

Chapter 1

On a brisk October afternoon, Wally Gibbs, the journalism school's first distinguished Clifford P. Stohlman Professor of Advertising, and Dean Cap Hodges sat in the bleachers in Carolina University's Sunny Dew Athletic Park watching a field hockey scrimmage.

The crowd was sparse, but field hockey had never been a big draw at CU. It had gasped along in recent years, subsisting on the table scraps of the athletic fund and stoic alumni support. A powerhouse team from Australia passing through America during their spring break had put the word out, welcoming any and all challenges. The CU coach was all too eager.

When the Lady Yamsters in Pinehaven, North Carolina, accepted her invitation, the Australian coach couldn't help but wonder what their mascot looked like. A yellow hamster? In fact, "Yamster" was the school's attempt to anthropomorphize North Carolina's state vegetable, the sweet potato. By the time CU had gotten around to selecting a mascot early in the twentieth century, the other state schools had taken all the good ones, from the state insect (honey bee) to the state mammal (gray squirrel). What remained were the state fruit and vegetable, and the Fighting Sweet Potatoes were clearly more intimidating than the Fighting Scuppernon Grapes.

The Australian coach was disappointed to hear the mascot was currently on the road. With no mascot to fire up the home crowd, the Aussies were trouncing the hapless Lady Yamsters. Hindered by their requisite uniforms and splintered sticks, the CU players inadvertently kept hooking each other's orange skirts and raising them above their waists. It was not so much a sporting event as an underwear fashion show. The CU coach was flipping frantically through the conference rulebook, trying to find something that would either disqualify the foreigners or force them to swap their spandex for skirts.

Wally Gibbs leaned toward Dean Hodges. “This is the most ass I’ve ever seen without paying a cover charge,” he said out of the side of his mouth. The dean did not react. “Seriously, Hodges, is every game like this? Who needs cheerleaders when the players are serving it up on the field?”

Wally settled back and pawed through one of his suitcases for a cigarette. The luggage accompanied him nearly everywhere. A mismatched set, one vintage cracked leather and the other fluorescent green vinyl, the pair served as his briefcase, his wallet, his file cabinet and his pockets. They contained every receipt, every phone number he jotted down and every idea fragment he ever had, along with his BlackBerry, micro-cassette recorder, matchbooks, loose change and several legal pads. He felt they lent an air of eccentricity to his character, a trait people would surely associate with a genius. Had he used grocery bags or a shopping cart, the effect would have been decidedly different.

Watching this protracted search, Dean Hodges asked, “Professor Gibbs, you do know why you’re here, don’t you?”

Wally perched a cigarette on his lower lip, lit it and dragged so hard his cheeks became pits. “Remind me,” he said over the tops of his horn rims. If he had learned nothing else in the corporate world, it was that the less he said up front, the less he would have to backpedal on later.

The dean smiled broadly behind his aviators. “School spirit, of course.” His smile quickly faded. “Athletics exert an enormous influence over this school. Years after they graduate, our alumni don’t subscribe to the school newspaper. They don’t flip through their old textbooks. But they do follow their teams with a passion. And guess what? That brings in money. Like that monstrosity right there.”

Dean Hodges flicked a contemptuous hand at the scoreboard, emblazoned with a colossal Sunny Dew logo that dwarfed the words “Carolina University” beneath it. This was the result of last summer’s controversial decision by the Athletic Department to boost revenue by selling the naming rights to its campus venues.

First up on the block was Watkins Field, the aging outdoor stadium used by the school’s soccer, lacrosse and field hockey teams. If the experiment failed, at least it wouldn’t have tarnished the school’s twin cash cows of basketball and football.

Ultimately, the rights went to the citrus soft drink Sunny Dew, bottled in North Carolina. The company had no known scandals, no tainting episodes, the name was cheerful and the colors of its packaging were complementary to the school’s own. Not coincidentally, Sunny Dew could also be sold at all events in 32-ounce plastic cups bearing its logo—at an eighty percent markup.

“This is what we’re dealing with, Professor,” the dean continued wearily. “Since the budget cutbacks, the school has found creative ways to supplement. Apparently, at any price.” He straightened himself up with a new resolve. “So, why you’re here, why I force myself and our staff to regularly attend these kinds of events is to show the journalism school’s support for our teams. When the corporate contracts dry up, when the naming rights to every last tree on the quad have been sold, I want the administration to show us a little mercy when they pull out the axe.”

The dean’s fiery performance entranced Wally. Hodges was an imposing figure: a tall, broad-shouldered African-American in his late 50s with a gray-tinged flattop and a severe mustache that turned down at right angles on either side of his mouth. His square-jawed expression was usually stern, though Wally had heard he had a wicked sarcastic streak. He also heard he had briefly played pro football before his tour in Vietnam had left him with an artificial knee and the nickname “Cap.”

Personally, Wally thought the corporate-sponsored scoreboard was an inspired if misguided attempt to hit the students where they lived. It advertised a harmless product to a captive audience. When there was one, that is; based on the turnout for today’s scrimmage, Sunny Dew’s investment-per-student was egregiously steep. And when the stadium emptied out and the scoreboard was turned off, zero ROI. He felt there must be a more efficient way to reach these consumers of tomorrow, the materialistic little go-getters who would soon be lining up in droves to trade their meager paychecks for fruit-flavored vodka and hybrid cars. In fact, he was sure of it.

“I’m here for more than that, Dean.” Wally said. He gestured broadly with his cigarette butt, then flicked it under the bleachers. “I can help get rid of all this baloney.”

Dean Hodges smiled. “Does this have something to do with your research? I would love to hear how that’s coming along. The rest of the board would, too. Next week, isn’t it?” He reached over and clapped Wally on the shoulder. “The way things are going, our campus is going to look like the Vegas strip. I would love to find a way to stop it before a beer logo ends up on every diploma.”

Wally had nearly forgotten about his supposed ongoing research project, as he had yet to actually put any thought into it. Once again, Wally had bettered his position by keeping his mouth shut.

As part of his endowment, he was contractually bound—in addition to his teaching duties—to deliver “efforts whose aim is to measurably improve the mass communications process.” For its part, the Stohlman Foundation provided a comfortable salary, housing, an assistant and

research funding to be used at the holder's discretion. The last item made Wally positively giddy: an open checkbook! The tenure review committee evaluated his progress twice yearly, with their first meeting just a week away. Wally was fairly sure he could dodge it, yet at some point he knew he needed to deliver at least a topic. And here Hodges had gone and handed him one.

Granted, he would need to work backwards from the dean's ambitious goal and come up with a way to realize it, even theoretically. That was the beauty of the wording in his contract: his "efforts" could be just that, with no practical application. Ah, academia!

"Exciting things, Dean Hodges, exciting things are on the horizon." He stood up and twitched his leg as his bladder began to assert itself.

The dean rose up to meet him, standing a full head taller. "I'm skeptical, Gibbs, but hell, that's my nature. As much as I doubt it can be done, I'd be delighted if you're the man who can do it."

Just then, an errant ball hurtled directly towards Wally's skull, the result of a miscalculated shot by a CU midfielder. Hodges' right arm rocketed out in front of Gibbs and swallowed the ball in his massive grip. Wally heard the slap of ball against palm before he was even aware of the situation. Cap tossed it back onto the field.

Wally was genuinely grateful. "Whoa—nice one. How'd you see that, anyway? I completely missed it."

Cap shrugged. "Protecting my assets. I'm watching you, Professor." Wally gave him a sidelong glance as the dean corrected, "*Out* for you—watching out for you. You're on my team, right? We're all in this together."

Whatever, Wally thought. "Sure. And thanks again." He started down the steps, then turned back. "I owe you one. Can I buy you a Sunny Dew?"

Chapter 2

Wally Gibbs was an idea man.

Sometimes the ideas would come from out of nowhere, plucked from the heavens and arriving fully formed. Often they would come from people, people who frequently thought the ideas were their own, but Wally recognized half-baked notions for what they were. And if he subsequently spent the time and energy to transform someone else's half-baked notion into his own fully-baked bundt cake, complete with a vanilla glaze, then the idea was rightfully Wally's. His brain was brimming with intellectual ingredients carelessly tossed aside by their original owners and into Wally's mixing bowl. After all, one man's discards could form the basis of another man's career.

Wally's career, at least the quarter-century of it spent at Food Barn, Chicago's third-largest grocery chain, had abruptly ended after upper management had gotten wind of his latest endeavor.

He had tried to sell the database for Food Barn's customer loyalty program (the Price Watchdog Network, or "PAWN" for short) under the table to Quail-on-a-Stick, a frozen, boneless, seasoned quail meat product sold on a skewer, eight to a box. By cross-referencing weight and age, Wally had produced a list of 500,000 overweight seniors who would appreciate the product's low sodium content. Cleverly, this same list could also be sold to a snack cake company.

Bouncing back was just a matter of reinventing himself. Wally had heard somewhere that those who can't do--or are legally prohibited from doing so for a one-year period--teach.

Wally had built a career on bullshit, and could sling it with the best of them, but teaching perplexed him. He was not prepared for the staggering amount of information he was expected to impart to one hundred Journalism 170 students twice weekly. Wally functioned better in sound bites. To a man coming from the world of the thirty-second

commercial, seventy-five minutes was an eternity.

Deliverance arrived in late September in the form of Anjali Sawhney, a journalism grad student and also his assigned teacher's assistant. Anjali was to be his Girl Friday while she completed her master's work. Not only had Anjali taken J170, and fairly recently, she had completed a veritable laundry list of other courses beginning with "J" that Wally thought would come in handy.

She had a tendency to look down when she spoke, which was infrequently. Of Indian descent, Anjali was light-skinned and petite with a thick black braid that hung down her back like a gym class rope. Wally didn't peg her for an athlete, but her attire usually consisted of sweatpants and a hoodie bearing the school's logo. Most of Wally's female students were spilling out of their tops and looked as if they had used corn oil and a vacuum pump to squeeze into their tourniquet-like shorts, but Anjali was essentially amorphous.

Wally was unsure of how to make the best use of her. Certainly she could get him coffee, intercept calls from Dean Hodges and such, but how could she further his own ambitions? After a few weeks of cautiously dancing around each other, Anjali proved her worth. When Wally returned to class from an unplanned bathroom break, his initial indignation quickly surrendered to relief.

Anjali was teaching the class.

"What's this?" he asked, scratching his straw-colored goatee.

"I'm sorry, sir," she said, "but someone had an interesting question. We were just kicking it around until you got back."

"Well. Please continue." Anjali led the students in a boisterous dialogue of whether advertising influenced popular culture or merely reflected it. Wally learned quite a bit.

She apologized afterward. "That wasn't supposed to happen, Dr. Gibbs; I'm just your assistant." He smiled at the sound of his new, self-appointed title. Though Wally held no advanced degrees, he was appalled at the thought of earning the respect of a bunch of snot-nosed Xbox junkies and had therefore exaggerated his academic credentials a tad.

"True, and we can't let the students think otherwise, but you really got them to open up today. When I'm talking to them, it's like a roomful of canned hams."

"Maybe they're intimidated by your reputation," she offered.

"Probably," he agreed, "but I'd like you to take the reins for awhile. You can help bring my material down to their level. I'm sure the experience would serve your thesis well. That is, if you don't mind."

"It'd be an honor, sir. But you never gave me a syllabus; I don't know what comes next."

Wally laughed and winked at her through his tinted horn-rims. “Who does? Just wing it, Anjali. It’s always worked for me.”

By the end of Wally’s first semester at Carolina University, Anjali had unofficially taught two full sections of his J170 class and was slated for another three come the spring. Being released from the tedium of lesson plans, lecture notes and paper grading left “Dr.” Wally Gibbs with inordinate amounts of free time, which he devoted exclusively to his most recent scheme.

•••

Before it had a name, a beta test or single subject, much less fifty, Project Argus had been the most revealing thing to come out of Wally Gibbs’ latest colonoscopy. He thought it ironic that his best idea in years, maybe ever, had occurred to him while a long, flexible tube snaked its way through his large intestine. Maybe having your head up your ass wasn’t such a bad thing after all.

Wally’s smoking habit, poor diet and stressful career had resulted in a gastrointestinal nuisance known as Irritable Bowel Syndrome. With no known cause, IBS plagues its victims with either crippling constipation or propulsive diarrhea. Wally was blessed with the latter. Medication, when he remembered to take it, did little to firm things up downstairs. As a cruel sidebar, Wally’s IBS was also accompanied by bouts of volatile flatulence. This was but one of the reasons he and his wife Janys no longer shared a bedroom.

His doctor insisted on a colonoscopy every other year. IBS by itself was undoubtedly irksome, but not fatal. However, Wally was shaping up to be a prime candidate for polyps, cancer, ulcerative colitis or Crohn’s disease, any of which could lay him out for good. Faced with the prospect of death--or worse, a colostomy bag--Wally endured these invasive procedures with a steely grimace.

He viewed them as an opportunity for uninterrupted, heavily sedated introspection. As the colonoscope looked inside him, he looked inside himself, searching for ways to better his position or at least outshine his colleagues.

This particular colonoscopy had been scheduled after Wally feigned severe abdominal pain on the morning of his presentation to the tenure review committee. A trifle pathetic, perhaps, but it bought him another five months.

Project Argus was the product of part Demerol, part desperation. As he lay on his side, knees drawn up, Wally racked his sluggish brain for ways to bring shape to Cap Hodges’ noble wish for an ad-free campus.

Anjali was still an enigma to him. She handled his class assuredly, but her own research confused him. Her attempts to explain it to him left him woozy and checking his watch--something about “women and media.” Could be a sculpture of Oprah, for all he knew. When he accepted the job, he knew the terms, but he figured he’d worry about it later. Sometimes ignoring a problem did indeed make it go away. But not this time.

His area of expertise was extremely narrow: grocery store marketing. Not the first set of words that came to mind when one decided to “measurably improve the mass communications process.” But surely there was a way to put a twist on something he already knew. After all, he was a much-vaunted authority on the subject of brand loyalty. For all the acclaim, though, Wally thought grocery store loyalty was about as genuine as Miss December’s everlasting love for Hugh Hefner. It all came down to your latest trick: who’s got the better coupons, who’s giving it two-for-one, who has the best free cookies to clam up the whining toddlers. That and shelf space.

As the scope blew a rush of air into his colon to expand its walls, Wally saw the future with a clarity he had never experienced before.

The days of traditional brand loyalty were over. Consumers were too distracted and fickle to pledge monogamy to a single cereal. It was time—and Wally would swear he heard a clarion call of trumpets at this point—for brands to be loyal to their consumers.

In his excitement, Wally attempted to leap off the table, but was yanked back bungee-style by the colonoscope. His endoscopist requested further sedation. Wally drifted in and out of the room, trying to envision the details.

Naturally, Randi would need to be involved. She was good at details.

•••

Two days later, Wally sat across from Miranda “Randi” Bisno in a Spanish fondue restaurant in the Old Town section of Chicago. The smell of bubbling oil and deep-fried meat coated their nostrils. A flamenco guitarist crooned from a dimly lit corner. Wally claimed he had chosen it for its privacy, not its romantic atmosphere. The tiny table between them made the booth uncomfortably cozy, and Wally’s knobby knees knocked up against her like waves pounding a jetty.

Randi had been Wally’s ad agency counterpart on the Food Barn account. She had joined OmniAdCom right out of Carolina University as an art director. Her artistic abilities were meager but her vision was grand. It was no secret that in advertising, political acumen and posturing

more than made up for mediocre talent. Long hours, unbridled ambition and strategic alignments propelled her up in the ranks well beyond her peers. By age 30, she was the executive creative director on Food Barn and several smaller accounts. She had the corner office, the EVP title, a generous bonus package, a greystone in River North and no husband or kids to muck it all up.

Now in her mid-thirties, she was at a crossroads. Thanks to Wally's indiscretion, her career was on shaky ground. Food Barn was on the prowl for a new agency. It was an unwritten rule of the business: new marketing VP in, old agency out.

Her connections with her alma mater had given Wally the inside track to his new career. She was only slightly bitter that he had flown all the way back to Chicago to complain about it.

"Let me tell you something about advertising," he said as he inserted a chocolate-coated marshmallow into his mouth. "People don't want it."

"Thanks for the update, Wally. I thought I was performing a treasured public service."

He ignored her. "The occasional pop-culture phenomenon notwithstanding, like that dancing badger, people are not big fans of advertising. And I've proven—we've proven, I should say--that we don't need it." He paused to smirk. "What if we could track people's spending habits and then reward them for what they buy?"

"Wally, that's so old. You came up with that, like, fifteen years ago!"

"Not some candy-ass tracking like the PAWN program. Once a customer leaves the store, no one knows what they do."

"We're not *allowed* to know. Not in this country, anyway." She drew her knees out of the line of fire.

"Bingo! I knew you'd go for the privacy angle! But the PAWN program is completely voluntary. People are so desperate to save a quarter on a cantaloupe, they'd give a urine sample at the checkout." Randi grimaced and pushed her plate away.

Wally spread his palms. "There's really no problem asking for—and building a database with—people's 'private' info, as long as there's something in it for them."

"Careful, Wally, haven't we been down this road before?"

"Perish the thought. That was the plan of an idiot, a dim-witted short-term thinker who didn't appreciate the big picture."

"That was *your* plan."

"I'm speaking of myself in the past tense. I am no longer that person. I have been given a vision of the future." He closed his eyes and smiled.

Randi waited while Wally's imaginary orchestra tuned up.

"Picture having thousands of PAWN cards," he continued, "one for

every store you've ever shopped in or ever will. Restaurants, too. And one for every TV show you watch, every magazine you read and every place you've ever been."

"I don't know—I've got four on my key ring now and it's getting pretty crowded."

"Now imagine replacing *all* those cards with one compact device."

"And it's still voluntary?"

He licked some chocolate residue from his mustache. "Eventually, yes."

He had her. His presentation skills had obviously been honed at CU; she was genuinely interested, especially given the dismal state of her career.

"Keep going."

"We track a consumer—let's call her Jody—we track Jody's behavior from the moment she wakes up and uses her favorite shampoo, until she goes back to bed and brushes her teeth with Brand X toothpaste. And think of all the products in between!" Wally was breathing more heavily, working himself up.

"It would be like a giant shopping list encompassing her whole life."

"Exactly. We could assemble a profile on everyone in the country that way."

"Then what?"

"Sell them, my dear! To the highest bidder! Say Jody buys Ragamuffin Diapers. We sell that piece of information *to* Ragamuffin Diapers. Wouldn't they be delighted to reward such a loyal customer with incentives to stay on board? Coupons, frequent pooper points, whatever."

"Sounds pretty expensive, just to keep a customer they already have."

Wally held up his index finger. "Conversely, we sell the same information to Ragamuffin's main competitor, Crapalicious Diapers. What would Crapalicious do to lure Jody away from her beloved Ragamuffin Diapers? Better coupons, free toys, who knows? It's out of our hands by then."

Randi sat up straighter. "Or charge a premium for the info and give a company exclusivity."

"Liking it," Wally nodded approvingly. "Don't you see? A company would much rather spend money to keep a current customer or even to win over a well-targeted prospect than just shower its marketing budget willy-nilly on the masses. Sure, the cost-per-customer goes up, but your waste goes away entirely. It's like trading a ripped shrimp net for a tranquilizer dart."

Randi let the bizarre analogy pass. “So how does one become a citizen of this advertising-free utopia?”

“Like any revolutionary concept, it must first win over its detractors, the old line who will always prefer the status quo, even if the status quo beats them about the face and neck every day. The devil they know.”

“And you’re the devil they don’t.”

“Like hell; I’m their salvation.” His sinister leer in flickering light of the fondue flame suggested otherwise. “Once enough people were on board, the general advertising level would decrease noticeably. Even the most die-hard skeptics won’t be able to deny that, and they’ll be so relieved to have all those annoying commercials out of their lives they’ll be beating on our door to sign on.”

“Free.”

“Of course. It’s a win-win.”

Randi thought for a moment. “It’s still more invasive than a plastic card on a key ring. You’re really watching them around the clock. Don’t you think people will find that creepy?”

“If you think Mr. and Mrs. John Q. Sixpack give a rat’s puckered a-hole about what people know about them, I ask you to merely watch a few hours of reality TV or click randomly around Facebook or YouTube. The more embarrassing, the better! Is this a country that’s surrendered its claim to privacy or what?”

Randi pressed her temples. She was deeply conflicted, because it was the first solid idea Wally had had on his own since she’d known him; on the other hand, it seemed a tad slimy. Their fortunes would be made watching America clip its toenails.

“Can it even be done?” she asked.

Wally sighed loudly. “What am I?”

Randi responded as if from a script, “Idea Man.”

“And what are you?”

“Action Girl.” This little skit had been part of their repertoire for years. It served to both aggrandize Wally’s status as a mystical high-concept sorcerer and remind Randi of her subordinate role as the order-taker. Once, after an all-night photo shoot, Wally had crept her out with a napkin sketch of costumes he designed for both of them: his with a gleaming breastplate and hers with a scoop-neck leotard and stiletto-heeled thigh-high boots.

“Okay, I’ll talk to my IT guy about it. He might have some leads on whatever kind of technology could pull this off.”

Through a mouthful of pound cake, Wally said, “I don’t want to hear the labor pains—just show me the baby.”

Randi’s hunch paid off—after one phone call, she had a line on some

devices that sounded tailor-made for their project. They weren't cheap, but Wally assured her the binding on his open checkbook had barely been cracked.

From what Randi was told, these devices were small—very small. She wasn't sure how they worked, but she told Wally they would need to be enclosed in something secure, yet discreet. If people knew they were there, they might alter their behavior. Wally agreed. He had seen that happen often enough in focus groups; once the group became aware of an audience, their responses got very theatrical and directed at the one-way mirror. People could be so vain.

With only fifty subjects, Wally could afford to improvise his way through the beta test. But if he hoped to broaden the project campus-wide, Idea Man would need a common denominator: something all students used, needed or just owned, yet took its presence for granted, so as to forget it was even there.