

1

Chase Mayberry could hear the hoot of a train's whistle, only there was no train.

On a warm Alabama afternoon Chase lay crumpled at the forty-yard line, his mouth open, his tongue on the dirt. Seconds earlier he had stood tall in the pocket, eyes out for a receiver, when a linebacker blitzed on his blindside. The rusher had a clear path to his prize. He rammed his helmet into Chase's back and mashed him to the turf. When Chase landed, his helmet snapped loose and dribbled off.

Ten rows up in the stands, Chase's parents held hands. "Dirty hit," Ernie Mayberry grunted. "But you watch, he'll shake it off."

Suzy Mayberry peeked through the fingers on her free hand. Chase hadn't moved. "He's hurt bad, Ernie."

Ernie kept his next thought to himself. *Get up, son, your future's ridin' on it.*

On the field, Chase felt a hand on his shoulder. "Chase, you hear me?" asked Chet Ponus, his coach. Chase's eyes flicked open. "What happened?"

Coach Ponus waved to the sideline and two medics ran out. They used a backboard to immobilize Chase and then eased him onto a stretcher. An ambulance rolled up. The trainers lifted Chase in, one climbing in beside him. As the driver steered toward the gates past the end zone, the Old South High cheerleaders gathered arm in arm. One was sobbing, Lacy Crooks, Chase's girl.

Suzy Mayberry watched the ambulance until it rolled out of sight. Her dinner started to churn. She knelt on the footrail, squeezed her face into the gap, and heaved into the dark dirt below. The splat was the only sound in the stadium.

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An hour later, Chase opened his eyes. He was in bed, but not his bed. His parents sat beside him. “Where am I?” Chase asked.

“We’re at the hospital, Chase,” Suzy said. Ernie added, “Some goon pancaked you. You remember that?”

Chase blinked a few times. “I saw some stars, heard a train. Don’t recall the hit, or the game.”

“You were dynamite, threw four touchdown passes,” Ernie raved. “When you got hit, we were up eleven points. Won by three.”

Silence, until Ernie rubbed his hands. “Just think, Chase, in two weeks you’re playin’ for the state title.”

Suzy glared at Ernie. A physician stepped in, lanky, cropped dark hair, glasses. The tag on his white coat read, ‘Coleman.’ “How is he, Doctor?” Suzy asked.

“He’s got a concussion,” Dr. Coleman said. “We’ll keep him overnight.”

Ernie stood and nodded at the door. “Doc, got a minute?”

The doctor followed Ernie into the hall. “How bad is it?” Ernie asked.

“It’s bad,” Dr. Coleman said. “He needs to lay low for a while.”

“How long’s a while?”

“A few weeks, at least.”

“A few weeks?” Ernie griped.

“Concussions are serious business, sir,” Dr. Coleman said. “A violent blow like the one Chase took causes the brain to slide against the inner walls of the skull. When that happens –”

Ernie stopped him with an open palm. “I know concussions, Doc. Look, in two weeks Chase has the biggest game of his life, scholarship ridin’ on it. You’ll clear him, right?”

Dr. Coleman swallowed. “I don’t see Chase playing football in two weeks.”

Ernie tugged at his gray goatee, the only hair above his neck. "I'll be back in the morning, Doc. Let's see what you think then." Ernie stepped away but turned back. "Chase's prognosis, you talk only to me, got it?"

Dr. Coleman nodded.

Ernie and Suzy stayed until eight o'clock, when a few of Chase's teammates showed up. The last player to see Chase was Luke Butkus, Old South middle linebacker. Luke was the meanest dude Chase had ever met, no one a close second. He wore his black hair buzzed close to his big head, sideburns curling like fish hooks along a strong jaw. Luke's dad, Teddy, worked with Ernie at the paper mill. Teddy and Ernie didn't get along. Chase and Luke got along only because they wore the same uniform. Off the field, Chase was too tame for Luke. On this night Luke didn't say much, but his parting message rang clear. "Heal your ass, Chase. We need you, bad."

Chase's final visitor was Lacy Crooks. He saw her eyes first, always did. Puffy now, but pale blue, like a summer sky, like magnets for other eyes. Thick hair the color of straw tumbled off her shoulders. She flashed a smile that gleamed against her red lipstick. Chase thought, *Man, if anything can clear my head, it's the sight of this girl.* Lacy leaned in and kissed his cheek. "Chase, I was so scared."

He managed a smile.

"Everyone's talkin' about Montgomery already," Lacy went on. "Think you'll be able to play?"

A knot rising in his throat, Chase answered with arched eyebrows. After a bit more chat, Lacy checked her watch. "Guess I'll head to the party." She leaned in and brushed Chase's wavy brown hair off his forehead. Another peck on his cheek and then she was gone.

Lacy's next stop was the Penner barn. Jake Penner was Chase's best pal and favorite target, an all-state receiver being recruited by the University of Georgia. Jake lived on a dairy farm at the edge of town. After every home game, classmates crammed into the big green barn behind the house. They tossed darts, chucked horseshoes, and drank whatever beer and booze was on sale that week.

The Penners had a rule. Anyone who entered the barn after sundown had to stay until sunup. Either that, or pass Doug Penner's personally administered sobriety test on the way out. Kids slept on mounds of hay scattered across the cavernous loft. The right side for boys, the left side for girls. It didn't always work that way. On the night of Chase's breakout game his sophomore year, he had his first hunker in the hay. She was a senior. He never saw it coming. One minute, Chase was sipping a beer. The next, she was leading him up the wooden ladder to a dark corner of the loft, shielded by bales of hay stacked eight feet high. Chase made moves he'd never made. When he got home the next morning, he picked a few twigs of hay out of the hair on his legs.

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Alone in his hospital room, Chase gently rolled his head from side to side. He still had no memory of the game he had just played. But he did recall the phone call from three weeks prior, the one from the quarterbacks coach at the University of Alabama. The same school that had ignored him the year before, when he was five-foot-eleven. But now Chase stood six-three, and the big school had noticed. "Finish the season strong," the coach had urged.

Alabama, the beast of college football, and Ernie's alma mater. Ernie Mayberry, two-time All-American at defensive end. Nicknamed 'Haystack' for his six-foot-six frame, he was a human battering ram, until the waning moments of the Sugar Bowl his senior year. That's when

Ernie's knee blew out in three places. A surefire pro career, gone poof. *Sugar Bowl, my ass*, Ernie used to grumble.

Chase closed his eyes. An image of his dad's face flashed in his head. *I gotta play in the championship game. I gotta do it for me, I gotta do it for Dad.*

The next morning, the Mayberrys drove to the hospital. When they reached Chase's room, they found Dr. Coleman scribbling on a clipboard. "Morning, Doc," Ernie said. "How's he lookin'?"

"He's clear to go home," the doctor said. "But I stick by my prognosis. Bring him back in two weeks for an evaluation."

"Fair enough, Doc," Ernie said, and then, under his breath, *Time for a second opinion.*

A bit later, Ernie eased his silver pick-up to a stop in front of the Mayberrys' home, a white clapboard ranch set at the base of a hill on the western edge of Pineville. Suzy took Chase's arm and led him to the front door. Chase could still feel a dull ache in his head, and the stairs took effort. Inside, they sat at the kitchen table. Ernie pointed to the *Pineville Post*, open to the sports page. "Since you don't remember the game, Chase, I figured you'd want to read about it," he said.

"My eyes aren't up for it, just wanna sack out."

Suzy stood and tucked a ringlet of brown hair behind her ears. "I'll take you up, Chase."

Chase stood. "One thing, Chase," Ernie said. "Doctor Coleman won't clear you to play against Montgomery. You're gonna go back to Lou Morton on Wednesday. He knows your history. We'll see what he thinks."

Chase ignored that. He followed his mom up the stairs and dropped on his bed. Suzy went back down and leveled her eyes on Ernie. "You have no business calling Lou."

"Doc Coleman's a greenhorn, Suze. We need a seasoned opinion."

Suzy sat. “Chase is hurt bad, Ernie. You better accept the real possibility that he won’t play against Montgomery. And don’t you dare try to influence Lou.”

“Come on, Suze, Lou’s a straight shooter.”

“Yeah and he’s your hunting buddy,” Suzy shot back. “I’m going with you, no shenanigans.”

Ernie reached for his bourbon bottle and poured two fingers into a glass. He hated Sunday afternoons. The next morning he’d be up early, driving the same seventeen miles to the same parking space. Twenty-five years at the paper mill. Ernie was shift supervisor now, a big dog, more dog than big. The plant was dying. Layoffs ruined lives. Furloughs crushed morale. Over a shift, Ernie could walk the entire floor and see more scuffles than smiles. He couldn’t wait to get out.

And now he had his escape plan: Chase Mayberry. Ernie knew that his son had the goods. His arm was pure gold. Chase could throw any ball – long or short, hard or soft, on a line or an arc – with pinpoint accuracy. He had eyes like a hawk; he could read a scheme, click through his options, and hit his third or fourth target. A coach once told Ernie that on broken plays, Chase could *anticipate* separation, or see his receiver break free of his defender before it would happen. Ernie said that wasn’t possible. “I’ll show you the film,” the coach replied. In the pocket, Chase could *feel* pressure, and he had the legs and the jive to reel off big gains. He was *that* good. One more standout game, Ernie figured, and Alabama would pounce. Chase would go on to make millions. Ernie could bury his hard hat.

But now Ernie had to grapple with this, Chase’s second concussion of the season. Chase had bounced back from the first one. Ernie took stock in that. *Headaches go away, right?* He knew one thing: no newbie doctor was going to stand between Chase and a full ride to the Crimson Tide.

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Chase stayed home on Monday and Tuesday. Each day the pain eased. On Tuesday afternoon he went for a walk, the crisp country air a soothing touch on his cheeks. On Wednesday afternoon, ten days before the title game, Chase rode with his parents to Dr. Morton's office. The doctor tested his attention, his memory, and his ability to process and learn. His movement, his hand-eye coordination, his reaction time. It took an hour and change, and then Dr. Morton summoned Suzy and Ernie. He shook Suzy's hand and tucked into a hug with Ernie. The doctor sat behind his desk, the Mayberrys filling the three seats opposite.

Dr. Morton let a few beats pass. His eyes on Suzy, he said, "Chase is coming along, but we're still two weeks out."

Ernie pulled at his second chin. "Chase had a concussion in September. He was on the field a week later."

"That was a mild concussion, this one is moderate," Dr. Morton explained. "Chase needs time to recover, Ernie. I can't put him at risk, nor can you."

Ernie stared at his shoes, until Suzy stood. "Thanks for seeing us on short notice, Lou. Of course, we'll abide by your judgment."

As Chase followed his parents out, he felt a strange mix of sadness and relief.

That Friday, Chase went back to school. He wore street clothes to practice that afternoon. When Coach Ponus told the team that Chase would not play against Montgomery, Chase bowed his head and fought off tears. He left practice early, went home, and crawled into bed.

The week that followed was even worse. Chase went to practice on Monday and Tuesday, but it was like sitting over a chocolate shake with his lips glued shut. The next two days, he skipped practice and went fishing instead. On Friday afternoon, the day before the

game, students packed the gym for the pep rally. Chase bailed out. *Everybody will feel sorry for me, and I got no time for that.*

As the rally began Chase was driving his Jeep across town to the farm owned by Gary Crooks, the father of Chase's girl, Lacy. Chase had begun working there in the spring. He had built rock cribs, cut thistle, and dug irrigation ditches. On this day he would steer a tractor around a hayfield, four men riding the slip behind him, lugging in bales. It would be easy work for Chase, a calming distraction from the coming game.

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Saturday night, a night made for football. Seventy degrees, a soft breeze, stars bright across an inky sky. Eight thousand fans had filled the bleachers at Fortune Field in Millbrook, a neutral site between Old South High in Pineville and Montgomery. Chase stood near the bench, wearing his jersey over jeans and sneakers. When the ref summoned team captains for the coin toss, Chase opted to stay on the sideline. He began to pace. *I've never missed a game, and now I'm missin' the biggest game of my life.*

Ernie and Suzy sat high in the stands near the fifty-yard-line. "You're quiet, Ern," Suzy said.

"Just sad," he murmured. She patted his knee.

The national anthem was played. The teams broke from their huddles and took the field. The Old South kicker put the ball on the tee. That's when the announcer spoke. "Ladies and gentlemen, please listen carefully. The Millbrook police have received a bomb threat. The target is Folly Field. Everyone must evacuate the premises. The game has been postponed."

Pandemonium broke out. Fans scrambled for the aisles, a few getting knocked off their feet. As Suzy and Ernie edged into the throng, she looked at him. "This is crazy, who would do such a thing?"

Ernie just shook his head. Chase fell in with his teammates on a jog to the busses. The left side of his head began to throb. *What the hell is wrong with me?* He boarded a bus and sat next to Jake Penner. The bus pulled out, and Jake grabbed Chase's arm. "Chase, this really sucks. But hey, maybe now you can play."

"You know I wanna play, Jake," Chase said. "But my head still isn't right. I mean, I'm scared shitless."

Ernie and Suzy finally made it to Ernie's truck. His phone dinged, a text. *All good?* Ernie typed back. *All good*, and then he deleted the thread.

When Chase got home that night, he told his parents that his head hurt. He went up to his room and dropped on his bed, his eyes settling on the quote his dad had stuck on his wall years earlier.

BE GREAT AT ONE THING, AND YOU WILL HAVE EVERYTHING

Chase turned out the light and slipped under his sheet. *I always thought my thing would be football. Now I'm not so sure.*