

THE ULTIMATE REALITY SHOW

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Chapter 1

Royal High School
Wheaton, Illinois

There were only a few moments of daylight left. The incoming fog had just blocked out the setting sun with all its splendid hues. The evening air was crisp as the lengthening spring days fought to tame the harsh Chicago winter.

It was Jack Forrest's favorite time of the year, the first week of daylight savings, the signal that summer was just around the corner—and the embryonic phase of next fall's football season. Spring training.

He stood on the sidelines, intensely surveying the field before him.

It was alive.

What any bystander would see as a mishmash of hormonal teenage boys running around with no apparent rhyme or reason, Jack viewed as an intricate ballet of drills and tests designed to help him determine the potential of his varsity football squad.

Jack looked down at his clipboard, straining to make out the roster of names in the growing darkness. He glanced up at the idle bank of lights hovering high above the field. He ached to turn them on and continue into the night, but it wasn't allowed with the recent budget cuts. Irritated, Jack brought the whistle up to his mouth and blew three short bursts.

"All right, men," he yelled. "That's it for today. Hit the showers!"

Fifty-seven teenagers dressed in purple gym shorts, white T-shirts, and purple panther helmets responded immediately. A few collided in the mayhem, giving Jack reason to chuckle at the spectacle.

"So, how does it look so far?"

Jack spun around, surprised to see Kathryn Williams walking up directly

behind him. She was the school's vice principal, Jack's immediate supervisor—and most recently a dinner companion a couple of times.

"It's hard to say this early," Jack said with a grin. Standing beside her, his six-foot frame dwarfed her by over nine inches. Her short brunette hair flipped in the breeze, but her normally bright and cheerful face held a serious frown. Jack instantly knew this was not a social call. Kathryn kept her eyes trained on him. "We need to talk."

"All right." Jack turned toward his assistant coach. "Chuck, would you mind making sure all the equipment's put away for me?"

"You got it, Coach," Chuck responded. "See you tomorrow."

Jack pulled the Panther cap off his head, scratched at his messed-up hair and turned back to Kathryn. "What's up?"

"C'mon, let's have a seat."

She led Jack to the stands and settled in the second row of bleachers. Jack stood beside her, shivered, and zipped up his jacket, unsure if the sudden chill came from the settling fog or the sense of dread coming overc him.

"You've only got two more days," Kathryn warned, looking out over the emptying field.

Jack drew in a long breath, then plopped down on the bench beside her, letting out a slow sigh.

"You knew this was coming ..."

"I know," Jack muttered. "I just hoped it would've gone away."

"You're not the only one."

Jack glanced away, trying to collect his thoughts as the last of his players walked toward the locker room.

They were alone.

Jack turned to her. "Will I still be able to coach this fall?"

"Coach?" She met his gaze. "I'm not even sure you'll have a job the rest of this semester."

Jack looked out toward the empty field again. "You know how much these kids mean to me."

"The special board meeting Wednesday. It all hinges on how you respond."

Jack blinked and bit at his upper lip. "Right ... how I respond."

"I need to know, Jack. Jerry is all over me about this." Kathryn bore into him with pleading eyes.

Jack knew the words the principal wanted to hear—needed to hear. But he couldn't bring himself to say them, even to save his job.

The awkward silence was interrupted by a black Chevy Suburban racing through the main gates from the opposite end of the field. It kicked up a cloud of dust as it sped across the dirt track that surrounded the grass.

"Hey, you can't drive on the field!" Jack yelled, relieved at the interruption. He bolted from the stands with Kathryn following right behind him. Before they could set foot onto the dirt, the distinctive sound of a helicopter snapped their attention skyward.

Through the growing fog, a shaft of light bore down on them, as the thumping of rotor blades grew increasingly louder. From the corner of his eye, Jack noticed the Suburban come to a stop, followed by what looked like a camera crew piling out and heading his direction.

"What's going on here?" Jack yelled to no one in particular.

The chopper came in just above the goalpost, making its way to the center of the football field. The sound was deafening as the blades sent a torrent of wind slapping Jack with stinging bits of sand and nearly blowing his cap off.

The helicopter rotated, revealing the call letters of the local ABC television affiliate before dropping softly to the grass directly on top of the Royal Panthers logo at the fifty-yard line.

With the rotors still spinning, the back door of the Bell Jet Ranger opened and a man stepped out, keeping his head low as he trotted away from the chopper.

"Isn't that Vince Sinclair?" Kathryn's voice was excited.

“Vince who?”

“You know, from The Ultimate Challenge.”

As he came closer, Jack recognized the popular television host—more from the promos than the actual series. The Ultimate Challenge was the latest hit on ABC. It was unique among reality shows because the participants were pulled from their everyday lives without warning. Jack’s brow creased as he noticed another camera crew step out of the helicopter behind Vince and head in their direction.

The TV host stopped a few paces from them. Jack thought he looked younger than he appeared on television. Dark hair, well built, a warm, inviting smile, handsome in a rugged way that would attract women yet not be a threat to men—Vince seemed to be the perfect television host.

The crew stepped up just behind him and focused a camera and a high-powered light right at Jack. He was blinded for an instant, blinking as he brought his right hand up to shield his eyes.

Vince brushed through his wind-whipped hair with his fingers, then waited a beat for the crew from the Suburban to get their camera trained on him. He cleared his throat just as the rotor blades from the helicopter finally came to a stop.

The stadium suddenly felt deathly quiet.

“Good evening.” Vince Sinclair’s deep voice echoed off the empty bleachers. “My name is Vince Sinclair. I see we’ve arrived a bit late. We’d hoped to catch you in the middle of practice. Coach Forrest, isn’t it?”

He knows who I am, Jack realized as the celebrity’s eyes locked on his.

He’s here for me!

Jack gulped. “I’m Jack Forrest.” He was embarrassed to hear his voice quiver.

His hand was taken in a firm handshake as Vince broke into a warm smile. “Congratulations, Jack. You’ve been selected.”

Jack’s heart skipped a beat, maybe two.

“You are the next participant on The Ultimate Challenge—with the chance to

win ten million dollars." Vince accented each syllable, playing to the camera while trying to draw a huge reaction from Jack.

Jack felt his cordial smile collapse and his stomach lurch. Somewhere in the mental fog, he heard Kathryn mutter something, but it just didn't register.

"Ten million ..." Jack stammered. "I thought your show gave away a million dollars."

"We used to," Vince answered, his smile taking on a mischievous gleam. "But it seems a million dollars just doesn't go that far these days."

Jack shook his head in bewilderment. "I'm sorry, there must be some mistake. I haven't asked to be on your show."

"No one ever has."

Jack inhaled deeply, then slowly let out the breath of air, hoping it would relax him a bit.
It didn't.

"I know you're shocked," Vince said soothingly. "That's part of the game. What you have to do right now is decide if you're going to play."

"How can I do that, I don't even know what the game is?"

Vince laughed. "That's also part of the game."

He paced a few feet to his right, then motioned over his shoulder toward the helicopter. "Jack, you'll step into that chopper and be flown to where The Ultimate Challenge will begin. We'll bring you back in seven days—or less, depending on your success."

Jack found it difficult to catch his breath. Why him? How could they have possibly picked a single, twenty-seven-year-old football coach from the outskirts of Chicago?

"The winner could be you, Jack. Ten million dollars."

He was speechless.

"Sounds like a great opportunity, Jack," Kathryn said beside him.

This guy is really serious, Jack thought as the reality of his predicament began to sink in. I can't just fly off in that chopper. This whole thing is nuts!

Vince broke the silence as if reading Jack's mind. "For a chance at ten million bucks, you're just going to have to trust me."

Trust you? You just landed that stupid helicopter in the middle of my football field, and you expect me to trust you?

"I need a little time to think this over."

"Time, huh?"

Vince looked down at his watch. Jack couldn't keep his eyes from darting back and forth from Vince to the camera's lens just over the host's shoulder. He could feel his pulse racing.

Vince looked back up at him with a smile, then his next comment nearly made Jack's knees buckle. "Your first challenge is that you must decide to get into that chopper in the next sixty seconds or you forfeit your position."

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