

MARK A. SALTER

SINS

OF THE

TRIBE

A NOVEL



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First Edition

*Dedicated to the game of college football,
for all its wonders and challenges.*

Wally

NEW MEXICO

WHEN I CLOSE my eyes and think of a blade of grass, sweet memories appear, filling me with a purpose abandoned long ago. These memories, independent of my will, multiply and become my thoughts. The blade is uniform in a sea of perfect green and, with one knee on the ground, I place my finger on it, look back to Henry for his nod, then the ball in the grasp of the center's hands. I give a quick command, the ball sails towards me, and my hands take over: catch, place, and spin. Then the sweet thud of Henry's foot sends the ball high over the cresting line and my blade of grass reappears as if the transaction was meaningless.

I think of Dion, Coach Oldham, and the other players and the trust they placed in me and my brother, Henry, even though neither of us belonged. I would've struggled to play small college football. I think of the fans in the stadium and those watching on TV. I feel their intense gaze as we performed our duties, a gaze that penetrated too far and asked for sacrifices without knowing their depths.

Bastille University. *The Bastille University Tribe*. Six-time national champions located on the Florida panhandle near the Georgia and Alabama border, the heart of college football. A place where they'd take your thoughts along with your body if they could. But here in New Mexico, my thoughts are my own. On long

drives where the black road converges to a point against a mountainous horizon, or at my aunt's art colony listening to peaceful souls discuss the meaning of their latest creation while I get high, or after I chase the Coach away from the valley and stare at the starlit night—I think of Henry.

The turnoff to my aunt's place was a few miles down the road when I saw the carcass. I pumped the brakes trying to slow my truck, a truck that would never pass inspection. The brakes whined their rusty complaint like they were too tired to make an unplanned stop and I was a good forty yards past the carcass when I came to a halt. This one was big, and I knew the Coach, a Mexican gray wolf, would be happy. The afternoon light was fading, and I reminded myself it was already October. I ran my hand through my long hair and scraggly beard, it was my way of measuring time—I hadn't shaved or cut my hair since everything that happened almost two years ago.

Instead of backing up I decided to walk. I pulled out a garbage bag I kept behind the front seat for just this purpose, stuck it in my jacket pocket, and slipped on my work gloves. The cool High Plains air was rolling in and it gave me a sense of liberation, quite unlike the unending Florida humidity and I gave thanks to no one in particular.

It was a raccoon, the biggest one yet. I looked it over carefully, noting the blunt trauma. The raccoon's head had taken the shot, probably from a front bumper, and it rested in a halo of blackened blood. I used to hate ugliness. I used to close my eyes and wait for it to go away, but over time I was conditioned to look at it for what it was and accept the unchangeable. Like hearing a knee get blown out or the shallow, gasping breaths of a teammate with newly broken ribs. First the pop, then the screams, or worse, the silent swallowing of pain. It wasn't physical pain that emptied them though, it was the pain of knowing they were eliminated

from the dance contest like some middle-aged proctor had tapped them on the shoulder with a sad look. Their dreams of going pro, probably marginal to start with, were finished unless they were at Dion's level.

I squatted over the raccoon and tried to see if any whisper of life remained. I hated talking at important times like this, but it was deader than the Tribe's shot at the National Championship two years ago. Nevertheless, I cleared my throat and spoke with a manner of politeness and gravity.

"Professor, I'm very sorry, but the Coach would like to see you."

His body was stiff, I could tell when I picked him up by the tail and lowered him into the plastic bag. The Professor's weight pulled on me like guilt and I soon found myself swinging the bag with the rhythm of my walk as if we were taking a pleasant stroll through the quad. A pickup truck crested the hill, and I knew who it was without confirmation. I put my head down and walked on the gravel, hoping it would pass, but it eased to a stop beside me. It was my Aunt Janie. She rolled down the window and I saw the sad look on her face, like she was watching a recovering alcoholic heading for the bar. She didn't speak and I took a moment before replying to her silence.

"I'm not hurting anybody," I said. "Or anything."

She let another moment pass and I felt her passive disapproval, just an exhale of dry, voiceless air as she checked the rearview mirror for traffic that wasn't there. I loved my aunt even though I barely knew her. When we first met, I looked into her face, trying to imagine the face of my mother, but that had faded quickly and now I saw only her and the gracious deeds she performed on my behalf. She was the only person I could turn to when it all came crashing down.

"Walter," Aunt Janie said. "I need you to stop by tonight. I got another email."

I nodded and painfully waited for her release.

“And do it before you get high.”

I nodded again without telling her I’d already read it, then she slowly pulled away. I’d been checking her laptop secretly to see if he wrote again. When I got back to the truck, I placed the Professor in the front corner of the cargo bed and wedged him in with my tool kit to keep him safe. My rifle was jammed in between the passenger seat and the door, the butt of it next to a couple boxes of ammo.

It took a couple of turns for the engine to start and when it did my excitement started to build, I even had butterflies in my gut and was thankful the feeling was as fresh as ever. I could feel the adrenaline pulsing in my veins and the euphoria starting to kick in, like we were running out of the tunnel at Bastille Stadium. As the Professor and I pulled onto the road, I called back to him through the open window.

“Don’t worry Professor, we’re going to get them sons-a-bitches.” I screamed a bloody howl and banged the top of the roof as the old truck strained as hard as it could.

The sun was sinking fast and the Professor and I had to hurry. I drove deeper into the land, the part where I feel like I’m burrowing instead of crossing. It always feels like I can walk out of my trailer and reach out and touch the mesas just south of the colony but to actually get there it’s almost a half hour drive over bumpy dirt paths. When I got to the spot in the valley between the mesas, I coasted the truck in and checked the sun. In about forty-five minutes it would dip far enough to cover the valley in the mesas’ shade and catching a clear view of the Coach would be tricky.

The Professor’s podium was a large flat boulder about five feet high and the Coach always had a tough time scaling it without the risk of a tumble. When I first began to shoot it was only for the thrill of hearing my shot echo through the valley, two or three

fading scorches like it was out of a movie. The first day I saw the Coach sniffing around some fallen animal, I drew the sight in and took aim. I didn't know what I was doing. I pulled the trigger and watched through the scope as the shot hit about ten feet away from the Coach. It was like the bullet stung the earth and a cloud of dust burst out of the ground then slowly drifted away, like applause in a faraway stadium.

The Coach had been coming from the scrub brush on the east, so I sat the Professor up as best I could and leaned him against a large rock I'd placed on the podium. I tried to position his head so he'd see the Coach coming but he didn't cooperate, his crushed head drooped to one side in a grotesque manner and I knew he needed a talk. I straightened his head and into those small black eyes I strained for his attention.

"Listen, Professor. He's coming and there's nothing we can do about it, you said so yourself. If I could, I'd raise your paws and stick your middle claw out on each one to let him know how you feel but I can only hold him off for so long. You got me?"

The Professor slumped against the rock with his head draped over again and his fat belly was exposed like a middle-aged man in a skybox waiting for the game to start. A mild wind caused some of his fur to flutter, little black and gray and white strands, beautiful and intricate and it always made me wonder why mother nature would go to such great pains creating life to then allow its destruction in such a cruel manner. The wind blew stronger in response to my thought as if it were trying to carry him away to a better place, but his weight bound him to the podium. His fate was determined, and I had my own work to do.

"One more question, Professor. Have you seen Henry?"

I climbed back in the truck and drove up to my spot, an outcropping of boulders almost a hundred yards away. With my rifle I scaled the boulders to the spot I'd cleared out and settled in lying down

on my stomach. The view through my scope let me scan the valley and when I determined the Coach wasn't there yet, I laid down my rifle and pulled out my Tribe flask. The etched arrow on the flask was nearly faded from overuse and the cheap whiskey burned down my throat, but within seconds the bloom of pleasant heat settled over my brain. I took another drink, then propped myself up on my elbows and stared through the scope. It gave me time to think.

The roads I traveled most days, the vistas from atop a high mesa, or this lonely valley open up something inside me. Amid the solitude I can pause the churning feelings inside and draw them into focus, if only for a moment, but the moment is never long enough. I was the one that made it crash, I ruined it, something I had prayed for my entire life, something communal and once pure.

A movement caught my attention, I scanned the valley and the Coach appeared, the Mexican gray wolf. He probably watched me every time I escorted the Professor to his podium. Watching him react to my bullets triggered a lustful relief, but it almost got me kicked out of the colony. The artists were heartbroken when they heard what I was doing. A few of them sat me down and explained how the colony, funded by the good fortune earned during my aunt's time in Silicon Valley, was a sanctuary for gentle beings seeking a peaceful existence in a senselessly violent world, and my shooting at innocent animals violated their communal pact of peace to the point that their artistic souls were blocked from manifesting themselves. As much as I loved my aunt, to me they were a bunch of middle-aged hippies getting high and filling out coloring books. Only Aunt Janie's wisdom made me think, *That wolf is as innocent as Henry.*

The truth is different. That wolf would climb over the dead bodies of his fallen brethren without hesitation in pursuit of fresh meat, just like the real Coach. And after my aunt received the first email, my marksmanship went to hell.

My name is Dion an old friend/former teammate of Wally Hestia. It's very, very important that I contact him, I have tried for two years but now it's super important. There's no trouble, he doesn't have to worry but I need to contact him very soon. Someone gave me this email and said you may know him or something. Please let him know I gotta talk to him, he can get back to me on this email. Thank u.

Before I was done reading, I could feel something growing out of me like vines trying to reach into the computer, wanting Dion's approval, wanting to be part of the Tribe again.

"Is this a friend of yours?" my aunt said.

I guess I was in shock and didn't notice her question until she asked again. I pulled out my flask, took a long drink, and wiped my mouth.

"He was special, one of the great ones, but he got ruined, too." I looked to Aunt Janie and saw the concern on her face. "It was my fault."

She took my hand in sympathy and we sat in silence.

"You've got to move on, Walter," she said. "You need to find out what he wants."

I didn't respond. I held my head in my hands, waiting for the moment to pass.

"You don't even see the irony of it, do you?" she said.

I lifted my head, wanting her to continue.

"You left and you're free with no responsibilities; you live in a wide-open space with no boundaries. But all you've really done is build yourself a prison." She waited for my response, but none came. "You need to reply to this Dion."

The dashed crosshairs of my scope lined up right on the Coach's temple and a simple squeeze of the trigger would end his life as the

Professor looked down on him. The Coach was a few feet from the podium, sniffing and circling as he tried to determine the best way to scale the boulder. I squeezed the trigger. The bullet hit the side of the podium and the Coach jumped back in fear but didn't yield any further. While he stood there, tongue out, breathing hard, I fired again, and it hit a few feet in front of him. He jumped back and then trotted off into the scrub brush, but I knew he'd be back.

I'd thought I found my own sanctuary here. Looking down the valley on a beautiful afternoon with no connections to the world was enough for me. After I left Bastille—escaped, really—I cut off all connections. I threw away my phone outside the stadium and never went back for my laptop. The only time I'd been on a computer since was when I used my aunt's to delete all my social media and email accounts and to see if that reporter printed the story. But she didn't, another promise of truth that went unfulfilled.

After the first email I drank enough to make my head pound like the marching band was playing off-key just outside my trailer. It was a few days before I responded.

I heard you're looking for me, I don't want to be bothered. What's so important and how do I know this is the real Dion McAres?

The Coach approached the podium, and I could see his determination. I got up on one knee, took careful aim, and squeezed off a shot. It hit behind him.

*I'm going to Bastille for the Kentucky game. Get there Friday night and call me at the number below. I'll let you know what hotel and I'll get you a room. Click on the attachment to find out why.
Dion. TRIBE FOREVER!*

The Coach circled the podium and I stood, not caring if he saw me. I fired off three shots, none close.

The attachment was a picture. My aunt's internet connection was slow, it filled the screen in slow horizontal lines from the top down. I could tell it was the campus right away, the stadium was in the background and there were people tailgating in the distance. Then the top of a football helmet appeared with people standing on both sides of the player. I saw Henry was the player, the people I didn't know. You could take a hundred pictures of Henry while he was in different states of mind and to anyone else, he would look the same. But I could call out every mood he was in; I could tell if he was joyful or sad or panicked. This picture made me cry. He was broken.

The Coach must have come from the far side, he appeared on top of the podium and approached the Professor. Then he stopped and looked in my direction, like he was asking what I was going to do. I fired until the clip was empty, and every shot missed.

*I forgot to say how to prove its me. You and me
are the only ones that know what QB21 means.
You have to show up, I'd come and get you if I
knew where you were.*

I never shot a single wolf in all my trips to the valley; I didn't have it in me. I sank to the ground and started to sob then covered my ears to hide from the sound of the Coach tearing into the Professor. In a couple of weeks, I'd be at the Kentucky game.

Dion

ORCHARD PARK, NEW YORK

THE BALL SPUN towards the ceiling in a perfect spiral and seemed to hang in the air before dropping back into my hands. It was my new ritual: lying on my bed, catching the ball, then closing my eyes and becoming Wally for a moment, trying to imagine what it was like catching the snap, placing the ball, then hearing Henry boom the shit out of it. Watching my boys run onto the field knowing it was a sure thing was like springing a secret weapon on the whole world, and it never got old. They were the most reliable weapon we had, even more reliable than me. And the most innocent. I can imagine being Wally as a holder, but I can never even come close to imagining what he went through.

The ball floated up above me and when it came down, I closed my eyes. I can still see their faces; Wally wanting to be part of the Tribe, Henry not wanting anything other than to be with Wally. The first time I met them is still fresh in my memory: two little white boys, a pair that had no business suiting up for the Tribe. I thought I was special, shielding them from abuse, making sure they felt welcome, but I was just doing it for myself. Through everything that happened, Wally was the only one to act like Bastille meant more than a winning football team and he paid the price for it. I wasn't there for him then, as a matter of fact, I abandoned him when part of it was my fault.

I tossed the ball in the air again, watching the laces spin around as if they were the days flying by. We didn't have much time. I'd searched for him for so long that it became a second job and now that I had made contact, it felt like I'd never hear from him again. The picture of Henry had to make a difference, it just had to.

The ball flew straight up, almost hitting the ceiling, and this time it had a slight wobble, an imperfection. Wally and Henry were perfect. We weren't. We let him down and he took more blame than any man could ever handle, some of it directly from me. We can't erase the past, but we gotta stop this sin from destroying the future. Wally has to believe again, and when he does, so will I.

Wally

WEST TEMPLE, GEORGIA
FOUR YEARS EARLIER

i.

THEIR OFFENSE OVERLOADED: all three wide receivers and their tight end were lined up to our right, leaving Jameel Williams, their best player, as the lone back and the left side empty. Their quarterback approached the line, pointed at me, and yelled a pre-snap call I'd hear all day. "*The Mike is 16, the Mike is 16.*" I was West Temple High's middle linebacker on defense—the Mike, quarterback on offense, and number 16.

It was the first play of the game, and I knew the play they were about to run, something I'd seen on film all week: a toss sweep to Jameel to our left, with both guards pulling. Their quarterback and I held a brief look as he put his mouthguard in and began the sequence with muffled words. He was just a normal kid like me, as opposed to Jameel Williams, who I feared would run over us, by us, and through us all day. Nevertheless, we were going to put a licking on him, at least we had convinced ourselves of that in the days leading up to the game.

"Marshall," I yelled. With a brief glance to my left I saw him nod for my benefit without looking at me. He knew it was coming,

too, his job was to hold the edge. Then I yelled “Louie, Louie,” to our defensive tackles, which meant penetrate to the left.

Then, when the center snapped the ball, something beautiful happened: Their lead guard pulled the wrong way and met their other guard in a head-on collision behind the center. The center came at me low and fast, and I shot my hands out and popped him on his shoulder pads. Like all mediocre linemen, he stopped moving his feet and I was by him quickly enough to see our defensive tackles bottle up Jameel and just about bring him down. Marshall, our best player, finished him off for a two-yard loss. It was going to be a long game and I loved every second of it.

Game days in high school. They had a special quality that fed me in ways I thought I couldn't live without. Like walking through a doorway into a temporary reality that would soon be shut and sealed again out of necessity. The feeling hummed beneath my skin and started from the time I woke up until I fell asleep, replaying the moments before they became a pale memory. The feeling was better with a win, but still powerful with a loss. Stronger if I played well, but still meaningful if I didn't. It was all war with no death. It was ever-important, without destroying innocence. Everyone cared, but there weren't enough to corrupt. We could perform, create, and destroy; we righteously screamed to claim our victories and howled at our failures; we were unique and unscripted. Instead of existing in quiet desperation, I was alive.

There were thirty-nine game days for me in high school, counting freshman, JV, and then varsity, and it was drawing to a close; the New Brunswick game was the thirty-sixth and also the day I first met someone from the Tribe. If the trail ended there, it would've been enough for me to talk about the rest of my life.

I always woke before dawn and as I laid awake, I listened to the rhythm of Henry's sleep, his innocent breaths barely audible three feet away, a sound that had fended off loneliness since I

was five years old. He never woke early or slept late, he waited patiently while I did his homework, and he never left the table until he was told.

I got up and edged my way between our twin beds and reached over the crowded desk, trying to find the window shade's cord without knocking anything over and creating a clatter. Henry wouldn't mind, but my adopted father, the Minister, would raise holy hell if I woke him.

Before we went to bed, I saw the Minister on the screened-in porch, slumped in his overstuffed chair, staring out into darkness. It was eleven thirty when Henry and I got home from work the night before and went through our routine. The side screen door creaked in proportion to the speed at which it was opened and I always pulled it slowly, then waited for Henry to hold it. The main door's knob was barely visible, and I carefully turned it to see if it was locked. When it opened, I stepped into the kitchen as quietly as I could while Henry eased the screen door shut behind us. We stood in the kitchen waiting to hear where he was and with no sound of him, I stepped into the parlor and saw him from behind in his chair out back.

The red glow of his cigarette illuminated the silhouette of the glass in his hand. As he exhaled a plume of smoke, I bent over to look at the bottle of scotch on the counter. It was a good four inches emptier than the night before, so I sent Henry to our room while I braced myself. I'd stopped trying to figure out the reasons for his rage long ago, I just let him land backhands across my face to wear him out and protect Henry. That night was no different.

But the mornings were mine, especially on game days before sunrise. In the pre-dawn darkness, I'd look through my window and imagine a different view before the morning light began its weak coloring of the yard, the goalpost trees, and the forest that led to nowhere. After a few minutes, I laid back down and looked around the room for inspiration, but it was too dark to see.

The poster of Clayton Gilmore, the Tribe's quarterback from the 1979 National Championship team, was hidden in darkness. I couldn't make out the colors and had to use my memory to see Clayton's beautiful green jersey with his white number 12 outlined in bright gold just below *Bastille* on the front of the jersey. His pants were white with gold and green striping down the side. The helmet was the best and it hadn't changed in all these years. It was white, a pure white, with just the right touches. The arrow started at the very back of the helmet and extended over the top to the facemask. Most teams have silly little stripes down the middle of their helmets that don't mean a thing and are just a distraction, but the stripe on the Tribe's helmets ended right on the forehead in a large green arrowhead.

On our bedroom wall there was a classic picture of the Tribe's offense during a game, taken from just the right angle, showing the offensive line, tight end, and quarterback and the first thing you notice is all those arrows on the front of their heads—lined up as if they were coming at the defense's heart. To finish it off, on the right side of the helmet was the *Tribe* in traditional script and on the left side was the player's number.

I admit, there were many sleepless nights spent lying in bed or daydreaming during class or a bus ride to an away game that I'd imagined myself in that helmet with my number 16 on the side. Just like Anthony Duke, number 16, the famous wide receiver on the '85 team that won it all, whose poster looks down on my bed. Next to him is Coach Oldham. For over forty years he's led the Tribe, a hero and the most respected figure in college football, maybe in all of sports. In the poster he's on the sideline wearing his famous green sweatshirt with "*TRIBE*" across the front. He not only coached the Tribe, but had played for them, too, winning our first National Championship in the sixties.

The most recent picture on our wall is brand new, a picture of Dion McAres, our new quarterback and the latest member of the

Tribe to be profiled by Sports Inc. To be featured on the cover of the country's biggest sports magazine and website is an achievement unto itself and it had been over fifteen years since the last one. But to reach that level as a true freshman after only three games provided much needed hope for the Tribe. The headline said it all: "The Tribe Is Back and in the Hands of Dion." He was only a year older than me, but athletically, we were in different worlds. Dion was six-foot-five and 220 pounds, a five-star recruit with offers from Alabama, Notre Dame, USC, Texas, Florida State, and every other school that ever graced the top twenty. There was a picture of him during his senior year of high school where he was sitting on a floor and beneath him were all the offer letters he'd received. But over his heart was the offer from Bastille and on his head, a Tribe hat. The internet went crazy that day, both for and against.

When the sun appeared, I sat up and reached over to Henry.

"Let's get our chores done so we can get ready for the game. We've got New Brunswick today, and Jameel Williams."

Henry took his time and I waited until he was engaged, then told him to get breakfast. I made both beds and folded Henry's clothes from the night before. He waited for me in the kitchen with an empty bowl in front of him and I filled it with his favorite cereal, then got the milk.

While Henry ate, I went out back to the screened-in patio and took measure of the mess. The Minister had company; there were seven empty beer bottles lined up by the lawn chair and a half-empty bottle of wine by the wicker chair. I collected the bottles, had my own cereal, and straightened up the kitchen.

"Let's go to the Church," I said.

Outside, leaves crunched under our feet as we walked and the smell of smoke from last night's school bonfire hung in the air.

"I wonder if they had a good time," I said. Henry looked at me but didn't speak. "I hope they didn't party too much."

Before we made it to the Church, the morning chill had gotten to Henry. I heard his teeth chatter before he let me know how serious it was.

“I’m cold, I’m cold, I’m cold,” Henry said, his voice never changing tone and without inflection.

It was Henry’s way of screaming. I gave him my jacket and he wrapped himself in it without putting his arms through the sleeves, but his teeth continued chattering until we got inside. It was my unplanned routine: keeping Henry warm, making sure his helmet was buckled up when he came on the field, telling him it was okay to speak to someone. *Someone is talking to you, Henry*, and he’d see the person as if they’d magically appeared and then he’d look at me again, a sacred reward that filled me and gave me purpose beyond anything I was supposed to subscribe to. He saw the world through me; I was the only one he looked at when called, and when we saw each other, the loneliness that covered me evaporated.

Cleaning the Church would take an hour and a half if I hurried. Henry sat in the front pew, pulled out his phone, and began playing the numbers game that gave him something to do while I went to work. When I finished cleaning, I put on my Tribe hat and we headed for school a mile away. My anxiety was peaking, and Henry’s slow movements drove me crazy but there was nothing I could do. The only time he ever moved fast was when he kicked.

Ever since our freshman year Henry had suited up but he never kicked until our junior year. Coach Huey needed every warm body he could to warrant the team’s funding and I never had the nerve to tell him how good Henry was. During that junior year we were winless after three games and during the fourth, Lucas, our QB and kicker, broke his ankle just before halftime. We lost 6–0 and Lucas was gone for the year, but I got my first playing time as a QB on varsity. The real shame of it was we did drive the ball three times in the second half inside their twenty—and once inside their

thirty—but without Lucas we didn't try any field goals and lost the ball when we couldn't make a first down.

The next day on Saturday afternoon I called Coach Huey and asked if he'd meet me at the field to discuss an urgent matter. While generally a congenial man who knew his football, he was ill-suited for an open conversation about strategy after the shameful burden of going 0–4. The first thing he asked was what in the hell was so important that there was a risk of him missing Bastille's kickoff and I quickly reminded him the game wasn't on for another hour.

That's when Henry, unprompted, approached the ball with three strong steps that caught Coach Huey by surprise. He kicked the ball off a tee for a forty-yard field goal, and it cleared the cross bar by twenty feet. I didn't say a word.

"Henry Nubinski, what in the world?" Coach Huey said. "You kick that ball again."

"Watch this, Coach," I said.

I took the ball over to the left hash and knelt down to hold for a fifty-yard kick. Coach Huey was standing behind us, and when I heard the punching sound of Henry's foot on the ball, that was all the evidence I needed to know it was good.

"Coach," I said, "Lucas is out for the year, and he wasn't that good of a kicker to start with. If Henry's kicking, we win. I know people talk about him, but he's just shy and he knows the rules." Henry didn't miss a single kick the rest of that season and he hadn't missed one this season. I just hoped that he'd get the chance against New Brunswick, the dominant team in our league.

Earlier, when the New Brunswick bus pulled up as we were heading out for warm-ups, they eyed us and we eyed them. They weren't any bigger than us, except for one lineman that seemed too fat to get out of his own way. Then I saw number 5, Jameel Williams, a four-star recruit who had offers from most of the big schools in the south. The program listed him at five-foot-ten, the

same height as me, but he weighed 195 pounds, twenty more than I did. I could tell by the way he walked he had more fast-twitch muscles than our whole backfield combined.

After their first play, the two-yard loss, their quarterback cursed out the errant guard and sent him out of the game. On second down Coach Huey, in all his wisdom, called a run blitz through the A gaps and there was nowhere for Jameel to run; I got partial credit for the tackle. On third down they threw long but it was incomplete, not even close. I came out of the game for the punt and sought out Coach Huey.

“Now’s the best time, let me do it,” I said. I wanted to take a shot down the field on the first play, something I’d lobbied him for all week.

He pulled his headset below his ears, thought for a moment, then turned to me. “Pro right, 383 flow and tell Dyson to play the Z. He’s the only one I want you to tell. And get rid of it quick.”

I caught up to Dyson before he got to the huddle. “Play the Z and run a fly, I’m going to launch it.” Dyson only got about three passes per game and typically dropped the one I threw on target. As we broke the huddle I whispered to Marshall, “I’m going to pull the ball.”

New Brunswick was in a 5-2 defense with Jameel, playing strong safety, lined up off the tight end to my left. He began to creep up as if he was an extra linebacker. When the ball was snapped, I turned to my left to hand off to Marshall through the three hole and Jameel bought it. I pulled the ball out of Marshall’s belly, and he hit that line like an airboat about to plow through the everglades when Jameel hit him. It was like Marshall hit an unseen piling from an abandoned pier, he didn’t just stop, he was *pierced*. But I still had the ball.

New Brunswick’s fat lineman was quicker than I thought, and he was half-blocked when he got close, but I ducked under, came

up, and launched the ball to Dyson. There was only a fifty-fifty chance the pass was close, and even if it was, Dyson had the same odds of catching it. As soon as I threw it, Jameel crushed me. Cheers from one of the sidelines erupted, but I was hit so hard I couldn't tell which sideline was happy. As Jameel stood up, he looked downfield and then back to me.

"You got lucky, boy," he said.

Still lying on the ground, I replied with a weakened voice. "Damn right, it's not like I'm going to outplay you."

That gave him a quick pause and he helped me up. As we were trotting down the field, watching Dyson score his first TD of the year, I spoke to him.

"A lot of scouts here, light it up."

He looked at me as if I'd violated an unwritten rule. "Ain't you trying to win?"

I shook my head, trying to gain clarity after taking his hit. "We've been talking about you all week; we're going to hit you with everything we've got. And next year when we're watching you on TV, we'll brag about playing against you."

It was as if I'd regained his trust. "True," he said and then headed for his sideline.

After Henry kicked the extra point, we were up 7-0, the only time they'd trailed all season, and I soaked in the moment. The rest of the game is difficult for me to recall, due to the shots I took to the head. I do know that on their next possession, Jameel got enough clearance on his toss sweep to make the corner, and, except for our undersized free safety who tried to tackle him and got knocked out in the process, no one touched him. When we did tackle him, it was due to an overload into the play or a stunt that bottled him up.

There was one play in particular that illustrated the difference between an average high school athlete, like myself, and a top

college prospect. They ran a trap play and I had a clean shot at Jameel. I hit him perfectly with my shoulder on his thighs and wrapped up, but he carried me for two steps as if I was a toddler, then twitched his hips and flung me to the side. I watched as he dodged our backup free safety, who wanted no part of him, then ran in for the score. By the end of the third quarter, he'd run for 283 yards, scored five touchdowns, and they were up 41-7.

After the game, Marshall sat next to me in the locker room. "Where do you think that guy will go next year?"

"I don't know, I'm hoping the Tribe will sign him."

"Dyson's having a party, you going?"

I shook my head. "Henry and I are working until eleven."

Coach Huey yelled into the locker room, telling me to turn in my jersey and pants or else I'd have to wash them myself, again. I closed my eyes and took a moment recalling the game. When I opened them, Henry was waiting for me, already showered and ready to go to work.

Wally

ii.

DEEP HICKORY SMOKE was all the advertising Papa's BBQ needed; I could walk there with my eyes closed. It was six by the time we went in the back door, and I hung my Tribe hat and put on an apron.

"Nice try today, boys," said Miss Diane. "Wally, help Henry fill the dishwasher before you bus tables."

I gave Miss Diane a nod and a yes ma'am. Henry looked over the stack of plates and began removing the silverware.

"There's no food," Henry said.

"Miss Diane already scraped them, but don't worry, the tables are full."

Henry rinsed the plates and stacked them while I rinsed the silverware. Henry wasn't allowed to attend to the silverware, he'd take each utensil one by one and scrub it clean while dishes piled up behind him. After the first load was in, I put on a new apron and headed to the front.

"I'm hungry," Henry said.

Running that barbecue to those nice people was like looking at heaven through hell's window. When I returned to the kitchen, Miss Diane was waiting for me; she had a sympathetic look.

"You boys are famished, ain't you," she said. "I gave Henry a few ribs and a plate of brisket that got sent back. Go ahead and get a bite."

I loved Miss Diane. After an hour, the pace slowed and Henry had saved plenty. There was even my favorite, Southern-style pork kielbasa. I ate each bite slowly, letting out a pleasurable hum that I found hilarious while Henry stared at me, which only compounded my humor.

“Wally, I need you out here,” Miss Diane said.

We had a table in a little alcove near the back and I hadn’t noticed it was occupied. A middle-aged Black man wearing both a Tribe hat and polo shirt sat there looking at his phone. He nodded when I approached with water but didn’t pay me much attention. I asked Miss Diane if she knew him, but she’d never seen him before. My intuition took over as I picked up a few plates from other tables, sneaking peeks of him the entire time. Then Mr. Wright, a local customer, got my attention and waved me over.

“That fellow in the back, he’s a Bastille coach,” said Mr. Wright. I could tell he was excited for me. “Go introduce yourself, he was probably at your game today scouting that running back from New Brunswick. You can tell him what it was like tackling that boy.”

“I would if I actually tackled him,” I said.

I wandered back to the kitchen door and kept stealing glances. When I looked over to Mr. Wright, he nodded in the coach’s direction then Miss Diane appeared behind me.

“Go introduce yourself,” she said. “We all know how you love the Tribe.”

I cracked my neck, screwed up my courage, and approached his table.

“Anything else, sir?” I said. The coach shook his head without looking away from his phone as he studied football scores. I decided to take a chance. “If you don’t mind me asking, sir, what did you think of Jameel Williams?” That got his attention.

He looked up at me as if I knew something that I shouldn’t. “Pretty fair runner, he had a big day, but I don’t think the home team was a good test for him.”

I nodded and was about to walk away but couldn't help myself. "What did you think of West Temple? Any future members of the Tribe?"

He sat back a little and took his time answering. "I thought they were going to make a game of it when they scored on that fly route, that was a nice throw."

"Thank you, sir." I tried to hold off a smile.

He sat back and sized me up and I was never so eager to be profiled in my life. He stuck out his hand and I obliged.

"Have a seat young man, my name is Barney Griffin. Are you just sitting down or leaving?"

"I work here, sir. I've got to—" I looked over to Miss Diane. She waved me to sit down, then made a point of turning away to give me privacy.

I settled into the seat as questions started piling in my head.

"You're number 16, right?" said Coach Griffin. "What were you and Jameel talking about after you threw that pass? Is he a trash talker?"

I told him everything from the conversation, what it was like to try and tackle him, how his burst was something none of us had ever seen. It was as if Jameel Williams was my teammate and I was trying to win him an offer. Before I could stop, I relayed my view on every player we faced all season that had a shot to play in college. I offered up stats and he countered with the height and weight of the top tier players and their probable landing spots.

"So, is the Tribe going to offer Jameel?" I said.

Coach Griffin paused with a degree of resignation. "He's a good player, but he'd never start at Bastille. Our backfield is stacked. If you think Williams is hard to tackle, try Jonathan DeVonta, he's six-foot-three, 235 pounds and runs a 4.5 forty. No, I think Mr. Williams will be investing in a winter coat fairly soon."

It took a moment as I ran through the big northern schools. "He's going to Wisconsin, isn't he?"

Coach Griffin looked stunned and leaned in to speak. “That kind of talk can get me fired. I’m not saying it’s true, but how did you guess?”

“I would never say anything, Coach Griffin. But it’s kind of obvious, Dalton Shaw used to be the Tribe’s offensive coordinator. I figured if the Tribe isn’t interested, you’re doing a favor for a friend, you know, keeping it in the family.” The edge of Coach Griffin’s concern faded but I wanted his trust. “Believe me, sir, I’m the biggest fan of the Tribe you’ve ever met, you can ask anybody. I won’t say anything.”

He must have been lonely because I could tell he enjoyed talking with someone as enthusiastic and steeped in the Tribe as I was. He talked about players I’d followed, all great athletes. His admiration and respect for Coach Oldham was clear; he even said he would’ve gotten out of the business long ago if it wasn’t for him, even though he had higher-paying offers from other schools anxious to harvest our football rich region. He also talked about the Tribe’s struggles—since the last National Championship, twelve years ago, the Tribe averaged only eight wins per year and the trend was looking down. That’s when they signed Dion McAres and many read it as Coach Oldham’s last push for a National Championship before he retired, he was seventy-eight years old.

“What are your plans next year?” said Coach Griffin.

I shrugged, not wanting to answer. “Probably work here and save up for junior college.”

“Grades an issue?”

“No, sir, I’ve got the test scores and grades to get into Bastille.”

“I know some good non-scholarship schools that would be interested, we talk all the time.”

My response was limp, our plan already set. Henry and I were going to work full time for Miss Diane and live in the studio apartment above the restaurant that looked like an attic with a bathroom. Between the two of us we could afford a beat-up

car and get the hell out from under the Minister's thumb, and I wouldn't have to clean the Church or empty his ashtrays or pick up his friends' beer bottles or suffer his backhand across my face.

Getting out from under the Minister had been my life goal since I realized it could happen, but the thought of happily moving away to college and playing DIII football, chasing co-eds, going to frat parties, and getting a degree was a dream I didn't dare entertain. My mood changed as Coach Griffin got up to leave and I played the only real card I had.

"The shame of it is, Coach Griffin, you didn't get to see the best player on the field perform today."

"Why's that, somebody hurt?" he said.

"No, our kicker is the best, but he only kicked an extra point today. If you would've had him last year that field goal attempt that fell short and was returned for a touchdown by Georgia Tech—"

"You mean the kick-six," he said.

"Sorry to bring it up, but it wouldn't have happened."

Coach Griffin sat back down, and I could tell he was sorting through his list of high school kickers. "I'm not familiar with any West Temple kicker and it's my job to know. What are his stats? What camps has he been to?"

"The reason you've never heard of him is that we typically don't get close enough to kick field goals, and regarding kicking camps, he's never been outside of the county. He's never missed an extra point and his field-goal percentage is one hundred percent, with a long of forty-seven yards. Isn't that true, Mr. Wright?" I knew Mr. Wright had been listening and he backed me up. "I'll bring him out, right now."

Henry was in the same spot I'd left him, sorting through plates and bowls. Coach Griffin and I had talked longer than I'd realized, Henry had a full plate of leftovers waiting for me and a stack of pots he hadn't touched yet. I tried to straighten him up and was about to tell him of his pending interview, but I knew it was useless.

When I presented Henry to Coach Griffin, the context put him in a new light. Henry was pale and seemed disaffected, he looked to a spot on the floor next to Coach Griffin and his arms seemed skinnier than usual as they hung untouched by the short sleeves of his dirty t-shirt. I wanted to stand closer to Henry without seeming awkward; I hated seeing him in a naked light. If Coach Griffin had just chuckled, said goodbye, and walked out of the door, I would've been satisfied that I'd tried.

Coach Griffin bent over slightly trying to lock eyes, but Henry shifted his gaze.

“What’s your longest kick, son?”

“It’s okay, Henry,” I said.

“Forty-seven yards against Central. There was a ten mile-an-hour crosswind.” Henry spoke as if he was reciting homework.

Mr. Wright and I subtly exchanged prideful glances, but Coach Griffin was a quick study.

“You don’t mind the other players trying to block the kick? You ever get tackled?”

“Wally told me to ignore them. I got knocked over once. Wally said it was okay.”

Coach Griffin looked through the window and gauged the light.

“Any interest in kicking a few balls right now?”

“We’re working right now, Miss Diane pays us,” Henry said.

Permission was granted from Miss Diane followed by Mr. Wright’s declaration of his secret desire to bus tables and wash dishes. Ten minutes later, we were on the field with the headlights of Coach Griffin’s car aiding the dwindling light. I pulled out Henry’s kicking shoes and four worn balls from my bag.

“Whenever you’re ready, Henry, kick one from the twenty in the center, then from each hash,” said Coach Griffin.

It was child’s play, I thought. Henry’s first kick went through, the kick from the right hash was perfect but from the left hash it wobbled and barely made it through.

“No, no, that was your fault,” said Coach Griffin, looking at me. “You held it wrong and didn’t give him a spot to aim at. Look here, I’ll show you.”

Coach Griffin coached me up, right on the spot. “Count the other nine players in the huddle, then find a spot seven yards back from the ball, then pick the *exact* spot and place your finger on it so the kicker can line up. And when I mean pick a spot, I mean pick a blade of grass. Then you look to your kicker, wait for his nod, then turn to the center and call the snap. You catch, place, and spin to get the laces out, then stare right through the ball until your blade reappears. Got it?” Coach Griffin knelt down and went through the process. “Go ahead and kick it, son.”

Henry was lined up with his head focused on the ball and his body cocked. Then he relaxed and his attention drifted away.

“What’s wrong?” said Coach Griffin.

I slowly approached. “He only kicks when I hold.”

Coach Griffin shrugged and tossed me the ball. “Did you understand what I said?”

“I got it, sir.”

Henry kicked from the left hash at the twenty again and the ball spun perfectly. I ran down past the end zone and retrieved the four balls as fast as I could, I didn’t want Coach Griffin to try and strike up a conversation. I returned out of breath.

“Can I pick the spot?” Coach Griffin nodded and with a thrill in my spine I thought, *It’s showtime.*

The grass in the middle of the field was worse than before the game, it was almost dirt at the forty, the equivalent of a fifty-yard try. I set up and Henry unleashed his leg, and that ball flew with a slower spin as if it had to pace itself during its long and perfect flight.

“Now, Henry,” I said, sprinted to the left hash, and set up like the clock was running out. He followed at speed, the only time he ever ran. Another command and we sprinted to the right hash and

it was like a mirror image of the last, good by ten yards. I went to fetch the balls again, but Coach Griffin stopped me and jogged over to his car as we stood catching our breath.

“How’s your foot?” I said.

“Are we getting ice cream after this?”

“Yeah, after we finish the dishes.”

When Coach Griffin returned, he emptied a bag of footballs onto the ground, college balls, all inflated hard with Tribe logos on them. I picked one up and held it with the reverence of a gem.

“I’m going to arrange the balls on the field, and I’d like you two to take your time and try each one,” said Coach Griffin. He started to set the balls on the hash marks, starting at the thirty.

“Sir, if you don’t mind, we can do better than that,” I said.

The locations I picked were outside of the rules and would embarrass a normal kicker. Henry unleashed each kick in succession, we were running to the next spot before the previous kick, perfect and always plenty long, hit the ground. The first spot was at the intersection of the goal line and the sideline, only thirty yards in distance, but the gap in the goalposts looked as if it was only a foot wide from that angle. Further up the sideline, we hit from the twenty, then again at the forty where the numbers would normally be. Then Henry made it from each hash on the fifty, the equivalent of a sixty-yard field goal. We went through the drill again starting at the other sideline while Coach Griffin caught the balls to make sure they went through. We were both sweating in the cold air when we finished and I sent Henry to sit on the bench while I helped Coach Griffin collect the balls. Coach Griffin was in awe.

“I’ve never seen anything like it,” he said. He stopped to get my full attention. “I don’t mean to be rude, but is he okay?”

I looked back to Henry, sitting fifty yards away, looking at his phone as darkness closed in. “Nothing’s wrong with him, he’s just shy, very shy.” Coach Griffin didn’t look convinced, and I

continued. "He's always taken normal classes and gotten As and Bs, he works, does his chores, and never gets in trouble. He's just a little different."

Coach Griffin looked over to Henry and shook his head. "You're right, we would've beaten Georgia Tech last year with him. He doesn't get nervous by the rush?"

"It's like they're not even there."

He gave us a ride back to Papa's and gave me his card.

"I can't guarantee anything, son, but I'll bring it up. I'm going to need to see him in a game, probably with another coach." Then he gave me two footballs. "It's the damndest thing how I lose these balls all the time."