

CHAPTER 1

High school football is life in the south. I hear old guys in my town talk about the good old days. Glory was theirs when they were gods. Their time to shine. A time when guys who didn't suit up on Friday nights wanted to be like them and all the girls wanted to be with them.

They talk, and I listen. But that was then and this is now. Now their lives are plain and boring. Suiting up means putting on the uniform for the local factory. If glory days are high school football, and life takes a nose dive to normal after graduation, then I'm already screwed, because my life as the number one running back in the region is far from glorious.

I'm already three reps into my bench presses when Coach walks in. The lights are off, so it startles him when he flips them on and sees me lying on the bench. "Slaughter," he yells, "what're you doing in here?" Coach only has one volume. Loud!

"Getting in some extra reps, Coach." I sit up on the bench and face him.

Coach scratches his head and looks at his watch. "What time did you get here? How'd you get in?"

"Seven. Gym door was open."

"Well, Slaughter," Coach grabs his clipboard from his desk, "there's something we need to talk about."

I cock my head sideways as I listen.

"Got word from your chemistry teacher that you failed her test."

"Yeah, sorry Coach. I didn't get a chance to study much for that one." What I don't tell him is that it's because he keeps us on the field for hours every night and there's hardly any time to study, but blaming others has never been my style.

“I’m sorry, son, but I’m going to have to bench you for the first half tonight. Starting Woody in your place.”

Color drains from my face. “Coach, you can’t do that. The scouts from UNC are going to be here tonight. It’s my only chance.”

“I’m sorry, Slaughter. Rules are the rules, and if I break them for you all the other boys will expect the same thing. Just because you’re the number one running back in the region doesn’t mean you don’t have to follow my rules.”

I start to argue with him but know it will be career suicide. He won’t hesitate to bench me the entire game, and I can’t let that happen.

“Sorry, Coach.”

“So am I, Slaughter. So am I,” he says and walks away.

I slam out of the weight room and minutes later stand in the shower and let the cool water splatter off my head and neck and wonder how I’m going to make it through this year. My focus has to be on the field. Tonight’s game is huge. The biggest one of my life.

There’s a rumor that some scouts from UNC are coming to our game. Not to see me or Sullivan. I’m almost embarrassed to say it, but they’re coming to watch few guys on the defensive line for Walker High to see if they’re good enough to be Tar Heels. That just means I have to make sure I get through their defensive line and make the scouts notice me.

I throw my game jersey on after I towel off, grab my books, and head to the library to print out a paper for class. About the time I leave the locker room, Sully and the rest of the guys flood through the door.

I cross the quad as buses pull in. The brisk morning air that comes with life in the mountains brushes against my face and cools my heated cheeks. It's the kind of cold that lets me barely see my breath in front of my face.

As always, Jenny Lee gathers inside the commons area with the rest of the cheerleaders clucking like barnyard hens. We've been together for what seems like forever. We met sophomore year and have been with each other ever since. Other than Sully, she's my best friend.

"Hey, babe," she calls out to me after she lifts her head long enough to see me. We've been together for so long that it surprises me that butterflies still flutter inside me the way they did the first time we met. Her smile makes everything alright.

"Morning," I reach over and give her a peck on the cheek before going to the library.

She stops me. "That's all you're going to say to me?" Her friends all stop whatever they're talking about and stare at me like I just kicked somebody's cat.

"Got to get to the library and print off my paper for McD."

"Oh yeah," Jenny Lee says. "I forgot to print mine. Will you print it out for me?" She reaches in her bag and pulls out a thumb drive and throws it at me. I would say she threw it to me, except for the fact that she throws like a girl and it plops to the ground about five feet away and skids another ten.

"Better hope it's not broken." I lean over and pick it up.

"Who cares if it is? I'll just tell McDonough that it broke and get another one later anyhow." Jenny Lee goes back to the group of girls huddled together and clucks again.

Jenny Lee's more like Sully than me. She comes from money. She almost smells like that crisp, clean scent of freshly printed bills. So when she says it's no big deal and she'll get another

one, she's not lying. Twenty dollars is nothing to her, but it means about early morning hours at my job to me.

I print out both papers. Mine isn't all that great because I didn't get to spend much time on it, but at least it's done.

Life in a small town does have its advantages when you're the number one back and everybody in town puts their Friday night hopes on your shoulders. It means that teachers are a little more lenient with grades and cops will look the other way for little things like drinking and stuff.

That only lasts about as long as you're on the team, though. After graduation, you're one of the rest of the slugs trying to make a living. And the cops love to come down hard on the has-beens. My guess is because they're all has-beens too.

"How much?" I ask the library lady behind the counter.

"Nothing." She must notice my strange look. "You're that Slaughter kid, aren't you?"

"Yes, ma'am," I say. "I'm Dusty." Her words don't exactly bother me, because I've been hearing them most of my life.

At first they said it because they felt sorry for me for being the son of Jason Slaughter. Talk about being punished for the sins of my father. I don't remember much about Daddy, because he went to jail for killing a woman and my little sister in a drunk driving accident when I was six. Not a single scratch on him. I haven't talked to him since I was eight. I'm pretty sure he's never getting out, but even if he does, I don't really care.

It's funny, though, how long people can hold a grudge against someone when that someone's daddy kills the preacher's wife on a rainy Sunday night. One coming home from church and the other from a bar. Two go to heaven and the other to jail.

It's a good thing I know how to carry a piece of pigskin leather filled with air because those same people now ask me if I'm that Slaughter boy for a different reason. Yeah, they all still know Daddy's in jail and Mama's pretty much no good either, but they seem to forgive me of my parents' sins. Funny what football in a small town can do for a nobody like me.

"I sure hope you boys can beat them Wildcats tonight." She hands me the last of the printed pages. "I'm tired of seeing them win the trophy every year."

"Me too, ma'am." I say as I leave. "Thanks again for the pages."

"You're welcome, son," she says. "Remember, wound the wildcats."

She laughs, because she thinks she's funny. The cheerleaders make up a slogan each week that has something to do with beating the other team. They say things like "Rout the Raiders" or "Stomp the Spartans" or "Tear the Titans." Always something to do with killing or hurting the other team. This week we play the Walker Wildcats.

"I will, ma'am." I nod and leave.

I head over to the cafeteria and grab a couple sausage biscuits before going back to the commons to meet up with Jenny Lee and Sully.

"Where have you been?" Sully shouts across the commons.

"Library," I say through crumbles of sausage and biscuit. "Paper due today."

"She didn't tell me that." Sully nods toward Jenny Lee and the other hens.

"Not a surprise." I grab a spot on the bench next to Jenny Lee and finish what's left of my biscuit.

"You didn't bring me one?" Jenny Lee rolls her eyes and huffs like one of those girls who always gets her way, because she is one of those girls. Pretty easy when her dad is the bank president.

“Didn’t know you wanted one.” I offer her my second biscuit, and as usual she turns me down.

“You always do that Dusty.” She’s the only one who calls me Dusty. Well, besides Mama. “You never think of me anymore.”

“What are you talking about? I think of you all the time.”

“No you don’t. All you think of is football. Nothing but football. I’m second string in your life.”

She’s pretty close in her analysis. Football is my primary focus because I want more than what I have now. I want what she and Sully have and will always have. They’ll never have to work hard for any of it. Their daddies will take care of them. Sullivan will eventually take over his daddy’s factory. He’ll be set. Jenny Lee hasn’t decided what she’ll do, but she doesn’t have to. When she’s got her daddy’s connections, she can do whatever she wants. I’ve known Sullivan Ray since the third grade and he’s like a brother. When I started dating Jenny Lee people started treating me differently because she’s so popular. I guess I kind of like that.

“Sorry, babe. Just been focused on tonight’s game, you know.” I put my arm around Jenny Lee and kiss her on the cheek again. “You know the scouts will be here tonight.”

“They’re not looking at your punk-ass.” Sully slaps me on the back.

“I know, but they’ll be looking at the guys I’ll be running through like they’re a wall of tissue. That’ll make them take notice of me.” I don’t tell Sully that Coach benched me first half.

“Wall of tissue. Damn son, I like that.” Sullivan holds out his knuckles and I bump them. “Charlotte, did you hear Slaughter call their D-line a wall of tissue?”

“Yeah, yeah, wall of tissue.” Charlotte’s the captain of the cheerleaders but seems to care absolutely nothing for football. It’s like she’s only on the squad because it’s a requirement to be popular.

The bell rings to let us know we have two minutes left to get to class. That’s another thing Coach makes sure of. We have to be in class every day, unless we’re dead or damned near dead. If we show up late to class and Coach finds out about it, he’ll have our ass at practice. If we are late on game day, we sit the bench first half. Since I’m already benched first half, no way in hell I’m going to risk missing the second half. Not with the scouts here. Maybe next time they’ll come out to look at me.

CHAPTER 2

“You about ready, Slaughter?” Sully splashes a fist full of water on his face.

“Yeah...I’m...ready...” I spit out a mouthful of toothpaste. “I’m ready as I’m gonna be.”

I rinse the rest of the toothpaste out of my mouth and take my toothbrush back to my locker.

There’s one constant in my life for as long as I’ve played football. I throw up before every game. Gross, I know. But it’s the truth. My nerves twist all up inside of me, and I can barely help myself. Next thing I know, I’m looking for a trashcan or a toilet. When I was younger, the first thing I found was my helmet, so I blew chunks in it. Didn’t take me long, though, before I stopped. Sweat mixed with puke makes for a miserable Friday night, and the stink doesn’t come out of my hair for days. Not good.

“Gonna need you tonight, man. Gotta get big and blow through them Wildcats.” Sully grabs his shoulder pads and helmet.

“Damn right! But I’m out the first half.”

“What the hell?”

“Chemistry test.”

Sully curses and then leaves me alone in the locker room. Everybody on the team is used to my silly superstitions, so they don’t really say much. After I puke, I go to the back of the field house and sit in the corner for a few minutes. I’m not sure if it’s exactly praying that I do or not, because I’m not really sure how I feel about all of that God stuff. I mean, I can’t really see what the big guy’s done for me lately.

No matter what it’s called, I find a quiet spot and spend some time alone and think. It’s kind of like visualization. Not sure what it really is but it works. At least for me. I see the game in my head before it starts.

Then I join the guys as they get ready to take the field. We hide behind the banner the cheerleaders made. The man on the PA system runs through a whole slew of announcements and sponsor mentions. Sully's dad is the biggest. We would have new uniforms if Sully wasn't the starting QB.

"Boys, I don't have to tell you what this game means do I?" Coach's voice can barely be heard over the roar of the crowd.

"NO SIR!" The whole team yells back at Coach.

"Then that means I don't have to tell you that since this is the home opener, those good people in the stands are expecting four quarters of football, right?"

"NO SIR!"

"And I certainly don't have to tell you that when you boys go out on that field, you represent me and the other coaches, your folks, and the fine fans of Coosa County High School."

"NO SIR!" Coach whips the entire team into a frenzy. Kind of like a group of sharks swimming in circles ready to attack.

"Didn't think so," Coach says. "We've got about five minutes before we run through that banner them pretty little girls made for y'all. When we go out there on that field, we need to make sure that Walker knows whose field they've come to."

"YES SIR!"

"Let me remind you that we have guests in our house tonight all the way from Chapel Hill. Those scouts came to look at Walker's defensive line, but when they leave the only thing they're going to remember is how our offense put a hurting on their D-line."

"YES SIR!"

The voice on the PA blares throughout the stadium. There isn't much to do in Flatbush,

North Carolina most of the year, but on Friday nights in the fall, the whole damned town comes out to watch us play. Been that way for years, and will probably be that way forever.

A giant boo roars through the stands as they announce the Wildcats.

Then it's time for us. "Give it up for the Coosa County Rebels."

The crowd goes nuts as Sully and I lead the team through the gate and onto the field. The entire team floods behind us as we break through the giant paper banner and run to the fifty-yard-line before we make our way over to our side of the field.

"Sully. Slaughter. Get your asses over here." Coach doesn't care what he says on the field. Nobody can hear him but us, so he lets curse words fly all night long.

"Yeah, Coach?" Sully asks.

"When you boys go out there for the coin toss, if we win it, I want us to receive."

"Got it!" Sully says. "But we need to start Slaughter tonight, Coach. Bench him next game."

"You want to do what I tell you or stand here and argue with me? If you want to argue, I'll get Junior to step up tonight. That'll put both of my captains on the bench."

"No, sir." Sully knows how to play the game, so he closes his big mouth. Coach is the only one I know that can get him to shut up.

"Good. I want us to take the ball first tonight, because I want you boys to go after their defense early. Show those scouts they should've come here to look at y'all and not them damned Wildcats."

"Damn right," I say as the whistle blows.

Sully and I head out to the center of the field. Their captains are already waiting on us.

"Surprised you jackoffs came out here," one of their guys mumbles.

“Up yours,” Sully replies with a middle finger.

“You boys want to keep up all that nonsense,” the referee warns, “I’ll go ahead and throw an unsportsman-like conduct penalty at both of you.”

I yank Sully’s jersey to get him to stop. Evidently, the other guy decides to keep quiet too. “We’ll get them on the field,” I whisper to Sully.

“Heads or tails?” the referee asks. “Visiting team calls.”

“Heads,” the dipshit who ran his mouth says.

The oversized coin flips through the air and light glints off of it in bursts. It hits the turf on its edge and bounces up and circles before it falls flat. “It’s tails.” The referee pockets the coin and looks to me and Sully.

“We’ll receive.”

“You won’t have it long,” dipshit says.

“Just kick the ball.” Sully eyes the kid as we walk away.

“Don’t matter. Your ass is grass.” The referee shoots him a look but doesn’t say anything. Probably because that’s nothing compared to the crap that gets said throughout the game.

Sully and I walk back over to the sidelines. Coach tells the kickoff return team to take the field.

I look around the stadium and pull my helmet over my bushy brown hair before remembering I’m not going in. Electric energy zaps through the metal bleachers and a group of men covered in Tar Heel blue stand near our end zone. I want to be the first person they see popping over that line, but it doesn’t look like that’s going to happen. I take a deep breath and set my helmet back on the bench. Just about the perfect Carolina chill on a September night and it’s killing me not to be going in.