

A LIFE
INTERCEPTED

A Novel

Charles Martin



CENTER
STREET

NEW YORK BOSTON NASHVILLE

PROLOGUE

He sat on the floor, towel around his neck, drenched in his own sweat, eyes trained on the screen. Football in one hand, a half-eaten banana in the other, a bottle of Gatorade in his lap. She sat next to him. Jeans. Older sweatshirt. Legs crossed. Remote in one hand, laser pointer in the other. Staring through reading glasses. Her hair had turned. Once deep mahogany, now snow gray. The turn was not unexpected; the timing was. Life had amplified genetics. In her early thirties, she was technically old enough to be his mom, but the last third of those years had not been kind. It wasn't so much the wrinkles as the shadow beneath them. He was a rising senior, a seventeen-year-old kid strapped with immeasurable talent, high hopes, and dreams he'd only whispered. At six feet three inches—nearly five inches taller than her—almost two hundred pounds and very little body fat, there wasn't much kid left. She didn't need magnifiers to see that. When she wanted his attention, she raised an eyebrow, lowered her voice, and spoke slowly, "Dalton Rogers." At other times, she just called him Dee.

He respectfully called her Sister Lynn while in the presence or ear-shot of others. When they were alone, he called her Mama.

Having some experience with talent like his, she was realistic about his prospects and had been careful to temper his expectations while not dashing his hopes. A delicate balance. The game on the screen moved in slow motion, a frame at a time. In the middle of the field—and the screen—number 8 stood under center. Well known during his time, he was the plumb line by which all others were measured. Which is why they were watching the film. Dee wanted to learn from the best. Few, if any, had been better than number 8.

She pressed pause and lit the screen with a green laser. The focused beam circled his feet. “Everything starts right there.” She tapped him gently on the head with her remote. “Feet. Feet. Feet. They’re the first link in the kinetic chain. When he throws, what comes out of his hand starts in his feet.”

Dee quoted from the article *Sports Illustrated* had later written about number 8’s performance in this game, “‘Million-dollar arm, two-million-dollar feet.’”

She tapped Dee on the head with the remote again. “Neither of which happened by accident. Remember...” She laughed once. “Football is chess played in 3-D with a little cardiovascular challenge thrown in for good measure. Not to—”

“Mention the marauding horde.” He waved her off like a gnat buzzing his ear. “I heard you”—he took another bite—“the first five hundred times.”

She smiled and lifted the green dot to his helmet. “Where’s he looking? Show me his eyes.” She spoke in present tense even though the game had been played fifteen years ago.

Dee followed the line of sight to the left cornerback on the opposing defense, who, at the moment, stood lined up three yards off number 8’s primary receiver, a rather gifted individual named Roderick. Better known to his friends and those who worshipped him as Roddy.

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Dee pointed him out with what remained of the banana. Mama made Dee eat one a day because the potassium and magnesium helped alleviate muscle cramps in his calves. He spoke through a mouthful. “Three yards off Roddy. Man coverage. He’s playing inside, which means he’s taken away the slant, challenging Roddy to hug the sideline and forcing the Rocket to throw outside shoulder.” It had been a close game, and the opposing team had not been impressed with the undefeated Saints or their star quarterback.

She pressed play and the video continued in slow motion. The quarterback began his count, checked right, and then paused. Noticing movement by both the weak side linebacker and strong safety, he stopped his count, pointed at both of them, and began walking up and down his offensive line hollering a change of play. Given the crowd noise, the quarterback then motioned hand signals to the receivers and the lone tailback. They nodded and made adjustments, spreading out slightly wider. All of this took less than four seconds.

Dee sat mesmerized—eyes large, mind taking notes. Taking everything in. He never grew tired of this. He’d watch these all night if Mama let him. Her film library consisted of more than a hundred films. Most of the high school games were reel-to-reel. By college they’d converted to VHS. Some of the ESPN stuff and most of the championships were HD. To give Dee access to the entirety without having to constantly switch back and forth between three types of technology, she’d had it converted to electronic files now stored by game and date on a Mac laptop that projected onto an enormous TV via an HDMI cable. She didn’t need to watch the screen to see the play developing—she’d been there. Could still hear the crowd’s roar and echo. The pennies rattling inside the milk jug. Smell the cut grass. She saw this and lots of other videos almost every time she closed her eyes.

She advanced the film several frames and the green dot rested on his helmet. “Eyes. Show me. Where are they now?”

Dee's hand dwarfed the ball when he pointed. "The umpire."

"Why?"

"He's got the play clock."

She circled the umpire with the green light. "Watch what happens when his hand goes up." The light flashed back across the screen to rest on the quarterback. "What's he doing?"

"Back under center. Restarting his count. Right now he's racing the clock 'cause he knows he's got about three seconds left."

She smiled. She'd taught him well. The light created a green halo as she circled the number 8 on the screen. "Think about everything going on in his head right now. Yes, he's physically talented, but the thing that sets him apart is the stuff you can't see." She then circled the entire screen. "This is a chess game. He's just moving the pieces around the board."

He nodded. Eyes fixed. The Rocket was about to expose a defensive weakness and win a Class 5A State Championship. Again.

She pressed play and whispered, "Checkmate."

The play proceeded. The center—a giant, fun-loving, faithful Labrador of a man called Wood—snapped the ball and then created a seemingly impenetrable wall of protection. The quarterback faked a handoff to the lone running back as he stepped into the B gap, bolstering Wood's wall and blocking the blitzing strong side linebacker. The quarterback then took three quick yet long steps backward to gain distance from the line and give the receivers time to make their cuts and get open. When the defensive tackle broke through and threatened to sack number 8, the Rocket turned, rolled right, and began checking down his receivers. While he was dangerous inside the pocket, he could dismantle you when he broke outside. Everybody knew that. In recognition of his talent and speed, *SI* had coined the phrase "the Rocket." The name stuck, and more than a hundred scouts and coaches stood in the stands that night, salivating over possible takeoff. The crowd rose to their feet, and the entire stadium sucked in a collective gasp. When he

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threw the ball, he didn't throw it where his receiver, Roddy, was. He threw it where Roddy would be when the ball got there.

She turned off the video and clicked on the light. Dee began packing up his books. It used to bother him that she never watched the ending. Then he learned that some memories fester, and if you pick at them, they cause the most pain. They walked outside under the covered walkway that would lead him across the grounds, back to school and his dorm, and her to her cottage, sequestered behind the massive brick wall. Her shield against the outside world. She hung her arm inside his. "You finished calculus?"

He smiled, nodding. "Yes, ma'am."

"Physics?"

"Test tomorrow. Second period."

She raised an eyebrow, asking him if he'd studied without having to ask him.

He shrugged. "Some."

She checked her watch. It was already after ten p.m. "Not too late." She pointed her finger at him. "And no *SportsCenter*. You can't watch that stuff and study for a test."

He smiled and pointed back inside the room. "He did it."

She nodded. He was right, he had. They'd watched it together. Some of it had been about him. "And you see where it got him?"

He chuckled but didn't respond. He knew better. Some things were still tender. A pause. He wanted to comfort her but didn't know how. "It's all over the news—he's getting out tomorrow."

She nodded and stared toward the garden.

He pressed her. "You made any plans?"

She shook her head.

"He know you're here?"

A single shake.

"You think he'll come find you?"

"I don't know." She crossed her arms. "I don't know what he'll do."

He felt the heaviness but didn't know how to help her carry it. And she'd always been careful not to let him. That weight she carried alone. He bent at the knees, bringing him eye level with her. "You need anything?"

She kissed his cheek. "Get some sleep and ace your physics test."

"You know," he slung his backpack over his shoulder, "I do have an A in the class."

She held up a finger. "A minus."

He lowered his voice, whispering, "It's an AP class."

She smiled. "Night."

She meandered through the walkways, her shadow appearing before and then retreating behind as she passed beneath the overhead lights and under the arms of the towering oaks that blanketed the private cottages. She pulled the door shut and curled up in a ball on the bed. Moments passed and she found her fingertips tracing the edges of the dove hanging from the chain around her neck. She'd always wanted to work with kids. Just not like this.

Two hours later, she twisted off the cap, poured three pills into her hand, and chased them with water. She showered, the pills kicked in, and her eyelids grew heavy. She turned on the TV, clicked resume, and tucked her knees into her chest. She drifted off to the sound of the crowd chanting his name. *Rocket! Rocket! Rocket!* The last image she saw was familiar to everyone. The whole country had seen it. On the screen, a kid in the stands held up that week's *Sports Illustrated*. It was the first time a high school quarterback had graced the cover of *SI*. Even the angle of the shot was deliberate—the photographer had taken the picture lying on his back on the grass. Number 8 stood on the field, ball in hand, all promise and possibility, goalposts rising behind him, the world at his feet. The title read THE GOD OF FRIDAY NIGHT.

She blinked, the tears spilled, and she drifted off to a time when all her dreams had come true.

CHAPTER ONE

Thirteen years ago

The assistant clipped the microphone to my lapel, smoothed my shoulders with a lint brush, and admired my day-old suit. “Moldone’s Off 5th?”

Busted. “Yes.”

A brush of my collar, then she turned to Audrey. “Nicely done.”

Audrey nodded once, accepting the compliment. The lady looked over her shoulder and then handed me a Topps football card with my picture on it. “My brother’ll disown me if I don’t ask.”

“What’s his name?”

“Ben.” She blushed. “He watches all your film. Wears your number. Your picture covers the door of his bedroom.”

Topps had printed a special run of all the guys they thought would go in the first round. Glossy. Thick cardboard. Picture on one side. High school and college stats on the other. I signed the card and she clicked back into assistant mode. “The audience will filter in through those doors in a minute. Feel free to mingle. Or

not. Your call. They have strict instructions not to cross that line, but you are free to do as you wish.” She pointed. “Those guys over there in the black T-shirts, with arms like yours but not quite as tall as you, will help keep order if needed. Jim will be in”—she eyed the digital clock on the wall—“in twenty-three minutes. We’re live in twenty-three and a half. Any questions?”

“No. I’m good. Thanks.”

She left and I glanced over my shoulder where Audrey had raised a knowing eyebrow and waved her finger at my suit. “Told you.”

I sat on the sofa, sent two texts on my phone, muted the ringer for the third time, and then sat while my left leg nervously bounced. My tie felt tight. Face flushed. Suit stiff, awkward. Along the far wall, behind the cameras, sat a table covered with danishes, bagels, and fresh-cut fruit. My eyes fell on the raspberries. I thought about sneaking a few, but then there was the issue of the mic and the cord and what if part of it stuck in my teeth and I didn’t know it. Sweat trickled down my back. Eight years as a starting quarterback, but little had prepared me for the media blitz of the last several days.

Audrey stood offstage, out of view of the camera. Hands tucked behind her. Shoulders relaxed. Wood called her “the real power behind the throne.” He was right. Between high school and college, she had endured more than ninety-six games. Sun. Rain. Snow. Thunderstorm. Power outage. Sacks. Concussions. Sprains. Pulls. Injuries. Little phased her. That had earned her the rather unflattering nickname—one of several—of “Prestone.”

As in, antifreeze.

The producer had given her a set of headphones so she could hear the interview. I motioned to the space next to me on the couch, then pointed to Jim Kneels’s empty chair. “He won’t mind.”

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She shook her head. “Don’t even think about it. You bring me out there in the middle of this thing and you’re not getting any loving for a month.”

Two days ago, Audrey had taken me to an appointment-only, custom men’s shop called Moldone’s Off 5th. For three hours, I modeled various colors and patterns and textures in a process that gave me a newfound respect for runway models and new cars. I’d walk out of the dressing room, climb the platform, and stand there in solids and pinstripes while she tilted her head from side to side and considered me. I felt naked. She’d then twirl her finger and I’d turn in place, allowing her to study the whole of me where she’d either nod in approval or be rid of me in much the same way she shooed pigeons in the park. After the fifth costume change, I protested.

“I’m quite happy with my wrinkle-free from Sears.”

“Honey, one of the things I love about you is that you’re small-town grounded and proud of it.” She turned to Moldone, who stood attentive with a measuring tape draped around his neck and reading glasses perched on the tip of his nose. “Mr. Moldone, you’ll have to forgive him, he’s been playing football a long time. One too many hits to the head.”

I smiled and turned to leave, confident she had begun to see things clearly. “Thank you.”

Evidently I was mistaken.

“But...” She held up a finger, stuffing my end around. “We’re uptown now.”

I pointed discreetly at the price tag, knowing that she was a miser at heart and reason would prevail.

She stood and smoothed my lapel. “I know. Crazy isn’t it? But this city is full of crazy people. Have you seen the numbers attached to your contract?”

“Yeah, but—”

“Get over it.”

“Everyone I meet will know I just bought all this stuff.”

She brushed my cheek. “It makes your eyes dance.”

When I opened my mouth to object to one more combination, she pointed her finger at me and raised both eyebrows. So I tried on a dozen more suits and just as many pairs of shoes.

We walked out with three suits, six custom shirts, five ties, two belts, two pairs of shoes, a maxed-out Visa card, and one very happy Mr. Moldone. I'd only ever spent that much for one other thing on the planet, and she was wearing it on her left hand.

At T-minus twenty, the double doors swung wide and the audience shuffled in, jockeying for front-row seats. Most waved, sat quietly, mumbled in hushed tones, flashed pictures, or held up their digital cameras and recorded me just sitting there. Others hollered, cheered, or shouted words of encouragement. One guy whistled. Might have been two hundred people in total. Sensing a growing chorus, the “bouncers” moved in. It seemed silly to keep sitting, so I untethered from the mic and mingled among the audience, shaking hands, signing autographs, and posing for pictures.

One lady hugged me. “Sweetheart, I drove 264 miles. Been standing in the rain since lunch.” I thanked her and signed her ticket stub and T-shirt and then laughed as the bouncers stepped in to pry her off me from one final hug. I worked my way through the first few rows, climbed the stairs, then made my way down to a woman in a wheelchair who was wearing my college jersey. Said her name was Jenny. I knelt for a picture and signed her sleeve. She just sat there crying. I kissed her forehead, and she squeezed my hand. She couldn't really control her muscles and neither of her eyes would look at me, but I found her beautiful and tender. A small boy, about ten, dwarfed in my college jersey and wearing the hat of what in a few hours would become my NFL home team, tapped me on the shoulder and shoved a Topps card in

my face. I signed it, kneeled posing for a picture, and said, "I like your hat."

He shrugged, shook his head once, and put both hands on his hips. "You've made things really difficult for me."

Still on my knees, I chuckled. "Really? How so?"

He turned the hat in his hands. "I hate these guys, and now I've got to pull for them."

Knowing I had met my match and was about to have my hands full, I extended my hand. "I'm Matthew."

"Mac. Mac Powell."

The kid had the confidence of a man in his midforties. "Well, Mac..." I leaned forward, my face just inches from his. I lowered my voice. "Since you brought it up, I didn't used to like them much either. Pretty much hated them." He smiled at my admission. "But—" I looked over each shoulder as if sharing a secret. "I didn't have much choice, and from what I can tell from the meetings I've had so far, these new owners are pretty good people. Between you and me, I'm starting to wonder if they haven't gotten a bad rap. I mean, that whole thing two years ago in the playoffs, I don't think that was their fault." He started nodding in agreement. "They totally got robbed by the refs on that third and one."

He held up a finger. "Yeah, but then there was that four-for-one trade fiasco for that injured running back Jackson, who hasn't seen the field since he signed."

A crowd had gathered. One of the ESPN guys had turned on a camera and was filming our interaction. Impressed by the kid, several of the adults had started recording on their digital cameras. "Yes, but—" I paused, also holding up a finger. "That trade fiasco is what created the salary cap room so they could sign"—I poked myself in the chest—"me." I paused. "And...that Jackson kid? I met him, and he's healthy now. Like, really healthy." The kid smiled. "I think you're going to be pleased with what he can do," I proffered. "So, let's give him the benefit of the doubt, at least until he proves otherwise." The

kid nodded like he understood completely. “Not to mention he’s now my teammate, which means I’m pulling for him.” The kid’s eyes told me that had sealed it. He examined his hat, pulled it down tight over his head, and shoved his hands in his pockets. I asked, “You play?”

He looked at me and turned up a lip. “Really? Do I look like I play?” Kid probably didn’t weigh sixty pounds soaking wet. He shook his head. “I want”—he pointed at Jim Kneels’s chair—“his job.”

I told you the kid was bold. I chuckled. “Well, maybe when you get it you’ll have me back and we can do this again.”

He stuck out his hand. “Deal.”

I turned to Audrey and pointed at the stack of footballs that the producers at ESPN wanted me to give to the audience after the show. She handed me a ball, and I signed it: *Mac, Blessings on your life and dreams. Matthew #8.*

He examined it, and after it met his approval, he tucked it under his arm and said, “Well, okay.”

Behind me, a door opened, several feet shuffled in, the lights flashed, further blinding me, and the assistant waved me back to my perch on the stage, where she hurriedly reconnected my tether. Once I was seated, the iconic Jim Kneels strode in and sat to my left. I’d been watching Jim on TV for a decade. Maybe longer. He had interviewed more of the greats than anybody save Howard Cosell. He shook my hand and glanced at the smiling crowd, his eyes coming to rest on the kid. “You learn quickly.”

“I don’t mind.”

“Enjoy the moment.” I felt he wanted to say more but didn’t. He straightened his papers, scanned the top sheet, and said, “Any questions?”

I shrugged. Jim is a big man. Broad. Tall. Thick. Former All-Pro linebacker. First with the Raiders, then the Steelers. One of four World Champion rings on his right hand. I had his card at home in a shoe box. “I was sort of figuring that was your job.”

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He laughed and nodded once. “You’ll do just fine.”

The light flashed green, and as one of the only living inductees to both the Football Hall of Fame and the Sports Broadcasting Hall of Fame, Jim crossed one leg over the other and paused. If his relationship with the camera was a dance, he was definitely the lead partner.

He began. “Let’s back up.” He eyed a sheet of paper. “Four-year starter in high school. Never lost.” He paused for effect. “Passed for more yards than any kid ever in high school history.” Another pause. “Threw for more touchdowns than anyone. Ever.” Longer pause. “On to college, where you were offered more than fifty Division I scholarships. Defying most, you chose to stay close to your hometown of Gardi and attend a state university, where you promptly broke almost every NCAA freshman record—on record.” He cleared his throat. “Then you won a couple of awards.” The audience laughed. “A few big games.” Audience laughed again. “Two hours ago, you were picked number one in the NFL Draft.” He studied me. Leaned back. “They write stories about guys like you. How’re you feeling?”

“Grateful.”

He let the answer filter out among the seats and settle. “I’ve watched you from high school. Interviewed you a half dozen times. Know you better than some who are watching this. After almost thirty years in this business, I am, at times, skeptical of a guy in your position who can do what you do, finds his face on Gatorade bottles and Nike commercials and cereal boxes, and yet uses words like ‘grateful.’ However, in your case, I find it genuine and difficult not to believe.”

He glanced over his glasses at me, then back through them toward his sheet. “In a few hours from now, you are flying out of New York City on a red-eye to Hawaii, where you and your wife, Audrey, are to enjoy a long-awaited and much-earned two-week honeymoon.” He glanced off set at Audrey and then, at the camera,

said, “For those of you who don’t know, Mr. Modest here made good on a high school promise and married Audrey...” He nodded to her. Another camera flashed her live picture on the screen alongside us. She waved. Confident. Comfortable in the shadows. Not seeking to share the spotlight. “. . . his high school sweetheart, prior to returning to college to prove his critics wrong and play his senior year. Most who follow football know her as Lady Eight or”—a chuckle and a single shake of his head—“Prestone.” He glanced at her. “Sorry. Had to. And then my personal favorite, the Spider Monkey.” A shrug. The audience clapped in approval. “What is it with football and nicknames?” The screen flashed several pictures of Audrey wearing my jersey. “Through snow, sleet, rain, scorching heat, and undaunted scrutiny from the press, she is and has been cool under pressure. His number one fan...” More screen shots. He looked at me. “She is as much identified with the number eight as you are.” Another glance at his cheat sheet, which he didn’t need but did for effect. A rehearsed sidestep in the dance. A natural segue to me. “You have an uncanny ability to win wherever you are. You’ve been described by your teammates as a surgeon, a commanding presence, a field general, a T. rex of defenses, and yet those same teammates are quick to follow with the word ‘unselfish.’ That you’re quick to defer credit. Which is unusual, given what you’ve accomplished. To what do you attribute that?”

I thumbed over my shoulder. “If my head starts to swell, she sticks a pin in it.”

The audience laughed easily. Jim waited. “And when that doesn’t work?”

“She sticks her foot someplace I don’t want it.”

More laughter. Jim motioned to the producer, who took the headphones from Audrey and led her to a seat on the couch beside me. “Audrey?” He stood and proffered. “Please.”

Audrey pinched my leg as she sat down alongside me. A whisper, “One month.”

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The audience applauded. Jim waited. “What does she bring to your team?”

“Despite what’s been said and written, I didn’t get here by myself. We did. Two years ago, when I forced a back shoulder pass to Roddy in the end zone in the final minute, losing the national championship, my critics said the success had gone to my head and I’d never win the big one. Audrey disconnected our cable, literally unplugged the radio from my truck, adjusted my workout schedule to avoid the media, and got me back on the field with Roddy because she didn’t want all those doubting voices having access to my thinking. A few months ago, with seven seconds to go in the game, I threw that same pass against the same coverage—and possibly better personnel—to Roddy. I’m not taking anything away from him. He’s as good as they come. He made me look good on more than one occasion, but if he were sitting here, he’d tell you that catch had everything to do with Audrey and much less to do with us.” I waved my hand across Jim’s sheet of paper. “That’s a record of us—of Audrey and me. What *we* did. Not what *I* did. Big difference.”

He turned to Audrey. “Anything to add?”

“Matty was born to do what he’s doing. He reads defenses better than most. Great arm strength. Good hips. Vision. Decent enough speed in his feet.” She chuckled as did Jim. “Not bad looking.” She glanced at the audience, baiting a response, followed by cheers and whistles. She returned to Jim. “Calm under pressure. A student of the game. Watches film ad nauseam. Has a film library that probably rivals this place. But his intangibles are what set him apart. He cares about those around him. The eyes in the huddle. They matter. And they know it. And you can’t coach that. His teammates are not numbers on jerseys or means to an end. They are the end. He is the first set of eyes they see when they wake up in recovery after surgery, the voice on the other end of the phone at five a.m. when it’s time to cut weight for camp, and he has been late to more

than one dinner with me because somebody was having trouble with a route or a read or an exam that would hamper their eligibility. If you check his cell phone, you'll see that the texts he's sent since being drafted, even some while sitting on this couch, were to his teammates, coaches, trainers. Just saying 'thank you' or 'it never would have happened without you.' Matty's authentic. Not pretending." She looked at me. "He is who he says he is."

Jim turned to the audience. "Pretty good commercial right there, folks. We'll be right back." When the light flashed to red, Jim looked at Audrey and then at me. "You, my friend, married above yourself."

I nodded. "That I did."

Jim fielded a few questions from the audience before the light flashed to green. I signed a few more balls, tossed them into the audience, and drove the producers crazy when I stood and stretched my mic cord across the set to hand a ball to Jenny in the wheelchair. When the light turned solid, Jim returned to me. "It's no secret that you put Gardi, Georgia, on the map. Given what you've brought your hometown, most everyone is a vocal, loyal fan. You're the honorary mayor. They gave you the keys to the city. If you have critics, they don't venture out much and they're pretty quiet about it." A chuckle. "And for good reason. Between high school and college, you've brought home seven championships. Your high school and college jerseys have both been retired. This past year, the main thoroughfare through town was renamed Matthew 'The Rocket' Boulevard. Your high school field at St. Bernard's was renamed in your honor. According to birth certificate applications, the most popular male name in Gardi the last five years running is Matthew." He raised an eyebrow. "So... what's left to accomplish?"

I pointed to my new friend in the audience. Young Mac was sitting on the edge of his seat, beaming. "I'm now a rookie in the National Football League. I wake up tomorrow lowest man on the totem pole. Everything you've described, everything you hold in

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your hand, served to get me here. That's it. Doesn't mean squat to the veterans. So I'm going back to school with the best in the game. A game I love. I seem to have been given some talent for it, although I can certainly improve. But it's still a game played between two sidelines where eleven guys in a huddle can do things together they could never do alone. That in and of itself is the majesty and wonder of football. It's why we play the game."

Jim paused. Then paused again. "Favorite moment in any game?"

"When we're down and the momentum is stacked against us. Those are the moments when we find out what we're made of. When we learn to trust and lean on each other. When the eyes behind the face mask matter."

Jim paused and folded the paper, slipping it into his jacket pocket. Twirling his partner. Holding her at fingertip length. "Word is that you'll leave this interview en route to a conference room where you'll sign several endorsement deals worth reportedly tens of millions, followed by the signing of a contract worth reportedly even more tens of millions, much of which is guaranteed—provided you show up to camp. And then, by all accounts, you'll fly"—he chuckles—"coach class to Hawaii. You're moments away from being a multi-multi-millionaire. Will this change you?"

A deep breath. "I hope so." The audience laughed. He glanced at Audrey. "She won't let me run the AC very low at night. Says we can't afford it. Not with the way I eat. I'm hoping she'll let me bump it down a few degrees."

He held up this week's *Sports Illustrated*. My picture graced the cover—the second time in four years. I was standing on the field at State, holding a ball, my back to the camera, staring downfield. The goalposts in the distance. It was a good picture. One I was fond of because it focused the viewer's eye on the field—the game—and not me. Jim held the cover for the camera, which projected it onto the screen for the audience. The title read CAN THE GOD OF FRIDAY

NIGHT REIGN ON SUNDAY? Jim tapped the title and waited. “Your response?”

I chose my words. “It makes me uncomfortable.”

Jim probed, “Why?”

I shook my head once. “I didn’t make me. I’m just being me.” I pointed to Jenny in the wheelchair. The camera flashed her smiling, severely cross-eyed face on the screen. “Jenny, forgive me if I’m out of line, but—” I glanced back at Jim. “I’d imagine she knows a good bit about hurdles. About difficulty. I throw a few touchdown passes, and people talk about my ‘greatness.’ They make statues that look like me and give me the keys to a city. It might take all the energy she has just to get out of bed, get dressed, and be in this studio. Where’s the applause for that? I’m playing a game. She’s playing for her life.” I paused and scanned the audience. “I love this game. I’m grateful I get to play it. I love seeing smiles on faces, and I understand the desire to read about the lives of guys like me, but in the grand scheme of things, what I do between the sidelines just doesn’t hold a candle to what others do outside them.”

Jim glanced at the screen. “Ladies and gentlemen, Audrey Rising with her husband and sometimes football player, Matthew Rising, commonly known around town as ‘the Ice Man,’ ‘T-Rex,’ ‘the Mayor of Gardi,’ and ‘the Rocket.’” He extended his hand to Audrey, then me. “Thanks for stopping by on what promises to be an eventful and well-deserved evening.”

“Thank you, sir.”