

BACKFIELD BOYS

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FARRAR STRAUS GIROUX
NEW YORK

Farrar Straus Giroux Books for Young Readers
An imprint of Macmillan Publishing Group, LLC
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010

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Printed in the United States of America
Designed by Elizabeth H. Clark
First edition, 2017

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

fiercereads.com

Cataloging-in-Publication Data is on file at the Library of Congress

ISBN: 978-0-374-30592-5

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*This is for Andrew Thompson (USNA '96) and
Jim Cantelupe (USMA '96), who taught me a lot about
football but more about loyalty and friendship*

PROLOGUE

TOM JEFFERSON WAS STARING INTO THE RAPIDLY SETTING SUN, HANDS on hips, wondering what to do next. It was just a game of touch football on a November afternoon, but he didn't want to lose to the private school kids.

Every Friday, eight boys met in Riverside Park for public school versus private school bragging rights. Tom and his best friend, Jason Roddin, along with Mike Roth and Marc Posnock, were the public school team—all seventh graders at Junior High School 44, which was four blocks east of the park.

The private school guys, all kids they had grown up with on the West Side of Manhattan, went to McBurney, an all-boys school about a mile away, off Central Park West.

The publics had the two best players: Tom and Jason. But they also had the two worst: Mike and Marc. The privates had figured out if they double-teamed Jason and forced Tom to throw the ball to Mike or Marc, they could slow Jason

down—no easy task since Jason was stunningly fast. His nickname was “White Lightning”—with good reason. Like Jason, Tom had earned a nickname, too: “Bull’s-Eye,” because he never seemed to miss a target.

Now it was getting close to five o’clock and the sun would soon be down. There were no lights in the small park, and everyone had agreed a few minutes earlier to two more possessions. The privates had scored to make it 6–6. Since there were no field goals or extra points, the boys simply counted each touchdown as one point.

So it was now up to the publics. If they didn’t score, the game would be a tie and they would have to buy the ice creams at Carvel since the privates had won the week before. In other words, a tie was a loss.

It was third down. Needless to say, the privates had been playing deep to keep Jason from getting behind them. They’d gladly give up an open pass in front of them to either Mike or Marc. Tom had to figure out a way to get the ball to Jason.

“What do you think?” he asked, as the four of them stood in a small circle a couple of yards behind where the ball sat on the ground.

The privates were standing back from the ball, hands on hips, taking deep breaths. Everyone was tired.

“We got two options,” Jason said, because the question was clearly directed at him. “We can throw it underneath and then try to score on fourth down, or go for all of it now.”

“No way they’re going to let you get behind them,” Tom said.

Jason grinned. “Don’t look up, but you know the trash can down by the trees?”

“Sure,” Tom said. The landmark was far down the right side of the field.

“Fake like you’re going to throw it to me underneath, and then just throw it right at that can.”

Tom understood. Marc and Mike both nodded. Their job was to spread out as far as they could to keep the defense at least a little bit honest.

Steve Holder, the slowest player on the privates, picked up the ball and flipped it to Jason—the touch-football version of a snap. Steve would slowly count to five and then rush Tom, forcing him to throw the ball whether or not someone was open. Tom could pull the ball down and run, but he wouldn’t get very far. Speed was not his forte.

Tom took the snap and instinctively spun the ball so his fingers were across the laces. He had done it so many times in his life that it required no thought. He dropped back a step, just to clear a little space between himself and Steve as he heard him counting.

“One-one-thousand, two-one-thousand . . .”

Jason had started from the right, running about ten yards up the field—which ran roughly fifty yards between the oak trees at either end that represented the end zones—and began to cut toward the middle. Kenny Medley went with him, Johnny Strachan lying back as a deep safety.

Just as he heard Steve say “Four-one-thousand,” Tom faked, beginning his throwing motion, then stopping. Jason, who had

paused for a split second as if expecting the ball, suddenly pivoted right and was past Kenny in the blink of an eye.

As he sprinted in the direction of the goal line, Johnny, who had hesitated for an instant after Tom's fake, scrambled to get back. It was too late. Jason was a blur. Tom came up on his toes and let go of the ball, feeling absolutely no strain on his arm or shoulder, wanting it to drop into Jason's arms just as he went past the trash can.

The ball arced through the darkening sky, and Tom could see Jason running under it with Johnny helplessly trailing him. Jason made the catch in full stride, raced past the tree, and held the ball up triumphantly.

Tom threw his arms in the air, doing his best Tom Brady/Peyton Manning imitation as he raced across the grass and dirt to congratulate his receiver. All four of the publics gathered to high-five one another. The privates stood and watched, then joined the circle to exchange handshakes and fist bumps.

Johnny bent over, hands on his knees, still trying to get his breath back.

"You know something," he said between gasps. "You two should play real football someday. You're pretty good together."

"Yeah," Kenny said. "Bull's-Eye to White Lightning. You guys could make history."

"History?" Jason said.

"How many great quarterback-receiver combinations had the black guy throwing to the white guy?"

Tom and Jason looked at each other.

"Should we make history?" Tom said.

“Yeah, we should,” Jason said. “Let’s talk our mothers into letting us play real football when we get to high school.”

Tom laughed. “You’re right,” he said. “That *would* be making history.”

Sweating and laughing, they all grabbed their jackets and backpacks and crossed Riverside Drive, heading in the direction of the Carvel two blocks away on Broadway.

PART 1

THE FIELDS JUST KEPT ROLLING PAST THE CAR, MILE AFTER MILE.

“Did it take this long the last time we came down here?” Jason asked.

He was sitting in the back of the Jeffersons’ silver Honda Accord. Mr. Jefferson was behind the wheel, a smile on his face even though they were more than five hours into the six-hour drive.

Riding shotgun, Tom laughed at his best friend’s latest complaint. “Last time, we flew to Washington, remember?” he said. “We rented a car in D.C., so the drive was two hours, not six. But I promise you we drove past every one of these fields.”

“All these cows, too?” Jason asked.

“Yup. And the sheep and chicken farms.”

Jason laughed. There was no way he would be in this car right now if not for Tom, who had convinced him that going to a jock

boarding school in Middle-of-Nowhere, Virginia, was a good idea.

Jason and Tom had grown up five floors apart in an apartment building on West End Avenue near Seventy-Seventh Street. They had met in the first grade at PS 87 after Tom's father, Alan Jefferson, a salesman for an athletic gear company, had been transferred from Chicago to New York. Tom's mother, Elaine, an elementary school teacher, had found work as a substitute teacher at PS 87, just over a two-block walk from the apartment building.

Jason's family had lived in their apartment since before he was born. His dad, Robbie, was a New York City police detective. His mom, Julie, was also a teacher, working at a nearby private preschool.

The parents became friends through their sons. Almost from the beginning, Jason and Tom were the best athletes in the PS 87 schoolyard. They started out playing punchball—smacking an orange rubber ball with their fists, rather than a bat, but otherwise following the rules of baseball—and soon graduated to stickball, basketball, and touch football.

It wasn't until they crossed Seventy-Seventh Street as sixth graders to go to junior high school that the two boys were part of any organized teams. There was no football team at their school, but they were starters right away on both the basketball and softball teams. Both badly wanted to play football. Their mothers weren't in love with the idea, but their fathers were.

One night, when the two boys were in seventh grade, the Jeffersons rode the elevator from the eleventh to the sixth floor for what the parents called "cocktails," although the mothers

drank wine, the fathers drank beer, and the boys drank soda. They all sat around the Roddins' living room and talked about a football summer camp that Mr. Jefferson had heard about from some of his coworkers.

"They're called seven-on-seven camps, because it's not real football but skills football," he explained. "You don't have line-men, except for a center to snap the ball. Everyone else is either a receiver or in the backfield at quarterback or running back. There's no real tackling either."

"How is it football if there's no tackling?" Mr. Roddin asked.

"First question I asked, Robbie," Mr. Jefferson said, smiling. "The camp is about helping kids develop their skills—running, throwing, catching, running pass patterns, defending pass patterns, reading offenses and defenses, things like that. There's almost no hitting at all."

Jason and Tom both loved the idea. They were determined to play for a real team when they got to high school, and this was a chance to enhance their skills.

The mothers weren't quite as enthusiastic.

"Okay, there's no tackling at this camp," Mrs. Roddin said. "But why aren't we sending them to a basketball camp somewhere, or a baseball camp? Aren't those the two sports we want them to focus on?"

"Maybe," Mr. Roddin said. "But I think that's ultimately up to the boys, isn't it?"

"Since when?" his wife said almost instantly.

Jason still winced at the memory of how sharp his mother's tone had been.

“Well, if Jason wants to play football or *doesn’t* want to play football, I think that’s up to him, Julie,” Mr. Roddin said. “I think Alan feels the same way. I don’t think we’d ever push either one of them to play football—or any other sport—but I don’t think we should tell them they *can’t* play a sport.”

Mrs. Jefferson had said very little up until that moment. Now she jumped into the fray. “You don’t think we could say no?” she said. She looked at Mrs. Roddin. “Julie, have you and Robbie ever had that conversation about football? Alan and I haven’t.” She then turned and looked directly at Mr. Roddin. “How can you possibly act as if playing football is the same as basketball or baseball or any other sport? Have you been living in a cave the last few years? Aren’t you aware of how dangerous the sport is?”

“As a matter of fact, I’ve studied the stats pretty carefully,” Mr. Roddin said. “And for all the panic going on, the fact remains that the odds one of the boys will get a concussion or suffer a severe head injury are pretty low. Even with all the new technology that makes it easier to identify a concussion, the rate for high school football players is, according to most studies, only about twenty percent.”

“Twenty percent!” Mrs. Jefferson practically jumped out of her chair. “Robbie, I want you to think about this for a minute: If the boys were about to get on an airplane and the pilot told you there was a twenty percent chance it would crash, would you let them get on it?”

There was a long pause. For a moment Jason thought that question would end the debate.

It was Mr. Jefferson who finally responded. “If that flight was the only way they could get where they wanted to go, yes, I would.”

“Well, then you need to have *your* head examined,” his wife answered.

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And yet, here they were, on a Sunday evening eighteen months later, on their way to Thomas Gatch Prep School in central Virginia, just outside the tiny town of Scottsville and not far from the campus of the University of Virginia in Charlottesville.

TGP had been started by a sports agent named Thomas Alan Gatch and several partners in 1999—in fact, a twentieth-anniversary celebration for the school was already being planned for 2019. Mr. Gatch also now served as head-of-school, the equivalent of a public high school’s principal.

The way Mr. Gatch had explained it to the boys and their fathers when they first arrived on campus for the seven-on-seven camp in the summer prior to their becoming eighth-graders, he’d gotten the idea to start TGP from his former employers at IMG, the giant sports-management agency that represented hundreds of athletes, ran professional sports events, and in the 1980s had purchased a tennis academy in Florida with the intention of turning it into a full-fledged high school—one where every student was an aspiring college athlete. The IMG Academy had been hugely successful, and Mr. Gatch believed he could not only copy it but better it.

“The difference between us and IMG is that we really *do* stress academics as much as sports,” he had told the boys and their fathers on the day they arrived. “My background is in education. I was a history teacher once and then a high school principal. That’s why we’re smaller by design, so we have a better teacher-student ratio. We pay our teachers as well as we pay most of our coaches, so we get better teachers.”

Jason had googled IMG Academy and was stunned to find that more than twelve thousand athletes passed through it every year—though only half of them attended full-time and lived on campus. The tuition was more than \$70,000 per year—plus living expenses.

Gatch was considerably smaller—about fifteen hundred full-time students—and had only recently added golf and tennis to its curriculum. The focus was on team sports: football; boys’ and girls’ basketball, soccer, lacrosse, and swimming; plus baseball for boys and softball for girls, since softball was a scholarship sport for girls in college. The school website boasted that TGP fostered traditional values in its “student-athletes,” on and off the playing field.

It wasn’t quite as expensive—tuition was \$55,000 plus expenses. But, like IMG Academy, it offered scholarships for especially gifted athletes whose families didn’t have that kind of money. Jason could still remember the two fathers’ eyebrows going up the first time Mr. Gatch mentioned that. He knew there was no way either his dad or Tom’s could afford to spend that much money a year to send their sons to high school.

The deal the fathers and sons had made with the mothers was

simple: the boys would be allowed to attend the summer seven-on-seven camp, and once it was over they would all reconvene. The brochure for the camp explained that doctors and trainers were present on-field for every practice or game. If a boy had suffered any sort of prior injury, he needed a doctor's letter clearing him to play. That soothed the mothers—somewhat. Jason was pretty convinced they were hoping that one of two things would happen: their boys wouldn't like the camp or they wouldn't do well enough there to consider going on to play high school football.

But Tom and Jason had both loved the camp. Jason enjoyed playing wide receiver and especially enjoyed catching passes from Tom. Through their Friday touch football games in the park, and later in the JHS 44 schoolyard, they had figured out that Tom had the stronger arm—though Jason's wasn't bad either—and that Jason was considerably faster and was a little better at catching the ball.

During the camp, every kid played every position at some point. The goal was to learn the skills needed to play anywhere on the field and then figure out later exactly where you would end up playing.

"The more versatile you are, the better your chances are of playing on Sundays," the head coach, James "Bobo" Johnson, told the campers, using coach-speak for playing in the NFL. "And when you start playing real football, being able to play on special teams will also help you greatly as you go up the ladder."

There was no special-teams play—kickoffs, punts, field goals—at the camp. There were, Jason learned, camps that

specialized in kicking. What's more, special-teams play was considered so dangerous that there had been talk in the NFL about abolishing kickoffs because so many injuries happened when twenty-two players ran full speed right at one another.

There was nothing Jason enjoyed more about the camp than the speed drills—or time trials. He won the time trials in the 100-yard dash, the 40-yard dash, and the 10-yard dash, beating everyone among the 150 campers on every timed occasion. His 4.58 forty drew oohs and aahs from the coaches and the other campers, and he enjoyed busting the stereotype that white boys couldn't run fast.

"Wait till they find out you're Jewish," Tom joked. "They'll want to drug-test you."

Tom's forty time was 4.77, which put him midpack among the other campers. But he had the most accurate arm in the camp—maybe not the strongest, though it was strong enough—but without doubt the most accurate.

By the end of the camp, they'd both made their mark and Coach Johnson had told them he'd be in touch with their parents.

"You boys belong here," he'd said to them. "You could be a great team, and you could help make *us* a great team."

He then made it clear to both boys that he wouldn't let money stand in the way of their enrolling at TGP for the ninth grade. A subsequent scholarship offer for each boy changed everything.

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Of course it hadn't been that simple. Neither Elaine Jefferson nor Julie Roddin was at all happy with the idea of her son going to a jock school 350 miles from the West Side of Manhattan to be—worst of all—a football player.

But when Mr. Gatch personally offered full rides to both boys, and when the fathers supplied the mothers with a list of where the 350 graduates from TGP's class of 2017 were going to college, they gave in—grudgingly.

"It won't do Tom any good to go to an Ivy League school if he can't remember his name when he's forty," Mrs. Jefferson said when her husband pointed out that six of the thirty-four football-playing seniors were going to the Ivies.

That had set off another round of the fathers pointing out the percentages and the mothers saying that *any* risk was too much risk. For their part, the boys had pleaded and a compromise had been reached: Tom and Jason would be one-and-dones: not one *year*—as with college basketball players, who played for a year before leaving for the NBA—but one *concussion* and done.

"First time it happens, Jason," Mrs. Roddin said, "that's it. Football's done."

Only with that understanding did the mothers finally sign off on accepting the scholarships.

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And so, as more and more cornfields and cow pastures raced past the window, Jason leaned back, closed his eyes, and imagined himself running under passes perfectly thrown to him by Tom.

He could see the headlines in the newspapers around the state of Virginia now—not to mention on ESPN's weekly high school highlight show: BULL'S-EYE TARGETS WHITE LIGHTNING IN TGP VICTORY.

This was going to be fun, he thought.

If they ever got there.

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THEY STOPPED FOR DINNER IN CHARLOTTESVILLE. A FRIEND OF MR. Jefferson's had recommended a steak place just off Route 29 called the Aberdeen Barn, down the road from the campus of the University of Virginia.

"So here I am, a couple miles from the school founded by old Mr. Jefferson, having dinner with *two* Mr. Jeffersons," Jason said, grinning, as they walked inside.

They were walking in the direction of the hostess's stand, where two young women were smiling at them.

"Do me a favor and shut up," Tom said.

"Reservation for Jefferson," his dad said to the two young women.

If the name carried any special meaning around here, the hostesses didn't show it.

"Yes, sir," the taller one said. "Table for three, right?"

As Mr. Jefferson was nodding, Jason said, "You realize, don't

you, that you're about to seat Thomas Jefferson?" He pointed at Tom.

The shorter of the two, a pretty brunette, didn't miss a beat. "Thomas Jefferson, it's a pleasure," she said. "I'm Martha Washington."

That was funny.

"Let me guess," Mr. Jefferson said as they walked to their table. "We're not the first people to come in here with the last name Jefferson."

"Or the first name Tom or Thomas," Martha answered, handing them menus as they sat down.

"But do you get Sally Hemings in here a lot?" Jason said, trying to keep the banter going.

Martha smiled. "Absolutely. But she has to come in the back door," she said as she walked away.

"Girl's funny," Mr. Jefferson said.

Jason knew about Sally Hemings from the early American history section of his social studies class. She was the slave who became President Jefferson's mistress after his wife died; the two had had several children together.

"She's got guts saying that to a couple of black guys," Tom said.

"I think she figured we could handle it," Jason said.

"What do you mean *we*?" Tom said. "Did I miss the part where you became black?"

"You always say I run like I'm black," Jason answered.

"I'm sure she was aware of that," Mr. Jefferson said, just as a waitress arrived at the table to take drink orders.

“First round of drinks is on the house, gentlemen,” she said. “Courtesy of Martha Washington. My name is Sally, and I’ll be your server tonight.”

Jason stared at her name tag. It actually said SALLY. *Amazing*, he thought. *Just amazing.*

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They all ordered Cokes. The boys were a long way from being old enough to drink, and even though they were now only a short drive from the school, Mr. Jefferson wasn’t taking any chances.

“Remember, after I drop you off, I’m coming back to Charlottesville to spend the night,” he said.

“It’s great of you to do this, Dad,” Tom said.

“Well, there was no way that Robbie could change his schedule,” Mr. Jefferson said. “And neither one of your mothers wanted to do the tearful-farewell thing down here after six hours in the car. So that left me.”

“Somehow I don’t think you’ll be tearful,” Tom said.

Mr. Jefferson smiled. “Probably not,” he said. “But I will miss you both.”

Tom’s head had been buried in his menu. Now it snapped up and he looked at his father, clearly surprised.

“For real?” he said.

“Of course,” Mr. Jefferson said. “Did you think I *wouldn’t* miss you?”

Tom shook his head. “No, I figured you’d miss me—us—but I never thought you’d *say* it.”

“Well, consider this a first,” Mr. Jefferson said. “But not a last.”

“Saying it once puts you in the lead over my dad,” Jason said, smiling. “Probably an insurmountable lead at that.”

Jason knew his dad loved him, but he was a tough-guy cop, not inclined to show much emotion—anger being the exception.

They all ordered steaks since they’d been told that this was one of the best steak houses in the state. Soon they were buried in sizzling platters of meat and several side dishes apiece.

“Good intel on the steaks, Dad,” Tom said as they all emptied their plates.

“Well, my guess is, even at a jock training table, the food you’ll get in the school dining hall won’t be all that good, so I figured I’d better get you a good meal tonight,” Mr. Jefferson said.

To top it off, they all ordered ice cream sundaes. Then they were out the door, headed in the direction of the school by seven o’clock.

The sky was slowly darkening overhead. It would be close to sunset when they got to TGP.

They arrived to find a slew of cars in the parking lot, with others pulled up in front of the dorms to be unloaded. They’d been told to report first to Jackson Hall—where all the school’s offices were located—to register. After that, they’d head to their rooms.

Two very pleasant women checked Tom’s and Jason’s names off a list and handed them dorm room keys. They were in Lee Hall, a six-floor all-male building.

“Mr. Jefferson, you’re in room 344,” one of the staff members said. “Mr. Roddin, you’re in 228.”

“Hang on,” Tom’s dad said just before Jason could open his mouth. “I know that the boys asked to room together.”

At seven-on-seven camp the dorms were empty enough that all the campers could have their own room. Jason and Tom had had adjacent rooms and had made it a point on their applications to request rooming together at school.

The woman who had handed them their keys was middle-aged, probably about forty, Jason figured. She had her dark hair pulled up and was wearing a blue blazer with a Thomas Gatch Prep School crest; the name tag on her lapel said MRS. WILLIAMS.

She smiled at them. “Yes, well, we get a lot of requests for room assignments, especially from boys and girls who are from the same hometown,” she said. “We think it better to start fresh, make new friends. It isn’t as if the boys won’t be seeing a lot of each other, is it?”

Jason was fine with the idea of making new friends. He just didn’t especially want to share a room with one of them.

“We should have been informed,” Mr. Jefferson said. “At least that way the boys wouldn’t have been taken by surprise. They’ve been counting on rooming together.”

“Well, next year they can put in a request for that, and maybe it will be granted,” Mrs. Williams said.

She looked past Mr. Jefferson to a father, a mother, and their son standing behind them.

“Welcome to TGP,” she said to them. “Can you give me your name?”

As politely as possible, she had just said, *I'm done with you—move on.*

Jason and Tom looked at each other, then at Mr. Jefferson.

“Do you want me to take this up the line to someone in authority?” Mr. Jefferson said. “She’s just doing her job.”

“Couldn’t be more officious, I’d say,” Tom muttered.

Jason was pretty certain that *officious* wasn’t a compliment, but he wasn’t sure what it meant.

Tom, who often read his mind, said: “Obnoxious when asserting authority. As in, *I’m in charge, don’t question me.*”

That said it all, Jason thought.

Tom turned to his father. “Let’s leave it for now,” he said. “We don’t want to be the only ones complaining on the first day. We’ll see how it goes. If we don’t like our roommates, we’ll try to make a switch.”

Jason figured Tom was right.

The three of them walked back to the car and, as instructed, Mr. Jefferson pulled around to the back of Lee Hall. It was not a football dorm per se, but all the school’s football players were among those who lived in the building. The basketball players also lived in Lee Hall.

The boys unloaded their things, and Mr. Jefferson stayed with the car while they first carried Tom’s stuff to his room. Tom’s roommate was sitting on the bed watching TV when they arrived. He jumped to his feet and introduced himself.

“Anthony Ames,” he said. “I’m from Marietta, Georgia.”

He was a black kid, clearly a lineman: about six foot three and, Jason guessed, at least 240 pounds.

Tom introduced himself, shaking hands. “And this is Jason Roddin. We’re from New York City.”

“The NYC boys. I heard about you.” Anthony shook hands with Jason. “You’re White Lightning, right?”

“That’s me. And this is Bull’s-Eye. He’s slow as sin, but he has the best arm you’ll ever see, no doubt.”

“Well, we’ll find out, I guess,” Anthony said. “Need a hand?”

The two friends thanked him but said they were good. They left to go deal with Jason’s things.

“I like him,” Jason said.

“In five seconds?” Tom said.

“Yup, I’m a gut-instinct guy. You know that.”

They went back to the car and collected Jason’s stuff and hauled it up to room 228. It was empty. Apparently his roommate—Jason hadn’t bothered to ask his name—hadn’t arrived yet.

Jason and Tom walked back to the car to say goodbye to Tom’s dad. It was just about dark now, the last bits of dusk fading rapidly. The three of them stood by the car for a second. For some reason, Jason had an almost overwhelming desire to jump back in and leave with Mr. Jefferson. He wondered if Tom was thinking the same thing.

“I better get going,” Mr. Jefferson said. “I want to be on the road by six in the morning, and you boys probably have an early wake-up, too.”

“Drive carefully, Dad,” Tom said, giving his father a hug.

Mr. Jefferson hugged Jason, too, thumping him on the back. “I texted your mothers when we got to the Aberdeen Barn. Do

yourselves a favor and give them a call before you go to bed and let them know you're okay."

They nodded, and he slid into the car and was gone. They watched the car turn out of the parking lot, headed back to Route 20 and Charlottesville.

"We okay?" Jason asked Tom as the taillights disappeared.

"We're fine," Tom said.

"Easy for you to say," Jason said. "You've met your roommate and you like him."

"*You* like him," Tom said. "I haven't passed judgment yet."

They turned and slowly walked back into the dorm together.

3

JASON WAS UNPACKING WHEN HE HEARD A LIGHT KNOCK ON THE DOOR.

He opened it and found a tall, gangly kid with a shock of curly blond hair standing there with several pieces of luggage.

"I'm guessin' you're Jason," the kid said in a very distinct Southern drawl. "I'm Billy Bob Anderson. Looks like we're gonna be roommates." He put out a hand.

Jason took the offered hand while restraining a smile. No one, other than actors, was named Billy Bob in real life.

"Um, sure," Jason said, afraid to actually say *Billy Bob*, because he was afraid he'd burst out laughing and not be able to stop. "Let me help with your stuff."

Billy Bob smiled. "Appreciate it," he said. "The coach who picked me up at the airport just kind of dumped me at the door after I registered. Figured I'd try to get everything up in one trip. Wasn't easy."

Jason took a suitcase and a computer bag, while Billy Bob

brought in another suitcase and what looked like a garment bag. Jason had taken the bed nearer the window, so they piled everything next to the other bed.

The two boys sat down on their beds, looking each other over. Billy Bob was around six feet tall, Jason thought, a couple of inches taller than he was. He was pretty certain he was a wide receiver or a defensive back.

“So,” Billy Bob said, breaking the silence, “I’m gonna take a guess that this is a first for both of us.”

“Being away at boarding school?” Jason asked.

“That too,” Billy Bob said. “Gadsden, Alabama, is a long way from here.”

“So is New York City,” Jason said.

“I reckon,” Billy Bob said. “I ain’t ever been to New York.”

“Well, we’re even, then,” Jason said, “because I’ve never been to Gadsden, Alabama.”

“And probably never will be,” Billy Bob said.

They both laughed.

“That’s not what I’m talkin’ about, though,” the Southerner said. “I was just thinking that I *have* to be the first Billy Bob you’ve ever met, and I *know* you’re the first big-city kid I’ve ever met. So we’re even again.”

“Maybe I’m the first Jewish kid you’ve met, too,” Jason said, taking a guess.

“You’re Jewish?” Billy Bob asked.

Jason looked at him for a moment, wondering if this was some kind of challenge. But he couldn’t see even a hint of malice in the boy’s face, just an innocent-looking smile.

"Not a lot of Jews in Gadsden, huh?" he said.

"Probably about as many as there are Billy Bobs in New York City," he said. "Hey, do you really live *in* the city?"

"West Side of Manhattan," Jason said.

"Is it scary?"

"Probably no scarier than it would be to be Jewish in Gadsden."

Billy Bob cracked up again. "Nah, you'd be fine. I'd take care of you."

"And I'd watch your back in the city," Jason said.

"I'll take you up on that someday," Billy Bob said. "For now, I better get unpacked so we can get some sleep. I hear six-thirty comes early around here. And I'm too beat even to scout out where they got all the freshman girls livin'."

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Tired as he was, Jason took a while to fall asleep, wondering what the next morning would bring. After breakfast they were supposed to get registered for their classes and pick up their books. The first football practice was that afternoon. Classes would start on Tuesday.

Tom knocked on the door at 6:20, and Jason introduced him to Billy Bob. If Tom had a first reaction to Billy Bob's name similar to Jason's, he hid it completely.

"Where's Anthony?" Jason asked.

"Out the door ten minutes ago," Tom said. "I think he wanted to be first in line for breakfast. My sense is the boy eats a *lot*."

As they walked to the dining hall, they began filling in the

blanks on one another's lives. Jason had been wrong: Billy Bob wasn't a receiver or a DB; he was a quarterback.

"Looks like we'll be competing, I guess," Tom said.

"Guess so," Billy Bob said. "The coach made a big point of telling me that TGP's top two quarterbacks were graduating. Guess I shoulda asked how many guys they were recruitin' at the position."

"My guess is, place like this, they overrecruit," Tom said. "They recruit five guys at a position and let two rise to the top. They figure the others will transfer."

"So you mean there will probably be five or six receivers when I get out there this afternoon?" Jason said.

"More like ten," Billy Bob answered, and they all laughed.

Jason could tell from looking at his best friend that he and Tom were thinking the same thing: this guy could be Tom's competition to be the starter, and he was a good guy. That was less than ideal.

"Well," Jason said, "I guess we'll find out soon enough."

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By the time they made it to the practice field, Jason was too tired to be all that concerned about how many wide receivers TGP had recruited.

The morning was spent shuttling around the campus, which was less familiar than Jason thought it would be—in part because he hadn't gone anywhere near a classroom during the seven-on-seven camp. New students had to pick up their books in each

class to give them a dry run on how to find those classrooms the next day.

It was hot, and the late-summer Virginia humidity hung over the campus like a curtain, weighing everyone down, especially as books accumulated in backpacks.

Jason was ready for a nap by the time they got to the cafeteria at lunch, but all the freshmen had to go to a postlunch orientation meeting, during which Mr. Gatch introduced them to every single person working at the school. Or so it seemed.

By the time they were walking down the long, winding hill from the academic and residential halls, it was after two.

“Do you remember the place being this big when we were here last year?” Tom asked Jason.

Jason had been thinking the same thing. The three dormitories—Lee, Jackson, and Monroe—all named for famous Virginians, two of whom had been Confederate generals—were massive.

They had stayed in Jackson the previous summer and, although they had crossed the quad to the dining hall every day, they hadn’t really been aware of the four buildings that housed the classrooms. Now they were.

The athletic facilities would have made most colleges proud. The football building had three levels, with locker rooms in the basement, a weight room and administrative offices on the main floor, and coaches’ offices and classrooms for team meetings on the second floor.

The two adjacent athletic buildings housed the rest of the boys’ teams and all of the girls’ teams.

Jason remembered crossing the Columbia University campus with his dad en route to basketball games there. This place was a good deal bigger—and more spread out.

When they arrived at the TGP football building, they had to go through another registration process, checking in at the equipment cage so they could be given all their practice gear and assigned lockers.

When Tom asked if number 10 was available—in honor of Eli Manning—the equipment manager looked at him as if he had asked for the keys to his house.

“We don’t even let the seniors pick their numbers,” he growled. “Why in the world would we care what number a freshman wants?”

He shoved the gear at him, and Jason noticed the number on the back of the top was 81. Tom was about to point out that 81 wasn’t a quarterback’s number but stopped when Jason put a hand on his shoulder.

“Later,” Jason said softly.

Jason was very pleased with being given number 19. He remembered that Lance Alworth, the San Diego Chargers Hall of Fame wide receiver, had worn 19. He liked that.

“Willis Reed,” Tom said, remembering that the great Knicks center had worn 19. “Johnny Unitas, too.”

“Lance Alworth,” Jason said. “Wide receiver.”

“Got it,” Tom said.

The freshmen, as expected, were tucked into the back corner of the locker room. That wasn’t a problem, though, because the locker room was huge. Jason guessed there were about eighty

players getting into their practice outfits—thankfully, they had been told to wear shorts and no pads for the first workout—and the room would easily have space for a hundred players if need be.

Every player's locker had his name on it, lined up alphabetically. Jason found himself between Gerry Richards and Larry Ross. Both were clearly linemen. They all shook hands and said hello and then dressed in near silence. The rest of the locker room was much louder, old acquaintances being renewed. The freshmen eyed one another, sizing everyone up. The older players, who had already proved themselves for at least one year, were a lot looser than the new kids on the block.

Tom and Jason followed the older guys down the hall and onto the practice field. There were actually two practice fields: one had FieldTurf—the currently in-vogue artificial surface—and one real grass. During the camp, they had worked out on the FieldTurf every day, but the coaches had told them the grass field existed because some of TGP's road games were played on real grass and the team would practice on it during those weeks. The stadium, which Jason knew seated about ten thousand fans, was on the other side of the two practice fields and was apparently used a couple of days a week for practice once the season began.

They made their way across the nearest practice field to a small bleacher. Everyone sat down to wait for the coaches. There was clearly a pecking order here, too: the seniors sat in the first two rows, the juniors in the next two, and so on up to the freshmen at the top.

At precisely 3:00, the coaches walked across the practice

field to the bleachers, led by Coach Johnson. Jason had googled him when the possibility of attending the seven-on-seven camp at TGP had first come up. He was fifty-one years old and was what was known as a football lifer. He had gotten the nickname “Bobo” growing up in Macon, Georgia, because when he was born his older sister couldn’t say “Bobby,” which was what his mother had wanted to call him. He had gone on to “live the dream”—his words in one interview—of playing at the University of Georgia and had been a starting linebacker for three years with a reputation for hitting anything that moved and hitting it hard. He had been honorable mention All-American as a senior and All–Southeastern Conference as a junior and a senior.

But he’d gone undrafted because he wasn’t considered big enough at six-two, 220, to play linebacker in the NFL, and he wasn’t fast enough to play safety. He had been invited to the Atlanta Falcons camp and been cut, then signed with the New York Giants practice squad—where he lasted, if Jason remembered correctly, for six weeks. Then he’d signed with the Montreal Alouettes of the Canadian Football League, but a torn knee ligament, an ACL, had ended his career.

The next year he’d gone back to Georgia as a graduate assistant. He’d risen through the ranks to become the linebacker coach under Ray Goff. He’d kept his job when Goff was fired and remained there when Jim Donnan and then Mark Richt took over the top coaching spot. But in 2005, Richt had passed him over to bring someone in from the outside as defensive coordinator and Johnson had left to take the job at TGP, assured that

Mr. Gatch wanted to build a football program that competed nationally and had facilities comparable to IMG Academy's.

According to one story Jason had read, it was now considered only a matter of time before Johnson left TGP for either an NFL coordinator job, a college head-coaching job, or a coordinator's position at one of the big-time college programs. In the meantime, though, the Thomas Gatch Prep Patriots had gone 24–2 the last two seasons.

Coach Johnson looked to Jason like he could still play linebacker. There was no sag in his body, no sign of anything resembling a belly. He stood in front of his players ramrod straight, eyes hidden behind mirrored sunglasses, a TGP baseball cap pulled tightly over his head.

"Upperclassmen, welcome home," he said, smiling—an expression that really didn't fit his face. "Freshmen, other newcomers, welcome to your new home."

From there, he introduced the players to the fourteen assistant coaches, some of whom Jason and Tom had worked with at the seven-on-seven camp, and four of whom were new to the staff. Jason knew that Mark Cruikshank, the quarterbacks coach, and Terry Reilly, who coached the wide receivers, were both new. They were young and had been assistant coaches at other high schools in Virginia. He figured a coach who knew none of the players—as opposed to someone who had already worked with some of them—was a good thing for him and for Tom. Everyone would be starting from the same spot in working with his position coach.

"We'll ramp up slowly this first week," Coach Johnson said.

“We want all of you to learn and relearn our offense and our defense. Beginning tomorrow, we’ll spend forty-five minutes each afternoon before practice in the classroom so your coaches can teach you the plays and the play calls. By next week, you’ll be expected to know them, so be sure you are listening *and* taking notes in your playbooks during those sessions. You’ll have academic homework each night, and you’ll have football homework, too.” He paused as if waiting for questions.

There were none.

He went on. “Today, we just want to go through some basic drills. We’ll get you with your position coaches and then work on sprints, agility, ball handling. Linemen, you’ll report to the sleds when the skill position guys start on their drills.

“I’ve introduced the coaches by position, so each of you report to your position coach when we’re finished here. If you are in doubt about your position—or you’re not sure what your best position will be, check with the appropriate coordinator. Clear?”

There were nods and a lot of “Yes, sirs,” particularly from the upperclassmen. Jason felt some adrenaline beginning to surge through him. He couldn’t wait to run some sprints and run under some footballs—preferably thrown in his direction by Tom.

As if thinking the same thing, Tom nudged him slightly in the ribs and whispered, “Ready?”

“Born ready, Bull’s-Eye,” Jason whispered back.

“Okay,” Coach Johnson said, raising his voice. “Coaches, spread out! Players report on the whistle!”

He blew his whistle sharply and everyone began scrambling

off the bleachers. Jason kept his eyes on Coach Reilly, who was jogging in the direction of the end zone to the right.

“See you in a few,” Tom said, trotting in the direction of Coach Cruikshank, who was headed for the far sideline.

Coach Reilly was holding a clipboard when Jason and the other receivers arrived where he was standing.

“Just to make sure that everyone who is here should be here, answer up when you hear your name,” he said.

Jason looked him over. He was young—no more than thirty—and was wearing the same outfit as all the other coaches: blue cap with TGP on it, white shirt emblazoned with GATCH PREP FOOTBALL, blue shorts, and blue-and-white sneakers.

He began ticking off names in alphabetical order. There were, by Jason’s count, twelve receivers standing in the circle around the coach. Jason wasn’t listening so much as sizing up the competition, trying to figure out whom he was going to be competing against for playing time.

“Jefferson!” Coach Reilly said.

That got Jason’s attention. Why was he calling Tom’s name? Or was he? It was certainly possible that there was more than one player named Jefferson on the team. But no one responded.

Coach Reilly tried again. “Jefferson!” he said, his voice a bit louder.

Still no answer.

Jason put a hand up. “Excuse me, Coach?” he said in a timid voice.

“You Jefferson?” Coach Reilly said.

“No, sir, but—”

Coach Reilly stopped him. “Let me finish the roll and then tell me why you felt the need to interrupt.”

That reply didn’t give Jason a warm and fuzzy feeling about his new coach. He waited for Coach Reilly to call his name. He never did. When the coach had finished calling the rest of the names on the list he looked up from the clipboard at Jason. Everyone else was also looking at him.

“And you are?” Coach Reilly’s tone was remarkably snide, given that Jason had only said three words.

“I’m Jason Roddin,” he answered, feeling his stomach beginning to turn over—although he wasn’t exactly sure why.

“Well, Rodding, you aren’t on the list of wide receivers,” Reilly said. “Could you be in the wrong place?”

Jason ignored the mispronunciation of his name, but he was beginning to think that maybe he *was* in the wrong place. And it had nothing to do with the list he apparently wasn’t on.

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JASON WAS STILL TRYING TO FIGURE OUT HOW TO RESPOND TO COACH

Reilly's question about whether he was in the wrong place when he noticed Tom and a coach he couldn't identify walking in their direction.

"Coach Reilly, I think we've got a couple of newcomers who are a bit confused," the coach said as he and Tom reached the receiver group.

"Well, Coach Ingelsby, I've got one youngster here who isn't on the receiver list, so maybe you can clear things up for all of us," Coach Reilly answered, a snarky smile—at least it looked snarky to Jason—on his face.

Jason realized then that the other coach was Don Ingelsby, the offensive coordinator; he'd heard of him but hadn't ever met him during the seven-on-seven camp.

"This is Thomas Jefferson," Coach Ingelsby said, putting an

arm around Tom. “He thought he was supposed to be with the quarterbacks. I’m betting you have Jason Roddin here with you when he should be with the QBs.”

“That explains it,” Coach Reilly said.

“Roddin, you need to report to Coach Cruikshank—and you better do it on the double.” He smiled the same snarky smile. “Jefferson, better late than never. Welcome.”

Jason looked at Tom, who shrugged his shoulders as if to say, *I don’t get it either*.

“Coach, excuse me,” Jason said, “but there’s been a mistake.”

“And we’ve cleared it up,” Coach Ingelsby said before Jason could go any further.

Jason shook his head. “No, sir, I don’t think so—”

Coach Ingelsby held up a hand to stop him. “Roddin, this is your first day, so I’m going to cut you some slack. But you need to learn that at TGP you don’t contradict your coaches—especially on the practice field. When practice is over you can ask your position coach a *question* if you’re confused about something. Now I’d suggest you get over to the QB group in a hurry, because you’re about five seconds away from a long run and I doubt that’s how you want to start your first practice.”

Once again, everyone was looking at Jason. Once again, his thought was that the coach had it wrong; Jason *did* want to run—and keep going until he got to I-64 and could hitch back to New York from there.

Instead, without saying another word, he began walking,

then jogging, in the direction of midfield, where the quarterbacks were gathered.

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When he arrived, much to his surprise, Coach Cruikshank didn't give him a hard time.

"Some confusion I take it, Jason?" he said. "We'll straighten it out after practice, okay?"

Jason was surprised by the friendly tone, and by being called by his first name. He just nodded and went to line up for the sprints that were apparently first on the practice agenda.

His adrenaline still up, Jason finished well ahead of the other quarterbacks at all three distances—even the 10-yard sprint, where he finished a full step ahead of Billy Bob, who was second.

"Why are you here?" Billy Bob said quietly as they walked back to the starting line. "I thought Tom was the QB."

"He is," Jason said, but didn't have time to say anything more.

When it came time to throw, Jason didn't do badly, but the star was Billy Bob. The kid could throw the ball over the moon, Jason decided after watching him. He had to admit, the Alabama boy's arm was stronger than Tom's, but he'd still bet on Tom when it came to accuracy. There was one other QB who caught Jason's eye—Jamie Dixon, a rangy kid who looked to be about six foot four and who, he remembered hearing, had been tabbed as the heir apparent to the two quarterbacks who had graduated.

The sun was still blazing hot and the humidity still thick enough to peel when Coach Johnson's whistle brought all the players and position coaches to the midfield area.

"Take a knee," Coach Johnson ordered, and they all did. Tom had veered away from the receivers and was kneeling next to Jason.

"Good first day," Coach Johnson said. He pointed in the direction of the top row of stands, where cameras were set up. "As you know, we tape everything that goes on here. I know it's all digital nowadays, but I'm old-school and I still call it tape. By the time we practice tomorrow, the coaches will have some comments for you based on what they see on the tape tomorrow morning.

"They'll also start scheduling you for individual tape sessions and, once we get all the plays in place this week, we'll spend some time on tape before practices. Tape, gentlemen, is a key to opening the door to football success. Come to those sessions ready to focus and work!"

They were all nodding. Jason felt himself dreading tape sessions already.

"We'll scrimmage on Saturday," Coach Johnson continued, "and that will go a long way toward establishing a depth chart for the opener. We only get two weeks of preseason practice, so come prepared mentally and physically every day." He paused, then finished, "Okay, that's it. Hit the showers."

Everyone stood up, and most of the players began walking slowly in the direction of the locker room. Billy Bob came over to where Tom and Jason were standing.

"So what happened?" he asked, glancing around as if wanting to be sure no one else was listening. "Why'd they switch y'all?"

"No idea," Tom said.

"I think we need to talk to Coach Johnson," Jason said.

"Bad idea," Tom said. "My guess is that this is a place where, if you go over someone's head, it won't be looked on kindly. I think we go to the position coaches."

"Equally bad idea," Jason said. "I was only with Coach Reilly a couple of minutes, but my sense is that he's a serious jerk."

Tom nodded. "Unfortunately, your sense is correct."

"Why don't you compromise?" Billy Bob said. "Go to the offensive coordinator. He'd be the one who had input, if not final say, into position assignments anyway."

"Coach Ingelsby?" Jason said. "He didn't strike me as a charmer either."

"If you're looking for charm, you're in the wrong place," Billy Bob said.

"I've been thinking that most of the afternoon," Tom said.

Jason was about to agree when they looked up and saw Coach Ingelsby walking in their direction.

"Ready or not . . ." Billy Bob muttered, and he turned and headed to the locker room, leaving Jason and Tom to meet their fate, in the form of their coordinator.

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"You guys like standing in the hot sun?" Coach Ingelsby said, taking off his cap to wipe his brow, the hint of a smile curling his lips just a bit. The effect was more frightening than friendly.

“No, sir,” Tom said. “But we were hoping to talk to you for a moment.”

Coach Ingelsby turned his palms up and spread them. “Talk,” he said. “Floor’s yours.”

Jason and Tom glanced at each other. Tom was a lot better speaking on his feet than Jason, so he took the lead.

“Coach, we think there’s been some confusion—”

“About what?” Coach Ingelsby broke in. It was pretty clear that he wasn’t feeling terribly patient, despite saying that the boys had the floor.

Tom picked up on the fact that he’d better cut to the chase. “I’m a quarterback,” he said. “Jason’s a receiver. Somehow I ended up today with the receivers, and Jason ended up with the quarterbacks.”

Coach Ingelsby folded his arms. “You boys were both in seven-on-seven camp a year ago, weren’t you?”

They both nodded.

“You know we taped everything there, just like we tape practices here, don’t you?”

They both knew it because one of the things the camp did was offer to let players buy their tapes to look at and analyze after they went home. They both nodded again.

“So don’t you think that the staff looked at your tapes from the camp before we decided where to assign you?”

“Did you look at Jason’s sprint times?” Tom asked. “Did you look at how he runs a route and catches anything within his air space?”

“Did you watch Tom throw?” Jason added.

The curled smile disappeared from Coach Ingelsby's face.

"If you two would like to apply for coaching jobs here so you can make decisions on who should play what positions, feel free. If you get hired, I'll be glad to listen to your input on every player we have on the offensive side of the football. Until then, do me and yourselves a favor: keep your opinions to yourselves unless I *ask* for them."

"Do you ever ask players for their opinions?" Tom said.

"No," Coach Ingelsby said. He turned and walked away.

Jason watched Coach Ingelsby stalk across the field toward the locker room without glancing back. "I thought that went well, didn't you?"

Tom didn't answer for a moment, ignoring Jason's joke. He had his arms folded, his helmet dangling from his right hand. Finally, he shook his head.

"Look, these are bad guys," he said. "At least this Ingelsby guy is, and so is Reilly. Haven't seen enough of Coach Johnson yet to know if he's the nice guy we met at seven-on-seven camp or—"

"He's not," Jason said. "Remember, he was recruiting us then—trying to charm us—sell us on this place. He's done selling. We've already bought. My guess is that the real Bobo is as big a jerk as Ingelsby and Reilly, and they're taking their cues from him."

"Probably true," Tom said. "We knew this was a jock factory when we signed up. I think we can live with that, especially going for free. I can deal with being yelled at by coaches, and so can you." He thought for a moment, then added, "But there's something rotten in Denmark."

“Huh?” Jason said.

“Come on, you read *Hamlet* in English last year, didn’t you?”

Jason shook his head. “CliffsNotes,” he said. “Got a B on the paper. What in the world are you talking about?”

“One of the most famous quotes in literature, ‘Something is rotten in the state of Denmark.’”

“Oh yeah,” Jason said, still embarrassed but trying to recover. “I remember now. Hamlet says it.”

Tom shook his head. “No, Marcellus says it in the first act. But he’s saying that something is wrong with the way Denmark is being ruled and—”

“I get it. Something’s rotten in the state of Virginia—at TGP.”

Tom sighed. “Close enough.”

“Well, sweet prince, we better go shower before we get in trouble for being late for dinner.”

“*Et tu*, Jason?”

“Whaa?”

“Forget it,” Tom said, throwing his arm around his friend. “One Shakespeare play a day is enough. Let’s go eat.”

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They walked over to the dining hall with Billy Bob, who was already out of the shower by the time they got to the locker room but had waited for them.

Even though he’d eaten three meals a day there during the seven-on-seven camp, Jason still found the dining hall—the

Robert G. Durant Dining Hall, apparently named for a donor rather than a general or a former president—overwhelming.

The room was big enough to easily fit every TGP student into it with space to spare. It had seemed relatively empty the previous summer since there were only about four hundred campers—football players, boys’ and girls’ basketball and soccer players—eating in there every day. The skylights built into the high ceiling seemed to make everything in the room shine.

Now, with the entire student body gathering three times a day for meals, it was quite loud, despite the high ceiling. Even amid the noise, Jason couldn’t help but notice that, although no one had been assigned a seat, there seemed to be very few coed tables and that for the most part players from each different team sat with one another.

“So what happened out there with Ingelsby?” Billy Bob asked as they loaded their trays in the cafeteria line. “Y’all in trouble?”

“Not yet,” Jason answered.

They filled him in on the conversation.

Billy Bob shook his head. “Makes no sense, really,” he said. “They need a quarterback this year, and I *know* good old Coach Johnson doesn’t like losin’. In fact, my daddy says there’s been talk around the Southeastern Conference that if Brian Daboll gets a job, Coach Johnson might be in line to be the next offensive coordinator at Alabama. *If* we’re good this season.”

“Why would he leave a job where he has absolute power to be a coordinator and have to work for someone—even if it is Nick Saban?” Tom asked.

“Because the head coach here only gets paid a hundred and fifty grand a year,” Billy Bob said. “The coordinators at Alabama make a million-plus.”

“Coordinators?” Jason said, stunned.

Billy Bob laughed. “You boys just don’t understand the South. *Everyone* in the Southeastern Conference gets paid a lot of money.”

They found their table just as the school chaplain was walking to a podium in the front of the room to deliver the premeal blessing. As quietly as they could, they slid into three empty chairs near the back of the room that Tom’s roommate, Anthony, had saved for them.

“Welcome home, ladies and gentlemen,” the chaplain said before starting his blessing.

“If this is home, how do I run away?” Jason whispered to Tom, causing him to snort with laughter.

“Hey, freshmen, you need to shut up and show some respect during the blessing,” some kid hissed at them from across the table.

“Blessing hasn’t started yet,” Tom hissed back.

The hisser didn’t respond because the blessing had gotten under way and he had bowed his head.

“Dear Lord,” prayed the chaplain, “we thank thee for our food today. May we be faithful stewards of thy bounty. Grant us the grace to walk where your son Jesus’s feet have gone . . .”

Jason wouldn’t bow his head for a prayer mentioning Jesus as the son of God (and he thought praying about someone’s feet was an odd choice for mealtime). Tom didn’t bow his

head because he believed that all prayer should be silent and private.

Somehow, the hisser took time out of his own praying to make note that neither of them had bowed his head or murmured an *Amen* when the chaplain finished. "What's the matter, you big-city boys don't believe in God?" he snarled.

Jason started to answer, but Tom put a hand on his arm in an I-got-this gesture.

"How about we all mind our own business?" Tom said.

The hisser glared at Tom but said nothing.

The kid next to him, whom Jason recognized as Ronnie Thompson, one of the other quarterbacks, looked at Tom and said, "Are you Muslim or something? You pray to Allah?"

"I'm not, but if I were, so what?" Tom said. "You pray to whomever you want, and I'll pray to whomever I want, and we'll leave it at that."

"Except you guys don't pray at all, do you?" the hisser said.

Billy Bob jumped in. "Fellas, I'm a good old boy from Gadsden, Alabama, and I go to church every Sunday and pray to the Lord Jesus Christ, just like you do. But at this school we've got folks from all over, and we all"—he glanced at Jason and Tom—"better learn that not everyone's the same as us. Now can we all just eat? I'm starvin'."

"I say amen to that," Tom said.

There was a good deal of glaring in response to that comment, but Anthony reached for the plate of chicken in front of him and the table fell silent as everyone began chowing down.

Amen, Jason thought, *to that*.