



# **THE DRAFT**

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This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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# PROLOGUE

## **December 1988**

Within the eerie quiet of Washington, D.C.'s, RFK Stadium, with more than fifty thousand Redskins fans watching in disgust on an otherwise clear afternoon, Rams quarterback Quincy Pressner crouched down behind his center, hands open and ready, and began the count.

The play he'd chosen was an obscure one, from last year's book. But the guys would remember it. They used it only once before, and it worked so well that they'd joked about it in the locker room afterward. It wasn't a "trick" play; Coach Jessel didn't care much for those. But it was unorthodox. It required the quarterback to pitch the ball to the tight end, who then pitched it back after the quarterback ran behind him, to the right flank, to create the illusion that he was going to sacrifice himself as a blocker. It gave the receivers on the opposite side more time to get downfield. It was a tough diagonal throw, across the center of activity and usually off balance. But a good arm could manage it. Pressner's execution of it last season was flawless, and he was even better now.

He stretched the count as long as possible, hoping to draw one of the defense lineman offside; another five yards certainly wouldn't hurt. He knew

these guys were dying to get at him. His own line had played immaculately all day, protecting him with Secret Service fanaticism. They wanted this victory, wanted it like they'd never wanted anything before. Some of them had been here for ages, waiting. Mitch Walken, the left guard, had been a part of the Rams' organization for nearly twelve years; his entire career. He'd been thinking about retiring, had mentioned it to a few writers and some of the guys on the team. No one wanted him to go, but he was growing weary from the lack of postseason appearances. Now the dream was within reach. Pressner knew how hard he'd play. He had a sense of that with all his teammates. He had always been able to accurately gauge the mood of the men at his command.

The ball came up, its cool leather sliding between the calloused skin of his large palms, and he took off like a rabbit. He faked left, then swiveled right and tossed the ball to Aaron Howard, the quiet tight end who would be making his third straight Pro Bowl appearance in a few weeks. Pressner ran behind him, turned, and started downfield. The Redskin defense fell for the con and followed the ball. When it came back to Pressner, the defense slammed on its collective brakes and tried to adjust, but two of them slid to the ground. In those critical seconds they became nonfactors in the play. When Pressner saw Sammy Greene's hand waving wildly on the far side, he tossed the ball over the mayhem and watched as Greene brought it into his lap and, alone and unthreatened, slow-jogged the remaining fifteen yards into the end zone. It had been pathetically easy—and this was against the defending Super Bowl champions during the first round of the playoffs.

A few isolated cheers emanated from the crowd, but otherwise the frustrated silence maintained. There were boos, of course, as the defense got to its feet, many of them with their hands on their hips and their heads low. They weren't used to this type of humiliation, but Pressner had been shredding them all day. A wunderkind, some of the papers called him. The next N-math, the new Unitas. One reporter wrote, "He has the athletic grace of a champion thoroughbred, and his ability to read and disassemble defensive schemes is somewhere in the freakishly genius category. Just his third year in the league, and he's leading his team on a march to the Lombardi Trophy like none before."

Pressner glanced up at the scoreboard—Redskins 7, Rams 34. Period: 4. Time Remaining: 01:47. It was over.

He lingered on the sidelines with his helmet on, distantly aware of the praise being heaped upon him by his coaches and teammates. *Brilliant performance, Quince. Just amazing. Super Bowl for sure. Next stop for you, Canton, Ohio.* He couldn't bring himself to share in their jubilation, for reasons he kept to himself. He knew they'd noticed his "off" temperament all day. Some had asked about it. He made excuses but didn't give answers. No one needed to know.

He scanned the enormous crowd, taking in the moment. Then he closed his eyes and breathed deep, catching the sounds and scents and committing them to memory. He was nearing the top of the mountain, he knew. The other games would almost be a formality. Washington was their toughest opponent, and he'd eaten them alive. Two more, and then the big one. The chance to make history—the first black quarterback to lead his team to a Super Bowl and then win it.

*Except . . .*

The clock ran down and the game ended. Feeling somehow detached from it all, Pressner followed his teammates back onto the field to shake hands with the enemy. Some of them passed along comments that he certainly wouldn't be sharing with his young son. But most were valiant enough in their defeat, wishing him well in the battles ahead.

As Pressner headed into the tunnel, he spotted the three men standing off to the side, their backs to the wall. They were smiling pleasantly enough in their tailored suits, three sanctimonious agents of righteousness who moved in a little pack as if sharing one mind. They watched him as he entered the darkened corridor. At first he pretended not to notice. Then he made eye contact and, unable to resist, flashed the "V" sign. Their smiles fell as if on cue, and the smallest of the them looked like he was capable of homicide. No one else noticed the exchange, but for Pressner it would be his last great victory.

Nearly four hours later, when the full moon was glowing like a pearl in the clear northern sky, Pressner walked alone to his car. He opened the door and tossed his bag in the passenger seat, then paused. He looked back at the

stadium, its lights glowing majestically around the rim, and he was suddenly fully aware of the magnitude of what was happening to him. This time the tears broke free, streaming down either side of his young face. He took a long, hard look at the world that he wanted so desperately to conquer—one that he would no longer be part of in a few brief weeks—then got into his Cadillac and sped away.

At that moment, the legend that eventually evolved into myth began.



## April 2006

Seventy-nine-year-old Phyllis Smith knew it was dangerous for her to be driving. The medications had robbed her of the privilege. She was frequently tired, and her reaction time was slow. Nevertheless, she *had* to get to the supermarket. If that new caregiver—the one with the two kids and the sleazy-looking boyfriend—had come early this morning like she'd been asked, this wouldn't be necessary. Nearly a year had passed since she was last behind the wheel. She still had the hulking black Mercedes Don bought her. She knew she should've surrendered her license at some point, but she couldn't bring herself to do it.

The images in the street were fuzzy at best. She could see colors and make out most shapes, but details were impossible. It was fairly busy already, the sun coming up, people moving about. All that really mattered, she had convinced herself, was the car ahead of her. She could more or less make out where it was since her depth perception wasn't too bad. She simply kept back a good distance and drove slowly.

The dizziness began as she approached the intersection where Light Street met Pratt. At first it felt similar to the pleasant numbness associated with

being slightly drunk. Then it heightened to a gentle swirling sensation. After that, she would say later in a deposition that precluded a sizable payout from her insurance company, she couldn't remember a thing. It all happened so quickly.

There was only one vehicle sitting at the intersection that fateful morning—a blue Jaguar XJ6. A beautiful machine but unremarkable in this affluent Baltimore suburb. The driver wasn't looking in his rearview mirror. If he had been, perhaps he could've reacted in time. Instead he was fingering through his CD collection, trying to decide whether to go with Randy Travis or Clint Black. Maybe even some of that Bruce Springsteen stuff everyone around here liked so much.

Meanwhile, Jack Harris, a carpenter from nearby Glen Burnie, was on his way back from Home Depot, where he'd picked up a load of railroad ties. He had the window down, elbow out, and was whistling to Johnny Cash's "I Walk the Line." He'd come down Pratt hundreds of times. He knew the intersection was dangerous, knew there'd been dozens of accidents there. But that didn't make him slow down as he approached it today. Seeing that the light was green, he didn't give it another thought.

Phyllis Smith's tiny body slumped over the wheel when she lost consciousness. The Mercedes swerved crazily for a moment, but not sharply enough to avoid the Jag. Upon impact it lurched into the intersection, giving Harris no time to react. On pure reflex he tightened his grip on the wheel and jammed the brake. The tires screamed, burning on the pavement. His truck swung to the left, and the back end began to drift forward. But the distance required to avoid the collision just wasn't there. In fact, Harris would realize with great irony much later on, the accident probably wouldn't have been half as bad if he'd just stayed on course. He would have smacked the Jaguar in the rear, spinning it sharply but probably leaving the driver relatively unharmed. As it turned out, the bulk of the impact delivered by a payload of railroad ties was absorbed by the Jag's door and, unfortunately, by the person on the other side of it.

When it was over, a horn was blaring and someone was screaming. Harris looked up but couldn't see anything because of the white smoke blowing from his radiator. He checked himself quickly and found no signs of injury.

His arms were already aching—the punishment for the understandable reaction of tightening his muscles—but there didn't appear to be anything broken or otherwise out of place.

There was no way the other driver could have been as lucky.

Trembling, he got the door open and stepped outside. He was faintly aware of a crowd beginning to form along the fringes. He could feel their eyes on him and suspected that some of them were already forming their judgments. Big guy, plaid shirt, swollen belly. *Probably a drunk. Typical.*

He started toward the crumpled Jag, then stopped. The tinted window was gone and the driver was nowhere to be seen. But the blood was there—a dark red stain down the side like cranberry juice.

“*Oh Christ . . .*”

Now the *real* terror came. Harris hadn't been in an auto accident since he was a teenager, driving his father's sky blue Chevelle in the rain. The tires lost touch with the road, and the car fishtailed into a pair of garbage cans. He wasn't hurt and no one was with him. But he was petrified at the thought of what his father would do. As it turned out, the old man was pretty teed off but mostly thankful.

Many years had passed since then, and Jack Harris had developed the common assurance that auto accidents happened only to *other* people. You saw them on the news when they were particularly bad, read about them in the paper, or heard of them at the local diner. But they didn't happen to *him*. They were part of a different reality, nothing to do with his. He was fifty-four, after all. Far too old and too wise to get into that kind of a mess.

The blood running down the wrinkled metal, however, transmitted a different truth. *My God*, Harris thought, *this is really happening*. That's someone else's blood trickling down the side of the damn door like rainwater. Something about the *movement* of it made it all the more unbearable.

He willed himself forward, determined to do something useful. As he got to the door he saw the driver for the first time. It was a fairly large young male dressed in a jogging suit. He lay on his side across the front seats. He sort of looked like he was sleeping. His clothing sparkled with bits of glass.

Harris heard several sirens in the distance. For some reason it made him think that he shouldn't move the victim. He went around to the other

side, where he found more blood, spattered on the inside of the window. At this point he began crying—something else he hadn't done in ages—and reached for the door handle. To his surprise it released, albeit with a protesting creak. He brought the door back gently, took one look at the driver's face, and froze.

Any of the other people standing nearby would have recognized the guy just as quickly. Now the situation shifted from unreal to surreal. *This can't be right*, Harris thought. But of course it was—some people really did win the lottery, whereas other got hit by lightning. Those were the extreme ends of reality's spectrum. No explanations, no sense or significance. Sometimes things just *happened*.

And for whatever reason, on this bright and chilly morning in April, Jack Harris, master carpenter and father of three, drove his beloved Ford pickup into the side of a dark blue Jaguar occupied by Michael Bell, the starting quarterback of the Super Bowl champion Baltimore Ravens.

Ironically, the same day began very quietly for Jon Sabino, the Ravens' general manager. He awoke at the usual 5:00 A.M., showered, shaved, put on khaki slacks (almost standard for NFL front-office personnel) and a polo shirt bearing the Ravens' logo. He moved about quietly so as not to wake Kelley, his wife of eight years. Then he went in to check on their two-year-old daughter, Lauren. She was lying peacefully on her side, wearing a tiny Ravens T-shirt and hugging a stuffed tiger. Her blanket, a hand-knitted gift from one of Kelley's college friends, lay nearby; Lauren had a habit of uncovering herself during the night. Sabino pulled it over her and brushed away the soft brown hair that had spilled onto her face.

It was still dark when he stepped outside. Dark and cool, but not cold like April could sometimes be in Maryland. The moon was full, casting everything in an eerie neon glow, and the North Star shone brightly. After he locked the door and reset the alarm, he paused for a moment, as he did every morning, to admire his neighborhood. It was an American paradise—a world of castles and glistening lawns and BMWs.

Jon had earned a scholarship to the University of Maryland, where he majored in business administration with a minor in sports management. He

also played football and baseball, but he was realistic enough—even though the admission was a bitter one—to know he did not possess the natural skills required to be a pro in either.

Nevertheless, upon graduation with honors, his love of sports led him to seek a position with a pro team. The general manager of the Washington Redskins admired his determination and gave him an entry level position assisting the scouting staff. Jon worked like a dog over the next four years and eventually became a full-fledged scout in the northeastern region. The logistics of the job could be brutal—eighteen-hour days, traveling for weeks on end, living in hotel rooms, eating in restaurants, watching one talented-but-not-quite-talented-enough player after another while trying to maintain focus and freshness.

In spite of the strain, it was at this phase of his career that his true gifts began to emerge—it didn't take long for the Redskins to realize he was a natural at judging and evaluating others. The players he recruited weren't flashy or dramatic, but the steady and reliable quality was there. An unusually high percentage of his recommendations ended up being drafted and making starting squads. Two even became Pro Bowlers. Jon's philosophy of placing such a high value on character was somewhat uncommon, but his reasoning was irrefutable—football skills are easier to teach than integrity. As a result, his recruits were more mature, more disciplined, and more driven, and thus hurdled the kind of barriers that stopped most "flash-in-the-pan" talents cold. Coaches liked working with Jon's picks, administrators liked dealing with them, and the fans loved them.

Jon moved through the ranks quickly, becoming Washington's head scout when he was only thirty-four. The politics within the non-public side of the NFL, he quickly learned, were brutal, but he learned how to play that game, too. It was all part of the competitive nature of the league. He made few enemies and had a knack for knowing when to be invisible. He fit in and became part of the greater dynamic. Soon other teams were scouting *him*. He was eventually offered the position of vice president of player personnel with the newly ordained Ravens. The Ravens' leadership was looking to fill some key roles with youthful, energetic individuals. It was not only a step up but an opportunity for him to return to his hometown. Since the Redskins didn't have a similar position to offer, they reluctantly let him go.

The Ravens weren't exactly a new team, but in fact the transplanted incarnation of the Cleveland Browns. In 1984, the Baltimore Colts moved to Indianapolis in the middle of a snowy March night. Then, in 1996, Art Modell, the Browns' owner at the time, was offered a sweet deal from the city of Baltimore. Modell uprooted his organization and headed for the East Coast, rechristening his club after the classic poem "The Raven" by Baltimore resident Edgar Allan Poe.

Hopes ran high until it became obvious the former Browns, who had struggled through the '90s thus far, didn't fare much better as the Ravens. In their first season they won only four games, suffering from overall mediocrity and the oppression of not one but two powerful rivals—the Broncos and the Jaguars. They didn't show much improvement the following season, either, winning only six games as they landed in last place in the AFC Central.

During those inaugural years, two key developments took place—Jon displayed tremendous ability as an evaluator of talent and as an administrator, and the Ravens' current general manager, Harry Colby, displayed tremendous ability as an incompetent idiot. He was a petty, power-crazed bureaucrat who insisted on having final decision over all personnel matters even though his experience in that area was minimal. He rarely heeded the advice of his underlings and even ignored the recommendations of his coaches, some of whom were veterans. The fact that most of the staff couldn't stand him didn't help much, either. So, at the end of three straight losing seasons, Modell showed Colby the door. His replacement, it was decided, would be the popular forty-two-year-old Sabino.

Jon inherited a bitter, war-weary group of players, front-office personnel, fans, and local sportswriters. The latter crucified him even before he made his first decision. And those who had toiled in the organization for years and were hoping to take the next step up the ladder began circling like vultures, watching for signs of vulnerability, waiting for a huge screwup so Jon would make a quick exit.

But he kept a level head and didn't take any of it personally. He understood the frustration and wanted to see the team succeed as much as anyone. He had studied the strengths and weaknesses of other teams through the years, collecting information that would be useful when this day came. He

allowed himself the typical freshman mistakes and learned valuable lessons from each one.

He soon came to learn that the title “general manager,” like most other titles in the NFL, was without clear definition and ambiguous at best. Some GMs were businessmen, others were football men. Some had strong skills in marketing and promotion and would busy themselves with issues concerning everything from merchandising to ticket sales, whereas others knew the X’s and the O’s. Some did a lot of the front-office hiring, others delegated it. Their duties varied from team to team, and the best ones focused on their strengths.

Jon decided to take this sensible route. Knowing his pedigree was in football personnel, he brought in good people to take care of the things he didn’t know rather than allow pride to rule the day and try to be a renaissance man. To some this was a sign of weakness. He hoped the men who had been largely responsible for bringing him here would interpret it as a sign of honesty, a dignified attempt to put the team’s interests before his own. He kept tabs on what was going on, but he allowed his directors to direct and didn’t meddle. And as his understanding of the pro football universe and his place in it began to crystallize, everything turned around.

In the first season under his guidance, which included a new head coach, two new scouts, a handful of new trainers, and even a new videotape librarian, the team went 7–9. Not a miraculous record, but a step in the right direction. The more fair-minded writers took note of the fact that a number of the players Jon had either signed from free agency or acquired through the draft were making significant contributions. One, a guard that Jon plucked from the third round, not only made the starting team but was elected to the Pro Bowl. Another, a defensive back, made the second team that same year. Even the most skeptical observers had to admit the Ravens were getting better.

During his first off season, Jon knew his central priority was improving the team’s offense, and in a slick free-agent maneuver that would eventually grow to historic proportions, he managed to lure hot young quarterback Michael Bell away from what seemed like a done deal with the Denver Broncos. It was on that day, the talking heads determined, that the Ravens became a force. Bell, who’d spent his first three seasons with the Jaguars, had

developed into a dynamic and confident leader with devastating pass accuracy and a slippery quickness that would have made Fran Tarkenton proud.

The next year the Ravens leaped to the top of their division with a 10–6 record and a wild card spot in the playoffs. Unfortunately their fledgling team was still too inexperienced to handle the pressures of playing on that level, and they were eliminated in the first round by the Jets. But they were on a roll, and the fans and media were rolling right along with them.

In Jon's third year, the Ravens made their statement. Completing their offense with a high-priced wide receiver and a pounding, powerhouse fullback, they stomped their way to a 9–0 record before losing their first game, by a field goal, to the Patriots. Two more losses to Miami and Tampa Bay completed an unbelievable 13–3 record and home advantage throughout the playoffs with a first round bye. Now Jon's name was being freely intermingled with the word "genius." His gift for creating powerful chemistries was no longer deniable. *Sports Illustrated* ran a nine-page article on him—"Savin' the Ravens: Are They Losers Nevermore?"

In spite of the fact that the team stalled on the road to the Super Bowl by losing 24–17 to the Broncos in the AFC Championship Game, one thing was clear—the Ravens were headed to the top. Less than a week after the season was over, experts across the nation were picking them as next year's favorites.

Their faith was well placed—in an unforgettable march to the championship, the Ravens' defense allowed fewer points in a single season than any other team in league history while compiling their second 13–3 record. Then they hurdled three playoff games and authored a 34–14 Super Bowl victory over the Buccaneers. The next season they reached the top again, crushing the Panthers 42–7.

Only six other teams had won back-to-back Super Bowls—the Steelers, the 49ers, the Cowboys, the Dolphins, the Packers, and the Broncos. And *none* had managed a third. Many said it couldn't be done; it was impossible in the free-agency era. Free agency had, after all, been implemented to arrest the development of dynasties. But somehow, it appeared, the Ravens were building one anyway. Either enthusiastically or bitterly, the fans and the media were forced to admit Baltimore looked like the best team again. A third straight championship was within reach, and Jon wanted it more than

anything he'd ever wanted in his life. It gave legitimacy to everything he'd ever done, justified all the hard work and years of toil he'd invested. It would lend solid, undeniable credibility to his "genius" tag and silence the few remaining doubters once and for all. His detractors were running out of things to say, his colleagues were boiling in their own jealousy (which, Jon could not help but admit, he enjoyed tremendously). To do something great in professional sports was one thing. To make *history* . . . well, that was something else. Sometimes just the thought of it kept him awake at night.

Best of all, it was *possible*—the core of the club was still together, they were all still young enough to remain in top form, and there had been no changes to the coaching staff or even the front-office personnel. The chemistry remained; it looked very much like the Baltimore Ravens were on their way to making history.

After all, only a cruel twist of fate could stop them.

The Ravens' offices were located in a magnificent modern facility in the Maryland suburb of Owings Mills, a twenty-minute ride from the stadium. They were well secured and off limits to the public.

At the front gate, Jon waved to Gary Stone, the Ravens' head of security. Stone possessed a deep loyalty to Jon, who hired him. They had been classmates in high school and kept in touch when they went to separate colleges. Stone joined the FBI shortly after graduation and traveled overseas for a few years. When he returned to the states, he left the agency to be a private investigator but found the work distasteful—too many sleazy divorce cases—and wanted out. Jon heard about this and happened to be looking for someone reliable and experienced to work for the team. He wanted either ex-military or ex-FBI, which was a common criteria when it came to security positions in the NFL. Stone was the perfect choice.

They briefly exchanged small talk, then Jon pulled through the gates and into his space near the front of the main building. Access required a security code on a keypad. Once inside, he turned everything on, then went to a small locker room reserved for the coaches and front-office echelon. It was similar in appearance to any scholastic locker room, with rows of steel boxes, wooden benches bolted to a tiled floor, and a set of showers.

Morning workouts had been part of his routine since he was a teenager. They were common not only to the players but to everyone who worked for an NFL club. The prevailing attitude throughout the league seemed to be that workouts were the proper way to start the day. They certainly were for him. A good workout provided the stamina he needed to get through the demanding twelve-to-sixteen-hour days without those slobby, low-energy periods. And the solitude afforded him the opportunity to collect his thoughts and focus on current priorities.

After he showered and dressed, he returned to his paneled office. It was less dramatic and luxurious than one might expect for a man in such an exalted, high-profile position. It was relatively small, with a walnut desk and a computer, a few framed photographs of Kelley and Lauren, and three large windows overlooking the practice field. There was no wet bar, no cabinet humididor filled with Cuban cigars, no plush deep-pile carpeting. Most general manager's offices were like this one. Contrary to common belief, high-ranking team executives weren't pampered by any means. The only true luxury item Jon had was a new Volvo sedan, and even that was leased by the team. If a GM wanted toys, he had to buy them himself.

Early April was draft time, and for a general manager that meant *busy*. As Jon got into his comfortable leather swivel chair, he remembered how he used to think when he was a kid, like any other ordinary fan, there was very little activity in a professional football club during the off season. It didn't take him long to realize this was dead wrong, especially for the administrators. Pro football had its "down time," but in positions like his it was only for a few weeks at the end of spring. Early September could also bring a simmering once everything was in place and attention turned to the players and the game. When that was over, however, a very different game began. This was the game the fans never saw and barely heard about. Perhaps it wasn't as glamorous, but it was just as tough, just as competitive, and the stakes were just as high. A young athlete's entire future was decided by the stroke of a pen. Millionaires were made in afternoon meetings. The power was tremendous and, for some, corrupting.

Preparation for each year's draft was particularly demanding. Technically the process began years before, when the scouts were reviewing players early

in their college careers. By January, a team would begin to assemble their draft board, which was usually nothing more than a collection of names on a wall. These were the players a team deemed capable of playing in the pros. Of the tens of thousands of college players in the country, a mere two hundred or so would be considered. A team had to base their choices on two factors—what they needed, and what was available. It was nothing more than a guessing game, plain and simple. In most cases, someone other than the head coach made the final personnel decisions, but usually that person conferred with his coaches when determining his teams most urgent needs. If a coach utilized a system that required a large tight end who could block, then such a tight end became that much more valuable in the draft. Putting together the final draft list was in part a slow process of elimination. Beyond the board of college prospects, a team would also assemble boards of both semipro players and those who were of pro quality but, for one reason or another, were not playing for any team at the moment. And, as with the college boys, each pro team had staff whose job it was to keep the information on all such players fully updated.

Jon took a heavy folder from his desk. On the first loose-leaf page was a neatly handwritten list of the Ravens' desired picks, arranged in order of preference. The desk was usually locked as a standard security measure—insider information on a team's draft was worth a small fortune and treated like a military secret during wartime. This year, however, he doubted anyone would be interested. Due to last year's second Super Bowl victory, the Ravens naturally had the last pick in the draft's first round. By that time most of the surprises would be over and most, if not all, of the premium talent would be gone. Every now and then a gem would slip into the lower rounds, but those cases were rare and usually the result of a player who greatly exceeded expectations rather than an oversight on the part of the scouts.

Jon tuned his radio to a '70s station and reviewed the list for what seemed like the hundredth time. There were two, actually—a "wish list" made up of players he'd love to get but didn't expect to, and then a "reality list," which he was studying now. He was still comfortable with it, sure that the player at the top would be available when their turn came. That player was Bryan Engler, a tackle from Florida State. The Ravens weren't in desperate need at that

position, but the coaches felt they lacked depth. One of their present tackles, Craig Little, would probably retire in the next year or two, and Frank James, another veteran in the same position, was also mumbling about calling it quits. So they needed to think about his replacement. Engler, if they could land him, would fill the role nicely.

Jon was thinking about the next player on the list, a wide receiver from North Carolina State, when the phone rang. Surprised, he glanced at his desk clock: 7:04. Odd that anyone would be calling this early, he thought. It wasn't often they had business so urgent that it needed attention at this hour.

"Hello? Oh, hiya, Tommy. What are you doing up at this hou—what's that? No, I haven't put on ESPN yet. Why?" When Jon heard and absorbed the fateful news, his stomach tightened. He asked if it was a joke.

It wasn't.