

1

The four-seat golf cart skidded to an abrupt stop, launching the Secret Service agent in the passenger seat into the windshield. The agent who had been driving jumped out and darted into the pristine gardens bordering the basketball arena.

Until that moment, the tour of the AllSport athletic center had been similar to every other, except today, the person sitting in the golf cart next to golf legend, Reid Clark, happened to be the President of the United States. The First Lady, along with another agent, was in the back seat. As usual, comments of amazement about the facility and athletes in training had flowed non-stop from the honored guests. Reid's cart was boxed inside four full carts of agents. An additional cart of agents was ahead of them and another behind.

Reid saw the head cart stop but was far enough back that he had no idea what the commotion was all about. He heard multiple agents' radios beep and tried to listen to the quick commands. Suddenly the carts on both sides pulled close and the agent in Reid's cart commanded him to stop. Agents immediately surrounded his cart with guns drawn. Out of nowhere appeared a black Suburban that skidded to a halt only yards away. The President and First lady were whisked into the truck. The heavy reinforced doors slammed shut and the truck sped off, tires spinning,

DEAD BALL

kicking up a spray of dirt and grass. Before he had left, the President made sure that four agents remained with Reid.

Reid still had no idea what the problem was. With intense curiosity he drove toward the group of agents at the site of the problem. AllSport security guards had also begun to appear. An agent yelled for Reid to stop, but he paid the agent no heed. It was not like Reid to take orders from anyone, especially on his own turf. He wanted to know what had happened, and no one was going to stop him. He pulled up next to the other carts and walked past the group of agents standing by the garden. He saw an arm protruding from under a bush and pushed his way through the surrounding men. Looking at the body, his heart skipped a beat. His gasp was loud and tears immediately welled up in his eyes. Lying there with a bullet hole in his left temple and blood covering his face was Bob Thomas, Reid's dearest friend and the Chief Financial Officer of The Inner City Sports Foundation and AllSport.

Reid's eyes fluttered and he became light-headed. He needed to sit down before he collapsed. *Too late.* Two of the agents closest to him caught him as he crumpled to the ground. They gave him a moment to revive, and then helped him to his cart and drove him to the administration building, where he had his office. Art Fornham, AllSport's director, met them in Reid's office after being informed of the situation.

Nancy Baron, Reid's assistant, left his side just as Art walked in. As she turned, her long, wavy, auburn hair brushed Art's arm. Reid noticed as Art turned to admire her nicely curved, tight, athletic body. Nancy was a common topic of conversation for many of the male athletes on campus. Her husband, John Baron, an NFL quarterback, regularly helped train athletes at AllSport. Seeing Nancy pull a tissue from her pocket and wipe her eyes as she left, made Reid appreciate her attempt at consoling him. She was obviously emotionally distraught also.

Art, a fit, middle-aged man with short grayish-white hair, walked over, took a seat on the couch next to Reid and quietly said, “Buck and Jay are already on the way in Chopper 2. The local Chief of Police and his detectives will be here shortly. Reid, I’m so sorry. I know how close you were with Bob. I just don’t get it. Who the hell would want to kill him? AllSport’s security has been at level four ever since. . . ., well, you know. Dammit, this is terrible. We can’t close down again.”

With a pained expression, Reid said, “Take it easy, Art, we’ll figure out what to do together. As soon as everyone’s here we’ll have a meeting. I want all of Bob’s staff prepared to stay late tonight. They each need to be interviewed. We need to inform them about this before rumors start to fly around the camp. You and I should go speak to them together. Might as well do it now.”

“Yeah, I guess,” Art sighed. “Are you sure you’re up to it?”

“No, I’m not sure, but we really don’t have a choice, do we?”

“I guess not.”

The accounting staff was small for a foundation with such a large cash flow. Although companies the same size as ICSF have accounting departments of over fifty people, Bob kept his staff small in order to prevent greed from becoming an issue. Millions of dollars were donated weekly to the foundation, and that kind of money could be very tempting to the wrong people. Bob hand-selected his staff of 25 from various companies that he had either worked for or with in the past. They were a very tight group, like a family, with Bob acting more as mentor than boss to all.

Reid and Art knew this would be a difficult, tear-filled meeting. They exited the elevator on the second floor and walked down the burgundy carpeted hallway to the accounting office. Entering the stark, bright bullpen of cubicles, it was obvious that no one had heard the tragic news yet. Twenty people were going through their daily business of making sure that the boatloads of money

that flowed in and out of their hands were accounted for to the last penny.

Stressed but happy faces greeted Reid and Art as they walked into the room. Reid nodded to a few of the employees as he walked to an area where he could address the entire staff.

“May I have everyone’s attention please? Could you all stop whatever you’re doing and join us?” He waited for the employees to gather round, then took a deep breath to calm his nerves. “I don’t know how else to say this, so I’m just going to be direct. Your boss and my best friend, Bob Thomas, was found dead on campus a little while ago.” Moans, cries and loud gasps filled the room. Wiping a tear from his cheek, Reid continued. “It appears he was murdered. We don’t have any more information at the moment, but Jay Scott and the local police will be here shortly. I know this is going to be difficult for all of you. Believe me it’s hard for me too, but we are going to need everyone’s cooperation. I would appreciate it if you would all stick around until Jay’s team has had a chance to speak with each of you. I know many of you have a long commute; we will make rooms available for you in the guest buildings. I will also have our camp psychologist available for anyone who needs to talk. For that matter, my door will be open as well.” Tears once again welled up in Reid’s eyes. “Once funeral arrangements have been made and we know a little more, we will allow for rotating time off for all of you. Until then, please just do your best to keep everything in this department running as smoothly as possible.” Reid looked around the room. “Does anyone know where Joe Spinelli is?”

“He’s on vacation in Nepal,” said Art. “He’s not due back for a week. He’s actually climbing Everest. I guess we need to try to contact him and cut his vacation short. He’ll just have to understand, and we’ll make it up to him somehow.”

Joe Spinelli, the director of the accounting department, pretty

much ran the show. He had worked under Bob in two previous jobs and was like a walking computer. He crunched numbers faster without a calculator than most people could with one.

“Until Joe comes back, Lisa Difillipi is in charge,” said Reid. “That is, of course, if you’re OK with it, Lisa.”

“You can count on me,” Lisa said in a sullen fashion. Lisa Difillipi was the head of the largest accounting area: Charitable Contribution Revenue, or CCR. She was also very close with Bob, as everyone knew.

“You all know where to find us if you need us,” said Reid. “Try to keep it together, folks. We have complete faith in you,” he said as he and Art left the office.

As they rode the elevator back up to the executive offices on the fifth floor, Reid said, “I need to call Bob’s wife. I should go tell her in person, but I can’t leave. I’ll get Shane to go spend the night with her.” He sighed, thinking of his beautiful wife. “Oh, Art, I can’t believe he’s dead.” Reid’s head was hung low. He then said with venom in his voice, “I’m going to get whoever did this, if it’s the last thing I do.”

Just then Art’s two-way radio beeped and he held it up to his mouth. “Come in.”

“Hey, boss, Dave Wheeler, the Chief of Police is here with a few detectives, and they’re heading over to the crime scene,” said Alan Fox, AllSport’s Director of Security.

“Thanks, Alan, but I’m not ready to talk to them yet,” Art said. “I’ll head over in a little while with Buck and Jay. Al, when they land, please come up to the boardroom with them.”

“You got it. Hey, Art, you and Reid should know that word of this is traveling fast all over campus.”

Art sighed. “I guess that’s to be expected. Let your team know they have to keep everybody calm and away from the scene. If there is any trouble, let us know immediately.”

DEAD BALL

“Roger that. See you in a while. By the way, how’s Reid doing?”

“I don’t think it’s really hit him yet. He’s been too busy so far, but he’s about to call Bob’s wife. That won’t be easy.”