FOURTH AND FOREVER

CHAPTER 1

The rolling farmlands of Eastern Washington come at me like ocean waves, an assault on my senses as the pink sky darkens and a bolt of lightning cuts across the horizon. Signs for places like Ritzville and Sprague and Fishtrap fly by as the emotions come rushing back. I see faces and names that haven’t penetrated my consciousness in years, maybe decades. Life had seemed so complicated in those days, even though it was so incredibly simple. *See target, hit target. Break his will*. We were trained soldiers. Trained to hurt. Trained to kill.

Thunder rumbles in the distance, and the first drop of rain splatters across my windshield – signs of danger that life rarely provides. Too often, we don’t see it coming; we can’t even feel it when it’s upon us. When we’re wrapped up in our lives, we can’t feel the power of the storm outside.

I see a sign for Cheney, and something inside of me clicks, something I hadn’t expected and can’t quite label. There’s a charge in my chest, a mix of excitement and nerves, a rush of dopamine in my brain, and a numbness in by spine. I feel a wave of nausea, and for a brief moment it’s so strong that I feel like I might lose the contents of my stomach. But as I slow my rental car and prepare to pull over, it passes.

The rain comes. I’m sweating now, and I recognize the feeling as something that used to come over me every summer for three years, back when I was younger, back when I was alive and the world was a different place – one that had a clear path but one that I could not see. My heart is beating. My jaw is clenched. My fingers, wrapped around the steering wheel with the grip of a boa constrictor, are tingling.

Yes, I recognize this feeling now. It’s the need for something that was a part of me for so much of my life, a sensation of need that can only be satisfied by one single thing.

I need to hit someone.

This is what I need. I need to find a target and turn my adrenaline-pumped body, to run at full speed without any regard for results or consequences, my calves throbbing and my thighs bulging, the muscles of my abdomen strengthening and my biceps twitching, my shoulders and head prepared for the moment of blackout – *shoulders squared, knees bent, keep your eyes open, see target/hit target, make that motherfucker remember your name* – my mind finally going blank as our paths meet at divergent angles, the speed and power of the moment converging in a single connection, the atoms coming together in an explosive collision – man to man, bone on bone, helmet to helmet, our worlds exploding in sparks and blood and the cracking of bones, our bodies coming together and falling toward the turf with the violence of worlds colliding, until there is the relief of my muscles going slack and my mind going blank, and suddenly we’re lying there, and all I hear is the crowd and the sound of my teammates congratulating me, and any sane man would probably want to close his eyes and wait for someone to come to his aid but all I’m wanting in that moment is to stand up and do it all over again.

Another crash of thunder rattles my car, and as I taste blood in my mouth I realize I’ve bitten my lip. The exit for Cheney, Washington, is a half-mile up the road. It’s pulling me, fooling me into thinking I’m years younger, that I’ve got something there waiting for me, that it’s almost time to compete, that it’s time to *hit* somebody. My muscles tense up, but instead of warrior-like anger, all I feel now is the sore hip and surgically-repaired shoulder that have become more a part of me than anything I’ve done in the past.

My rental car veers off the exit, and suddenly I’m overcome with an incredible sense of void. The game won’t be there for me, a game that I never really appreciated and didn’t realize how much I’d missed. The competition became a drug, one that I can no longer buy. But the feeling of emptiness is more than that. For the first time, the reality of it all washes over me, that he won’t be there, that Connie Davis is not waiting for me at the pool table of some shitty dormitory lounge in some shitty little town, his face a diamond in all the manure, his stoic eyes lighting up when he sees me.

I slow to a stop sign and close my eyes, trying to picture his face, but all I see is black. All I feel is the raindrops pounding on the hood of my car and the slow crawl of a single teardrop down my cheek. I can taste the salt as it rolls over my lips and into my mouth, a sensation I haven’t felt in I don’t know how long. I pull the car over to a small patch of dirt next to a stop sign. The tears come harder. I cannot stop them now.

I hear the voice of someone from my past, a voice I can’t name – maybe a doctor, or a coach, or an ex-girlfriend. The voice comes to me in a whisper, gently cutting through the drum of the rain.

“It’s over,” it says. “It’s over.”

I open my eyes and look one way, then the next. I look again. Both ways. A habit I picked up as my younger self. I can’t see anyone coming, but I won’t take my foot off the brake. Whenever you’re looking one direction, you’re blind to what’s coming from the other side. It’s a frustrating reality of life; God didn’t give us eyes in the back of our head. We can only see what’s in front of us.

*It’s over.*

Then the rain lets up, and I hear another voice, coming at me from the other side of my car window. I look up and see a truck idling next to mine.

CHAPTER 2

I thought I’d taken a wrong turn. I pulled my father’s old ’86 Chevette to the shoulder of the off ramp and spread out the map across my dashboard. This was supposed to be my first National Football League training camp, and already I’d gotten lost. The exit sign clearly said CHENEY, but this couldn’t possibly be the place. Fields spread out in front of me, a rusted gate a few hundred yards to my right. I half expected to see Tumbleweeds skitter across the hood of my car.

Maybe there was another place – a Chaney or a Cheanault or a Shainey, someplace that sounded similar. The letter they’d sent to my parents’ home must have misspelled the place. The directions they’d given me at the team complex on the east side of Seattle must have mislabeled the exit. I searched the map, trying to find the city to which I was supposed to be going.

“You lost, bud?” a voice drawled out through my open window.

I turned to see a large, doughy looking guy with something resembling a beard, his eyes looking back at me from the driver’s seat of a tripped-out pickup truck. When I didn’t respond, he said: “You look lost as a long-tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs.”

I couldn’t place his accent, but it sounded Southern. I immediately wondered if I’d taken a horribly wrong turn somewhere, if I’d perhaps ended up in Cheney, *Mississippi*.

“I’m trying to find a college,” I said, the summer sunlight blazing in my eyes. “Eastern Washington University?”

“That’s right where I’m headed,” he drawled. Then he spit into a coke can and smiled. “You ain’t a rookie, are ya? Fresh meat?”

“I’m, uh, well … I’m going to training camp,” I stammered. “With the Seattle Seahawks.”

“No shittin’?” he said. “Me too.”

I felt a flutter in my stomach, the way I used to feel in grade school, when I was about to make a new friend.

“What a coincidence,” I offered. “My name’s Ross. Ross-“

“Whatever, Meat,” he drawled. “Follow me.”

He peeled out, kicking up dirt as his truck took a right turn and headed down a long, straight road that didn’t look like it went anywhere. I tossed my map onto the passenger seat and slammed on the gas, trying to keep up. I had a pinch of Copenhagen behind my bottom lip, an old habit I couldn’t kick, and spit into a Coke can. Everything I owned was in the back seat or stowed away in the trunk. None of it meant much, save for the photos of my father and a few letters from my ex-teammates. I could see his truck up ahead and had to pound the accelerator up to 85 miles per hour just to close the gap. Eventually, I got close enough to see the guy’s license plate: RD GRTR 74.

We drove on for miles, the country road never turning, the scenery barely changing until we passed a house, then some kind of paper plant, then a gate that led down a long, dirt road toward the country. The street didn’t feel like a path that leads toward opportunity. Cheney reminded me a little bit of Denton, Texas, where I’d taken a college visit as a high school senior but never really wanted to go back. North Texas University and Mankato State seemed to be my only offers until Northwestern and the University of North Dakota swept in midway through my senior season at Fridley High School. I know my father really wanted to stay home and play for him at Augsburg College, but we both knew in our hearts that it would probably end badly, so I decided to go to the school with the best academics. That I could tell people I’d be playing in the Big Ten made the decision that much easier. Five years had passed, and I never could have imagined I’d be on my way to a real NFL training camp, but life can be funny sometimes.

If my father could see me now, I’d like to think he’d be smiling down from above.

The RD GRTR 74 pickup truck finally slowed and took a left turn into something like a neighborhood: small houses with fenced-in yards and laundry drying on lines out back. I still couldn’t imagine any kind of college in these parts, much less a professional football training camp. But after a few blocks, I could see EWU signs and a six-story dormitory that resembled a can of Pabst.

The guy’s brake lights came on, and he pulled into a parking spot. I chose one a couple of spots away and watched as he got out. The guy was much bigger than I’d expected, bigger than any man I’d ever seen that close up, even bigger than those Neanderthals up in Ann Arbor.

I got out of my Chevy quickly, but the guy never looked back at me. He just sauntered up toward the beer-can dorm. I spit out my tobacco onto the gravel and grabbed a duffle bag filled with cleats and T-shirts and headed off in that direction, noticing for the first time that there was a football field just up the hill, not much bigger than the one where I’d played in high school.

The big guy was standing at a table when I entered, making small talk with a balding, squat guy who sat in a folding chair across from him.

“Have fun, Rohlenbach,” the balding guy said, handing him a key on a lanyard. “Should be a hell of a year.”

“Long as I got a single room,” the big guy said without looking back at me, “I can tolerate this shithole for a few weeks.”

And off he went, his massive frame moving across the lobby and into an elevator. He had to duck his head to get inside, and I estimated he must’ve been six-foot-seven, three-hundred and thirty or forty pounds.

I weighed two-thirty-five on a six-foot frame.

“You must be a rookie,” the balding guy said, his eyes glancing at me before going toward a clipboard on the table between us. I wondered what he could see in that one quick glance at me, whether he saw anything like a football player. With my shoulder-length hair and the kind of frame that probably didn’t even stand out on a college campus, I doubt I looked like the next star linebacker. “Welcome,” the guy said in rote. “Name?”

“Pawlawsky. Ross Pawlawsky.”

He ran his finger down a page, flipped it over and tapped the clipboard. “Here you are,” the guy said, still staring at the page between us. “Pawlawsky. Linebacker. From Northwestern, huh?”

“Yes, sir,” I said, although the balding guy only looked five or six years older than I was.

“Didn’t know they had a football program there,” he cracked. Then he looked up, winked and said: “I went to Wisconsin. But, hey, you led the Big Ten every year in student newspaper honors, for what that’s worth.” He flashed a grin, then grabbed a lanyard key and held it out for me. “You’re with Davis,” he said. “Connie Davis. We like to keep you rookies together.”

“Did you say *Connie*?” I asked.

“He doesn’t look like a Connie, from what I hear,” the guy said, his eyes returning to the clipboard. “Real name’s Constable. And he looks meaner than a yellow jacket during a honey famine.” He glanced up, winked, then went back to his clipboard. “If you were hoping for a hot blonde with big tits,” he added, “you’re out of luck.”

I took the key, a Seattle Seahawks emblem adorning the lanyard, and felt the sense that this was all real, that this was no longer a dream, that my father was looking down on me with his massive chest protruding and his jaw muscle tight, as if he were holding back the tears he never cried, and the weight of it all came down on me – so much so that I came as close to weeping as I had in years; not even at the funeral had I allowed myself to cry.

“Good luck,” the balding guy said, and he was looking at me in that moment, with two words coming out of him in a way that said: *You’ll need it, undrafted rookie from Northwestern University. We’ve got thirteen linebackers in camp, and you’re Number Fourteen.*

And then he looked past me, and I realized a line had formed, and when I turned I saw the black-and-blond flat-topped afro and the gold-plated sunglasses and the huge medallion across the front of a tight T-shirt that had the words “DON’T PLAY WITH ME IF YOU DON’T WANNA GET PLAYED” across the front, and at once I recognized Lassiter Boyd. His head was facing forward, clearly annoyed at the wait, and I as I stood there frozen, the balding, middle-aged guy grinned and said: “There he is. LB the LB. Back for more.”

“Just here to get paid, boss,” Lassiter Boyd said. His shoulders were massive and the ripples of his stomach muscles protruded from beneath his tight T-shirt. He stood about six-foot-three, three inches taller than myself, but seemed much, much larger. Only when his large head turned toward me did I realize that I’d been staring, frozen in something like star-struck giddiness. “You need an autograph or something, boss?” Lassiter Boyd, three-time All-Pro, said.

“The elevator is right past those couches,” the balding guy said, pointing, clearly trying to push me along.

I obeyed, feeling like a scorned school girl. Stepping into the elevator, I glanced at my watch. I still had a few hours of daylight. The first practice wasn’t until the next morning.

I arrived to find an empty dorm room, went back downstairs to retrieve the rest of my things from the car, and changed into my workout clothes. I put a dip in my lip.

I went off to find the practice field.

CHAPTER 3

*He had closed the door behind us, which he didn’t usually do. I recognized this right away, even though I was only four or five years old. It’s my earliest memory, one I’ve tried to push away. For years, I didn’t understand why it was there, why someone like Mr. Kevin would be such a vivid part of my younger years, but there he was, whenever I closed my eyes.*

*He closed the door and sat down in an office chair. Told me to sit on the floor. He had one of those floor puzzles. He had pictures of all the letters in the alphabet. He quizzed me on them, told me I was a smart kid but that I could use some help. He’d taken me into his office three or four times before, but this time was different. This time, he had shut the door.*

*I’m not totally sure who Mr. Kevin was. I know he worked at my Aunt Ruth’s daycare center a day or two a week, maybe as a janitor or a finance guy or some other job I wouldn’t have understood at the time. I knew that I trusted him. When things got too busy for Aunt Ruth, he’d take kids aside for some lesson time. That’s all I knew. I’m not even sure my Aunt Ruth was aware of it. He had big glasses and wispy hair. He wore collared shirts that were too tight, the buttons bursting and the folds of his skin poking through.*

*He never tried anything on me, not once, and at that age I never would have suspected it. As the years passed, I found myself asking a lot of questions. Who, exactly, was he? Why did he pull kids into his office? Why did he choose me?*

*We only got to the letter G when there was a hard rap on the door. Mr. Kevin stood up to open the door, and that’s when my brother Frankie kicked it in. He called the guy some names – words I’d never heard before -- and grabbed me by the back of my shirt. He told Mr. Kevin that he would cut his dick and balls off if he ever tried “that” again. I didn’t know what “that” was.*

*Then my brother Frankie pulled me out of Mr. Kevin’s office. Frankie refused to ever let my mom take us there again.*

###

The truth is that it took most of my younger life for me to finally fall in love with football.

It took my father dying.

Frank Pawlawsky had been coaching football for as long as I had been alive. He’d been a high school coach when my brother and I were born and took an assistant coach’s position at Augsburg College when I was three or four years old. The subject of my dad’s salary never came up, but in those early years my mom had to go back to work. She would drive my brother, Frank Jr., who was 18 months older than me, and I to the “group home” where our Aunt Ruth worked. The “group home” was basically a holding place for Foster kids, but Ruth let us hang out there from eight to five every weekday, and Frankie and I were too young to know any different.

Most of the kids that rotated in and out of there were pretty normal, but there were a few head cases. A couple of them tried to mess with me, but Frankie was a tough son-of-a-gun who quickly put them in their place.

Frankie took after my dad. Frank Pawlawsky Sr., my father, was a mountain of a man who stood about six feet tall but had enormous hands and thick, tree-trunk legs. He’d played some football back in the day and earned a scholarship offer to the University of Minnesota, but they took it away when he tore up his knee as a senior in high school. Dad never forgave ‘The U’ for abandoning him, and every time a Minnesota Gophers game came on the radio he made it a point to remind Frankie and me how long it had been since they’d been to the Rose Bowl. Twenty years. Twenty-five years. My dad would stick his massive chest out when he’d say it, as if he’d somehow been responsible for the decay of Gopher football.

Football continued to drive my father; it’s the only thing that got him out of bed in the morning. Dad seemed put off by anything else in life – church, politics, neighbors, family dinners – but his eyes sparkled whenever he watched reel-to-reel films of Augsburg practices while breaking down players’ weaknesses in the darkness of the family living room.

That’s how I would see him in the months after he died: sitting alone in a dark room, the projector flashing images onto a blank wall next to a black-and-white television, his eyes focused and his lips muttering. Most nights, we’d eat dinner without him – just my mother, Frankie and I devouring baked chicken or casserole or whatever it was my mother found time to cook after her shift as a secretary at the plant. Her boss was third in charge at the plant, a vice president in waiting, and although we heard a lot of stories about him, we never met the man.

She finally quit her job in 1985, when my father had gotten promoted to Augsburg’s head football coach. He was 38 years old. Frankie was 10. I was eight.

We saw him even less after that; his new office came with a VCR that allowed him to watch game film at work. I’d often hear him coming through the front door late at night, when I’d be lying in bed, waiting patiently for our household to be complete. On the rare occasion when my father would look in on us, I’d press my eyes closed, fearing he’d find me awake and punish me somehow, maybe by not coming home at all the next night.

When he was home, my father was usually talking football strategy or taking us into the backyard to throw the pigskin around. “Flick the wrist,” he’d say, or, “Thumbs together, arms extended, like you’re not afraid of the damn ball, then ease the thing into your body.” Sometimes he would make us tackle each other: “Keep your head up! UP!” Or: “Shoulders squared, then lift … *like you mean it!*” It was like my father spoke only one language, the language of football. I tried to comply, but my brother outweighed my by 30 or 40 pounds, and bringing him down was like trying to lasso Paul Bunyan with dental floss.

Frankie learned quickly that the best way to earn Dad’s attention was by becoming a good football player. He had a ton of natural talent, more than I ever had, and pretty soon Frankie was the star of his Pee Wee team, running and catching and tackling with unbridled ferocity. Dad found time to take off work and attend his games, something that rarely happened once I became old enough to play.

This all came at a time in our lives when an 18-month age difference may as well have been 18 years, but even though Frankie was bigger and taller than I was and already beginning to get muscles, my dad kept taking the two of us out back to compete. One of us would line up at receiver, the other at defensive back, and my father would throw passes. Frankie caught everything thrown his way, even if I knew what pattern was coming. He had taken my father’s advice to heart, learning how to use his hands and cradle the ball into his hands, how to use his body to shield off a defender, and how to time his jump so that he could get his hands on the ball first. Even if I took a running start and laid my body into him, full force, he’d still hang on.

On one such occasion, after I’d heaved myself into him on back-to-back plays, he took over on defense and got me back. He was 10 or 11 at the time; I was nine and a lot smaller. I lined up a few steps from my dad and ran a pass pattern over the middle. Frankie let me catch the ball before laying me out, full flush, leaving my crumpled body flat on the grass as the ball skittered harmlessly away. I couldn’t catch my breath. I thought I was dying as I writhed across the grass of our backyard, moaning in pain. No one was saying anything. I tried to open my eyes but could feel the tears welling up inside me.

“C’mon, now,” I heard my father say at last, and at first I thought he was talking to Frankie. “Get up,” he said, sounding exasperated. “Let’s go.”

I opened my eyes and looked up at him as a tear filled my eye socket and rolled down my cheek, into the grass.

“Up, Rossie, let’s go,” my dad said, a little louder. His jowly face glanced at me then looked away, scanning the neighborhood as he pushed air through his nose. “Shake it off.”

I lifted my head from the dirt and looked up at him, hoping he would see the pain in my eyes. He must have noticed the tears then, because he said: “Oh, for Chrissakes. Clean yourself up and line up.” I looked over at Frankie, who wouldn’t make eye contact. “Up, Ross!” my father shouted, and the volume of his voice forced me to rise to my knees. Using the bottom of my Minnesota Vikings T-shirt, I wiped the dirt and tears from my face.

“He can’t do that,” I mumbled, managing to get to my feet. My back and shoulders hurt, but mostly it was my pride. I glared at Frankie, who spit into the dirt and offered only a quick glance. “That was a cheap shot,” I said.

“Clean hit,” my father said flatly. “Line up.”

Frankie was fighting a grin by then, as if he’d gotten away with something. With slumped shoulders, I started back toward the imaginary line of scrimmage.

“Hustle!” my father, Coach Frank Pawlawsky, barked. I forced myself into a jog.

As soon as I got in place, Dad called out “Hut-hut!” and I was off again, half-heartedly running a pass pattern while my older brother breathed all over me. When my dad finally threw a pass, Frankie stepped in front of me and grabbed the ball. It was all I could do to swing a leg in his direction, tripping him. We both fell into the grass, and when I started to get up, he caught me with a knee in the side.

“Quit being such a pussy, Rossie!” Frankie called out. I turned to look at him, but my eyes met those of my father. His said: *What are you going to do about it*? He raised his eyebrows, as if daring me to engage in a fight. Frankie stood over me, fists clenched.

“I don’t want to play anymore,” I said, turning toward the house. I was almost to the back door when my father called out.

“So you’re quitting?” he said. I didn’t respond, so he added: “Maybe Frankie’s right, Ross. Maybe you *are* a pussy.”

I never wanted to hit someone as bad as I did at that moment, but all the strength had been sapped out of me. I felt the tears building up again.

I was sitting at the kitchen table when my father came inside a few minutes later. He leaned in and whispered into my ear.

“If you don’t toughen up, boy,” he said, “you’ll never get anywhere in this world.”

Who knows? Maybe he was right; maybe there was a method to his madness.

Because after that, I got tough.

CHAPTER 4

When I try to picture Connie Davis’s face on that day I first met him, it’s nearly impossible to remember what he looked like then, when he was young and still somewhat innocent and the world had yet to treat him with such cruel heartlessness. So much would be taken from him in the years that followed; to the point that he would become something less than a man. That’s the thing that was hardest of all: over time, he wasn’t even human anymore.

What I remember from that first time I’d met him is that he was reading the Bible. I’d returned from a three-hour workout, dripping with sweat and impatient anticipation, when I found the muscle-bound guy in a tank top sitting on the bed across from mine – not just looking at a Bible but actually *reading* it. He had dark skin and even darker eyes, penetrating eyes that were so focused that they looked like bullet holes. His hair was cropped into some kind of a crewcut, from what I recall. It was a haircut that was well out of style at a time when shaved heads or close-cut fades were the typical under-the-helmet hairstyles. Connie Davis looked more prepared for an army commitment than for his first professional training camp.

I glanced at his Bible. Between the pages was a small photograph, and upon that the image of a young man wearing an oversized football uniform. An informal bookmark. Connie had one hand on the book, the other on a half-eaten apple. He chewed rhythmically, grinding the piece of fruit between his teeth without noticing that I had walked into the room -- and if he had, he didn’t bother to look up from the words on the pages.

“Hey,” I said. He didn’t respond, just kept on reading, so I said it again, only louder: “Hey. I’m Ross.” His eyes flashed in my direction, tearing holes in me – dark, angry eyes -- then they went back to the Good Book. His massive, bare shoulders looked like brown bowling balls. He wore baggy sweatpants and flip-flops that were so small that his long toes hung over the edges. “I guess we’re gonna be –“

“I’m reading!” he shouted without looking up.

If anyone off the football field had shouted at me like that in recent years, I hadn’t remembered it. I was used to opponents and my position coach giving me an earful in an effort to evoke some kind of response, so I wasn’t quite sure how to act when my new roommate snapped at me in such a way.

I set down my gear and began putting things in drawers, the silence killing me. My heart was still pounding from the three-hour workout and whatever nerves were pumping through my body. I pinched a dip of tobacco into the space between my bottom teeth and lip and sat down on my bed, quietly spitting into an empty Styrofoam cup.

I thought about the life I’d left behind. The former college teammates. The girl, Meg, I’d started seeing at the end of my senior year. My mom and brother. My hometown. It all seemed so far away, and I wondered what may or may not still be there for me when I went back.

After what seemed like an hour but was probably more like ten minutes, he closed the book and set it down next to his leg, using the photograph to book-mark his page.

“Mmph,” he mumbled to himself, his eyes now closed. He nodded, then opened his eyes and looked at me. His dark, beady eyes had a way of penetrating a man’s soul. “My apologies, dog,” he said, his voice deeper than I expected. “Corinthians. I get passionate about Corinthians.” His face softened, even though his dark eyes still penetrated my soul. I dared not look away. “Nobody interrupts my Corinthians,” he said. “It’s my favorite part.”

Then he kicked off his flip-flops, swerved his body and lied down atop the sheets, his fingers clasped across his chest. I expected him to say more, but he just lied there. His eyelids closed.

I stopped unpacking my things. I spit into the Styrofoam cup.

“I’m Ross,” I said. “You must be Connie.” Once again, he said nothing. “What kind of name is that – Connie?” I asked. “Is that, like, Jamaican?” No response. I could see his lips moving, like he was whispering, but his eyes remained closed and he seemed to be ignoring me. “Look,” I said, “I know we’re all fighting for roster spots here,” I said, “and maybe only one of us is going to make the team. But it’s a long camp, and the least we could do is –“

“Thank you, dear Jesus, in your name I live and breathe and pray,” he said softly, then he opened his eyes. “Just prayin’,” he said to me. He held out a hand, smaller than I’d expected. “Connie Davis,” he said. “Carson-Newman University.”

“One double-A?” I asked, shaking his hand. He had a firm grip, one that said he meant business.

“D-2.”

“Oh, yeah? My dad used to coach at Augsburg. D-3 school.”

“I said D-2,” he said softly.

“I know, but-“

“Two national titles, one runner-up,” he said without any hint of emotion. He might as well have been reciting his home address. “Basically a D-1 program,” he added. “Better than most D-1s.” He reached over and picked up the Bible.

“Who’s picture?” I asked, spitting into the cup. He looked at me like he didn’t understand, so I nodded toward the Bible in his hand. “The bookmark.”

He opened the book and held up the photo. “Me,” he said, showing me a faded photograph of a stone-faced kid, too serious for his own good, unable to hide the fear in his eyes. The young Connie wore a red-and-yellow jersey and shoulder pads that were way too big. He held a helmet under his puny arm. “Before my first practice,” he said. “The first football practice of my life.” He put it back in the book and closed it before setting the Bible in the drawer of a desk next to his bed. “I kept it to remind myself how far I’ve come.”

I pulled a stack of socks out of my duffle bag and began gently placing them into an empty drawer.

“Yeah, we made it, huh?” I said. “A real NFL camp.”

“We ain’t made nothin’ yet,” Connie Davis said, resting his head back on the pillow. He held the Bible to his chest. “Where you from, dog?”

“I went to Northwestern,” I said. “Ranked No. 1 in the country. In journalism and civil engineering, anyway.” I let out a small laugh, but Connie Davis just stared at the ceiling. “That was a joke,” I said. “Our football team –“

“I know it was a joke,” Connie Davis said. “I didn’t laugh ‘cause it wasn’t funny, dog.”

He sat up and re-positioned a lamp above his bed. The sky was darkening outside.

“Practice at 10 tomorrow,” I said, removing the Copenhagen out of my mouth and disposing it in the cup. “Meetings start –“

“Eight o’clock,” he said. “I know.” He clicked off the lamp and clasped his hands behind his head on the pillow. “I’ll be there at seven-thirty,” he said, and those were the last words Connie Davis spoke all night.

I can’t say I slept much the night before my first NFL training camp practice, but I must have dozed off in the early-morning hours, because Connie Davis was gone when my alarm went off at six. He’d taken his Bible with him, which didn’t surprise me, and the next time I saw him, he was reading it in the front row of a meeting room in the basement of Dressler Hall. A dozen or so other players were there too, mostly veterans – the big RD GRTR 74 guy among them. My eyes worked the room, falling upon quarterback Dean Salmer sitting in the middle of the third row. One couldn’t miss the slicked-back hair, tan face and movie-star good looks. He was one of the more recognizable players in the league.

Salmer was in his mid-30s, having already lived a pretty good football life, but one thing the former No. 1 overall draft pick had never done was to play in a Super Bowl. Injuries had derailed his previous two seasons in Dallas, and the Seahawks had signed him to a fat, four-year contract, hoping to perhaps squeeze a couple magical seasons out of his Pro Bowl arm. I’d had him on my fantasy-football team as a sophomore at Northwestern, but I never could have imagined being in the same room with him, much less calling him a teammate.

Sitting next to *the* Dean Salmer was out of the question, and Connie Davis didn’t appear too eager to converse with anyone, certainly not me, so I grabbed a seat by myself in the back. The other seats gradually filled in around me, until Coach Hannigan entered, bringing an end to whatever conversation was going on in the room. I sat straight up in my seat. Connie Davis closed his Bible, using the photograph for a bookmark, and put the book away.

When Coach Hannigan took his place before us, he opened by clapping his hands, rubbing them together and looking around the room. Bill Hannigan was a man of few words, from what I’d seen of his television interviews; his press conferences were notoriously dull. But he was as good an X’s and O’s man as there was in the game, as evidenced by his two national titles at Texas a few years earlier.

“Gentlemen, welcome to the 1999 season,” Hannigan said, then paused for effect. “This is where it starts, men. All those gaudy statistics and hard-fought wins we’re going to pile up, it all starts here. In this room.” He pointed toward the wall. “Out on those practice fields,” he said. He went quiet and looked around the room for effect. “A lot of you were around last December, when we came one game short of the playoffs,” he continued. “That’s not gonna happen again. Not on my watch. Not to this group of men. There’s too much talent in this room to come up short like that.”

With that, he gave the floor to the offensive coordinator, some gray-haired guy with a pointy nose. He instructed us where to go for our positional meetings and reminded us that when we got our playbooks, we were supposed to treat them like our own offspring.

“Now let’s go kick the shit out of the rest of the league,” he concluded, clapping his hands together as the veteran players started barking out motivational clichés around me. I wondered how many of these first-day-of-camp meetings started out the same way, and at what point the excitement would wear off. I looked around the room and saw a lot of big guys, a few familiar faces from games I’d watched on television, and plenty of talent. I wondered how I might fit in.

From there, I headed into Dressler Hall’s Room 106, where the linebackers gathered. There were thirteen of us in all, and only six or seven were going to be on the active roster at the end of camp. Lassiter Boyd – “LB the LB” – was going to be among those who would make the cut, as were returning starter Reggie Hagaman and a long-limbed guy named Kwame Mitchell who was a veteran who used to back up Boyd but was making the transition to middle linebacker. Five other guys who had been with the team at various times the previous year were also there, as were two recent draft picks, so the odds weren’t in my favor. I glanced over at Connie Davis, who was a lot shorter than I’d remembered. He had thick, bowed legs and a muscular neck, but Connie didn’t really look like a football player. He was shorter than most of the linebackers I’d played with at Northwestern. Then again, the guys in that room at Dressler Hall probably would have thought the same if looking at me. I had spent plenty of time in the weight room but wasn’t nearly as cut as most of them, and I was the only guy with hair that went down to my shoulders.

My nerves were flying when practice began, but I felt like I held my own. Starting fullback Jeter Gates was a beast in blocking drills, and I got torched the one time I went against veteran tight end Tony Russell, but otherwise I felt pretty good about the practice.

When I wasn’t participating in drills, I was sizing up the competition. Lassiter Boyd certainly looked the part but didn’t exert himself, while Kwame Mitchell made some assignment mistakes in his first practice since moving from outside to middle linebacker. A kid from Florida State that the Seahawks had taken in the fourth round had plenty of size and speed but was stiff as a board and didn’t seem to have much natural instinct.

The guy who stood out the most, to me, was Connie Davis. He was the shortest of all the linebackers, but his quickness and intensity were incredible. His huge shoulders were apparent even though we weren’t wearing pads, protruding from the V of his body, and he had bow legs that moved with remarkable speed. His motor never stopped. Just watching him bust his ass through a drill, I knew I had to step up my own game. I put every ounce of effort into every practice snap, acting as if it might be my last, because I had to try to match Connie’s desire.

We broke for lunch and meetings before hitting the practice field again in the afternoon. Lassiter Boyd and a couple of other veterans took the session off, while my legs were so dead that I had to fight just to make it through a couple of elementary drills. At one point, a guy they called Coach George, who coached the linebackers, called me out for “ginger-assing” through a drill.

“We got thirteen linebackers at camp, and you’re number thirteen, kid!” he shouted as I jogged back to the end of the line. “Keep showing lily-ass footwork like that, you’ll be Number 20!”

Connie Davis had no such problem. His laser focus never waned, and my roommate continually out-hustled everyone on the field. We hadn’t even put on the pads or started hitting yet, but it was apparent that Connie was making everyone take notice.

He was reading his Bible when I returned to the dorm that night, holding the photograph bookmark between his fingers, and this time I did not interrupt. I undressed in the silence of the room and left to take a shower, my third of the day. The Eastern Washington heat had sapped me of my energy, and I wondered how I might get myself motivated for the next day’s practice – much less four more weeks of them.

I climbed into bed after my shower, still wet but too warm to dry myself off. Connie continued reading for another half hour or so before he clicked off the light.

“You were pretty amazing today, Connie,” I whispered into the darkness. He said nothing. I rolled over. “Not bad for a D-2,” I added. I hoped he might chuckle at that, but Connie Davis remained silent. All I could hear was his breathing. The dampness of my stringy hair cooled my head against the pillow. “I don’t know how you do it,” I said. “My body was gassed by this afternoon, but you …” I let the words drift off into the night. The soft sounds of a television in one of the single rooms upstairs seeped in, and I strained to hear. I imagined one of the veteran guys, maybe Lassiter Boyd or Dean Salmer, the aging quarterback, watching all the talking heads on ESPN as they sized up the competition. Guys like Boyd and Salmer were more concerned with the Broncos and Raiders than with the next day’s practices, but that’s all I needed to let permeate through my thoughts: making it through another day, making sure there were still thirteen linebackers by tomorrow night, even if I was still Number Thirteen. By the end of the week, maybe I’d move up to Number Twelve.

“Thank you, Jesus, in your name I live and breathe and pray,” Connie whispered through the faint light of a setting sun outside our dorm-room window. Then, his calm voice just barely above a whisper, he said: “You’re too geeked up. It’s draining your muscles, depriving your brain of the oxygen it need to think. That’s why you’re gassed.”

“What’s that?”

“You tired,” he said to me. “That’s why. You get too fired up before practice, worrying and stuff.” I could tell by the direction of his voice that he was still facing the ceiling. “You got to control that aggression, turn it into power.” I heard him roll over, toward the closed window. I couldn’t tell if he was talking to himself or addressing me. “They’ll still notice you,” he added. “Don’t need to run through a wall to be seen. Just need to let ‘em know you can go over it.” When I didn’t respond for a few seconds, he asked: “You feel me?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Yeah, I do.” Lying a few feet away in my dorm bed, I smiled into the darkness. Just hearing him say that calmed my nerves, not because of what he said but because of *how* he’d said it. Connie Davis had a soothing voice that bled strength. It was like he was pumping his own confidence into my body. “Thanks for the advice,” I said quietly. “I’ll use it.” Then, sitting up in bed, I added: “You do know I’m your competition, right?

“No man is competition ‘cept myself,” he said quietly. “Only myself and my God will decide whether I make the team.”

His voice trailed off, as it he was talking to himself now, and I closed my eyes and started thinking about the next day’s practice. I imagined using my hands to shed a Jeter Gates block, or jamming Tony Russell at the line to re-direct his pass route.

“One more thing,” Connie said into the darkness. “You got to quit that stuff. It’ll kill you.”

“What stuff?”

“Cancer’s the real deal, dog. He don’t play.”

I turned my head and could barely see my tin of Copenhagen on the bedside table. I knew he was right, but some habits die hard.

“I hear ya,” I said. “Good night, Connie. Good luck tomorrow.”

But he didn’t say anything else.

CHAPTER 5

Connie Davis had always been a man beyond his years, but nothing could have prepared me for what I saw when I walked into his room at the convalescent center in Houston. His hair, once midnight black and full, was thinning and flecked with gray, scattered around his head in patches like puddles on blacktop. He sat in a wheelchair, hunched over and shaking. His arms and legs were threadlike; the taunt muscles of his youth had withered away over time. His useless feet splayed out in either direction, as if each had been broken at the ankles. His cracked, aging toes hung over the edge of his flip-flop sandals. A new Bible was resting in the middle of a pile of books on a shelf nearby, looking like it hadn’t even been opened.

“Connie,” I ventured. He said nothing, which wasn’t too far out of character. But there was a part of me that was wondering – hoping? – that I had the wrong room, that this wasn’t the man I’d come to call my best friend all those years ago. “Connie Davis,” I said, a little louder this time. I bent my aching knees, placing one of them on the carpeted floor between his feet, and looked into his eyes. Those dark, beady eyes of his found my face, staring daggers at me, and in that moment I had no doubt it was him. “Connie,” I said, taking his hand. He had no grip. “It’s me, Ross. Ross Pawlawsky.”

He continued to stare at me, his body trembling slightly. A lot of time had passed since we’d seen each other, and after all that had happened, I wasn’t sure he would want anything to do with me. I couldn’t blame him for hating me now, but so much time had passed that I thought maybe we could talk. It was a long shot, I knew, but I’d never forgive myself if I hadn’t tried.

“Ross,” I said again, holding his limp hand in mine. “Ross Pawlawsky.” When he didn’t say anything, I added: “From the-“

“Paw-loff-see?” he said, each syllable coming out slowly, his voice quiet and raspy from what could only be a lack of use. “Pawloffsee. I don’t know no Pawloffsees.”

He stared curiously into my eyes, as if he was trying to bring back the past, and I could tell he was being sincere. He didn’t recognize me at all.

“You from Houston?” he asked.

“Connie,” I said. “It’s me, Ross. From the Seahawks. The Seattle Seahawks.”

“The Seattle *Seahawks*?” Connie said, his voice rising. “What the hell I know about the Seattle Seahawks?”

It was the first time I’d ever heard Connie Davis swear. Ever.

“What do you want from me?” he said, his shaky voice agitated.

“Connie, you don’t remember,” I said. “We used to be friends. A long time ago. When-“

“*Friends*? I’ve never seen your fucking face in my life?” he seethed, his voice mixed with anger and frustration. That word – *fucking* – I would have guessed the Connie Davis I knew couldn’t even say it. “You some kind of shit-packin’ fruitcake?” he added, his voice rising. He was almost shouting. He had pulled his hand free of mine and was trying to get out of his wheelchair. I reached for his shoulders, so frail and bony. “Get the *fuck* off me, freak!” he shouted, falling back into his wheelchair. I stood and backed away. I was about to get a nurse when he said something I hadn’t expected, something that knocked me backward in time.

“Keena!” he yelled, his body trembling and his voice gaining strength. “Keena, get in here! KEENA!”

I backed to the doorway, standing there and still facing him. I poked my head out, half-expecting to see his wife come bounding up the carpeted corridor, her elegant hair wrapped up in a ponytail that hung across one shoulder. But of course that was impossible. And there was no one in the hallway, not even a nurse.

“Connie,” I said softly, stepping back toward him. “Connie, Keena’s not here anymore. She hasn’t been here for …” My voice trailed off. Whatever fight Connie had in him fell away. He sat slumped in the chair, trembling, his black eyes searching the small, barren room.

When his gaze fell back upon my face, his eyes looked sad and on the verge of tears.

“You go get Keena,” he whispered. “You go get my wife, tell her … You go get Keena!”

I felt a hand on my shoulder. I turned to see a nurse staring back at me. The nametag on her breast said PAMELA.

“Is something wrong, Connie?” she said, looking past me.

CHAPTER 6

After one practice during our fourth week of camp, I left the locker room and saw Connie twenty or thirty yards ahead of me, his back to me, walking back toward the dorms. He had the hood of his sweatshirt pulled up, but I could tell by the back of the “Carson-Newman, Six-Time Defending SAC Champs!” sweatshirt that it was him. I called out but Connie did not respond. I considered quickening my pace but found my legs were too sore. Only when we got to our dorm floor did he see me. He nodded but didn’t say anything. He unlocked the door to our room and we both went inside. Connie pulled back his black hood, and for the first time I realized he’d been wearing headphones.

“Tupac?” I asked, taking a chance on an artist that was universally loved by my black college teammates.

“Say what?” he said, pulling back his headphones.

“What’re you listening to?” I asked.

“Rev. Clay Evans,” Connie said, setting down his headphones on a nightstand. “You heard of him?” I shrugged. Connie nodded his head but didn’t say anything. He just looked deep into my eyes. Then he turned and opened a drawer on the nightstand, pulling out a photograph.

“That’s her,” Connie Davis was saying as he held a photograph of what looked like an African queen. “Keena.”

“She’s gorgeous,” I said, trying not to stare. Her caramel skin and green eyes popped out of the photograph. She wore an evening gown over a long, lean body and had her hair pulled back to show off the features of her face: the smooth forehead, the deep-set eye sockets, the high cheekbones and sophisticated smile.

“Got married last month,” Connie said, the pride in his voice giving no evidence of braggadocio. “She’s even prettier on the inside.” It was the first time I’d really seen Connie, the man. All that coldness he used to defend himself had slipped away, if only for a moment.

“I bet,” I said. “Must have been hard to leave.”

He just nodded and held the picture in front of his face for a few seconds. I’d learned a little bit about Keena in the month that we’d been roommates, but for some reason Connie hadn’t felt comfortable enough to show me a photo of her until that moment. It was as if I’d finally earned his trust. His life outside of football was still somewhat of a mystery to me, despite all the time we’d spent together in the short time I’d known him. When Connie did talk, it was mostly about football or practice or the Bible. None of those things used to interest me as much as they did when Connie Davis spoke. His voice and manner drew me in. Almost everything I’d learned about him came during an internet session one night at the EWU library. I’d gone there to exchange emails with a few of my former Northwestern teammates, and whatever I told them about my roommate seemed rather vague until I decided to do a search and find out more about the elusive Connie Davis. I was the only Seahawks player in the library at the time, as most of the veterans had headed off to Spokane to catch a movie or have a late dinner on a rare night off. Connie was back in the room reading his Bible, of course. What I learned about him from the computer was that he was a two-time Division II All-American, too small to be a serious NFL prospect, undrafted – like myself. He’d grown up in Houston and had graduated from a different high school than where he started. His real name was Constable, son of Carl and Rita Davis. And, according to his college bio, he had a fiancée named Keena Dionne. Now she was his wife.

“She’ll still be there when we get done here,” he told me as he put the photograph back into the nightstand and started pulling off his baggy sweatpants. “She ain’t goin’ nowhere.” He got undressed, sat back on his bed and opened up his Bible.

“She looks like an incredible woman,” I said, reaching for a spit cup.

Connie nodded and took in the words of the Lord. I enjoyed my Copenhagen in silence while looking out the window, down onto the brown grass of an Eastern Washington summer. We still had an hour before the second practice of the day, but I could already see that Connie was preparing himself mentally for the violence of the day. I understood his routine well enough to know that he’d soon put the Bible down, close his eyes and get into the right frame of mind. We were both rookies, but I had come to look up to Connie in these moments. I tried to follow his lead, to wean anything I could from him as Cutdown Day approached. He’d been right about me being too amped up before those first early practices; once I let myself loosen up, I found a groove. I’d already survived the first cut, which left the team with just eight healthy linebackers, and I was trying to adhere to the old adage about not counting numbers and seeing where you stood until the final cuts were made. But it was difficult.

A guy named Sturdivant, a valuable backup and special teamer from the previous year, had already gone down with a knee injury. Lee Hollingsworth, a seventh-round draft pick, had given up on football because of recurring back issues. Three other guys had already been cut, leaving the Seahawks with a roster that included three projected starters, two other veterans who looked likely to make the team, the Florida State kid the Seahawks had used a fourth-round pick on, Connie Davis and me. The more I did the math in my head, the more certain I was that Connie was the main thing standing in the way of me making the final roster.

He must have known the same thing, and yet for some reason Connie was doing everything in his power to help me survive the cut. Early on, I’d thought maybe he was trying to feed me misinformation, to throw me off in an effort to improve his own chances, but every adjustment he suggested – *turn the hips*; *jam the receiver* here*, not* there; *use your elbow to shed the block; anticipate where he’s gonna try to hit you*  – turned out to work in my favor.

We worked out together in the gym, usually in silence, and quizzed one another on the in’s and out’s of the playbook. We even woke up at the same time – 6 a.m. – for a morning jog before breakfast every day. I followed Connie to every practice and into meetings, opening the door for Lassiter Boyd to give me my first nickname.

“There’s he is,” Boyd said one day when he walked into the meeting room, finding Connie and I sitting alongside each other. “The White Shadow. I knew if Davis was in here, The White Shadow couldn’t be far behind.”

The truth was that I admired everything about Connie. I’d never seen a player as fast and as relentless as Connie Davis. If had been three or four inches taller, had maybe gone to Florida or Texas instead of Carson-Newman, he’d have been a first-round draft pick. Of this, I was convinced. I saw him make reads on the practice field that not even Lassiter Boyd, the Pro Bowl linebacker, could make.

As we headed out to the practice field on a Thursday in late August, it dawned on me that this might be my final NFL practice. Our last preseason game was two days away, and after that, final cuts. I took in whatever scenery there was – a hundred or so fans, many of them dressed in shorts and Seattle Seahawks jerseys, wearing sunglasses to protect their eyes from the scorching sunshine – and decided not to leave anything on the field. If the Seahawks were going to cut me, I was going to make it a hard decision.

I practiced my ass off, once even getting chastised by the offensive coordinator for pushing one of his receivers too hard after a catch over the middle, and used whatever energy I had left to limp back to the dorm, where I began to pack my things for the break of camp. We still had the one preseason game left, but we’d practiced for the final time at Eastern Washington University; as of next week, whoever made the cut would be practicing at the Seahawks’ official practice facility on Seattle’s Eastside.

Davis’s stuff was still in the dorm room, except for his Bible, which he carried everywhere with him. But he was nowhere to be found. I wrote him a short note telling him we might see each other down the road, maybe in another NFL camp or something, then I packed my things and got in my car to head over the hills to Seattle. We had a preseason game against the San Diego Chargers in less than 48 hours, and my on-and-off girlfriend Meg was due to arrive in Seattle on a flight from Chicago at 11 p.m. I couldn’t wait to see her, to touch her, to smell her hair. We’d only been together for a few months, but something just felt right when I was with her. Making it through a month without sleeping with another girl only seemed to confirm my beliefs that Meg was right for me. I wondered if we’d ever be as close and Connie and Keena were.

As I pulled my ’86 Chevette out of the parking lot, I swung by the practice field for one last look. In the falling sunlight, I could see one shirtless body still on the field, running sprints. I slowed and pulled the car to the curb, calling out to Connie from the other side of a fence. At first he didn’t even look up, but when he was finished with his sprints, he grabbed his shirt and made his way to the fence.

“Outta here, Pawlawsky?” he said.

“Yeah, my girl’s coming to town. What about you? You need a ride back to Seattle or anything?”

He shook his head. Sweat glistened off his dark skin as he dragged the T-shirt over the pores of his face. “I’m good, my man,” he said.

I wished we were in the dorm room for a proper good-bye. The next time we’d see each other, it would be game time, and Connie would be in his zone. After that, one of us would get cut. This was as close to a farewell as we’d probably get.

“It’s been real, man,” I said.

He tilted his head, as if he hadn’t heard me.

“You know, camp and all,” I said. “At least one of us is going to … I mean, we’re not roomies anymore, y’know?”

“Ain’t nothing over yet,” Connie said, his face in something like a scowl. “Still got San Diego, dog. That’s all I’m thinking ‘bout.”

Then he dropped the T-shirt onto the brown grass and took off on a sprint, resuming his workout as if I wasn’t even there.

CHAPTER 7

The call came in the middle of the afternoon. Meg and I were taking in an outdoor rock concert under the Space Needle, my own personal good-bye to Seattle, when my cell phone vibrated. I’d been checking it every three or four minutes, wondering if I’d missed a call – so often that Meg threatened to throw it twenty rows back. I could tell she was just as nervous as I was, even if she did her best to keep a stiff upper lip.

The sun was shining in my face as some dime-a-dozen white rapper with tattoos and a shaved head spit rhymes on stage. My heart dropped when I felt the phone’s vibration, my mind wondering if the Seahawks were calling because I did – or didn’t – make the team. I’d saved my best preseason game for last, recording six tackles and a broken-up pass while playing almost the entire second half against the Chargers – but Connie was even better, with a pair of sacks and an interception. The 425 area code on my phone alerted me that this was it; I glanced at Meg and nodded, then punched the green button.

“This is Ross,” I said into the phone, my hand covering my free ear as the wanna-be rapper carried on in the background. I spit into the artificial turf of the outdoor arena. Meg hated it when I dipped, especially in front of her, but the nicotine calmed my nerves and the Copey was a necessary evil on stressful days like this.

“Pawlawsky,” the voice said. I could barely hear it. “Dave Witmer.” The balding guy who’d checked me in the first day of camp. He was some kind of football operations guy, Coach Hannigan’s right-hand man, and some of the veterans called him The Turk because he was the guy who had to tell people they were cut. My heart dropped. “Listen, Coach Hannigan wanted to … y’know, with the game and all this week.” The music was so loud that I could only hear his words in fragments. “… to tell you that … Not anything you did … Just numbers. ... Love to have you on our … Your agent and all.”

When he stopped talking, I looked at Meg and shrugged. Thinking it would be a good idea to be at a concert on a day as big as this was my mistake. She rubbed my arm and offered a supportive smile.

“Sorry, Dave,” I said. “I’m having trouble –“

“Sounds pretty loud there. … Northwestern marching band in your living room?”

“So, yeah. I mean, no,” I said. “So, like, I didn’t make the team?”

“You … the team.”

“I *did*? Or I *didn’t*?”

“You … the team,” he said, louder. “Ross, we’re letting you go!”

All of the energy in my body went away in that moment, and for a split second – I swear to God – I felt like my legs were going to crumple. I almost swallowed the tobacco that was in my lip. Meg placed a hand on the back of my neck and rested her forehead against my shoulder. I’m not even sure if I said anything more to Dave Witmer before I hung up, but I sure as hell didn’t want to be out at a loud concert anymore. I felt like I’d been drilled by three defensive linemen: my head hurting and my vision blurry. All of my dreams had been crushed in a single moment. I’d never really expected to make the team, but making it this far had only made the cut harder. The news came without any kind of forgiveness.

One thing I didn’t do was cry. I hadn’t shed a tear since I was eight years old, thanks to my father’s tough love, and I wasn’t going to start then, standing next to my girlfriend at a concert while surrounded by thousands of kids who weren’t even old enough to drink yet.

“I’m sorry,” Meg said, taking me into her arms. She wasn’t a petite woman – Meg ran the hurdles at Northwestern -- but she always felt so small and frail whenever I wrapped my arms around her body. We held each other, and in some remarkable way, she was holding me up. “Let it all out,” she whispered into my ear.

But I wasn’t going to. There was no way I was going to cry.

Almost immediately, my thoughts went to Connie Davis. I pictured him celebrating with a glass of sparkling water, taking Keena into his arms and kissing her passionately, then leading her into the bed of some hotel room and making mad love to her. Then they’d wake up, he would sign his first contract, he’d make a few calls and make arrangements to buy his parents a new car, and he’d head off to Kirkland, Washington, on Seattle’s Eastside, for his first regular-season practice.

Then it dawned on me that I didn’t even know for sure whether he’d made the team. That he’d been the most impressive linebacker in camp might not matter; in the NFL, potential out-weighed performance. Since he hadn’t grown three inches during the preseason, he was still an undersized rookie from a D-2 school who was too small to play in the league. The Seahawks already had their starting threesome back from the previous year, another veteran was returning from shoulder surgery, and they had used a fourth-round draft pick, a valuable commodity in the NFL, on the linebacker from Florida State. It was entirely possible that Connie Davis got caught up in the numbers as well.

My self-pity didn’t last long as I frantically searched for a way to see if Connie had made the team. I thought of calling the local newspaper to ask, but I didn’t have the phone number. It occurred to me to hit re-dial and ask Dave Witmer, but he was up to his eyeballs and had probably already forgotten my name.

I led Meg through the crowd and back toward the car. She was saying all the right things and doing her best to keep my spirits up, but the truth was that all I cared about in that moment was Connie Davis.

We were back in the hotel room, packing up our things for a morning flight back to Chicago, when my phone rang again. I recognized the number.

“Ross. Randy Pilkey.” My agent. “You cleared the waiver process, which is the bad news, but the good news is that the Seahawks want you on their practice squad.”

“The practice squad?” I said.

“Yeah. Eight guys,” Randy said. “You practice with the team but aren’t eligible to play on Sundays. You’re basically an injury away from being on the active roster. And you’ll get six-grand a week.”

“The practice squad,” I said again.

“Unpack your bags, Ross. You’re a Seattle Seahawk.”

I hung up the phone and took Meg into my arms, squeezing her like a child. In that moment, I could have married that woman; I was beginning to think that one day I would.

She pulled a bottle of champagne out of the mini-fridge -- she’d stashed it away earlier in case I made the team – and we toasted to my new life.

“Can you move to Seattle?” I asked, knowing full well that she still had another full year of school before graduation. Then I thought of my father and how long it had taken him to make any real money. I calculated what six-thousand dollars a week computed to over seventeen weeks; barely a salary at all. What if I spent the next three years on the practice squad? Would I really want Meg to come up here and tag along while I feebly chased a dream?

The image of my father’s face came to me in that moment. I remembered the time he’d called me a pussy and told me I needed to “get tough.” All those early mornings in the high school’s weight room, then walking out into the cold Minnesota air and feeling the sweat frost against my skin. All those Friday nights, the taste of blood and sweat still in my mouth, nights when he had told me I just wasn’t good enough, that I didn’t have the instincts or the grit to ever play college ball, much less in the pros.

I excused myself to the bathroom, where I shut the door, fell to my knees and looked up toward the ceiling.

“You were wrong, Dad,” I whispered. “”Goddamn you, I *am* good enough.”

I felt like I might cry, but I fought back the tears. That bastard was never going to break me again.

CHAPTER 8

Frankie Jr. quit the team midway through his junior year of high school. He’d been the starting halfback as a sophomore, but the next year some kid named Bayo something-or-other moved into our district from the North side of Minneapolis and started taking some of his playing time. Bayo was just a sophomore, a year behind my older brother, and he was lazy sack of shit who hated practices but was so quick and shifty that he couldn’t be stopped on Friday nights. By midseason, he was starting. So my brother, who just a few months earlier had eyes on a Division I-AA scholarship, gave it all up because of his pride.

My father never forgave him. He also spent most of the next two years reminding me of how good Frankie Jr. could have been. By the time I was a junior – Frankie’s senior year -- Fridley was ranked sixth in the state and came one win short of the state title game with an 8-2 record. All my dad had to say was: “If Frankie had been on the team, you guys would have been unbeaten.”

I still hadn’t fallen in love with football but knew it was a way to keep my dad off my back. He never thought I’d be good enough for varsity, but I’d put in the work in the weight room, got my bench press up to 340 pounds, and was starting at defensive end and fullback by my junior year. The next year, with Bayo off playing at Wisconsin-Whitewater and our quarterback playing at St. John’s, I served as a team captain on a squad that went 6-3.

The idea of getting a college scholarship drove me, not because I wanted to save my parents some money but because my father didn’t think I’d get one. He’d always talked about coaching me at Augsburg and made it sound like he’d be doing me a favor by giving me a spot on the team. Then along came Northwestern. Big Ten. A chance to get one of the best educations in the Midwest.

“I didn’t think you had it in you, Rossie,” my father had said when I’d told him the news. Frankie was by then playing junior-college baseball at Normandale, but his 80-mile-an-hour fastball and his lack of a curveball meant his athletic career was on life support. “The Northwestern Wildcats,” my father had said. “Well, I’ll be damned.” Then the old man threw in an observation that he just couldn’t keep to himself. “Hell, even the Gophers been to the Rose Bowl more recently than them.”

I’d like to think most of my father’s antics were motivational tactics, meant to bring out the best in me, that maybe one day over a cold beer we’d be able to laugh about it all. That one day he would confide in me that all that tough love was meant to bring out my potential.

But that day never came. We never had that opportunity. The stress of being a head football coach caught up with him when Frank Edward Pawlawsky Sr. was just 51 years old. Dead of an unexpected heart attack. Never got to see how far his youngest son’s football career would go.

Football killed my father, which gave me another reason to hate the sport. But the truth was that on the day that I died, I finally started loving the game.

# # #

The Seahawks’ offensive coordinator was shouting.

“Tempo, men! Tempo! Let’s go!” he screamed, churning his right hand while holding a play sheet in his left. It had been a long practice, and the Eastern Washington heat was getting the best of all of us. The muscle soreness and mental fatigue had set in long ago, and guys were starting to get chippy on the practice field.

The offensive players rushed to the line as Coach Hanigan stood behind them, wearing dark sunglasses and a wide-brimmed hat to protect himself from the sun. This was an offensive drill, meant to work on a set of structured plays from a new alignment the offensive coordinator had devised over the summer. I was on the field as a chess piece, one step above a tackling dummy along with the other 10 defenders on the scout-team defense.

As I tried to read the formation, quarterback Dean Salmer gave two quick grunts and the ball was snapped. I knew I was out of position as soon as the ball was snapped, but I instinctively knew where the play was going. I moved quickly to my left, and one of the goon offensive linemen – probably that hick Rohlenbach, the one with the Road Grater license plate – went to lay a hit on me. I ducked under it, diving toward the ball carrier, only to meet the knee of starting fullback Jeter Gates. A second-year player from Syracuse, Gates was one of those intense guys who knew a lot about football but very little about anything else. I hadn’t planned on colliding with his knee, but that’s what happens in football, and he responded by picking me up by the shoulder pads and landing a punch to the abdomen. I was so stunned that I wasn’t prepared for what came next: he grabbed my facemask, tore off my helmet, breaking the chinstrap, and threw a punch that caught me flush against the eye socket.

“Fuckin’ rook!” he screamed.

He went to take another swing, but I ducked that time and grabbed his shoulder pads. I was about to hit him back, despite his helmet, when it occurred to me that I didn’t know how that might look. If I punched out a starter, would I get cut from the team? Would all the veteran jump me? Or would they admire my “spunk,” my “grit”? In football, it’s a fine line. It’s often referred to as controlled chaos, and we’re taught from a young age to play when hurt but not when injured. We can be seen as crazy lunatics or passionate gamesmen, depending on the situation, and ripping a player’s head off can be seen as both a good and bad thing. The game practically demands for aggression, and any sign of backing down can be seen as weakness. It’s a violent, unforgiving game – hit or be hit --- and I couldn’t fathom just standing there after someone had challenged my manhood. Gates and I both reared back to throw another punch when I felt a pair of big, strong hands on my shoulder pads.

Connie Davis, rookie linebacker on the 53-man roster, pulled me away.

“Goddamn rookies,” Jeter Gates vented as Rohlenbach and another offensive lineman stepped between us.

“Let ‘em go! Let ‘em fight!” Lassiter Boyd shouted, giggling from the sideline as he leaned on a fellow starter’s shoulder pads. “Go ‘head, White Shadow, mess ‘im up! Show ‘em how we roll on D!”

“Fuck you, Boyd!” Jeter Gates yelled, but that only made Boyd laugh harder. Then Gates pointed toward me. “Go for my knees again, rook!” he shouted. “Just try it. See what happens.”

I did my best to stay away from Gates after that, which is hard to do when you’re a scout-team linebacker and he’s the starting fullback, but by the end of practice it was apparent that he’d forgotten about me. I was completely insignificant in his world – an O to his X, just a guy hired to prepare him for every Sunday battle.

CHAPTER 9

I first met Keena Davis on the Friday before the 1999 regular season opener. She was even more beautiful in person: tall, lean, with chocolate skin and dark eyes that exuded the kind of confidence that immediately put you at ease. She had her hair pulled back into a ponytail that reached all the way to her waist. Meg, I could tell, felt inferior in her presence, despite her summer tan and beautiful, blond hair, which she’d spent an hour curling before we left for our double-date. She was back in town for a long weekend.

Connie and I shook hands and introduced the women; Keena kissed my cheek and offered a gentle hug, saying with a friendly smile: “I’ve heard a lot about you.” I wondered how she and Connie spoke to each other in their down time. Did they speak in proverbs? Did they talk about God? About football? She seemed so refined that I realized there was a lot to Connie’s personality I had yet to uncover. I wondered how he might have described me: a try-hard white kid from Minnesota? the guy he beat out for a roster spot? the guy who shared a dorm room and smelled like sweat socks?

It was good to see Connie out of football pads and dressed in something other than sweatpants and a tank top. He seemed even smaller, with bow legs and huge shoulders; maybe a defensive back or a muscular kicker, if any kind of athlete at all. Keena towered over him, at least six inches taller in her heels, but the way they stood together, his muscular arm draped around her hipbones, it was obvious that he was the protector of his queen. He wore a wedding ring that I’d never seen before.

“How’s the eye?” Connie asked, and until that moment I had forgotten.

I touched the swollen flesh under my left eye socket and shrugged. “That’s nothing,” I said, also nursing a sore calf muscle and a bruised thigh. “It’s the ones you can’t see that hurt the most.”

“I think it’s kind of sexy,” Meg said with a giggle, rubbing my eye. Keena laughed along with her, touching her on the elbow as only women can do.

“These men and their war wounds,” Keena said, shaking her head with elegance. Her beautiful hair did not move. “Heaven knows Connie’s had his share.”

She turned and kissed him, and the love they shared was obvious. Connie turned back toward us, maintaining his stoic stare, and the crease along his forehead didn’t move. But you could tell that he was awed to be in this woman’s presence. It dawned on me that I’d never seen Connie smile. Not once.

He was dressed modestly, with a collared shirt that was buttoned to the top, and black slacks. I wondered how he might dress once the paychecks started coming in; the $425,000 salary he was going to make as a rookie could surely pay for a nice suit or two. Keena wore a short dress that showed off her long, elegant legs. Meg, five-foot-nine and once Miss August in the Northwestern University’s chapter of the Delta Theta fraternity calendar, looked like a high school cheerleader beside her.

Over dinner, we all got to know each other better. Meg asked Connie what it felt like to get the call he’d made the team.

“Ain’t no call,” Connie said. “No new was good news, I guess.” He stuffed his fork into a salad.

“He was ecstatic,” Keena half-whispered, the back of her hand resting against her cheek as if she were letting us in on a secret. “By Sunday night, when the call hadn’t come …” She leaned back in her chair and draped a long, thin arm over Connie’s well-defined shoulders. “This big, tough guy can be quite a softy, believe it or not,” she said, then planted a kiss on the side of his forehead.

At Meg’s pressing, Keena went on to tell us about her own life, how she’d grown up in Houston but was mostly a gawky teenager who preferred sports to shopping and dances. “And whatever else teenage girls are into,” she said. She’d met Connie when they were in the sixth grade. “He was still Constable then,” she said. Meg and I looked at each other. Connie’s eyes showed something like embarrassment. “They didn’t know that was your real name?” Keena said, then laughed it off. “C’mon now. What else don’t y’all know about him?” She went on to describe a small, quiet kid who was always moping around with his lips pursed. “Like he was ‘bout to fight somebody,” Keena said, taking a sip of her sparkling water. “But I could see right through it.” Connie had finished his plate of roast beef and vegetables, his eyes staring at his plate as if Keena were talking about someone he had never met. “We started going to the same church,” Keena continued, “and eventually we got to talking about Jesus. I’d never taken him for a man of the Lord. Soon enough, we were drawn to each other. Around high school, I’d say. I remember, I’d given up on him asking me to the Homecoming Dance, then there he was one day, standing on my mama’s doorstep with a tulip in his hand. Wearing a T-shirt and a bowtie. I’ll never forget it.” She took another sip of water and winked. “Guess you could say he had me right there,” she added.

Connie kind of nodded his head, clearly ready to move the conversation forward, when Keena set down her glass and looked right at Meg. “So,” she said, “when’s this handsome young lad going to make an honest woman out of you?”

The words his me so flush that my face must have turned crimson. Connie stopped chewing for the first time, looked up sheepishly, and used a fist to cover his mouth as he fought back laughter. I considered changing the subject but couldn’t think of anything clever to say. The truth was that I’d already started thinking about it. I was pretty sure Meg was the right one, but I also knew that I was still young and that I hadn’t yet thought of anything to do with my life besides keep playing football. I hadn’t yet begun life, not really, and I knew I still had a lot to learn.

“OK, none of my biz,” Keena said. “I’ll tell you one thing. There’s no better feeling than getting to come home to the person you love the most in the world. No better feeling.” She reached over and took one of Connie’s thick hands. “And I get to experience it every day of my life.”

CHAPTER 10

My first season in the NFL was an exercise in impatience. Every week, I’d don a different jersey number, pretending I was somebody I was not. One Wednesday I was Junior Seau; the next, Ray Lewis. I’d study film of them, often sitting in with the offensive players, watching the opponent’s linebackers’ tendencies before mimicking them on the practice fields. My job description was to give the Seahawks’ first-team offense – Dean Salmer and halfback Walter Watts and Jeter Gates and Rohlenbach – a “good look.” And I took my job seriously.

The other part of my job was to try to stay patient.

Sundays were easier than I thought they’d be, even if my mind was unable to turn off the constant thoughts of I-could’ve-done-better-than-him while watching the games. Every time Kwame Mitchell, the starting middle linebacker who used to play outside, missed a tackle or got caught out of position, I’d silently wish I’d been there to make the play. I’d become the person I hated: the on-the-couch fan who was better than the guys playing on Sundays, who knew more and wanted it more. I’d watch road games on television, and I’d watch a slow-motion replay, thinking: I could have reacted faster … I should have been out there … I would have made that play.

The minor injuries I sustained at practice began to pile up, but the truth was that nobody cared what hurt. I’d stretch out on my couch and watch Sunday games with an ice pack on one knee, on a shoulder, on a sore ankle. I’d imagine myself being in the right position every time an opposing offense ran a play, and after time I began to make notes about what defensive schemes worked against which alignments. Sometimes I’d have a team-issued painkiller, a Vicodin or Oxycodone pill, to soothe the pain. They weren’t hard to get, even for the practice squad guys, and it was easier to concentrate on the games with a little something to take the edge off.

Whenever either offense would stall out, and the punt team would rush out onto the field, I’d keep my eyes glued to Connie Davis. Number 59. It was no surprise that Connie had become something of a cult hero among the ever-dwindling group of Seahawks fans that came out for games. He played almost exclusively on special teams, one of those guys who flew down the middle of the field on kickoff returns and punt coverage, more often than not lowering his head every time a blocker got in his way to make sure that he was the first to deliver the blow. He had found that being shorter than the other guy could be an advantage: leverage-wise, the lower point of impact usually wins. When he would get to the return man, Connie would show little regard for his own safety. He’d dig his cleats into the turf on a dead sprint and catapult himself into the poor guy with the football.

During home games, when I was allowed to stand on the sideline in a team-issued warmup, I could hear the sheer violence of the hit: the bone on bone, teeth clanging together inside a man’s head, mouth-guard flying and air leaving lungs. The crowd letting out a collective gasp of disbelief. College football had been nasty, filled with passion and anger and testosterone, but this – this level of football was something altogether different. This was high-speed violence, like a cannonball colliding with an oncoming truck.

I counted a half a dozen times or so when the hit came with so much force that Connie couldn’t immediately get up. On such occasions, I’d move myself to get a good view of his body, my hands coming together to silently pray for him to get up, and each time he did. One time, in a road game I was watching on the television inside my Woodinville apartment, bags of ice on my aching body parts, Connie took such a big hit that he began jogging toward the wrong sideline before a couple of our teammates caught up with him and turned him around.

Meg was back in Evanston for all of this, finishing up her social work degree at Northwestern, so I spent most of my nights alone inside my bare apartment, where I’d put a mattress on the floor and had yet to decorate with any plants or wall art. Occasionally, I’d go out with some of the other practice-squad guys. Doug “Hambone” Hamilton, a charismatic offensive lineman who was in his second year on the squad, was the ringleader. After Friday walk-throughs, he would make the rounds in the locker room and tell the other seven of us where we’d be hanging out that night. It was usually at the Applebee’s in Kirkland or the Cheesecake Factory at Bellevue Square – somewhere we could get a big table and be loud without anyone seeming to care. A few of the guys would even watch road games together on Sundays, although I preferred the comfort of my own apartment so I could study each play and make notes on what the defense was doing right and doing wrong. I’d fire up my VCR and tape the games, then go back for a closer look at night, staring at the light of the screen like my father had back when he was analyzing game film of the Augsburg College football games.

I’d often have a can of beer in front of me, maybe a pain pill or two, and I’d feel a buzz coming on by the time I watched the taped replays. It wasn’t long before I was drinking myself to sleep on the couch. There was no one there to stop me, and Mondays were always light because the roster players were tired and sore, so it didn’t seem to matter. I’d spent most of my college career avoiding alcohol for fear of underperforming on the football field, but for whatever reason I began to overindulge when I was finally living alone in that Woodinville apartment. Who was going to care?

What made me feel even better was mixing a few beers with a pain pill or two. Getting Vicodin or OxyCodone wasn’t difficult – pain was a part of football, whether it was getting issued pain pills or getting shots of Toradol before and after games – and I got to stashing away the pills on occasion for a rainy day. I’d take a pill with a few beers and even tried crushing up the pills and snorting a line or two, just for the high. The drugs took away all my physical and emotional pain at once, and adding a few beers numbed me to the point that I felt like Superman, if only for a few hours. Then the high would wear off, I’d feel guilty about getting that messed up, but my body craved the drugs so much that I had to take some more. I tried to stop on more than one occasion, but the shakiness and insomnia were too much to take. My body wouldn’t let me go without.

Occasionally, the drinking got over-excessive on our Friday-night outings with the practice squad, so I’d have to take a cab home. I was responsible enough to understand that a DUI would effectively end my career before it started, so I made sure not to take any chances. But the thought of coming home sober on a Friday night and lying in bed alone was an alternative that was almost as pathetic. I’d take a Vicodin pill before bed to offset the hangover before it had time to kick in.

It was a lonely existence, nothing like the professional football life my father would have imagined. I thought of him often in those quiet moments, more often than I probably should have, and the memories were easier to chase away with another swig of beer, washing down another Vicodin pill.

Connie and Keena had their own thing going on, although they did invite me over for dinner at least once a month. She traveled to road games to watch him play, spending most of the Saturdays alone in a hotel room, reading her Bible or sight-seeing while he was off doing team activities. During the week, Connie and Keena always found time to go to Wednesday-night church services.

The few times Connie got a chance to play linebacker with the defense on game days, he’d shown flashes of ability but got exposed for his lack of experience and small stature on occasion. The Tampa Bay Buccaneers had a huge fullback that bowled him over one time on the way to a first down, and this 6-foot-6 tight end from the Ravens caught a touchdown pass over him once, but otherwise Connie held his own.

The truth was that the team could have used a few more like him. The decision to gamble on an aging quarterback paid off in the early going, but Dean Salmer got banged up and struggled in home losses to the Broncos and Raiders. The offensive line had all sorts of issues, leaving starting halfback Walter Watts with just 350 rushing yards at midseason, while injuries took their toll on the defense. Lassiter Boyd ended up trying to do too much on the short-handed D, which by early November had a rookie at one starting cornerback and a guy who’d opened the season with me on the practice squad at the other. Kwame Mitchell’s move from outside linebacker to the middle turned out to be something of a disaster, as he had neither the instincts nor the attention span to lead the defense, and by the beginning of December the Seahawks were 4-8 and out of contention for a playoff spot. The Seattle Times ran a column detailing why Coach Hannigan ought to be fired, while fans were openly wondering whether the team should tank the final four games to get into position to draft another franchise quarterback.

Through it all, I quietly went about my business, studying film and suiting up for practices, even when my body was aching or my head was pounding from a hangover. The worst one came on the day after Thanksgiving, which I’d spent with the other practice squanders at special teams coach Dunn’s house. His fridge had been stocked with Australian beer, to which I’d helped myself often while Coach Dunn carried on and on about his playing days at Pitt. He told us behind-the-scenes stories from game days: the time when Salmer had a concussion but stayed in the game, only to call a play from his high school playbook while all the other offensive players stared back at him blankly; the road game when Lassiter Boyd and Kwame Mitchell had nearly come to blows in the locker room; the woman in Denver who was always waiting in the hotel lobby when the team arrived for its annual game and had slept with, by Coach Dunn’s count, six of the defensive starters since 1995. We laughed and felt like a part of the team, but the truth was that all of us practice squanders would have given our left leg for one road trip to see it all for ourselves. Hearing him tell the stories made it feel all the more real to me; I felt that much closer and further away from being on the active roster. I imagined the other players, the ones who were getting the real paychecks, gathering around larger tables in bigger houses, nursing their war wounds and carefully monitoring their food and alcohol intake because they had a game in three days.

In the days and weeks that followed, I dreaded the thought of spending Christmas Day alone but knew I wouldn’t have time to travel home to Minnesota because I’d have practice the following day. I was lonely but too unaware to call it loneliness. Pawlawskys weren’t the type to wallow in self-pity, so I just kept plugging along, kind of like my mother had done in the months after my father had died. Frankie Jr. was living a few miles away in St. Paul and still visited her when he could, but his fiancé and job took up most of his time. My phone calls had petered out over time; I was waiting for a chance to play, what more was there to say? As the week of Christmas got closer, I thought about calling home but couldn’t imagine what we might talk about: *Still practicing with the team and spending my nights alone in my apartment. … Oh, yeah? As for me, I’m still lying around mourning your father.* Even the phone calls to Meg had gotten shorter and shorter – me saying less and hearing more, although at some point I guess I had stopped listening.

I was home alone drinking beers one Saturday night of a team road trip when I decided to take a cab into the city. I’d been thinking a lot about my father during the holiday season; the smell of football gear mixed with cool air, and an inordinate amount of time to sit and think, will do that. I wondered what my conversations with my father might be like --- whether he’d be proud of me for persevering or would cut me down with backhanded comments about the guys on the “real” roster. I know he wouldn’t have believed I’d have made it this far, but somehow I just didn’t feel satisfied anymore. It was like there was a big television in heaven that only showed NFL games, and until my dad saw me on the screen, he wouldn’t believe I’d actually made it.

The cab dropped me off in an area called Pioneer Square, a part of town where there rows of bars and restaurants greeted hundreds of men and women about my age every weekend night. The revelers moved from spot to spot, high-fiving each other and carrying on about what they drank and who they wanted to bang and God-I-think-I’m-gonna-puke. It reminded me of weekend trips into Chicago during my days at Northwestern, except whenever we’d gone into the city in those years, I was just an observer – two or three drinks maximum so I wouldn’t lose my focus on football. Here, I was one of the many people who were just trying to get lost in the haze, trying to escape from something, if only for a few hours, before swirling into the blackness of night with very little memory about what had happened on a weekend night.

I don’t remember much from that particular night except that I’d met some bartender named Cindy or Samantha or something who had a place two or three blocks away in a SoDo District loft, and we ended up going to her place, mostly because I was too drunk to call a cab, and one thing had led to another, and …

When I got home early the next morning, there were four messages from Meg on my voicemail. Saturday nights were usually our phone nights. I erased the messages without listening to them, turned off the ringer, and crushed up a Vicodin pill with the back of a spoon, spilling the powder into a half-liter of Gatorade that I downed while relaxing on the couch with the TV on mute, waiting for kickoff.

I drifted into a deep sleep, dreaming about what it might be like to run up the middle of the field on kickoff coverage in a real NFL game, my hair flowing and my muscles pulsing. I awoke to the ringing of my telephone.

CHAPTER 11

I could probably count on one hand how many times my father watched one of my football games. After Frankie Jr. had quit, by dad was so angry with the Fridley High coach that he stayed away for all but two or three games. While I was at Northwestern, he’d been too busy coaching at Augsburg College to come out for games – not even the two times we played in Minnesota.

“I wouldn’t pay money to watch that shit team anyway,” he’d said. “Golden Gophers my ass. They’re not even good enough to bronzed.”

But I do remember one time when he was in the stands. We were playing at Notre Dame, in a stadium where my father had never previously been and had always wanted to go. It came on a rare weekend when Augsburg didn’t have a game because the opposing team – Wisconsin Stout or Macalester or one of those schools – had to cancel its season due to a measles outbreak. I purposefully didn’t ask my mother or father where they’d be sitting because I knew seeing him would only make me that much more nervous. I wouldn’t even let myself scan the seats for his face – undoubtedly stern, with thick eyebrows turned inward, full of judgment.

But just knowing he was there brought some kind of strength in me. I’d gotten to a level of football that neither my father nor Frankie Jr. had achieved. In many ways, this would be my crowning moment, no matter how I played.

As it turned out, I had the game of my life. The Irish were huge favorites in that game, but their offense had trouble moving the ball. I had two sacks, a forced fumble, an interception I returned for a touchdown, and thirteen tackles. Had it not been for a couple of costly turnovers by Northwestern’s offense – one inside our own 10-yard line, the other at the Notre Dame 2 – we probably would have pulled off the upset. Instead, we lost 16-13 on a last-second field goal. But the defense had played its ass off. Every time I made a big play, I could hear a cheer from the small spattering of Northwestern fans in that historic stadium on that frigid Saturday afternoon. I knew full well that my father wasn’t the type to openly cheer about anything, and yet somehow by not finding him in that stadium I’d convinced myself that those cheers were coming from him. For those three-and-a-half hours, I’d genuinely believed that my father was standing and clapping and shouting, his enthusiasm standing out inside a huge stadium that had otherwise fallen silent as the hometown team struggled to score.

After the game, my parents met me outside the locker room. My mother gave me a huge hug and broke into tears, while all my father had to talk about was how shitty the Notre Dame quarterback was.

“I can’t believe they’re ranked in the top 10 with that guy throwing the ball,” my father said. “If that’s the best arm they could recruit, Notre Dame football is about to fall off the map – believe you me.”

Even at dinner an hour later, as we sat at a large table in some South Bend eatery, my father wouldn’t let it go.

“That kid couldn’t even start at Carleton College,” he said, referring to the Notre Dame quarterback. I did my best not to let it ruin my big day, but the truth was that I couldn’t wait to get the visit over with so I could hang out with my teammates.

What I took from that game was that every time I played a road game where I made a big hit or broke up a pass over the middle to shut the crowd up into a hush, I’d channel my ears in on the small contingent of Northwestern fans who were cheering – and I’d imagine that they were my father. I would imagine the stone-faced demeanor cracking, the effort it would take to push his large frame from the seat, and his hoarse voice screaming out in pride. The idea was preposterous, the vision hard to imagine, but somehow it motivated me to try harder, to push myself, to try to break the will of the guy across the line from me.

That turned out to be the last time my dad ever saw me play a game. Three weeks later, while watching game film on a Friday night with Augsburg on the verge of its biggest game of the season, Coach Frank Pawlawsky Sr. went into cardiac arrest late at night. They found him in his office the next morning. He’d basically worked himself to death.

I was crushed when my mother called to tell me the news, but I didn’t let myself cry. Nor did I shed a single tear at the funeral.

My father had taught me not to.

CHAPTER 12

When the Seattle Seahawks’ 1999 season was officially over, I called my mother to tell her I was planning to move home for a couple of months. Just until offseason workouts started up again in March.

“Ross,” she said, her voice taking on a serene quality that brought me back to that day 2 1/2 years earlier when my father had died. “There’s something I’ve been meaning to … I know I should have called earlier, but you’re so busy and all …” I could hear the muffled sound of her telling someone she was talking to Ross. I wondered if maybe Frankie was visiting, maybe with his fiancé. “I’m moving out of the house, of *our* house,” she said into the phone. “Too many memories. And it’s so *big*.” I guess I should have seen it coming. She was fifty-five years old, alone in a big house full of memories. Maybe if she’d had both of her sons close by, things could have been different. But there I was, off chasing what was left of my football dream in some city she’d barely known had existed nine months earlier. Football had taken her husband away for most of her adult life, and now the goddamn sport – the one I’d hated for so long because my father loved it more than he would ever love me – was robbing her of her youngest son.

“What about …?” I said, but there were so many ways to end the question that I didn’t know where to begin. Maybe if I just quit football and moved home, maybe then things could go back to being the way they once were.

“Ross, listen,” she said. “I don’t know if Frankie told you, but I’ve met someone. He’s … well, he’s just a man who makes me feel less, you know, lonely.”

The words hit me like a blindside block. I pictured some graying man, with wispy hair and a devilish smile, his crooked fingers grabbing at my mother’s face, planting kisses on her cheeks with cracked lips.

“Are you, like, *moving in* with him?” I asked, only because my swimming mind couldn’t think of any other thing to say. She was silent for a few seconds.

“Not right away,” she said. “Just closer. I’ve found an apartment in Edina. Not far from-“

“Edina?! Fucking *Edina*?” Now I pictured some rich old man, with a silk toupee and a handful of cake between his age-spotted fingers, feeding it to my mother beneath a chandelier.

“Ross,” my mother gasped. “Don’t ever talk to me that way. What would your father …?”

“Ha!” I laughed mockingly into the telephone. My bags were packed a few feet away, and the plane ticket was on my nightstand. “What would Dad think?” I said. “What would he think of what *I’m* like? What would he think of *you*? Of some other *man*? He’s only been dead …”

My voice caught in my through and trailed off, washed out in anger and emotion.

Calmly, my mother said my name again. “Ross,” she said. “You’re emotional. I know. It’s a lot to take in. Really, I understand. I do. I was scared to death to tell you. But having Gary here, having someone … It’s something I just can’t explain.” I couldn’t think of anything to say that wouldn’t break her heart. So I didn’t say anything. “What your father and I had, that can never be replaced,” she continued. “That’s not what I’m trying to do, Ross. It’s just … I need …” She began to cry. She was always the weak one in our unit. “I don’t know what I need, Ross,” she whispered. “I don’t know anything. It happened so … *fast*.”

“I know, Mom. I know.” A little more than two years had passed since my father’s heart attack, and still I hadn’t shed a tear. Listening to my mother cry on the other end of the phone, 1,500 miles away, only made me more angry. I wanted to take a running start and throw my body at someone, to deliver a bone-crushing blow that would leave us both dazed and staggering toward oblivion. I wanted to smack the will out of someone, to hit him so hard that he could barely stand up and wouldn’t be able to find his team’s sideline. I realized I hadn’t put a good hit on anyone in more than a year. We barely got to hit anyone at practice; it was more like a pillow fight than a football game. I used to live for those moments, the ones when you were not just trying to hurt a man but to injure him, to leave him crumpled on the grass, gasping for air. Practice squaders didn’t get to deliver those hits – we weren’t supposed to hit anyone. We were just chess pieces that got dragged out of the box every morning to prepare the grandmaster for his next challenge.

“Do you know how much your father loved you?” my mother said suddenly, without warning. It was a question I’d never really pondered, one that couldn’t possible have a quantifiable answer. I was his flesh and blood, so of course on some level he loved me. I don’t think I ever really doubted that. I’d just come to figure that he had shitty way of showing it. “He loved you like crazy,” my mom said. “Both you boys. He was never as proud of any of his teams as he was of you boys.”

“Mom, not right now-“

“Then when?” she said. “Just hear me out, Ross. He never got to say this. God never gave him a chance.” He’d had plenty of chances, I wanted to tell her. How hard would it have been to hug your kid once in a while – *once*, maybe – and to tell him you loved him? But I said no such thing. I let my mother have her moment. She was a broken woman, trying to pick up the pieces of her life. “Frank Pawlawsky was a *very* passionate man,” she continued. “Deep down, he was passionate about a lot of things, his family included. He might not have shown it much, because that’s the way he was raised, but I know his heart was filled with tears of joy whenever he was around you boys.”

She paused and blew her nose into a Kleenex.

“Your father came from a different generation, Ross,” she went on, her voice gaining its strength back. “He always said to me: ‘I’m not in the business of raising happy kids, Jean. Our job is to raise happy, functioning adults. To give them the tools to survive in this world.’ That’s what he tried to do, Ross.” She sniffled. “That’s what he was trying to do.”

I could hear her voice quivering again. I wasn’t one to take my mother into my arms – I was, after all, Frank Pawlawsky’s kid – but in that moment I wished I could embrace her and let her tears fall on my shoulder.

“That’s the hardest part,” she managed to say through the tears. “He did all the work, then he didn’t get to stick around to enjoy the rewards.”

I looked down at an ice pack that was resting on my aching knee. I wondered if those were the kinds of rewards he’d hoped to see.

“Look,” I said. “That’s all water under the bridge. Whatever –“

“You’ll understand, Ross,” my mother said, interrupting me. “When you’ve got kids of your own, you’ll understand.”

I waited for more, although at the time I wasn’t sure what I wanted to hear. As the years passed, and I thought about that conversation, about the things my mother was telling me that my father never got to say, I came to realize that all I was waiting to hear was that he would be proud of me. That he would be proud of what I’d become. At some level, I knew my father loved me, but was he ever really *proud* of me? But in that moment, I wasn’t thinking of any of that. I was swimming in other thoughts – of my father when he was about my age, looking down at the face of a newborn boy; of an aging, faceless man in Edina holding hands with my mother; of where I was going to spend the next two months before workouts began again.

Then my mother said this: “What’s going on with Meg, anyway? Isn’t it about time the two of you started planning a wedding?”

###

The Sunday of the NFC Championship Game, I showed up at the house of Connie and Keena Davis half in the bag. I’d started the day with a leftover Vicodin from a handful that one of the trainers had given me to get through the weekend. When my knee and back still hurt an hour later, I tried crushing up a second pill and snorting through a straw – a technique I’d heard made the pain go away faster. I had a bottle of beer with lunch before heading over to Chili’s, where I downed four or five more beers while watching the first half but had started to get the vibe that the wait-staff wanted me gone. I drove around for awhile, deciding I was in much too good a mood to watch the rest of the game alone in my apartment, so I headed to Bellevue and showed up at the Davises’ unannounced.

Keena answered the door, looking elegant in a T-shirt and sweatpants and with hair pulled back in a ponytail. I could hear the television barking out play-by-play of the game in the next room.

“Ross!” Keena said. “What a nice surprise.” Her smile radiated as I stood in the doorway. Her hazel eyes looked me up and down, then her smile faded. “Is something wrong?”

“Hell, no,” I blurted out with a chuckle, then quickly realized the error in my ways. “Heck, I mean. I meant to say ‘heck.’” Even in my state, I could hear myself slurring. I tried to focus and speak more clearly. “The game is on,” I said, enunciating each word carefully. “It’s good. The game. The …” I forgot what I’d been about to say.

Keena looked me up and down, then stared into my face as her smile faded.

“Connie!” Keena called out pleasantly, her eyes still fixed upon me. “Ross is here!”

“Send him on back!” Connie Davis called out above the din of the television. I immediately regretted that I’d come. “Eagles are about to tie it up!” he said with enthusiasm.

Keena paused in the doorway, taking me in with her eyes for a couple more seconds before stepping back with a nod of the head.

Connie was sitting on a leather couch, leaning forward with elbows on knees, dressed in a white tank top and baggy sweatpants. His feet were bare.

“McNabb just hit two big third-down passes,” he said, his beady eyes staring at the television. “He’s in a zone, Dog. Can see it in his eyes.”

I stood in the doorway, trying to focus on the television. The room seemed to be moving in a slow circle. I wasn’t sure why I had come and couldn’t possibly get back in my car and drive like this. I considered inviting myself out, driving a block or two and then sleeping it off in my car. I opened my mouth but could not speak.

“You all right, bruh?” Connie asked. He was looking back at me then, from where he sat on the couch, his black eyes burning my skin.

“All good,” I managed, then I took a step toward the couch and momentarily lost my balance before regaining myself. Connie stood and kept staring at me from a few feet away. The Eagles were lining up for a field goal. Connie looked past me, to where Keena was now standing in the doorway with her arms folded.

“Hon,” he said. “Can you heat up some of those chicken wings for us? Something I got to show Ross down in the basement.” I could see by the way Keena raised her eyebrows that she wasn’t used to being treated like a waitress. But she turned and exited anyway, then Connie led me downstairs. I stumbled at one point, but Connie steadied me from behind. The stairway was thin and steep.

I had been in his basemant two or three other times. There was a pool table down there, in a large area that was otherwise empty. A laundry room was connected through a doorway on one side, a bathroom leading to an unfurnished bedroom on the other. Connie flipped on the light, turned to look me in the eye, then he snapped his shoulders and had me pinned against a wall, his forearm across my throat. I struggled to find my breath.

“You’re playin’ me, Ross,” he said, spittle flying from his teeth. “You come into my *house* …” He slammed my back against the drywall. I grabbed his biceps and squeezed but couldn’t loosen his grip. He leaned in closer, so close that his nose was almost touching my chin, his beady eyes staring holes through me. “I’m gonna ask you this one more time,” he said through his teeth. “And I don’t want no more nonsense.” He licked his lips and dropped his voice to a near-whisper. “Are. You. All. *Right*!?”

What I felt like pointing out was that a muscular, tough-as-nails professional football player had me pinned against a wall with his forearm jammed into my through – so, no, I definitely was *not* all right. But that was the alcohol talking. I knew he could smell it on my breath, and I also knew he wasn’t going to take “All good” for an answer again.

“No,” I managed. “I’m just…” He loosened his force, and my back slid down the white drywall. “I mean … I think I messed up, Connie.” I swallowed hard. “I messed up bad.”

His hands let go, and I fell all the way to the floor, crumpled up like a slot receiver who’d tried to test him over the middle. The weight of everything fell upon me: cheating on Meg, the loneliness, my dead father, my heartbroken mother. I felt tears well up inside of me but fought them back. No man would ever see me cry again.

“I don’t know what’s happening,” I whispered. “I don’t know where I am. I don’t know who I am.”

His hands were on me again, his big, meaty mitts under my armpits as he pulled me up, back to my feet. I stood with my back to the wall, fragile and scared, half-wishing he’d just punch me because it would hurt less than whatever words he had for me, but all Connie Davis did was lay his hands flat on the wall above each of my shoulders.

“’You can do all things,’” he whispered in my ear, “’through he who strengthens you.’” His right hand reached up and covered the top of my head, his fingers splayed across my skull. “You ain’t alone in this, bruh,” he said as my eyes met his for the first time. “I got you. You know I got you, right?”

I nodded weakly.

“Say it,” he said.

Taking in a deep breath, I found my voice. “You got me,” I said.

“You are not alone,” he said again.

From upstairs, Keena called out: “Everything okay, boys?”

Connie nodded, still staring at me. “It is now,” he called back. Then, to me, he whispered: “It is now.”

I felt whatever was balled up inside of me fall away.

“Wings are heated up,” Keena called out from above us, before adding: “And I put on some coffee.”

CHAPTER 13

*Her blood was on my hands.*

*Shivering, helpless hands, wanting to reach out for something that wasn’t there. My eyes, open but unable to see. My heart beating, but not alive.*

*Together, we fell. The blood was all around us now. Covering the cracks in the windows. Shielding us from the faces outside. I wanted to scream out, to tell them to go the fuck away. To tell them not to leave.*

*We close our eyes at the moment of impact, as if maybe what we don’t see can’t be there. We close our eyes – in prayer? in fear? in denial? We close them and never once think that it might be for the final time. Every night, we lie down and close our eyes. We fall into places we’ve never been, places we hope to see again, places that were never and will never be there. If we could control these dreams, what would we dream?*

*Is this why we close our eyes? To dream?*

*The blood is pooling at my feet now. So much blood. I feel it on my skin. I imagine it flooding over me, filling my lungs, taking me away.*

*Yes, I close my eyes now. A dream within a dream. I close my eyes and wish it all away.*

CHAPTER 14:

I told Connie about everything. The pills. The drinking. The loneliness. Cheating on Meg. Grappling with my father’s memory and with my own career prospects. I accompanied Connie and Keenan to church that night and continued to go every Wednesday night and Sunday morning of the offseason – the three of us sitting side by side by side, like a mixed family. Connie tended to close his eyes and nod at certain points in the sermon, as if the pastor was speaking directly to him, and over the weeks that followed I found plenty of inspiration in the sermons as well.

Church became the center of our world, and the time in between was mostly spent with Connie and I reading to each other from the Bible or enduring muscle-burning workouts. We had access to the Seahawks’ practice facility but did most of our work outdoors. Connie introduced me to a place called Tiger Mountain, where we ran uphill sprints and did most of our cardio work. He taught me exercises I’d never done: carrying a log over our heads, up a steep incline; pulling pickup trucks attached to a rope; sprints through the sandy shore of West Seattle; pushing boulders and lifting granite; throwing a medicine ball up to his patio balcony. My muscles burned through the workouts and throbbed through the night, but over time my body began to adjust.

I’d all but moved into the Davises’ basement bedroom. We watched tape at the team’s complex and brought some to his house, where we’d sit up until the wee hours watching how the NFL’s best linebackers shed blocks and jammed receivers and read formations. I tended to stay up later than Connie, watching tapes of the Seahawks’ offense from the 1999 season, preparing myself for another training camp on the scout team. After Connie would retire to the upstairs bedroom, where he would climb into bed with Keena and drift into dreams of glory and enlightenment, I would pop in the videos and stare for hours, the glare lighting up my face in the darkness, trying to find any advantage I could. While Connie was preparing himself for the 2000 NFL season, I was focused solely on training camp, on beating the man across from me on every play. I still had a job to win.

I hadn’t had a drink or a pain pill since the day of the NFC Championship Game, which wasn’t hard to do for someone whose mind was always on something else. Rather than letting myself fall back into a depression, mourning my father and the family house getting sold and messing up the best relationship I’d ever had, I put all of my mind into the game of football. I had become my father, if only for that summer – if only for what was likely to be one last chance at making an NFL roster.

Even if drinking or using did enter my mindset, Connie was there to make sure I didn’t act on it. He himself had never drank alcohol, but he seemed to speak from experience when he told me, over and over again: “That’s the devil’s tonic, son. Meant to kill a man from the inside out.”

When I did have a quiet moment or two, I’d open up Connie’s Bible, not fully comprehending everything but would find verses here and there that might come in handy when I needed strength.

“I can do all things,” Connie had paraphrased, a line from Philippians, “through he who strengthens me.”

Through Connie, I had found strength. I couldn’t thank him enough, but I could tell by the way Connie continued pushing me that he wasn’t in it for the praise. He genuinely wanted me to be the best football player, and the best man, that I could be. And to this day, I’m not sure where that dedication came from.

I’m not entirely certain what kept me going, either. Motivation is a strange thing, and it typically has a shelf life. As we liked to say in the football world, a great pre-game speech will get you jacked up to run through a wall … unless someone hits in you in the mouth first. It’s a game that more about mental toughness than physical toughness, and we all need to find inspiration from somewhere if we’re to survive.

One warm afternoon, Connie and I were lying on the dry grass of Seattle’s Magnusson Park, glistening in sweat as we took a ten-minute break after a five-mile run. The sunlight burned my eyes, creating a holistic glare.

“What do we do this all for?” I asked, gasping for breath. “I mean, what kind of gluttons are we?” Connie didn’t say anything. He just breathed beside me, his chest heaving in my periphery. “Think about it,” I said. “We’re killing ourselves out here so we can kill people on Sundays. You ever think about that?”

“Nah. Can’t think that way, dog.”

“No, really,” I said, leaning on an elbow as I turned to look at him. “Think about the game of football. Someone gets a ball, eleven guys try to kill him, ten other guys try to protect him. We all try to maim each other for a few seconds, then we get up, take thirty seconds to catch our breath, and we do it again.” I leaned back again, letting the sunlight cover my face. “It’s like *Lord of the Flies* or something,” I added, reaching into my tin of Copenhagen for a dip of tobacco.

“Stuff’ll kill ya,” Connie said as I put it between my lip and teeth. I loved a dip after a good workout.

“*Lord of the Flies*,” Connie said flatly.

“The book,” I said, spitting into the grass. When he didn’t say anything else, I knew he hadn’t read it.

“Only one book I need,” he said, then Connie sat up and took in a deep breath. “Man, who’s got time for books? We got to kill ourselves before we get killed.” With that, he stood up and wiped his face, then took off in a sprint.

I dutifully followed, off across the grass and toward a wooded area where he would lead me through a step-up drill on a fallen tree. After that, we took turns running up hills with each other on our shoulders. Just when I thought I had nothing left, he took me to an open field and we worked on tackling technique. It had been a long time since I’d hit anyone for real, so just the act fueled some adrenaline that I didn’t know I had. Without pads, we took turns banging our bodies into each other at half speed. Connie would tell me to lower my core, to bend the knees and hit on the incline.

“Can’t leave your feet, dog,” he said. “Head up. See what you hit.” He crouched down, his thighs parallel to the dirt, and showed me. “Got to see what you hit,” he repeated. “That’s the most important thing. Can get away with sloppy tackling in college, but not here, dog. This is a different animal. This is the big time. These guys are so fast, so strong, that they’ll make you look foolish – or worse – if you look down for a single second.”

“Worse?” I asked. “What do you mean, *worse*?”

He stood straight up, hands on his hips and sweat glistening off his shirtless body, and stared into my eyes.

“Some guys,” he said, “they never get up.” He shook his head. “Don’t even want to think about that,” he said. “Think about that, you get …” He shook his head again, then crouched down like he was standing in a starting block. “Let’s go,” he said. “Quarter-mile sprint. To the tennis courts. Loser runs hills. Let’s do it.”

And we were off. This was one of his methods: never quitting, pushing yourself beyond your means. He’d been challenging me like this all summer. He would tell me we were in our final drill, then inevitably he’d make me do one more. “You gonna quit?” he’d scream at me whenever I balked. “That what you gonna do – quit?!” The question, of course, was always rhetorical. I’d find something inside myself to do it again. Twice, Connie showed up at my house in the middle of the night, rousing me from sleep. He’d put me through a military-type drill, right there in the basement bedroom of his house, asking me over and over: “You gonna quit? Huh?”

He was screaming that as we ran, side by side, through the dirt path of Magnusson Park. And I beat Connie Davis by a step or two on that quarter-mile sprint. It was the first time I had ever beaten him.

Later that week, we were resting again, lying on a blanket staring up at the Fourth of July fireworks. Keena’s head was stop his massive arm, her white teeth glowing in the falling colored lights. The summer was flying by quickly. We only had two-and-a-half more weeks before we’d be packing our things and heading east on I-90, toward Cheney.

My second training camp was about to begin.

CHAPTER 15

Constable Allen Davis was a colossal mistake.

This didn’t become apparent to him until his teen-age years, well after life began dealing him blows like a wounded highway deer. As he sat at the driver’s seat of his 1999 Jeep Explorer, Connie let the travesties of his younger life drop from his lips unfiltered.

His mother, Rita McGee, had died when he was just six years old, the breast cancer eventually taking her at the tender age of 25. Constable lied down in bed the night she died and wept into his pillow, asking God why. He slammed his fists into the mattress and scratched at his own eyes and screamed out into the darkness until his father arrived at his door. Carl Davis stood in the doorway of his bedroom, his eyes bloodshot and his cheeks wet, saying nothing, overcome with his own grief. “Why, father?” Constable asked, but his father could not answer. He simply turned around and fell into a heap in the hallway, unable to speak.

The days and weeks and months that followed were more of the same, with Constable’s father trying to keep things as normal as possible but too crestfallen to address the death. On the one occasion when Constable asked his father, “Don’t you miss Mom?”, his father just teared up and looked into his cup of coffee, as if maybe she could be found in there. He stayed like that for a long time before reaching over and touching the hair on the top of his son’s head. “She’s with us still,” Constable’s father had said, and nothing else. Young Constable looked around the room, thought of going upstairs to look into his mother’s bed. *She’s with us still*?

A few months passed before Constable was up in the attic, looking through his mother’s things, when he found a faded stack of letters. He began reading them as best he could but didn’t understand what they meant. They were in his mother’s handwriting, addressed to a man named Thomas Reid who lived in Memphis. Some of the letters mentioned a baby and apologies about something Rita had done with Thomas Reid’s uncle.

“It was one mistake,” one of the letters read. “I never meant to lose you, Thomas. So close to our wedding day.”

In the next letter, Rita wrote: “I know the boy is yours, Thomas. I just know it. I’m so certain that I named him Constable. Remember how you liked that name?”

Seven-year-old Constable took the stack of unmailed letters to his father – to the man he *thought* was his father. He asked what the letters meant.

Carl Davis stood in the kitchen and began reading through the stack of letters, his hands shaking and his jaw clenched. A tear ran down his face.

“One of the letters talked about this dude she met while she was pregnant,” Connie Davis told me as he sat behind the steering wheel, staring out the windshield as the Eastern Washington landscape passed by. “Didn’t mention him by name, but she told this Thomas guy about how she married him and the dude thought the boy was his.” Without looking at me, Connie pursed his lips like he was holding back anger and added: “The guy I called my father, he found out I wasn’t his from a letter his dead wife never sent.”

Connie stared out the window in silence for a long time, maybe three or four minutes, lost in thought, before he continued with his story.

Carl Davis, the man he’d thought was his father, burned the letters and started hitting the bottle. There were nights he didn’t even come home. In a sense, he’d lost his wife and his son in a matter of months. He’d become a shell of a man, barely a man at all, had fallen out of love with life. Days would go by, and Constable wouldn’t see his father. He spent his nights balled up in the darkness of his room, shivering in fear, feeling as if he had no one. He cursed God and wondered what it might be like to kill himself. He stopped praying to himself and started praying to his dead mother, asking her why she’d done it. Asking why he should forgive her.

One night, he heard gunshots outside his house and wandered into the streets, hoping to get shot. He stood in the darkness, waiting for the end.

On another night a few years later, when Constable was 13 years old, his father came into his room and kissed him on the forehead, saying he was sorry. Constable could smell the alcohol on him.

He didn’t see his father for three days after that.

“I had a choice,” Connie Davis told me as a highway sign for Ellensburg passed us. “I either give in, or I find somebody.” Nodding his head, his eyes filled with inspiration, Connie said: “I found God. Again. I took Him back, and He let me. God always forgive, dog. He always forgive.”

Shortly thereafter, Connie met Keena. She was the affirmation he needed for re-dedicating himself to Jesus. They started dating, and soon enough her family took him into their home. His life began to turn around. He started playing football and was really good, despite his size. As a 5-foot-6, 140-pound defensive end, he led the team in sacks as a junior. He started lifting weights, could put up more than 300 pounds on the bench, and bulked up to 180 pounds by his senior year, and suddenly the idea of going to college seemed like a reality. Texas Christian University and the University of Houston offered him a chance to walk on, if he could pay his own way there. Seminole Community College recruited him hard. But Carson-Newman was the one four-year school to come at him with a full scholarship. He packed his bags for Jefferson City, Tennessee.

EDITED TO HERE – TORADOL

With Keena more than 13 hours away playing college volleyball in Dallas, Connie dedicated himself to football and the Bible – nothing else. There were other women at Carson-Newman, but none of them interested him. He grew two inches and was bench-pressing 375 pounds by his junior year. The Carson-Newman football team became a national Division II powerhouse. He earned All-America honors.

But he almost threw it all away. Between his junior and senior years, when he was driving back to Houston for the summer, Connie saw a sign for Memphis and turned his beat-up Chevy toward the western Tennessee city. He hadn’t forgotten the letters. He had to find Thomas Reid, the man who may or may not be his father. As he drove into the night, Connie imagined the scene. He wondered why the man had left his mother in the first place. Had it had something to do with the uncle she’d mentioned? Had Thomas done something to her? Connie’s mind started to get the better of him. The anger built up inside of him. Losing his mother and the man he had long believed was his father had been too much to take.

By the time he looked up Thomas Reid and found the man’s apartment in a Memphis phone book, Connie was ready to kill. He grabbed a tire iron from the trunk of his car and made his way up to the door. Thomas Reid opened the door and stared at him, the fear rising in his face. He was a little man, not much taller than 5-foot-6 and only about 150 pounds, dripping wet. He had child-like eyes, fearful eyes that looked like they were about to cry. Connie held up the tire iron. He looked inside the decrepit apartment. The man ducked and put his hands over his head, begging for the menacing, muscular young man at his door to spare him.

Connie dropped the tire iron, turned and walked away. He got back in his car and continued on toward Houston.

“I never told nobody that,” Connie told me as we saw a road sign for Moses Lake. “Never. Not even Keena.” He looked at me. His eyes said that we were bonded now, that I had finally gotten inside him and would never be allowed to leave. We were brothers now, I could see that in the way he was looking at me. “I looked in that man’s eyes and tasted blood in my throat,” Connie said. “I wanted to kill that man, and I don’t know why.” Looking out the window as a gentle rain began to fall in the night, Connie set his jaw. The vein across his forehead pulsed. “I promised myself right then I’d never get that angry again,” he said softly. “Not at any man.” He nodded, as if he was talking to himself. “Never again,” he said.

Then Connie asked me to open the Bible that laid on the console between us.

“Open it to Matthew,” he said. “’If you do not forgive a man of his sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.’”

I opened the book. I turned to Matthew.

“Listen, Connie,” I said. “It meant a lot that, you know, you told me all that and all.”

He looked at me with his beady eyes, then nodded his head toward the Bible. I looked down and began to read to him.

CHAPTER 16:

Keena was back in Seattle, volunteering at a local church and doing some part-time modelling, when Connie Davis and I headed toward Cheney, Washington, for our second NFL training camp in the late summer of the year 2000. During the spring and most of the summer, Connie had been there to help me get into the best shape of my life. My core felt stronger, my legs more agile. Not getting to hit anyone during the previous season had left me without a constructive way to take out my aggression, but it had also saved my body from a lot of the punishment guys like Connie took during the season.

His rookie year had left him with a partially torn labrum that made weightlifting a difficult task. He had to find creative ways to keep in shape, and I’d been along for the ride.

When we passed through Ritzville, less than an hour outside of Cheney, the familiar emotions came flooding back. I was tense, nervous, ready to lay my body into somebody with ill intentions. I could feel a jolt of electricity inside my gut, an anticipation that was mixed with fear. Connie liked to say that absence of fear is death, and by the time we saw the first sign for Cheney, I wasn’t sure which one I’d rather have.

“Here we go,” Connie said when his pickup truck veered off I-90, onto an off-ramp and out toward the unknown. After reading him a few comforting passages in the Bible, I’d fallen into a comfortable silence while staring out at the darkness. He looked at me for one of the few times during the entire five-hour drive. “Man,” Connie said. “I thought *I* was the quiet one.”

I didn’t know what to say to that, so I just stared out at the headlights, casting a glow over the passing farmlands and an occasional mailbox, then the sidewalks and houses of the inhabited part of Cheney.

“Six and ten,” I said quietly.

“Huh?”

“Six and ten was the best you guys could do last year, huh?” I said, staring out the front window as his headlights fell upon Dressler Hall.

“New year, bruh. New year.”

The Seahawks had gone through a reconstruction of sorts over the six months while I was re-focusing myself. Two defensive starters had moved on to other teams, two others had been salary-cap hits, and free agency and the April draft had brought in a whole new crop. The Seahawks had used a second-round draft pick on a middle linebacker named Willie Kincade, a 240-pound bruiser from LSU who was already being penciled in as a starter so that Kwame Mitchell could move back outside. Seattle’s first pick had been South Carolina quarterback Chandler Giles, the heir apparent behind Dean Salmer. The two of them would be engaged in a training-camp battle so intense that all eyes would be on the quarterback position, while those of us fighting for the final two or three roster spots would have to wage our wars in the shadows.

Our first team meeting brought about another change. Lassiter Boyd, the brash, Pro Bowl linebacker with the streak of blond across his flat-topped afro, hadn’t reported for camp in time. The buzz was that he was holding out for more money. That left us with eleven linebackers. One of them was a surfer-boy type named Chase Valhalla, an undrafted rookie from Arizona who immediately attached himself to me because we were the only white guys at the position. Valhalla saw me as some kind of role model: the undrafted kid who’d found a way to stay on the team out of training camp. I saw him only as competition.

Connie was working with the No. 2 defense when practice opened, right behind Kwame Mitchell at weakside linebacker. I was the fourth middle linebacker, working alongside Valhalla most of the time. The kid kept messing up his assignments, which left gaping holes in the run game and often forced me to try to cover two guys in the passing game.

“Just do *your* job, Pawlawsky!” Coach George called out when some rookie tight end caught a pass over the middle. “Quit trying to play the hero!”

Valhalla tried to walk with me after practice, but I wanted no part of him. He babbled on about the nickel package this and the B-gap that, but I just wanted to get to the cafeteria for some food.

I couldn’t find Connie anywhere in the locker room, so I undressed and showered before heading off toward lunch in a pair of baggy shorts, flip-flops and a Northwestern Football T-shirt. As I passed the training room, I saw Connie, sitting on a table, wincing in pain.

“You all right, man?” I asked, leaning in the doorway. A trainer was cutting the tape off his left ankle.

“All good, bro,” he said without looking up.

He limped into the cafeteria a few minutes later, putting his tray down at a table where I sat with Rich Semple, a safety who’d been on the practice squad with me the previous year, a backup linebacker named Curtis and Valhalla. I couldn’t shake the kid.

“How’s the ankle, Con?” I asked. Valhalla was in the middle of a story about the Arizona-ASU game his junior year, something about how they had so many injuries that he had to play a few snaps at running back.

Connie set down his tray without looking at me. He cut up a thin slice of salmon and mixed it with rice.

“The ankle,” I said, a little louder, leaning forward over my roast beef and carrots. “How is it?”

He kept chewing, not saying anything. He swallowed, then looked at Rich Semple.

“Hey, dude, I thought you had a pick on that throw to Williams,” Connie said to Semple, ignoring my question.

They got to talking, eventually including Valhalla as he chimed in about the interception he had to seal the win over Stanford in ’98, and I quietly finished my roast beef and left.

A half hour later, inside our dorm room, I asked Connie again.

“It looks pretty bad, dude,” I said. He wore a bulky ice pack, taped to his lower leg.

“What time’s afternoon practice again?” he asked, sitting down on his mattress and reaching for his Bible.

“Two-thirty,” I said. He nodded, opened his book, and laid his head on his pillow. He lifted the ice-packed leg gingerly onto the bed. “You gonna make it?” I asked.

“Course. Why wouldn’t I?” He was staring at me with those dark, beady eyes of his.

I nodded toward the leg. His eyes stayed trained upon mine. When he didn’t say anything, I turned away and grabbed my playbook and opened the door, on my way to the common area.

“It don’t hurt, Paws,” he said from behind me. “If I don’t look, it don’t hurt.”

CHAPTER 17:

Willie Kincade had been the one to call me. He was retired by then, working as an assistant coach at Louisiana-Monroe, still limping around the practice field on a surgically-repaired left knee. He hadn’t had the Pro Bowl career that the Seahawks were hoping from him when Willie was selected in the second round of the 2000 NFL draft, but he had found a way to forge out an eight-year career – a success in the world of professional football, where the average span of service is fewer than three years. Even in the military, the longevity is better.

Willie had made a few million dollars before the knee forced him into retirement, and by then the Seahawks had a new core of young linebackers who were helping the league’s sixth-ranked defense soar to the top of the NFC West standings.

“Ross Pawlawsky?” Kincade said into the telephone. His voice was more raspy than I remembered, undoubtedly due to the four years he’d spent yelling out for college players to take a better path to the ball and to use their hips not their hands and to lead with the shoulder, not with the helmet. *For Godssakes,* never *with the helmet! That’ll get you fifteen yards!*

“Yea, this is Ross.”

He seemed genuinely happy to hear my voice, despite the decade or so that had passed since we’d seen each other, and we quickly fell into stories of his first training camp and how I’d helped teach the defense to him before his rookie season.

We joked about Coach George and his scratchy voice, the way he messed up players’ names – “C’mon, Palinsky! Get your hands on the ball!” – and how he threw his mesh ball cap whenever he was particularly displeased.

I asked Willie how his knee was feeling and whether he enjoyed coaching. He told me about his first year as a grad assistant, how he’d been ready to call it a day at five o’clock, when all the players were leaving, only to be told that the coaches were just getting started; some work nights went well past midnight. He told me stories about some of his Louisiana-Monroe players, like the freshman linebacker who missed a game because of herpes.

Eventually, Willie’s voice got real low, his tone taking on a serious quality that told me this was the real reason he’d called.

“You hear about Connie?” he asked. “Connie Davis.”

What I almost told him was no, Connie and I don’t speak anymore, haven’t since … wow, how long had it been? But none of that seemed important now. Nobody had said Connie’s name to me in years, so I braced myself for whatever was coming next.

“No, I haven’t,” I said cautiously. “What’s up?”

Willie took in a deep breath. I could hear a little kid babbling and throwing something in the backyard.

“Ross, I hear he’s in a bad way,” Willie Kincade said. “Your boy, he ain’t doin’ well.”

CHAPTER 17:

Connie Davis was the first to embrace me after the news, and although I could feel the tears welling up inside of me, I instinctively pushed them back.

“We’re brothers,” Connie said. I could hear in his voice that tears had overcome him. “We always were, but now we’re *really* brothers.”

Connie, me and the rest of the players on the Seattle Seahawks’ 65-man roster had played our final preseason game 48 hours earlier. I’d tackled a guy inside the 10-yard line on a kickoff return, forced a fumble and delivered a block on a 62-yard touchdown by our rookie punt returner. It had capped off an incredible preseason that took me from hopeless to nail-biter as the final cuts came down. Earning a spot on the practice squad wasn’t going to be enough this time around.

The offseason work with Connie had not only given me the strength and stamina but also the right mindset. Connie and I ran through drills, taking time out to go over game situations or read from his Bible. Connie gained most of his inspiration from the Book, while a lot of my strength came from the subtle challenges he’d instilled in me during our workouts. I had never quit, no matter how much I’d wanted to. Everything in me had told me to get out, to run away, but I had nowhere to go. So I was ready to endure whatever Connie had shelled out.

Through it all, I never could figure out why he’d been so intent on preparing me to take a roster spot that very well could have been his.

And then the day came. Coach George went against protocol by giving me the call personally, telling me I’d always been one of his favorites.

“We need your tenacity on special teams, Paws,” he said. “We’ve lost some guys there, and we need some fresh legs.”

It wasn’t until I’d hung up the phone that it dawned on me: what guys? Had he been referring to Connie, who had limped through the entire training camp and showed a noticeable drop in speed? Had Connie unknowingly prepared me to take his spot?

But when Connie came knocking on my apartment door, then threw me into a bear hug when I opened it, I knew right away that we’d both been picked.

“Brother for life!” he screamed, tears running down his face. “Brother for *life*!”

Exactly seven days later, we were standing across from each other, hopping up and down, the anticipation making my head spin. I kept telling myself to calm down but couldn’t – not when we were all huddled around special teams coach Vern Rich, not when we lined up for the opening kickoff, not even when the kicker’s foot met the ball. I was jacked up – *too* jacked up, the way Connie had warned me not to ever play. It had been his first piece of advice to me.

When the opening kickoff shot through the air, I tore out of my stance and up the seam of the field, matching Connie stride for stride, before he cut into the center of the field and threw his head into two blockers. Connie successfully broke the wedge, leaving a hole just big enough for me to squirt through. I ducked under another would-be blocker and got enough of a hand on the return man get his thigh pad between my fingers. I wrapped my other arm around his calf and pulled, slowing him down just enough for a teammate to arrive and make the tackle at the Jets’ 11-yard line. I exploded to my feet, every muscle in my body flexed and my neck veins pulsing, while exhaling a celebratory howl. Everything had gone blurry, the colors of the stadium so bright that they all ran together. I could taste my own breath, could feel the pounding of my heart. Somebody slapped me across the helmet, then I let out another howl before turning to find Connie so we could continue the celebration.

The crowd had gone quiet, and as players from both teams gathered near midfield, I realized that somebody was down. My heart sank. I could barely see a 5 on the jersey, but I couldn’t see the whole number.

“It’s Davis!” one of my teammates called out, signaling for a trainer to get on the field. Two trainers came running out with medical supplies strapped across their backs, running to duty like military personnel. I wondered at first if Connie’s ankle had finally given out. As I moved closer, I could see that he was face down, not moving. I fell to one knee, feeling sick but able to gather myself in enough to say a few words of prayer.

“Please, God,” I whispered. “He’s been your most dedicated servant. He’s been your rock. He’s never wavered – not once. He-“

Suddenly, cheering swept through the stadium again. I lifted my head to see that the trainers had Connie Davis on his feet, his arms wrapped around each of them as they slowly led him toward the bench.

“Con?” I said, running to catch up with them. “Con, you okay?”

“Hey, now, everybody back away,” said one of the trainers, a guy named Steve who had been with the Seahawks through three different coaching staffs. “Back away! Let’s get him to the bench.”

I stood and watched from a distance as they analyzed his pupils, held up three fingers and asked a series of questions. I almost missed my cue when the Jets had a three-and-out and out punt-return team was summoned to the field. I was still putting on my helmet as I ran out there, barely getting into position before the snap. I laid a block on some heavy-footed backup lineman, then turned and set my eyes on a speedy cornerback who was coming my way, his head turned and his attention fully set on the return man. He didn’t see me coming when I laid into his ribs from the blind side, sending the poor guy flying to the turf five yards behind the play.

“Nice hit, Pawlawsky!” Coach Vern Rich called out as I left the field, but I barely even glanced at the crumpled body I’d left behind. And eye for an eye. My chief concern was finding my injured teammate.

“Where’s Connie?” I shouted to no one in particular upon returning to the sideline. He was nowhere to be found. I pulled off my helmet and tasted blood run into my mouth. I smelled grass and sweat. The crowd had fallen into a murmur as the Seahawks’ offense trickled onto the field during a television timeout. “Connie. Where is he?”

“They took him to the locker room,” Coach George said in his gravelly voice. He grabbed my arm. “C’mon, kid, head in the game.”

I tried to heed his advice but couldn’t help stealing glances toward the south tunnel, waiting for Connie to emerge.

The Seahawks weren’t exactly running up the score, but we were in total control of the game for the entire first quarter. Quarterback Dean Salmer, playing like a veteran who could feel the breath of a first-round pick trying to take his job, ran an efficient offense while our rebuilt defense played with a discipline I hadn’t expected. Kwame Mitchell was looking more comfortable back on the outside, Willie Kincade was steady while starting the first game of his NFL career, and the defensive linemen were hitting all the right gaps.

Seattle led 10-0 by the middle of the second quarter, when I ran off the field following a kickoff return to see Connie Davis, No. 59, standing there with helmet on.

“You good?” I asked.

His eyes remained focused on the field as his head nodded ever so slightly.

“You had me scared,” I said, patting his shoulder pad while still trying to catch my breath from the kickoff coverage.

“Never be scared,” he said softly. Then he turned to look at me. His pupils were big, and I could tell that he wasn’t fully recovered. “Fear’s nothin’ but weakness.”

“I thought you were hurt,” I said. “Seriously hurt, y’know?”

He turned away from me. “Pain’s weakness too,” he said. “And weakness is a pain.”

I never forgot those words.

###

Later that night, as I lied in the bed nursing my own battle wounds, a bruised shoulder, a cut chin, a charley horse in the shape of Lake Erie – I heard the ring of a telephone. I fumbled through darkness, seeing the numbers 12:13 on my digital clock, to find the receiver.

“He’s been throwing up for two hours,” Keena Davis was saying. “Oh, my God, Ross. He’s …” She fell into a sobbing fit.

“I’ll be right over,” I said, throwing on a pair of sweatpants.

By the time I got to the Davis house, he was sitting in a leather chair, holding an icepack to his temple. When he saw me enter, his eyes turned angry and he looked away.

“I’m good,” he said.

“You need to get to a hospital,” I countered.

“I’m good.” He flashed a look toward Keena that said: *Why did you call him in the middle of the night?*

“Connie –“ I started.

“I’m good. Stop trippin’.” He stood up from the chair and wobbled. I could tell he was not right. I reach to help him, but he pushed me away. Hard. My calf caught the leg of a table, and I stumbled and fell over. “Everybody get off me!” he shouted. Keena stood nearby, a hand over her mouth, tears staining her cheeks, her eyes telling me to do something. Connie stepped forward and stood over me, reaching out a hand. “Get up, dog,” he said, helping me to my feet. Then he leaned in close, saying into my ear: “You shouldn’t be here. It’s one in the morning. Go home.” His breath smelled like vomit. His pupils were so big that I couldn’t even see any of the white surrounding them.

“Connie, you need *help*!” Keena shouted. “I called him because –“

“It’s just football,” he said, looking at her as he gripped my arm and held me close. “This is what football looks like. This is why we got six days before the next game. We get better.”

“But you-“

“That’s why we got trainers,” he said, cutting his wife off again. I’d never seen him stand up to her like this. He was ticked off, but not necessarily at her – Keena just happened to be standing in the way of his anger. “Let’s all get some sleep,” he said, his voice calming, “then we’ll let the trainers take care of it tomorrow.”

Keena’s desperate eyes met mine. I looked away.

“This is what we do,” Connie said, releasing my arm. “We knock people out, we get knocked out, then we lick our wounds for a few days and do it all again.”

“He’s right,” I said softly. I stepped toward the door and looked at Keena. “It’s just football,” I said softly. “It’s just football.”

###

Nobody could have expected that the 2000 Seattle Seahawks would storm out to a 3-0 record, but the offseason changes brought a new focus to the team that had been missing the previous year. We’d beaten the Jets, Vikings and Cardinals to open the season, but things were about to get tough with upcoming games in Miami and St. Louis in back-to-back weeks.

Special teams had become a big part of our success, and I can’t say I’ve ever had as much playing football as I did sprinting down the field with Connie Davis and the crew. He’d missed only one practice because of the Week 1 concussion and came back better than ever, as if the brief scare had injected him with a sense of immediacy as we ran down the field as a unit, our helmets leading the way like bullets at the unfortunate targets that carried the ball. Coach Vern had started calling us “The Scuds,” a nickname that we loved. Every time our offense started sputtering, Connie and I would begin pounding our fists on each other’s shoulder pads, saying things like, “It’s almost Scud time, boys!” When fourth down would arrive, we’d scramble into position, wait or the ball to be snapped, and fly down the field without any regard for our own safety. We had delivered some bone-crushing hits, one of which was so violent that Connie and I hit helmet-to-helmet while immobilizing a poor return man for the Cardinals with such violence that Connie had to be helped off the field. He was still battling a headache the morning after the game, but that was nothing compared to what was about to hit us across the face.

We first heard the news on the radio on our way to Monday meetings: Lassiter Boyd was ending his holdout. The Seahawks would have to clear a spot on their 53-man roster.

CHAPTER 18:

This is what was happening on the other side of the country.

Inside of a laboratory an hour’s drive from the National Football League offices, a woman removed a human brain from a jar of formaldehyde and carefully placed it onto a clear sheet of glass, lit from all sides. She had three other brains just like it, treating each like gold coins as she protected them from the outside world. At that very moment, a younger man, one who was about my age and had played some college football in the Ivy League, was on a cross-country drive, meeting with football players, ex-football players and the relatives of dead football players, giving each of them a spiel about the damages of the sport and the studies currently being connected and the need for more research. The only way to do more research would be to get more brains. “We can save the next generati9on,” he was telling them, in living rooms and bars and coffee shops – anywhere but on the property of NFL teams. “We can save them from themselves.” This man was the type of person who could single-handedly bring down the NFL over time, if ever he could get the data, if only he could get the brains. Soon enough, he’d be getting trailed by cars with tinted windows, cars that would follow him along the rain-soaked roads of country towns between Columbia, Missouri, and Salina, Kansas, and Glendale, Arizona. He would drive a beat-up car, would pay for fast food on a meager salary, just for an opportunity to beg for signatures from people who had the rights to dead men’s brains.

“We can save the next generation,” he would tell a retired NFL player in Scottsdale.

“We can save the next generation,” he would tell a dead kid’s parents in Bakersfield.

“We can save the next generation,” he would tell a sophomore safety at the University of California in Berkeley.

They’d all ask about the current generation. What could he do about *them*?

“That’s what we’re trying to figure out,” he would answer, although it wasn’t really an answer at all.

And way over on the East Coast, the woman would be using a high-powered microscope to study the XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

In the coming months and years, the woman will discover incredible things, findings that will shock her into clarity, and as the brains keep coming in, the data will continue to confirm her theories, and then she will reach out to the powers that be, to the men that run the most powerful professional sports league in the world, and these men will seem suspiciously cool to the findings – as if perhaps they’ve already suspected or even known some of these links to long-term brain damage, to conditions like ALS and early-onset dementia – and she will grow more and more frustrated with the autocracy and the cover-ups and the denial, and eventually even she will be asking the question.

What about the current generation? What happens to *them*?

CHAPTER 19:

Lassiter Boyd came sauntering into the Seahawks’ locker room on the Wednesday morning before our fourth game of the 2000 season, his chest sticking out like a peacock and his dyed blond flat-top now shaven into a Mohawk, like some kind of rooster.

“Y’all miss me?” he called out, and a few of the guys started laughing and reaching out their hands to offer hugs. I wasn’t one of them. While the Seahawks weren’t exactly rolling over the competition, we were finding ways to win games and were coming together as a team without Lassiter “LB the LB” Boyd.

“Well, if it ain’t the White Shadow,” he said, patting me on the back as he passed toward his empty locker. I looked at him and offered a friendly nod. No words. Connie welcomed him back with a deep stare, one that said, sincerely: *I’m glad to have you back with the family, now let’s get back to work.*

The coaches were ambiguous in talking about what would happen next. Boyd, having finally reported and started collecting paychecks again, was on an exempt list for up to two more weeks, meaning he would be eligible to practice but not to play until they officially added him to the 53-man roster. When that move came, somebody would have to go.

As a special teams player who was at the same position, I knew all too well that the return of Lassiter Boyd might mean the end of my run as a Seattle Seahawk.

I had an extra bounce in my step that day at practice, as if I had to remind the coaches that I was a valuable asset. Lassiter Boyd, who was splitting his reps between the first and second teams, looked slow and out of shape. There was no question about which one of us wanted to be there more, but desire is only about 10 percent of what it takes to stay on an NFL roster.

By Saturday’s walk-through in Miami, I was pretty sure I’d be on the field for the game the following day. Boyd made the trip but was no longer taking snaps with the No. 1 defense -- the “ones” – which meant he wouldn’t be starting and probably wouldn’t even be active for the game against the Dolphins.

Road games were a different beast altogether in that we had each other but none of the typical outside distractions. Connie’s full focus was on football during road weekends, since Keena was thousands of miles away, and his dedication to her was always apparent in her absence. Professional football players draw a crowd of beautiful women, which I’d kind of expected but was still somewhat shocked to see in my first year traveling with the team. Women would line the bar at the team hotel, practically wearing a “Will Fuck for a Glass of Chardonnay” sign across their ample chests. Even the subtle ones were pretty easy to spot, and in Miami the women were so beautiful that I spent a good hour flirting with one before deciding she was only trying to get in bed with a jock – so I turned in early. Connie was already asleep; he never gave road women the time of day, even though they wooed over his mysterious eyes and ripped body as he walked through the lobbies of hotels.

Connie and I were both well-rested and hyped just before kickoff that Sunday. Lassiter Boyd watched from the sideline in street clothes as Connie and I head-butted and screamed words of encouragement into each other’s facemasks.

“Go get ‘em, Scuds!” Coach Vern called out as we took the field, bouncing up and down impatiently while the kicker placed the ball on a tee. The humidity pressed down upon my chest on a sweltering day in late-September.

Connie’s eyes met mine, telling me one final time that we were about to inflict untold damage on whoever got in our way. There were speedier guys on the kickoff coverage team, and even one or two guys who had better tackling form, but Connie and I were the animals of the group; we had the thirst for blood.

Connie was the wedge-breaker, which meant that he was supposed to be the first guy up the middle of the field, flying head first into the main line of protection. Most return units would have three of their bigger guys waiting for us around the 15- or 20-yard line, and as the ball flew through the air they would come together in a wedge that was designed to create a pocket of protection for the return man. This “wedge” would keep the opening line of defense from getting to the return man, and it was Connie’s job to fly into the wedge and break it up, leaving holes for the rest of us to squeeze through. He was to do this by any means necessary, more often than not leading with his helmet. Id personally seen him knocked out cold on at least two occasions and woozy as he came off the field on a few others.

It was close to 90 degrees when that ball sailed into the humid South Florida air that Sunday afternoon, and the 3-0 Seahawks and 2-1 Dolphins were underway as the roar of the crowd overtook Joe Robbie Stadium. The rush of noise helped to create a boost of adrenaline that I’d never in my life be able to re-create. Something inside of me was aware of this even in that moment, especially after spending a year on the practice squad, unable to hit anyone as I watched Sunday games from the sideline or on television in my Kirkland apartment. The thrill of anticipation that takes over your body as you’re running full-speed across the turf, hoping to avoid 10 angry men in order to find the only one that matters, the one with the ball, is unlike anything you’ve ever felt or will ever feel. The best football men will tell you to vision every play, to *see* yourself making a tackle or being in the right spot, but the truth is that on those kickoffs there is very little that goes according to script. You can’t possibly expect what might happen when the ball’s in the air, so you simply keep your eyes ahead and run like hell.

I could hear Connie breathing alongside me, his churning lungs sounding like a rabid dog as he kicked into gear and moved ahead of the pack. Some backup tight end got a shoulder pad into my ribs, but I was able to keep my feet and stay in Connie’s wake, watching him as the undersized backup linebacker from Carson-Newman left his feet and buried his helmet into the chest of a man who had six inches and about forty pounds on him. The man staggered backward, tripping a teammate, leaving a huge hole and a clean shot at the guy with the ball. I set him in my sights and, without breaking stride, delivered a blow so jarring that the 72,000 fans drew in a collective gasp. Together, my opponent and I collapsed at the 14-yard line. Teammates were on me at once, jumping and pounding and screaming in my ear as the Miami offensive players jogged onto the field to form a huddle. Filled with energy, I turned toward my own sideline and passed the starting defense as I made my way to the bench. Lassiter Boyd, dressed in a white Seahawks sweatsuit while wearing gold-framed designer sunglasses, met me at the 25-yard line, slapping me on the side of the helmet as he shouted: “Atta boy, Shadow! Break their mothafuckin’ will!”

Connie staggered to the sideline a few steps behind, looking woozy from the hit but able to run off the field under his own power. Coach George called on him four plays later, after the Dolphins had already moved the ball to the 38-yard line, and Connie was uncharacteristically out of position on a running play that ended well past the 50. I could see that Connie still wasn’t right as the Dolphins snapped the ball out of a no-huddle offense, and some pulling guard blindsided him with a huge block that sprung the halfback for 14 more yards.

Connie came out of the game after that play and didn’t see another snap with the defense the rest of the half. We were down 20-3 at halftime.

When we returned to the visiting locker room, bruised and sweaty, a few of the offensive guys were screaming at each other. One of our receivers, a guy named Keon Williams, was shouting at Dean Salmer to get him the goddamn ball already, while two of the linemen were yelling at a rookie about his missed assignment on a quarterback sack. Through all the noise, I could hear someone screaming in the training room and realized after a few minutes that it was Connie. Soon enough, the others quieted down and heard it too. Rohlenbach and a massive defensive lineman named Curtis Daws went in to see what was going on, with Lassiter Boyd close behind. I followed, finding Connie in a state of angry confusion, like I’d never before seen him. Two trainers were trying to restrain him but quickly got thrown into a training table. An assistant coach, a strength and conditioning coach who could bench press 350 pounds and out-weighed Connie by 50 tried to wrap him in a bear hug but took an elbow to the face. Rohlenbach, Daws and Boyd rushed in, and I followed, caught up in the rush, as we grabbed his legs and threw him down on a training table, trying to restrain him. Connie wasn’t saying anything; he was just fighting us off with everything he had, as if we were a team of alien abductors trying to take him to our leader. I had hold of his left arm, whispering, “Connie, it’s me; it’s me, Connie,” but I could barely keep my grip against his amazing strength. Three or four others joined in the battle to hold him down. He was all grunts and groans, fighting with everything he had, until, at last, he had run out of gas and lied limp beneath us on the table.

Once the trainers had everything back under control, it was almost time to go out for the second half. Coach Hannigan said only a few words about second-half adjustments before we were out the tunnel and back on the sideline, my arms still shaking and my brain lost in the image of Connie Davis convulsing.

On the field, the onslaught continued in the second half. The only positive was that the special teams got plenty of work in the 30-13 loss to the Dolphins, who kicked off seven times and fielded eight Seattle punts. Coach Hannigan said very little afterward, when we returned to the locker room, and I couldn’t find Connie anywhere. Coach Hannigan, in his understated way, reminded us that we’d all gotten into this profession for more than the paychecks, that there was something else within us that made us football players.

“My challenge to you all,” he said before exiting the visiting locker room, “is to find that. It’s in there. Find it.”

When he was gone, Lassiter Boyd stood before us, still wearing his sweatsuit, his forehead sweaty even though he hadn’t taken a single snap.

“Gotta put this shit behind us,” he said, his voice rising with each word. “This ain’t about who fucked up, who missed this play or that play. This is about *you*, man.” He was screaming now. I wished I’d seen that kind of passion from him before. “You! Every single one of you mothafuckas! Don’t point the finger at nobody else! Hell, I didn’t even play, and …”

Even though his voice continued to get louder, his words faded out in my ears. My head was swimming with thoughts of Connie – where he was, what he was doing. Was he awake? Was he okay?

After Boyd stormed out, word got around that Connie had been transported to a local hospital but that he was well enough to make the flight home with us. We dressed slowly, licking our wounds, and I felt something like relief at the news. For the first time in three hours, I was able to start thinking about football again. I’d played one of my best games, despite the loss. It hadn’t been the same without Connie out there with me in the second half, but we’d had more combined energy in that first half than I could ever remember. We were making plays all over the field, and I carried on even after he was gone. If it hadn’t been for the scoreboard, I may well have thought I’d been on the winning end of the blowout. Lassiter Boyd could say what he wanted about looking in the mirror and all that, but I knew deep down that *I* had done everything in my power to give us a chance.

And it wasn’t enough.

The flight home was quiet, but I was in a pretty good mood the whole way. Connie sat up front with one of the trainers, obviously sedated, his head resting against the window as he stared out at the clouds. I said a silent prayer for his health, amazed by the human body’s power of healing, and looked forward to lining up alongside him again in seven days for the opening kickoff of the Rams game. I could see Connie’s slumped body from across the aisle and looked forward to the day when we’d look back on this and laugh about it: a couple of old men in a bar, chuckling about the time he’d been so out of whack that he tried to take on half the team.

I had my own maladies from another game in this gladiator sport, but as I rubbed the golf-ball-sized lump on my thigh and the dried blood on my forearm, I knew I’d been much more fortunate than Connie had. Every Sunday morning, we wake up blessed to be able to play the game we love; every Sunday night, we lie down blessed to still be walking.

When we arrived at Sea-Tac and boarded the team bus, guys were tired but seemed to be in better spirits. The weight of an embarrassing loss was lifting, and the guys appeared to be taking Lassiter Boyd’s advice to heart: *Let this shit go.*

Not until we got off the bus in Kirkland at around midnight did Coach George motion me to follow him. It was pitch black except for a few lights above the lower gate outside the team facility, and a few of the wives and girlfriends were waiting in luxurious cars in the parking lot to meet their men. Keena was the first to exit her car, wiping the tears from her eyes, and she was so excited to see Connie that she jumped into his arms and wrapped her legs around him. I felt a pang of jealousy in that moment. I was fortunate to have my health, but it was Connie who was truly the lucky one.

I followed Coach George into the building, limping slightly as the bruise on my leg began to throb. My back was starting to hurt, which was normal on Sunday nights and became excruciating on Monday mornings. Someone once compared playing football to being in a car accident, but no one does that every single weekend.

Coach George led me through the locker room and into his office. I could tell by his silence that he was serious.

“Take a seat,” he said after closing the door. I obliged, and he sat atop his desk, with one leg extended and his foot flat on the ground between us. “Played a hell of a game out there,” Paws,” he said. “Hell of a game.”

“Thanks, Coach.” I met his eyes, as I’d been taught to do with people of authority. Within them, I saw something like sympathy.

“You know you’re one of my favorites,” he continued, holding my gaze. “I love the way you play, I really do.” He took in a deep breath and closed his eyes. I felt my heart sink. “We’re activating Lassiter Boyd this week,” he said, then opened his steely blue eyes and looked into my face, as if he was searching for something. “Got seven linebackers as it is.” I could feel myself falling, like I’d been running behind a wedge of three teammates who just collapsed and left me exposed. “Look, kid,” Coach George said, “we’ve got to let you go. For a day or two. If no one picks you up –“

“Don’t say practice squad,” I heard myself saying, and I sounded like an angry kid who was being told he couldn’t have dessert.

Coach George just nodded. “We’ll make a spot for you,” he said. “When – *if* – you clear waivers.” Except the way he said *if*, it was if he’d been reading a script, as if he and I both really knew nobody was going to pick me up.

I felt the rage rising inside of me. The lessons my father had taught me about turning hurt into anger, and I could feel it building up inside of me. I wanted to blast Coach George through the computer screen that blinked behind him. He was the only one man enough to tell me to my face, I gave him that, but he was also the only other person in the room. So fuck him.

I couldn’t meet his eyes for fear that I might do or say something I’d regret, and so I just stood in silence for a few seconds before turning toward the door.

“It’s nothing you did, kid,” he said. “You did everything we asked. Really. You were the consummate team –“

“*Fuck* your team,” I seethed through my clenched teeth, my voice even and my hands shaking. “Fuck your team and your stupid little practice squad.” I didn’t even bother to turn around to look at him. He said nothing else as I walked out the door.

The news was on the wire the following day, although nobody cared about some second-year special teams player getting cut; that Lassiter Boyd was back on the active roster was the only news that mattered.

Actually, there were at least two people who cared. One of them was Connie Davis, who called me Monday afternoon to tell me I’d gotten a raw deal and then read some scripture to me in an effort to build my spirits. By that time, I’d already packed most of my things, even though I didn’t have anywhere to go. My agent was feverishly working the phones in an effort to find an opening on another team.

The other person who seemed affected by the news was my brother Frank. He hadn’t called in weeks, not since my first official game, and he seemed unsurprised when he saw the transaction in the newspaper: *Seattle Seahawks – Activated LB Lassiter Boyd. Released LB Ross Pawlawsky.* He started by telling me my father would be proud of me, that I’d surpassed any expectations by playing in a single NFL game – much less four. Frank told me he was proud of me, too.

“I know I’ve never told you that, but … yeah, whatever,” he said. Then his tone changed. “Listen, Ross, you’ve got nothing left to prove,” he added. “Football’s a hard, hard business. Look at Dad. The shit killed him, chasing that dream and all. Don’t let it own you. Don’t think of yourself as a failure, okay?” He waited for me to say something, the dutiful little brother taking the sage advice, but I just bit my lip and tasted blood. “And if you ever need it,” he continued, “I can get you an interview with this guy who’s pretty high up here at Sugarman Leaman. He could, y’know, maybe get you in, with your degree and all, at a mid-level right out of the gates and –“

“I’m a football player,” I said flatly into the phone.

“I know, Rossy. It’s just that … well, the offer’s there. If you need it, just give me a call.”

The only person I needed to call about a job was my agent, who picked up on the fifth ring when I called him a few hours later. He told me that the 49ers and Buccaneers showed interest but that both were looking at me as a practice squad addition.

“Just you and me talking here, Ross,” my agent said, “I genuinely think that Seattle’s practice squad is the best option. You know them, they know you. You’d be an injury away from being on the active roster. Next man up and all that.”

“Fuck the Seahawks,” I said.

“I know you’re pissed off right now, Paws,” he said. “You should be. Believe me, you should. You play with more heart than Lassiter Boyd has bags of money. But this is a business, my man. Plain and simple. This isn’t Johnny-stole-your-girlfriend-and-you-gotta-make-him-pay. This is the NFL, Paws. *Not For Long*. Got to take your shot when you got it. Got to make decisions with your head, not your heart.”

“When do the Niners play Seattle?” I asked.

He groaned. “Couple of weeks,” he said, as if he’d been through this line of questioning before, with another client in another town.

“If I sign with the Niners,” I said, “I can tell ‘em every goddamn thing the Seahawks do. Defensive calls, situational formations, snap counts, everything. They’ll be on the quarterback before the ball gets to him.”

“I understand Paws,” my agent said patiently. “Listen, I get it. I feel your anger, my man. I’m as pissed as you are, believe me. But why don’t you just sleep on this, huh? Give it a good night’s sleep, then we’ll talk in the morning.”

“I don’t need to sleep on it.”

“Keep your bags packed,” my agent said, and I wondered how he might have known. “Get some sleep. By tomorrow, we’ll make some calls. It’s too late tonight to do anything anyway.”

When I hung up the phone, it rang almost immediately. I wondered how quickly he’d redialed, thinking maybe there was another opportunity. But when I answered, the voice I heard belonged to Connie Davis.

“Get your coat on,” he said. “I’m downstairs, parked out front. Let’s go shoot some pool.”

When I got home three hours later, I unpacked my bags. By Wednesday afternoon, I was on the Seahawks’ practice field.

I was back on the practice squad.

###

Connie stopped by my apartment again that Saturday morning, on his way to the team headquarters. The team would be boarding a bus an hour later, then they’d be on an airplane destined for St. Louis. The Rams and Seahawks were tied atop the NFC West, both with identical 3-1 records, and the Week 5 game would be a pivotal one in terms of momentum for the rest of the season.

“Listen, bro,” Connie said, “I just wanted to come by to say …” He paused. He was wearing a nice suit and sunglasses. Keena was waiting in the car at the bottom of the stairs. “I’m gonna miss you, brother. Tomorrow. Out there, y’know, running down kickoffs and punts. You should be there. Forget Lassiter Boyd, man. He just tryin’ to get paid. You should be out there. It won’t be the same.”

I stood there, shirtless and in a pair of workout shorts I’d thrown on when the knock on the door woke me from sleep, and held the door open. He said nothing else, he just turned and walked down the steps, off toward the waiting car.

The next day, I turned on the game to find him sprinting down the field after the Seahawks had taken a 3-0 lead. He threw his body into the wedge, then somehow made the tackle while lying on his back. He celebrated with two teammates, and just before the commercial break I noticed something written on his wrist tape. I rewound the TiVo. I hit pause.

R.P.

There, on his wrist, written in black ink, were my initials

###

The games went on without me, and while the defense continued to hold its own with Lassiter Boyd on the weakside, the Seahawks’ offense sputtered. The career of Dean Salmer began winding down as the veteran quarterback ran out of magic, his arm losing strength as he became so error-prone that golden boy Chandler Giles took over in Week 7. By Week 10, the Seahawks had fallen to 5-5 and were desperately falling out of the playoff hunt again. Conniee Davis sat out a game with a concussion, while Lassiter Boyd’s time away from training camp caught up with him and a series of hamstring injuries landed him on injured reserve. My loyalty and perseverance paid off in the end, as I was back on the active roster for the final three games.

We were 8-7 heading into the regular-season finale, with a legitimate shot at a playoff berth, but word skittered out midway through the first quarter that the Vikings had upset the Packers and claimed the final postseason spot. I didn’t let it affect my play. The oft-heard phrases in football circles about how you’re always playing for your job and the film doesn’t lie and every game is an audition tape are even more true when the games don’t matter in the overall picture. I made three tackles on special teams, blocked a punt and even saw a few snaps at middle linebacker, while Chandler Giles and the offense finally put it all together in a 31-10 win over the Falcons. Our backup offense was in for the final six minute of that game, moving down the field with elegant grace, the final time former Pro Bowler Dean Salmer would lead a unit before retiring a few weeks later, to score a touchdown with a minute and a half left on the clock. Everybody knew the game, and the season, was over, yet as Connie and I jumped up and down in anticipation of the ensuing kickoff return, we both had as much bounce in our step as ever. We glanced at each other, like we always did in those moments, only this time Connie held his gaze longer than usual. It wasn’t until a day or two later that I realized he’d been trying to tell me something in that moment: that this might be the final time we’d sprint down the field together as fellow “scuds.”

His eyes didn’t leave me until the kicker raised a hand and the referee blew the whistle. Five seconds later, the ball was in the air.

The sky above us was a gorgeous robin’s-egg blue as we played outdoors at the University of Washington’s football stadium while our new downtown facility was being built. The ball carried end over end, my legs churning and my nostrils flaring and my breath pounding inside my helmet, my eyes watching Connie as he made his move. Nobody on that field knew what the future held; another non-playoff year meant, with near certainty, that head coach Bill Hannigan and his staff would be gone. Lassiter Boyd was somewhere roaming the sidelines in street clothes, his contract officially expiring in the coming weeks and a free-agent tour of several other NFL cities on the horizon. Chandler Giles, the hotshot rookie quarterback, seemed to be the only sure thing to be back on the roster next year, so this era of Seahawks football was about to turn the page.

I could hear Connie breathing as he passed, and in that moment I looked to see the wedge out in front of us. In a flash, I could see that the three front men were coming apart at the seams, half-interested in doing their assignment and mostly expecting the same kind of cracker-assed effort from our side. But Connie wasn’t that type of player. He kept firing on all cylinders, no matter the circumstance, and he recoiled to unload his torpedo-like violence when one of the players ducked under him, as if in fear. The player’s shoulder pad clipped Connie’s shin and sent him flying, head over feet, his leg crumpling under him as he came down in a heap as another player’s knee rammed into his helmet. Connie went collapsed with such violence that I momentarily lost track of my assignment, allowing the return man to slip past me; watching film with my teammates the following day, I looked like I’d already checked out on the season.

When the whistle blew, I immediately ran to where Connie lied motionless on the turf, his head bent at an awkward angle and his right leg splayed out wide. My first reaction was to wave for the trainers, and then I knelt down beside Connie and asked if he could hear me. I could see that he was breathing, but his facemask was planted in the FieldTurf. I asked again if he could hear me. One of the trainers arrived and pushed me away. I stood and watched over him, the sunlight of a beautiful winter day caressing the back of my neck.

“Don’t turn him over,” one of the trainers said to the other. “Is he moving?”

I could hear the sound of seagulls overhead; that’s how quiet the stadium had become. Only a few hundred fans had stayed for the end of the game, a fact that I hadn’t notice until that moment. One second, Connie Davis had been sprinting down the field beside me, the wind at our backs, and the net second he was motionless on the ground near my feet.

Seconds passed, maybe a minute. I held my breath and watched. The members of the Falcons’ offense had gathered around in silence, a few of them looking down in concern.

“He’s moving,” one of the trainers said at last, and I could feel the weight of relief leave my body. A moment later, they were turning him onto his back. Inside his helmet, Connie’s eyes blinked at the sunlight. He’d been knocked out cold, again, only this time he wasn’t standing up and jogging off the field.

“It’s my knee,” he said softly, a hint of panic in his voice. “Something happened to my knee.”

And then he closed his eyes again, pressing the eyelids together to fight the pain.

CHAPTER 20:

Death consumes us.

When someone close to us dies, the weight of pain never leaves – not for a minute, not for a single second. Someone once said that the cure for grief is movement, but the truth is that we simply can’t out-run it. Our every breath, our every thought, our every step, is weighed down by the sheer mystery of it. We’re so saddened that the sadness turns to guilt – grief for what we’re grieving. Are we consumed by our own loss? By the one we’ve lost? Are we sorry for the days we won’t get to spend with them? For the hours that can’t possibly be filled by anything else? Or do we weep from the self-pity that overwhelms us?

I remember standing at my father’s funeral, the grief beating down on me, and wondering how I could possibly make it through. It had all happened so suddenly, and there were so many things left unsaid, that I was paralyzed by the thought of moving on. I remember thinking that I’d flunk out of school, get kicked off the football team, end up locking myself in the bedroom of my parent’s house – what had since become only my mother’s house – thinking about all the things I should have said or should have done.

Only that’s not the way it was at all. My life went on, the world went on, and in the days that followed I became angry that everyone found it so goddamn easy to fall back into routine. My father wasn’t a perfect man, but he’d deserved more than this. He’d deserved a world that would stop and mourn for him, one that would acknowledge his existence.

Soon enough, I had no choice but to go on myself. There I was: back in class, back at school, back at the football field, telling myself that’s what my father would have wanted. Fooling myself into thinking I ever knew what my father wanted.

We tell ourselves in those moments that we’ll be different people, that we’ll cherish the time we have with our loved ones and make a better effort to let them know how we feel. That we’ll open our eyes up to the world and give each day everything we have. That we’ll learn something new about ourselves in every day we have. That we’ll never waste another moment of this thing called life.

But the truth is that we’ll lose touch with how we feel, with how we ever felt. We’ll question the relationships that we have and the ones that we had; we’ll lose touch with people, with ourselves, with our God. Instead of growing closer to people, we’ll drift away from them. By trying to close the gap with the one we’ve lost, we’ll widen the chasms between ourselves and the people we’ll leave behind.

There was this kid who went to Fridley High with me, a kid I didn’t really know at all, the kind of boy who wore a Motley Crue jean jacket and smoked cigarettes outside the drive-thru hamburger stand on Friday nights. His name was Stinson or something, although I’d never known it until the day I saw it in the newspaper. I guess one winter day during our junior year, he was out skitching behind his buddy’s Camaro when the car swerved and the Stinson kid got thrown into oncoming traffic. They showed the kid’s face on the news that night, and I thought to myself: Have I see that kid before? It wasn’t until the next Monday, when we showed up at school and they held an assembly for hi, that I found out he’d been in my class. There was a buzz around school that day, everyone talking about you and mourning about what could have been.

Two days later, I saw some long-haired kid in the parking lot, wearing a jean jacket and a chain attached to his wallet, curled up in a ball, crying his eyes out. And I probably should have said something to the kid, but the truth is that I’d been ignoring guys like that for so long that I wouldn’t even know where to start and would probably end up looking disingenuous for even trying, so I let him be.

Within a few weeks, maybe even days, the Stinson kid was all but forgotten. Even his friends had to move on. One kid got a tattoo on his forearm that said BKS FOREVER. That seemed to be the only thing that remained of Stinson.

A few years later, around the time my father passed away, I saw the kid with the tattoo. I was back from college for the summer, out shopping for a gift for whatever girl I was seeing at the time. The guy was at the mall, his sleeves rolled up and the BKS FOREVER tattoo on display. He was hanging out with a balding guy that I realized had been the long-haired crier from the school parking lot. They looked a little older, but otherwise they were still the same: dressed in jean jackets, smoking cigarettes, feigning cool. When they passed by me, the long-haired kid looked me in the eye, and although he was trying to look cool, I could see in his face that he was still hurting, that no matter how much time he spent dressing the part, he’d never really be the same.

Death takes something away from you that you’ll never get back.

###

My father’s funeral was attended by many. There must have been a thousand people at the church – neighbors, assistant coaches, players and ex-players. I recognized a few but not very many. Most of them seemed to be from a man’s life I didn’t know all that well. Some spoke and told stories, ones I hadn’t heard. They painted the picture of a man I didn’t know. Maybe the time would have come, had he lived a few more years. Perhaps life is such that we’re supposed to not know very much about our parents until we’re parents ourselves, and then we’re to begin peeling back the layers.

Of course, I never got that chance. I had to spend the rest of my life wondering what my father would have said, what he would have done with the rest of his life, how he might have felt about my accomplishments. He would become some kind of invisible being inside my head, a place to direct my thoughts and fears.

All the tears I never cried, he was in there storing them away.

Maybe I’ll understand my father one day. Maybe, if I ever have kids of my own, it will all make sense.

CHAPTER 21:

Keena Davis was standing in the doorway, holding some kind of a photograph above her head. Her pearly teeth were shining in the summer sunlight, even brighter than usual – an observation I never thought possible. I squinted to see what she was holding but couldn’t tell. It looked more like one of those Rohrshack tests they give you at the psychiatrist’s office than anything else.

“Look, Ross,” she said. “Just *look*!”

Connie came into view, his eyes smiling, but his mouth closed. He leaned his crutches against the wall, placed an arm around her and balanced his weight on one leg.

“We did it!” she shouted, holding up the plastic contraption so I could see the plus-sign. “We’re gonna be *parents*!”

Connie’s lips parted in something like a grin, then he nodded his head joyously. Immediately, I took each of them in an arm and pulled the two of them in for a group hug.

“You believe it?” he said.

“*Parents*,” she said again.

I whispered into the space between us: “I couldn’t think of any two people who would be better. That’s one lucky kid. Really.”

It was a few days after the Fourth of July, 2001. Keena was already in her second trimester, so they felt comfortable sharing the news.

“You wouldn’t believe how hard it was not to say nothin’,” Connie said after we’d retired to the living room. They had been trying for awhile, I knew, and apparently there had been a miscarriage before I’d ever met Connie and Keena Davis.

“You know your room’s not going away,” Keena said when she returned from the kitchen with three glasses of lemonade. “He’ll be sleeping upstairs, in the room next to ours.”

“*He*?” Connie said. “How you know … I thought we agreed …”

Keena grinned and handed me a lemonade.

“Connie wants a boy,” she said. “He won’t admit it –“

“I just want a healthy –“

“-but he can’t hide anything from me,” she continued. “I know him too well.”

“Just as long as he’s not a Ram or a 49er,” I said. “Wouldn’t want to have to boo him when I’m old, sore and sitting on the 300 level.”

Connie, sitting on a leather couch with his legs out and his crutches nearby, laughed. “Yeah, if he hits like his daddy, you won’t be booin’ nobody,” he said proudly, laughing harder.

Keena sat down and took a sip of her lemonade.

“Lord, I’m already starting to show,” she said, although one hand was across her abdomen and I couldn’t tell one way or the other. “I’ve been on this earth twenty-six years now, and the one thing I’ve never been is *fat*.”

“It’s a baby,” I said, “not a plate of wings every Tuesday night at Shelby’s Tavern.” She chuckled at this and held her smile. I’d never seen them so happy.

The walls of their living room were covered with African art. There was a photograph of their wedding day and two more of what I assumed to be her parents, and the room was immaculate. I sat on a white leather couch, next to Keena, feeding off the radiance that oozed from her every pore. I tried to picture their child – boy or girl – and couldn’t imagine it being anything short of beautiful.

“So this is what happens when you can’t get up and walk out of the house,” I joked. “Guy hurts his knee and …”

“What else is there to do?” Connie said with a laugh. Keena laughed along with us.

I couldn’t stop staring at her. Keena’s beauty was difficult to ignore, but on that day I saw something else. I could see the face of a mother, the very thing she’d been meant to be.

Connie reached over and rubbed her stomach. “Tell you one thing,” he said. “This lil guy ain’t gonna be playing no special teams.” His jaw was set, as if something was on his mind, but Connie didn’t say anything else.

“Headaches still there?” I asked.

“Come and go,” he said softly, then Connie looked down at his bandaged leg. “Just got to get my knee right. That’s all.”

Keena leaned forward, as if to whisper a secret. “If I had my way,” she said, “my child wouldn’t *ever* play football, no matter where he was to play on the field.” She leaned back. “That’s no affront to what you all are doing,” she added, “but my child isn’t getting his pretty little brain getting knocked around every Sunday afternoon.”

“Only one in every 12,000 make it to Sundays,” I said. “Hey, we’re the *lucky* ones.”

She reached over and rubbed Connie’s head. “My man sure doesn’t *feel* lucky,” she said.

Connie looked over at her, took her hand in his, and kissed her fingers. “You’re gonna be a mama,” he said softly, almost to himself, then leaned over and kissed Keena on her cheek. I had dated a few women over the past couple of years but never got too serious about one, and in that moment I realized it was because I knew what true love looked like. Until I met someone who was the Keena to my Connie, my search would go on.

“Well, whatever you do,” I told them, “it’s going to be the right decision. I can’t imagine any better set of parents than the two of you. That baby won’t feel unloved, not for one minute.”

“Got that right,” Connie said, his jaw set with the same conviction he carries into game days.

Keena reached over and took my hand. “You’re such a beautiful man, Ross,” she said. I’d never been called that before. Not once in my life. “You really are. I’m so glad you’re here to share in this joy with us.”

“No doubt,” Connie added. “Uncle Rossy.” We all got a laugh out of that.

“Whatever you need from me,” I said when the laughter died down, “I’ll be there.”

Reaching over to pat my hand, Keena said: “We know that,Ross. We know that.”

In that moment, I felt something I hadn’t felt since my father died. I felt like part of a family.

“Unless it’s a college education,” I said. “Connie’s the one with the six-figure salary.”

He winked. “Seven,” he said, “if this knee of mine can make it through two more years.”

###

By the time we departed for training camp two weeks later, Keena was showing for all to see. It was just a tiny bump, but on her lithe frame it was impossible to miss.

She sat in the passenger seat of my father’s old ’86 Chevette while Connie stretched out in back, his right knee straight across the vinyl seat and his crutches leaning against it. He wasn’t going to leave Keena behind, not this year, not with her in this condition. Maybe it had something to do with his own father disappearing in his own skin all those years, but Connie was already doing everything he could to make that child feel loved.

He was six months out of surgery, and the doctors were estimating that he’d be able to start jogging within a couple of weeks. Lateral movement was at least another month away, and if all went according to plan, he might be back on the field as early as Week 5.

The timing couldn’t have been worse. Lassiter Boyd had signed a six-year deal with Washington in March, meaning Connie could have had a shot at the weakside linebacking job. Kwame Mitchell was already falling out of favor with the new coaching staff, and the switch to a 3-4 defense seemed to favor a fast, undersized guy like Connie. But he would have to watch and rehab, his lone focus to get healthy while the rest of us battled for jobs. The change in defenses meant I had a better chance at a roster spot than ever before, and seeing as how there would be more linebackers on the field in the 3-4 system, I would have a legitimate shot at some real playing time. The 3-4 meant there would be two starting inside linebackers instead of one, and I was determined not to spend a single day on the practice squad when the 2001 season.

Cheney looked and smelled just the way I had remembered, with the minor exception being my accommodations. While Connie and Keena got to shack up in the “family” dorm, which was reserved for veterans with wives and kids, I was back at Dressler Hall, this time sharing a room with a three-year veteran named Chad Knowles, who had joined the Seahawks as a low-priority free agent. I knew a little about him and immediately understood the pairing – Knowles was mostly a special teams player who’d been on and off the Pittsburgh Steelers’ roster for much of the previous two seasons – but I couldn’t get past the fact that he was there to try and take a roster spot. *My* roster spot. I’d feel better about my chances if not for the fact that Todd Willis, our new head coach, had spent the previous four years as Pittsburgh’s defensive coordinator.

Chad was cordial enough, and it was hard not to like the guy and respect his approach to the game, but it just wasn’t the same out on the practice field without Connie. I still got to eat lunch with him in the cafeteria and saw him at team meetings, but most of my free time was spent cooped up in a room with Chad Knowles while Connie and Keena Davis were off planning the rest of their lives.

When the preseason games began, it became even more obvious that Chad and I were fighting for the same roster spot. He opened the preseason in the same position on the kickoff coverage team where I had been to end the 2000 season. I rotated in on the next kickoff, and it went like that for the first two preseason games. My only meaningful action with the defense came in the fourth quarter, when I was surrounded by rookies and guys who weren’t going to make it past the first cut.

As much as I hated the sparse playing time, what made the games even more excruciating was knowing Connie wasn’t out there with me. I’d be psyching myself up on the sideline before a punt, habitually looking over to where Connie was supposed to be pumping me up, only to be reminded that I was alone. Until his knee healed, the “scuds” would be nothing more than a piece of broken artillery. I was just a jersey number again, part of the old guard from a coaching staff that had long since been put out to pasture. I imagined the day when we might be back out there together, running up the field without any regard for our own safety, the sole focus being to lay down the guy with the all. Looking back, I could say that those Sundays I’d spent playing special teams with my best friend were the greatest days of my young life.

A few days before the third preseason game, the Seahawks’ linebackers coach, a guy named Lance who had spent two NFL training camps trying to make it as a safety but was already washed up at 30 years old, called me into his office and told me they weren’t going to have a spot for me. “At inside linebacker?” I asked, and I could tell by the look in his eye that he had meant something more than that, even before he said the words: “On the roster, Ross.” He said something else about letting me go before the other cuts because it would give me a chance to catch on with another team, but he and I both knew that being among the first cuts from a 6-10 team wasn’t going to create a revolving door of teams waiting outside my agent’s office. Stunned, I accepted the news and walked out of Lance’s office without much to say. Only later did the words come flooding into my brain: what I *should* have said, what I *could* have said, and what I didn’t say at all. I was on my way back to my dorm room when it dawned on me that I couldn’t face Chad Knowles knowing that he’d already beaten me out. The man in me wanted to congratulate him for a job well done, but the competitor in me wanted nothing of the sort, so I took a walk to try and cool off.

I headed down the hill, toward the closest thing Cheney, Washington, has to a downtown area. The sun was out, the skies were clear, and the sidewalks were empty. I don’t know what I was doing, maybe looking for something to eat or some kind of diversion to keep my mind busy, but it seemed pre-destined when I took a right turn and saw a tavern, its door open, the three or four patrons inside each sitting alone.

I only had two beers. I deserved them. I’d sworn off drinking, then everything had gone my way, and now I was lost again. Two beers. What could it hurt? It said something that I could stop after two. I didn’t even crave another, not at all. I just thanked the bartender, turned around inside the dark tavern and headed back out into the light.

I ascended the hill, back toward my dorm, still not ready to face Chad Knowles or anyone else affiliated with Seahawks football, and so I just kept walking.

That’s how I ended up outside Connie and Keena’s “family” dorm.

She was just coming out of the front entrance, looking very pregnant and incredibly radiant as she fumbled with her keys. She didn’t notice me at first, and when she did, Keena Davis seemed a bit surprised. Then her face lit up.

“Good news!” she called out. “On our way to a specialist to see if Connie’s ready to start running!” She shut the door and locked it. There wasn’t another soul around. “A team car came to pick him up 15 minutes ago,” she said. “I’m heading to Spokane to meet him at the hospital. Want to come along?”

I should have been able to say that I had meetings or weightlifting or that I just needed the rest before the next day’s practices. But none of that mattered suddenly. I had nowhere to be, nothing to do.

“Sure,” I said. “I’ll drive.”

She tossed me the keys, and we got into the car, our destination just 20 minutes away off I-90. We mostly talked about the baby on the way there, my eyes stealing glances at her bulging stomach as she spoke. She told me about the color they’d picked out for the baby’s room – a light blue for a boy, and a subtle yellow for a girl. She told me they had whittled down the names. “I’d tell you,” she said, wagging a red fingernail in the space between us while flashing her amazing smile, “but I’d have to kill you.” She chuckled and got quiet, her smile not fading as she looked out the window, out onto the fields of wheat and corn that painted the landscape between Cheney and Spokane.

“He’s going to be an incredible father,” I said.

Still smiling, she turned to look at me. “No doubt,” she said. The smile faded. I could tell something was on her mind.

“You look worried,” I said, trying to keep my eyes on the road in front of us.

Keena Davis took in a deep breath. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see her body stiffen. She exhaled.

“All these injuries,” she said. “I just …” She ran the palms of her hands across her lap, a nervous habit I’d noticed in the rare occasions that Keena was stressed out. “Ross,” she said, turning toward me, “do you ever …? I mean, you play the game, too. Do you feel …?”

I waited for her to finish the question, but she never did. She waved a hand in the air, as if shaking off the thought.

“I’ll just be glad when it’s over,” she said. “This game, you know, it’s his whole life. Sometimes I think he loves it more than … anything.”

“He loves you more than football,” I said. “That’s a fact, Keena. I know that. If you’re worried-“

“It’s not that,” she said. She stared out the window, out into a graying sky that began to drop small pellets of rain on the windshield. I turned on my wipers. “I’ll just be glad when he’s done playing,” she said. “Football has done some amazing things in his life, and it’s allowed us the lifestyle we have, but it scares me sometimes. Every time he gets hurt. I ask myself: is *this* the time he doesn’t get up?”

I tried to think of something that would reassure her, of the right words that might put her mind at ease, but the truth is that whatever I needed to say would have been a lie. Hundreds of thousands of men had played the game over the past century, and most of them had walked away with minimal long-term damage, but the truth was that you just never knew. My dad used to tell me about this New England Patriots wide receiver who got paralyzed during a game. When I was a kid, it happened to another guy, a lineman for the Detroit Lions, and my mom was so shaken by it that she forbid me from playing football for a couple of years. Football was a beautiful game, but it was also a violent one. People got hurt. Most recovered. Every once in a while, someone didn’t.

“Woo, just talking about my man makes me excited to see him,” she said. “He’s probably working up a sweat right now, those doctors running him through the paces. I can almost see his gorgeous, black skin glistening, just thinking about it.”

“Well,” I said, “that’s about all I need to hear about that. Maybe I’ll just drop you off here, let you cool off on the walk the rest of the way.”

We both got a laugh out of that, then we saw the first exit sign for Spokane. The rain had really started to come down, to the point that my wipers were hammering away at top speed. It was the middle of the afternoon, and I wondered if maybe the afternoon practice would be canceled. The wet glass was a recipe for knee injuries, and I was hoping we might fill the time with indoor meetings or film work. I only had about 45 minutes to pick up Connie and head back to camp. It seemed like a lot of time, but you never knew. I pushed down on the gas.

“He’s going to shock everyone,” Keena said. “They told Connie Davis he’d be out nine or ten months, but he’s not the kind to let anyone tell him anything. He hasn’t given up on being ready for the opener, you know. And when my man sets his mind to something …”

“’Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial …’” I said.

“James, one-twelve,” she said, smiling. “Amen.” The exit came upon us, and I veered my car off the highway. “I don’t know what all he’s told you about his life,” Keena said, “but nothing’s ever come easy. He’s had to work for everything. *Every*. Thing. He usually gets whatever he wants, but that’s only because he’s worked his *ass* off.” She touched my hand, which was on the stickshift. “Please don’t tell him I phrased it that way,” she said with a chuckle. “He hates when I curse.”

I slowed at the exit ramp and turned left at the stop sign, heading back under the highway and into downtown Spokane. The rain was really coming down. The hospital was only a mile or two away, right in the heart of the city. I felt my stomach turning with nerves as it dawned on me that Connie’s football future might be decided in a matter of minutes. If there’d been some kind of setback, it might cost him the entire season. He was right on the verge of making it big, of getting his big contract. It could all be taken away so quickly.

“Nothing is gonna stop that man,” Keena said, almost to herself. The rain pelted black tar in front of us, creating little splashes that looked like dancing bugs. Thunder cracked overhead. I could see a green light up ahead, and I turned to look at Keena. Her green eyes sparkled, even as the afternoon light faded. She was lost in thought. I’m not sure if she was thinking about Connie’s injury rehab or the baby, but there was no doubt that she had a light inside of her that was shining, as if she knew that everything was going to turn out all right.

When I turned my head back, the light had turned yellow. I put one foot on the brake but, reactively, decided that the rain was coming down too hard to risk it. I gunned the engine, hoping to beat the red, hoping to avoid a ticket, and even though I turned to look, I swear to God I never saw the car coming.

###

One of my teammates, I can’t recall which one, once described football as being like a car crash on every play.

This was much, much worse. The blackout was sudden, so sudden that I never saw what hit me. I never heard car brakes or screaming or much of anything – not even a crash. I was just glancing at Keena, her gorgeous face filled with beautiful contentment, one second, and in the next everything had turned to chaos. Glass was flying everywhere, her bones were crushed against the weight of my body, and our body parts were mangled under a heap of metal. The first thing I vaguely remember hearing was the sound of spinning wheels and falling rain, and my skin was wet with liquid – raindrops and sweat and motor oil and blood. I felt nothing else as my adrenaline kicked into gear, the way it does on Sundays, when I can’t feel the pain at all, and as it washed over me, I felt myself falling into some kind of a black pit.

###

I awoke on the third floor of Deaconess Hospital, two floors beneath where Connie Davis had been taking knee functioning tests a few hours earlier. Or had it been a few days? Lying there on the hospital bed, I had no idea. I could feel pain in my left shoulder and could taste something like rubber as I sucked through the oxygen mask over my mouth, but very little else seemed to register. I was afraid to try to move my limbs. Had I actually died? I could hear only muffled sounds, something like a broken fan in the distance and the rhythmic beeping of an EKG machine. A woman in a blue smock was standing over me, her stethoscope hanging down into my eyes, and she was saying something to someone I could not see. In that moment, I was pretty certain that all I could move was my eyeballs.

I tried to trace the steps backward, to remember how I got there, closing my eyes into darkness, when suddenly I saw her face. The contentment in her eyes. The shining light within her. The baby.

“Keena,” I tried to say, but the oxygen mask prevented me from getting any words out. A hand rested against my chest, patting gently. It felt like the hand of my mother, comforting me in sickness.

“You’re going to be okay, Mr. Pawlawsky. Everything’s going to be okay.”

Except that it wasn’t.

###

I’ll never forget the moment that they told me. A nurse had entered to raise my bad and adjust my interveneous tube. I hadn’t seen her before. A black woman with friendly eyes and a small mouth. She was all hips and thighs. She spoke to me as she pressed bedside buttons and tucked in my sheets.

“They tell me you’re a very lucky man,” she said. “Quite lucky. Just to be alive. And with only minor injuries.” She lifted my head and added a soft pillow. “I understand you play football,” she said softly, grunting as she moved things around. Then she looked into my eyes for the first time. “Incredible, really, that you’re not … well …”

Her words trailed off. She pulled the oxygen mask from my face.

“Keena,” I said. “Where is Keena? Where’s Connie?”

She flashed a smile that didn’t seem to have much behind it and turned her back, rolling some type of aluminum tray toward the window.

“The passenger,” she said, as if she hadn’t heard me, “she took the brunt of the collision. Her body served as a human airbag, so to say.” She turned and looked at me, smiling again with that small mouth of hers. “Saved you from a lot worse injuries,” she added.

“Keena,” I said again. “How is she?”

Her sympathetic smile didn’t wane, but her eyes twitched.

“You’ve been through a lot,” she said. “You need rest.”

“Where is she?” I shouted, and the woman’s smile faded. My body **jerked, but I couldn’t lift myself from the mattress. The woman folded her arms across her ample chest.**

**“I’m afraid …” she said, and everything went black after that.**

**###**

**When I awoke again a few hours later, he was standing over me. I know it was him. He had on his gray Seattle Seahawks sweatshirt, with the hood pulled up over his head so that his face was lost in a shadow of darkness. I was in a haze, my eyes barely open, my head still half asleep. He wasn’t saying anything. I couldn’t tell if he was even looking at me.**

***Connie*, I tried to say, only the words wouldn’t come out, and then I had that sensation that you get when you’re lying on the couch, in front of a television set on a Saturday afternoon, the Wisconsin-Michigan game on mute, trying to keep your eyes open, but they’re just too heavy, and you drift off unwillingly, off to another place and time.**

**###**

**I dreamt of sunshine and grass and an empty practice field. The sky was impossibly blue, and a brown bird flew overhead, followed by a smaller, white bird, whistling through the silence. I wore my practice pads but realized I’d forgotten my helmet. As I turned to go back to the locker room, I heard the whoosh of a crowd. My teammates were running toward me. The clouds descended, and a hard rain came upon us. My wet bangs covered my eyes, and when I opened my mouth to speak, water flowed in, causing me to choke.**

**“C’mon, boy! Let’s do this!” a voice shouted, and I looked up to see Connie Davis, in full pads, with his white, No. 59 road jersey, running past. I turned and watched him go, then fell in line, running through the storm to catch up. The kicker was already placing the ball on the tee. As I looked around, we were inside a stadium I did not recognize, the cheers of tens of thousands filling our ears.**

**Connie was jumping up and down. “C’mon, boy! C’mon!” Looking right at me. His eyes were darker than I’d ever seen them. I stood in the pouring rain, pointing to my head, showing him that I didn’t have a helmet, that I shouldn’t be playing. But Connie just held his hands out and turned them skyward, as if to say, *So what*?**

**“What you can’t see,” he shouted, “can’t hurt you!” His eyes were bloodshot. His jaw was tense, just like it always was on game days.**

**Behind where Connie stood, looking at me, the kicker ran up to the ball and sent it airborne, out into the wind and rain. Connie Davis took off in pursuit, and instinctively I followed, desperately trying to keep pace even though I never could; no matter how hard I tried, I could never keep up with Connie on the football field. I ran through the marble-sized hail that pelted my scalp. I squinted and tried to find the white, No. 59 jersey out there, running in front of everyone, leading the charge and clearing the path for the others. Always our protector. Always, *my* protector.**

**And then, all at once, I lost him. He seemed to just disappear. But I kept running, purely on reflex. I had a job to do. I ran with all my might, ready to deliver a blow. I put my head down, and when I looked up again, I saw him coming at me. Connie Davis. The No. 59 jersey so large that I didn’t have time to swerve.**

**Like a truck, he ran through me.**

**###**

**I awoke in a cold sweat, struggling to catch my breath as the silence of the room fell in on me. The pale light of morning seeped in through a window, and for a moment I convinced myself that it had all been a dream. I was probably late for practice, I might even get cut from the team, but none of that was of any importance anymore. All that mattered was that Keena was okay. *She’s okay*. Nothing else held a single ounce of weight in my life – not football or Connie’s rehab or that guy Chad Knowles coming in to take my job or the new defensive scheme, or anything at all. None of that was important anymore. The only thing left was Keena. That she was okay.**

**But then I heard the beep of an EKG machine, and I could feel the tubes attached to my body, and I could smell the unmistakable scent of hospital anisceptic.**

**The silence returned, except for the sound of my own breathing. Two long, flat ceiling lamps waited above me, turned off but still visible in the dim light. In the distance, behind a closed door, I could barely hear two women talking about coffee.**

**Then another beep.**

**I began by moving my toes. That being accomplished without any pain, I flexed my calf muscle, bent my knee, lifted my butt and flexed the muscles of my arms – my biceps, my triceps, my forearms an fingers. My body felt the way it did on a typical Monday morning after a football game – painfully sore, but still intact.**

**I relaxed my limbs and lied in the stillness of another day, feeling blessed to have it. The shades were pulled down, but a crack of sunlight shot across the room like the hand of God. His gentle reminder of the preciousness of life.**

**“Calvin,” a voice said suddenly, cracking through the darkness. It was Connie’s voice. I immediately became tense. The memory of Keena’s face assaulted me, my insides turning with emptiness. I could not see him, and for a moment I wondered if I’d just imagined the voice. “Connie,” he said again, and this time I could hear the chair squeak as he rose. Slowly, he limped into vision. He no longer used crutches. His hands were folded in the front pocket of his Seahawks sweatshirt, and his face was lost in the darkness of his hood.**

**“We were gonna name him Calvin,” he said softly, standing over me at my bedside. “Calvin Matthew Davis. Keena’s father name was Calvin,” he said. His head was down. His huge shoulders pressed against the sweatshirt, but otherwise he looked like a small, weak man: the way his shoulders slumped over and caved inward, how his back slumped and his arms hung limply on either side of his rib cage. I wondered if maybe that’s how the man Connie thought was his father had looked, if maybe he’d come from a long line of meek men but had worked like hell to break the cycle. Weakness is our curse at birth, and only the select few are able to overcome it.**

**Connie knelt down next to my bedside, placed a warm hand on the back of mine and said softly: “Let’s pray. Together.”**

**I could feel the clamminess of his palm upon my skin. I wondered if he could feel the rigor of my heartbeat, pounding with a combination of heartache and fear.**

**“Pray with me,” he said, his head down. “Pray for Keena,” he said softly. His voice was hoarse, as if he hadn’t spoken in days; or, maybe, from screaming at the heavens. “I know you loved her too, brother,” he said. “Not like I loved her, but …”**

**“I did,” I said softly, the words coming out of me like attic cobwebs.**

**“Lord, give us the strength to go on,” he said, his voice still weak. “I know You’re my protector, father, and I know she’s safe in Your arms. But I ain’t so sure about myself. Keep Keena and Calvin in Your heart, as they’ll always be in mine, Lord. Show them the way, Father. Show us the way, too.”**

**He fell silent, and I thought that was it. But just as I opened my mouth to offer an *Amen*, he went on.**

**“Lord, O, Lord,” he said, “I believe in Your power of forgiveness. I cannot blame. I cannot hate. ‘Do not stay angry forever,’ You say, ‘but delight to show mercy.’ Please, Father, give my fallen brother the forgiveness in my heart. For Keena could forgive. Keena had only love, dear Lord. Only love. She could not hate. She could not harbor anger. She could not fear. She could only love.” He paused and took in a deep breath. I could feel his fingers trembling. “Give me her strength,” Connie said. “Her strength to forgive. Amen.”**

“Amen,” I echoed, and he squeezed my hand.

I swallowed hard as he stood and looked toward the window, the crack of light illuminating one side of his tear-soaked face. I watched as a tear rolled down his cheek. He did not attempt to wipe it away.

I opened my mouth as Connie limped toward the door, opening it and stepping out into the light as the silence fell back into the room. The door closed softly, and the darkness swallowed me up.

“I’m sorry,” I said softly, but I’m sure he didn’t hear me.

CHAPTER 22:

I still had not cried by the time I dressed for the funeral two days later. I was out of the hospital by then, my shoulder still sore and my back stiff, my face blemished by small cuts, and I couldn’t stop thinking about what the nurse had said.

*Her body served as a human airbag. She saved you …*

I prayed to Keena throughout my days but still hadn’t brought myself to give Connie a call.

There’d been an article on the front page of *The Spokesman-Review* the day after the accident, mentioning my name and a line about blood-alcohol tests still pending, but the only mention of Keena made reference to an unidentified woman with unspecified injuries. The next day’s paper referred to Keena’s death, mistakenly reporting that she was “believed to be a love interest” of mine. A man and a woman in a car together – two and two, in this case, made five.

I’d wanted to call Connie after that, to explain that his wife was nothing of the sort, that there was no romantic interest at all, but I just couldn’t bring myself to pick up the phone. He had his own demons, ones that cut much deeper than mine did, and so I guess I was waiting for him to make the first move.

He had prayed for the ability to forgive, but I still had yet to hear anything else from Connie Davis.

I saw him at the funeral, but only from a distance. He looked like a broken man. I realized in that moment that there could have been nothing in the world, nothing that one human could ever do to another, that would hurt worse than what I done to Connie. That it had been an accident had only added to the grief, I’m sure. The anger inside him wasn’t targeted at anyone; it just built up inside.

As I watched one of his relatives, a cousin or someone, help Connie into a seat, I felt a hand on my shoulder. I turned to see Coach George, tears in his eyes, wearing a cheap suit. He squeezed my shoulder, the bad one, and I fought he urge to wince and pull away. He was always a man who’d meant well.

I sat alone in the back, trying to stay inconspicuous, staring at a large photograph of Keen’a beautiful face. Her forgiving eyes stared back at me, comforting me, as if saying: *It wasn’t your fault*. But I couldn’t help wondering if I could have saved her. Connie had loved me enough to trust me with his most valuable possession, and how had I repaid him? I closed my eyes and saw Keena sitting next to me, the very vision of a proud mother-to-be, and then I turned to see the yellow light. Could I have frozen time? Was there enough time to stop? Even if I had slammed on the brakes, the worst that would have happened – the absolute worst -- probably would have been whiplash. Keena and I would be wearing matching neck braces, laughing with Connie about the whole thing.

Had the car that hit us even seen her? Had the angelic look of contentment been replaced by the horribly disfigured face of panic? Had she known, in taking her final breath, that the end was upon her?

What if we’d left five minutes earlier? Five minutes later? *Half a second* later? What if I’d had better reaction time? What if I’d given up on professional football and had been off in St. Paul, working alongside my brother inside a small office where they allowed their employees to come in or tie-free-Fridays? What if I’d been the one who’d suffered the knee injury? If Connie hadn’t laid his body on the line to break that wedge?

What if I?

What if I?

What if I?

The questions bounced around in my head like pinballs. Eventually, one question barked out louder than the others.

*What if I hadn’t had that drink?*

CHAPTER 23:

Connie was worse than I ever could have imagined. Willie Kincaid had been right about him: Connie had it bad.

Thirty-nine years old, his body shriveled and his mind decayed, the rage within him was finally coming out. The hallways of the Houston rehabilitation clinic where Connie spent his days and nights hid him from the outside world, but people like him were popping up all over the country. Those rich men’s secrets were no longer locked inside some Boston University laboratory; for every Connie Davis, there were dozens more like him. Perhaps hundreds. The brain injuries. PTSD. ALS. Chronic depression.

A popular former quarterback, one of the biggest personalities of his generation, was spending hours and entire days locked in dark apartment, teetering on the edge. A Super Bowl fullback, his brain so damaged that he needed help getting in and out of a wheelchair; he was not even 50 years old. A special teams ace, his brain still intact but his body withered and useless, at 36 years old, waiting to die like Lou Gehrig. A Pro Bowl linebacker, dead of a self-inflicted bullet wound.

A generation had been destroyed by the game, by the things we didn’t know, by the injuries we couldn’t see. I had read about it on the internet, had seen countless news stories and heard all these tragedies on talk radio, but never once had I thought that Connie Davis might be among those suffering.

More than a decade had passed since we’d seen each other, and in those precious moments when I would wonder what had become of him, I’d never thought about the concussions. At least half a dozen that I’d witnessed in person, and a handful more that I’d seen on television after my career was over. All those hits, all those woozy, Sunday afternoon trips to the locker room. Silently killing him.

As I stood outside the rehabilitation clinic where Connie Davis was likely to spend whatever years he had left, it occurred to me that I should have seen this coming. Much like that car that seemingly came out of nowhere and killed Keena, I should have seen it coming.

I returned to my Ford S-150 pickup truck, started the engine and drove to the first apartment complex I could find. Then another. And another. My modest, two-bedroom home was six states away, up north where I had buried my mother and moved into a suburban neighborhood where I had an easy commute to work and just a 10-minute drive to my brother’s house to see my niece and nephew. Frank III – Trip, they called him – had become quite a baseball player; his mother forbid him to play tackle football. All of that would still be there when I got back. I called my boss, told him I’d be telecommuting.

Finally, I found an apartment for $795 a month, just four blocks from the rehab center. Month-to-month lease. Told the landlord I wouldn’t be spending too much time there.

Three days later, having moved a few of my things down from Minnesota in a U-Haul, I went to see Connie Davis again. This time, I knew what to expect.

CHAPTER 24

We were back working out together within a few weeks. Connie called me on the morning of September 11, telling me to turn on the television.

“I’ll be right over,” I said when I saw the second airplane crash into the North tower.

We watched in horror, saying very little until the early afternoon, when we prayed together and talked about fear. Connie read me again the passage about forgiveness.

“*’ Do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy*.’”

He looked up from his Bible.

“You know I forgive you,” he said. Connie reached over and squeezed my shoulder, the one I had hurt in the accident but had wrapped up on game days before earning the 53rd and final roster spot. “God always forgive, dog,” Connie said of that September day a few weeks after he lost his wife and child. “He always forgive.” He squeezed harder on my shoulder, pinching the muscles together. “If we gonna heal,” he said, “we’re gonna need each other.”

For a couple of days, Connie and I had become something of a media freak show. When the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* got the story that the passenger in my car had not only died but had also been the wife of Connie Davis, a minor media frenzy broke out. The public relations department did its best to keep the reporters away from us, but on that Monday night I pulled up to Connie’s house to find two television trucks parked outside.

September 11 happened the next day, and our tragedy became forgotten – literally, overnight. Why Connie and I were able to maintain our friendship was somewhat of a mystery to me, but the best way to understand it was in remembering that Keena was the most forgiving woman I’d ever known. She would have wanted Connie to forgive me -- he and I both knew that, although we never spoke of it. I also knew that Connie didn’t trust very many people in this world; he never had. For whatever reason, I was one of the few people in his inner circle, and just having me around must have provided some comfort.

We never really talked about the accident in those first few weeks. Connie had photographs of Keena all over his Eastside home, but he rarely said her name. I knew he had not forgotten her, but it was probably easier just to push forward and think about other things.

Connie was near the end of his knee rehabilitation, and we pushed each other in the weight room and often ran sprints after practice. I got to do my thing on special teams every Sunday, while he watched from the sideline and waited to be cleared by doctors. The first month of the season was played under the dark cloud of September 11, but the games went on. Football was part of our nation’s healing process, a way to tell the bad guys that they hadn’t beaten us.

Connie cried often in between workouts, but whenever I tried to get him to open up, all he’d do was fetch his Bible and continue reading scripture aloud. His grief just didn’t have words, not ones he could find.

I had my own challenges, like when I’d be sitting in a team meeting and suddenly, without warning, my mind would begin moving – that’s what it felt like – sliding down into something of a daydream: the crushed car, the broken bones, Keena’s dead face, her eyes open, blood gushing from her mouth. In these moments, my body would lose its grip, and I’d feel myself slipping away. On more than one occasion, one of my teammates would grab my arm, saying: “You all right, dude?” I always seemed to come out of it, but the fear inside of me got worse with each passing day.

Did I have time to slam on the brakes?

Should I have heard the car coming?

Could I have saved Keena? Was she lying against me, dying – *dying* – while I was passed out and useless?

Inside the team’s workout facility in late September, while Connie continued to work his way back from knee surgery and I got my body ready for another game, he was lifting on the bench press when I noticed his eyes fill up with tears. I stood over him, helping Connie get the bar back on the rack, then he took in a deep breath and struggled to get to his feet. He wobbled and fell into my arms. He wept on my shoulder, and I couldn’t help thinking that if it hadn’t been for me, the love of his life would still be alive.

“The Lord never gives us more than we can handle,” he said through the tears. “The Lord must know I can bear this weight. But it’s heavy, Ross.” He sucked in a deep, withering breath. “It’s heavy, Dog,” he whispered.

An hour later, we were at a tattoo parlor in Renton. The names Keena and Calvin were inked in cursive along his wounded heart. His coiffed hair had gone scraggly, and his clean-shaven face had grown a wisp of a chin beard. His eyes were saddled with bags of skin. Only his taut muscles remained from the Connie Davis I once knew.

The young Connie, his face on the bookmark photo, was long gone. The bookmark bounced around the pages of his Bible with each passing day, providing a pretty good indication of how he was spending his free time. The Bible provided comfort from the suffering, but I knew Connie well enough to understand that the only kind of therapy that would keep him going would be a return to the football field.

Four games into the 2001 season, the Seahawks were staring at a 2-2 record, and a home date with the hated Rams followed a bye week. My bum shoulder had been flaring up, but I dared not tell anyone for fear of losing playing time. Connie had undoubtedly felt the same way about his concussions earlier in his career; the less he said about them, the better the chance that he’d stay on the field.

He was back at the practice field the Thursday before the Rams game, practicing but not yet eligible to play. The knee looked great, and Connie’s speed was back as he ran around with the scout team, shaking the rust off. The team had placed him on the physically-unable-to-perform list before training camp, meaning he was eligible to return for Week 6; if he wasn’t healthy enough to return by then, the team would have to place Connie on the season-ending Injured Reserve.

Watching Connie run around at practice, I was reminded of what an incredible athlete he was. He had the things you can’t coach: speed, will, desire, work ethic, passion for the game. The only thing he ever loved more than football was Keena. And when he was out on the practice field, his mind filled with alignment shifts and gap assignments, he seemed complete again – if only for those two hours.

I couldn’t wait to get him back out there on Sundays. Maybe the final thing we needed to secure our friendship was to play together again. As much as he talked about forgiveness, and despite his willingness to let me back into his life, Connie was still holding back. He was more guarded. I’d been responsible for the death of the thing he loved the most; maybe full forgiveness was never truly possible. But I truly believed that our friendship could continue to grow, especially once he got back on the field with me.

“You comin’ over tonight?” he asked, standing in the locker room of the Seahawks’ practice facility. He was shirtless, the names KEENA and CALVIN staring back at me, silently punishing me with guilt. “Read some scripture?”

“Sure,” I said. Three hours later, we were sitting in his living room.

He closed his Bible, marking the page with his childhood photograph, the picture of a face that could have been Calvin’s.

“Listen, man,” he said, “there’s something I gotta know. I don’t want to know, but I *got* to. You understand what I’m saying?”

I could feel a swallow building in my dry throat. I nodded slowly. Connie stood up from his chair and sat on the wood-framed coffee table between us. Our knees were touching as he looked into my eyes. His were bloodshot, filled with pain. There was a crease across his forehead that I didn’t remember being there when Keena was alive.

“Was she happy?” he asked. He licked his lips, which were dry and chapped. “I mean, right at the end. Before … you know.” His eyes did not leave mine. They bore a hole through me. “Just tell me she was happy, man,” he said. “That’s all. Just …” He looked away and began sobbing. I’d never known that a man could carry that many tears.

I patted his leg.

“She was never happier,” I said. “That’s why …” I paused, unsure of what I was about to say.

Looking down at the floor, Connie said: “Tell me how it happened. Start from the beginning. Don’t leave anything out.” He shook his head back and forth, his damp eyes still trained on the floor. “I’m ready now,” he said softly, as if speaking to himself. “I need you to say it. I need to hear it.” He lifted his head, and his bloodshot eyes looked into mine. “Tell me how she died.”

I swallowed hard and began from the time we left Cheney. I told him how we’d been talking about Connie’s rehab and the baby – I didn’t mention the part about her motherly intuition telling her that “Calvin” was going to be a girl. I told him about the rain, how it seemed to come out of nowhere. I told him how I pulled off the highway, into downtown Spokane, and turned to look at Keena. Who knows how long I’d looked away? A tenth-of-a-second? A full second? Two seconds? The light was yellow when I turned back toward the road. Had it just turned yellow? Was it about to turn red? I didn’t know. I just knew that I didn’t have time to –

“Stop,” Connie said, holding up his hand. “Stop there.” He stood up and paced around the room, rubbing his meaty hands together as if he was cold. “You ran a red light?”

“Yellow,” I said. My mouth was dry. He was pacing back and forth, like a lawyer. Or a predator, waiting to strike. “It was yellow,” I said. “Connie, I would *never* –“

“You never saw the car comin’.”

“I just …” The words were getting stuck in my throat. I was beginning to get nervous, was staring to think maybe Connie was about to unload on me. I was the wedge; he was the wedge-breaker. It was long overdue. “Look,” I said. He stopped pacing and stood in front of me. “I don’t know what to …,” I said. “I just … I wish I could make it better.” I stood up, and he turned away.

Connie stood with his back to me, his eyes starting up at a large photograph of Keena on the wall. Her cheekbones were perfect, her skin the color of molasses.

“I told you,” he said, without looking back. “You’re forgiven.”

He didn’t say anything else, and I took that as my cue to leave his home.

###

The Seahawks flew into the bye week on a high note, having hammered the St. Louis Rams 31-13 to move into a first-place tie atop the NFC West. I hadn’t done anything spectacular but didn’t miss any assignments either and felt like I’d contributed to the win by playing mistake-free football and by doing all the little things that don’t show up on a stat sheet.

Connie watched it all from the sidelines, his arms folded and his face as stoic as I’d ever seen it. Our conversation a few days earlier seemed to have set him back in the grieving process.

Coach Willis gave us a few days off after the win, and I spent the time nursing my sore shoulder and other minor injuries that had creeped up over the first six games of the season. By Thursday afternoon, we were back on the practice field, working on a few problem areas while preparing for our next game, which was still 10 days away. Connie was back to running with the second-team defense and getting some reps on special teams, so it was looking more and more like he was set to return from the knee injury. I kept my fingers crossed, knowing he needed the distraction. He needed one part of his life to get back to normal.

We’d said very little to each other since the night I described the accident to him, but I felt like just getting back out on the football game for a real game might help meld the bond we once had. There’s nothing like competition to bring guys together; if nothing else, it gave us something to talk about, an icebreaker.

One of the defensive captains hosted as Sunday viewing party on his big-screen TV, upon which we watched the Dallas Cowboys take on our next opponent: the Giants. New York had one of the best return units in football, and I knew while watching the game that we’d have our work cut out for us. Rookie punt returner Otis McGavin already had two return touchdowns on the season and nearly broke a third in the first half of the Dallas game. The Giants’ kickoff returns put the offense out past the 35-yard line on three consecutive kickoffs. More than a dozen of us were gathered around the living room watching the game; Connie was among those not in attendance.

Just before halftime, I got a call on my cell phone from team headquarters. Dave Witmer, the director of football operations, told me I needed to come in for a quick meeting. I immediately thought something had happened to Connie.

I assumed the worst. He’d been so quiet over the past week-and-a-half, and all those tears that he’d shed so freely now seemed to be bottled up inside of him. Was it possible that he’d finally snapped? That the weight of losing his entire family in a flash had finally led him to do something drastic?

I drove like a bat out of hell, ignoring the fear of driving that I’d developed since the accident. I weaved in and out of traffic and even blasted through a yellow light, my body tensing up as I closed my eyes and hit the gas. Maybe Connie was only on the verge of hurting himself; maybe I was the only one who could save him.

But when Bill met me at the front door of the facility, he seemed in no hurry. His massive chest was tucked inward, and he was wiping his palms together slowly. He gave me a sympathetic look and led me down a hallway, into Coach Willis’s office.

Todd Willis was a no-nonsense guy, at 39 the youngest head coach in football. He’d been brought in to put his own stamp on the team and did just that by letting go of popular veterans like Walter Watts and two starting offensive linemen – including Doug Rohlenbach, the massive hick who’d called me “Meat” on the way to that first training camp.

Dave Witmer left the room and closed the door behind him.

“We’re letting you go,” Coach Willis said abruptly. The words hit my like a slap across the face. “As you know, Davis is healthy now, and we’ll be taking him off the PUP list tomorrow, so we’ve got to clear a spot.” His hands were folded. He looked me directly in the eye. “It’s business, you know,” he added.

I fought to maintain eye contact but felt a sickening heat rising up inside of me.

“You’re cutting me?” I managed to say through my fog of confusion.

“You were officially placed on waivers fifteen minutes ago,” he said. “I’m sure, with your tenacity and what you’ve shown on film, that someone’s gonna pick you up. You’re a hell of a special teams player. Guys like you don’t grow on trees.”

“Connie’s taking my spot?”

“Listen, Ross. It’s never easy. It never is. I got cut six times. Wanted to quit every time, but I never did. I kept at it, and never once did I regret what became of my career.” He leaned forward, across his desk, his hands still folded. “Every cut,” he said, “just makes for more battle scars.”

I wasn’t totally sure what he meant by that, but I could tell by the way Willis stole a quick glance at his watch that he was done with me.

A week later, while sitting at home alone, I watched Connie Davis take the field for the opening kickoff and I felt sick to my stomach. I was so proud of him for making it back out there, but I wanted to be running down the field alongside him, waiting for Connie to throw his body into a couple of blockers so that I’d have a clear path at the guy with the ball. We were a team, Connie and me, we always had been. But now he was moving on, and I was stuck on the outside looking in.

My agent had called every team in the league, but I’d run out of practice-squad eligibility and didn’t seem to be of any use to anyone in the NFL. Connie hadn’t called since I’d been cut, not one time, and I couldn’t help thinking about the day a couple of years earlier when he’d shown up at my apartment on his way to the airport, just to tell me he was going to miss me out there. This time, there was no such visit.

The only correspondence I got from Connie came the day after the Giants game – a 16-13 Seattle victory on a last-second field goal – when a package arrived on my doorstep. I opened it to find a Connie’s Bible, with his childhood photograph marking the page of Micah 7:18.

*Do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy.*

Inside the back cover, Connie wrote a short note:

“Paws:

I hope this isn’t the end for you – as a football player, or as my friend – but for now we’ve got to move on. Forgiveness is not forgetting, and as much as I wish we were still playing alongside each other, I truly believe this is one of those times when it’s God’s way to give me a sign. There’s too much pain in my heart when I look into your eyes – the very eyes that saw my precious Keena alive for the final time. This isn’t to say that it’s your fault, brother. It’s just to say that I need space. To heal. To run free. To love myself again.

And to figure out how to love mankind again.

May Keena always be in both of our hearts,

C.

P.S. Never stop loving yourself, brother.”

I had read that letter dozens of times over the months and years that followed. I would watch Connie Davis on television and hold the letter in my lap, cheering for him as if he were my own son. I watched as he worked his way into the starting lineup and helped lead the Seahawks to their first division title in 17 years. The image of him running, helmetless, along the sidelines after the clinching win, while waving an American flag with one hand and slapping fives with fans with the other, never left me.

I read how he signed a four-year deal with the team for $11 million a few weeks later, only to get cut two years into the deal because of salary-cap constraints; a younger, cheaper, healthier version of Connie Davis had come along in the 2004 draft. When the Chargers signed Connie to a one-year deal, I got NFL Ticket and watched every one of San Diego’s games. I watched as, in Connie’s second year there, the Chargers came one win shy of the Super Bowl, when they won the AFC West title a year later.

Connie Davis ended up playing eight years in the NFL. I watched almost every one of his games. I pumped my fist when he made a big hit, imagined myself making eye contact with him before every kickoff. Then his career ended, and he disappeared. I couldn’t find him. I watched fewer and fewer games. I stopped loving football, or even liking it. I mourned the game. I mourned our friendship. I mourned Keena.

Then I mourned my father. I moved back to Minnesota and re-connected with my family, with the only family I’d ever have.

But I never cried.

CHAPTER 25

He was just the way he’d been when I visited four days earlier. Sitting in a wheelchair. Slumped over. The top of his salt-and-pepper hair, and the bald spots within, visible as I opened the door. Connie Davis looked like a man twice his age.

“Who’s there?” he said loudly, angrily. He tried to lift his head but couldn’t. His hands were crumpled and shaking.

Holding a book in my left hand, I stepped forward and knelt down between his feet.

“It’s me,” I said softly. His dark, beady eyes fell upon my face. The crease across his forehead had swollen over the years.

“Who the hell are you?” he asked indignantly.

“It’s Ross, Connie. Ross Pawlawsky.”

He took in my name, started at my face, then his emotionless eyes fell back toward the floor.

“Never seen you before in all my life,” he said dismissively.

“Connie,” I said. He looked up at me with bullets for eyes.

“How you know my name, fool?” he barked.

“Keena,” I said, and the word hit him like a splash of cold water. “I’m a friend of Keena’s. She sent me.” I felt my hands shaking. My skin was warm. Lying to Connie brought me back to a bad place, to all those years ago when I hadn’t had the nerve to tell him the truth about the accident.

“You know Keena?” he said, his eyes large and filled with wonder. They were the eyes of a child. “Where is she?” he asked.

“She’s … away,” I said. I swallowed hard, trying to find the words. I never was much good at lying. “She sent me,” I said.

“Keena did?” His mouth fell open. “Is she …?” He tried to get up from his wheelchair. I reached out and gently touched his shoulders, telling him to sit back down.

“Easy,” I said soothingly. “She’s not here. Not right now. But she’s coming.” I could feel something inside of me screaming, something that I refused to acknowledge.

“Keena?” he said again. He leaned back in his wheelchair and looked around the room, as if he was seeing the surroundings for the first time. The bookshelf was just the way it had been; not even the new Bible had been moved. The walls were bare. A desk rested against the wall, unused. His bed sheets were pulled up, creased so perfectly that I knew right away Connie had helped someone do it. His eyes found mine again, and I hoped he couldn’t see the lies in my face. He held my gaze. I wanted to look away. Then his head dropped. “Where is that woman, anyway?” he asked. “Been looking for her all morning.” I chuckled inside, knowing full well that Keena – the *real* Keena – never would have stood for Connie calling her “that woman.”

I often wondered if maybe he’d had a hand in putting himself in this state, if the only way to cope with Keena’s death was to find a place where he could always be near her. But then I’d read all the reports on concussions and all those young men – elderly, by the standards of the game – who had lost their capacities, and then I realized that this was not Connie’s making, it wasn’t God’s making, it was the making of the game.

He wheeled his chair over to the window and pulled back the shade.

“She’s been good to me, that woman,” he said. “We’ve been married – what? Twenty years now? Thirty?” He turned his head just a bit in my direction. His jaw clenched, but his eyes were smiling. “We got a boy, you know,” he said. “Calvin.”

“I know.”

“He’s … Aw, hell, I lose track of time,” The sound of his voice changed when he spoke of his family; Connie sounded ten years younger than he had a few minutes earlier.

“He’s eleven,” I said. “Eleven years old.”

“That’s right,” Connie said. “Eleven.”

I stood up and took a step toward him. He spun his wheelchair around, away from the window, and looked up at me with distrustful eyes. I took the book in my hand and held it out for him. It was the Bible he’d given me all those years ago.

“Keena wanted you to have this,” I said. He looked at the book strangely, as if I were offering him a piece of stale fruit. His shaking hand reached out slowly, cautiously, and with two fingers he plucked the bookmark from between the pages. He held it up, staring at the image of his own face, thirty years younger.

“Who is-?”

“That’s Calvin,” I said, feigning confidence. He looked up at me, then back down at his own, younger face.

“Of course.” He stared at the photograph, his eyes filling with pride. “You see here, he’s a football player, you know.” I nodded, but he wasn’t looking at me anymore. “Hell of a player. Like his Daddy.” The photograph trembled between his fingers as he tried to lift his head, to look up at me. I knelt down again. “You know,” he said, “I used to play some ball myself.”

“I’ve heard.”

He took the Bible from my hand, flipped through the pages, then closed it.

“My eyes aren’t what they used to be,” he said, his head hanging down. He held the worn Bible on his lap.

I patted the book. “Would you like it if I read to you?” I asked. “I think Keena would like that.”

“Keena?” he said angrily, then his face relaxed again. “Oh, yeah,” he said. “Where did you say she was?”

“She’s away,” I said. “For now. You are not alone.” I offered a smile and patted the book again. “Shall we read?” I said softly. “Then maybe you could tell me a little bit more about your family.”

Handing me the Bible, Connie said: “I’d like that.”

CHAPTER 26

A large pickup truck pulled up alongside me as I wiped tears from my eyes. I lifted my head from the dashboard and looked over to see a blond girl, with beautiful eyes, looking back at me.

“Are you lost?” she said. I wondered if she could see the red around my eyes, if she could tell that I’d been crying. The idea of a twenty-year-old girl seeing my cry mortified me.

“No,” I said. “Not anymore.” I wiped my aging face. “Just taking a break,” I said. “I’m, y’know, tired.”

She smiled, an unbelievably radiant smile that curved up like a hook and somehow made me think of Keena Davis.

“Yeah,” she said. “Cheney takes a totally *long* time to get to, right? Like, no matter where you’re coming from.”

I nodded.

“Unless you’re looking for hell,” she added with a curve of her lip and a shrug of her shoulder. “That’s the only place within walking distance. Right?”

If she was asking a question, she didn’t wait for an answer. She pressed a button that closed the passenger-side window, then she drove off, leaving behind a cloud of dust.

I pulled up to the stop sign and looked out at the road that went to the south, off toward the Eastern Washington University campus. I waited and watched her go. I wondered what her life was like, what it would be like. She was so young, so untainted, the world out in front of her and there for the taking. She was young enough to run full-steam at life, her path clear, unaware of the danger that lurked.

I checked traffic in both directions, rolled through the stop sign, and got back onto the highway, headed toward Spokane.

###

The girl had been wrong. It only took twenty minutes to get to Spokane, if that’s the kind of place that you can count as anyplace at all.

The highway seemed dreamlike in the middle of a summer day. The déjà vu was impossible to ignore. I found myself glancing at the passenger’s seat on more than one occasion, ready to say something as if someone was sitting there beside me. Twenty years had passed since I’d seen Keena take her last breath. I’d thought of her less and less as the years passed, but her face was upon me in a rush as I saw the sign for Spokane and slowed to take the exit ramp into the downtown core.

I hadn’t taken a drink in years and had sworn off the snuff, and the Copenhagen tin in my back pocket felt strange as I took a left and looked out at the blue sky above the buildings in front of me. I could see the traffic light in the distance, glaring red as if in warning. I could feel my body shaking. Every breath felt forced. I could hear each swallow.

The light turned green, and I slowed the car down. I came to a stop and put the car in park. A car behind me laid on his horn. I opened the door and got out, giving him a quick glance of apology. I reached into my back pocket and pulled out the tobacco tin. I’d spent an hour cleaning it out earlier that morning. Replacing the tobacco leaves with ashes.

I walked out into the middle of the intersection. The traffic stopped around me. Another car horn. Someone rolling down his window to call me a motherfucker. Someone asking if I was crazy.

A slight breeze picked up – or maybe I just hadn’t previously noticed it – as I opened the Copenhagen tin. I turned it over and let the ashes float out into the wind. The sun beamed down on me. The blaring car horns faded into silence.

When I got back on the highway and started westward toward Seattle, a gray cloud blanketed the sky and began dropping drops of rain.

NEW ENDING:

ROSS ENDS UP TAKING THEIR ASHES TO THE PRACTICE FIELD AT EWU, HOLDING THEM IN A BAGGIE NOT MUCH DIFFERENT FROM THE ONES HE USED TO CARRY AROUND CRUSHED PAINKILLERS

I could feel the warm breeze as a cloud passed overhead, creating a shadow on the green grass of the practice field that was in front of me. I stared out past the field, out at the stalks of wheat behind it. The flatness expands in front of me, rolling out toward the eastern edge of the state, but all I can see is the horizon. I know Spokane is out there, with its eight-story buildings that pass for skyscrapers, and beyond that the hills of Montana and my hometown of Minneapolis and the Great Lakes and the New York City skyline and the Atlantic and Europe – places I know exist but cannot see. All that I see is right in front of me: wheat surrounding an abandoned football field.

“Hey, there,” a voice says from behind me. I turn to find a man in a red, mesh baseball cap with the logo of an eagle just above the bill. I must have jumped, because he quickly added: “Didn’t mean to startle you.”

“Just didn’t see you coming,” I said.

The man, who looked to be a few years older than me, put out his hand and smiled with his eyes.

“Coach Pflajel,” the man said, and we shook hands. His grip was firm, like that of a man twenty years younger. “I didn’t get your name.”

“Just an old football player,” I said. Our interlocked hands came apart.

“Ain’t we all,” he offered. His hands went to his hips as he seemed to size me up. “You play here at Eastern? My d-coordinator, Dyson, he’s been an Eagle since –“

“Nah. Just some memories from time I spent here,” I said.

He nodded his head and folded his arms across his chest. He looked to be in pretty good shape for a man his age.

“You kid play here?” he asked, and the friendly look in his eye passed, as if he was ready to begin an interrogation.

“No kids,” I said. “Not sure I’d let ‘em play football if I did. Game does some funny stuff to you.”

“Maybe so,” Pflajel said. “Saved my life, though. Don’t know where I’d be without it.” I could see something in his eyes, something like memories flashing through his mind. I remembered something a coach told me back in the day, that he never once closed his eyes and dreamt about standing on the sideline with a headset – only about actually playing in a game. He unfolded his arms, and I saw his name across the heart of his collared shirt. PFLAJEL, spelled differently than it sounded. A name I’d seen before.

“Pflajel,” I said out loud, mostly to myself. “You didn’t know a Peter Pflajel, did you?”

He smiled for the first time. “That’s me,” he said.

“Played quarterback at Wisconsin?”

“Guilty. Not many people remember that.” I looked at his face, at the lines around his eyes and the sagging skin. The guy was actually about my age, though I still saw myself as much younger. “You play in the Big Ten or something?”

“Sort of. Played at Northwestern. Not sure if that counts.” He laughed at this. “Name’s Pawlawsky,” I said.

“Ross Pawlawsky,” Peter Pflajel said.

“Heard of me?”

“Linebacker. Number forty-nine. Hit like a Mack truck. No one ever clocked me as hard as you did in that ’96 game in Madison.”

“You guys beat us bad that day.”

“Thirty-eight to six. I remember. Our tailback, Bruce Kissington, ran for two-sixty that day. But you came in on a delayed blitz, third and nine in the second quarter, and blindsided me. Hit me so hard I swear every one of my teeth came loose. That’s what it felt like.”

“Holy shit,” I said. “I don’t even remember that.”

“I’d never forget it. Knocked me so silly I couldn’t remember the playbook until after halftime. Spent most of the second quarter calling, ‘Run left,’ or, ‘Run right.’ Anything but a pass play. I was scared shitless.” He laughed again. “Doesn’t surprise me you don’t remember, though,” he added. “You defensive guys, you get to do all the hitting, so it doesn’t mean as much to you. Those of us who took all the abuse, we never forget it.”

He clapped me on the shoulder, like we were old friends. I felt closer to him at that moment than I’d felt to anyone in a long time.

“You’ve got quite a memory,” I said.

He smiled, and that look of nostalgia returned to his eyes. “Best years of my life,” he said. “Just wish I could’ve kept going. Didn’t have the arm or the size to make it in the League, so that senior year was the peak of my career. A year I’d never give back.” His hands went back to his hips. He stood before me like a drill sergeant. “You know, six of the guys from that team got drafted. Kissington went to Jacksonville in the second round but never really amounted to much. A couple of other guys lasted two, maybe three years.”

I thought about telling him that I’d made it four years, almost five. But that was the old me, and there was no way to talk about it without sounding like one of those glory-years guys.

“Yeah, well,” I said, “if it was easy, it wouldn’t be the Not For Long league.”

He laughed at that, then looked at his watch. Behind him, I could see a few players carrying helmets start to file out of a large building. Practice was about to begin.

“Listen, I know you’re busy,” I said apologetically.

He clapped me on the shoulder again.

“Nice seeing you again,” he said. “I like it better when I see you coming.”

We shook hands and he offered one last smile before a wave of players ran up behind him and caught us in a wave of red-and-white.