

CHAPTER 1

In eleven hours, seventeen minutes and eight seconds my life could change forever.

Or not.

I can feel every second ticking inside my chest as if my seventeen-year-old heart knows what's at stake. What has to happen.

Or not.

I hate the *or not*. I want a life. Not this piss poor excuse of one I've been stuck with. The kind of life that sucks every single minute of every single day...except when I'm on the football field. Only then do I come alive.

I need a break tonight. With less than a year left in high school, this is the only chance I have to leave this podunk town behind.

Everyone else gets a break. Why can't I?

Why aren't the scouts coming to see me? Why are they coming to look at Walker's defensive line instead of me? They're good, no doubt, but I hold my own every time we play them. I put up good numbers against them and have set school records already. I've trained harder than any other player I know and have paid my dues. It's my turn.

Trying to finish my Algebra homework, I draw in a deep breath and force it out. If only I could force the darkness inside me out, too. The place that hides all the taunts people have unloaded on me my whole life every time I tried to prove I was better than white trash. Their words hide and snicker inside my head, waiting until I score another touchdown then poke me and whisper, "You're just a big fish in a small pond. A tadpole in a mud hole actually."

That's all going to change tonight when I prove to the scouts and this whole damned town that I'm somebody. That I'm going to make it out of this God-forsaken town.

I'm huddled up in the corner of the weight room when Coach walks in. The lights are off, so it startles him when he flips them on and sees me sitting on a weight bench next to the window doing my homework in the early morning light. "Slaughter," he yells, "what're you doin' in here?" Coach only has one volume. Loud!

"Finishing Algebra. Got a test today." I shift on the bench and face him.

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

"Seven. Gym door was open."

Coach doesn't know it, but I'm always here at seven in the morning. This season anyhow. I bust my ass on the field and off. If I want to get a scholarship I have to have the grades too, so I'm here every morning after work studying and finishing my homework.

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

I cock my head sideways as I shove my book in my bag.

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

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

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

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

"I'm sorry, Slaughter. Rules are the rules, and if I break them for you all the other boys

will expect the same thing. Just because you're the number one running back in the region doesn't mean you don't have to follow my rules."

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

"Sorry, Coach."

"So am I, Slaughter. So am I," he says as I leave.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Oh yeah," Jenny Lee says. "I forgot to print mine. Will you print it out for me?" She reaches in her bag and pulls out a thumb drive and throws it at me. I would say she threw it to

me, except for the fact that she throws like a girl and it plops to the ground about five feet away and skids another ten.

“Better hope it’s not broken.” I lean over and pick it up.

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

Jenny Lee’s more like my Sully than me. She comes from money. She almost smells like that crisp, clean scent of freshly printed bills. So when she says it’s no big deal and she’ll get another one, she’s not lying. Twenty dollars is nothing to her. It means about three overnight hours at my job to me.

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

School comes pretty easy for Sully and Jenny Lee, but I work my ass off for every A and B that I get. Life in a small town does have its advantages when you’re the number one back and everybody in town puts their Friday night hopes on your shoulders. It means that teachers are a little more lenient with grades and cops will look the other way for little things like drinking and stuff.

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

“How much?” I ask the library lady behind the counter.

“Nothing.” She must notice my strange look. “You’re that Slaughter kid, aren’t you?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Where have you been,” Sully shouts across the commons.

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

“Jenny Lee said you’d be right back.” Sully nods toward Jenny Lee and the other hens.

“Well, I’m back now.” I grab a spot on the bench next to Jenny Lee and finish what’s left of my biscuit.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER 2

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

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

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

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

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

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

“What the hell?”

“Chemistry test.”

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

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

Then I join the guys as they get ready to take the field. The cheerleaders have the banner ready, and we hide out in back. The man on the PA system runs through a whole slew of announcements and sponsor mentions. Sully's dad is one of the biggest sponsors of the booster club. I don't know if we would even have new uniforms if Sully wasn't the starting QB.

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

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

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

"NO SIR!"

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

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

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

"YES SIR!"

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

"YES SIR!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yeah, Coach?" Sully asks.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The oversized coin flips through the air and light glints off of it in bursts. It hits the turf on its edge and bounces up and circles before it falls flat.

“It’s tails.” The referee pockets the coin and looks to me and Sully.

“We’ll receive.”

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

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

“Don’t matter. Your ass is grass.”

The referee shoots him a look but doesn’t say anything. Probably because that’s nothing compared to the crap that gets said throughout the game.

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

I look around the stadium and pull my helmet over my bushy brown hair out of habit before remembering I’m not going in. The electric energy zaps through the metal bleachers and I see a group of men covered in Tar Heel blue standing near our end zone. I want to be the first person they see popping over that line, but it doesn’t look like that’s going to happen. I take a

deep breath and set my helmet back on the bench. Just about the perfect Carolina chill on a September night and it's killing me not to be going in.

The whistle blows and Walker's kicker boots the ball high into the air. It isn't very deep, but it hangs in the air long enough for their team to get halfway down the field. As soon as it plunks into Ferguson's hands, they swarm him like an angry hive of bees. This isn't going to be easy.

We take the field with the ball on the twenty-one yard line, and I drown out about as much as I can to focus on the game. If I have to sit, I may as well study their defense.

Three and out. The blue wall, as they like to call themselves, is much tougher than they look. They waste no time pounding our O-line into the ground and swarming Sully before he has time to react. By the time they get back to the sideline, Coach is fuming. Obviously his plan to stick it to them is a terrible one.

"That's the best you could do, Sully?" Sully is used to Coach yelling at him. Heck, we all are.

Sully pulls grass from his facemask as he removes his helmet. "I don't think they're human, Coach. Besides, what do you expect without Slaughter?" Sully looks to our offensive line as they struggle for air.

"Get over there with Punkin and figure out what y'all are gonna need to do when we get back on that field."

Punkin is the offensive coordinator. He's been with Coach for a long time now. Used to play for Coach over in Texas years ago. He isn't the smartest guy in the world, but he does know offense.

“Take a seat, fellas.” Punkin pushes towels off the bench. “We got us a bit of a situation here.”

“That’s quite an understatement, Punkin.” I snatch a Gatorade bottle and squirt some in my mouth. More out of habit than anything else, because I sure haven’t done anything from the sideline to work up a sweat.

They go over a few plays and some ideas, but nothing makes much of a difference during the first half. When halftime arrives, it’s a miracle that they’re only up on us by two touchdowns. If I don’t score soon, I can kiss a scholarship goodbye.

Halftime is over and it’s my turn. “Let’s go,” Sully yells and I follow him onto the field. “You ready?”

“Born ready, Sully. You know that,” I say. “Take the snap, drop back, and pitch it to me.”

“Right side first,” Sully says.

Once we huddle up, it’s clear that Coach Cromwell bit off of a chunk of their rear ends. The offensive line wears a look of fury on their faces. Their guys are definitely bigger than ours and much faster, but our boys are determined.

Sully calls the play and we take our place on the ball. We have decent field position after they punt.

The ball snaps and flies through the air. I take off to the right side of the field and Sully pivots on his heels and tosses it out to me. The Wildcats choke the middle like they did most of the first half, so it catches them off-guard when the ball whips out to the side and nobody’s there to stop me. I’m easily ten yards down field when someone flies up and crashes into me like a freight train. We hit the ground hard, but I don’t care. A first down and a couple extra yards pump up the lifeless crowd. It’s the first thing we’ve done all night to get them excited.

I jog back to the huddle and make sure not to let anyone know that their safety got me good. My head still spins when I join the guys. I'll have to keep a better eye on number thirty-seven.

"Nice run," Bean says to me.

"Way to hold 'em off," I say. "Now let's do it again."

Bean stares at Sully. "Damn straight. Let's do this."

Whatever Coach Cromwell said to them seems to have done the trick. We move the ball down field like we're playing against a pee-wee team. I get a few more big runs, and our wide-receiver blows their safety away for about thirty yards. We have first and ten on the eighteen yard line.

"It's coming to you." Sully drops to one knee. "You're going to do what you do best, Slaughter. Bust it up the middle."

Sweat finally pours down our faces and a cloud of steam rises into the night sky. The big boys breathe heavy, but they do their job. They're stopping that blue wall from advancing. They haven't been able to push them back yet, but they hold them long enough to give Sully some breathing room. And on a night like tonight, that's all I ask.

"You got it." I hold my hand to the center of the huddle. "I need y'all to make me a hole. It don't have to be big."

"You got it," Bean says.

"Rebels on three."

Hands in the middle, we shout in unison and make our way to the line of scrimmage.

As I get ready and the guys head to the line, I look to the men dressed in baby blue. I point at them and give them a wink. I know we're too far away for them to see me, but it makes me feel better.

I line up behind Sully. When he begins the snap count, I take off to the left in a slight jog. This causes the defensive line to shift slightly. The corner and safeties shift even more. We have two receivers line up on the right side just in front of me. Their defense takes the bait.

I slow my pace when I hear Sully call blue. Then stop in my tracks and wait. Finally, the center snaps the ball. Sully is in shotgun formation, so when the receivers take off down field, it doesn't surprise me that Walker's defense covers them up.

A split second later, I dart for the middle, and Sully meets me with a shuffle pass. I stick the ball tight in the folds of my left arm and cut up field. There isn't much room between the center and left guard.

I bust up the seam and find myself in open field. Since everyone thinks the play is to the right, their entire defense is off balance once I clear the secondary. I've got daylight for about ten yards, so I run as fast as my legs will carry me. Within seconds, number thirty-two catches up with me, and I stare at grass again.

After popping back up, I jog to the huddle. I don't quite hit the target, but I put us on the seven yard line.

"Helluva run, Slaughter," Sully says as I put my hands on my knees. "Need a second or two?"

I'm breathing hard, but my juices are flowing. Momentum is on our side. "Nah," I say as I suck in air. "I'm good. Let's do this."

Coach is signaling a play to Sully. It's a screen pass to our tight in, Wildeman. Sully nods his head and relays the play to us. "Coming to you, Wild Man."

"No, it's not." My words surprise Wildeman, but he knows not to question me. "I'm getting that ball. I got us here, I'm taking it home."

"You sure, Slaughter?"

I look to Sully. "Never been more sure in my life."

"Coach is gonna have my ass, ya know?"

"Let me worry about that." Sully knows me well enough to know when I'm in the zone.

"We've got this boys," Sully says.

Nobody says a word.

"Fox." Sully grabs Jeremy Fox's facemask and pulls Fox to him. "You need to get to the far corner of the end zone quick and give me a target. Make them think you're getting the ball. Got it?"

Fox simply nods. My guess is that he's about as nervous as the rest of us. Not Sully though. He never gets nervous. A lifetime of getting his way will do that to a guy, I guess.

"Slaughter." Sully looks at me but knows better than to grab my facemask. "We've got those scouts here from UNC, and I've got just one question for you before I snap that ball."

"What's that, Sully?"

"You ready to show them what we got? You ready to change your life?"

The only thing I have on my mind at that very moment is running into that end zone and right up to the scouts. Time they know who Dusty Slaughter is.

"Let's do this."

The play clock winds down, so we hustle to the line. Everything goes as planned and the center snaps the ball. Sully pitches it out to me and I cut for the corner. Unfortunately for me, Walker's defense didn't fall for anything.

I find myself facing an ocean of blue jerseys. I jump over the guy diving for my ankles and into the crowd around the two yard line. Instead, I'm met with a shoulder to the chest. I'm at the top of the pile of blue like on a wave about to crash against the shore. As I go down, I'm hit by someone else and it spins me around. Somehow, my feet find the ground and I break free from the pile, my back toward the end zone. I turn and run.

The stadium erupts. Touchdown!

When I look to the corner, my world crashes down around me. The scouts are gone.