

GUT CHECK

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For Leigh and Alden

CHAPTER **ONE**

I guess I'll start with how my parents came *this close* to naming me Thor. Seriously. And you know what? As ridiculous as the name sounds, I kind of wish it was mine. Thor is a beefy name and it would've fit me well since I'm a pretty beefy dude. Like, as a Thor, I'd proudly lumber down the hall and cute girls would stop and think, *There goes 260 pounds of twisted steel and sex appeal*, rather than what they think now, which is probably more like, *There goes 260 pounds of cheese cubes and man boobs*. I'm sure girls would still laugh when I accidentally broke a pencil in my big clumsy paws, but it would be a flirty laugh, like a giggle, and they'd say, "Oh, Thor, your giant hands are so strong . . ." and I'd reply, "Well, you know what they say about guys with big hands . . ." and they'd grin and be like, "What *do* they say about guys with big hands?" and I'd be like, "Greater risk for cancer" or something equally stupid because I'm so awkward around girls I blow it even in my fantasies.

Thor, God of Thunder. Has a gritty ring to it, right? Much better than my actual name, which is just Wyatt. Apparently

it was a compromise between my parents, back when they actually agreed on stuff. My dad wanted me to have a tough-sounding name like most of the men who live here in Grayport. Practically every guy in my town is called Hunter or Gunner or Archer, like they were named after what job they'd have if we were surviving in a postapocalyptic shantytown. Frankly, Grayport isn't far from that. A postapocalyptic shantytown, I mean. Our local economy went to crap eight years ago, and half the stores in town are still boarded up. Our beaches, if you want to call them that, aren't filled with people, but are littered with debris brought in from the storms that constantly rock our coast. Hell, even our high school football stadium, the jewel of the town, is falling apart. The whole thing is made from lumber we've recycled from shipwrecks, and our long row of state championship flags fly atop poles that are actually old ship masts.

Grayport doesn't have much to be proud of besides our football team and our general aura of blue-collar toughness, so it's no surprise that my dad proudly claims that I'm named after Wyatt Earp. He was this legendary Old West gunslinger with a "don't F with me" attitude and an absolutely savage mustache (google the guy—he had so much testosterone I'm pretty sure even his mustache had a mustache). But my mom says I'm really named for her uncle Wyatt, who, if legends of *his* greatness are to be believed, was an assistant librarian with a moderate case of asthma. I'll let you figure out which Wyatt I take after.

But I also have another name—a secret identity, if you will:

Poncho Pete. Only three other people know about it, and frankly that's three people too many. It wasn't exactly a privilege being Poncho Pete, so I'm relieved that so few people know I'm the loser hiding beneath that claustrophobic mascot costume. One person who knows is my best friend, Nate, a fellow freshman and my coworker. Nate helps me sell rain ponchos at our little wooden booth underneath the stands of Grayport High's football stadium. Since most everyone in Grayport already has a rain jacket to protect against the constant storms, our poncho sales were lagging big-time, so our boss, Mr. Cliff, created Poncho Pete, a giant caricature of a fisherman whose nose comprised like 75 percent of his face. For some reason Poncho Pete wore a cape. It was a poncho.

The third person who knows my secret identity is Dad, who made me take the job in the first place. My dad is *not* a guy you argue with, but I complained pretty hard since this job meant I'd be working during our home football games, and in Grayport you're a nobody if you aren't out there cheering on our boys to another state title. Plus there was the humiliation of being a mascot—what if somebody from school recognized me through the eyeholes cut into Poncho Pete's nostrils?

This argument seemed to really piss off my dad. A few days before the football season we were eating breakfast and I brought up the humiliation thing. He just sat in silence, stirring his whiskey and coffee. After a while he mumbled the word *humiliation* to himself, real bitter-like, and stormed off to his fishing boat in the harbor. I was still salty about the situation

later that day when our landlord stopped by our apartment and handed me a letter addressed to my dad. I couldn't see much when I held the envelope up to a light, but I did make out a faint *final warning on late payments*.

I put the letter on Dad's dresser and then called old Mr. Cliff to say, *You got yourself a Poncho Pete*.

"You feel that, Wyatt?" Mr. Cliff held out a wrinkled palm and caught a raindrop that seeped through a crack in the wooden bleachers above us.

"I can't feel anything in here, Mr. Cliff," I shouted from the muted depths of my oversized fisherman head. It was actually the most comfortable part of my costume, since my bright yellow rain slacks were two sizes too small.

Nate sat coiled on a stool behind our booth, an empty cash box in his lap. He was pouting because I'd convinced him to be our cashier. A second raindrop plopped on his nest of curly blond hair, and he pulled up the hood of his complimentary poncho.

The rain must've been coming down hard. It was the opening night of football season—fourth quarter against our biggest rival, Blakemore High—and the electric excitement in the air seemed to have coalesced into an actual storm.

I tilted my head back so I could inspect the bleachers above through the eyeholes in Poncho's nostrils. Suddenly, as if responding to the mystical power of Poncho's giant schnoz, the

bleachers began to shake. Raindrops shook loose from the wooden boards and sprinkled down on us, and the long row of glowing lanterns began to sway from their creaking ropes, throwing creepy shadows across our stadium's makeshift concourse. The rumble quickly crescendoed into a quake of cheering and clapping and foot stomping. You could literally feel the wooden boards of our shabby stadium rattling like a leaky ship in a storm.

Grayport touchdown. Must've been.

The dank underbelly of Grayport Stadium was suddenly abuzz with activity as dozens of vendors scrambled for their AM radios. Behind each booth a blur of hands frantically contorted antennas and twisted volume knobs to better hear Bobby Tingle deliver the play-by-play from the world above. Cliff, Nate, and I huddled around our radio, and I held my breath to better hear Tingle's call through my fisherman head.

“. . . and Grayport retakes the lead on Brett Parker's thirty-three-yard QB keeper!”

Tingle's voice always trumpeted with pride, despite his moderate but passionate listenership. Since practically the entire town was packed into the twenty-thousand-seat stadium, the only radio listeners were us stadium vendors, the parking attendants outside, the lighthouse operator by the bay, and all those Grayport fishermen enduring another dark, wet night on boats bobbing somewhere in the Atlantic.

“I'll tell you what, folks: We just got our answer to whether the much-feared Blakemore linebacker, Derek Leopold, would be able to

bottle up Brett Parker. The league's reigning MVP just juked Leopold outta his socks on his way to his second score of the game. Parker's sensational play has really got this place jumping . . . and on cue, here comes the rain, thick and heavy!"

Mr. Cliff clapped his hands together. "Alright, boys, man your positions! Wyatt, this is your moment. Just like we rehearsed."

Mr. Cliff proudly referred to the rain dance as *Poncho Pete's Blood Rite of the Merciless Monsoon*, but really it was just me swaying awkwardly while Nate tooted out "Mary Had a Little Lamb" on his recorder. I reluctantly stepped in front of our booth and began hopping around with my arms extended like an airplane. I always *hated* dancing in any setting. When people looked at a guy my size dancing, they didn't see coordination or confidence or even comedy. They saw jiggles.

As I danced, the guys working the Italian sausage stand next to us shook their heads and smirked before averting their eyes when the secondhand embarrassment got too strong.

Other than that, thank god, I didn't have an audience.

It really wasn't a surprise. Other vendors (like the guys selling food, game programs, Grayport football shirts, etc.) rake in tons of cash on game nights. Nate's right when he says that Grayport football is the life vest that keeps the town from drowning. But the poncho business was a real struggle-fest. It rains in Grayport like every freaking day, so you'd be certifiable if you didn't already own a waterproof outfit. Besides, there was *no way* anyone was going to leave their seat right now. This was

what Grayport lived for: fourth quarter of a tight game against Blakemore, our hated rivals who couldn't handle the sloppy, difficult conditions that our team and fans thrived in. This was our home-field advantage—and the only advantage, it seemed, to calling Grayport home.

But man was it a big advantage on Friday nights. It was like our pride in enduring storms gave us this magic ability to see through the thick coastal mist as Brett—*our* Brett, from just over there on 528 Pine Street—threaded passes that somehow got better the worse it rained.

Midway through the fourth quarter the rain was pounding the bleachers so hard that we could barely hear Bobby Tingle on the radio. Blakemore was now beating us by five, and the mood among the vendors took on the same gloominess of our cavelike concourse. I took off my Poncho Pete head, confident that nobody I knew would come down and discover my secret identity. A few drenched scouts from USC (there to watch Brett, no doubt) slogged over to us, but otherwise it was quiet.

That is, until a pack of six girls materialized through the fog into the concourse. The sausage guys stopped flipping their meat so they could concentrate all their energy on the girls. Each was rocking a matching pink sports bra, and on their skinny tan stomachs were the letters *B-R-E-T-T* spelled out in red paint. They were dripping wet, and coming right toward us.

I noticed that one of the girls in the pack wasn't matching her friends. She sported a crop top Grayport High T-shirt, which to me seemed braver, and in a way hotter, than if she was

matching her friends. I felt a weird pull toward her, and as she glided forward through the dim orange glow of the lanterns, her aura sharpened into something real. Her brown hair was clumped in a wet tangle, and she had a cute perky nose like a little hill in a meadow of freckles. Actually, now that the girl was closer, she looked more and more like—

Oh shit.

I quickly grabbed Poncho Pete's head and slammed it back on.

"Nate," I hissed. "We've got a problem. Haley. She's coming."

"So . . . ?"

"So, the other day I might've kinda definitely told her that I'm on varsity football."

It wasn't a planned lie, I swear. It just slipped out. A harmless little fib that was about to bite me in the butt. See, Haley sat in front of me in biology, and I had what you might describe as a debilitating crush on her. Every day throughout class I'd wonder about this cute girl in front of me, wonder who she was wondering about, wonder if she even knew my name, and wonder if my wondering would eventually have some sort of telepathic effect on her feelings for me. I also sometimes wondered why I was getting such a shitty grade in biology.

Then, after two weeks of wondering if Haley's world existed only in front of her, she turned around at the end of class and smiled at me.

"Hey," she said. "Did Mr. Benson say the test was next Monday or Tuesday?"

I said, "Monday for sure," which was a guess, and Haley smiled again and said thanks. Then, as she tossed her notebook into her bag, she asked if I was going to the game Friday. It was a simple yes-or-no question that vaporized my brain.

"Uh, well, yeah," I said. "'Cause I'm playing in it."

Nate listened to this news and looked at me like I had two heads, which I guess I technically did. "Why the hell did you tell her that?"

"Because I'm a complete moron."

But also because I *had* to know, if only for ten beautiful seconds, what it was like to be somebody different. To be respected, to be a guy who really *mattered*. Earlier that day I'd been cut from football tryouts, and even though I had known I had no shot and had been preparing myself for the bad news, I was really disappointed. Or more accurately, I was disappointed with how disappointed I felt, how much I desperately wanted to play. As I scanned the list that Coach posted outside the locker room, every name I read had been a new opportunity to see "Wyatt Parker," a new chance for my life to change. But in the end, each name had been just another mini disappointment until finally I reached the end of the list and was left looking at nothing. Just emptiness.

So when later that day Haley turned to me and hesitated a second because she clearly didn't know my name, it felt like some vague structure inside me, tall but flimsy, had toppled over. Buried in that rubble, I felt a sharp desperation and reached for anything that could pull me out, let me breathe.

So I looked at Haley and pretended that I had reached my goal, that I had made the team, and that on Friday I would finally be wearing a Grayport jersey with my number stamped front and back. A jersey that, once you put it on, transformed you from just another fat kid into a varsity lineman.

When the girls reached our booth, Mr. Cliff was bursting with excitement to finally have some customers. "Hey, Poncho Pete," he called to me. "Quit hiding back there and show these nice ladies how you called down the rain."

I was making a "please don't do this to me" face from underneath my mascot head. I was determined to stay in the shadows behind the booth.

Mr. Cliff frowned. "Come on, Poncho! Nate, start the tune!"

I slunk into position in front of the booth. Through Poncho Pete's nostrils I could see Madison Wheatley, Mia Torres, Dakota Babson, and Samantha Betts standing in a semicircle of terrifying poses, their arms folded across their pink sports bras as they traded obvious whispers and snickers. Haley was standing to the side, but her gaze was leveled right on me. I felt epically lame. Like, by comparison Nate looked totally badass next to me, and he was holding a recorder.

Nate brought the instrument to his lips, and I instinctively sucked in my stomach, as if that could actually squelch the unstoppable jiggle effect. I extended my arms into my pathetic airplane pose.

"You know, it's really okay," Haley suddenly interjected, her

voice warm yet firm. "I'm sure Poncho is pretty exhausted from all this rain."

The other girls grumbled small complaints—*oh, come on, it'll be funny!*—but Haley just smiled and pulled a ten-dollar bill from her jeans pocket. Mr. Cliff shrugged and began stacking ponchos on the booth's counter.

Relief rushed through me, followed by a blast of gratitude. Haley, I realized, was one of those rare people who just get it, someone who can read social cues the same way Brett can read defenses and know exactly where to throw the ball. Then it struck me that maybe the other day Haley had known *exactly* when the biology test was, that maybe she just found a reason to brighten up the day of a kid who always trudged into the room, his shoulders a little slumped.

I grabbed the pile of ponchos to hand out to the girls. Then I had the terrible idea of saying something to them.

"So, are you guys, like, big Brett Parker fans or something?"

"Geez, what gave it away," snarked the girl with the *R* on her stomach. She snatched a poncho from me.

I handed one to Haley. Was I imagining things, or was she giving me an odd squint, like underneath my costume she could see the real me?

"Thanks," she said. "You're a lifesaver, Poncho. Really."

I was beaming under my mask. "Well, not all superheroes wear capes," I said, surprising myself with the clever line.

"But you *are* wearing a cape."

“Oh . . . right.” It was time to quit while I was only slightly behind. “Well, stay dry out there!”

I spun around and *BLAM*, slammed Poncho’s head directly into a lantern. I frantically reached up to grab the head as it tipped backward, but it was too late. It toppled to the ground with a crash.

I stood motionless, my back to Haley, trying to figure out a way to discreetly retrieve Poncho’s head. I could feel her staring a hole into my back. A silent freak-out exploded in my soul as I realized there was no way around this.

I winced, took a deep breath, and slowly turned around.

Then, just before I faced Haley, a violent burst of clanging rang out from the sausage booth. Everyone in the concourse, including Haley, turned to check out the commotion.

The sausage guys were wildly banging pans with their tongs. This was their celebration for big plays.

“. . . and Grayport is still alive!” shouted a fevered Bobby Tingle through the radio. *“An unbelievable fourth-and-ten conversion by Brett Parker has brought the offense to the Blakemore fifteen-yard line. The clock has ticked down to the two-minute warning, Grayport trailing by five. Buckle in, folks!”*

The pack of girls, the vendors, Nate, Mr. Cliff—everybody—rushed toward the ramp leading up to the field. In the commotion I discreetly plunked Poncho’s head back on.

At the mouth of the tunnel, one of Haley’s friends yelled at her to hurry up.

“Coming!” she shouted back. Then, in a quick movement

that I might've subconsciously wished into existence, Haley pulled off her T-shirt.

Painted on her stomach was a big red 7.

Brett's number.

Haley unfolded her see-through poncho and slipped it on, then rushed to join her friends, disappearing up the ramp without looking back.

"Hey, Poncho, you coming or what?" Mr. Cliff shouted at me as he joined the mass of bodies funneling into the ramp toward the field. "We need your magical powers out there!"

Stepping into the open air of our stadium is like diving head-first into the deep end of Grayport's soul. Perched delicately on a rocky bluff overlooking the ocean, the stadium pulses with a raw and invigorating danger. My favorite part is the sound of the waves crashing into the stone embankment and how you can hear the water crest then slam into rock with a steady *whhh-thunk whhh-thunk* that echoes through the stadium like our communal heartbeat, a reminder that we're still here, defiant and surviving despite it all.

At 6'2", I could easily see the field over the crowd of vendors huddled at the ramp opening, but I had to tilt my head back slightly to get a better viewing angle out of Poncho's nostrils. After two short runs and a quick slant pass that got stuffed for two yards, our offense was facing a fourth-and-one from the six-yard line. The crowd stood as one, but held a tense silence so

the offense could hear Brett's play call over the whipping rain and wind.

Brett broke the huddle and strode to the line of scrimmage. I always found that watching him play football was mesmerizing, inspiring, and depressing all at once. It was mesmerizing to see how confidence and athleticism radiated from every one of his movements; inspiring to know there are actually people out there like this; depressing to know that this would never be me.

Still, I liked to imagine what it was like to *be* Brett, what it's like if you're at center stage, not some sideshow in a costume. I wanted to be down there on the field as the salty mists rolled in from the shore and enveloped the stadium in a thick cloud that gives the bulbs on the old light towers their fuzzy orange glow, like little halos floating in the dark sky. I wanted to take that exhilarating walk up to the ball as the booming waves spoke on behalf of the entire hushed town, who you can't even see through the fog, but who you can just *feel* all around you, rooting for you, getting soaked with you, practically *bleeding* with you because this moment right here, fourth-and-one in the rickety fishing town of Grayport, is all we really have.

"Hut, HUT!"

The shotgun snap was low but Brett easily plucked the ball off his shoelaces. He tucked it and took off on a QB keeper, off-tackle right. By stacking the line on the left, Blakemore was daring us to take it right, directly at their all-league outside linebacker, Derek Leopold.

Leopold easily threw aside his blocker and met Brett with an electrifying collision about one yard behind the line of scrimmage. He had Brett wrapped up and was driving him back. That was it, game over.

But just as the entire town groaned—a whole season lost on opening night—Brett somehow spun free from Leopold's claws. Now Brett stumbled backward a couple of yards and, regaining his balance, he rolled out in an angled sprint toward the sideline, right where the first-down marker was planted. The Blakemore cornerback on that side read Brett's trajectory and raced to meet him at the marker, while Derek Leopold also chased Brett from behind. At the marker, the cornerback crunched into Brett with a perfect form tackle, but Brett's momentum was too much as he bowled his opponent forward. When the two of them hit the ground, they were a few feet beyond the first-down pole.

The whistle blew and the crowd erupted in a deafening cheer that suddenly muffled into a silent dread as we watched Derek Leopold hurtle recklessly toward Brett. Everyone could see Leopold's target: Brett's left arm, which was planted firmly in the muddy turf as he pushed himself off the ground and out of the tackle. Leopold dove like a 250-pound missile aimed at the exposed limb.

My great-uncle Wyatt passed down his asthma to me, and I was wheezing by the time I ran my Poncho ass down to the

ambulance zone outside the stadium. The snap of Brett's bone had made a deep, hollow *klok* sound, like a wooden bat connecting with a fastball, and it was still echoing through the stadium when my feet instinctively took off for this spot. Haley and her friends were among the dozens of others who had the same idea to wait for Brett at the ambulance. The outcome of the game didn't matter anymore.

The rain had stopped, and moonlight filtered through the fog and drenched us all in a weird, almost supernatural glow. After a couple minutes the group's concerned murmurs were cut off by medics shouting to clear the way. A gurney whirred toward the ambulance. Brett lay upright in the back, holding his arm. Incredibly, he didn't look to be in pain—he just lay there with a vacant stare, which was way worse.

A few onlookers screamed at the sight of blood spurting like a leaky hose from the spot where Brett's bone, so pristinely white, broke through the skin. The sight made me feel like puking. But that feeling, which was located high in my throat, wasn't nearly as bad as the wrench I felt twisting deep in my stomach. As they loaded Brett into the ambulance, I was leveled by the realization that this was going to change *everything*. What "everything" entailed, I couldn't yet say. And looking back now, there's no way I could've predicted the epic shit-storm that this event would bring to the town—and to me specifically. But I just had this feeling, this dread. Usually when the king goes down, the game is over for the pawns. For me, though, everything was about to begin.

Peering into the ambulance, I noticed that Brett's empty stare had shifted slightly, had taken on some life.

He was looking at me. Looking at Poncho Pete, that is.

Without thinking, I removed my head. I gently placed it on the ground, walked over to the back of the ambulance, and climbed in.

A paramedic planted a stiff-arm into my chest. "Whoa there, kid," he said. "Immediate family only."

"It's okay," Brett murmured from the stretcher. "That's my brother."

One year later.

CHAPTER **TWO**

For the longest time I was a floater. I never committed to a major goal or quest. It's hard to be pumped about the future when, like most guys at Grayport, you're already destined for a lifetime of mopping decks on fishing boats. Sure, after a few decades of slopping up fish guts you might be named "first mate" or whatever, but the more realistic hope is that your mopping zone gets upgraded from the stern to the bow. With the view up front you can at least pretend you're sailing forward into an infinite horizon. Still, deep down you always know the truth: that you're drifting, and that every journey ends by anchoring back in Grayport.

But that changed after Brett's injury. I finally had a mission.

It all started in the ambulance, where the paramedics assigned me the job of distracting Brett while they jammed his bone back in place. This was pretty important, as far as side quests go, and I totally blew it. I just stood there like a fool, fumbling for words that never came. I couldn't think of *anything* to say to Brett. We'd shared bunk beds in our tiny attic room for

my entire life, but somehow we'd never had a meaningful conversation.

It's not that Brett disliked me, necessarily. I think he always viewed me as a curious but mostly useless expansion, like when your iPhone requires a ridiculously large iOS update just to add a taco emoji. I swear some nights it felt like there was nothing more between us than a stale fart that had escaped my sheets and floated up to my big brother, who'd catch a whiff and not laugh at me, not yell at me, not do anything at all other than roll over and face the wall in a thick, awkward silence.

I thought we'd be tighter after sharing the traumatic ride to the hospital. Stuff got intensely real in the ambulance. It was a total frenzy of shouting and blood and shiny machines that beeped like crazy. But over all the chaos, over all the flashing lights and sterile needles and space-age devices, one item stands out the most in my memory: an ordinary stick of rubber. It was the size of a Snickers bar, and the paramedics placed it between Brett's clenched teeth so he wouldn't accidentally bite off his tongue in agony. When life is stripped of all its fluff, it can be pretty raw and brutal.

I guess that's a tough lesson everyone learns eventually. But I thought maybe a special bond forms when you learn it alongside someone else. Like it becomes a secret between the two of you. Granted, anyone visiting the poncho booth in the following weeks could see Brett's maroon bloodstains spattered across my mascot costume. But those people weren't there when the blood was bright red. Only Brett and I shared that.

Not that I expected us to suddenly become #bffs or #bros or hashtag anything at all. Brett was quiet around everyone, and I knew nothing would change that. I was just hoping we could reach a level of comfort that allowed conversations only long-time siblings could have. You know, the kind that start with “Hey, remember that time when . . .” and are answered by your brother with a nostalgic chuckle or, if it was a bad family memory, a quiet acknowledgment like “Yeah, man, I remember—that was pretty fucked up.” And then just like that, neither of you are holding the weight of the past by yourself.

But we never got there. Not even close. For an entire year, Brett was focused solely on rehab and staying in shape. When he actually did talk to me it was nothing new, just typical blah questions like “What’s for dinner?” and “Can I borrow your phone charger?” and “Did you know your shirt’s inside out?”

The only—and I mean *only*—people Brett was close with were his teammates. So my mission for the following school year was clear: make varsity football. I’d been cut from the team the previous year, so this was my last chance to play with Brett before he graduated and disappeared to some big D-I college where he’d have a new roommate, a guy who’d probably be funny and cool and not a taco.

So my quest log was updated easy enough. Now all I had to do was make a nationally renowned football team that was essentially an army of highly trained athletic specimens. Easy as pie.

I spent the year preparing: I cut a little weight. I stopped

eating pies and tacos and Snickers. It's no piece of cake going cold turkey on something you love, but that's how the cookie crumbles. I gained a little bit of strength, too, mostly doing body-weight exercises like push-ups and squats and pull-ups, because when you're a guy my size, those exercises are *plenty* difficult. In fact, I even went from being able to do zero pull-ups to being able to do two of them, which is technically an improvement of infinity percent.

So I actually went into my sophomore season feeling slightly optimistic. At the very least, I figured that the experience would be good for me. It would make me less soft, inside and out. After all, a football field is a lot like the inside of an ambulance. It's where life is distilled down to its most primal elements. Pain. Instinct. Survival. It's high-stakes chaos where you have no control over anything other than your response to the madness. You can discover a lot about yourself on the football field. You can learn what you're capable of.

But what if you learn you're capable of terrible things? Now that's something I wasn't prepared for.

It happened about halfway through a preseason practice, though technically it was still tryouts for nonreturners like me and Nate. Actually, calling it "tryouts" is too generous. Preseason was more like a Hunger Games battle of survival where at any moment for any reason you could be mercilessly slaughtered or, even worse, cut from the team. Over the first few weeks the roster

had been trimmed from eighty-five to forty-three, and somehow both Nate and I were still there. At first I was shocked we'd made it that far, but then again maybe this was proof that great rewards wait at the intersection of talent and determination.

"True, true," Nate agreed between squirts of water at our mid-practice break. "Though we can't discount the possibility that we haven't been cut because the coaches have forgotten we even exist."

That's why I hated being friends with a science nerd like Nate: He had a major hard-on for dumb things like facts and reason. But he did have a point. We likely weren't there because of football talent, but because of a skill we'd inadvertently demonstrated at every party and school dance: being invisible.

I snatched the water bottle from Nate and took a swig. "Well, I hope Trunk Greenhammer forgot I exist. I accidentally stepped on his foot at practice yesterday and he glared at me like I had just texted him a dick pic."

I nervously glanced over at Trunk at the far end of the water station. His massive chest heaved up and down as he ripped the cap off a bottle and poured water down his gullet.

"Did Trunk say anything to you?" Nate asked nervously.

"He said that if I ever stepped on his foot again, he'd go 'bitchcakes' on me. Whatever that means."

Nate furrowed his bushy eyebrows in deep thought. Even in his oversized shoulder pads, he always looked more like a professor than a football player.

"'Bitchcakes,' eh? Probably involves Trunk pounding you

into shapes once thought anatomically impossible. I gotta say, I'm pretty impressed that such a creative term escaped from the cobwebs of his skull."

We laughed quietly, but it soon fizzled into an uncomfortable silence.

"Are we stupid, Nate?" I said after the pause. "Thinking we could possibly compete with these guys? I mean, Trunk practically sweats creatine."

"Nothing is stupid," Nate said emphatically. "It all comes down to simple physics. Force equals mass times acceleration, right? So to hit with the same force as Trunk, you just need better acceleration to go with your mass."

That's why I loved being friends with a science nerd like Nate: To him, your weight is your mass and nothing more.

"Newton's third law for the win!" I said, extending a fist for what was definitely the dorkiest pound in the history of mankind.

Nate sighed and gently pushed down my fist. "Newton's second law, actually. The third law states that every action has an equal and opposite reaction. For example, in physics last week, when you should've been paying attention to this stuff, you were instead sitting behind Haley and creepily breathing on the back of her neck with a strong force that was equal and opposite to her feelings for you."

"See, that's where you're wrong," I said, grinning. "Because we can't discount the possibility that she forgot I even exist."

Nate started to respond but was interrupted by the shrill of

a whistle. It came from Coach Crooks, our offensive line coach who was about infinity years old and who played Grayport football even before our granddads. Coach Crooks had only, like, seven teeth and even less patience, so Nate and I joined the herd of other linemen and ran over to him, buckling our chin straps on the way.

As we gathered around Crooks in a semicircle, I strategically positioned myself on the opposite end of Trunk. Nate slipped in behind me. A moment later I heard the usual *snap* as he unbuckled his chin strap. Nate had apocalyptic acne and the chafing of his chin strap must've been absolute torture. Every chance he got, Nate would unbuckle his chin strap, even if it was for just a few seconds of relief.

It tore me up inside, seeing Nate do this again and again. Trust me, I have always known what it was like to have a physical flaw on display for the whole world to see. But at least my weight problem was my own stupid fault. Nate's acne was bad luck, plain and simple. He was super sensitive about it, too. Like, Nate and I could joke about *anything*, but I'd never in a million years mention his acne.

Coach Crooks was standing next to a tackling dummy and staring down our group. His bony hands were on his hips and his thumbs were hooked under the waistband of his way-too-short gym shorts that I'll probably be describing to a therapist someday.

Crooks flicked his head toward the tackling dummy. "You all see this dummy?"

This was a rhetorical question, but Trunk said yes aloud.

“Well, it ain’t a dummy anymore. From now until we play Blakemore, it’s that son of a bitch Derek Leopold. We’ve cooked up a few tricks for that bush-league bastard, starting with a heavy dose of double-teams.”

Trunk clapped his hands together in excitement and shouted something that was less English than it was gurgle.

I turned slightly toward Nate and whispered, “I think Trunk was bitten by a rabid animal as a child.” This game of wisecracks was dangerous, but Nate and I couldn’t help it. Making fun of Grayport’s macho football culture distracted us from how badly we wanted to be part of it. Nate responded with a snicker that was a little too loud.

Coach Crooks snapped his glare over to us. “Something funny over there?”

White-hot panic washed over Nate’s face. “Oh . . . uh, no, Mr. Coach Crooks, sir.”

Crooks leaned forward and spat brown tobacco juice between his front teeth. “Change of plans, fellas. No more dummy. Today we’ll be using live bait. Let’s go, Zitty Pimpleson—get your butt over here.”

Nate glanced at me nervously.

“Told you the coaches know who you are,” I said quietly. Not my best joke, but I don’t think Nate heard anyway. He buckled his chin strap with a wince and ran to the front of the firing squad.

CHAPTER **THREE**

The double-team drill was efficient, cold-blooded, and hard to watch. We formed two lines, and on Coach Crooks's whistle the two guys up front exploded into Nate with vicious smashes that easily crumpled him like an empty soda can.

At least Nate got a small break when it was my turn. On Coach Crooks's whistle, my blocking partner, a junior lineman named Justin, exploded into Nate's chest, but I made sure my half of the double-team was nothing more than a whimper. It was a relief not to railroad Nate, but my weak hit was yet another example of what was quickly becoming one of my biggest shames. Over tryouts I was starting to realize that the real difference between me and Trunk (or Brett, or any guy on varsity) wasn't mass or acceleration. The difference was heart, grit, balls—whatever it is that gives you the ability to throw your body with reckless abandon, to hit with anger and without hesitation. I'm sure you've heard the saying that football is a game of inches. But I played football like I lived my life: a game of flinches.

As usual, Coach Crooks responded to my pathetic block with the worst reaction a coach can have, which is to say that he had no reaction at all. If I'd been a typical player, Crooks would've yelled, screamed, kicked dirt, said *Do it again*. With me, though, he just blew his whistle. Next.

Crooks's intensity started to pick up when Brett, flanked by his entourage of assistant coaches and backup quarterbacks, stopped by our drill on his way to the water station. Brett always had a royal air to him that made everyone stand a little straighter, hit a little harder, and dig a little deeper.

We continued our drill while Brett watched quietly, his piercing green eyes underlined in bold by smudges of eye black. Coiled around his right arm was a long scar. Bright pink and wormlike, it somehow seemed fresher now that Brett was back on the same field where the scar had been born.

Each time Crooks blew his whistle, Nate absorbed the full weight of revenge. Impressively, he kept scrambling back to his feet. Dude didn't say a word.

"Stop tiptoeing around and *hit*," Coach Crooks shouted at us between reps. "This is *Derek Leopold* here!"

As I got closer to the front of the line for my next turn, my heart began racing, keeping pace with the mantra that was now pulsing like a siren in my head:

Brett's watching. Brett's watching. Brett's watching.

I didn't even notice that Trunk was standing next to me in line—my next double-team partner—until he grabbed the side

of my face mask and yanked me within inches of his seething red face.

“Enough of this crap,” he hissed as Crooks cursed out two more linemen for not hitting Nate hard enough. “It’s time to end this kid. I’ll go low and tee him up for you.”

In the span of ten seconds, about a hundred considerations exploded in my head. My first thought was, *That sounds a lot like an illegal chop block*. Next I thought, *But man would it be an impressive hit*. And my last thought was, *And Brett’s watching. Brett’s watching. Brett’s watching*.

When it was our turn, I approached the line and looked up at Nate. A chunk of grass was wedged in the corner of his face mask and a dark splotch of brown blood began to ooze through his chin strap. He flashed me a goofy grin that said, *Don’t worry, I’m alright*, followed by a subtle roll of the eyes that said, *The meatheads have really taken it to new heights, huh?*

I didn’t know what I was going to do as I crouched into my three-point stance. I didn’t even know what I was going to do when Crooks blew his whistle.

But it turns out that my body knew.

Trunk and I shot out of our stances, and Trunk immediately dove low. His shoulder swept out Nate’s legs, leaving the live bait dangling in midair for me. It was just too easy. Everything was right there for me to take.

I threw all of my mass into Nate. Combined with the equal and opposite force of Trunk’s low hit on the other side, my

impact caused Nate to flip ass over teakettle. When his body finished cartwheeling, he landed on his chest with a spectacular *crunch*.

All the guys erupted in wild cheers. Nate, meanwhile, was curled up and wheezing.

I was gut-punched with instant regret for the personal foul. Even worse, the regret was coupled with guilt when I realized the hit—the surge of power, the raw immediacy of it—felt *good*. Really good.

The guys had surrounded me, cheering various forms of “fuck yeah” and “that’s how we do it.” They awarded me with enthusiastic butt slaps that in the football world are basically a form of social currency. But the dirty hit made it all feel counterfeit to me.

As crappy as I felt, though, it could’ve all been worth it. Life is about difficult trade-offs, and I’d made my choice. I spun around, looking for Brett, waiting for his pat on the shoulder, his *fuck yeah*, his *that-a-baby*.

Finally, I saw him. His back, actually. He was on the opposite sideline, getting a drink at the water table. He hadn’t even been watching.

I turned back to Nate. He was still on the turf gasping like the wind had been knocked out of him. He motioned over Coach Crooks, and after a few failed attempts, he choked out one word: “Trainer.”

This was unprecedented. Asking for the trainer was so frowned upon, so against everything Grayport stood for, that

our team doctor stopped bothering coming out to the field. He just read magazines in the training room, the most deserted place in the entire town.

But Crooks seemed unusually sympathetic. He knelt by Nate's side and put a hand on his back. "Yeah, kid," he said quietly. "Let's get you up." He extended a hand to Nate, who got to his feet and started slinking toward the training room.

"Oh, and one more thing," Crooks called after him. "When you're done with the trainer, go ahead and pack up your locker."

Nate didn't respond. The rest of us stood in silence and watched the dead man walking.

I took a few steps forward. "Nate!" I yelled, unsure of what I was going to say if he turned around. I think I wanted him to yell at me, scream at me, kick dirt at me. Anything.

But all he did was slowly raise a hand up to the side of his helmet. For a second I thought he was going to flip me the bird.

Instead, he just unbuckled his chin strap.

CHAPTER **FOUR**

The only argument Nate and I ever had took place behind the poncho booth our freshman year, the next home game after Brett got injured. The fight was over Haley. Like, we were literally *over* Haley, or rather her Facebook picture on Nate's phone, examining it like scientists at a petri dish. Nate said something like, "Wyatt, how can you be so obsessed with a girl who has such a bad case of sorority arm?," to which I calmly replied that I liked sorority arm—*loved* it, in fact—and that I'd explain why if he just quickly reminded me what sorority arm was. Nate grinned his black-and-orange Halloween braces and said, "Wyatt, my friend, you have a lot to learn about women," then explained that sorority arm happens when a girl in a group photo places one hand on her hip and juts out her elbow, forming a sideways triangle with her outer arm. It's a bit of optical wizardry that makes said arm appear skinnier in the picture than if it'd been hanging down flat like a dead fish. Sorority arm, Nate explained, is a technique every woman

knows instinctively, like how birds are born with the ability to fly or how dudes are born with the ability to sit down without crushing our nuts.

Ultimately, sorority arm just made me want Haley more. I always saw her as a pristine picture of confidence, but it turned out that she might actually be insecure about her appearance, kind of like me. I wondered how and why a girl as pretty as Haley would feel such pressure to make her arm look skinnier, then I thought about what Nate and I were doing at that very moment—staring at her pictures and dissecting her appearance—and I knew who the real culprit was.

Anyway, now that I think about it, that wasn't really an argument at all. A disagreement, more like.

The explosion of cheers and life-affirming butt slaps from my teammates did not echo into the next day. Just the opposite, actually—I was met with icy silence. The only person who spoke to me was Justin, who was standing next to me during team stretch.

“How’s that kid?” he blurted all of a sudden. His eyes remained locked ahead on Brett, who faced the team as he led us through stretches. Practice was already buzzing with a tense urgency. Opening night against Blakemore was just four days away, and I overheard some of the guys speculating that today we’d be installing a much-rumored special play into the offense.

A big, big deal, this secret play. Our coaches had spent most of team stretch pacing the field, nervously looking over their shoulders for Blakemore spies.

It took me a moment to realize that Justin was addressing me, and that he was asking about Nate. "He's fine," I muttered, though I wasn't sure.

"Wasn't he your buddy?" Justin asked coldly. Clearly this was more of a statement than a question, so I didn't answer.

Nobody said another word to me until the end of practice, when Coach Crooks ordered me to stand in front of the first-string offense. "More live bait today, boys!" he announced. "But no double-teams. Today we're cooking up something special."

Crooks grinned, and I could sense everyone lean in, just slightly, toward him. Here, finally, after several days of rumors and speculation, was the unveiling of the secret new play.

"On Friday we're going to punch Blakemore right in the mouth, but we're also going to beat them with our brains." Crooks tapped his temple with a *thunk* of pruney fingertips. "And how are we gonna do that? Well, I got two words for you fellas: Tackle. Eligible. Pass."

Upon hearing that he'd be the target of a pass play, Trunk clapped his giant hands together and unleashed a "WOO!" that could be heard all the way in Blakemore.

Next came a walk-through of the play. Crooks had the offensive lineup on the ball, their backs to the oceanfront end zone. I remained facing them, arms outstretched in a T.

With Grayport's constant shroud of mist and with its rain

always going sideways into your eyes, it's common to think you've seen something and only later discover it was an illusion conjured by a few twirling wisps of fog. That's why I kept my mouth shut when, during Crooks's walk-through of the super top secret tackle-eligible pass, I thought I saw two dark figures lurking on the top row of bleachers behind the seaside end zone. One form was sitting while the other was standing. But after blinking away the moisture that had collected around my eyes, they had vanished. Maybe they disappeared behind a cloak of mist, but more likely they were just another vague illusion courtesy of the Grayport coast.

Meanwhile, Coach Crooks was walking Brett and the offense through a fake handoff that culminated in a rollout left, Brett's non-throwing side, a move that would require some fancy footwork and throwing mechanics that even some NFL QBs can't do, but which Brett could pull off no problem.

Next came the blocking assignments. "We'll go with standard zone blocking," Crooks explained. "'Cept for you, Trunk. Now everyone listen up here, 'cause this next part is the most important point you'll hear all season." Crooks was standing behind me now, and I jolted with surprise when he slammed a hand onto my right shoulder pad. "This here is the opposing outside backer, in other words that scumbag-piece-of-shit bastard Derek Leopold. Now Trunk, when you release off the line to run your pass route, you must, must, *must* first put a shoulder into Derek Leopold. You *gotta* at least slow him down, else he's gonna have a free run at Brett and rip his head off, and

if that happens I'm gonna rip your nuts off, if you even got 'em. Understand?"

Trunk nodded firmly, like, *Murder Wyatt: check.*

"Alright, enough chitchat. Let's run the damn thing live!"

Crooks waddled his creaky frame over to the wall of backup players.

That's when I saw them again. The figures. The fog clouding the bleachers had lifted just enough for me to see a flash, or a glint, more like, from a shiny silver object (a knife?) dangling from the hand of the sitting figure. I squeezed my eyes shut and opened them. The two figures were still there.

Tackling dummies aren't supposed to speak, but this was probably a good time to open my mouth for the first time all preseason. "Um, Coach?"

Coach Crooks didn't hear me. His old-man ears were big enough to hold the mysteries of the universe within their labyrinths, but they were pretty rusty, hearing-wise.

The offense approached the line of scrimmage. Brett crouched down and put his hands under the center. Trunk stared at me like he was already debating where to hide my carcass.

"Coach!" I shouted again. "Coachcoachcoachcoach!"

Crooks blew his whistle and the offense rose from their three-point stances. "Christ, Wyatt! This better be good."

I pointed toward the bleachers. The entire team swiveled around.

An army of Russian battleships could've been in the harbor and Crooks would've reacted less dramatically than when he

saw the two lurkers. His jaw dropped so far the entire wad of tobacco fell out of his mouth. He fumbled for the whistle hanging from his neck and in his panic yanked it clean off the chain, then began frantically blowing into it.

Clearly this was a matter for Coach Stetson, our head coach.

"Everyone back to individual position drills," Stetson shouted. "And in the meantime, someone's gotta check out what's going on with our visitors."

Stetson paused like he was considering which player he could most afford to lose via murder from knife-wielding spies.

"Hey, Wyatt," he said, addressing me for the first time ever. "Hustle over there and report back."

CHAPTER **FIVE**

The dark figure with the knife didn't even look at me as I approached. He was perched on the edge of the wooden bleacher, completely absorbed with our practice. In his right hand he held the glistening blade, which even from a distance I could tell was a fishing knife. A fillet knife, to be exact, which any Grayport kid knows is about eight inches long, slightly curved, and sharp enough to gut a seven-hundred-pound tuna with a quick flick of the wrist. The man was leaning forward. He held the knife vertically so its point dug lightly into the wooden bench in front of him. As he observed practice he'd casually spin the knife, using the tip as its axis, then grab its handle just as the blade's rotation slowed to a wobble.

I looked at him from the bottom row of the bleachers and saw a thin face peppered with blades of black and gray stubble. The face was intense, focused. But you could sense a deep exhaustion in it, too. As I got a closer view, I realized that I knew this face well, better than I wanted to. I still wasn't sure about the second dark figure, who was a few rows above, but this man

here was no Blakemore spy. He was a Grayport legend responsible for three of the championship flags hanging on the ship masts high above us.

I tentatively climbed up a few rows toward him.

“Hey, Dad.”

My father nodded. His eyes remained locked on the field. Locked on Brett. “Hey.”

“Coast Guard shut down the harbor again?”

“Fog.”

I winced. This meant there’d be no fresh fish for dinner. Instead we’d fry up our small reserve of frozen mackerel, a fish that tastes like, to put it politely, the ocean’s grundle.

Back on the field, the team had started some generic passing drills to kill some time until they knew whether we had a spy situation. From the stands I heard a loud cheer from the field, and I turned around to see a receiver, about sixty yards downfield from Brett, striding toward the end zone with the ball. The row of assistant coaches behind Brett subtly extended their hands to each other for low fives. Brett, meanwhile, was already calling a new huddle like, *Come on, let’s get to the next rep already*. Dad didn’t react one way or the other. He continued to spin his knife.

There was also another sound mixed in with the cheers, a sound that you *never* heard in Grayport: a man giggling. With *delight*.

I knew of only one man in Grayport who laughed like that, and sure enough, when I looked through the fog at the second

mysterious figure, there was Murray Miller. He was waddling down the bleachers toward me.

“Holy cannoli, did you *see* that pass? Must’ve traveled fifty yards *on a line*.” Murray Miller giggled again, this time with childlike wonder.

I waved down to the coaches and gave a thumbs-up. No Blakemore spies here.

I turned back to Murray Miller. I liked talking to the guy, even though he never remembered my name. He was super short (the top of his head barely came to my chest) and shaped like a bowling ball. He was always fidgeting with a pair of thick glasses that rested snugly upon his round chipmunk cheeks. Basically, Murray Miller was the answer to what a Cabbage Patch Kid would look like if it were fifty years old, balding, and sporting a fuzzy mustache. I sometimes had to suppress a weird urge to tickle Murray Miller.

“Um, this isn’t a big problem, Mr. Murray Miller, but I don’t think you’re supposed to be here. This is a closed practice.”

“Whaddya mean? It’s Media Day! Practice is open to the press. Or did the coaches forget again? Please don’t tell me the coaches forgot again.”

It was funny hearing Murray Miller refer to “the press” and “the media.” As the lone reporter in all of Grayport, Murray Miller *was* the media. Like, all of it. And I have to say, he was pretty good at his job. People devoured his annual Football Preview in the *Grayport Gazette*. He was the oldest of the old school—dude wore a fedora on his head and kept a pencil

behind his ear. He referred to news stories as “scoops,” and I once heard that he still uses a typewriter. I think if poor old Murray Miller discovered that most written communication these days is through something called “emojis,” and that spitting a good emoji game can even get you *a date*, his head would explode into a confetti of a million little frowny faces.

“No, no, the coaches didn’t forget,” I lied. “It’s just that, well, we’ve got this new secret play, right? And—”

Here I got distracted by Murray Miller’s eyes, which had widened to three times their normal size. I’d made a big mistake letting it slip about our new play.

“It’s just that our coaches want some privacy,” I quickly added. “So maybe you can just, you know, quickly get the info you need and then, like . . . leave.”

A frown nestled into Murray Miller’s curved mustache. “I suppose I could skedaddle,” he said. “But I can’t leave without a quote or two.”

“Yeah, okay. I mean, probably. I’ll tell Coach. You know Brett doesn’t do interviews, but maybe we can send over Trunk Greenhammer or someone.”

Murray Miller shook his head. “Naw, I don’t need to talk to Trunk. Heck, I don’t even care about interviewing Brett. I’m here to talk to *you*, the newest member of the team!”

Murray Miller must’ve been confused. “Well, tryouts are still happening,” I explained.

“Not according to this final roster, they’re not.” Murray Miller unfolded a single sheet of paper in his tiny hands. “Coach

Stetson gave me the roster this morning. Very official. Take a look.”

My hands were trembling as I took the roster. I scanned down to the bottom. There, listed right below “Parker, Brett,” was my very own name. Not “Brett’s Little Brother.” Not “Thor, God of Thunder.” But “Parker, Wyatt.” Sophomore. Right tackle. Number 67.

I felt so happy I could puke.

Murray Miller must’ve felt uncomfortable being a part of this little moment I was having with myself, because he softly cleared his throat before interrupting. “Gee, don’t look so surprised, kid. Now, mind if I ask you a couple questions?”

Murray Miller reached into the pocket of his corduroys and pulled out a mini notepad. My pulse was jackhammering. I was still trying to process the news, and now I had to give an interview? Soon my thoughts would travel from my mouth to that notepad, then to Murray Miller’s typewriter, then to the entire town, to my team, to my whole school.

With this blast of anxiety came a second kind of rush, one that I’d never really felt before. It was like adrenaline, but more than that. A part of me felt like: You know what, Wyatt? You’re on varsity now, and hell yeah people want to talk to you and hear your thoughts and your one-liners and your scoops. And you know what else? You deserve this attention. You worked your ass off this summer. You earned this.

Man, that moment was energizing, standing there with Murray Miller, the town’s megaphone, as he held pencil to notepad.

This was what it was like to experience pride. And not superficial pride like when you get a triple kill in *Call of Duty* but real, actual, in-your-heart pride, the kind that comes when, for a brief and surreal moment, your inner voice and the outside world synchronize to say in a single confident declaration: *You did good.*

"First question," Murray Miller said, angling his notepad to protect it from the slanting wind and rain. "How, in your opinion, is Brett feeling about the season?"

Oh.

I should've known. I really should've. Brett's a quiet guy, an impossible nut to crack, so people have always tried to get in his head through me, the guy who's shared a bunk with Brett for the last sixteen years.

"Brett and I have talked a lot about this upcoming season," I lied. "A lot. And he told me that he's excited."

"About . . . ?"

"The season."

"I see."

A row below us, my dad sighed and got to his feet. He took his knife and slowly made his way down the bleachers, one half step and one grimace at a time. He'd move by taking a regular stride with his left leg followed by a long, looping swing of his right leg, which was stiff as a board. Dad messed up his hip in the championship game of his senior season, and now twenty-five years later the doctor said all the cartilage in his right socket was gone. With each step bone was grinding on bone. He needed

a hip replacement, but when Dad saw the surgery cost he said he could catch every fish in the sea and still not have enough dough to pay that type of goddam bill.

When Dad reached the bottom row of the bleachers he sat down and continued watching and knife-spinning.

"So far Brett's looking like he hasn't missed a beat," Murray Miller said. "Have you noticed any limitations from the . . . um, you know . . . from what happened last year?"

Both of us looked down at the field, where Brett roped another bullet to a streaking wideout.

"He seems good to me," I said.

"So Brett's fully recovered, right?" Murray Miller asked.

"I think so."

"And in good shape?"

Three days after the surgery to reset the bone, my dad got Brett a used stationary bike. We had no clue how Dad got it to our duplex, considering we didn't own a car. I joked that maybe Dad had ridden the bike home. That got a laugh outta Brett. And even though he was real high on painkillers at the time, I felt something like pride in my joke.

"Yes, Brett's in good shape."

"And it's fair to say that Derek Leopold and Blakemore have something major to worry about this coming Friday?"

I sensed what Murray Miller was trying to do here, and I was pretty impressed with myself for recognizing it. There was no way I was going to get suckered into insulting Blakemore and giving them "bulletin-board material" for inspiration. Luckily,

I've watched enough NFL interviews to know the art of giving non-answer answers.

"Well, we respect Blakemore as a team," I said. "We're going to come out and try to run the football early. We'll also try to pass the football early. We'll kick the football early, too, if we lose the coin toss."

"Yes," Murray Miller said with restrained frustration. "But we're going to get revenge on Friday, right?"

"I just want to thank God and my teammates for the opportunity to play Friday."

"Yes, yes," Murray said dully. He wasn't writing any of this down. "But it's fair to say we're looking good again, right? That Grayport's going to be back on top?"

And then something occurred to me. As I looked down at Murray Miller with his wide imploring eyes and his furry little mustache, as I took in his faded tweed jacket with holes so big you could see them through his cloudy plastic poncho (which also had holes), I realized that Murray the Reporter didn't need assurance of our dominance so much as Murray the Grayport Resident did. All of Grayport needed it. Every day the town opens the *Grayport Gazette* to see a blast of the usual headlines: Crime is up, jobs are down, and the rain will be sideways. But when the annual Football Preview hit the stands in three days, they'd also get to read some good news: Grayport football is back and ready to kick some effing ass.

"You know what, Murray Miller?" I said, suddenly emboldened. "Come kickoff Friday, we're going to punch Blakemore

right in the mouth. In fact, you might even say we're going to go bitchcakes."

"Bitchcakes?"

"Bitchcakes."

"Alright, bitchcakes." Murray Miller giggled and wrote this down. I started feeling that adrenaline-type rush again, but now it was laced with a lust for revenge. I fueled the fire by thinking of Derek Leopold and how all he got was a personal foul for his hit on Brett. And while Brett spent the next year on a stationary bike with his arm in a cast, Leopold went on to lead the county in tackles and sacks, become the league MVP, and make a verbal commitment to play college ball at USC, where it never rains and where the water is too warm for mackerel.

"Not sure I can say 'bitchcakes' in the paper," said Murray Miller between giggles. "Got another way of putting it?"

Unlike Nate, I didn't have a big brother who kept me updated on the coolest new lingo. But I *did* remember Trunk bragging in the locker room about how that summer he took some kid named Tyler to Pound Town. That sounded decent enough.

"Let's just say we're pretty fired up to take Derek Leopold to Pound Town."

Alright, I'm going to pause a moment to share three important points with you. Maybe you already knew them, but I sure as hell didn't:

First, Tyler can sometimes be a girl's name. Second, "Pound Town," it turns out, is typically located in bed, on a couch, or in the back seat of a car. And, finally, to get to "Pound Town," you

don't take the Pain Train, as I thought. You take the Boner Express to Penetration Station.

Of course Murray Miller knew none of this either. "Pound Town—I love it," he said, furiously scribbling on his notepad. "This really is good stuff. 'Pound Town,'" he repeated. "I mean, that's headline material right there!"

"We've been waiting all summer to take these guys to Pound Town," I added. "We know they're into being dirty. But you know what? We can get dirty, too. We're gonna stuff them. And as Coach Crooks said just today, we're going to keep coming and coming and coming."

"This is perfect. Just perfect," Murray Miller said, still scribbling. "And I can quote you on this?"

"Oh, definitely. The name's Wyatt. Don't you forget it. W-Y-A-T-T."