behind them were other team members and coaches of all races.

From left to right facing the reporters stood Blade Bower, Rod Hall, Willie Williams, Mark Herndon, Chester Mohammed, Augustus Eja

Jr., Tyler Kyochevia. In the middle, slightly forward, stood Clint Duffie.

One of the young blonde White reporters, mic in hand, approached Clint. “We are now speaking to Clint Duffie, General Manager of the Columbus Rockers, about an obvious act of solidarity with and support for their highest ranking Asian American Official, Jerry Chan, recently the victim of a racially-tinged act of vandalism. GM Duffie, other swirling reports begs this question: Part of the concern over Jerry Chan’s identity stems from the very sophisticated, high-tech removal of all fingerprints from both hands. Obviously, that would be to obscure his true identity. Can you shed some light on that?”

Clint replied, “Before Jerry legally immigrated to the United States, he was active in the Hong Kong Nationalist movement, and often had to go underground, and change his identity to prevent what could be horrible reprisals from the Communists.” Clint pointed his finger at the young reporter. “And if you would more closely check your sources of this so-called swirling information, you would know that to be true, and not ask me a question like that.”

The reporter, taken back a little, pursued with a nervous laugh. “The front row of your protest is all African American. Is there some symbolic reason for that?”

Clint replied, “Let the world see a deep sining of the stereotype that Black people don’t care for Asian Americans. We don’t socialize with them; we don’t date them; we ignore their issues, so they say. Racism wins when races are divided. Togetherness means all races, including Whites, including colleagues who have joined us today. Right here you see no division; no stereotypes, so broadcast to the world that reality, young man. To those White Nationalists out there, we are all just inferior animals. Well, these animals are linked together with civilized members of your race, and showing love, integrity, power, a just determination, and with our metaphorical bazookas loaded to blow away their hate, their evil, their violence.”

“Look up there, on the roof!” The young reporter exclaimed. “There’s Jerry Yang with his wife Edith and his daughter Queenie. You can see

them waving at us with one hand, and waving an American flag with the other hand—whoops, I am sorry, I meant Jerry Chan.”

Embarrassed, the reporter moved down to the right. He stopped in front of Augustus Eja, who wore a red jump suit and with his loose dreadlocks flowing over his shoulders.

“Okay, we have the Columbus Rockers’ new phenom, Augustus Eja. Can you tell us why you are here and what you want to accomplish?”

“Yo. Look at my hands.” Eja waved his bat a little.

Backup QB Ron Thibodeaux joined the line next to Blade. Next came QB Vic Rendon, with the bushy black hair on top but close shaved sides. Rendon hugged Ron’s shoulder. On the other side, receiver Mark Hunston joined the line, his sea of face freckles casting him as an adolescent.

Clint waved his hand. “Y’all come up now.” That included Coach Rene Delepenso, who yielded in the back to other team members.

8.

The next day, Wednesday, midday, a gloomy cloudiness hung over the City of Columbus. There were very few people out in the streets of Downtown, a symbolic reminder of a tragic turn in a news story being followed by millions.

A low-keyed female voice spoke behind the camera. “Medical officials have confirmed that Columbus Rockers Chief Strategy Officer Jerry Chan has passed away late last night from a heart attack. Medical officials say they are certain that this was from natural causes, and no foul play was involved. The Columbus Rockers were providing round the clock security to the Chan family. Jerry’s wife Edith, understandably shaken by this tragic death, attributed her husband’s death to overwhelming stress from the drumbeat of character assassination and attacks, culminating in this week’s vandalism. Rockers Owner Carl Bedrosian called Mr. Chan’s death a time-delayed murder, with the vandals and hate mongers having blood on their hands.”

9.

On Friday morning, a megachurch was nearly full for the celebration of passing for Jerry Chan. An elderly White Pastor called attention to a giant video screen behind the pulpit. He announced, “The next tribute to our beloved Jerry Chan comes live streamed from Massachusetts: Columbus Rockers Head Coach Rene Delepenso.”

Rene’s head appeared quite large on the screen, and several Rockers players stood behind him, displaying flowers; a facsimile of other flowers that has already been sent.

Rene said to the congregation, “I am honored, blessed and humbled to give this tribute to Jerry Chan, one of the Columbus Rockers’ most wonderful and impactful leaders. As I address your church in Gahanna Ohio, I did research and found that Gahanna is a Native American word. Also, if you change just one vowel in the word Gahanna, it translates to hell. That is an apt description of the evil that Jerry and his family had to endure for several weeks, with false accusations, hate, racism, and an evil that has nothing to do with our accidental sin pattern. It is an evil that is deliberate, malicious, harmful, and deserving of the strongest condemnation and justice. We acknowledge this terrible reality, but quickly move past it, to the original Native word that has brought about blessings for the tens of thousands of people living in Gahanna. I would respectfully ask any current Native leaders if we can add just one more word to the town’s name as inspiration from Jerry Chan: Hosanna. Gahanna Hosanna has a nice ring to it. Hosanna translates into the word save—not just any save, but a supernatural save, by the perfect God-man Jesus Christ, who died for our sins and reconciled us to God for those who place their trust in Him—the most important decision we can ever make in our lives, not only for our transformation and joy in this world, but a perfect after-life when we die. Jerry embodies the name Hosanna, both in a spiritual sense, the way he brought God closer to countless people, but also in a physical sense, the way he served, helped in time of need, and loved the Rockers family and people in the Columbus Metro area. Jerry, we love you and will miss you always.

“Romans 12, v. 10 was Jerry. It reads, ‘Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves.’ That is the polar opposite of the racist slanderers. Last year African American Martin Nelson was killed by a White police officer in Missouri. Afterwards, the city released a statement saying that Martin resisted arrest and was stopped under suspicion of theft. Thank God there were both video recordings and witnesses that disproved the police’s allegations. It is one thing to slander people who are alive. It is a higher evil to slander a dead person—they can’t answer their accusers! I will not stand here and let Jerry Chan become another Martin Nelson. The DNA of Jerry, with Edith’s consent, will be posted on the Rockers Website, along with the different DNA code of that Communist bio-terrorist Yang. Anyone who continues malicious accusations against our deceased brother Jerry—or in other ways attacks the Asian American community in the USA--will not only have to deal with me, but the entire Rockers organization. Our hearts and prayers go to Edith and Queenie, and if it is too painful to return to their current home, two Rockers Vice Presidents, Marisol Lezcano and Shirley Marcus have offered their homes to Edith and Queenie, where they will get a strong support network.”

10.

Marisol Lezcano drove her modest, silver bug of a car into a parking spot in an underground garage. The lot was half full and semi-dark. Marisol stepped outside with cell phone in hand. “Hi, Carl. I am at the Worthington satellite location to meet with a very distraught employee in our Sponsor Relations section. Wants to meet with me privately about some ethics issue, as she said in her voice mail today.”

“You do move fast, Mari.”

“If it’s something I can resolve before the Sunday game and avoid any further distractions, I’ll do it. I’m walking in blind, so I need your prayers.” Marisol gave a laugh, “Catholic prayers are fine.”

“You get my prayers of all denominations.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Two men approached from the stairwell. Jeans, leather jackets, gloves—and black cloth masks completely covering their heads except for eye slits.

They walked directly toward Marisol. She froze like a deer in the headlights, then played with her phone as if to ignore them—then a glance from the corners of her eyes and a quick prayer that they would turn right or left.

Both men got right up in her face. “Check my right hand, salsa babe.” Some device inside the mask made him sound like Mickey Mouse. The speaking man lifted his hand to reveal a .357 magnum pistol.

Marisol raised her hands immediately clutching the cell phone. “Purse is in the car. Please don’t hurt me.”

The first man grabbed her cell phone and hurled it about 50 feet. “A weapon of mass destruction by you people against real Americans.”

The second man had two spray cans and was spraying on Marisol’s car. It was a yellow circle with a brown dot inside. “I’ll give you a nickel, the entire worth of your mud race, if can tell me what that means,” the second man said, his voice identical Mickey Mouse.

“No,” Marisol murmured.

“The yellow circle is the Commie chinks strangling America. The brown dot represents the brown people enabling them and America’s demise.”

The first man took his gun and aimed it at the car. Marisol shriveled back. The second man came within inches of Marisol’s face. “You will notice that it’s a bulls-eye. Bang! Everywhere you go, Chiquita Marisol, just remember, we are in your streets, in your office, in your home, in your head. Sweet dreams.”

They started to run away, then the first man turned and added, “The Columbus Rockers make a great show of force to protect Jerry Chan. Yet they cannot even protect their women. Huh!” And they quickly disappeared into the stairwell.

The first thing Marisol did was to jog over and retrieve her cell phone. It was cracked in the back, but the front was undamaged. Walking back to their car, she could not stop trembling.

“First John Four, there is no fear in love. God’s promise. I just wish I would feel that promise now. God help me.” She dialed a number on her phone, her fingers shaking.

“Let me guess. Your magic carpet hero has finally come, and you want me to talk you out of him. No way.” It was Shirley.

“Shirley, I’m at the Worthington office and was just subject to a racist attack. Two men, and they threatened violence.”

“I’m on my way, and I’ll call it in!”

“No, no, it’s over. I’m okay. Urgent meeting.”

“Well, join the club. I just had swastikas spayed on my house. You’ve heard about a woman scorned, but how about double vengeance from a woman and a Jewish person scorned! Tito set up the same surveillance cameras at both the Worthington office garage and my house. At the least we will find out if it is the same scumbags hitting up you and me. We may get more info on these bad guys.”

“Thank you as always, Shirley.”

“Take a deep breath and count to ten, Marisol,” Shirley counseled.

“More precisely, count to fourteen and three quarters.”

Marisol tried to laugh.

A few minutes later, Marisol took a seat at the wooden desk in a small office; the designated meeting place with the frantic employee. Marisol checked her brown pants suit for any signs of creases or trauma, as she wanted to be presentable for this meeting.

Soon after there was a knock on the door. In stepped a young, thin White woman with green sweater and tight blue skirt a few inches

above her knees. “I’m Laura Sterling, the person who called you.” She took a seat opposite Marisol’s desk. Straight dirty blonde hair stretched down her back; bangs covered her eyebrows. In her tentative voice, she continued, “I am so sorry for my tone and for bothering you with this. I’m sure you are very busy, Vice President Lezcano.”

Marisol stood up and offered her hand. “Let’s go sit at the table. Please call me Marisol,” she said as they sat together. No that’s too formal. Call me Mari.”

Marisol was still trembling and practiced deep breathing.

“Are you okay? Pardon me, but you don’t look well—uh, Mari.”

“I am grateful your concern, which already says much positive about you, Laura. We are all human and have bad days.” Marisol smiled, “I just had one, but we are here to talk about your bad day. I am very interested in hearing about it.”

“It’s the big one.”

“The big one?”

“You know, the health conglomerate. I was just given that sponsor as an assignment. I had a bad experience with one of the executives in a PR meeting. My boss, Carol, I called her, but she wasn’t around. I was so upset, I just needed to talk to someone! I’m sorry!” Tears filled Laura’s eyes.

Marisol took card out of her purse and handed it to Laura. “My door is open to future communications. Please don’t hesitate. This is family, not hierarchy. Please tell me what happened.”

“Buddy Davis, a Vice President, insisted on a very private location. We started talking about the sponsorship terms, very cordial—but then he became very aggressive. He made sexual comments and suggested vile stuff we do right there! Of course, I refused. He kept insisting, and I kept saying no. The last thing he said to me is that there are no witnesses, and that he works at a different level from me—and that he is going to call his good friend Rockets Owner Bedrosian and demand that

I be fired—for using foul language and playing the feminist card, whatever that means. It’s all a lie! All I said was no, no, no!” More tears flowed down Laura’s cheeks. “I can’t lose this job, Mari. My Mom has MS, and I am the only person supporting her.”

Marisol moved closer and gently patted Laura’s shoulder. Nothing was said for about two minutes, until Laura added, “This is what I was wearing. Is this a dress code issue? I guess I could have worn something more—modest.”

“Did you flash anything at him?”

“No!” Laura said with indignance.

“Then never let anyone body shame you. And please, don’t body shame yourself.” Marisol added, “I can’t promise how this will end. But I promise pursuit of the truth and justice—and to be a sympathetic ear for you.”

11.

11:00 AM precisely on Saturday morning: Buddy Davis sat behind his opulent desk. Middle aged, he had wavy blonde hair and a tan face, almost red. His colorful golf shirt was covered with gold from his neck. A giant window behind his desk overlooked the Columbus skyline from above. Buddy checked his digital watch in anticipation.

Finally, a woman’s voice sounded over the intercom. “Mr. Davis, Marisol Lezcano from the Columbus Rockers is here.”

“Send her in.”

In sauntered Marisol. She wore a blue dress cut about three inches above the knees and showed some neck jewelry. She had applied some makeup to her face including pink lipstick and frizzed up her unpinned hair a little. Buddy rose to shake Marisol’s hand. Marisol looked around for a seat and found a wooden chair about ten feet in front of Buddy’s desk. She sat down, turned her body a little and crossed her legs.

“Thank you, Mr. Davis for agreeing to meet with me on such short notice. Your secretary was very accommodating.”

“Wait, I am confused, Ms. Lezcano,” Buddy said in an elevated tenor voice. “Of course, we are having this meeting. I called Carl last night.”

“What are you anticipating from this meeting?” Marisol asked.

“I was assuming that Carl sent you here to follow up on our request about Ms. Sterling. Didn’t you speak to Carl?”

“Not since last night. I only spoke to Laura. What did Carl tell you?”

“That he would take care of it.”

“Mr. Davis, this may be a very short meeting. I’m not here to convey information. I am here to get information.”

Several minutes later, the Vietnamese American secretary in the outer room paged Buddy in response to the loud male voice coming from his office. “Are you alright, sir?”

Inside, Buddy responded, “Sorry, Thao. I just get animated when I think of that Sterling twit coming in with her attitude, making references to corporate fat cats, and getting in my face, using the F-Word. Are we gonna let her get away it, and disrupt the wonderful synergy that Allied has forged with the Rockers since its exception? Do you understand what is at stake here, Ms. Lezcano? How many people you think would get hurt, including people on gurneys, if some rebellious young militant can disrupt the great partnership between Allied and the Rockers.”

“Mr. Davis. Honestly, are you putting on a show for me?”

“What? What kind of question is that?” Buddy yelled.

“It has happened before with other people I’ve interviewed. That’s why I ask the question, sir.”

“You are in danger of encroaching into Ms. Sterling’s territory, Ms. Lezcano.”

“Thank you for warning me. Please let me ask one important question: What exactly did you do to make Ms. Sterling to suddenly unleash vulgar language at you? She just did it out of the blue?”

“What? Why do crazy people do crazy things? Ask her!”

Marisol quietly smiled. “I have all the information I need, and please forgive me for getting so direct. I understand everything you are saying, and I promise that Carl and I will talk, and we will get back to you with a resolution soon. Okay? Peace?” She waved two fingers.

“Yeah, sure. Sorry I got so—uh, emotional.”

“We share common bonds of humanity. I’m sure we can work together.”

“Thank you—and as nice and attractive as you are, I am surprised someone has not swept you away by now. Just being nice. And honest.”

“Oh, but I am taken, Mr. Davis.” Marisol held up the third finger of her left hand. There was a ring with a cross on it. Marisol discreetly made a checkmark on her notepad.

“That really is a shame,” Buddy added. Marisol added a second checkmark. “Oh, and the good news is, and this is totally legal: Nothing would stop us from giving nice bonuses to Rocker employees for enhancing the partnership. It is called dual financial incentives for excellence. I know nothing about your personal life, Ms. Lezcano. But just maybe there are expenses you are struggling with, or family members in need?”

Marisol etched in 3 x’s on her pad, and then drew a line through them. Tic Tac Toe.

12.

The screen had a grainy image of a football field. Then came a deep male voice: “And now the highlights from the Columbus Rockers game against the New England Patriots. As called by the Rockers rippers Phil Kenny and Barbara Rennie.”

Highlight #1 (right to left) PHIL: Patriots threatening on the Rockers’ 37. Caldwell back to pass, pressure, he’s got Dean on a crossing pattern, uh-oh he’s loose on the sideline, and he just juked Herndon. It’s up to our safety, and Dean is down, but the football hit the pylon. That’s a Patriot’s touchdown. 6-0, pending the point. **BARBARA:** Lewis over-reacted to the inside action, and let Dean get away on the sideline. I can read Blade’s angry lips: Hold your ground!

Highlight #2 (left to right) PHIL: Rockers driving, Patriots 17, and we need to tie this baby up. Rendon is in a groove; 5 out his last 5. He drops back, zings one into Willie at the 5, it’s batted up—and oh no, intercepted by Patriots CB Bailey, and he’s down at the 7. Rendon was a fraction too late. And he still looks wobbly out there. **BARBARA:** Coach Rene promised Vic would play. Didn’t promise he’d be 100 percent.

Highlight #3 (right to left) PHIL: Rendon back, sprints to his left, and heaves it across his body, as Tyler has broken free. He’s got it! Touchdown Rockers! Bang, Boom, Bong! 55 yard bomb, Rendon to Kyochevia, after that previous tripping penalty. **BARBARA:** That followed Rendon’s clutch throw to Hunston on third and 13. Now a morgue mentality among the previously fired up New England crowd.

Highlight #4 (left to right) PHIL: Blitz on Caldwell, he escapes it, up the middle now he has an alley to the right—the Rockers 40, 30, 20, finally tackled by Brown at the 18. This rookie Quarterback, with a 40 percent completion rate, just burned the Rockers D for 40 yards with his legs. **BARBARA:** Lewis bit on a QB pump fake even when Caldwell was 5 yards past scrimmage. Lewis gets his flank scorched one more time, and Rene may sit his butt down.

Highlight #5 (left to right) PHIL: This will be about a 42 yard field goal attempt after the sack. Smith missed 2 last week against the Eagles—which the Patriots lost 27-0. The kick is up—and good. 10-7 Pats.

Highlight #6 (left to right) PHIL: Caldwell back in the pocket, heaves it long to Marsten—and he’s got it at the Rockers 16. Augustus Eja brought him down. And fans, you can frame that video, because you won’t see it very often. Eja being torched for a 48 yard bomb—especially by a rookie QB. **BARBARA:** Eja was just a step off his game there, but Caldwell’s pass was masterful. The Rockers’ D needs to step up here; we don’t wanna go down 2 scores on the road.

Highlight #7 (left to right) PHIL: This is a chip shot, 30 yards. And it’s good. 13-7 Patriots.

Highlight #8 (left to right) PHIL: Third and 4, Pats on the Rockers’ 43. This is a big moment for the defense, right before halftime—Caldwell’s going deep, he heaves it in the right corner, Marston and Eja—Marston got a hand on it, but AEJ took it away! Eja is up, holding the ball over his head. His third interception in his young NFL career. Maybe a momentum lift for the second half. **BARBARA:** This rookie Quarterback is fearless, I’ll say that, going after our best. Eja made up for the bomb he gave up earlier, costing us 3.

Highlight #9 (left to right) PHIL: The Rockers have less than a Quarter to avoid a loss to one of the worst teams in the NFL. Okay, Rendon back, lots of pressure—screen to Kyochevia, and he’s got a convoy and lots of green! 50, 40, 30, slips a tackle, 20, 10, down at the 8! **BARBARA:** Coordinator Rodney had that play timed right, as the Pats D was pinning back their ears on Rendon the entire half.

Highlight #10 (left to right) PHIL: Second and goal at the 18 after the holding penalty. We need 7 somehow, not 3. Rendon back, pressure, hit hard, gets it off, back of the endzone—Willie’s got it! Williams a tap dance just inside the line! Touchdown Rockers! Bang, Boom, Bong! Extra point away from the lead! **BARBARA:** Rendon hung in there knowing he would get creamed. That may be the best pass he’s thrown as a Rocker.

Highlight #11 (left to right) PHIL: Kyochevia takes it on a counter, breaks through a seam—at the 40, 50, down the sideline, 40, 30, out of bounds at the 24. Tyler’s approaching 200 yards total offense, and maybe there’s a friendly rivalry between he and his best friend Eja, as to who is having the greatest star impact this season. **BARBARA:**

Well, Augustus Eja has shown us the obvious: He is human, capable of mistakes, like anyone.

Highlight #12 (left to right) PHIL: The cascade of boos continues, after Willie has been flagged for his second consecutive offensive pass interference penalty. How often do you see that? After the Montez drop, it is fourth and a ton. This will be a 49 yard attempt by Hooker, right about at his limit—here’s the snap, it’s on target, and—good! Pow! Rockers up 17-13! **BARBARA:** That is huge; the Rockers defense had the Pats in lockdown mode all half, and now the young Quarterback needs a touchdown.

Highlight #13 (right to left) PHIL: Too much time for the Pats to gamble on fourth and 6. Lucas to punt, and Eja’s got it at the 36, his number—and he found a seam! Got a block, now cuts to the left, 40, 30, could be, no, they got him at the 21. **BARBARA (laughing)** Maybe he heard your comment about the friendly rivalry with Tyler.

Highlight #14 (left to right) PHIL: This should be automatic for Hooker, 24 yards. It’s up and good. 20-13, Rockers. **BARBARA:** A touchdown would have been great to put this puppy away. But we’ll take the 3.

Highlight #15 (left to right) PHIL: Kyochevia on a jet sweep—to the 30, he spins, and lost the ball! Pats LB Reynolds has it at the Rockers’ 27. Oh my. You won’t see that very often, Tyler fast and loose with the pigskin.

Highlight #16 (right to left) PHIL: With fourth and 18, and still almost 4 minutes to go, Pats Coach Yost has decided to take the 3, and bet on getting the ball back. Here is the kick: Good. 20-16 Rockers. **BARBARA:** What a tribute to Rene and Blade, the way these young Rocker defensive studs have shut down the Patriots offense in the second half!

Final Highlight (right to left) PHIL: There is a lot of fingernail chewing in Columbus. That partially blocked punt could cost the Rockers the football game. I mean, Mays virtually whiffed on the rusher. Third and 5, Patriots, from the Rockers’ 28. A minute left; plenty of time for Patriots to win the game—okay, Caldwell back, and he’s going for the

end zone, back shoulder to Marston—but Eja’s having none of it! AEJ just picked the receiver’s pocket like a Times Square mugger! Interception, Eja again! He tapped his feet clearly in bounds and took a knee. This one is over! The spaces between seats in Gillette Stadium are up escalators, as Augustus Eja Junior has just slammed the door on the New England Patriots! BARBARA: Eja’s a monster rover, with reaction skill I’ve never seen. Yost gambled that Eja would overplay his receiver, and that Marston, their best pass catcher, could undercut him for the reception. Not a bad idea--but they were dealing with our man with unprecedented instincts. If Eja keeps this up, he’ll make the great Neon Deion look like a benchwarmer by comparison.”

Coach Rene Delepenso shut off the video. “Pay no attention to the exuberance of the announcers. We sucked!” Rene addressed the entire Columbus Rockers football team; it was Monday. “Starting with me, because there were adjustments I should have made. We’ll spend three hours this afternoon going over videos of our little mistakes yesterday—and the big ones. What is our motto? We don’t repeat mistakes, we learn from them. One mistake, and we’re human. The same mistake twice, and we’re in transition. The third time, and we’re a dog. That applies to me as well, because if I screw up in the same way three times, I’m out in the street looking for a job.

“Now, every one of you, look at me: I betcha you were looking up in that bullet proof Skybox at that nice Chinese-American grandmother owner of the Pats, getting abusive communications, you’re thinking, Jerry Chan! The three Asian players on the Pats getting nasty Twitter messages. And we stand in solidarity with you! Feel your pain, Pats! How can we even think of coming up here and beating down your poor football team! Of course, that was not in the front of your mind. But maybe subconsciously, deep down inside.

“I want all the offensive players on one side, and all the defensive players on the other. Go ahead, spread out. And here’s the gap between you, like Moses dividing the waters. On the one side is life. It comes at us. We live it and help each other as a family. On the other side is football. That is business. There is lots of support from the Rockers organization for people who can’t help letting one side intrude on the other. But when we are in a football mode, we are in football mode. We are locked in. Blade, I want you to take a picture of us right

now—and we'll post it everywhere, as a reminder that the football game that was played yesterday will never be in evidence again in Columbus Ohio, as long as I am Coach.

“Now the good news: I have never been around so many young men with such character. When you are having a bad day—and know you are having a bad day, and still get the job done--translates into a positive adjective that I cannot even describe. Outside of blood family, you are my family for life, whether or not you remain a Rocker. I love each of you, and you inspire me. With all the crap swirling around on and off the football field, there was a will, a spirit in you that said, losing is not an option.

“As a reward, I am treating all of you to a nice dinner tonight at my expense. We'll throw in some fun games—including a \$5,000 performance bonus for the player who can best analyze the tapes and describe our best path for overcoming those mistakes. Also, Tyler Kyochevia asked me to announce that he is organizing a Bible study today at 5:30. It is totally voluntary; it's not my call; and I am not keeping track of who attends.

“Now, before important business today, just a reminder: The Super Bowl Champion New York Jets are coming to Columbus this Sunday. That's W-W-Willie and the Jets. Led, of course, by Willie Namath and his 43 touchdown passes last year and 8 more in 2 games this year. No, Willie Namath is not related to the great Joe Willie Namath, although the younger one was named after the older. Obviously, it takes a Namath for the Jets to win a super bowl--several decades apart. We are going to make a statement: they will know that they came to Columbus Ohio, and their season will not be the same after they play us.

“Here are some quotes out of New York recently. Let them sink in as you get laser focused in the practices. Quote one: Tyler Kyochevia will feel like he's running in mud when facing our defense, and at the end of the game he will be begging for mud. Quote two: When Vic Rendon becomes a free agent, he may sign with the Jets, and we'll put him on our practice squad. Quote three: Augustus Eja had more fun in college football the last two games. Now he will experience the real NFL, and his head on a swivel will miss the dancing in the end zone.”

Rene looked into the eyes of his players. “There’s fire there? There better be. See you upstairs.”

After Rene left, Tyler beckoned some of the players to the video screen. Laughing, he showed a still shot of a thick-haired female African American reporter in the Rockers’ locker room after the previous game.

Tyler laughed, “Come on y’all, remember her name?”

“Esther Brown. Unforgettable,” Eja replied.

Tyler continued. “Yes, Esther Brown, Harvard educated reporter showing off some Harvard-esque. When she interviewed Augustus, her question was very long. I’ll give \$20 to the guy who answers, how many words did she use?”

“At least 50,” Willie Williams answered.

“Close enough, my man.” Tyler tossed Willie a \$20.

Laughing, Tyler said, “And who can name some of the verbs she used?”

“Analyze, decipher, pontificate,” Thibodeaux said, pointing to his head.

“And you missed one,” Tyler said. “Extrapolate.”

“Yeah, yeah,” came nodding laughter from the crowd.

“Well, extrapolate this, Esther Brown.” Tyler ran the video. “This is Augustus, right after he heard the question. See him tilting his head a little? Maybe pondering his own creative English?” Playful towels were tossed in Eja’s direction.

“And now our man is standing up. Pondering some more Ivy Tower jargon maybe?” Tyler narrated.

Eja tilted his head one more time, then said, “Two and oh.” He turned and walked out. The room broke out in loud laughter.

13.

All the Rockers were dressed in suits in this expansive fancy restaurant, as Rene Delepenso's dinner party was winding down. Now was gaming extra time, including boards, cards and videos.

The Dreadlocks Brothers were locked in a game of chess at one table, when Augustus Eja smugly moved his rook, "Checkmate, Ty!"

Vic Rendon and a short White man cruised up to their table. The White man was bald in front with flowing gray hair in the back, and the press pass pinned to his jacket read, Leo Starr.

**"Vic, you want a piece of this?" Augustus challenged playfully.
"Twenty moves, max."**

"I am about to end your winning streak, Augie."

"Wait, wait," Starr blurted out. "Sudden superstardom gives us the license for several names. Augie? I love it. Noted."

Eja stood immediately with jabbing finger. "You are never to call me Augie. That is family only. And you're not it."

Eja's voice was loud enough that the other tables stirred a little. Rendon tried a little levity in passing, "If we play a team called the Montana Media, we can count on you for at least 5 INTs."

Tyler's hand was stretched in a calming gesture toward Starr, with his other hand planted firmly against Eja's chest.

Eja pushed his hand away. "I'm not doing nothing. You think I'm gonna hit him?"

"Sit down, Bro." Tyler waved the rest back. "Are you alright, Augie?"

"I am fine." Then Augustus called loudly, "Hey Leo! Look, I'm sorry. I was out of line."

"I'm worried about you, man," Tyler said. "You always had this man of few words aura. But I've seen a change. Last year with the Buckeyes

there was a raucous joy about you when you made a big play. Now—” Tyler made a sulking face.

“My Mom is dying, 200 miles away. That is tough.”

Tyler placed his arm around Augustus’s shoulder. “You can’t bear family grief alone. I never see you at our Bible studies or at church.”

“I believe, Ty. I just practice my faith alone, okay?”

“God works through people—and I think I know why you are quiet and isolated a lot, though you never told me. When your father passed in April, that’s when I noticed the change. I let you grieve, but as your best friend, after a while I’ve got to call it out.”

“He meant everything to me, man. He taught me values, faith, football, everything I am. Life isn’t life without him.”

“It has occurred to me why you ditch church,” Tyler said. “That was always a special time because your father was always with you, even at OSU. He was an extension of God. Now church is just a reminder of the pain from that loss. Am I close?”

A single tear ran from Eja’s right eye. “Man, you not only have my soul, but my mind. Bingo! With my sister in Japan, you are the closest functioning family I have. I truly appreciate it Ty.”

“You just broke your record for the most number of words in one sitting,” Tyler said, and they both laughed. “Seriously, if you are still processing your Dad’s death alone, what will happen when your Mom passes? Have you considered that?”

“I mean, yeah! My father’s death was a shocker, a heart attack. I’ve had plenty of time to brace myself for Mama’s passing that I think will be peaceful.”

“Not good enough Augie. Come back with me tonight, and we’ll have some extended prayer time. And I don’t mean just five minutes.”

“Come on, man, it’s late.”

“Bro, you keep telling me you don’t sleep much yet you have all this energy. Just shut up.” Tyler pushed Augustus’s shoulder and they both laughed.

14.

Tuesday afternoon: Carl, Cliff, Marisol, and Shirley took their usual seats at the roundtable in Carl Bedrosian’s office. Rene was absent, preparing for the game. Carl’s open white jacket and relaxed posture belied the tense look on his face.

“I have a weather question,” Carl said. “It is mainly for Marisol, since you are a passionate storm watcher. Can a tsunami hit Columbus?”

Ah—Maybe a derecho or earthquake off of Lake Erie? Oh, Noah!” She beamed. “Is that a trick question, sir?”

“My trick answer is—I am already under water. The off-field challenges I face as Rockers owner will prompt a meeting with the entire management team, and also an open discussion with Rocker employees and players of all races. But first I wanted to get some close discussion with the people--you all, Rene later--that I am closest to in Rockerstown. I can relate to racial insensitivity, selfishness, cultural gaffes, etc., because I am just as guilty as anyone. What makes us decent, respectful human beings, is we acknowledge it and humbly ask questions with an ear toward compassion and acceptance of people who are different. What I can’t understand is people waking up, looking in the mirror, and saying, today my calling is to hate people who are different and try to hurt them. And somehow proudly living with themselves! It boggles my mind. What I will never accept is people in the Rockers family being threatened by racist and anti-semitic terrorists. My determination is tenfold after the tragedy last night and this morning, again impacting the Rockers organization.”

“Sorry, uh, what tragedy?” Marisol said, palms in the air. “I’ve been attending to a sick niece.”

“We’ll get to that in a minute,” Carl said. “First I want to hear the concerns of Marisol and Shirley, because you have been directly impacted.”

Marisol stroked the cross covering her flowery dress. “Thank you for Tito’s security officers. I am also grateful for Ephesians Chapter 6, where God reminds us not to struggle against flesh and blood, but against spiritual authorities in the dark world. That helps me overcome thoughts of vengeance and makes it easier to address my fears. Other than that, racial justice is only possible when White leaders stand boldly with minorities and say, no! As you are doing now. I deeply appreciate it, sir.”

“With no disrespect to Marisol,” Shirley said, “Tito can take his dogs home—nice dogs, I mean, before Garfunkel bites them. No one has ever asked why I wear loose sweaters and shirts over my pants, and I’ve never said a word, until now.” Shirley stood and lifted her shirt tail. Quite visible was a holster carrying an automatic pistol. “Locked, loaded and legal. Tell Tito I will take care of myself.”

“Shirley, it’s great you are doing your part. Still, I will do my part,” Carl said. “Now, let’s get visual from last night and today.”

Carl opened up a large laptop and displayed an array of video shots. “Here we see spontaneous non-violent protests. And a limited number of violent incidents. This was in Indianapolis, not terribly far from us. Police conducted a drug raid, and there was resistance. Melvin Jones, an innocent bystander, an IUPUI grad student, was just passing by when all came down. A police officer was wounded, two drug dealers were killed, two more arrested, and Melvin Jones was shot dead. Some idiot in the Indianapolis Police Department released a statement saying that Melvin was also resisting. Video totally disproved that. He had absolutely no connection with the druggies. From what we’ve learned over the past few years, the peaceful protesters largely outnumbered the violent ones. At minimum, there will be grand jury involvement.”

Marisol looked ashen. “There was a Melvin Jones who worked in my section as a communications intern right up until July. He did great work for us and taught me a few tricks. Nicest guy, a funny jokester, and he even got me to join him to deliver groceries to disabled seniors.”

Marisol pointed her index finger at Bedrosian. “Carl, don’t you dare.”

“I’m so sorry, Marisol. That is our Melvin.”

Marisol covered her face. “Dios mio, por favor no,” she mumbled. Tears streamed down her cheeks. “Excuse me.” She ran out.

“Really serious. She even left her brownies,” Shirley quipped. “I’ll console her later.”

There was a knock on the door, and Donna peak in. “Tito Guevara, sir.” Tito stepped in displaying a blue monogrammed security shirt. Clint offered him a seat in Marisol’s chair.

“I did an analysis of the camera shots at Shirley’s house and in Worthington. It’s the same two knuckleheads.” Tito got up to leave, but Clint stopped him.

“You need to hear this too, Tito,” Clint continued. “Shirley, do you want to take the honors?” Shirley extended her arm to Clint Duffie. “This was Shirley’s idea, prompted by those swastikas on her house. What’s our name, Shirley?”

“CSIA.”

“Clint and Shirley Investigative Agency. Shirley and I spent several hours online, bought in a couple IT geeks, to try to find out if there is a main group behind all this anti-Asian conspiracy stuff. A common denominator is a group called the VAR: Vanguard for an Aryan America. All over the place, like rats. Shirley and I focused on the violent acts in Indianapolis and found this interesting tidbit. Did the name Henry Busch surface on your videos, Carl?”

“Don’t recognize it, Clint.”

“The profile on the civil violence was not surprising: There were some community folk, but mostly anarchists and White Nationalists spearheaded the violence. The VAR was up to their neck in the destruction. The police arrested one of the leaders: Henry Busch. According to the police, Busch helped coordinate the vandalism and

fires so America could blame the Black community and start a race war. There is also evidence on Busch's phone, connecting to the dark Net, that the VAR is planning a major terrorist attack and frame the African American community—at a football game. Busch is not talking.”

Donna appeared at the door again. Her appearance was frantic. “Did you hear the news? Augustus Eja's mother just died.”

15.

Augustus Eja cruised down Highway 33 in his Porsche, rural Ohio enveloping him. For the family occasion, Eja wore a brown leather jacket over a print shirt, slightly open for a silver star medallion. Riding shotgun with him was a young, casually dress Chinese woman with straight back hair, steel rimmed glasses. Her face and body were thin, and she was tall.

Eja lifted his cell phone. “Hey Bro. Heading down to Mama's, the passing ceremony tomorrow. I told Coach Rene I'd be back tomorrow night. I took Juna Tan, that whiz kid with numbers Chinese intern out of OSU. She's hardly been away from Columbus so I'm giving her a piece of Americana—knock it off, Ty, Mama's house has an extra bedroom for her. Don't be starting no rumors.” He looked at Juna. “Is Juna your Chinese name?”

Juna smiled. “I like it. My English teacher gave it to me.” Her Chinese dialect was mild.

“Ty, I call her Shanghai Juna. Juna, Tyler says hello. Summa Come'a Louder out of THE Ohio State University.” Augustus disconnected and turned the car radio volume up; uplifting music.

“They are singing about Jesus, right?” Juna said. “The Jesus songs I hear mostly have a different style of music.”

“This is Black Gospel. I listen to a mixture of Christian music—contemporary, rock, southern, Gospel, out of respect for my Mama. That was the mix of music she used to listen to. And I'm getting into all of it again, now that I am more regenerated and peaceful—thanks to my Bro Tyler.”

“I always wanted to visit a Christian group. But studies and the internship have made it hard.”

“Juna, you’re welcome anytime. I can get you plugged in.”

“The President of our Chinese Student Association told us to never talk about politics in America,” Juna said. “But I don’t hesitate to say that it was good that the real leaders of China got rid of those crazy leaders that caused all that mayhem. I hope they catch the fugitives. Will make our nations’ bonds stronger.”

“Hey, this is America,” Augustus said. “We are free and equal. And visitors are welcome—hey, don’t look at me like I’m something special. Only three years out of high school, three years of college, and now. Got a lot to learn.”

“Did you graduate?”

“No, not yet. The NFL short-circuited that. My Dad right before he died told me, don’t look at the money. So the first thing I did after last spring’s football draft was to register for 2 summer courses. Now I have just five credits left—at THE Ohio State University.”

Juna lightly touched Eja’s hand. “What is that fancy ring?”

“In American football, when a college wins a national championship, the players get these rings.”

“I don’t follow American football—but OSU just won it?”

“No, it happened my second year. Last year in the playoffs the other team scored at the end to beat us—although it was questionable because two of our players were clipped on the play.”

Juna gasped, “Two of your players were killed?”

Augustus laughed. “No! You have been reading Mafia novels in China? Clipping means the players were knocked down in the back.”

Later, Juna asked, “What was it like growing up in West Virginia, Mr. Eja? It is similar in China, a shocking difference between the big cities and the small agricultural towns.”

“I didn’t grow up in West Virginia,” Augustus answered. “After my father died, Mom found it hard to live in the Columbus house, so she moved in with Uncle Vaughn, who while retired was better equipped to take care of Mama’s failing health. I sent money down there, but I just wished I could have been with her the last few weeks. Man!”

“I am so sorry, Mr. Eja. Where did you grow up?”

A place northeast of here called Youngstown, Ohio. A nice success story; an industrial wasteland found some economic revival from high tech, white collar companies—by the way, Juna. You are now family so you can call me Augie.”

The sun had dropped below the horizon as the Porsche drove into the small West Virginia town where Beatrice Thomas Eja had just passed. They stopped at a convenience store. The streets were quiet except for an occasional pickup truck.

“Uncle Vaughn texted me to pick up some drinks. Come inside, Juna, and get a further feel for rural small-town USA. I won’t use the R word and teach you some unacceptable English language,” he laughed.

While they were in line to pay for the packs of drinks, a uniformed police officer was helping himself to coffee, and then kept his eyes on Augustus and Juna—all the way out of the store.

As Augustus and Juna climbed into the Porsche, the Officer raced to his cruiser. He climbed inside and fired up the engine.

The Officer said to himself, “A non-American and a half American together in a White town and a fancy car. Molotov cocktail of suspicion.”

Eja drove two blocks when he saw the flashers. He pulled over with the police cruiser right behind him.

“Juna, did I do something wrong?” She shook her head.

The Officer approached the car with a bright flashlight. Eja rolled down the window. “I need to see your driver’s license and registration.” The Officer, a 40-ish White guy, had rough facial skin. Eja complied with the request, and the Officer retreated to his cruiser.

Juna was digging through her purse. “Juna! Keep your hands on the dashboard. And do not move them.”

The Officer soon returned with his imposing flashlight. Eja kept his hands on the steering wheel. “What law did I break, Officer?”

“I need you to both step out of the car.” Eja complied very slowly, with his hands in full view. “Miss, I need your identification, too,” the Officer said. Juna fumbled around. Finally, she handed the Officer her papers.

“That is a legal visa,” Juna said.

“Maybe. Commies have hi-tech ways of monkeying around with Americans’ identities.”

The Officer did not hide his name: Moll, etched on a metal tag. “Are you okay Miss?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?” Juna asked.

“What brings you here, Mr. Augustus Asian? Do you have White in-laws in our town?”

“Maybe. Or you could come to Columbus and meet my White—and Asian and Latino in-laws.”

“Don’t tell me about Columbus. I got plenty of lansmen up there. My own kind of people.”

In the bright streetlight of the quiet street, Eja noticed a tiny tattoo on the Officer’s arm, next to the cuff: Rahowa.

Eja took some deep breaths. “Let’s get down to it. Why are we being stopped?”

The Officer drew his revolver and aimed it at Eja’s face. “We’ve been having problems with cocaine and fentanyl. With your gang banger hairstyle and attitude, you fit the profile of someone we need to check. Now, I need your permission to search your car.”

“Permission denied. We did nothing wrong. You need a search warrant.”

Officer Moll stepped back. “Both of you, turn around and put your hands against the car.”

Officer Moll cuffed both Eja and Juna. Juna blinked hard with disgust, conjuring up photographic images from the discredited Chinese government several years back.

“It’ll be alright, Juna. We’ll resolve this soon,” Eja consoled.

The police station was just a storefront in this small town; a temporary landing place for a larger county facility. A different Officer drove Eja’s Porsche into the parking lot of the police station.

The two Officers escorted Augustus and Juna into the stuffy, unkept room of the police station. They were met by uniformed Officer with gray hairs and medals. His name plate said, Chief Edward Wilson.

“What have we got here, Chuckie?” Wilson’s voice was easy, nonchalant.

Moll said, “Assault on an Officer, resisting arrest—”

“Lies! We did nothing wrong!”

“Hey!” Wilson shouted back.

Moll continued, “And this little honey is here for possible immigration violation.”

Okay,” Wilson said. “I’ll process them, print them, and hold them here.”

Officer Moll stepped outside in the parking lot. He drew his cell phone. “Hey Bud. We had some uppity negro and a Commie chink lady cruising through our nice little White town like they owned it. I put some heat on them. Charges probably won’t stick, but I betcha they think twice before coming back here. The darkie is a hot shot Columbus Rockers player, yeah, that White-bashing syndicate, so I was doubly pleased to lean on him. People like that don’t have long.”

The police station and jail was something out of an old Western movie: The holding cell was big concrete block with bars. The only light in the cell came from the adjoining office. Eja and Juna shared the cell with three drunks sprawled out of the floor. The cell smelled like vomit, and there was blood and graffiti on the walls. Augustus chose to stand rather than sit on the wooden benches. Juna hugged him from the side.

Wilson sat at his desk ignoring the prisoners. Eja approached the bars. “You’re not actually going to send us to the county jail with no evidence, are you?” Wilson looked up for just a second. “I am going to be very calm and reasonable. I am Augustus Eja from the Columbus Rockers; just check my ID. I am here for the passing ceremony of my mother, Beatrice Thomas Eja. She is probably listed in your newspaper, if you don’t know her. Juna is a student at the Ohio State University and is on the payroll of the Rockers. We were profiled by that Officer after getting drinks for my mother’s ceremony tomorrow. Soft drinks, spelled s-u-g-a-r, not fentanyl. Please just open your eyes, Chief.”

Chief Wilson stood up and grabbed his radio. “Chuckie, I need you back here.”

Wilson and Moll went into a back room.

“Chuckie, tell me what happened.”

“There a couple dealers from Charleston we’ve tracking, and he looked like one of them, so I pulled him over. Eja became belligerent and pushed me. He tried fighting back while cuffing him. That was clear

justification bring them in. The girl, too with all the immigration fraud going on. Just hear her voice. She doesn't talk American."

"Any bruises, injury from the scuffle? Prints on your uniform?" Wilson asked. Moll shrugged.

"Body camera?"

"You know it's been on the fritz, Chief."

"Wait here, Chuckie."

Wilson unlocked the holding cell. "You are both free to go. Mr. Eja, I honestly don't know what happened. But understand I am not declaring you innocent. There is just not enough evidence to charge you."

"I guess I am supposed to thank you," Augustus said. "If my name was not Augustus Eja Junior, would I be a free man now?"

"Don't insult my integrity," Wilson said.

"Well, likewise, I am not declaring you innocent of bias. Not enough evidence." Eja said. "So you get a mulligan."

"Get this straight: I have Black friends."

"Juna, there is a duffel bag in my car. Please bring it in. Chief, if I offered you free Rockers tickets, I'd be back in handcuffs, right? Instead, I am going to give you some reference contacts—because I don't want you to be 99 percent convinced of Juna's and my innocence. I want you to be 100 percent."

Juna returned with the bag, and Eja handed Chief Wilson some calling cards.

"By the way, Chief. Can I speak to Officer Moll briefly?"

"Chuckie!" Moll came out with an annoyed look.

“Look, no hard feelings, okay?” Eja said to Moll. “You are just doing your job.” He offered his hand. With the Chief looking on, Moll reluctantly shook Eja’s hand. After Moll left, Eja took his bag, turned his back briefly and applied some substance to his hand.

“Mr. Eja!” Wilson called. Augustus turned around. “May I ask you a question? Did you major in criminal justice in college?”

“Maybe. Why would you ask?”

“You think I am a dumb redneck, don’t you?”

Eja and Juna started for the door. Eja stopped one more time. “You may be half right, Chief. But in the end, you did the right thing. So I offer a genuine thank you.”

“You do not get the last word, Mr. Eja. I do. Go and kick the Jets’ butt on Sunday.”

16.

Clint Duffie appeared very dignified on local TV with his sharp black suit and salt and pepper hair. A middle-aged female reporter had a mic in Clint’s face. “I have no comment about racist actions against Rockers employees or terrorist threats, except to say that we are all vigilant to make sure safety and good prevail. But there is a deeper issue, Julie. Even the worst terrorist attack kills thousands, but we still have segregation patterns and lingering injustices and inequities impacting millions, and much apathy in addressing it. Many Whites still won’t reach out to minorities, in spite of their clear complicity in a history that cannot be denied. That is the root of the ignorance-driven injustices.”

An athletically built, bearded man threw his camouflage hunting hat at the TV screen, as a bald stud turned the TV off. They both wore camouflage khaki. The bearded man had the word Goose printed on his shirt while the bald man’s shirt print read Osprey.

“Most of us measure our life span in years. Little does that coon know that his lifespan is measured in days,” Goose said in a deep foghorn voice. “Are you absolutely certain about Hays?”

Both men sat down. “The coon Hays wears the same shoes every day—at least for the two weeks we’ve been surveilling him. The usher job is his only income.” Osprey spoke with a mild drawl, a la Kentucky.

Goose displayed a pair of blue and white sneakers from under the table.

“Yeah, an exact match, even our added scuff marks,” Osprey said. “The best time to make the switch is Saturday PM, when he is in Rockers stadium on assignment. The utility shirt I’ll wear should raise no suspicion as I enter his apartment.”

“My part is clean,” Goose said. “The high-tech explosives these days are so slick that Hayes will notice no difference in the shoe weight. There is an automatic detonator in the shoe that we program from computer.”

A detailed layout of Rockers Stadium was spread out across the table. “Hays is assigned right here.” Goose marked an X. “You see it is between the Skybox and the Rockers team benches. The blast will be sufficient to take both out—all that mud people pollution and White traitors. Gone.”

“Let’s do it toward the end of the third quarter,” Osprey suggested. “Less of a chance people will be wandering around during breaks. Most people should be locked into their seats and game by then.”

“Billy has already hacked into Hays’ social media accounts. He even penned the hacked statement that we’ll release to the Internet, the world, a few minutes after the blast,” Goose said.

“Let me read it. It’s brief, but so eloquent: “This is Paul Hays and the Black Revolutionary Army. I am glad to give up my life, because it’s a glorious day because of all the White crackers who died today. Long overdue after more than 400 years of oppression. More big blasts to come. Shiver, America. You should be afraid.”

“What a poet!” Osprey cackled. “The most impactful poet in American history, as inner cities will again burn—not this time from looters, but from enraged White patriots. Let the race war begin! Rahowa!”

17.

Friday midday, in Carl Bedrosian’s office: Donna opened the door for Laura Sterling, wearing a blue cotton dress cut to the knees. In front of her, seated at Carl’s table from left to right, were Marisol Lezcano, Carl Bedrosian, Tito Guevara and a heavysset man with bow tie, thick glasses and a floppy hat. Their chairs were angled to face the door.

Laura recognized Carl as the Rockers owner and froze from all the corporate power. Marisol smiled and indicated the fancy gold plated chair normally reserved for Carl. Laura sat down, trembling.

Marisol said, “Laura, let me introduce you to Rockers Owner Carl Bedrosian; Vice President for Security Tito Guevara; and Anthony Senise, Chairman of the Board for Allied.”

Laura’s trembling increased. “I know I have no recourse or ability to petition such power—” Tears streamed down her cheeks. “Please, I cannot afford to lose this job!”

Marisol reached over and touched her arm. “You never have to petition grace, Laura. Please go ahead, Tito.”

“A few years ago, Reginald “Buddy” Davis had a sexual harassment complaint filed against him at a different employer. Just like now, he made a big scene raging at his accuser, demanding that she be fired. Unlike the Allied situation, there was a hidden camera that captured Davis’s misconduct. Even though she was not fired, the victim filed a lawsuit for monetary damages against the employer. When these types of suits are filed, there are often hush-hush negotiations, and they all signed a financial compensation settlement. It was a sealed, secret agreement—which meant no one was supposed to talk about it. Davis was allowed to resign. With a clean record on the surface, Allied hired Davis.

“I have ways of making secrets not so secret anymore—I believe we should never hide evil, because hidden evil can have devastating consequences,” Tito added.

“Do you know where you are sitting, Laura?” Carl asked. She shook her head. “That is the chair always reserved for me in these meetings. Today is the Honor Laura Sterling Day.”

“Thank you for your courage, Laura,” Marisol said.

“Young lady, you have no idea how your heroism saved Allied from a potential public relations disaster,” Senise said in a slow, deliberate voice. “In addition to possible legal complications. In my extensive corporate history, I’ve learned that if someone is a sexual predator once, they are likely to do it again—and please be assured that Mr. Davis’s firing for fraudulent misrepresentations is not a secret.”

Carl said, “Your integrity, Laura, has earned you a \$5,000 raise in your salary. And an Award to go in your HR file.”

“More than that,” Senise said. “Because of your inspiration to us, Allied has committed much of our extra assets to help address health disparities in the inner cities. These millions of dollars are being called Laura Sterling grants.”

Tears again flooded Laura’s cheeks. This time they were over a smile.

“Here is some more positivity,” Tito said. “Interpol just arrested Jianming Yang in Amsterdam. They also got two more fugitives in Europe. Progress. And some peace in Jerry Chan’s grave.”

18.

GAME TIME

The Rockers’ stadium was full and loud. The Jets with their green and white hovered on the sideline like shunned relatives. Then the stadium got louder as the Rockers exploded out of their tunnel with their moving lava of blue, Tyler Kyochevia leading the way as always.

Phil announced, “The 2-0 Jets versus the 2-0 Rockers. We are minutes away from kickoff.”

Barbara added, “It is a misleading 2-0 comparison. The Jets’ 2-0 was 45-7 over the Lions and 35-10 over the Ravens.”

Phil said, “Look, on the Rockers sideline, they are mounting three-foot American flags. There are dozens of them. I cannot tell you what is going on.”

Suddenly Carl Bedrosian’s face appeared on the jumbotron; bigger than life. “Good afternoon, all you Rockers fanatics out there and all other football fans, here in the All-American city of Columbus. I am Rockers Owner Carl Bedrosian, and I join you in anticipating an exciting and safe game this afternoon. Please note the mounted American flags in front of the Rockers’ bench. The Columbus players will be taking a knee to show their support for all efforts to support racial equality and stand in unity against all forms of racial and social injustice. Those knees are not an empty exercise; they embody a commitment from everyone in the Rockers organization to do more than talk; but to take positive actions, together in unity, to fight racism, hate and discrimination.

“The flags are positioned in front of the players to send a loud message that we are honoring the flag, not disrespecting it. The flag we embrace, and the accompanying national anthem stands for all of America’s great values. Those values include equality, justice and inclusion of people of all races and ethnicities. So we kneel before the flag to honor the flag and America’s values of racial inclusion. There is no conflict there.

“Our players also kneel in tribute to former Columbus Rockers intern Melvin Jones, an innocent man unjustly killed when he did nothing wrong. The tribute also goes to Jerry Chan, the highest ranking Asian American in the Rockers organization, who tragically succumbed to a heart attack after harassment by deranged racists. By kneeling our players embrace the flag that embraces justice that honors America’s fallen heroes, including Jerry Chan and Melvin Jones. Please join me in a moment of silence as we honor these two wonderful men.”

The large photos of Jerry Chan and Melvin Jones appeared alternately on the jumbotron during the silence.

As the tenor opera star belted out the national anthem, all the Columbus players and coaches kneeled. Phil said, “Some of the Columbus players also placed Bibles next to the flag. Tyler Kyochevia, Augustus Eja, Vic Rendon, Willie Williams, Mark Hunston, several of the more prominent players. It looks like a Qur’an next to Chester Mohammed’s flag.”

“And look, some of the Jets players are kneeling in the direction of the giant America flag hovering over the stadium,” Barbara said.

“Kickoff, and I cannot remember so much anticipation,” Phil said. “Rockers getting the kick, going right to left. The Jets are pooching it down to the 20. They want nothing to do with Eja. Phillips has it, and he is tackled at the 26.”

“Third and 1 at the 35. Rendon flare out to Montez—and it’s off his fingertips,” Phil said.

“That’s the worst possible start for the Rockers,” Barbara lamented. “We need time of possession to keep Willie Namath, last’s years NFL Most Valuable Player, off the field.”

When Willie Namath took the field, all eyes were on him. The former Notre Dame All American was 6’ 4” with a shadow beard, and curly brown hair sticking out behind his helmet.

“Namath back to pass, pressure, and Rogers has it down the middle, breaks a tackle, now cuts to the sideline, the Rockers 40, 30, tackled by Hernon at the 22.”

“It’s Lewis again,” Barbara said. “He always gets burned on the flank. And that’s it. Blade just pulled him.”

“Third and 4 from the 16,” Phil said. “Namath back to pass, zings it into Temple at the 5—and the ball comes out! Lewis’s replacement ripped it out!”

“That’s Lionel Holt, Columbus native,” Barbara said. “And giving up just 3 points with Namath on the field is a minor victory.”

“A very quick first Quarter,” Phil said. “Namath was masterful with the short passes and mixing in the Rogers runs. But the Rogers fumble at the Rockers 12 has kept the Rockers close. Jets at their own 39, first and 10, going right to left. Rogers breaks our line, past midfield, down at the Rockers 47.”

“Namath back to pass. He’s got Temple and out of bounds at the 25. He got wide of Eja and hit our great one for a 22 yard gain,” Phil said.

Barbara said, “Namath has been staying away from Eja, but he has this sixth sense to take advantage when Eja is just a little off.”

“Third and 10 at the Rockers 13. Namath back to throw. He can’t find anyone open, and Jay has him down at the 15! Great coverage again!”

Barbara said, “Only 6 points surrendered to this scorching offense in the second quarter is a clear victory for the Rockers D so far. But where is our offense?”

“Third and 8 for the Rockers going left to right,” Phil said. “Rendon a quick pass to Hunston, and it sailed high. Rendon is now 2 for 9.”

“Well it’s against the best Defense in the NFL over the past 2 years. But still—” Barbara said.

“First and ten, Jets, their own 29. Namath back to pass—and he’s got Temple. Herndon was on him this time and couldn’t keep up. Our safety Bell push him out at our 17. That’s a 53 yard bomb from Namath--a killer.”

“Rene just called timeout,” Barbara said. “It’s an open secret that General Manager Clint Duffie has the magic words to spark Rendon out of a passing funk. And Coach Rene has played that card now, as Duffie is down on the sideline, his hands across Rendon’s shoulder pads. And it looks like Rodney is going to shake up the offensive line. Gregs and Pullman are getting ready to go in.”

“Third and 2, Jets at our 9. Namath back, quick pass, touchdown, Castle. It was a crossing pattern and they had Herndon and Eja crossed up.”

Barbara said, “But there was contact on both of our defensive backs! Clear picks, and there should be an offensive pass interference call. Coach Delepenso is going ballistic on the sideline. Herndon is in the Ref’s face and Eja just had to pull him away before 15 is tacked on.”

Boos and the rain of debris on the field continued through the extra point.

“The Rene and Clint fairy dust has worked on Rendon again, as he has hit 4 of his last 5 passes! Just in time, with it 13-0,” Phil said. “First and ten, Rockers, at the Jets 28. Rendon a quick hitter to Tyler—and he spins away from their corner at the 15, down the sideline, finally out of bounds at the Jets 6.”

“Get that D-lox Bro the ball!” Barbara said. “Where’s he been?”

“Second and 18 at the 14 after the holding penalty. A direct snap to Montez, runs, no a jump pass to Higgins at the 10, spins—and the ball is loose. The Jets’ Jolly picks it up. He’s running up the sideline. Willie pushes him out of bounds at the 29. Oh my. You cannot mess up these chances against a great team, Barb.”

“Reggie Jolly, the Jets’ All Pro safety, just ripped the ball away from our tight end Higgins.”

“Namath back to pass, safety blitz, he gets away, but we’ve surrounded him. Down for a 3 yard loss.”

“Second and 13 Jets from their 26, and they are up 13-0. Namath a quick pass down the middle—and Eja steps in front, he’s got it, breaking outside, the 30, 20, 10, Castle at his ankles, but he shakes out—Touchdown Rockers! Bang, Boom, Bong! Augustus Eja’s second pick 6! And there goes the ball down, his backward bow, his front bow. This crowd has just woken up! I can barely hear anything!”

Barbara said, “Eja broke off of Temple with his uncanny silent communication with the safety and jumped Castle on a cross route.”

Phil said, “We are just not taking advantage of opportunities. We got lucky when Namath slipped down when running for the first down. But now, with the crowd going wild and we get the ball back, Rendon hits Hunston with a 30 yard gain—and after that 2 holding penalties. Hooker is back to punt at our 40. A line drive. Castle has it at the 23—oh no, he broke through. Cuts to the left now back to the right, catching us against the grain. He’s loose. 50, 40, 30—Jones trying to catch, no way. 10, touchdown, Jets. Just like that, it’s gonna be 20-7.”

“No one has left Rockers Stadium yet,” Barbara said. “But it sure feels like it.”

Phil said, “Again, we have holding penalties after that nice pass from Rendon to Tyler. Now the Jets are at midfield, with a minute to go until half. Third and 4. Namath can just about put this game out of reach if our D doesn’t step up.”

“The Defense has been spirited,” Barbara said. “Namath has 190 yards passing but a lot of those are quick flips to Rogers or their tight ends.”

“Okay, Namath back to pass. He’s going for it all, the end zone. Eja has position on Castle, and he’s got it, no Castle slapped it away. Almost AEJ’s second INT of the half.”

At the halftime gun, with the Jets up 20-7, the teams ran off the field to only a modestly loud crowd. Tito Guevara with his monogrammed shirt and binoculars was high on his perch, perusing everything in front of him. He gave a stern eye toward the Rockers’ VIP deck: He saw someone who was not supposed to be there. He looked closer: It was Diana Bennett sitting at a table with Marisol and Shirley. Now he remembered that Marisol had invited her.

Tito dialed his cell. “Special Agent in Charge Miles, please.”

After a few minutes an angry male voice came on: “What is it now, Guevara?”

“Just a followup, Agent Miles. Has anyone talked yet?”

“These things take time; we are not the Preakness. Let me ask you a question: Have you seen any security threats in your place?”

“We’ve checked everyone coming through the turnstile, and even made an announcement that people should come early. Everything seems under control.”

“Let me back up, and sorry for the harshness. It’s been a tense time. Thank you again for the big tip. A game changer.”

“Not my tip, but I’ll take the compliment,” Tito replied.

“This is the last thing I will say unless there is a change,” Miles said. “There have now been 37 arrests of this Vanguard of the Aryan America bunch. Three of the VAR members, including the one you gave us to open the door, agreed to talk, and provided enough evidence of crimes in several States to justify the arrests of the other members. The other 34 members are very defiant, at least so far. These crazies just keep shouting ‘racial holy war’, or rahowa. The White Nationalists often talk mayhem but don’t follow through. There is no hard physical evidence of any imminent terrorist attack, but we will be searching computer hardware. You got all these lawyers, of course, telling them not to talk.”

“And here’s the last thing I’ll say to you today: It’s amazing in a civilized society how people can think lawyering is more important than saving potentially thousands of lives.” Tito disconnected.

Third Quarter, right to left for Jets:

Phil said, “We just had an exchange of punts, but stalemate doesn’t work down 13. Okay, Namath second and 8 from their own 35. Rogers has it, gains 3, so let’s see if this fired up bunch of kamikaze Rockers can get another stop—okay, third and 5. Namath quickly back, but Eja off the edge nails him! A rare corner blitz by Augustus Eja Junior!”

“I don’t know if it was Blade’s call or AEJ’s instinct,” Barbara said. “All I know is that Eja was a beebee!”

Phil said, “Eja gets another chance for a play. But he has been neutralized as a punt returner by sky high moon shots by Mauer. Okay, here’s another. This one’s playable—but Eja gets creamed at the spot of the touch. A couple Jets are dancing around him.”

“That’s okay, this man of no words gets up and walks away. He lets his game do the talking,” Barbara said.

Phil said, “Third and 3, our own 19. Rendon zings it—and Tyler has it on a crossing pattern and he’s loose!” Phil’s voice was suddenly animated. “Cuts inside a block at the 45, 50—cuts all the way back! It’s a footrace, but Jolly has the angle, and makes an ankle tackle at the Jets’ 16.”

“Scorch-a-roni,” Barbara said. “And we need 7 here.”

Phil said, “Rendon back. He’s got Willie at the pylon. Touchdown Rockers! Bang, Boom, Bong. We’re about to be down by just 6!” Phil and Barbara slapped hands. “And the crowd is on their feet—uh oh, Willie just showed Jolly the ball. That will cost us 15. Rene is not pleased.”

“You cannot give Willie Namath 15 yards for good field position when you are playing catch up.” Barbara was disgusted.

“Willie Williams knows it. He’s tapping his chest.”

“Jets second and 6 from their own 41. Namath, back, and he wants that touchdown back, as this is going deep to Castle. At the 10, batted in the air by Bell—and Herndon snags it! He’s knocked down at the 15. His first pick of the season. That’s Namath’s second interception of the game, and his second of the year.”

The wild fans are smelling momentum shift; another patented Rockers rally,” Barbara said. “They are pointing down toward the end zone.”

“Rendon spins and hands it off to Montez for 2. Uh oh, Rendon is limping. I think he just reinjured that ankle. He came off the snap at a

funny angle. Oh my Gosh, Vic is limping off. The trainers are out. Vic is slow. And grimacing. And Ron is up already.”

The collective gasp in the stadium lasted until Ron jogged on for the play. Barbara said, “Thibodeaux versus Namath. Not a good name match, Phil.”

“We have a little buzz back, Barb! Thibodeaux 4 for 5, no turnovers, and he’s put us in scoring position. Not bad. Fourth and 4 from the Jets’ 30. Hooker for a 47 yarder, to cut this baby down to 3 points! The kick is up—and it’s wide left.”

Barbara said, “He wasn’t named Hooker for nothing.”

“Okay, we are nearing the end of the third Quarter. The Rockers need to step it up a notch, Barb. First and 10 Jets—and Rogers breaks over midfield to the Rockers’ 49. Not the way to do it.”

“Namath running an option, now spinning back to the right, spins away from Holt—and oh my, Eja just plastered him! I mean, a savage hit. And Namath is still down.”

“We got to get a replay here.”

“Eja is standing over, saying consoling words to him—and here comes Masters, and he just leveled Eja! Both benches are clearing now, Barb. Oh, my. There is pushing and shoving--It’s starting to cool down now. Namath is slowly getting up. Now he’s down again. There is laundry on the field, as the coaches and Refs keep the players separated. Now here is Larry Fox with call:”

**“Personal foul, Number 36, Defense.” He put his fist to his head.
“Targeting. Booth review.”**

**“Delepenso and Bower are on the field screaming at the Refs,” Phil said.
“They are pointing to the jumbotron replay as boos and debris cascade down from the stands.”**

“No way!” Barbara says. “Namath ducked his head at the last second to dodge Holt, and Eja was going for the legs, the proper tackle. Is Eja a mindreader, clairvoyant?”

The boos got louder, as Namath was helped off the field.

“Namath is going into concussion protocol, I’ve been told,” Phil said. “In the tent now. He’s done for the game, Barb.”

The referee activated his mic for the booth call: “The targeting call has been overturned.”

“That’s the right call!” Barbara said loudly.

Rene called a timeout.

“There a stoppage, and Eja is on the bench,” Phil said. “Blade is waving fingers in front of him and talking to him. Eja is talking back to him.”

Rene beckoned to Blade Bower on the sideline. “How is E doing?”

“He’s lucid. Maybe just a little woozy.”

“A little woozy? A little dead? I am taking Eja out,” Rene said.

Barbara said, “Now we hear that incredible sucking sound—as Augustus Eja goes into the tent.”

“The Jets’ backup QB is Fred Curry out of Grambling. Not a bad passer, but his scrambling skills are scary,” Phil said. “Hands it off to Rogers. Stuffed for no gain—now he’s running an option. Fumble, but he falls on it and tapped down. Third and long coming. Amidst all the calamity, the score is still 20-14 Jets.”

“And Augustus Eja just came out of the tent, hands high in the air, as if to say, I am fine,” Barbara said. “Now he is looking at Coach Delepenso with his hands clasped together, pleading to go back out there. Oh, great fodder for TV NFL highlight reel!”

The fans were so busy reacting to Eja that they barely noticed Curry being sacked for a 12 yard loss. A chant grew in the stands like a wave: Eja in! Eja in!

“Okay, Mauer to punt. In the end zone, touchback,” Phil said anticlimactically, over the noise.

Rodney handed the headset to Rene. “Hi, Coach it’s Carl. An angry sponsor, Bricks, just called me to express his displeasure about Eja getting benched in this huge game for the Rockers. Of course, he’s insinuating disruption of our partnership.”

“And exactly how much is Bricks getting paid to coach this football team?” Rene fired back.

“I’m just using that call as an excuse to check on AEJ,” Carl said. “It’s still your call, Rene.”

“Carl, ask Bricks if he wanted a football game to get in the way of a condition that could potentially maim or kill him.”

“The fans are still on their feet, and there seems to be some commotion behind the Rockers bench, Barb.”

“Oh my Gosh there is a flame! People running everywhere.”

Eja broke into a full sprint, leaped over the railing, but stumbled because of a canvas in his hands—as a Black usher writhed in the aisle with his feet on fire. Eja reached the man, but Eja was tossed aside by Tyler, who took a fire extinguisher from Montez and foamed up the burning man real good. Many of the Rockers players shoved the fans out of the way, as other ushers and Tito’s security personnel rushed to the scene.

The stunned crowd with craned necks stood for several minutes, waiting for an explanation. The referees also came over.

Finally, the PA announcer boomed: “This game is being delayed for a staff person in medical distress. The game will resume shortly.”

An ambulance came onto the field, and the covered usher, with plenty of medical company, was rolled from a stretcher into the ambulance. The crowd applauded the man as the ambulance drove away.

“This will be a lively press conference,” Barbara said. “I can just imagine the questions that will be asked.”

“Back to game,” Phil sighed. “First and ten, Rockers on their own 20, going right. Okay, Ron back to throw, and he’s got Willie out of bounds at the 45! Now that is the electroshock we needed to get us all focused back on the game!”

“Third and 2 at the Jets’ 47. Montez, and he’s stuffed. Fourth down.”

“Of course,” Barbara said. “Montez isn’t even in positive yardage yet.”

“And that’s the end of this eventful third Quarter, with the score, New York 20, Columbus 14.”

Blade handed the headset to Rene again. “This is Clint. I taped a short statement and I want it broadcasted right after the game. Some great news and powerful tributes to certain people so the Columbus family will feel good no matter how this game ends.”

“Air it now,” Rene said.

“What? In the middle of the game?” Clint asked.

“Yeah. It could fire up the team. I’ll have Willis flop.”

The punting team was running out on the field. “Willis!” Rene called. The Coach made a chopping motion below his knees. Willis ran another ten yards and then pretended to trip. He grabbed his knee, and the trainers rushed out. Some of the Jets players rolled their eyes.

“While we are tending to the injured player,” The PA announcer said happily, “Here is an announcement from your Columbus Rockers!”

Clint’s dignified face appeared on the jumbotron. “Hello, I am Clint Duffie, General Manager of the Columbus Rockets. While we enjoy

football, we are reminded of other responsibilities beyond the gridiron.” Clint’s voice boomed through the rafters. “All decent Americans have been touched by the evil scourge of racism, anti-semitism, hate and malice, and it has come right into the Rockers family. It has especially impacted people of color, mostly notably Asian Americans and African Americans, but also a Rocker Latina and Latino. Everyone in our organization has taken steps to promote cross-cultural communications for better understanding and compassion, and to take concrete actions to stop injustices. I take this time to give tribute to special Rockers people for special heroism on that issue. First, I salute Shirley Marcus, whose diligent research unmasked the actions of the violently racist Vanguard for an Aryan America. Shirley is a justice warrior and a good friend. Secondly, our own Coach Rene Delepenso has contacted Christian Pastors all over Ohio and beyond and gotten a commitment to forge a national dialogue on how churches can come together for a national summit to develop practical ideas on combatting injustices. Thirdly, I salute Marisol Lezcano and Tito Guevara for their hard work and integrity to stop a sexually abusive employment situation. Their heroism has resulted in tens of millions of health dollars going into the inner city. We also salute Laura Sterling, the whistleblower who courageously reported the abuse, that allowed Ms. Lezcano and Mr. Guevara to intervene on the side of justice. Tito Guevara, as the head of Security of the Rockers, keeps us safe.

“But the most amazing act of heroism and courage comes from our very own beloved defensive back Augustus Eja. It is an amazing story. While being racially harassed in West Virginia, he noticed Neo-Nazi references and a connection to Columbus regarding the arresting Officer. AEJ, a criminal justice major, brings along fancy equipment in a little bag, just in case something comes down. So with this abusive Officer, he applied the advanced DNA kit, got the Officer’s DNA just on an educated hunch—and we found out that the Officer’s DNA matched that of the DNA found in Jerry Chan’s home after the break-in! That led to an FBI arrest of the Officer, and as he talked, it sparked a chain reaction of arrests. Now there are at least 37 VAR racist criminals in custody.”

As Clint concluded the video, the whole crowd stood and applauded loudly. There were even green-clad Jets fans cheering—and players from both teams waving white towels.

Amidst the roar, Referee Larry Fox walked up to Rene, finger pointing. “Don’t think for a minute I don’t know what you just did. Forfeiture is in the new NFL rulebook for those kinds of stunts. Rene, try that again this season, and it may cost you a game.”

“Larry!” Rene called over the roar as the Ref stated away. “There are more important things in life than football.”

The roar continued even as Jets QB Fred Curry and Ray Rogers were alternately gashing the Rockers’ defensive line with chunks of yards, going left to right. Only when Curry ripped off a 30 yard run down to the Rockers’ 10 did the crowd noise stop.

“Blade needs a big play,” Phil said.

“And no more Hollywood endings with Eja,” Barbara reminded.

“Okay, another option play. This time Herndon tightens up and stops Curry for a 1 yard gain.”

“Now third and 8. Curry tosses a swing pass to Rogers. Off his hands. It’s going to be a 2 score game now anyway,” Phil said.

“With Eja out of the game, the Jets are kicking deep. Herndon’s got it at the goal line, right to left. He’s buried at the 20. 23-14 Jets, and Thibodeaux has to figure a way to get us at least 3, for a 1 score game.

“Okay, Ron back to throw. Linebacker blitz and Ron is hit but gets it away deep—Tyler has a step on Jolly—he’s got it! 20, 10, Touchdown Rockers! Bang, Boom Bong! It’s gonna be a 2 point game!”

“Thibodeaux’s first NFL touchdown pass!” Barbara said. “And it could not have been bigger!”

The Rockers Stadium was rocking shaking, in delirium. The roar continued as the players lined up for the kickoff.

Then players on the field started tripping, running. People in the stands started moving without moving. A stadium rocking without human effort. A low roar kept going even after the fans stopped cheering. Stunned curiosity turned to terror as the concrete trembled underneath people's feet. Earthquake! Was the cry. People ducked; people cried out. Some people got down on all fours as parts of the stadium looked like reverberating jelly.

The low roar and shaking lasted a few more seconds. Then it suddenly stopped. No one moved; it was an eerie calm borne of the shock of the multitude—that they had just experienced an earthquake.

There was a newsfeed announcement on several cellphones: “The quake seemed to originate in the low mountains of Southeast Ohio near Athens, with the fault lines coming all the way up to Columbus.”

People looked around, and there did not seem to be casualties, except for some bruises. Finally, there was a dour announcement over the PA: “Due to natural circumstances and an act of God, the football game has been suspended until further notice. Please follow the ushers for an orderly exist from Rocker stadium.”

The fans complied, still quite stunned. The Rockers and Jets players met on the field for handshakes. Amidst the quietude, a bottle flew out of the stands and hit Jets QB Fred Curry in the shoulder pad. The N-word coming from the perpetrator was noticeable in the relative calm. Rockers player immediately formed protective wall around Curry. They looked up into the stands and saw that the offender was tackled by other fans and held for security. Ron Thibodeaux wrapped his arms around Curry's pads as a symbolic protective hug. In another part of the stadium, Augustus Eja and Willie Namath were having a cordial conversation, hands locked in an extended shake.

A Bible passage Colossians 3, v. 11 suddenly popped up on the jumbotron in big letters. It caught the attention of many of the fans and players, and prompted fascination, speculation.

Rene called up to the Skybox. “Carl, was that you or Clint posting Scripture?”

“No. I thought that was you, the Pastor-Warrior,” Carl replied.

Rene shrugged to the rest of his players. Then many people noticed Colossians 3, v. 11 popping up on their phone text messages. People were very curious now. But it also produced an uncanny sense of peace, all around.

Some people looked up the verse: “Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.”

In the Skybox, Marisol and Diana Bennett remained seated at the table, taking in the people calmly wandering out; some talking lowly about this amazing, historical day.

Diana said to Marisol with a wicked smile, “I betcha you will tell me that this is all an act of God.”

Marisol smiled back. “I am so happy that you joined us today, Diana, and that we can be friends. One promise we haven’t not kept yet; that you would meet Augustus Eja personally. I’ll call Rene to see if we can take you down.”

“Marisol, you make it harder by the day for me to argue with you about religion.”

“Then we won’t. But yes, God can perform these miracles, or with the Colossians postings He may be working mightily through a person that is not obvious to everyone. Statisticians have been asked, what are the odds of a random occurrence, a coincidence, more than 300 Old Testament independent prophecies coming true in the future—not including the miraculous event not explained by normal human discourse? I would have guessed one in a million. But no, they just kept adding zeros to the odds against--and zeros and zeros. And I lost count.

“My friend, that’s the Bible and math together.” Marisol crossed her first two fingers.

With all the chaos on the field, Coach Rene has not yet found the Jets Coach for the customary sportsman handshake. Don Ross, one of the

Black NFL Coaches, was hard to miss with his tall stature, gray beard and the Jets hat he always wore.

**Rene finally caught up with him, and they shook hands.
“When we finish this game, I think we have an even shot against you.”**

Ross laughed back. “I’m not so focused on this game. I am more concerned about being Jets-ready when we meet you again in the playoffs. Great game, Rene.”

You too, Don.”

Rene finally caught up with the Dreadlocks Brothers. The three walked arm in arm, into a kneeling pond of blue and green jerseys together. Kneeling in unison before something mightier than the American flag.

To be continued—a long season!

