

RUN & SHOOT

By Jay Busbee

The story so far: The Deep South University Bootleggers are one of the SEC's football powerhouses. They've begun the 2009 season 2-0, but not without withering criticism from their head coach, Rip Thackston. Late in the evening after a win at Ole Miss, Thackston is standing on the practice field when headlights approach him ... and don't slow down. ([Click here for the R&S home page.](#))

Chapter 3: Cut Short *Texas Tech @ DSU*

Two weeks at college, and Byron Delahanty was already on the verge of getting some strange. School ruled.

He and the girl he'd met at the cheesy little dorm mixer – Kourtney? Kasey? Kaitlin? Something like that – were sneaking now across the dark back forty of DSU, the territory of football and baseball practice fields. Neither one of them had any idea where they were going, having gotten completely turned around in the darkness and addled by some low-end grain punch somebody had whipped up in a trash can. Byron vaguely remembered taking two hits off somebody's Louisville Slugger-sized spliff and becoming obsessed with Kourtney/Kasey/Kaitlin's ass. Absurdly obsessed. Monks-writing-Bibles-by-hand obsessed.

He had no idea how he'd managed to talk her out of the party; his specialty was statistics, and his usual mode of conversation was virtual, via IM and email and messageboard. But he dug deep, found a reservoir of game he didn't know he possessed, and slathered her with waves of solid-gold bullshit, and next thing he knew, she was out here with him, leaning against the chain-link fence that surrounded an ink-black field.

"Is this the football field?" Kourtney/Kasey/Kaitlin wondered, her chin resting on her forearms atop the fence as she stared out over the field. This pose had the dead-bang perfect effect of forcing her to jut her hips out just so, and Byron was lost in reverent contemplation.

"Hm? What?" He replayed the last few seconds back, TiVo-style, in his mind, and assumed a pose of worldly knowledge. "Nah. That's not the real field."

The real stadium has about a hundred thousand seats. You know, on game days it becomes the sixth – “*Kill the trivia, Dexter*, a voice inside him screamed, and he halted what could have turned into a twenty-minute disquisition on DSU’s Augustus Stadium.

“You ever think about streaking across a football field? Wouldn’t that be cool?”

“For me? No. Major not cool. For you, though ...” Was this really happening? At this pace, he’d run through his entire library of high school fantasies by January.

She fixed him with a knowing grin. “Not so fast, slick. I’m not that easy.” And with that, she vaulted up and over the fence in one smooth motion. “You want to get an eyeful, you’ve gotta keep up.” She peeled off her top, tossed it over the fence at him, and took off running into the darkness.

“Oh sweet Jesus, thank you, thank you,” Byron whispered as he clambered up and over the fence. He thought about ditching a few clothes of his own, and then sanity returned and he started running.

From there, it was like the world’s greatest scavenger hunt. First one shoe, then another, then a bra, then a pair of inside-out jeans, then a scream –

The sound echoed across the field, and Byron was completely disoriented – for starters, K-girl had been running a broken-field pattern, and he couldn’t quite figure out where the shriek had come from.

“OhmygodcomeherecomeHERE!” she screamed again, and distantly Byron realized she didn’t know his name either. That stung a bit.

Then he tracked her down, and thoughts of a bruised ego vanished in a vision of a topless, thong-clad beauty. “Hey, baby –” he began, but when she covered up with one arm, he realized with a sinking feeling that this particular little fantasy wasn’t going to play out along its proper course.

“I tripped over somebody!” K-girl gasped. Byron recognized that she had that heartbreaking sound to her voice, the sound of adrenaline flushing out any and all alcohol buzz. And he also recognized that if somebody else was out here, he was going to be expected to kick some ass. Great.

He took off his shirt and tossed it to her. It seemed the right thing to do, and he recognized that with a little chivalry he might still be able to wrangle some thank-you sex. Not as good as anonymous wildcat I-don’t-want-or-need-to-know-your-name sex, but you take what you can get.

And now he began surveying the field around them. He took out his phone and backlit the screen, sweeping it back and forth across the green grass. The tiny blue screen only lit up about three feet in front of him, so when a khaki-clad leg popped into his view, he shrieked a little himself.

K-girl was practically wrapped around his throat, though, and didn’t seem to notice. He took the opportunity to toughen up, and turned around to grin at her.

“Check it out!” he whispered. “It’s somebody drunk off their ass!”

K-girl giggled, and pushed at the leg with her bare foot. "Hey, buddy!" she said. "This ain't a hotel! Get a room!" Byron nodded in approval; you laughed at women's jokes no matter how lame.

"Hold on, I'm going to get a picture," he said, and he walked around to the side of the prone figure and knelt down close. He stuck his phone out, popped off a flash, and then held it up to look at his handiwork. And the first thing he noticed was ...

"Boy, that guy was a sloppy eater," K-girl said. "Look at all that sauce all over his shirt. And pants. And the ground."

A cold wave welled up in Byron's gut, and all thoughts of bagging K-girl vanished from his mind. He reeled and vomited up the evening's hot dogs, very nearly hitting the corpse of Coach Rip Thackston.

And when he'd wiped his mouth and composed himself, Byron did the only thing he could think to do:

He posted the picture on Twitter for the entire world to see.

Dr. Veronica Albert heard the sirens - lots and lots of sirens - but didn't bother even looking out the window. She hadn't been here at DSU long, only two years now, but she knew enough not to think too hard about what might be going on out there in the strangeness of a college-town Saturday night. She had papers to grade, reams and reams of papers.

Veronica - do not call her "Ronnie," no, absolutely not - had somehow inherited the thankless task of overseeing the academic eligibility of the DSU football team. This, in addition to her usual duties as an economics professor. She had quickly determined that she could give tests to the squirrels outside her window and get a roughly equivalent rate of passage to the football team.

Seriously, look at this one - it had the penmanship of a fourth-grader. This one was written in crayon, for heaven's sake; this one had stains on it that Veronica didn't want to think about, and ... did somebody take a *bite* out of this one?

Veronica threw down the papers and lifted her glasses to massage the bridge of her nose. She was attractive in a way that her brother called "academically hot." Put her in Vegas, or even a typical DSU-area bar, and she'd go unnoticed. But plopped her down in the midst of a departmental meeting, among a dozen hornily repressed academic tweeds, and suddenly she became the girl with the most cake.

Of course, she hadn't realized that she'd been getting played as well, that these sweating eggheads had designs on manipulating her ambition for their own grimy little ends. They didn't want sex from her - well, not first thing - no, what they wanted was her time and her talents, her skills to handle the scut work that the university foisted upon them.

That meant being the football team's academic advisor. If, as the immortal Cactus Jack Garner once said, the vice presidency of the United States wasn't

worth a bucket of warm piss, being a football team's academic advisor didn't even warrant the bucket. She'd had to oversee work on thousands of papers with titles like "Football and Pussy: Comparison and Contrast." (Opening sentence: "Football and pussy are very different, but also very similar.") She'd intended to keep count of how many times she was pushed, prodded, cajoled, nudged, threatened, advised or warned about how to handle the case of this or that idiot football star. She'd given up at 100 – after she hit that mark in six days.

Veronica didn't blame the kids, not even the ones who, to paraphrase the old line about Terry Bradshaw, couldn't spell DSU if you spotted them the D and the S. They'd been raised since birth to believe that education wasn't a road to riches, but a roadblock. That studying was for wusses. That literacy was for little people. And it all worked out just fine for them ... until they hit 22 and were staring at 60 years of life with absolutely no job-worthy skills. Not even Wal-Mart responds well to "can sack the shit out of a quarterback" on a job application.

She'd been at this gig for eighteen months now, and had dialed back the educational-crusader act by more than half. Nobody liked sanctimony in an educator; in these anti-intellectual times, preaching the value of knowledge was like preaching the value of kissing your grandmother. Everybody knew it was the right thing to do, and everybody did everything they could to avoid it.

So Veronica picked her battles. And right now, she was deep in the midst of one with Davon Jeffries. He had been one of her better students – relatively speaking, of course; he'd struggled like a drowning man just to keep his head above D-level work. But suddenly, his grades had dropped off a cliff. He wasn't just getting Fs, he was getting F-minuses. His work wasn't just subpar, it was subterranean. And since Davon was one of the most important members of the DSU defense, she was getting ovary-crushing pressure to right the ship with Davon.

She stared at his latest biology case study, a paper which documented his attempts to first dissect a frog (using a steak knife rather than a scalpel) and then, since the dissection went south, his accounts of how he breaded and ate the frog's legs. ("They made me vommit. I was vommiting and ~~shi~~ pooping for 2 days.")

There was an answer here, she knew it. But she just couldn't concentrate with all those damn sirens out there ...

The joint was called Big Box, and from the outside, it certainly looked the role of the gargantuan, soulless retail establishment, the kind that choked the life out of the little mom-and-pop stores fore miles around. But look closer. There wasn't a single shopping cart anywhere on the premises. The parking lot was filled with pickups, lowriders, SUVs, chopped and channeled rides ... but absolutely no minivans. And the music that pulsed from within Big Box wasn't

soothing, consumer-friendly lite rock; no, it was a stomping, hammering, shake-your-ass-till-it's-horizontal beat.

Step inside the doors, and through darkness and seizure-inducing flashing lights you'd see the familiar presence of a greeter in a polyester vest, yes, but this greeter had arms the size of sewer pipes. And yes, you'd hear a voice over the PA broadcasting two-for-one specials on "Candy" and "Chocolate" in Aisle 13. And there'd be a long row of cash registers stretching into infinity ... but unlike in your typical mega-marts, each of these registers had a shockingly beautiful woman writhing in pleasure, throwing off more and more clothes with every verse.

Yes, Big Box was the superstore of strip clubs.

The brainchild of two female DSU grads who sussed out an unmet need in the community (a gentleman's club where the patrons could relax with better-than-even odds that they would avoid getting robbed or killed), seized a choice empty building, and took advantage of a loophole in local government that didn't specifically prevent adult establishments. Big Box did all the things its superstore brethren did --- hired locally, promoted green practices, donated to charity and community efforts - it just did so with a pair of 36-DD's to go along with the friendly smile.

Big Box was a favorite of the Bootleggers, since its vast environs provided them with a near-anonymous haven away from the prying, desperate eyes of the rest of Shepherd's Ferry and the national media. The VIP section of Big Box was the area once used for women's clothing, and the dressing rooms still stood, providing a ready opportunity to sample a range of merchandise. Limit three items in the dressing room at once, of course.

Tonight, with the sting and throb of the Ole Miss game still deep in their bones, most of the Bootleggers were simply sprawled out on half a dozen couches in the VIP section, waving languidly at the dancers as they crawled from player to player.

Jimbo and Nguyen stretched out across one couch, their heads nearly touching, their feet thrown over opposite arms of the couch, and watched a soundless episode of "Golden Girls" playing on a 42-inch HD TV on the wall near them.

"Those ladies were ten kinds of horny on that show," Jimbo said. "I used to rub one out to 'em every day after school."

Nguyen twisted to look at Jimbo. "You are shitting me. Those grandmas got you off?"

"Dude, I was in high school. The wind got me off." He waved at the screen. "What can I say? Unlike most of the girls I went to school with, when these chicks talked about doing it, you know they'd walked the walk."

"The bowlegged walk. Would be like throwing a hot dog down a hallway."

"Like I cared back then. I used to get hard when the paper towel commercial came on where the mom has to reach up to wipe the top shelves. Oh, the way those mom jeans curved around her ass ..."

Nguyen just shook his head. "You were one pathetic-ass little bitch, Jimbo."

"Hey, that was ninth grade. By 12th, I was landing ladies twice my age. This one time, it was straight out of a porn movie. She comes into the coffee shop and says, 'I need someone to grind -'"

Nguyen twisted around on the sofa to look at Jimbo. "That's it?"

Jimbo waved him quiet. "Dude. Look over there."

In the darkness, near a rack of shelves that still held a few stray automotive products, Nguyen could see an earnest-looking young man in spectacles and a suit that was about half a size too large for him, nursing a drink with the bar napkin still wrapped around its base. And he was staring right at them.

"Great," Nguyen sighed, "another big fan." He lifted a hand to wave the guy over and get the fawning out of the way, but Jimbo slapped it down.

"Dude, no," he said. "That's no fan. He's got the stink of NCAA all over him."

Nguyen peered over the edge of the sofa. "That weed's an investigator?"

"I've been hearing rumors," Jimbo said. "And if there was one here, he'd be getting an eyeful." He motioned across the lounge toward Wray Mattiece, who was surrounded by four of the most astonishingly beautiful women ever to grace Big Box - or Shepherd's Ferry, for that matter. Each one was dead-set on becoming Mrs. Mattiece, and each one was angling to give a demonstration of what Wray could expect on their wedding night.

"Shit, dude, I've got to get out of here," Nguyen said, setting his beer down and rolling to the floor like the Big Box was under attack. "I can't lose my scholarship ..."

"Hold on, man," Jimbo said, handing Nguyen back his beer. "I've got an idea. What say we go a little 24 on this guy?"

"We're going to torture him?"

"If it comes to that. But we'll start by discrediting him." He motioned at a dancer who was just clambering down off a display of women's sweaters. "Hey, Krystle."

"It's pronounced *Cristal*," the dancer said as she tried to tuck herself back into a Girl Scout uniform.

"Whatever. Hey, got a job for you. See that guy over there? Lonely, kind of dorky, bad dresser?"

"Going to have to narrow it down a bit more than that."

"In the suit."

"Oh, yeah. He looks rich."

“He is. He’s got tons of daddy’s money to spend. What say you and the ladies take him on a good old-fashioned sleigh ride?”

Krystle narrowed her eyes at Jimbo. “What’s in it for me?”

“Well, lots of sweaty fives and tens, I’d imagine,” Jimbo said. “Plus, I’ll get you two tickets to the Florida game.”

“Four. I want to bring my grandkids.”

Jimbo paused for just the slightest instant. “...Four it is. Now get on it.”

And she did. With gusto.

“Wow,” Nguyen said. “It’s like watching a snake eat a mouse.”

“Witness: compromised,” Jimbo said. “Now, what say we get another drink—”

“WHOOOOOO!!!” The full-throated bellow echoed throughout the club, and both Jimbo and Nguyen turned to see its source.

“What kind of low-class dumbass—” Nguyen began, then saw a guy in a University of Florida jersey standing in the middle of Aisle 23 hollering to the heavens. “Oh. Of course.”

The guy was wearing a No. 15 Gators jersey with the name “Tebowner” monogrammed across the back. He had a beer in one hand and a cell in another, and he was doing a shuffling motion somewhere between a dance and a seizure.

“He’s gone, he’s gone, he’s gone!” Tebowner shouted. He beckoned his companions over and held up the phone’s glowing screen. As each one looked at its image, their eyes widened in horror and they turned away. And with each shocked reaction, Tebowner only laughed more.

“The hell?” Jimbo said, then waved at Tebowner as he passed. “Fella. What’s up? Who’s gone?”

“Rip Thackston, man!”

Nguyen and Jimbo exchanged stares. “Coach got fired?” Nguyen said. It didn’t make any sense. They were 2-0, looking solid and –

“Not fired, you idiots!” Tebowner hollered. “Dead!”

He held up his phone, and on it Jimbo and Nguyen could very clearly see the photo Byron Delahanty had taken just five minutes earlier across campus, the photo showing Rip Thackston’s broken and bloody body.

In later testimony, Nguyen would say he couldn’t recall anything after watching Jimbo order up the dancer for the NCAA investigator. (Said investigator was absolutely no help, having been found shackled in a Balinese jack basket during the ensuing melee.) What security cameras showed, though, was Nguyen pile-driving Tebowner straight into a line of shelving that cascaded over like dominos, taking out patrons and dancers alike across half the store. It was a bloody, ugly brawl, one that resulted in forty hospital trips and a hundred large in damage.

And thanks to the intrepid camera-phone video skills of Tebowner, it was all worldwide before sunrise.

Next: Open Date