
The Audible 0.1

A Hungry Gods Universe Novel

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CONTENTS

Act I · The Best Available Answer

1	The Read	4
2	The Recommendation	13
3	The Other Quarterback	22
4	Eleven Men	32
5	The Better Decision	42

Act II · The Optimal Player

6	Compliance	58
7	Protection	69
8	The Model Doesn't Play	80
9	The Price of the Route	90
10	The Change	103

Act III · Who Gets to Decide?

11	The Sideline	116
12	The Objective	127
13	The Wrong Objective	140
14	What We Owe	151
15	The Right to Decide	160

Act IV · Zero Point One

16	The Championship	173
17	The Replacement	184
18	The Last Drive	193
19	The Audible	202
20	The Men Who Were There	210
	Epilogue · The Next Call	231

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ACT I

The Best Available Answer

CHAPTER ONE

The Read

The cornerback moved before the rest of the stadium did.

It was half a step, his left foot coming forward beneath the noise. Caleb Rourke saw it while Owen Dace was still fastening the strap of his glove. Beyond Owen, the student section bounced against the silver railings. The band had stopped playing, but its last low note remained somewhere in the brickwork. On the scoreboard Allerton led Ashford State by three. On the field, with a minute and forty-eight seconds left in the first half, they had third-and-six at their own forty-three.

The corner had been seven yards off when Caleb broke the huddle. Now he was at six. His shoulders stayed square to Marcus Bellamy, the outside receiver on Caleb's right, but his weight had changed. Behind him, the safety edged toward the hash.

Caleb looked left without moving his head much. Two linebackers stood over the centre and right guard. A third had walked outside the left tackle. Five men showing pressure, four more capable of coming. A defence making a picture for him to solve.

He knew this picture. Or something close enough to it that his right hand had already loosened, ready for the signal that would move the protection and send Marcus behind the corner.

In his helmet, Russ Boone, the offensive coordinator, said, "Thirty-four. Stay with it."

Caleb's wrist display held the same recommendation: 34, white on blue. Beneath it, smaller, CONVERSION 0.68. There was no voice belonging to the Oracle. The voice was Boone's, a little dry from shouting over a headset all afternoon.

"Mike fifty-two," Caleb called.

The centre, Luis Ortega, pointed and repeated the identification. The line settled. Marcus touched two fingers to his thigh: ready.

The play clock passed fifteen. The communications indicator went dark. No more staff voice, no more transmitted updates. The approved wrist unit retained the pre-snap packet already delivered; it could not receive a fresh answer now. Caleb could use what he had, or use himself.

The corner took another inch.

Caleb could change it. The option existed, practised on Tuesdays, printed in the offence's procedures, available to every quarterback who understood the look. The whole offence would hear the call. Luis would repeat the protection. Nobody would be surprised except, Caleb hoped, the defence.

He kept his hands still.

"Blue eighty. Blue eighty. Set."

Luis snapped. Both linebackers bailed out, one turning his hips toward Owen in the slot, the other looking for the running back. The outside linebacker came, and the corner on Marcus's side came with him.

Caleb had been right about the pressure.

He had time to be right and nothing else. Luis and the right guard took the interior rushers. Owen crossed the shallow middle, dragging the dropping linebacker with him. On the left, tight end Bennett Shaw planted at seven yards and turned into the space the linebacker had abandoned.

The ball left Caleb's hand before Bennett completed the turn. It met his numbers. Bennett tucked it, took two thick steps through an arm tackle, and fell across midfield.

First down.

Caleb ran toward the new line of scrimmage while the crowd rose. Marcus jogged beside him.

“He came,” Caleb said.

“I noticed.”

“We had the fade.”

Marcus turned his head. “We had Bennett too.”

Boone’s voice returned when the officials set the next play clock. “Good. Twelve personnel. Same tempo.”

Caleb took the next call. A run for four, the back squirming out of Luis’s shadow. Then a quick completion to Marcus for eleven, the corner this time retreating and leaving Marcus enough room to turn outside. With fifty-seven seconds left, Daniel Harker, the head coach, used Allerton’s second timeout. Caleb stood at the sideline while Boone showed him a formation on the tablet, already arranged, the proposed sequence prepared.

“They’re late getting the nickel off against twelve,” Boone said. “We’ll hold the grouping.”

Caleb nodded. The defensive picture was alive in his head, but Boone was looking at the next one.

On first down from the Ashford thirty-two, Bennett sealed the edge and the back gained seven. On second down Caleb hit Owen up the seam against a linebacker who had stayed flat too long. Owen was caught at the twelve. Allerton hurried, and Ashford spent a timeout before the ball could be snapped.

The stadium briefly became individual sounds: somebody behind the bench shouting for Marcus; the clack of a trainer closing a case; a little boy near the tunnel trying to make a whistle work. Caleb could hear himself breathing.

Jonah Price stood three yards behind Boone, helmet under one arm. He had been watching the drive on the sideline display. His thumb held his place on a printed sheet that had gone soft at the edges.

“Their boundary safety’s sitting on the tight end,” Jonah said.

Boone nodded. “We have it.”

Jonah looked at Caleb. No accusation, no desire to sneak the call into his own name. Just a fact offered while there was time to use it.

Caleb said, "I saw."

He had not seen, not on that last completion. He had been watching Owen.

On the next play Marcus went inside, Bennett went outside, and the safety took two steps with Bennett. Caleb put the ball on Marcus's back shoulder, away from the pursuing corner. Marcus brought it in at the four and drove the last yards with the defender hanging from his hip.

Touchdown. The extra point made it seventeen-seven.

Marcus tossed the ball to the official and came to Caleb, lifting both palms. Caleb slapped them. Around them eleven men began making their way toward the bench, some fast, some bent at the waist. The band found its song. In the old tunnel mouth a custodian in a blue jacket raised his broom like a flag.

It had been a good drive. Caleb knew that. He had thrown every ball well, found every required answer, gotten them down the field without wasting the clock. His body carried the lightness that came after successful work.

The corner's half-step remained with him.

At halftime Harker told them the defence had earned a score and the offence had earned a second. He did not mention prediction. He told the guards to stop looking at the scoreboard before the whistle, told the kickoff unit where Ashford was getting its return lane, and told everyone they had thirty minutes left.

Jonah sat on the floor between two equipment trunks eating a banana. He had a habit of breaking the fruit in half before peeling it, which Caleb found faintly irritating and could not have explained why.

"You liked thirty-four?" Caleb asked.

Jonah swallowed. "On third down?"

"Yeah."

"I did."

“Corner was coming.”

“That’s why I liked it.”

Caleb waited.

“The safety was on top of Marcus,” Jonah said. “Bennett had the middle.”

“Safety couldn’t get all the way outside.”

“Maybe.”

Caleb leaned his shoulder against the wall. “You can say it.”

Jonah put the second half of the banana into its peel. “I think Bennett was an easier throw.”

There it was, the small faithful language of Jonah Price. An easier throw. Not the chance to punish a defence, not the opening that disappeared before anyone else could name it. An easier throw that had moved the chains.

“Sure,” Caleb said.

Jonah looked up. “What?”

“Nothing.”

“It wasn’t nothing.”

But Luis called across the room for Caleb to move so he could get to his bag, and Caleb did, carrying the conversation away before it could become one.

Allerton won thirty-four to seventeen. Ashford scored a touchdown in the third quarter and a field goal in the fourth; between those scores Caleb led a passing-touchdown drive and a drive ending in a field goal, and the Stags’ defence recovered a fumble at midfield to set up a rushing touchdown by Darius. None of it felt effortless. The right side of Caleb’s neck hurt where a rusher had landed on him. At the end, taking a knee, he watched Luis’s fingers shaking slightly as they settled over the ball.

They were tired men. They had beaten the twelfth-ranked team in the country. They deserved the noise.

After the handshake line, a broadcast reporter caught Caleb near the tunnel. She stood on a small box to bring her face level with his

and held the microphone beneath his mouth. Behind her the stadium lights showed rain that had not yet reached the ground.

"Caleb, another remarkably clean performance. Twenty-seven of thirty-four, three touchdowns, no interceptions. How much of this comes down to trusting the process?"

He still had his mouthguard looped around two fingers. His answer should have been easy.

"We prepared well," he said. "The line gave me time. Marcus and Owen and Bennett got where they needed to get."

"Allerton leads the nation in recommended-decision execution. Does it feel different, having so much certainty before the snap?"

Caleb looked past her. Marcus was signing a child's silver cap with a pen somebody had borrowed from the reporter's producer. Luis was walking with one sock down and his cleats in his hand.

"There's not much certainty once they start coming at you," Caleb said.

The reporter laughed, as if he had supplied the expected humanising joke. "But the answers are clearly working."

"Today they worked."

He gave her something about next week, something about the defence. She thanked him. His name and face went to people eating dinner in rooms he would never see.

In the locker room his phone held forty-three messages. His father had sent GOOD WORK followed by a photograph of the television, Caleb's own face tilted toward the microphone. His mother had sent a list: drink water, call when free, excellent throw to Marcus. She always included one football detail so he would know she had watched and not merely worried.

He called her while pulling on jeans. She answered on the third ring.

"You're limping," she said.

"I'm sitting down."

"On the television."

"Everybody limps after a game."

“Your father limps after groceries.”

In the background his father said he had carried six bags at once, which was not necessary information but had evidently been waiting for an audience.

Caleb laughed. It came out more freely than he expected. His mother asked whether he had eaten. He said he would. She told him his younger sister had been elected treasurer of something and he needed to ask her about it rather than wait for her to ask about him.

“I will.”

“She watched too.”

“I’ll call.”

He stayed on until she ran out of small matters. This was one of the things he loved about home: a victory could remain large without making everything else disappear.

Outside, wet leaves had collected along the kerb. The older alumni had gone to dinners in rooms with dark wood and portraits of former presidents. Students streamed downhill toward the bars. On the steps of the library, two people in blue paint were arguing over whose bicycle had been stolen, each holding a front wheel.

Caleb passed a television in the student union window. A former quarterback in a checked jacket was drawing a silver line through the first-half conversion.

“Watch Rourke stay disciplined here,” the man said through the open door. “Earlier in his career, this is where he takes the bait. Now the system gets him the correct answer, and he delivers it.”

Caleb kept walking.

The quarterback room occupied the corner of a building that had been renovated too many times to possess a single age. The hallway had new lights and old radiators. The room itself had six chairs, two newer than the others, a whiteboard nobody had managed to clean entirely, and a tactical wall whose surface held reflections even when dark. Caleb let himself in with his player credential.

He should have been hungry. He was hungry, but he did not want to go anywhere yet.

He found the play. Third-and-six, own forty-three, one forty-eight. The system supplied the approved view first, the picture from above with twenty-two player markers. He changed it to the end-zone film. He did not need the markers. He wanted the feet.

The corner moved.

Caleb froze the frame. He could see his own right hand at his waist, fingers just beginning to open.

He ran the play forward. Bennett crossed the line to gain. The officials made their signals. Everything they needed had happened.

He returned to the frame before the snap.

The door opened behind him. Caleb expected a coach. It was Jonah, wearing a rain jacket over his team shirt, a bag of takeout in one hand.

"Forgot my charger," Jonah said.

Caleb nodded toward the low shelf.

Jonah found it, coiled the cable, and looked at the wall. "That one again?"

"Just watching."

"You want food?"

"What is it?"

"Rice. Chicken. The vegetables you don't like."

"I like vegetables."

"You like fries."

Jonah set the bag on the table. There were two containers. Caleb wondered whether there had been two when Jonah arrived or whether the second had become his in the doorway.

They ate with the clip stopped above them. Rain clicked against the narrow window. Jonah sat in the chair with the crooked right arm and used his folded jacket to keep the takeout from sliding.

"Would you have checked it?" Caleb asked.

Jonah looked at the screen long enough to make the question real. "Probably not."

"Probably?"

"I wasn't standing there."

Caleb lifted his eyes from the container.

Jonah shrugged. "It looks easier from here. Everything does."

They ate without speaking for a while. Jonah's phone vibrated; he glanced at it and set it face down. Caleb did the same when his sister's message arrived, then remembered his promise and turned it over again.

"You going out?" Jonah asked.

"Later."

"We have review at nine."

"I know when review is."

Jonah closed his container. "See you then."

He took his charger and the empty bag. Caleb remained in the chair, his food cooling beside him. On the wall the safety stood between two possibilities, his weight still uncommitted. Marcus had not taken his first step. Bennett had not found the opening. Luis held the ball against the ground.

Caleb advanced one frame.

The corner's foot lifted, and then the alignment was gone.

CHAPTER TWO

The Recommendation

Harker's Sunday began with a drain.

The kitchen sink had backed up sometime during the night, and by six-thirty his wife had arranged a wrench, a bucket, and two old towels on the floor. Daniel stood looking at the objects while his coffee cooled on the counter.

"You could call somebody," Peg said.

"I can do a trap."

"You can call somebody who can do a trap."

He got down on one knee. The cabinet pressed against his shoulder. Above him, Peg cleared the breakfast plates as though he were a minor appliance temporarily obstructing a cupboard. They had been married twenty-seven years. She knew which kinds of difficulty he considered personal and which he would delegate before breakfast.

The nut turned. Water hit the bucket, mostly. Daniel caught the rest with a towel and held up a thick white tangle.

"There," he said.

"A championship effort."

He was late leaving and had to stop at a red light opposite a church where volunteers were carrying folding chairs through a side door. At the next intersection he saw one of his freshman defensive tackles holding an umbrella over an elderly woman. The boy's name was Reuben Tate. He weighed three hundred and eleven pounds and had

cried in Daniel's office during camp because his father's train had been cancelled and he did not know how to say he missed home.

Daniel raised his hand. Reuben raised his free hand back.

At the football building somebody had already updated the season record on the lobby wall. Two and zero. The first win had been against a smaller school that had accepted a substantial payment to play them. Yesterday's win meant more, but both occupied the same amount of space.

The staff meeting began at eight.

Simone Avram, who ran the programme's football intelligence group, stood beside the screen in running shoes, her hair still damp. Boone had three pages of handwritten notes. The defensive coordinator was trying to operate the coffee machine with the silent fury of a man who understood a far more complex machine than the one in front of him.

Harker sat at the end of the table. "Health first."

The athletic trainer reported bruises, one ankle needing reassessment, and an offensive lineman whose back spasms had settled overnight. No player had entered the concussion protocol. The ankle belonged to a special-teams freshman; Harker asked whether the boy could get to class without crossing half the campus on crutches. Somebody wrote it down.

Then Simone put yesterday's decisions on the wall.

She never began with the result. Harker had learned this about her in their first season working together. A forty-yard completion could move her less than an incomplete pass into the correct window. Early on he had thought she was defending the model against football. Later he had realised she was defending their ability to learn anything at all.

"Thirty-six graded passing decisions," she said. "Not thirty-six passes. Scrambles and sacks remain in the decision set."

The coffee machine yielded. The defensive coordinator returned to his chair as though nothing had happened.

“Caleb executed the recommended primary action on twenty-nine. Four adjustments were approved within the concept. Three changed the concept.”

Boone said, “Two of those were checks we’d installed.”

“Yes. I’m distinguishing them, not calling them errors.”

She enlarged the distribution. The forecast bands were broad enough to irritate anyone wanting a verdict. Over the previous season and the summer’s controlled practice sets, situations placed in the model’s sixty-to-seventy percent conversion band had converted approximately sixty-five percent of the time. The injury estimates had a longer review window and different limitations. She said that before anyone could ask.

“We’re not validating long-term health from two games.”

“Are we beating our old call sheet?” Harker asked.

“The recommendation policy is outperforming the comparison policy in the scrimmage assignments. In games, we have one observed sequence. We can estimate the alternative, not replay the season.”

“Plain language, Simone.”

“Our best evidence says yes. It doesn’t say the play we didn’t call would have worked yesterday.”

Boone turned his pencil between his fingers. “We’re getting cleaner answers against pressure.”

“And fewer throws outside the intended timing,” she said. “The system is helping. Caleb is also delivering those throws. Both belong in the evaluation.”

Harker watched Boone underline something. Russ had spent twenty years building offences. Now he could ask a machine to rank the pages of his own playbook, and it would return an answer supported by information he could not have collected alone. He used the answer. So would Harker. Neither of them had discovered an honourable way to prefer less information.

The question was what they did after receiving it.

“Bring the quarterbacks in,” Harker said.

Caleb arrived with a notebook and no breakfast. Jonah had breakfast in a paper cup and a notebook that looked used. The younger quarterbacks came behind them, first-year Sam Givens trying to keep his elbows from taking up too much room.

They reviewed the scoring drives first. Harker preferred to show players what they had done well while they still had enough energy to hear it. The play to Marcus at the twelve was good from protection through finish. Caleb moved his eyes correctly. Marcus gave the corner a stem that opened the inside without carrying him into the safety. Bennett understood he was clearing space, not asking for the ball.

"Eleven doing it," Harker said. "That's the picture."

Then Boone put up third-and-six.

Caleb's pencil stopped.

"You had a question?" Boone said.

Caleb glanced at Harker. "Corner showed early."

"He did."

"We could have gone outside."

Simone put the alternate on the adjoining display. The same personnel, a protection slide toward the pressure, Marcus releasing vertically after an inside jab. The predicted conversion probability was lower than thirty-four's. The potential gain was larger.

"There are two safeties," Jonah said.

Caleb looked at him. "I can count."

Jonah set his breakfast down. "The boundary safety doesn't have to cover the whole outside. He only has to close it before the ball gets there."

"He's leaning inside."

"His feet aren't."

Boone moved the film backward. Harker watched the safety, whose shoulders suggested one thing and lower body another.

Caleb said, "Marcus beats him."

"Sometimes," Simone said.

"That's what receivers do."

"Caleb," Harker said.

The room settled. It was not a rebuke yet, but everyone knew where one might begin.

Caleb laid the pencil flat. "I'm saying the defence was giving us something. I'm not saying Bennett wasn't open."

"It was giving us pressure," Boone said. "Thirty-four made them pay for it."

"With eight yards."

"We needed six."

Harker let the silence last. Sam stared down at his notes, writing nothing.

"Here's what I need you to tell me," Harker said. "What makes your check better in that situation? Not prettier. Better."

Caleb looked back at the film. Harker could almost see him rebuilding the field, stripping away the room and the morning, returning to the place where the choice had felt immediate.

"That corner's not disguising," Caleb said. "He's looking at the backfield. He's past the point where he can bail clean. If I get the protection changed, Marcus has a free release."

"The corner isn't the problem," Jonah said.

Caleb's jaw tightened. Then he pointed at the screen. "Safety still has to make it."

Jonah nodded. "And Bennett's defender has already left."

Nobody spoke for a few seconds. Then Caleb picked up his pencil.

"Okay," he said.

Harker disliked that okay. It could mean understanding, compliance, or a door shutting. He could not assign a grade to its sound.

They finished the review. Sam had misread the same practice coverage twice; Harker kept him afterward to discuss it without making the error a public feature of the boy's identity. Jonah collected the cups. Caleb waited in the hallway.

"Can I talk to you?" he asked when Harker came out.

They went to the office. The room faced a service road, not the stadium. Harker had chosen that office when the renovated wing

opened because he did not want to spend his days looking at something that could flatter him.

Caleb sat without being told, which he had earned over three years and would still lose if he used it badly.

“Am I supposed to check anything?” he asked.

“You know the procedures.”

“I know what the paper says.”

Harker leaned back. A crescent of grime from the sink trap had dried in the groove of his wedding ring. He rubbed it with his thumb.

“The paper says you can change a call when you have a reason and the offence can execute the change,” he said. “That’s what I expect.”

“Then why does every review feel like I’m answering for doing it?”

“You answer for staying with it too.”

“Do I?”

The question deserved better than the first answer Harker had.

“If you throw the hitch with the corner sitting on it, I ask why you threw it.”

“And if it was recommended?”

“I still ask.”

Caleb studied his face. Harker knew what the young man was measuring: whether the coach’s remembered examples matched the coach’s current habits.

“I had a good game,” Caleb said.

“You had a very good game.”

“I felt like somebody could have put anybody in my helmet.”

Harker looked at him for a long time.

“Anybody can’t put that ball on Marcus’s back shoulder.”

“You know what I mean.”

“I know you’re unhappy. I don’t know yet which part I can help you with.”

Caleb dropped his eyes. In public he was loose and quick, the kind of athlete who could make a crowd think confidence had no cost. Here he looked twenty-one.

“I used to know why you wanted me out there,” he said.

Harker felt an impulse to reassure him completely. It was a familiar temptation, particularly with good players. Tell them what they wanted, buy another week of cooperation, leave the harder conversation for someone else.

"I want you out there because you can run our offence better than the other quarterbacks right now," he said. "You're making good throws. You can move. You can see the field. You've earned the job. None of that makes the job permanent."

Caleb nodded once.

"Jonah helped you yesterday," Harker said.

"I know."

"Do you?"

"I heard him."

Harker did not push further. Caleb got up, thanked him in a voice with little gratitude in it, and left.

At noon Daniel walked across campus to a lunch with Miriam Calder, the university's president, and two alumni who had helped fund the performance centre. The lunch had been scheduled before the season. Yesterday's victory improved the mood and complicated the conversation.

One alumnus, a retired surgeon, asked whether the system could reduce injuries further if the coaching staff were willing to give up a little scoring efficiency. Calder listened closely. She had a way of listening that made people finish their thoughts more carefully.

"We already trade performance against workload," Harker said. "But you have to know what kind of injury and what kind of cost you're talking about."

"Surely there's a threshold," the other alumnus said.

"There are several."

Calder put her fork down. "And who sets them?"

Harker explained the medical staff's independence, the training plans, the coaches' consultation with players. It was all true. He noticed, while describing it, that he had made the process sound smoother than it was.

The surgeon said the new system might let universities lead rather than follow professional sports in athlete protection. Harker agreed. He meant it. He had coached men whose bodies remained with him years after their names disappeared from the programme's publicity. A limping man at a wedding. A former linebacker asking whether Daniel knew anyone who could get him a specialist appointment sooner. These were not abstract reasons to use better forecasts.

"We're also teaching judgment," Calder said. "That remains part of the educational claim."

"Yes," Harker said.

She held his eyes for a moment, then asked the surgeon about his grandchildren. Daniel was grateful and faintly ashamed to be grateful.

Back in the football building the weekly evaluation file waited for his signature. It combined film grades, practice performance, health availability, conduct, and something called decision reliability. The latter had appeared first as a coaching aid. It now occupied its own column.

The athletic department wanted consistent information for development plans. Professional evaluators were requesting comparable data. The analysts said excluding compliance would discard a variable associated with fewer turnovers. All of these arguments had merit. Daniel had approved each incremental change when it arrived, generally on a day when something more urgent needed him.

Caleb's total was high. Jonah's had risen. Below the scores, a note described Caleb's independent checks as an area for monitoring.

Harker opened the note and added: Strong execution. Adjustments must be assessed by situation and communication, not deviation alone.

He read it again. The sentence sounded correct and did not tell anyone how much the column should matter.

Boone appeared in the doorway.

"You got a minute?"

"What do you need?"

“Jonah’s getting a first-team period Tuesday. And I want him in the two-minute period against the ones.”

“Give him the period.”

Boone nodded. “Caleb know?”

“Tell him.”

When Boone left, Daniel’s phone lit with a photograph from Peg. The sink had drained. Under the image she had written: Your other team thanks you.

He smiled and sent a thumbs-up, then deleted it and wrote Glad it worked. Peg disliked receiving the same response he gave scheduling messages.

The evaluation still waited. The file had twenty-six names. Some men needed more practice, some less. One would miss a class if nobody adjusted his treatment appointment. There were decisions in it Daniel understood well and decisions he had allowed himself to understand only well enough to sign.

He reread Caleb’s entry, left the column where it was, and approved the report.

CHAPTER THREE

The Other Quarterback

Jonah woke before the alarm because the radiator had begun its argument with the wall.

The apartment was above a repair shop on Larch Street. The shop dealt in appliances too old to report their own defects and newer ones whose owners did not trust the reports. Below Jonah's bedroom a man named Vic tested washing machines. Sometimes, near midnight, Jonah could hear a spin cycle through his pillow.

He had been offered a newer place with other athletes, farther from campus and paid for by an agreement that would have required him to appear in twelve promotional pieces. He had declined. His father said he was making himself poorer out of stubbornness. His mother asked whether the radiator worked.

It worked fiercely.

At six-twelve Jonah sat on the edge of the bed and read the message that had arrived overnight. His mother's school was changing its scheduling platform again. She wanted to know how to move a file without losing the notes attached to it. Jonah read the attached picture, worked out which button she had not noticed, and sent instructions in four lines. He deleted the fifth line, which began It's pretty easy.

He dressed, ate two pieces of toast, and packed the same bag he had packed the night before. Checking was part of getting ready, but he knew it could become something else if he let it. He checked once.

Outside the shop Vic was trying to coax a dog from beneath a delivery truck.

“That yours?” Jonah asked.

“Not yet.”

The dog took a piece of bread and remained under the truck.

“He’s patient,” Jonah said.

“So am I.”

At the performance centre the early lights had the flat brightness of a place before people filled it. Jonah changed shoes, checked in with the strength assistant, and began the mobility sequence written for him. He had stopped thinking of the sequence as something between him and throwing. There had been a summer when his shoulder hurt every morning and he regarded the pain as proof of work. Simone’s team and the trainers had reduced his throwing volume, changed the spacing, and shown him where fatigue was spoiling his mechanics. The pain had gone away. His deep accuracy had improved.

He did not need a theory about technology to be grateful for that.

The assistant held a resistance band while Jonah rotated through his hips. Across the room Luis was doing a modified set, his lower back monitored by a trainer sitting on a rolling stool.

“How’s the back?” Jonah asked.

“Attached.”

“Good development.”

“You’re not allowed to make jokes until you start a game.”

Jonah smiled. Luis smiled too, and shifted under the trainer’s hand.

At seven Jonah worked his drops on the empty indoor field. He placed three small discs behind the imaginary centre, not as destinations but as checks on the angle of his feet. If he landed too narrow, the throw to his left became a correction rather than a motion. Caleb could throw from a base Jonah had spent two seasons learning not to

occupy. That was talent. Calling it merely technique would have been an insult to both of them.

Sam Givens arrived carrying a net and looking as if sleep had failed him personally.

"You said seven-fifteen," Sam said.

"It's seven-fifteen."

"You're already going."

"You're on time."

They set the net and threw. Jonah could correct the freshman without making him feel corrected every time. He learned that from his mother, though he would have disliked putting it that way. His mother taught children who came to class certain they were bad at mathematics. She said the first useful thing was to stop making them prove it.

Sam pulled a throw low and left.

"Again," Jonah said.

"What did I do?"

"Watch your front foot."

The next ball hit the centre panel.

"Now tell me," Jonah said.

Sam looked at his shoe. "Opened too soon."

"Good."

By eight they were finished. Jonah showered and walked to a seminar in a classroom above the library. A junior, he was studying civil engineering, which meant people regularly asked whether football had made him interested in bridges, as if the route from one subject to another had to involve a collision.

The seminar's current project was a flood-control proposal for a fictional municipality built around real terrain. His group had chosen a design that protected the largest number of households. His classmate Lydia, who had grown up in a town evacuated twice, wanted them to explain what happened to the households left outside the barrier.

"We have a budget," Jonah said.

"I know."

"We can't protect everyone equally."

"I know that too."

He looked down at the map. Three streets lay beyond the proposed wall.

"Then what are you asking?"

"Whether we should write the proposal like those streets don't exist."

Jonah took his pen back out.

The instructor stopped at their table. They discussed relocation assistance and construction staging. Jonah's phone remained in his pocket, even when a notification buzzed twice. After class he saw that the first-team period had been added to his practice schedule.

He read the message again without meaning to.

Lydia was packing up. "Good news?"

"Maybe."

"You have the face."

"What face?"

"Like you want to grin but somebody might charge you."

He did grin then. She wished him luck, not knowing what for. It was easier to receive it that way.

At lunch he opened the opponent's pressure cut-ups. A third-down package used a false interior overload to make the running back stay inside while an edge rusher came free. The conventional response was to throw quickly to the side the rusher had left. That worked unless the nickel defender fell underneath the route. The Oracle favoured a concept in which the tight end delayed and released opposite the pressure.

Jonah watched twelve examples, then turned the recommendations off and watched them again. He needed the reason in his hands. A play number could tell him where to begin; it would not help if the defence changed in a way that required him to finish somewhere else.

Caleb came in halfway through the second set.

"You doing Moreland already?" he asked.

“Pressure package.”

Caleb put his bag down and stood behind the empty chair. “They run it more with ninety-one in.”

Jonah checked the personnel tab. Caleb was right.

“He can drop,” Caleb said. “Other guy can’t. Well, he can. You’d want him to.”

Jonah laughed. Caleb sat down.

For twenty minutes they worked well together. Caleb saw the defensive end’s first step; Jonah noticed the running back’s location changing the nickel’s responsibility. Boone came in, watched without announcing himself, and asked them to put the solution on the whiteboard.

Caleb drew the release route in a broad curve. Jonah shortened it.

“You’re making it a wheel,” Jonah said.

“I know what I’m making.”

“Bennett can’t get there that fast.”

“He’ll be flattered you said fast.”

Boone tapped the shortened route. “This is the one we’re installing.”

Caleb capped the pen. “Fine.”

Jonah returned to the film. The good twenty minutes had ended, but it had happened. He tried not to discount it because the last minute felt different.

Practice began with the bay doors open, a cold draught from outside pushing the artificial turf pellets into the corners of the facility. The outdoor fields were available, but Boone wanted controlled repetitions for the installation before taking it into weather. Coaches moved between groups; equipment staff dragged bags; two managers argued over the placement of a camera until a third moved it and ended the matter.

In individual work Caleb threw the deep outbreak from the far hash. Marcus caught it along the sideline without needing to slow. Jonah threw the same ball a foot too far inside. Marcus adjusted, completed the catch, and tossed it back.

“Again?” Jonah asked.

“We’ve got time,” Marcus said.

They ran it twice more. The third was right. Caleb’s first had been right.

When the first-team period arrived, Boone gave Jonah the initial series. There was no announcement. Jonah pulled his helmet on, listened to the call, and entered the huddle.

Luis looked up. “You can joke now. Practice exception.”

“Later,” Jonah said.

“Terrible start.”

Jonah called the formation and concept, then waited for Bennett to repeat his tag. The defensive scout unit had been told to disguise aggressively. They did. On the first snap both safeties held their depth and the nickel showed pressure. Jonah kept the called pass, checked the protection, and found Owen settling behind the dropping line-backer for nine yards.

On the next play the boundary safety rolled down late. The Oracle’s packet had already included that response branch. Jonah signalled the attached hitch, made sure Marcus saw it, and threw before the corner could close. Six yards.

The third call was a run. He did not make it a statement about being allowed to throw. He handed the ball to Darius Kemp, watched the backside end, and followed the play far enough to see Luis working up to the linebacker. Seven yards.

At the end of the first series Boone nodded once.

Caleb took the next one.

Jonah watched with his helmet still on. The first pass was better than Jonah’s: a seam thrown through a narrowing gap, Bennett reaching above the linebacker and landing in space. The second snap Caleb changed the formation tag late. Owen moved in, the nickel followed, and Caleb tried to hit Marcus on the outside comeback. The corner stayed attached. Caleb held the ball, shifted right, and made an excellent throw on the move to Darius.

“Whistle,” the practice official called. “Sack.”

Caleb turned. The scout defensive end had touched his waist before the release. Noncontact rules for quarterbacks made the moment seem smaller than it would have been on Saturday.

"I'm out of that," Caleb said.

"Maybe," Boone said. "Third-and-long."

Caleb converted the third down with his legs, though the run would have ended earlier in live contact. Nobody denied the athletic quality. The coaches recorded the decision and the practice restriction separately.

The next series belonged to Jonah.

By its end he had made four completions and one deliberate throwaway. The throwaway frustrated him more than the missed deep ball earlier. A second option had opened just as he committed to sending it beyond the sideline. He knew Boone would see it.

Boone did. "You had Bennett late."

"Yes, sir."

"You're getting through it too fast there."

"Yes."

Jonah took the correction and remembered the feeling before he lost it. His best advantage was not immunity from errors. He could place the error somewhere he could return to it.

Near the end they ran a two-minute period, ball on the offence's thirty-five, down six, one timeout. Jonah got the first repetition. The defence played its own schemes now, Trey Dandridge calling adjustments that the offence had not previewed.

At second-and-four Trey crowded the line and smiled at Jonah.

"You read the answer sheet?" he asked.

Jonah looked at his wrist. "You on it?"

Luis snorted. Trey backed out at the snap, and Jonah put the ball into Owen's hands beneath him. On third-and-two later in the series, Jonah recognised an interior pressure look and moved Darius across before the communication cutoff. He waited until Luis echoed the change, then snapped. Darius met Trey in the gap. Jonah had enough time to hit Marcus at the sideline for fourteen.

They finished with a touchdown to Bennett on the same delayed release Jonah and Caleb had discussed at lunch.

When Jonah jogged off, Caleb handed him a water bottle.

"Good protection call," Caleb said.

"Thanks."

"Trey almost sold me that one last year."

Jonah drank. He wanted to ask whether Caleb had known before today that Jonah could do this against the starters. He wanted to say it had not suddenly become true just because the period appeared on a schedule. Neither sentence would help them.

"You ready?" he said instead.

Caleb put his helmet on. "Always."

His repetition ended with a touchdown too, after a sack and a remarkable fourth-down throw that Jonah would not have attempted. Boone praised the throw. Harker, who had watched from the far side, spoke to the line about the sack. The period did not give Jonah a simple victory, but he knew which series had needed rescuing.

Afterward, in the cold tub, his knees ached in the ordinary way of knees that had carried him through a long day. Darius sat opposite him eating crackers.

"You were good," Darius said.

"You blocked Trey."

"I noticed."

"Thanks."

Darius lifted a wet hand from the water, inspected the cracker damage, and ate it anyway. "You don't have to thank me every time I do my job."

"I'm working on it."

"Work faster."

Jonah's mother called as he left the building. The file had moved successfully. One of the notes had vanished, but she found it in a separate tab.

"I had a good practice," he said.

She stopped talking about the school. "Tell me."

He described the first-team period in a way she could follow. She knew football well enough now, but she wanted to know about people more than plays. Had the other men listened? Had the coaches said anything? Was Caleb all right?

"I'm not taking something that belongs to him," Jonah said.

"I didn't say you were."

He leaned against the cool brick. "I know."

"You can want the job, Jonah."

He closed his eyes. Inside the building a cart rattled over the floor joints. A door thudded. Ordinary work continuing after his best day in weeks.

"I do," he said.

"Good."

She did not turn it into a larger lesson. She asked what he was eating for dinner, and he said chicken again, and she asked whether the city had exhausted every other animal.

He walked home smiling. Vic's adopted dog was now on a blanket behind the shop counter. Jonah crouched and held out his hand. The dog sniffed it, considered the absence of bread, and went back to sleep.

In his apartment he made dinner. The chicken went into the small pan his mother had brought on her first visit, which rocked on the stove because one burner had never sat level. He propped the pan handle on a wooden spoon and cut a pepper on the board balanced across the sink. The apartment smelled of garlic. Through the floor he heard Vic closing the shop, dragging the heavy rear door along its track.

His father called while he was washing the board. Jonah let it ring once longer than necessary. His father had always been good at celebrating what could be seen: a completed pass, a posted grade, a paycheck. Explaining a practice period risked making it sound like the thing itself.

"Your mother told me," his father said.

"It was practice."

“That’s what she told me.”

Jonah turned off the tap.

His father asked about the apartment, then about the bridge project, and stayed with the answers. Before hanging up he said, “If you get your chance, we’ll figure out getting there.”

“You don’t have to promise that.”

“I didn’t promise. I said we’d figure it out.”

Jonah ate at the narrow table below the window. He put the other serving into a container for tomorrow. His mother had been right about the chicken. He added pasta to the shopping list and, after a moment, something that could be cooked for another person without an apology about the stove.

He had finished his throwing for the day. The deep outbreak still bothered him. His arm did not need another throw, but his feet might take a few more drops. Eight, he decided. Then bed.

The indoor field stayed open for players with approved access. Jonah walked back across campus carrying the small discs and his own ball. The lights over the far end were off. He placed the discs for a deep outbreak, far hash to field side, the throw Caleb had made so easily.

He took the drop without releasing the ball. Turn, plant, open, finish. Then again. He watched the position of his shoe, not the imaginary receiver.

On the seventh repetition he felt the movement settle. On the eighth he lost it.

He stood still, breathing through his nose. Then he picked up the discs.

Back in his apartment, he wrote the paragraph about the unprotected streets, sent it to Lydia, and worked through the problem set. At ten he closed the laptop. He had completed the recovery schedule. Another hundred throws would not improve the next day.

He set the alarm for morning.

CHAPTER FOUR

Eleven Men

Marcus's mother had brought the wrong shoes for the campus tour and refused to admit it.

She walked beside him in leather flats, carrying a handbag large enough to contain the supplies for a smaller household. His brother Andre trailed them with two coffees to go and a box of pastries he had been told not to open yet.

"You can slow down," Marcus said.

"I'm walking."

"We have all morning."

"Then show me where you go to class."

He pointed at the building ahead. "There."

"Which window?"

"Depends if they're letting me out."

She struck his arm with the back of her hand. Andre opened the pastry box.

Friday mornings were their best chance to see him before home games. On Saturday Marcus belonged to the schedule from breakfast until the locker room released him. Afterward he was tired enough to make dinner feel like another assignment. His mother worked alternate weekends at a distribution centre outside their hometown. She had changed shifts twice to get this visit. Marcus had asked her not

to. She had told him she was a grown woman who could speak to her own supervisor.

Now she stopped beside the library and adjusted one shoe.

Marcus pretended to study a noticeboard. Andre ate a pastry, folded the box so their mother would not see the missing space, and handed Marcus the second coffee.

"How's work?" Marcus asked.

"You can ask that like a regular person," Andre said.

"I did."

"You did the big-brother voice."

Marcus sipped the coffee. It was too sweet, exactly how he had liked it when he was seventeen. Andre had remembered accurately and four years late.

"How's work, regular person?"

"Good. I'm getting more hours."

Andre installed commercial flooring with a crew whose foreman had once played defensive tackle. The foreman texted Marcus after games with advice on route running. Marcus replied politely. He was not ready to trust a tackle about the position any more than he was ready to trust himself about flooring.

"You get into the course?" he asked.

"January."

"Good."

"Don't pay for it."

Marcus looked at him.

"Mom said you asked what it cost."

"I asked what it cost."

"I've got it."

Their mother straightened. "Both of you quit doing accounting at each other."

They went inside the student union, where she could sit without acknowledging why. Marcus bought breakfast with his meal account. Andre was impressed by the fact that Marcus did not pay directly and

unimpressed when Marcus explained how much the account actually represented.

At a table by the window his mother took an envelope from her bag. Inside were photographs printed at a shop near home: his younger cousin at a school recital, the front porch after repairs, Andre holding a tile cutter like a fish he had caught.

"You can send these," Marcus said.

"I did. You give them a heart. I don't know if you look."

He spread them on the table.

He did look, but she was not entirely wrong. On his phone, their lives arrived between a coverage clip and a treatment reminder. Everything could be opened at once and nothing stayed open very long.

"Porch looks good," he said.

"Your uncle did the step."

"I was going to do it."

"You were going to do it in May."

Andre leaned over the pictures. "It was a bad step in March."

Marcus smiled and put the photograph of the porch in his wallet. The other pictures went back into the envelope, which he placed in the inner pocket of his jacket where he could feel its edge.

His mother asked about the professional scouts, trying to make the question casual. Marcus told her there had been more contact through the staff, more requests for film and verified testing. Nothing promised. The receiver class would be strong. A senior season mattered.

"You've been playing well," she said.

"So have a lot of guys."

"I didn't ask about a lot of guys."

He loved her for that and needed her not to do it. Every weekend somebody else had a spectacular catch, ran a faster time, showed the sort of unusual trait that could move a player from one list to another. Marcus could not ask an evaluator to love him. He needed them to understand his work.

"They like the route detail," he said. "They like that I can play inside and outside."

"And the catching," Andre said.

"Apparently that's a plus."

His mother folded her hands over the strap of her bag. "Just keep yourself well."

Marcus looked out at a group of prospective students following a guide across the courtyard. They moved with the tentative obedience of people who had not yet learned which doors they could open.

"Trying," he said.

He took them to the academic building, showed them the seminar room, and introduced them to an instructor who recognised him without looking impressed. His mother asked about the degree requirements. Marcus was studying public policy and had discovered that people either thought it appropriate or asked what he would do with it if football failed. The instructor asked him instead whether he had finished the reading.

"Most of it."

"The useful part or the short part?"

Andre laughed so loudly the corridor turned toward them.

After they left for the hotel, Marcus went to the performance centre for his scheduled review. A sports-medicine clinician named Erin Sandoval met him beside the treatment tables. She had worked with him since a hamstring strain in his sophomore year. She could tell when he was minimising pain and when he was merely annoyed to be asked about it.

"Any change since yesterday?"

"No."

"Morning stiffness?"

"Same."

She examined the leg, asked him to push against her hand, and watched him do a short movement sequence. The hamstring was not injured now. There was localised tightness after a heavy week, a little

loss in one test that by itself would not have dictated anything. Combined with his recent load, it justified changing the day.

"We're keeping the plan," Erin said. "Half the high-speed work. Normal walkthrough."

"How much tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow's a separate assessment."

"That's not an answer."

"It's the answer I have this morning."

Simone joined them with a tablet. The model displayed Marcus's recent acceleration exposures as a cluster of dots and lines, each one a moment he remembered physically if not individually. Erin explained the clinical finding. Simone explained the loading forecast. Neither pretended the graph could diagnose a tear that had not happened.

"We're reducing a manageable risk," Simone said. "Not telling you something will go wrong."

"How manageable?" Marcus asked.

She gave him a range and explained why it was a range. He listened. This was not useless information, and he was not insulted by its existence. Two years ago he would have run every repetition he was offered, lost his stride, and blamed himself for getting slower. Now he understood his body better.

"I need the red-zone period," he said.

"Boone can install it with you in walkthrough," Erin said.

"I need the full-speed release against their leverage. We didn't get enough Wednesday."

Simone scrolled. "The reduced plan has you on one competitive rep."

"I know. I saw it."

Erin looked at him. "What are you asking for?"

"Two. Not six. Two with the right look, then I'm out."

They considered it. He resented how relieved he felt when they actually considered it.

"If the first increases symptoms, there's no second," Erin said.

“Okay.”

“And you tell me.”

“I tell you.”

Simone updated the plan. Marcus watched the number change from one to two.

“Does the development file show this as me rejecting the plan?” he asked.

Simone stopped moving her finger.

“It shows a modified plan agreed with medical,” she said.

“Because I asked.”

“Yes.”

“I’d like that written too.”

Erin nodded before Simone did. Marcus thanked them and got up. The conversation had gone reasonably well. It would have gone faster if he had kept quiet, and that fact stayed with him as he changed.

On the practice field Boone asked where Marcus had been. Marcus explained the revision. Boone checked with the assistant carrying the availability sheet and placed the two repetitions into the schedule.

“You get the look once,” Boone said. “Don’t waste it arguing with the corner.”

“He usually starts.”

“You usually finish.”

Marcus’s first competitive rep was against a scout corner who had been instructed to take away the inside release. Marcus showed him the inside, leaned into the space between them, and came out under the defender’s outside arm. Caleb delivered the ball along the back line. Marcus caught it with both feet down though college rules required only one.

“Show-off,” Caleb said as Marcus returned.

“You’re welcome.”

The second used a different look. The corner was patient. Marcus had to work harder to open him. He got the separation late, and Caleb threw the ball slightly ahead rather than into Marcus’s body. It was

good, a throw that allowed him to finish without absorbing the corner's full weight.

"Done?" Caleb asked.

"Done."

"That's all they're letting you do?"

Marcus watched the defensive back retrieve the ball. "That's what we agreed."

"You look fine."

"I'm glad. You should invoice them."

Caleb laughed, then saw that Marcus had meant the sentence a little more than the delivery suggested.

"I didn't mean—"

"I know. Go throw."

Marcus put on a vest and stood beside the assistant filming the next period. Watching practice gave him time to see things that playing it concealed. The scout corner rubbed his shoulder between repetitions. Darius checked his wrist call twice because the assistant had sent the wrong grouping. Luis turned and corrected the young right guard before the coach noticed.

Caleb ran a series against the starting defence. The contact level was controlled: no tackling to the ground, quarterbacks untouchable beyond a hand signal, defenders expected to wrap and release. It was still football played by fast men whose restraint had limits at the moment their bodies met.

On the last snap Caleb saw Trey shade outside and changed the called concept. It was a check the offence knew. He announced it clearly enough that the receivers and back echoed the tag. The change left the protection in its original form, a rule the package allowed if the defence stayed within the expected front.

The defence did not stay.

Trey called a late interior exchange. The tackle crossed Luis's face, the end moved inward, and Luis had to turn back to help the left guard. On the right, Nate Holloway was left without the assistance he had expected against the defensive tackle. Nate had started only two

college games. He was strong, technically improving, and a fraction late resetting his feet.

The tackle struck him high on the chest, legal hand placement, hard momentum. Nate stumbled backward and landed on one knee. Caleb slid away from the pressure and sent the ball across the field to Owen, who had broken free behind Trey.

Twenty-eight yards if they were playing a game. A beautifully thrown ball.

The offence cheered. Boone called it a good finish. Nate remained down long enough for the trainer to step toward him.

Marcus lowered his vest zipper. Luis had gone back to Nate, bending close to hear what he was saying. The tackle who had hit him stood two paces away with his hands on his hips.

"You good?" the defender asked.

Nate nodded and got up. He walked stiffly toward the trainer, one hand pressed to his ribs.

Caleb came off the field smiling and reached for the water.

"You see Owen?" he asked Marcus.

"Yeah."

"Trey overcommitted."

"Nate got hit."

Caleb looked back. "He's okay."

"They're checking."

The smile left Caleb's face, not completely, but enough. "That was the front exchange. Protection's still right."

"I didn't say it wasn't."

"You said it like—"

Marcus held up a hand. "I said he got hit."

Boone summoned Caleb before the conversation could narrow into something neither of them had intended. Marcus watched them at the board. Caleb traced Owen's route. Boone pointed at the line. The two things could be true on the same screen.

After practice Marcus sat beside Nate on a treatment table while Erin examined him. The finding was a rib bruise, painful, not alarm-

ing. They would watch it and adjust contact. Nate looked less worried than embarrassed.

"I got high," he said.

"You got a guy in your chest," Marcus said.

"Feet should've been under me."

"Probably."

Nate looked at him. Marcus smiled.

"You want me to lie? You can get that somewhere else."

Erin handed Nate a cold pack. He pressed it to his side and winced.

"They got the pass?" he asked.

"Owen got it."

"Good."

Marcus considered telling him he did not have to be glad. That would have been another person explaining his interests to him. He left it alone.

"What are you doing tonight?" he asked.

"Review."

"After."

"Review more."

"Terrible hobby."

Nate smiled a little. He was from a town with a single stoplight and had told Marcus during camp that the campus's delivery machines made him nervous. Marcus invited him to dinner with his mother and brother. Nate said he did not want to intrude. Marcus said Andre would be relieved to have another audience for his jokes.

They ate at a place behind the bookstore where the owner remembered Marcus's order but still called him Martin. Marcus had corrected him once, then decided it was pleasant to be somebody slightly less recognizable for an hour.

His mother asked Nate what he studied. Nate told her history, and she asked which part, and he began explaining labour movements with enough enthusiasm that Marcus watched his brother's face for rescue signals. None came. Andre knew something about working crews and had questions. Nate relaxed into his chair.

Caleb's message arrived halfway through dinner: Nate okay?

Marcus replied: Bruise. With us eating.

A second message: Tell him I'll check in tomorrow.

Marcus showed Nate the phone. Nate nodded, his mouth full. Caleb cared. That had never been the question Marcus wanted answered.

When dinner ended his mother stood carefully. The wrong shoes had become her problem again.

"I'll get the car," Andre said.

"I can walk."

"You can," Marcus said. "He's getting the car."

She sat back down and gave him a look. He gave it back. A familiar dispute with no scoreboard.

At the hotel he carried their bags upstairs. Andre had paid for half the room without telling their mother. Marcus found the receipt while moving a jacket and put it back. On the way down he stopped at the lobby television. A sports programme had begun its preview of Saturday's game.

The practice clip was already circulating through the team's approved publicity feed: Caleb rolling away, Owen alone in space, the ball arriving like the final piece of something designed. The caption called it creativity within a disciplined system.

Nate's collision was outside the crop.

Marcus stayed until the clip looped. He knew the pass deserved admiration. He had been close enough to see how difficult it was. He also knew where Nate had been standing, and what had happened there, and how easy it was to find the score without finding the cost.

He watched one more time, then went to meet his family at the car.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Better Decision

On the plane to Ridgeline, Caleb sat beside a window that would not quite darken and tried to read about housing policy.

He had borrowed Marcus's notes because they shared an elective and Caleb had missed the seminar for a broadcast interview. The instructor permitted the absence and not the missing work. Marcus's handwriting grew smaller wherever the instructor had said something he disliked. In the margins he had written questions that Caleb understood separately without yet understanding their relation to the reading.

Across the aisle Jonah worked on a drawing with a ruler. Darius slept with a hoodie pulled over his face. The flight attendants had been warned about the team's appetite and were proceeding down the aisle with the composure of people supplying a temporary army.

Caleb's phone held an article somebody had sent him. The headline said Allerton's Quarterback Makes the Right Choice Every Time. He had not made the right choice every time against Moreland. He had overthrown a receiver who had beaten single coverage, failed to see a linebacker underneath a dig, and on one third down run into pressure he could have avoided. They had still won twenty-eight to ten. The defence had been excellent. Jonah had completed five of six passes in the fourth quarter, leading the last touchdown drive.

None of those particulars had reached the headline.

Caleb opened Marcus's notes again.

"What's the blank?" he asked, holding the page toward the aisle.

Marcus leaned forward from the row behind. "Which?"

"After household mobility."

"Costs."

"Why didn't you write costs?"

"I did. You can't read."

"I can read other people."

Marcus reached for the page and added the word above the original. "Now you can read me twice."

"Thanks."

"Send me your response. I want to see if you do the same thing you did last time."

"What thing?"

"Say the city should offer choices and never say who pays for them."

Caleb leaned back. "It was a first draft."

"It was the one you submitted."

From across the aisle Jonah made a sound that might have been a laugh. Caleb looked over. Jonah was carefully studying the drawing.

"You got something?" Caleb asked.

"No."

"You definitely got something."

Jonah lifted his ruler. "A bridge."

Marcus laughed. Caleb did too, despite himself. For a moment the plane held men going somewhere together, not a depth chart.

Ridgeline's town lay below low hills bleached by late summer. Their stadium was newer than Allerton's and louder in a way Caleb distrusted, sound reflected back from metal and glass. The home team wore red. People had painted the retaining walls red, the pedestrian bridge red, a line of old cars red for a tailgate procession. At the hotel a child wearing a Ridgeline jersey asked Marcus for an autograph and then told Caleb he hoped he threw four interceptions.

"Only four?" Caleb asked.

The child reconsidered. "Six."

"Don't help him," Marcus said.

That evening Boone reviewed the red-zone plan. Ridgeline had a fast defence, stronger outside than between the tackles, capable of producing pressure without bringing more than four. They would present Caleb with opportunities to leave the pocket and defenders prepared for where he preferred to go.

"Stay on schedule," Boone said. "Make them defend every part of the field."

He called on Jonah to explain the boundary rotation. Jonah did. Then he called on Caleb to explain the front exchange that might accompany it. Caleb did that too.

Harker sat at the back without interrupting. Caleb could feel him listening, not to the information alone but to how the two quarterbacks gave it.

After the meeting Caleb went down to the hotel pool, which was closed, and sat in a chair outside the glass doors. His father called.

"Big one tomorrow," his father said.

"They're all big."

"I know. I'm allowed to say it."

Caleb watched an automated cleaner move along the bottom of the pool. It reached the wall, stayed there briefly, and turned.

His father asked about the week. Caleb talked about classes first and waited for the conversation to move to football. His father had coached his youth teams until a broken leg forced him to watch from a chair. After that Caleb's mother said his advice improved because he could no longer chase the boys while giving it.

"Jonah got more reps?" his father asked.

Caleb looked at the cleaner again. "Who told you that?"

"It's in the practice reports."

"He gets reps every week."

"I'm not worried."

"Good."

"You don't sound good."

"Then don't ask me like I'm supposed to explain being under investigation."

His father went quiet. Caleb pressed the heel of one hand against his forehead.

"Sorry," he said. "It's fine."

"I can just ask how you are."

"I'm fine."

"You used to give me longer answers."

Caleb heard, beneath the attempt at humour, a man whose contribution had become uncertain. His father had watched every game, driven every road, bought equipment they could have delayed buying, and now could offer either praise or questions, both dangerous.

"I'm tired," Caleb said. "I've got the reading done. The shoulder's good. I want to play."

"Okay."

"How's the roof?"

His father told him. It was a longer answer than the roof required, and Caleb listened until he heard how his father really was.

The next afternoon Allerton won the coin toss and deferred. Caleb watched Trey lead the defence onto the field. He touched the padded wall beside the bench, a private habit he had acquired his first season and continued without believing it affected anything. The wall was warm from the sun.

Ridgeline took almost six minutes to go seventy-five yards. They ran between the tackles, made a third-and-five with a ball thrown ahead of tight coverage, and scored from the three. The extra point made it seven-zero.

Allerton's first possession reached midfield and ended with a punt. Caleb had an open receiver on second down, but the pass was tipped by an interior rusher whose hand seemed to arrive from nowhere. On third down Owen was tackled short of the line to gain. The defence forced a punt in return, and Caleb got the ball back at his own twenty-one.

He knew the importance of the second possession without needing Boone to tell him. A road crowd understood when an offence was beginning to doubt its day.

He handed off twice, gains of six and three. On third-and-one Luis and the left guard drove the interior tackle backward, and Darius stepped through for four. Caleb threw to Marcus at the sideline, fifteen yards and a clean catch. The communications packet for the next down offered the quick pass to Owen against the space Ridgeline was conceding inside.

Caleb took it. Nine yards. A run gained five, and they were at the Ridgeline thirty-seven.

The next play lost three when an end defeated Bennett's block. Caleb did not see a reason to change the second-down call. Marcus caught a crossing route for twelve and was pulled down by a safety who held on after the whistle. Marcus got up smiling in the particular way he did when he was angry. Caleb met him on the way back.

"Leave it," he said.

"I didn't do anything."

"Keep doing that."

On third-and-one Caleb faked to Darius, saw the end fold inward, and kept the ball for six. At the twenty-two he finally felt the crowd recede from the huddle. It was as loud as ever. It had lost its authority over the small work in front of him.

They scored three plays later, Marcus clearing the middle and Bennett catching the ball behind the linebackers. Seven-seven.

The second quarter belonged to the kickers. Ridgeline made a forty-four-yarder; Allerton answered from thirty-eight. A late Ridgeline interception of a tipped pass gave the home team a short field. Trey's defence held at the eleven, and the home kicker made another. At halftime Allerton trailed thirteen-ten.

Caleb knew the interception had not been entirely his fault. He had also put the ball behind Owen, making the tip possible. In the locker room nobody asked him to choose between those truths.

Boone showed him the location. "Lead him."

"I know."

"Then do it."

The trainer checked Caleb's shoulder and neck. His treatment table faced the backs of Marcus and Luis as they bent over the offensive line's screen. Nate had started despite the rib bruise, medically cleared, with a protective pad beneath his uniform. Caleb had checked on him before the game. Nate said he was ready and asked Caleb whether the hotel coffee had tasted like the paper cup. They had both laughed, which allowed them to end the conversation without speaking about the hit.

Harker came through the room and stopped by Caleb's table.

"You're playing well enough to win," he said. "Play better."

"Yes, sir."

No arithmetic, no reassurance. Caleb welcomed it.

Allerton opened the second half with a drive that stalled at the Ridgeline forty-two. The punt pinned the home team at its eight. Trey broke up a pass on third down, and a short punt gave the Stags possession at the Ridgeline forty-seven.

Boone sent eleven personnel: three receivers, Bennett, Darius, the line, Caleb. The call was a play-action concept, Marcus crossing at intermediate depth, Owen clearing the field safety, Bennett available beneath. The model favoured it against the expected split-safety coverage. Caleb had run it beautifully in practice.

He reached the line and looked at the boundary corner.

The defender had been patient most of the afternoon, staying above Marcus and driving down when the receiver made his cut. Twice he had nearly broken up the comeback. This time, with the ball on the left hash and Marcus alone to the short side, the corner stood nearer than he had before, his outside foot angled back and his eyes fixed on Caleb rather than Marcus.

The safety was twelve yards deep, shaded toward Owen. Not enough distance to guarantee anything. Enough for Caleb to see a route.

He checked his wrist. The packet included the alternate because the staff had prepared it: an out-and-up by Marcus, the back staying in to give the throw time, Bennett changing from a route to a chip and release. Same grouping, legal formation, known signal. The touchdown estimate was higher than the called play's immediate touchdown estimate, but the chances of a useful gain were substantially lower. On first down the recommendation remained the crossing concept.

Caleb saw the corner glance toward the sideline. Then the eyes returned inside.

It was not proof. He knew it was not proof. He also knew what he would do with the corner if he were coaching him: invite the quarterback to repeat the ball that had worked, make the passing window feel available, close it at the moment of release.

"Cedar. Cedar," Caleb called, bringing his right hand across his chest.

Luis turned, heard the repeated tag, and pointed the protection. Darius set himself for the inside threat before expanding. Bennett touched his helmet. Marcus looked directly at Caleb and gave one small nod.

They knew.

Caleb let the defence settle. The play clock was at nine. At seven he snapped the ball.

Darius took the first step toward the run fake, then planted and met the linebacker who had come through the right-side gap. Bennett checked the edge rusher's path before releasing into the flat. Marcus accelerated inside the corner's cushion, turned his head, and opened his shoulders as though expecting the ball on the out.

The corner drove forward.

Not far. Just enough.

Marcus dropped his hips, took a hard outside step, and went up the sideline. Caleb's front foot was already in the ground. The field safety saw the route, changed direction, and had too much ground to cover.

The ball rose into the afternoon.

Caleb could feel the throw's location before Marcus looked up, a sensation he trusted because it had been wrong often enough to earn the occasions when it was right. Marcus ran beneath it. The corner reached for his waist and missed. At the twelve Marcus caught the ball over his outside shoulder, turned toward the field to avoid the sideline, and outran the safety's angle.

For a second the crowd's noise stopped belonging to anyone. The visiting section found it first.

Caleb was running before Marcus crossed the goal line. They met near the numbers. Marcus hit him with both hands and kept going, face open, shouting something Caleb could not hear.

The extra point made it seventeen-thirteen. On the sideline Boone took Caleb's helmet in one hand and pulled him close enough to speak without the headset.

"Good communication," he said. "Great throw."

Caleb was breathing hard. "He was sitting on it."

"You got him."

Harker slapped his shoulder. Jonah handed him the tablet showing the play, Marcus's line rising behind the corner's broken line.

"Nice ball," Jonah said.

Caleb waited for the qualification. None came.

Ridgeline answered early in the fourth quarter with a touchdown drive, a third-down scramble keeping it alive. Twenty-seventeen. Caleb took the next possession from his own twenty-five with ten minutes and forty-one seconds left. He did not try to recreate the long touchdown. The defence was no longer offering the same picture, and even if it had, he would have needed the rest of the offence ready to offer the same answer.

They drove with runs and short completions. A false start put them behind schedule at midfield. Caleb checked a protection against a pressure that did come, found Bennett underneath, and left them third-and-three. Darius made four. Caleb hit Owen between the

hashes for seventeen. Marcus drew a holding penalty on the next snap, giving them first-and-ten at the sixteen.

They scored on third-and-five from the eleven, Owen crossing behind Marcus while Caleb held the linebacker with his eyes. Twenty-four-twenty, five minutes and twenty-eight seconds remaining.

Ridgeline's next drive ended at the Stags' thirty-one. On fourth-and-three, Trey caught the running back at the line and the rest of the defence closed around him. Allerton got the ball with two minutes and forty-six seconds left. Ridgeline had two timeouts. Boone called runs, Caleb made the checks necessary to preserve them, and Darius earned the first down they needed after the last timeout. Caleb knelt twice. The final whistle arrived with the ball tucked under his arm.

Four and zero.

The broadcast reporter asked about the long touchdown first.

"What did you see?"

Caleb told her about the corner's eyes and the safety's depth. He did not say he had reclaimed something. He did not need to. The clip would say it for him.

On the plane Marcus slept with his headphones on and the printed photographs tucked into the seat pocket in front of him. Nate sat upright because leaning against the window hurt. The line had allowed one sack. Darius had carried twenty-two times. They had all made the day possible.

Caleb's father sent a message: THAT WAS YOU.

Caleb read it until the flight attendant asked whether he wanted food.

The next morning his long touchdown was on every screen in the facility. A former receiver praised Marcus's sell. A former quarterback praised Caleb's conviction. The same man who had praised his discipline against Ashford now praised his refusal to accept the obvious answer.

Caleb did not mind the contradiction until review.

They watched the full game. His late scoring drive was clean and controlled. Boone praised the throw to Owen at the eleven. Harker praised the clock management after the fourth-down stop. The interception received the attention it deserved, no more. Caleb admitted the ball was behind Owen. They moved on.

Then Simone put the long touchdown on the screen beside the forecast packet.

"The outcome was excellent," she said. "We should separate the execution from the choice."

Caleb laid his pencil down.

Boone watched her. He had praised the check on Saturday. Caleb had heard him.

Simone highlighted the expected drive values. Under the conditions recorded before the snap, the crossing concept remained the higher-ranked call. The deep alternate needed Marcus to win against the corner, the safety to remain out of position long enough, the protection to hold, and Caleb to put the ball where only Marcus could finish. Every one of those things had happened.

"And I saw they could happen," Caleb said.

"You saw a reason to expect the corner to drive," Simone said.

"He did."

"Yes."

"I'm not sure what we're reviewing."

Harker leaned forward. "Listen first."

Simone brought up the pre-snap view. "The model included his shallower alignment and the direction of his first look. You and the model weighted those differently."

"Then it weighted them wrong."

"This time he did what you expected. That doesn't tell us the weight was wrong across the other situations."

Caleb looked at Boone. "We installed the check."

"We did," Boone said.

"You told me it was good."

"I told you the communication was good and the throw was great."

"You said I got him."

Boone stopped. "You did get him."

Jonah sat very still, his notebook open. Caleb disliked having this conversation in front of him more than he disliked any individual sentence in it.

"Would you want it back?" Caleb asked Harker.

"The touchdown? No."

"The decision."

Harker looked at the two screens. "I want to know if I want the decision again."

The room had gone quiet enough that Caleb heard an assistant moving a chair in the office outside.

Simone showed comparable packages from the controlled scrimmage work. They were not the same play against the same twenty-two men. She said that clearly. In the sets where the offence had been assigned the higher-ranked concept rather than permitted free selection, the offence had stayed on schedule more often and produced better aggregate drive outcomes. The deep alternatives generated memorable successes and more stalled possessions.

"You're showing me practice," Caleb said.

"It's one part of the evidence," she said. "The game data supports the direction, with more limitations."

"Marcus can beat that guy."

"He did. He won a difficult route."

"Then how can you put the decision below a play that didn't happen?"

Jonah looked up. "Because we can't choose after we see the result."

Caleb turned toward him. "I know when we choose."

"I'm saying you didn't know he'd drive."

"I had a read."

"You had a good read. That's not the same thing."

Harker raised a hand. "Enough. We're not changing Saturday. We're trying to get ready for another one."

He turned to Simone. "Can his explanation go into the review?"

"It should."

"Then put it in. We keep the outcome, the execution grade, and the decision assessment separate."

Caleb picked up his pencil, but there was nothing he wanted to write.

After the meeting he found Simone in the corridor.

"You think I shouldn't have done it," he said.

She shifted the tablet under her arm. "From the evidence available before the snap, I would have preferred the called concept."

"Even now."

"Now I know what happened. That's different."

He looked down the corridor toward the lobby, where his throw was playing again on the big display.

"What would change your mind?" he asked.

Simone took time before answering. "A pattern showing we systematically undervalue that cue. Or information that wasn't represented. Or a reason our objective isn't the right one for the situation."

"Me telling you what I saw isn't information?"

"It is. It goes into the review. It doesn't automatically outweigh everything else."

"Nothing I do automatically does anything."

She studied his face. "Neither does a forecast."

He wanted to believe she meant it. He also wanted her to stop explaining a touchdown to him as though he had found it by accident.

"Okay," he said.

She heard the same closed door Harker had heard two weeks earlier. This time she let it close.

Caleb left the building and walked to the library. He had an assignment due Monday. Marcus had told him to say who paid for the choices, and Caleb had revised the final paragraph on the plane, changing two sentences and discovering the rest of the argument needed changing too.

In the library he opened the file. He read it, added a paragraph about municipal budgets, and deleted a sentence that claimed every

household could be offered an equally acceptable option. Then he stared at the empty space where it had been.

At the next table a student ate an apple quietly and failed. Caleb put on his headphones without playing anything.

His phone buzzed with a message from his sister. The treasurer position required her to stand in front of the school council, and she wanted to know how he handled talking when everybody looked at him. He recorded a reply, listened to it, and deleted it. The first version made him sound like the television version of himself.

He tried again. He told her to know her first sentence, speak more slowly than felt natural, and find one person who seemed to be listening. He said if she lost her place she could stop rather than pretend she had not. Then he sent it before he made it polished enough to become useless.

By four the assignment was done.

He went back to the football building to retrieve his notebook. In the quarterback room Jonah had yesterday's final drive on the wall.

"You still at it?" Caleb asked.

"For a little."

Caleb put his bag on the table. Jonah paused the clip. It was the third-and-five touchdown to Owen, not the long ball to Marcus.

"This was good," Jonah said.

"They weren't all accidents."

Jonah turned in his chair. "I didn't say they were."

Caleb wished he had kept the sentence inside. He sat in the chair beside Jonah and looked at the paused film.

"You'd never have called Cedar," he said.

Jonah watched the screen. "Probably not."

"It's a touchdown."

"It was a touchdown."

Caleb gave a short laugh without humour. "You hear yourself?"

"I do."

"You can just admit I was right."

Jonah took his hands off the keyboard. "About what?"

Caleb did not answer immediately. The obvious answer had begun to divide into parts, and he resented Jonah for standing so patiently while it happened.

"About the corner."

"Yes."

"About Marcus getting past him."

"Yes."

"About calling the play."

Jonah looked at him. "That's the one I don't know."

"The model says you do."

"The model says there was a better expected drive. I think it probably had a better call."

Caleb stood and went to the whiteboard. The lunch diagram from Moreland week remained in the corner, Bennett's delayed release shortened by Jonah's neat line. He picked up an eraser, then put it down.

"Would it matter what I saw?"

"It mattered Saturday."

"Would it matter to you?"

Jonah turned all the way toward him. "I told you your ball was good. I wanted it caught. I was standing right there."

Caleb rubbed his mouth. He remembered Jonah at the sideline with the tablet, the unqualified praise, and saw what he had done with it since.

"I know," he said.

The room held them without giving either one another a line.

At last Jonah restarted the final-drive clip. Caleb remained standing. On the screen Darius crossed the formation to pick up the pressure. Caleb stepped into the throw and put the ball where Owen could catch it moving away from the linebacker. No spectacular correction. No endangered window rescued by his arm. A difficult defence made briefly manageable by eleven men who had prepared for it.

“There,” Jonah said, pointing to the linebacker. “You held him longer than I would have.”

Caleb leaned forward.

“I saw him look at Marcus.”

Jonah ran it back. “Show me.”

Caleb pointed, and Jonah watched. For a few minutes they worked on football. It was not agreement, but it was work they could still do together.

Later, alone, Caleb opened the review attached to the long touchdown. His explanation was there. So was the execution grade, the positive outcome, and the lower decision ranking. None had replaced the others.

He played the clip once more.

Marcus drove the corner down, went past him, caught the ball. Caleb still felt the throw in his shoulder. He would feel it for years. It had been beautiful, and it had helped them win, and the more often he watched it the less it could answer the question he wanted it to answer.

He closed the clip, opened the next opponent’s film, and began again.



ACT II

The Optimal Player

CHAPTER SIX

Compliance

Avery Brandvold had promised to write eight hundred words about the quarterback competition. By Monday afternoon they had written four hundred and sixty about a column heading.

The heading was DECISION RELIABILITY. It appeared on an evaluation sheet Sam Givens had opened on his own phone, at a table outside the student union. Sam had intended to show Avery how much he was improving. He had permission to discuss his own evaluation, and the first-year quarterback seemed glad to find a journalist interested in a player who had not yet thrown a college pass.

“This went up,” he said, pointing.

“What does it mean?”

“Decisions. Not forcing balls. Getting through reads.”

“Is it the same as your film grade?”

Sam looked again. “No. I have that too.”

There were two separate numbers. The first described execution. The second described reliability. A third, under DEVELOPMENT PRIORITIES, told Sam to maintain alignment with recommended actions under high-pressure conditions.

“Sounds like football,” Sam said.

Avery had watched Allerton for three seasons and covered the team for two. They knew enough football to avoid making obvious mistakes and not enough to feel safe when someone assumed exper-

tise. They had begun this article because Jonah Price was getting work with the starters and because their editor wanted a story before the larger outlets agreed there was one.

"Would you show me one of the plays that changed it?" Avery asked.

Sam hesitated. "Not the whole playbook."

"I don't need that."

He opened a practice entry. No diagram, only a short description, the observed gain, and three grades. Sam had completed a pass for nine yards. His execution grade was good. His decision assessment was not.

"I changed the route tag," he said. "I saw the corner drop."

"Did you communicate it?"

"Yeah. They said that part was fine."

"Then what wasn't?"

Sam read the explanation below the grade. The called concept had a higher estimated conversion probability. His alternate had worked against that particular response. The assessment concerned the decision before the outcome.

"That makes sense," Avery said.

"It does," Sam said, sounding relieved. "I just wish they'd call it something else."

"Why?"

He looked across the courtyard. A bicycle courier was trying to get a folding cart through a door that opened the wrong way.

"Reliable sounds like whether people can trust you."

Avery wrote the sentence down. Sam watched the pen.

"You can use that," he said. "But I'm not saying they can't."

"I'll make that clear."

They read back the passage they had recorded. Sam corrected one word. Avery made the change in front of him. Before leaving, they asked whether he would provide the two entries he had discussed. Sam sent images with the route names and packet identifiers covered. Avery did not ask him to uncover them.

In the newspaper office, above a campus store selling notebooks and replacement charging cables, Kit Amadi looked at Avery's draft and removed the first paragraph.

"Where's the quarterback competition?" Kit asked.

"I think this is the competition."

"You have a freshman talking about a grade."

"And the grade has a part he can't quite explain."

"He explained it."

Avery sat in the chair opposite the desk. Kit had a pile of proofs beside one elbow and a bowl of cereal beside the other. It was nearly five. Kit treated breakfast as a kind of food rather than a time.

"What's the difference between making the preferred choice and being a reliable person?" Avery asked.

"For this story? You tell me."

"I don't know yet."

Kit slid the draft back. "Then don't write like you do."

The office was too small for the number of people who claimed it. A photographer edited on the floor because the stools hurt his back. Someone had left a broken printer beneath a table in the hope that proximity to journalists would repair it. On the wall, front pages from twenty years earlier showed old controversies whose urgency had settled into typography.

Avery kept a front page pinned over their own desk: a report on a residence hall closed for repairs without accommodations for the students who lived there. They had contributed the photographs and been annoyed for weeks when nobody remembered that part. Kit knew. Kit also knew that wanting credit was not the same as having a story.

"We can move the sports piece to Friday," Kit said. "If you get something by then."

"What do I tell athletics?"

"That you have questions."

Avery sent the questions through the communications office. They asked how decision reliability was calculated, whether following a

recommendation was evaluated separately from executing a play, and whether the metric influenced playing time. The response arrived Tuesday morning, written in the calm institutional language Avery had learned to distrust only after reading it carefully.

The programme evaluated athletes through a broad range of measures. No single metric determined participation. Recommended-decision execution was one useful predictor of performance and safety. Coaches retained discretion.

Every sentence could be true.

Avery requested an interview with Simone Avram and another with Russ Boone. The communications director offered them together. Avery asked for separate appointments because the questions were different. The director said she would see what she could arrange.

At noon Avery went to the theatre, where they worked three shifts a week helping maintain the lighting system. The student production had hung a simulated moon directly in front of a light required for the second act. A stage manager asked whether the light could move. Avery said the moon could move more easily. The stage manager said it was an artistic decision.

“Then artistically put it six inches to the left.”

They spent forty minutes on a ladder. The director came in, looked from the auditorium, and asked for the moon to go back. Avery moved the light instead. It took longer, required a new cable path, and made the scene look better. The director thanked the stage manager.

On the bus home Avery reread the athletics statement without discovering a satisfying analogy. Not every frustrating thing was their article. They crossed out a paragraph they had begun on their phone.

Their roommate Dacey had bought tomatoes and left them arranged by size on the counter, an organisation that served no purpose Avery could identify. Dacey was a chemistry student who made excellent dinners from ingredients that looked unrelated before they entered a pan.

“You’re doing the football face,” she said.

“What’s the football face?”

“You look like you want permission to interrupt dinner.”

“I have a grade question.”

“I’m sure you do.”

Avery explained the evaluation. Dacey asked whether the player had been marked down for a decision that increased the chance of failure.

“Yes, according to their estimate.”

“Then why is it wrong?”

“I didn’t say it was.”

“You made the face.”

Avery helped chop onions. Dacey waited for an answer. The knife struck the board four times before Avery had one.

“I want to know how much of the grade is that,” they said.

“Then ask how much.”

Dacey slid a bowl toward them. No sympathy offered until Avery did the practical thing.

Simone agreed to meet Wednesday in a small room at the performance centre. She arrived five minutes late and apologised while taking a call she had to finish. Avery watched through the glass as she discussed a sensor that had recorded impossible accelerations. She sounded neither embarrassed nor alarmed. They were checking the device, excluding the bad readings, and retaining the rest.

When she came in, Avery asked whether that happened often.

“Often enough to have a process,” Simone said. “You don’t publish every broken thermometer as a crisis in medicine.”

“I wasn’t planning to.”

She smiled slightly. “Good.”

Avery showed her Sam’s entries with his consent and identifiers removed. Simone recognised the layout, not the player.

“He’s asking why these are different,” Avery said.

“They’re different decisions.”

Both plays had produced nine yards in practice. In the second, Sam had stayed with a recommendation. The execution grades were close. The reliability grades were not.

"The gain is not the variable we're assessing there," Simone said.

"Which variable are you assessing?"

She drew two short columns on a piece of paper. In one she wrote observed result. In the other she wrote information available at selection. She explained conditional forecasts, compared decisions with similar options, and warned Avery not to imply the plays were identical because the yardage matched.

Avery nodded. "I understand why you don't just reward the outcome."

"Then what's the question?"

"How close is decision reliability to following the recommendation?"

Simone put the pen down. "Related. Not identical."

"How related?"

The answer required a screen. Simone opened a general description of the scoring process, cleared it for publication through the communications office, and showed Avery the components. Protection identification, progression discipline, unnecessary exposure, adjustment communication, and conformity with ranked recommendations all contributed. The last component had grown as staff became more confident in the forecasts.

"What was it before?" Avery asked.

Simone gave the earlier range and the current one, emphasising that the position and situation altered the weights. For quarterbacks, recommendation conformity could account for approximately a fifth of the broader development score. There were adjustments for contextual review and coach overrides. The process was more qualified than the headline Avery could already imagine.

"So a player who executes equally well can have a lower development score because he chooses differently."

"If his choices are assessed as worse, yes."

“And the model supplies much of that assessment.”

“It supplies an estimate. The staff supplies the grade.”

Avery wrote that down exactly.

“Does a player know how to challenge the estimate?”

Simone looked at the consented entries again. “They can discuss it with their coach.”

“Does that change the number?”

“Sometimes.”

“Do they know when?”

Simone did not answer quickly. Outside the room two players passed carrying resistance bands, arguing about whether a musician they both liked had become too popular. One said popularity was what the musician had been trying to achieve. The other said that was different.

“I’d have to look at how the review is communicated,” Simone said.

“Would you?”

“Yes.”

Boone met them the next day after practice. He sat with a plate of food he ate standing up whenever he remembered it. Avery asked how he used the evaluation.

“A quarterback can’t keep putting us in bad situations and make up for it with a throw everybody remembers,” he said.

“Are you talking about Caleb?”

“I’m talking about the position.”

“People will think you mean Caleb.”

Boone looked at them. “Then don’t make it a quote about Caleb.”

Avery marked the restriction in their notes.

“Does following a recommendation count as a good decision if the defence changes?”

“Not automatically.”

“How do you account for that?”

Boone described the film review. He had an example from a recent game where the called route ran toward coverage that arrived late. The quarterback had stayed with the call, and the decision grade re-

flected the failure to adjust. He did not offer the player's name. Avery did not need it.

"So the metric can reward a departure."

"It can. It should."

"Does it do that as often as it marks one down?"

He stopped eating. "I don't have the count."

"Would the count matter?"

"The situations matter."

Boone did confirm Jonah's increased first-team work. He described the younger quarterback's consistency and preparation without criticising Caleb. Avery asked whether Jonah now had a higher internal development rating.

"I'm not giving you their files."

"I'm asking whether it's a factor."

"Everything we know about how they play is a factor. The job is running the offence."

Avery left with more usable material and less certainty about the intended angle. In the courtyard they encountered Nate Holloway, carrying a bag in one hand and a jacket in the other. Nate had spoken to them once during camp, when they were collecting accounts of first-year experiences.

He asked whether they were writing about the quarterbacks. Avery said yes, partly.

"Jonah checks on the line a lot," Nate said.

"So does Caleb."

"Yeah. Caleb's good."

"Is Jonah different?"

Nate put the jacket over his bag. "He asks if we have the change before he wants the ball."

Avery considered the remark. "Could I quote that?"

"Not like Caleb doesn't."

"Then maybe I shouldn't."

Nate looked relieved. It made Avery uncomfortable to realise how easily the sentence could have become the article's sharpest line.

At the newspaper office Kit asked to see the draft. Avery had twelve hundred words now and a better opening. The story described the evaluation process, the increased role of recommendation conformity, the reasons Allerton used it, and the uncertainty about how athletes understood their opportunities to question a grade. The quarterback rivalry remained in it, but it no longer carried every paragraph.

Kit circled the proposed headline: When the Right Answer Becomes the Grade.

"You're saying it's the right answer."

"I'm saying they treat it as one."

"Then say that."

They settled on Following the Forecast. Beneath it, the subheading explained the development metric. Avery disliked the headline's modesty and knew Kit was right.

The communications office requested one correction about the weights: the upper range described the quarterback development composite, not every position's total evaluation. Avery made it. Simone sent a clarification that the model did not use its own forecasts as observations in calibration. Avery added that to the methods paragraph and removed a joke that now looked unfair.

Friday morning, before publication, Avery went through the proof one last time. The draft said that a successful adjustment could be penalised in the evaluation. Kit had circled penalised and asked what had actually happened.

"The decision grade went down," Avery said.

"The execution grade went up."

"Yes."

"Then tell people both."

Avery made the change. They had liked the earlier sentence because it made the institutional response sound absurd. The actual response was more difficult to explain and more interesting once they stopped demanding absurdity from it.

The photographer came over with two options for the story: Caleb at the line, wrist raised, and Jonah seated on the bench with the call sheet spread over his knees. Both were good photographs. Neither showed the evaluation process.

"The wrist," Avery said.

Kit looked at it. "You want everybody to think he's reading orders?"

"He's receiving a recommendation."

"Which part does the picture explain?"

They used a wider frame from practice, all eleven offensive players visible, with the consented grade examples beneath the text. Avery still preferred the wrist photograph. They closed it without saying so.

Mid-morning, the communications director called about the article's link to the quarterback competition. She asked whether Avery could delay until after Saturday, because the team was preparing for Eastgate and players were being asked about a process they had not created.

"The questions won't disappear after Saturday," Avery said.

"They might be better answered after the staff has time to respond."

"We've had the response in review for two days."

The director went quiet, then said that was fair. She asked Avery to keep the coaches' football explanations near the metric descriptions, rather than place them in a final paragraph most readers might never reach.

"They're there," Avery said.

"Thank you."

After hanging up, Avery reread the placement. The explanation was there, but not where the director had meant. They moved Boone's account of the failure to adjust upward. It was a request worth accepting even though they had resisted the first one.

Kit watched them rearrange the page. "You still have a story?"

"I think so."

"Good. It should survive people making reasonable points."

Sam came by a little before noon. He looked at the proof for a long time, then set it on Kit's desk. "That's what I said," he said at last.

"Yes."

"I thought it would sound angrier."

"Are you angry?"

He considered it. "Mostly I want to get good."

After he left, Avery opened the two consented practice entries side by side. Nine yards on each. Similar execution grades. Different assessments of the decisions. They had removed the routes and identifiers; the remaining rectangles looked almost interchangeable.

Between them, Avery placed the question they had not yet answered: how many players had learned to choose for that second number?

They saved the file and sent the story to Kit.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Protection

Jonah's aunt mailed him a photograph of his first football team, which he opened at breakfast on the morning Allerton played Eastgate.

He was twelve in the photograph, standing in the second row because his coach had mistaken his quietness for height. His helmet was too large. His hands hung beside him as though he had not been told he could put them anywhere else. The boy next to him, who later became a plumber, had an arm around his shoulder and an expression suggesting victory over the photographer.

His aunt's message said she had found it while looking for a warranty. Beneath the photograph she wrote that they had all known he would make it.

They had not. They had loved him, driven him places, and hoped. That was more useful.

He sent a thank-you, then saved the photograph in the same folder as his mother's school messages. He had to be at the stadium in an hour. On the table lay his unused ticket to a student concert Lydia had suggested. He had been free Thursday until the staff added an installation period. Lydia had taken another classmate and sent him a photograph of the drummer dropping a stick. He owed her a reply that was not about practice.

He sent: Did he recover?

Then, before he could make the conversation depend on an answer, he added: Coffee Monday? I can actually be there.

At the stadium Caleb was already changing. He had Avery's article open on his phone. Jonah had read it at home and been glad it did not pretend his work consisted of obeying a wristband.

"You talk to them?" Caleb asked.

"At the media session."

"About the grades?"

"No."

Caleb turned the screen off. "Sam did."

"It's his grade."

"I didn't say he couldn't."

Jonah sat on the bench and pulled his socks up. Caleb had begun saying what he had not said more often than what he meant. It was not a habit Jonah could afford to correct on game day.

Outside, the band rehearsed the short brass fanfare played when the team came through the old tunnel. There was always one rehearsal in which the last note came early. Jonah liked hearing it. At kickoff every note would seem to belong exactly where tradition required, and he would know someone had worked to put it there.

Boone gave him the third-down response sheet. Eastgate had a fast edge rusher and a defensive coordinator willing to send him from either side. They sometimes moved the rusher late, after the offensive line had made its identification. The system had produced a good forecast of the frequency; the coaches had installed protections with enough flexibility to meet it.

"Keep your eyes on the back," Boone said. "If they change the front, tell me what Darius sees."

"Yes, sir."

"Not just where he ends up. What he sees."

Jonah went through the sheet. Half-slide protection, the line responsible for the initial interior threats on one side, the running back scanning opposite. A full-slide variation against the overloaded look, the back meeting the widest threat to the other side. The terms were

compact because nobody could deliver a lecture in the seconds before a snap. Compact did not mean optional.

Luis stopped beside him. "You got the Lake adjustment?"

"Same as Wednesday."

"If they bring the end over late, we need it said."

"I know."

"I know you know. I'm telling all three of you."

Luis went to Caleb, then Sam. Jonah watched him do it and thought again how often preparation looked like repetition to anyone watching only one conversation.

Allerton led fourteen-ten at halftime. Caleb had thrown one touchdown to Marcus and Darius had scored the other on a run behind Luis. Eastgate had made a field goal on its first possession and scored a touchdown before the half on a long pass after a missed tackle. Caleb had completed twelve of sixteen throws, including two that looked harder from the sideline than they had on film.

Jonah charted the edge rusher's alignments. The player's number was nine. In the third quarter he began standing wider on obvious passing downs and moving inward once the offence settled. He wanted the tackle's first step to commit before the snap.

"Nine's selling wide," Jonah told Boone.

Boone watched the next clip. "We have it."

He relayed the adjustment in the next open communications window. Caleb nodded on the sideline, repeated the protection term, and returned to the field.

With seven minutes and eighteen seconds left in the third quarter, the Stags faced third-and-seven at Eastgate's thirty-nine. The score remained fourteen-ten. A conversion would put them nearer a manageable field goal or keep the drive moving toward a touchdown. A sack could push them out of either.

The called concept put three receivers into different depths over the middle, with a quick outlet if the pressure made the longer routes unavailable. Its protection expected the initial front Eastgate showed. The attached alternate, Birch, sent Owen across beneath Marcus's in-

side-breaking route. Against Eastgate's late double-pressure look, Birch paired with the Lake protection adjustment. The offence had practised the pair together.

Caleb broke the huddle with the original call.

Jonah saw the defenders shift. Number nine moved from a wide right-side alignment to the other edge. A linebacker stepped into the gap he had left. The nickel crowded down outside Bennett. A picture that looked simpler until a person tried to account for every man in it.

Caleb shouted "Birch" and made the signal for the alternate concept. Owen touched his helmet. Marcus repeated the tag. Luis turned his head, asking something Jonah could not hear.

Caleb called "Birch" again.

"Lake," Jonah said under his breath.

Boone was pressing his headset control. The communications indicator had already gone dark at fifteen on the play clock. Boone released the control and stared at the field.

The ball was snapped with six on the play clock.

Luis and the guards moved according to the protection they had retained. The tackles took the ends they could account for. The linebacker showed inside, then dropped. Darius stepped toward that inside threat before seeing nine coming free from the far edge.

He went across to meet him, late and nearly sideways.

Caleb put the ball on Owen as the receiver crossed the line to gain. Owen caught it, secured it, and was tackled at the thirty-one. A first down, eight yards.

Darius took the rusher's weight on his chest. His feet left the ground, not far, enough to turn his attempt at a block into a fall. Nine rolled off him and got up. Darius lay on his side.

Jonah had already taken a step toward the field. He stopped at the boundary. The trainer was running out. Harker stood very still beside Boone.

On the stadium screen the replay first followed Owen's catch. Then the broadcast view widened, and the collision appeared in the

corner. The crowd's initial cheer thinned into the uneven noise of people discovering a second thing had happened.

Darius sat up with a trainer's hand at his back. He held his left arm away from his chest and tried a breath. The trainer said something. Darius nodded and did not move yet.

Marcus stood a few yards from him. Caleb came closer, helmet tilted toward the ground. Luis spoke to the official, then turned away.

Jonah looked at the protection on his sheet. He did not need to. The correct tag was still there.

Darius left the field with the medical staff. He walked under his own power, breathing carefully. They took him to the examination area behind the bench. The reserve back, Keon Merritt, went in. Allerton gained four yards, lost two on a run stopped behind the line, and on third down Caleb threw incomplete after Keon correctly picked up the edge pressure. The field goal from forty-six was good.

Seventeen-ten.

Caleb came off and listened while Boone pointed at the clip. Jonah stayed close enough to be available and far enough not to make the correction an audience event.

"You changed the concept," Boone said. "You didn't change the protection."

"I thought Lou had it."

"He asked you."

"I heard him echo Birch."

"He echoed the concept. He asked about the protection."

Caleb looked toward the medical area. "Darius?"

"They're checking," Harker said. "You stay here."

The coach's voice brought Caleb's attention back, not easily. Harker made him state the two calls, the paired adjustment, and the communication requirement. Caleb did. Knowing it now did nothing for the play they had just run.

"If you don't hear the protection repeated, you don't have it," Harker said.

"Yes, sir."

“Not think. Hear.”

“Yes.”

Eastgate tied the game on the next drive. A defensive penalty extended it; a well-blocked run gained twenty-two; their quarterback found a receiver at the back of the end zone on second-and-goal. Seventeen-seventeen with forty-two seconds left in the third quarter.

Caleb led Allerton to a touchdown early in the fourth. He checked protections twice, deliberately waited for Luis’s acknowledgment, and took the shorter option when a safety closed the seam. Marcus caught the scoring pass from the eight. Jonah wanted every part of it to work and watched himself wanting, as though the desire needed proof.

Darius did not return. The medical staff had found no immediate sign of a more serious chest injury, but he had significant pain, and further assessment would be needed. Harker accepted the unavailable designation without asking for a way around it.

Eastgate made a field goal to pull within four. Allerton answered with another, twenty-seven-twenty. On the last possession, with Eastgate at midfield and less than a minute remaining, Trey tipped a pass and the free safety caught it. Caleb took the kneel-downs.

Five and zero.

The band played. Jonah clapped the safety on the shoulder, gave Keon the game ball Boone had told him to deliver, and went to find Darius.

The back sat on a treatment bench with his jersey off and his pads opened. There was a red mark across his upper chest. He was making fun of a manager’s new haircut. The joke was a good sign and not a medical finding.

“You need anything?” Jonah asked.

“A new chest.”

“They stock those?”

“Ask the science lady.”

Jonah sat beside him. Darius's phone was ringing. He looked at the screen, declined the call, and typed a message.

"My dad," he said. "If I answer before I know everything, he'll ask questions till I die."

"You could tell him that."

"That I'm dying?"

Jonah smiled. Darius did too, then stopped because smiling had become laughing and laughing hurt.

"Don't make me funny," he said.

Luis came in next. He crouched beside the bench, told Darius what he had heard before the snap, and asked what Darius had understood. They spoke without raising their voices. Darius had expected the original scan. By the time he saw the edge rusher, crossing over was the only way to keep the quarterback upright.

"I should've taken the angle wider," Darius said.

Luis shook his head. "Not the first thing that went wrong."

When Caleb arrived Jonah stood to leave. Darius asked him to stay until the trainer returned. Jonah stayed.

Caleb rested his helmet on the floor. "I missed the tag."

Darius looked at him. "Yeah."

"I thought Lou had the whole check."

"He didn't."

"I know."

Caleb crouched where Luis had been. Darius was not angry in a way that would make apologising easy. He was sore, tired, and waiting for information about his own body.

"I'm sorry," Caleb said.

"Okay."

Caleb stayed there. Jonah watched him understand that the answer was not an invitation to obtain a better one.

The trainer returned and took Darius for the next assessment. Luis went to shower. Caleb remained in the examination area, leaning against the wall.

"You saw it," he said to Jonah.

"I saw the change."

"You knew."

"I thought we needed Lake."

Caleb looked away. "I knew that too."

"You didn't say it."

"I know I didn't say it."

Jonah took a breath. The rest of the room smelled of tape and disinfectant. Someone was rinsing a cup at the sink. Nothing about the space encouraged a conversation large enough to hide in.

"When you call the concept, Owen can adjust himself," Jonah said. "Marcus can adjust himself. Darius has to know what the five guys in front are doing."

Caleb nodded.

"The route was there," Jonah said. "That's not the part I'm arguing."

"I'm not arguing any of it."

"Okay."

For a moment they could have stopped. Then Caleb said, "Must be good for you."

Jonah looked at him.

Caleb's face changed almost at once. He knew what he had said and could not take it out of the room.

"I want to play," Jonah said. "That doesn't make this good for me."

"I didn't mean—"

"You did."

Caleb pressed his hands together between his knees. "For a second."

Jonah could accept that more readily than a denial. "Don't do it again."

Caleb nodded. A trainer passed them carrying a case. Both moved their feet to let her through.

They did not repair the conversation. Jonah went to his locker, showered, and answered Lydia. Monday coffee was still possible. She had sent a place and a time. He wrote both into his calendar rather than trusting football to leave them alone.

Sunday's review began with Darius's availability. Imaging and the clinical examination had not found a fracture or the internal injuries the staff had needed to rule out. He would be kept out of contact and reassessed. There was no promise about the following game. He attended the meeting in a sweatshirt, lowering himself into the chair slowly.

Boone ran the protection clip from the end-zone angle. Harker asked Luis what he had called. He asked Darius what he had heard. Then he asked Caleb.

"Birch," Caleb said. "I should have called Lake and waited for the echo."

"Did the headset give you that?" Harker asked.

"The original packet had it. I didn't finish the adjustment."

They marked the failure as communication, not independent selection. Simone left the conversion outcome in the result column and the error in its own place. This time the distinction caused no dispute.

The review moved on. Caleb's fourth-quarter drive was good. Keon's work was good. Trey's pressure on the tipped interception was good. Darius sat with one arm folded across his chest, applauding Keon when the coach showed his best block.

When the other players left, Harker kept the quarterbacks, Luis, and the backs. He put Monday's installation sheet on the table.

"Jonah takes the first mixed-front period. Caleb, you're with Lou until you can finish the call through a late shift."

"I did it the rest of the game," Caleb said.

"You did. Tomorrow we do it without needing somebody to get hit first."

Caleb looked toward Jonah. Jonah kept his eyes on the sheet, where his name had replaced Caleb's for six repetitions. He had wanted those repetitions all week. Getting them this way did not prevent him from being glad he had them.

"Keon stays with the first protection group," Boone said. "We need his timing with the tackles."

Darius shifted in the chair. "When I'm cleared?"

"We'll build your work back. He needs these snaps now."

The back nodded. On the way out he asked Luis to take his laundry bag to the car; lifting it had hurt that morning. Caleb reached for the strap.

"Lou's got it," Darius said.

Caleb let go. Luis carried the bag without making a conversation of it.

Afterward Jonah stayed for his own practice review. He had rushed one progression and thrown behind Sam's substitute scout receiver in another. Boone made him say what he had seen. Jonah said it, watched the clip, and found the point where his understanding stopped matching his feet.

At noon he went home. Vic's dog had learned to bark at delivery carts and was doing it with commitment. Jonah stopped to rub its head, then went upstairs and put the unused concert ticket in the recycling. He checked tomorrow's schedule once. Coffee remained on it.

When he returned to the building that evening, the quarterback room was lit. Caleb sat with the third-down clip paused at the moment Darius changed direction. He had turned off the route markers and the forecast panel. Only the players remained.

Jonah stood in the doorway long enough for Caleb to notice.

"I'm just watching," Caleb said.

Jonah nodded and left him the room.

On Monday he met Lydia for coffee. He arrived four minutes early and found her already reading by the window. She had ordered tea. Jonah stood with his cup until she moved her bag from the other chair.

"You can sit," she said.

"I didn't know if you were working."

"I am. Now I'm stopping."

She closed the book. It was a novel he had never heard of. He asked about it and listened to an account that became more compli-

cated as she remembered who had told whom which lie. She laughed at her own failure to explain it.

"You're making it sound good," he said.

"It is good. I'm making it sound terrible."

He asked whether he could borrow it when she finished. She said yes, then asked about the game. Jonah gave her the score and told her Darius had been hurt but the examination was reassuring so far. She asked whether he was worried. Jonah said he was, and she did not ask him to quantify it.

They talked about her summer job, the shop beneath his apartment, and the dog Vic had decided to keep. Lydia had once worked in a kennel. She said he should bring a photograph next time and not a picture of himself standing beside a dog, which men apparently did when asked for photographs of dogs.

"That's a pattern?" he asked.

"A tragic one."

He laughed. His phone buzzed with a revised recovery appointment. He looked at it, saw there was time to respond later, and put it back in his pocket.

When they left, she asked whether he still meant to read the book.

"I do."

"Then don't make it homework."

He walked toward campus carrying no new football information and feeling better anyway.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Model Doesn't Play

Trey Dandridge's sister sent him six recordings of a dance rehearsal and asked which one to keep. He chose the fourth. She replied that the fourth had the wrong music.

He listened again. His niece was moving to something only she could hear, crossing the living room with both arms extended while her grandfather kept time on the edge of the sofa. The recorded music arrived a beat behind. Trey had chosen the video because the child looked happiest.

Wrong music, he wrote. Right dancing.

His sister sent a laughing face and kept the second.

During Allerton's open week, Trey had intended to go home. It was a three-hour trip, and he had arranged a car with another senior whose family lived forty minutes beyond his. Then a required defensive session moved from Thursday to Friday. He could still leave afterward and return Sunday, but the school performance he wanted to see was Friday at four. His niece had told her teacher he was coming.

He stood outside the defensive meeting room and called his sister.

"You can tell her yourself," she said.

"I will."

"Don't say maybe if it's no."

"It's no."

She was quiet for a moment. "Then tell her that."

Inside, Devon Pike had spread four tablets across the table. The defensive coordinator was comparing Pinehurst's calls by formation, field position, and the recommendation bands available from the opponent's public technical disclosures. Every team in their conference used predictive support. Not every team built as much of its own infrastructure as Allerton, and no team published enough to make the work easy.

Pike saw Trey in the doorway. "You're not up yet."

"I know."

"Then go do whatever you're looking like that about."

Trey went back into the corridor and called his niece. He told her he could not make Friday. She asked why. He said they had practice work he could not miss.

"You practice every day."

"Most days."

"You already know."

He leaned against the wall. "Not all of it."

She considered that. He could hear a television behind her and his father telling somebody to lower it.

"Then watch the video," she said.

"I'll watch."

"The one with the right song."

He promised. When he returned to the room, Pike had put two plays on the wall and was waiting for him to sit.

"Pinehurst likes what?" the coach asked.

"Open field, second-and-medium, boundary receiver inside of the numbers."

"Say the action."

"Quick out. Or the back attached to it."

Pike ran eight clips. Pinehurst's quarterback checked the receiver's leverage, caught the snap, and put the ball outside. The pass was usually completed. On film the decisions looked almost boring. In the season chart they made the offence difficult to stop.

"We can break on that," Trey said.

“You can. What stops you?”

Trey looked at the safety’s position in the third clip. “They tag the vertical when the corner starts sitting.”

“Good. So?”

“Make the picture they want and change who closes it.”

Pike nodded toward the display. The proposed defence showed a soft corner, a safety with apparent responsibility elsewhere, and a linebacker who would widen into the out window after the snap. The corner could maintain depth instead of driving. The first two steps would invite the call; the next two would make it different.

“It’s not new,” Trey said.

“No. It’s football.”

The new part was how well they could choose the situations in which the invitation would be accepted. Allerton’s defensive system estimated Pinehurst’s selection policy, not only its tendencies once a play was running. Under certain states the best-rated option appeared often enough that the Stags could prepare a narrower response. The offensive forecasts across the field would be responding to an opponent that, on earlier film, had behaved differently.

“Their people aren’t asleep,” Pike said. “If we do it twice, what happens?”

“They add the response.”

“Maybe once. And if we don’t show enough before the snap?”

“The quarterback sees it himself.”

Pike ran a clip from Pinehurst’s previous game. The quarterback checked away from the quick out, moved the back, and hit the slot receiver behind a late rotation. Trey watched it twice. A person seeing something before the new sample was large enough to become a confident tendency.

“So don’t get married to your cleverness,” Pike said.

Trey grinned. “Been engaged a few times.”

“Divorce is expensive. Tell the corners.”

On the practice field the defensive backs argued about the disguise. One wanted to hold his alignment longer. Another wanted to

show the invitation earlier so the offensive packet would rank the intended call first. Trey had to make them say their responsibilities in the order the snap would require rather than the order their argument preferred.

"We don't get points for fooling their tablet," he said. "We get a stop if everyone lands where he belongs."

In the first repetition the linebacker widened too soon. Caleb saw him, held the ball, and found Bennett crossing behind. In the second the safety rotated late but took a poor angle, giving Marcus enough room to catch the ball despite the deception.

Pike blew the whistle. "You made them choose it. You still have to cover it."

The third repetition was Jonah's. He stayed with the called out, saw the linebacker arrive, and sent the ball beyond Marcus toward the sideline. Incomplete, safely outside the receiving window.

"You're welcome," Trey called as the offence reset.

Jonah looked at him. "For what?"

"Continuing education."

"Mine or yours?"

Caleb's next repetition beat them. He checked to a run against the light box, confirmed the tag with Luis, and watched Keon go through the space Trey had been assigned to vacate. Seven yards before the practice official stopped it. Caleb looked toward Trey and spread his hands.

Trey nodded. It was a good decision. He liked beating Caleb, and Caleb liked making him admit when the opposite had happened. That arrangement had served them for three seasons.

After practice Caleb came to the defensive room carrying his helmet.

"You guys building traps for our system now?"

Pike was gone. Trey had stayed to review the failed angles.

"We were building them for Pinehurst."

"Used us as a specimen."

"You're available."

Caleb sat beside him. "Simone know?"

"She helped choose the sample."

"So she knows it can be played."

Trey opened the combined review. "Everybody knows it can be played. That's why it keeps getting new information."

Caleb watched the second repetition. Marcus catching a ball in a space the defence had narrowed but not closed.

"You could have just told me what you were doing," Caleb said.

"Then I'd be showing you a defence we wouldn't run."

They moved through the clips. Caleb named the disguise before Trey could bring up the assignments.

Trey opened a series from the previous season. Caleb had checked to a vertical route three times after the boundary corner showed the same foot position. Twice it worked. The third time the corner opened early and the safety arrived from the other side. Incomplete. Caleb had remembered the defender's recovery, not the fact that the defence had created the invitation.

"You think I'm predictable," he said.

"I think you're a person with habits."

"So is Jonah."

"Yeah."

"The recommendations make habits easier to find."

"Sometimes. Your favourite answer is easier to find too."

Caleb sat back. The helmet rested on the floor between his shoes. Trey had known him long enough to recognise when a joke might let him receive the sentence and when it would merely let him leave.

"You got me with the run today," Trey said. "You made sure the guys had it. You took the space that was actually there."

"The forecast was still on the pass."

"I'm not grading your whole life."

Caleb smiled reluctantly.

"If you check it tomorrow, and I know you like that check, maybe I stay inside," Trey said. "Maybe the pass gets better again. You don't

beat me by proving you can choose. You beat me by choosing something I don't defend well."

"I know how defence works."

"Then stop talking like it stops working when they give you odds."

Caleb looked at him. Trey let the sentence sit. He had earned some bluntness, though not an unlimited amount.

At last Caleb said, "Darius okay?"

"Walked past him this morning. He told me my jacket looked like a substitute teacher's."

"That one does."

Trey looked at the jacket. "Both of you have no range."

They watched another ten minutes. Caleb pointed out where the disguise could be identified from the safety's approach angle. Trey marked it for Pike.

On Friday Simone joined the defensive staff for the Pinehurst preparation. She showed how Allerton's own offence had updated after the practice traps. The first recommendation had been made against one expected defensive response. Once the new pattern entered the review, the system widened its uncertainty and altered the ranking under matching conditions.

"So we can't use that invitation against Pinehurst?" a corner asked.

"You can," Simone said. "It depends what they've represented, how quickly they update, and what their quarterback notices. We don't have their complete model."

"How many snaps before they learn?"

"I don't know."

The corner looked annoyed. Trey understood. A room filled with more information had made the missing information feel like something withheld.

Pike stood. "We run the defence like they can see it. Nobody gets to stop doing his job because the setup looked smart."

Simone stayed afterward to ask Trey about Caleb's observation. Trey described the approach angle. She wanted to know whether it was visible consistently or only in the practice set.

“We can look,” he said.

“Please do.”

Trey opened the clips while she watched. The distinction appeared in three examples and disappeared in two. In the third it was visible only from the end-zone camera, not from the quarterback’s location. Simone excluded that one from the proposed feature check.

“He saw it today,” Trey said.

“Then we keep today. We don’t pretend the other angle was available to him.”

She could be very exact in a way that felt generous when the exactness protected a person’s account and stingy when it questioned it. Trey had both reactions before the session ended.

That afternoon he watched his niece’s performance from his apartment, first live through his sister’s unsteady phone and later in a clean recording. The live version cut off the left side of the stage. His niece spent most of the dance on the left. Trey heard the music and saw the edge of her elbow whenever the phone wandered.

His father took over the recording halfway through and zoomed in until only her face remained. Trey texted him to zoom out. His father could not read the message while filming. His sister finally reclaimed the phone.

Afterward the child asked whether he had seen.

“I saw,” he said.

“Did I do the turn?”

“You did.”

“I almost didn’t.”

He asked her what happened next rather than telling her not to worry. She showed him the turn again in the school corridor, while other children passed carrying coats and flower bouquets. A boy stepped backward into her path. She stopped, let him pass, and began again, angry at the interruption rather than embarrassed by it.

Trey applauded into his phone. His niece bowed and vanished when someone offered cake.

He stayed on with his sister for a few minutes. She asked about classes. He had a music-production assignment he had not finished and a statistics exam the following week. She asked whether he was making music or studying how to make it. He said both. She asked to hear something. He said it was not ready.

"You say that every time."

"It's true every time."

"Send something unfinished, then."

After the call he sent her a rough track. She replied without advice about football or encouragement to be brave. She said the bass was too loud. He listened again, turned it down, and wondered when she had acquired useful opinions about mixing.

The Pinehurst game came after the open week, under a low sky threatening rain. Allerton led ten-seven at the end of the first quarter. Pinehurst's second possession of the next period reached the Stags' forty-six, second-and-five, the grouping Pike wanted.

Trey called the defence. The corner gave space. The safety held his apparent inside responsibility. Pinehurst's quarterback looked at the sideline packet, studied the leverage, and stayed with the quick out.

The linebacker widened on time. The corner stayed deep. The quarterback saw the closing window, hesitated, and threw toward the back instead. Trey had kept that part. He met the back after a gain of one.

Third-and-four. On the next snap Pike called an ordinary pressure. The quarterback threw incomplete. Pinehurst punted.

The trap had not produced an interception or a spectacular tackle. It had made a good offence choose a less useful second answer and left the defence work to do on third down.

"We'll take it," Pike said when Trey came off.

At the next similar state, Pinehurst changed. The quarterback moved the back before the snap and hit the slot receiver through the space behind the widening linebacker. Eleven yards. Simone's staff added the response while Pike made the sideline correction.

Trey did not feel betrayed. The opponent was playing football too.

Allerton won thirty-one to twenty-four. Caleb threw for two touchdowns and ran for another. Darius, cleared for a limited workload after the open week, carried seven times while Keon took the larger share. Marcus caught six passes, including a third-down ball that kept the last scoring drive alive. Trey finished with eight tackles and the unsatisfying knowledge that his best preparation had produced something that would not enter anyone's highlights.

Six and zero.

Outside the locker room Caleb stopped him.

"They changed on you," he said.

"They did."

"Second time."

"You want to write a report?"

Caleb grinned. "Just noticing."

"Keep noticing."

Trey walked to the performance centre with Pike after the team meal. The coach wanted to review the defensive adjustment before Sunday. Trey wanted to finish and leave before the evening vanished. They compromised on four clips and watched nine.

In the last one Pinehurst's quarterback ignored a late check from his sideline, waited for the snap, and completed a pass into a tight window. Trey had almost reached him. He ran the clip again, watching his own first step this time.

"He's good," Pike said.

"Yeah."

"We'll get him next year."

Trey smiled. "You will."

Pike glanced at him, remembering he was a senior. "Right."

It was the first time that week Trey had felt the season passing rather than continuing. He would not be here next year to learn the next correction with these men. Somebody else would stand where he stood, read what he left, and discover the part he had never managed to write down.

He went home, opened the rough track, and worked until the bass sat where he wanted it. Then he sent the new version to his sister with no explanation.

CHAPTER NINE

The Price of the Route

Marcus bought his mother a dishwasher on Tuesday and lost an argument about it before the delivery company had her address.

"Mine works," she said.

"You wash everything first."

"That's how you use a dishwasher."

"Not this one."

"You've become an authority?"

He had spent forty minutes comparing models while a treatment machine warmed the back of his leg. His left hamstring had settled with the revised workload. The medical staff had increased his available repetitions gradually. He was healthy, playing well, and tired of every conversation about his earnings beginning with an instruction to save them.

He did save them. He also knew the family's old dishwasher had required a towel beneath the door for six years.

"Tell Andre not to install it," he said. "Delivery includes installation."

"Andre can install a dishwasher."

"I'm sure he can. I paid somebody."

She sighed in a way that sounded partly like surrender. "What colour?"

"White."

“Good.”

That was her thank-you. He took it.

Allerton had beaten Union Technical thirty-five to fourteen the previous Saturday, reaching seven and zero. Marcus had caught two touchdowns and a pass at the sideline with the corner’s arm across his chest. A professional evaluator had requested the complete sequence, including the plays before it. Marcus liked that request. Anyone could admire the catch. Fewer people wanted to see what he had done when the ball went elsewhere.

On Tuesday he met with an adviser from the player-development office. The adviser discussed representation, insurance paperwork, and the assessments professional teams were likely to request. Marcus had approved specific performance information for sharing and kept other information within the medical process. The boundaries were explained clearly enough that he could ask where a field belonged.

“The decision-reliability summary,” he said. “Do receivers have that?”

“A version of it. Alignment, assignment, response to option routes.”

“Do they get the workload disagreements?”

The adviser looked at the permission form. “They get verified availability and relevant medical information through the authorised route. They don’t get every conversation you’ve had.”

“What about a note that says I asked for more repetitions?”

“Let me check the export.”

She checked it with him sitting there. There was no such note. Marcus was reassured and irritated by the work reassurance had required.

“You can ask for a copy,” she said.

“I am.”

She sent it. He thanked her and went to class, where he spent the first twenty minutes thinking about whether the dishwasher would fit the opening beneath his mother’s counter. He texted Andre for the

measurement. Andre sent a photograph of a tape measure and, beneath it, You could have asked before buying.

It fit.

Friday brought rain. Cresthaven's defence practised somewhere in that same weather, two hundred miles away, and Marcus imagined the corner assigned to him watching the Union film. Marcus had watched the corner's film too. A senior, quick feet, willing to play through the receiver's hands rather than chase the ball. Good against the boundary. Less comfortable when Marcus moved inside and forced him to work across the field.

Boone's plan used that difference. Marcus would take more slot snaps. Owen would move outside on selected groupings. The substitutions were routine and legally handled, the defence given its opportunity to match when Allerton changed personnel. They could gain an advantage through alignment, not by pretending a player had vanished.

The weekly medical review found no reason to restrict Marcus beyond the load plan already in place. Simone's dashboard showed increased accumulated exposure over the previous two games. The staff adjusted Friday's high-speed work downward. Saturday's participation would be monitored in the context of how the game developed.

Marcus asked whether he could do a final full-speed release against press. Erin said one. He did one. It was poor. The corner got his hand into Marcus's shoulder and delayed the route long enough that the throw had gone elsewhere.

Marcus wanted another.

"You've got the movement," Boone said. "Watch it, then walk it."

"I need the timing."

"You need legs tomorrow."

Marcus stood breathing into the cold air. The coach was right enough that arguing would have been dishonest. He walked the release, watched the clip, and went inside.

On the way to the locker room he found Nate trying to knot a tie in front of a dark window. The team would travel in dress clothes. Nate had watched two instructional clips and combined the wrong halves of each.

"You're inventing something," Marcus said.

"It's a knot."

"So is a fishing net."

He took the tie, undid it, and showed Nate how to make the narrow end long enough. Nate watched closely. Then Marcus made him do it himself. On the second attempt it held.

"You'll get a contract if you keep doing that," Marcus said.

"For tying?"

"For listening."

Nate grinned. Marcus almost asked whether the young lineman had read Avery's article, then decided the joke could remain a joke. Not everything they did needed to be entered into the current argument.

They travelled by bus. Cresthaven's stadium stood near a river, its lights reflected in parking-lot puddles. At the hotel Marcus called home. The dishwasher had been delivered. His mother put the phone close enough for him to hear the machine running.

"It's quiet," she said.

"That's the idea."

"I washed a pan without washing it first."

"Radical."

"Don't make fun. It came clean."

He smiled at the ceiling. She asked whether he needed anything. He said no. She asked again, meaning something larger than a snack or a clean shirt. He said he was good and, for that evening, meant it.

The game began at three-thirty. The rain stopped before kickoff, leaving the grass wet and the air dense. Cresthaven had renovated the drainage beneath the field two seasons earlier. Warmups showed stable footing in most areas. Marcus changed cleat length after testing the turn near the numbers, making the choice with the equipment

staff. He was not playing on an obviously unsafe field. It was a field with weather on it, like hundreds he had played on before.

The first quarter was hard work. Allerton scored on its second possession, Darius taking a handoff through the middle from the six. Cresthaven answered with a touchdown drive that took the clock into the second quarter. Caleb then led the Stags to a field goal. Cresthaven scored again before halftime, taking a fourteen-ten lead.

Marcus had four catches. One gained nineteen; one gained three. On two other plays he took defenders out of the spaces Owen and Bennett needed. The corner stayed with him outside. Inside, Marcus could make him turn his shoulders before the route declared itself.

At halftime the trainer asked about his legs. Marcus said the hamstring was fine. It was. He had a scrape beneath his left elbow and the familiar ache in both feet. Erin inspected the scrape, cleaned it, and told him to keep the sleeve over it.

Caleb sat beside him while Boone spoke to the line.

"He follows you inside," Caleb said.

"Sometimes they pay them for that."

"He's turning early."

"I know."

"We can use it."

Marcus drank from the bottle, then handed it back to the manager. "Make him hold the first look."

Caleb nodded. It was the sort of football conversation Marcus liked: exact enough to belong to the next work, small enough that neither man needed to claim the whole idea.

Allerton scored early in the third quarter. Marcus caught a seam pass to the eighteen. Three plays later Caleb found Bennett at the back of the end zone. Seventeen-fourteen. Cresthaven responded late in the quarter, its quarterback carrying a third-down scramble through a gap the Stags had not closed. The drive ended in a touchdown from the two. Twenty-one-seventeen.

By the fourth quarter Marcus had played more than fifty offensive snaps. There had been longer games. There would have been more

rest if Allerton had controlled the score. The staff had rotated him out for two short series, kept an eye on his movement, and asked for symptom reports. He was fatigued without feeling impaired. The difference mattered to him, and the staff had accepted it.

The new drive began at Allerton's twenty-five. Caleb hit Owen for twelve. Darius gained five and four, then Bennett converted third-and-one with a nine-yard catch, moving them to the Cresthaven forty-five. A defensive offside penalty added five. Marcus caught a five-yard pass at the sideline for another first down. The next run gained two. An incompletion left third-and-eight at the Cresthaven thirty-three, ten minutes and thirteen seconds remaining.

Marcus lined up in the slot to Caleb's left. Owen was outside him, Bennett on the right, Darius beside the quarterback. The original concept gave Caleb a quick completion option with a route working behind it. The packet preferred it against the expected rotation. A paired alternate sent Marcus on an intermediate in-break, Owen clearing vertically, with enough protection to let the crossing window open.

Caleb saw the corner turn toward the sideline before setting his feet. He called the alternate, Rail, and gave the protection tag explicitly. Luis repeated it. Darius echoed his scan responsibility. Marcus signalled ready.

The change was legal and fully communicated. Whatever happened next would not be another missing word in the backfield.

Marcus released at the nickel defender's outside shoulder. The defender opened. Marcus pressed the vertical stem hard enough to make him respect it, then planted to come inside. Owen carried the corner upward. The safety stayed near the goal-side hash, farther away than Marcus expected but still able to close.

Caleb held the ball through the first window. Pressure moved him half a step right. Marcus crossed into the second window, hands beginning to rise. The throw arrived a little high and behind his preferred lead point. Not uncatchable. A ball he would normally call his.

He reached, caught it, and came down on his right foot while his shoulders were still turning toward the throw.

The nickel hit him from the outside. The contact took his hips across the planted leg before the foot released from the turf. His knee moved in a direction his body could not follow.

There was pain. There was also a brief feeling of absence, something failing to hold while the rest of him kept moving.

He fell with the ball secured against his chest. The safety arrived after he was already down. The whistle blew.

First down at the twenty-two.

Marcus did not stand.

At first he was angry at the delay. The same instinct that made him get up after ordinary hits instructed him to get up now. He tried to draw the right leg beneath him and stopped. The pain changed when he moved it. He could not find a position that made it bearable.

Erin was beside him. She asked him to keep still, asked where it hurt, asked whether he had felt or heard anything when the knee moved. He answered. Her hands were careful. He watched her face and disliked how little it revealed.

Caleb stood beyond her shoulder. Marcus looked past him toward the sideline, where the reserve receiver was putting his helmet on. Someone had already begun preparing the next play. Of course they had. There was a game going on.

"Can you tell me?" Marcus asked Erin.

"We need to examine it properly."

"But can you tell?"

"I'm concerned. I'm not diagnosing it out here."

He nodded because the answer was honest. He hated the answer anyway.

The medical staff helped him onto the cart. He kept the ball until an official asked for it, then handed it over. The crowd applauded. Marcus had applauded men leaving on carts and thought it a decent thing to do. From the cart it sounded like people being grateful the difficult moment had acquired a familiar action.

He did not raise his hand. He looked at the railing, the wet coats hanging over it, a small child holding an oversized cup with both hands.

In the examination room beneath the stands, the game came through a monitor set too high on the wall. Marcus asked someone to mute it. The trainer did. They removed the tape and carefully opened the brace prepared for transport. A physician examined the knee. There was swelling already.

"We'll get imaging," the physician said. "You're not going back."

"I know."

Marcus had not known until he said it.

The clinician explained the concern about ligament damage, what the field examination could suggest, and what it could not establish. Marcus asked whether his foot had stuck because of the cleats. The physician said they could review the mechanism; an answer would not come from looking at the shoe alone.

Marcus looked at the shoe anyway. A clump of dark grass hung between two studs. He had chosen those studs before the game, after a reasonable assessment. Now the shoe looked as though it ought to contain an explanation.

His phone buzzed. Mom. Then Andre. Then his mother again. He asked the player-care assistant to call her while he listened.

"I'm here," he said when the connection opened.

Her breath caught. She had been watching.

"Tell me."

"They're checking my knee."

"How bad?"

"I don't know yet."

She waited. He could hear the dishwasher in the kitchen, quietly continuing the work he had given it.

"Are you hurting?"

"Yeah."

The assistant explained the next steps without promising an outcome. His mother asked when she could come. Marcus told her not

to drive now. She said she would decide about her own driving. He closed his eyes and let her keep that decision.

Allerton made a field goal after the stalled possession, twenty-one-twenty. The monitor remained muted. Marcus saw the score change and did not feel what he expected. Winning was still important; it was merely happening at a distance he could no longer cross.

He was transported for further assessment while the game continued. The driver asked whether he wanted the radio. Marcus said no. An equipment assistant rode beside him carrying his bag. The assistant was a student named Bree who had patched Marcus's glove during the Union game. He knew her name because she had told him she preferred it to being called Equipment.

"You can watch," he said, seeing her look at the phone.

"I don't need to."

"I said you can."

She opened the game. Allerton had the ball again. Caleb was taking the short throw and getting the offence to the line. Marcus could not see the entire screen but could follow from Bree's face. A conversion. A run stopped. Another conversion.

"Where?" he asked.

"Their seventeen. Thirty-nine seconds."

"Timeouts?"

"One."

The next run gained nothing. Harker let the clock move, then used the final timeout with six seconds remaining. The kicker made a thirty-four-yard field goal, leaving one second. Twenty-three to twenty-one. Cresthaven used the remaining kickoff time in a return stopped well short of midfield. The game ended.

Eight and zero.

Bree looked at Marcus and then back at the phone, unsure what response he wanted.

"Good," he said.

He meant it. She did not ask him to mean more.

The definitive images came later. The doctor showed him the injured structures without making the colours on the screen a substitute for plain language. The anterior cruciate ligament was torn. There was also a lateral meniscus tear. Other important structures were intact. The damage was significant, but it was not an announcement that he would never play again.

Marcus listened while the doctor described reconstruction, the possibility of repairing the meniscus, the importance of settling the swelling and restoring motion before the next stage, and the long rehabilitation that would follow. Return would depend on more than a date. Strength, control, symptoms, testing, and confidence would all matter.

"This season?" Marcus asked.

"No."

The doctor did not cushion the word.

"The spring testing?"

"You won't be ready to perform normally at those events. We can plan the medical communication, but we can't make the calendar heal the knee."

Marcus nodded. The professional draft had been an approaching door. Now he would reach it with records, questions, and a body unable to demonstrate what the records described.

"Can I get a second opinion?"

"Absolutely."

"I want that."

They arranged it. He asked for copies of the images and the written assessment. He asked which decisions needed to be made now and which could wait. The physician answered without treating the questions as a refusal to accept care.

His mother arrived before dawn, Andre driving. She brought the handbag and a sweater she had chosen without knowing whether he would be cold. Marcus let her put it over his shoulders. Andre looked at the brace, then at the wall, as if the wall could be handled more safely.

“Dishwasher fits,” he said.

Marcus laughed once, carefully. “You measured.”

“Somebody had to.”

His mother sat beside him and held the hand not attached to the bed rail. She did not say everything would be all right. He was grateful for that until he wanted her to say it, and then grateful she still did not.

They returned to Allerton Sunday afternoon. Harker visited after the team’s review. He asked what Marcus wanted shared, confirmed that the medical staff would handle the details he authorised, and asked whether there was anything the programme was failing to arrange.

“Don’t put a recovery date on a poster,” Marcus said.

Harker looked at him. “We won’t.”

“People will want a story.”

“You can decide which part you give them.”

Marcus hoped that was true. He knew the play would already have been watched thousands of times by people deciding what it meant without asking him.

“The second opinion,” he said. “I want it separate. Not somebody who already knows what the first doctor thinks.”

“We can arrange that.”

“I want to talk to him myself.”

“You will.”

Harker stayed a few minutes, asking about classes and where Marcus could sleep comfortably. Marcus’s apartment had stairs. The programme had temporary accessible housing near the performance centre. Marcus accepted it after seeing what the room looked like, not merely being told that it was available.

Caleb came in later with a bag from the campus bakery. Marcus had no appetite for it, but he took the bag. Caleb stood near the foot of the couch, watching where to put his hands.

“That ball was late,” he said.

Marcus looked at him.

"I held it. I should have led you more."

"It was catchable."

"You had to turn back."

"I did."

Caleb's face had the exhausted stillness Marcus recognised after losses, though they had won.

"They're reviewing the risk," Caleb said.

"They're reviewing a lot."

"The original call had less exposure."

"Maybe."

"I changed it."

Marcus looked down at the bakery bag. There were two pastries, one he liked and one Caleb liked. Caleb had bought food for a visit he had not known how to make.

"I ran it," Marcus said. "The nickel hit me. My foot didn't release. We'd played a lot of snaps. Your ball made me turn. You don't get to pick one thing and call it the whole injury."

Caleb sat on the chair opposite him. "I'm not trying to make it—"

"I know what you're trying."

Marcus stopped. The anger was real and not entirely Caleb's to receive. He shifted the brace, winced, and waited for the pain to settle.

"I don't have enough for this today," he said.

Caleb nodded.

"I want to know what happened. I don't want every person who feels bad asking me to help him with it."

"Okay."

"You can sit."

Caleb sat. They watched a basketball game neither cared about. When the broadcast became a discussion, Caleb muted it without asking. Marcus accepted that small decision because it matched something he had already wanted.

His mother called from the hotel to ask what he would eat. Marcus gave her an answer. Andre sent a photograph of a store aisle, asking

which charger fit Marcus's phone. Marcus chose the one in the middle.

Caleb stayed until Luis arrived. The lineman brought no gift and asked no question large enough to become a burden. He told Marcus that Nate had finally tied his own tie without assistance and had spent the bus ride checking whether the knot remained there.

Marcus laughed, then cried before he knew that was what he was doing. Luis stayed seated. Caleb looked down, giving him the room that was available without leaving it.

Later, when the visitors had gone and his mother was taking a call in the hallway, Marcus opened the authorised performance export he had received on Tuesday. It had not changed. His catches remained there, his verified speed, his work across different alignments. Nobody had yet appended the new uncertainty. For a moment the file seemed to concern a different man, one whose future could still be described mostly by what he had done.

He closed it before his mother came back. He would need the record. He would need the new information too. Neither could do the rehabilitation for him.

Beside the couch his right shoe lay in the open equipment bag. Bree had cleaned it. The grass was gone. It looked like a shoe he could have worn yesterday, which was yesterday, before yesterday became a place he could not reach.

He set it on the floor, opened the family message thread, and began telling Andre exactly where the spare key was.

CHAPTER TEN

The Change

The first thing Harker did Monday was remove Marcus's name from the available-player list. The second was put it back in the meeting list.

A coordinator had moved the receiver into the rehabilitation grouping, which was appropriate for treatment scheduling and not for every hour of his day. Marcus would still attend the offensive meetings he wanted to attend. He would still receive film. His season had ended. His place in the room had not.

Harker sent the correction and opened the quarterback comparison.

The report had been in preparation before Cresthaven. He had requested it after the Eastgate protection failure, widened it after Pinehurst, and told the analysts to stop making every page look like an answer. He wanted the underlying plays. He wanted the practice contexts. He wanted them to show where the conclusions held and where they depended on assumptions.

He had gotten eighty-three pages.

Boone arrived carrying breakfast. "You eat?"

"Later."

Boone placed half the breakfast on the desk. Harker looked at it and began eating.

"You read it?" he asked.

"Twice."

"Your answer?"

Boone sat. "Jonah."

Harker put the fork down. The answer had been coming toward him for weeks. Hearing it said plainly made the room feel different.

"Explain it without the score."

Boone did. Jonah identified late changes earlier and completed the required communication more consistently. He kept his base under pressure, moved through the progressions at the intended pace, and threw the ball away before a bad play became worse. He missed some opportunities Caleb could reach. He created fewer situations that required Caleb's exceptional gifts to recover.

Against equivalent first-team practice periods, with personnel and defensive tasks accounted for as well as they could be, Jonah's offense stayed on schedule more often. His limited game possessions were good, though the opponents and situations made them a weaker comparison. His work in the quarterback room was better than it had been in August and had been excellent then.

"The recommendation grade helps him," Boone said. "Take it out and I still want him."

"Against a defence that makes him move?"

"We keep the outlets honest. We don't pretend he has Caleb's legs."

"Deep outbreak from the far hash?"

"Caleb's better."

"Broken pocket?"

"Caleb."

"Then why Jonah?"

Boone looked at him. "Because I want fewer broken pockets."

It was not wholly fair to Caleb, and they both knew it. Some broken pockets were created by defenders winning their assignments, not a quarterback holding the ball. Boone opened the clips and separated those from the ones Caleb prolonged by waiting for a route that had already closed.

Harker watched eleven examples. In four, Caleb's improvisation was the only reason the offence had a chance. In the others, the chance had been available earlier in a less memorable form.

"He's seeing the rescue before he takes the exit," Boone said.

Harker nodded. "Some of the time."

"Enough of the time."

Simone joined them at nine. Harker asked her to distinguish the injury review from the quarterback comparison.

"They're separate," she said.

"They need to stay separate in every summary."

She opened the Cresthaven review. The system had indicated elevated cumulative exposure for Marcus, and the medical and coaching staff had managed it with planned breaks and adjusted practice work. The alternate route had a higher modelled collision exposure than the original. That estimate did not predict an ACL tear. It did not account perfectly for the exact foot placement, contact angle, surface interaction, or throw location.

"Can we say the check increased his risk?" Harker asked.

"We can say the pre-snap estimate was higher under that check. We can discuss the mechanism we observed. We can't say what would have happened if you'd called the original."

"And the ball?"

"A late ball can change the receiver's exposure. The film supports that here. How much each factor contributed to the injury is a different question."

Boone rubbed his eyes. They had all watched the knee move. No number could make that picture easier to remember.

Harker looked at Simone's draft note. It used the phrase avoidable exposure.

"Avoidable how?" he asked.

"A different route assignment would have changed the traffic."

"Then say changed. Avoidable sounds like we know we could have kept him from getting hurt."

Simone reread the line. "You're right."

She changed it. The system could be accurate without every summary written around it being accurate too.

Harker asked the orthopedic consultant what Marcus had authorised them to know. The treatment planning was moving forward. A second specialist would assess him independently. Neither specialist would promise his professional outcome. The programme's responsibilities were clear enough to act on even where the future remained uncertain.

After the meeting Harker called Miriam Calder. She wanted to know about Marcus and the press requests. He gave the authorised account, explained the support arrangements, and said the player would determine what he shared beyond the team's availability statement.

"Is there a safety issue we need to address now?" she asked.

"We're reviewing the play and the workload. There wasn't an ignored medical restriction."

"That's useful. It's not the only question."

"I know."

He told her the review would include the staff's decisions, not just Caleb's. She asked when it would be completed and who would receive it. He gave dates. She did not ask whether the report would be reassuring.

Then he told her he was changing quarterbacks.

Calder waited. "Because of the injury?"

"Because Jonah's playing better at the things we need the position to do consistently."

"Can you explain that publicly without discussing private evaluations?"

"Yes."

"Then explain it that way."

After the call he wanted to go outside. Instead he asked Luis to come by.

He did not ask the centre to vote on a quarterback. He asked about protection communication, whether the offensive line understood

the paired tags, and what happened when an echo was missing. Luis gave him the account without exaggerating the Eastgate error into a season-long condition.

"Caleb fixed it at Pinehurst," Luis said. "He's saying the protection clearly."

"I saw."

"Jonah's good too."

"I saw that too."

Luis sat with both hands on his knees. "You changing it?"

"I'm making a decision."

"Then tell Caleb before people start guessing."

Harker thanked him. It was advice he could accept without treating it as an instruction.

He called Caleb in at two, after the senior's class. The quarterback arrived in jeans and a sweatshirt, carrying a book with notes sticking out along the edge. He looked tired. Harker wondered how many visits he had made to Marcus, then left the question aside.

"Sit down."

Caleb sat. His eyes went to the report on the desk.

"Jonah will start against Fenwick," Harker said.

Caleb held still.

Harker let him have the first silence. He had learned not to fill it with reassurance before the player had understood the sentence.

"Because Marcus got hurt," Caleb said.

"No. That play is in the review, and your throw on it matters. The comparison was underway before Saturday."

"You'd decided."

"I hadn't."

"But you were looking."

"I look every week."

Caleb's eyes stayed on the report. "We're eight and zero."

"We are."

"I got us there."

Harker waited until Caleb looked up.

"You helped get us there. So did the defence. So did the line, the receivers, both backs, the kicker. I'm responsible for next Saturday too."

"You think Jonah wins Cresthaven?"

"I can't replay Cresthaven with Jonah."

"You think he makes the ball to Marcus at Ridgeline?"

"I think you make some throws he doesn't."

"Then what are we doing?"

Harker turned the report around but did not push it across the desk yet.

"He's ahead in the full-speed periods against the ones. He's getting the ball out on time more consistently. He's been cleaner with late protection changes. The offence loses fewer yards on the snaps where nothing opens. That's what I'm choosing."

Caleb stared at him. "The score says he follows."

"I had the analysts remove that component. I watched the film again. I still choose Jonah."

"You can make film say whatever you want."

Harker felt the sentence as an accusation, which it was. He set his hands flat on the desk.

"You can come back tomorrow and question any grade you want. We'll go through the play. Today I'm telling you who starts."

"So there's nothing I can say."

"There's plenty you can say. It won't change the decision today."

Caleb leaned forward, elbows on his thighs. The book rested against his knee. "You recruited me because I could see things."

"I did."

"Now seeing things is the problem."

"Waiting for the thing you want when the one we need is already there is a problem. Missing a protection tag is a problem. So is getting through a progression so fast you miss the late window. Jonah does that sometimes. I grade him for it."

"Not in front of the whole staff."

"Yes, in front of the staff. You're not in every one of his reviews."

Caleb looked away. Harker regretted the sharpness, not the correction.

"He's earned this," Harker said. "You know his work."

"I know his work."

"Then don't tell yourself this happened because he's easier to coach."

"Is he?"

Harker considered the question. Jonah was easier in some ways. He arrived prepared, received correction without displaying every feeling it produced, and made less noise when he disagreed. That could make a coach mistake quietness for agreement and agreement for understanding. Harker had made that mistake with other players.

"Sometimes," he said. "That isn't enough to start him."

Caleb nodded very slowly. The honesty had not helped him feel better. Harker had no reason to expect it would.

"What am I supposed to do?" Caleb asked.

"Prepare to play. You'll have second-team work and the reserve plan. If he's unavailable, you're next. If he struggles, I'll make the change I think we need. You don't stop being a quarterback."

"Just your quarterback."

Harker did not answer that with a slogan about teams. "I know what the job means to you."

"You know some of it."

The sentence was fair. Daniel had lost positions before, and the memory did not entitle him to claim this one.

Caleb stood. Harker pushed the report toward him.

"Your comparison," he said. "Your entries. Jonah's private information isn't in that copy."

Caleb took it and looked at the first page.

"What do the scouts get?"

"What you authorise through the process. I'll tell them why I made the change. I'll tell them what you do well."

"They'll hear I lost the job."

"They will."

Caleb folded the report against his book. At the door he stopped.

"Does Jonah know?"

"Not yet."

Caleb nodded once and left.

Harker stayed in the chair for a minute, then called Jonah.

The younger quarterback arrived with a notebook. Harker almost smiled at its inevitability and did not. He told Jonah the decision plainly.

Jonah's face changed before he controlled it. Happiness, unmistakable and quickly contained.

"Yes, sir," he said.

"You can be glad."

Jonah nodded. "I am."

Harker outlined the practice work, the communication to the team, and the initial plan for Fenwick. Jonah asked about the reserve packages and whether Caleb would retain some designed runs. Harker said the staff would decide that by opponent, not distribute snaps as compensation.

"I don't want to make it harder for him," Jonah said.

"You don't help him by apologising for earning the job."

"I know."

"You also don't get to use the recommendation as an answer when I ask why you threw a ball. You're running the offence. Explain the football."

Jonah looked directly at him. "Yes."

They discussed Fenwick's pressure tendencies. For five minutes the meeting became ordinary preparation. Harker needed that, and suspected Jonah did too.

Before leaving, Jonah asked whether Caleb had seen the same comparison structure. Harker said he had his own entries.

"Good," Jonah said.

He did not ask to see Caleb's score.

At the team meeting Harker announced the change. He explained the football reasons without using the phrase decision reliability. He

said Caleb would remain prepared and that the offence's audible procedures still applied to both quarterbacks. Nobody asked a question immediately. Then Bennett asked whether the timing on one route would change with Jonah's drop, and they returned to work.

That night Daniel came home later than he had promised. Peg had left dinner on the stove. She was at the table sorting donated books for the community programme where she volunteered. One box held books with missing pages; another held duplicates. Daniel took a plate and sat beside her.

"Did it go badly?" she asked.

"It went how it goes."

She slid a damaged picture book into the first box. "Then eat before you decide you can do it again."

He ate. She asked him to read a page whose print had faded. He held it beneath the lamp and read the sentence aloud. A child had circled one word in purple.

"Keep it?" he asked.

"The story's intact. Keep it."

He put it in the good box. They sorted for twenty minutes, work that required enough attention to stop him replaying the office and not enough to make him useless.

On Tuesday Jonah ran the starters. The timing was different in small ways: he came out of the play a fraction sooner, set his feet nearer the designed landmark, waited for Luis's protection echo with visible patience. Owen had to adjust his expectation on the deep crossing route. Bennett needed two repetitions to align the release with Jonah's shorter pocket movement. These were changes, not improvements by definition.

Caleb worked the second unit. His first throw was too hard and went through the freshman receiver's hands. On the next rep he adjusted, put the ball in a catchable place, and corrected the receiver's route depth without shouting. Harker watched from the far side. Nobody got better because the coach made a public event of every sign of disappointment.

Boone's first-day review found Jonah good and slightly rushed. The new starter wanted to justify the job every time the ball was snapped. Harker told him to justify it by running the play in front of him.

On Wednesday Caleb requested a review of three entries. Harker made the time. One grade changed after they reconsidered a defender's late rotation. Two did not. Caleb stayed angry, but the argument was about plays. Harker could work with plays.

The injury review moved separately. It identified a late throw, higher collision exposure under the selected route, accumulated work, and the mechanism visible on film. It did not identify a single preventable cause with certainty. The recommendations addressed throw timing, rotation plans, and how collision-exposure estimates were communicated in the pre-snap packet. Marcus would be consulted about the parts that concerned his participation and authorised records.

On Thursday Avery asked Harker whether recommendation compliance had decided the quarterback change.

"I chose Jonah because of his performance," he said. "Timing, protection command, consistency against pressure. Those are football things we can show on film."

"And the metric?"

"One piece of information. I'm the person who picked him."

He heard his own sentence and hoped he would continue to mean it when the choice became harder to defend.

Fenwick arrived Saturday with a five-and-three record and a defence strong enough to make the first series uncomfortable. Jonah took the opening possession at Allerton's twenty-five. He completed the first pass to Bennett for six, handed off for two, and faced third-and-two. Fenwick showed pressure inside, dropped one linebacker, and brought the nickel off the edge.

Jonah adjusted the protection before the cutoff, confirmed the echo, and hit Owen for seven. The crowd cheered with the disproportionate relief of people watching a new starter complete something familiar.

The drive ended in a field goal. Three-zero.

Fenwick punted on its first possession. On Allerton's second, Jonah converted a third-and-six with a ball thrown before Bennett turned, then found Owen on a seam for the first touchdown. Ten-zero.

Harker glanced at Caleb. The senior stood beside Boone, helmet on, holding the response sheet. He was watching the defence, not the crowd.

Fenwick answered with a field goal. Jonah's next drive stalled after he missed the deeper window and checked down too early. Boone made the correction. On the following possession Jonah used it, held his eyes through the linebacker's movement, and threw to Bennett behind him for twenty-one. Darius finished the drive with a touchdown run.

Seventeen-three.

Before halftime Jonah led another drive to a field goal. Twenty to three. Fenwick's final possession of the half ended with a punt, and Jonah knelt once to take the Stags into the locker room.

In the locker room Harker gave the defence credit for winning field position, told the line where Fenwick was changing its interior pressure, and told Jonah he was leaving one progression early.

"You're playing well," he said. "Stay in it."

The third quarter made the test less comfortable. Fenwick scored a touchdown after a long return gave it a short field. Twenty-ten. Jonah responded with a deliberate drive, using the recommendation when it fit, making a coordinated check when a late alignment changed the read. Keon caught the outlet on third down and took it past the marker. Owen caught the touchdown from the fourteen.

Twenty-seven-ten.

Fenwick kicked another field goal early in the fourth. The Stags then held the ball for more than six minutes. Jonah threw once on third down, an accurate completion to the reserve receiver, Micah Dunn, who had taken much of Marcus's outside work. Darius scored from the four.

Thirty-four-thirteen.

Harker kept Jonah in for the final short possession after the defence forced a punt. No dramatic reward, no need to send Caleb out to make the afternoon easier to describe. Jonah took the kneel-downs.

Nine and zero.

Harker shook the other coach's hand and turned toward his players. Jonah was speaking to Micah, pointing at the receiver's shoulder and laughing about something. Luis put one heavy hand on the quarterback's helmet. Keon came up behind them carrying the ball.

Caleb stood at the edge of the group. He smiled when Owen pulled him in, then looked back toward the field. Harker could not know what he was thinking. He could see how hard it was for him to watch men he loved succeeding without needing him to lead them.

In the locker room the players gave Jonah the ball. He accepted it without a speech. Caleb crossed the room, held out his hand, and waited.

Jonah took it.

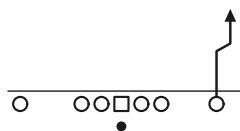
"Good game," Caleb said.

"Thanks."

There was no celebration large enough to erase the small distance between them. Harker left it there. He had chosen the starter. He had not been granted control over what the choice would cost.

After the players left, he watched the final drive again. Jonah's third-down completion arrived at Micah's chest, on time, with the protection intact. Caleb was visible in the sideline frame, tracking the ball from release to catch.

Harker stopped the film before the next snap and wrote Monday's work on a fresh page.



ACT III

Who Gets to Decide?

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Sideline

The spare helmet had a strip of white tape inside the earhole. Caleb had never noticed it before. Someone had written his number there in a square, careful hand, although his number was also on the back and his name was above it. On the sideline against Fenwick, with Allerton leading by ten in the third quarter, he found himself picking at the end of the tape with his thumbnail.

"You're going to want that," Luis said.

Caleb let go. "It's my helmet."

"I meant the earhole."

Luis sat on the bench with a towel over his head while the defence worked. A student equipment assistant tightened the screw in his chin strap. Beyond them, the stadium kept moving without Caleb. The band lifted its horns. The silver flags shook above the student section. On the display over the opposite stands, Jonah's last completion was already being replaced by an advertisement for graduate programmes.

Fenwick had scored on its first possession of the half. Its kickoff return had given it a short field; Allerton's defence had missed a tackle and then allowed a throw down the seam. None of this concerned the new starting quarterback's decisions. Nevertheless, Caleb felt a small, ugly opening in himself when the score became twenty-ten.

He closed it as well as he could.

Boone was gathering the offence. Caleb joined the outside of the circle. He had stood here before during defensive possessions, but usually with Boone's hand on his shoulder, usually with the next series beginning in what Caleb needed to know. Now Boone faced Jonah.

"Their nickel's getting depth before the snap. Don't let the picture make you hurry."

Jonah nodded. "Luis, on the third-down package, if they walk both up, I want the left echo before we break."

"You got it."

"Keon, don't widen just because the end does. Stay inside him until I clear you."

Keon had replaced Darius for this series. He touched his chest once, acknowledging the assignment. Jonah looked around the circle. His eyes stopped on each man long enough to establish that he had been heard.

Caleb had sometimes mistaken this for anxiety. Standing outside it, he could see the sequence underneath. Jonah was spending time before the huddle broke so that he could spend less at the line. There was nothing timid about it.

The offence went out. Luis left his towel on the bench, neatly folded, which seemed an unreasonable thing to do during a football game.

On second down Jonah checked the ball to Keon for six yards. From Caleb's angle the throw looked dull: a short ball to a back who had only just turned. Keon caught it without changing his stride. A linebacker arrived where the back had been, then pursued him to the sideline.

Caleb moved forward.

He had seen the same linebacker settle under the deeper route. If he had been playing, he might have waited for the receiver to come out the other side. He knew he could have made that throw. He could feel its shape even with his helmet under his arm.

On third down Jonah threw to Keon again, this time after holding the boundary safety with his shoulders. First down. Four plays later, Owen crossed the goal line with the ball tucked against his ribs. The stadium noise became a physical pressure against Caleb's face.

He met Owen at the numbers and slapped his shoulder pads. He told Keon good work. When Jonah came back, Caleb pointed at the field.

"The safety stayed with you."

"For a second."

"That's all you needed."

Jonah was breathing hard. "Yeah."

Neither of them made the exchange larger than it was.

Caleb watched the rest of the game from a place where the sideline heater blew hot air at his knees. Allerton won thirty-four to thirteen. Late in the fourth quarter, after Darius scored, Boone asked whether Caleb was warm.

"Yes."

"Keep it that way."

For three minutes Caleb expected to enter. He put his helmet on and took it off again. Fenwick punted, Jonah returned for the closing kneels, and the expectation had nowhere to go. Caleb stood beside Sam Givens while the crowd counted the final seconds.

Sam was clapping too hard. He seemed to recognise this and brought his hands down.

"Good one," he said.

"It was."

On the walk to the tunnel, Caleb heard his name. A boy behind the rail held a programme over the edge. Caleb signed it using a pen that barely worked. The boy's father thanked him and said, "You'll get another shot."

Caleb returned the pen.

He wanted to ask whether a shot was all the man thought he had lost. Instead he nodded, because the boy was looking at him.

Inside, the old tunnel smelled of wet concrete and the sharp wintergreen rub the trainers used. Players ahead of him began to sing the fight song. He joined on the second line. His voice sounded ordinary among theirs.

On Sunday morning he went to the dining hall before film and found that he did not know what to eat without the previous day's appetite. Usually he woke hollow after a game. He put eggs, potatoes, and two pieces of toast on his tray, carried it to a window, and left most of the potatoes.

His sister called while he was trying to peel a paper lid from a coffee cup.

"Did you watch?" he asked.

"Most of it."

"Most?"

"I had to work. Then the television in the break room had sound but the picture was some kind of cooking competition."

"That seems hard to follow."

"People sounded upset."

She asked how his public-policy presentation had gone. He had forgotten he had told her about it. He said it was Thursday, not last Thursday, and then checked his calendar while she talked.

"Are you doing okay?" she asked.

Across the room, a dining worker lifted chairs onto a table one at a time. Caleb watched the man test the balance of each one.

"I don't know yet."

"Okay."

He was grateful that she did not say he would get another shot.

In film, Boone stopped the touchdown drive on the first Keon completion. He asked Jonah about the linebacker. Jonah answered, and Luis added that the tackle had sold the pass set a little differently because Fenwick's end was jumping the snap.

Caleb had not seen that. The adjustment was small: one shorter step with the tackle's outside foot, his hands arriving half a beat later.

On the screen it was visible. From behind the play it would have been almost impossible to distinguish from an ordinary set.

The play was built out of things Caleb did not control and sometimes did not notice.

Boone let the film run. A route, a block, a six-yard gain. Caleb waited for the attention to return to the quarterback and discovered that the room did not need it to.

At the end, Sam stayed behind.

"Can I ask you something?"

Caleb was collecting his tablet. "You just did."

Sam smiled because he thought he was supposed to. "About the boundary throw against the two-high look. Coach says I'm late."

"Then get it out earlier."

"I know. I mean, when do you know?"

Caleb looked at him. Sam was still in team-issued clothes, though it was Sunday and no one required them. There was a small patch of shaving rash under his chin.

"You see it," Caleb said.

Sam nodded. Caleb left before the boy could ask anything else.

By the time he reached the stairs, he knew what he had done. He had protected something he no longer possessed by pretending it could not be explained. The answer had made his own ability sound large and Sam's problem sound like a deficiency of eyesight.

He did not go back immediately. He walked outside and sat on the low wall beside the practice entrance. Two students passed carrying a rolled rug between them, laughing at the difficulty of turning it through a doorway. Caleb watched until they disappeared. Then he texted Sam.

You free after class tomorrow?

The reply came almost at once.

Yes.

Monday afternoon he borrowed three cones from the equipment room. Sam met him on the indoor field carrying two footballs and looking as though he expected an additional practice.

"No throwing yet," Caleb said.

He placed the cones along a hash and asked Sam to stand where the quarterback would be. Caleb walked out to the position of the field safety.

"What do you need him to do?"

"Turn away from the boundary."

"Why?"

Sam began to explain coverage. Caleb waited until he finished.

"That's the diagram. I'm asking what makes the throw late."

Sam looked toward the cone that represented the receiver. "I'm waiting for him to turn."

"Right. By then the corner's seen it too."

Caleb walked back. He showed Sam where his feet were landing, then asked him to move through the drop without a ball. Sam's third step carried him too far sideways. He had to gather before setting to throw. Caleb had seen the same thing on film but never needed to name it.

"You're building yourself another step."

"They told me to open my hips."

"They're right. You don't have to open the whole building."

Sam laughed, properly this time.

They worked without a ball for ten minutes. Caleb gave him the ball only after the movement began to look uneventful. His own arm wanted to demonstrate, to make the difficult throw once and establish who was teaching whom. He kept his hands empty.

On the seventh attempt, Sam released before the imaginary receiver came out of his break. The ball struck the padded wall beyond the cone.

"That one," Caleb said.

"It was high."

"We'll fix high. You were on time."

They retrieved the balls together. Sam asked whether Caleb had always been able to make the throw.

"No."

“Really?”

“I used to miss it outside. My coach put a trash can there. I hit the guy carrying the trash can.”

Sam laughed again. Caleb had not told the story in years. In the version he usually remembered, the can had been empty and the throw almost good. Now he remembered the man’s angry face.

Boone arrived as they were finishing. He watched one repetition and asked Sam what he had changed. Sam explained. Boone nodded and told him not to add another twenty throws on top of his scheduled work.

“Sixteen,” Sam said.

“That’s not what I said.”

After Sam left, Boone helped Caleb carry the cones back.

“Useful,” he said.

Caleb shrugged.

“I’m not giving you a character award. It was useful.”

“I know.”

In the equipment room, Caleb put the cones inside a stack. He had liked being told, and did not like how badly he had needed to be told.

The week before Lakeshore, his schedule became both emptier and more exact. He took the same meetings as Jonah. He studied the same calls. His first-team repetitions were limited to the preparation the coaches needed from a backup, and each one seemed visible in a way a whole practice had not.

When he failed to identify a late rotation on Tuesday, Boone corrected him. Caleb felt the correction settle into a future in which mistakes had become his defining characteristic. On the next repetition he held the safety and delivered the right ball, then looked toward Boone too quickly.

Boone was watching the receiver.

Sam took the next four identification snaps. On the last, the defence walked a linebacker outside Bennett and left four men in the box. Sam looked at Luis, then toward Boone. By the time he began the

run-check signal, the play clock had reached four. He abandoned it, kept the pass, and threw the ball away when the corner closed.

"What did you have?" Boone asked.

"The run."

"Then get us into it. We're testing identification."

Sam nodded. The period was over. A manager moved the cones for the next group.

Caleb found him beside the water bottles. "You saw it in time."

"I know."

"What were you waiting for?"

Sam wiped the mouth of the bottle with his shirt. "Which grade it was going to be."

Caleb almost told him to stop worrying about the grade. He had spent half the week worrying about being trusted with four snaps.

"Ask before the period," he said.

"I did. He said identification."

Caleb looked toward Boone, who was already setting the next drill. "Then ask what happens when you change it."

Sam screwed the lid on. "You think I haven't?"

At night, Caleb and two classmates rehearsed their presentation in an empty seminar room. One of them, an older student named Denise, had worked for a city housing office before returning to school. Their project concerned a proposal to allocate repair crews according to predicted demand.

Caleb was supposed to introduce the budget. He kept saying "we" when he meant the city department.

"You can't promise the money," Denise said.

"I'm reading what it says."

"It says the director can authorise it. You're presenting a recommendation."

He crossed out a sentence. They went on for another hour, arguing about whether the least expensive option would survive a hard winter. Neither classmate knew enough football to be tactful about the quarterback change. They knew it had happened, and then they

asked him to move his section because the argument worked better with the budget last.

He moved it.

On Thursday they presented in a room with windows that would not close properly. Someone had wedged folded paper into the frame, and it fluttered when the heating came on. Caleb stood beside the screen while Denise described the repair backlog. The third member of their group, Gideon, forgot a figure and looked at Caleb. Caleb supplied it. Gideon thanked him and continued.

Caleb had imagined the presentation as a manageable obligation beside his real life. Standing there, he discovered that Gideon had been awake until two in the morning rebuilding the charts. Denise had interviewed someone who worked for the city. The work would have existed without him, and it would have been less complete.

When his section came, he spoke too quickly. The professor asked him to return to the slide showing the reserve fund. He returned to it and answered the question. A student in the back asked why the department could not simply hire more workers. Caleb began with the answer he had rehearsed, heard how little it answered, and asked Denise to explain the staffing constraint.

Afterward, Gideon shook his hand with unnecessary formality.

"We survived," he said.

"You did the charts."

"They were very survivable charts."

They went for coffee. Denise had to leave after ten minutes for a shift at the campus archive. Gideon asked Caleb whether travelling for games was fun. It was a question people usually asked without wanting the answer.

"Some of it," Caleb said. "Mostly you see a hotel and the stadium."

"That sounds terrible."

"Sometimes there's a really good hotel."

Gideon laughed and told him about a summer job cleaning rooms at a resort. He had opinions about the hotels Caleb liked. Caleb lis-

tened, then found himself describing the enormous lobby at Ridge-line, with its decorative canoe nobody was permitted to sit in.

When they separated, Gideon asked whether Caleb wanted to work together on the final assignment too. Caleb checked the travel dates before saying yes. He liked being asked for a reason that had nothing to do with how far he could throw.

On Thursday, after practice, Jonah found him at the whiteboard.

"That boundary throw with Sam," Jonah said. "He was better today."

"His feet were late."

"I know."

Caleb waited.

"I kept telling him where the ball had to be," Jonah said. "You got him there."

Outside the room someone dropped a helmet. It rolled along the floor with a hollow, irregular sound. Jonah looked toward the door and then back.

"Lakeshore's backside end is sitting more on early downs," he said.

Caleb turned to the board. "Because you don't keep it."

Jonah's face tightened.

"That wasn't—" Caleb began.

"No. It's true."

They watched the end on film. The player had held his position against Fenwick's quarterback two weeks before, but against a more mobile opponent he had chased the back. The evidence was incomplete. Lakeshore's front had changed with the personnel. The end might have been following different assignments.

Caleb drew a bootleg and then erased it.

"You don't need to outrun him. Make him wrong twice. He'll start moving."

Jonah leaned forward. "With the tight end?"

"Or the back. But don't turn it into something you have to be me to run."

For a moment the remark sat between them. Caleb heard the arrogance in the shape of it, though this time he had not intended to be arrogant. Jonah took the marker and drew where he would set his feet.

“I wasn’t planning to.”

At Lakeshore on Saturday, the check they had discussed produced a nine-yard completion to Bennett. Allerton won thirty to sixteen, its tenth straight victory. Jonah threw an interception when a linebacker got underneath a pass that had been available a moment earlier. He came to the sideline angry with himself, explained the mistake, and returned for a scoring drive. Caleb watched the explanation without feeling the opening he had felt against Fenwick.

That was not a victory large enough to report to anyone.

After the game, while the offence waited for the buses, Sam asked to see the interception again. Jonah had gone to the medical room for routine treatment on his shoulder. Caleb opened the clip.

“Why didn’t he just take the back?” Sam asked.

“Because the back wasn’t free yet.”

“But he gets free.”

Caleb stopped the picture before the throw. The linebacker was moving but had not declared himself. Bennett’s hands were coming up. Beyond them, the safety had taken a step that would soon become important.

“He has to choose here,” Caleb said.

Sam studied the screen.

“It was still the wrong throw.”

“Yeah.”

Caleb let the play run. There was nothing else he needed to add. They watched the interception together, and then went out to find their seats on the bus.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The Objective

The correction was twelve words long. Avery had spent more time on it than on the opening paragraph of the original article.

Allerton's quarterback development score incorporated recommendation alignment within a broader decision-reliability assessment. It was not, as a caption on the newspaper's social feed had suggested, a score for obedience. Avery had not written the caption. Their name was under the article nevertheless.

Kit stood beside the printer holding a paper cup with a split rim.

"We correct it where people saw it."

"We did."

"And on the article."

"I did."

"Then stop trying to make the correction sound like a counterattack."

Avery deleted the last sentence. They had wanted to point out that the university's own public language was less specific than their reporting. It was true, and it did not belong in a correction.

Downstairs, someone was trying to move a delivery dolly through the shop door. Each attempt made the ceiling shake. Kit sipped carefully from the intact side of the cup.

"What have you got next?"

Avery turned the screen. "The definitions changed."

“They always change.”

“These changes affect evaluations.”

“Then show me how.”

The document was an old presentation from a university workshop on predictive systems. It had been publicly available for two years. A doctoral student had sent Avery the link after reading *Following the Forecast*. The student did not work for football and knew nothing about the quarterback decision. She wanted Avery to understand what an objective function was before using the phrase again.

The presentation described early work on Allerton’s football decision support. It included a sample player-development dashboard. Accuracy, timing, communication, adaptability. Recommendation alignment appeared under research diagnostics, with a footnote: not intended for independent player ranking.

On Sam’s current report, alignment contributed to a graded category. The distinction was visible. It did not establish who had made the change, or why.

“Could be legitimate,” Kit said.

“I know.”

“I’m reminding you because you look happy.”

Avery closed the old presentation and made a list of people to call.

Simone Avram answered the request herself. She offered forty minutes on Wednesday, then sent a second message saying she could provide an hour if Avery came at eight. Avery came at eight.

There was a rowing photograph on the shelf behind Simone’s desk. Eight women lifted a boat, their faces turned away from the camera. Avery had not been in her office before; the first interview had been in a borrowed room at the performance centre. Below it stood a little wooden box of spare charging cables, each folded and held with a rubber band.

“Do you row?” Avery asked.

“Not much now.”

“Were you good?”

“We were.”

Simone moved a chair away from the screen so they could sit at a proper angle. A mug had left a pale circle on a stack of papers. She put the papers in a drawer without trying to conceal their headings: staffing requests, computing capacity, a student's reference letter.

"Show me the discrepancy."

Avery put the two documents beside each other. Simone read the old footnote, then the current category description.

"That's not a discrepancy in a prediction," she said.

"I didn't say it was."

"You called it a model change in your email."

Avery looked at the email. They had.

"An evaluation change," they said.

"Yes."

Simone brought up the release history. There were dates, version numbers, staff notes. No entry said that the quarterback must surrender his judgment. Most of the entries concerned ordinary problems: a category being interpreted differently by two coaches, a report taking too long to prepare, repetitions that should not have been included in a comparison.

Recommendation alignment had entered the scored assessment in stages. First it was attached to review notes so coaches could identify recurring disagreements. Later it became one input to decision reliability. The most recent change standardised its contribution across comparable repetitions, reducing the discretion of individual position coaches.

"Why standardise?" Avery asked.

"Because two players shouldn't receive different grades for the same kind of decision merely because they have different coaches."

"Who approved it?"

Simone opened the approval record. Boone had signed the football assessment revisions. Harker had approved their use. Simone's name appeared beside the implementation and validation work.

"Who decided reliability should mean that?"

"The football staff."

“Was that a meeting about how to measure something you’d agreed on, or a meeting about what you wanted players to become?”

Simone stopped moving the cursor.

“I wasn’t in every conversation.”

“But you signed it.”

“I signed that it was implemented as specified.”

Avery wrote the sentence down. Simone watched them do it.

“That sounds worse than it is,” she said.

“You have the implementation record,” Simone added. “You don’t have the meetings, the injuries we prevented, or the old grades we replaced.”

“I asked for the meetings.”

“You asked for an hour of my time.”

Avery closed their notebook halfway. Simone heard the unfairness too late to stop the sentence. She had offered the hour herself.

“I’ll request the records separately,” Avery said.

Simone moved the two reports closer together. “Let me explain what I signed.”

“Then tell me what it means.”

She did. A measurable category required consistent inputs. If staff chose to include agreement with a recommendation, Simone’s team needed to make sure the calculation did not confuse a player who never had an opportunity to adjust with one who repeatedly changed plays. They had corrected several distortions of that kind. The work had made the report fairer.

“Fairer within the category,” Avery said.

“Yes.”

The office heater clicked. Simone glanced at the rowing photograph, then back at the screen.

“I thought the category was useful,” she said. “I still think it can be.”

“For what?”

“Identifying decisions we should review.”

“That’s different from ranking players.”

"It can inform a ranking. So can a dropped pass. The question is what else you know."

She showed Avery a blank demonstration report. A coach could attach an accepted contextual explanation to a deviation. That explanation remained in the detailed record. The monthly summary, however, displayed the numerical components and a trend line. It linked to the explanations without reproducing them.

Nothing had been lost. Nothing had been falsely calculated. The most portable part of the report was also the least explanatory.

"Who looks at the summary?" Avery asked.

"Coaches. Development staff. Players see their own. Access depends on the use."

"And external scouts?"

"Not without the athlete's authorisation, and not everything is eligible for export."

Simone was firm about that. Avery crossed out a question that presumed broader access than they had established.

They turned to practice recommendations. Here the objective was not always the same as in a game. Some sessions prioritised execution at game speed. Others controlled total physical exposure. A development period could test a skill that was not yet the player's strongest. The system required staff to specify those aims.

"Does independent adjustment have a target?" Avery asked.

"We run identification drills."

"I mean when a player notices something you didn't plan for."

"That's harder to define."

"Harder than agreement?"

Simone's expression changed. Avery thought they had found the sentence the article needed. Then Simone said, "Harder than agreement isn't the same as more valuable."

Avery put their pen down.

"You don't want to train arbitrary departures," Simone said. "There are ten other people out there. And a quarterback who always agrees may be doing excellent work to establish that agreement."

“I understand.”

“You understand the words. I’m not sure your questions allow that player much of a life.”

The interview ran twenty minutes over. Avery left with fewer clean sentences than they had expected and a request pending for the staff’s written evaluation criteria. In the hallway, a player Avery did not recognise leaned against a rehabilitation machine while a clinician changed its settings. The player asked whether he could finish in time for a laboratory class. The clinician asked when the class began.

Neither referred to the player’s trend line.

* * *

Simone stayed in her office after Avery left. She had a ten o’clock meeting. Instead of preparing for it, she reopened the first dashboard specification.

She remembered the room in which they had discussed it. Boone had wanted fewer red marks that represented nothing useful. An assistant had complained that “adaptability” meant whichever player the coach already liked. Harker had asked for something that would help him distinguish a bad decision from bad luck. Those were reasonable requests.

She had suggested recording the available recommendation alongside the actual choice. At the time, the proposal seemed modest. Without that comparison, how could they learn?

At ten, she went to a staffing meeting and argued for another analyst. She used the reduction in preventable workload injuries as evidence that the programme’s investment was working. It was working. Her junior staff were exhausted and deserved help. She did not mention Avery’s questions until the meeting was over.

Boone stayed behind.

“We should look at the summary,” she said.

“Because of the article?”

“Because the summary gets read more than the notes.”

Boone rubbed a thumb along the edge of his tablet. "That's why it's a summary."

"I know."

"We can't put every argument on the front page."

"Then the front page shouldn't suggest there wasn't an argument."

He considered that. "You got a proposal?"

She did not. She asked for two days.

That afternoon, she sat beside Tamsin, one of the analysts who maintained the reporting pipeline. Tamsin had written the code that kept contextual explanations attached when reports were revised. She took pride in it, properly. Before that change, staff had sometimes needed to search three separate records to find an accepted explanation.

Simone asked what happened when someone exported only the summary.

"They get the summary," Tamsin said.

"And the explanation?"

"There's a marker for a note. If they request the eligible detail, it's included."

"Could the summary show accepted context directly?"

"Yes. We discussed that."

Simone pushed her chair back. "Then why am I asking again?"

Tamsin stopped typing. She opened the old work request and turned the monitor toward Simone. The approval at the bottom was Simone's.

"Because you changed your mind," Tamsin said.

"I meant why didn't we revisit it."

"You asked us to keep the page count down."

Simone read her own note: retain links; preserve comparison view.

"I did. I'm sorry."

Tamsin turned the monitor back. When Simone asked about the revision, she gave the estimated hours and the other task that would have to wait. She did not offer to stay late.

The staff had wanted the summary kept to a single page so coaches could compare several players without switching screens. Showing every note would have made it longer.

Simone remembered Boone trying to compare four reports on a bus. He had shown her why he wanted the shorter view.

“What’s changed?” Tamsin asked.

Simone could not honestly say that the report had changed. Its use had expanded, and she had paid more attention to whether it remained accurate than to what readers treated as sufficient.

“I want the accepted context visible without another step,” she said. “Not the full note. Just that it exists and was accepted.”

Tamsin sketched a revision. It was not difficult. That made Simone feel better for a moment and then worse. The obstacle had not been computing capacity.

At six, her old rowing teammate called about a reunion. Simone had already declined twice. This time she opened her calendar and found a weekend after the season.

“You’ll be bored with how slow I am,” she said.

“We’re going to lunch.”

“I can do lunch.”

“Can you?”

Simone looked at the unfinished proposal. She put the date in her calendar before returning to it.

* * *

On Thursday, Avery met Sam in the student union. He had brought the wrong report at first, then returned to his residence hall for the latest one. Avery offered to buy him lunch. He refused until they said it would be a bowl of soup, not an inducement to disclose anything.

“I’m allowed to talk about my soup,” he said.

His report contained a deviation marked acceptable. In a practice identification period he had changed a pass to a run after recognising a light box. The run gained four yards. His explanation had been accepted because the period was designed to test recognition, but the

recommendation-alignment component still recorded a departure. The decision grade incorporated context; the alignment measure retained the literal fact.

"It doesn't say I was wrong," Sam said.

"No. It says you didn't follow it."

"I didn't."

"Does that distinction show in the summary?"

Sam looked. "Not unless you open this."

Avery asked whether he felt discouraged from changing a play. He took a long time to answer.

"Depends who's watching."

"Which coach?"

"I mean everybody. If the play doesn't work, I need to know why I did it. If I followed the call, sometimes I only have to know why it didn't work."

He was not accusing anyone of a rule. Avery checked that with him twice. He grew impatient on the second occasion.

"That's how it feels. You asked."

He opened the practice schedule beneath the report. Two of his six mixed-front repetitions had gone to a base-call period the week before Lakeshore. The total work was the same. The work he was allowed to choose was not.

"Boone said stabilise the identification first. I missed a backer twice. That's fair."

"Did he say the alignment score was why?"

"He showed me this page. He said the trend wasn't steady enough."

Avery looked at the summary, then at the accepted explanation behind it.

"And you showed him the note?"

"After. He said we'd look at the next block."

Sam described the light box he had recognised in the remaining period, the check he had begun too late, and Boone telling him to use what he saw. Avery asked whether the hesitation had been marked as an identification error.

“It was one,” Sam said. “That’s the problem.”

Sam put the report away and asked whether a newspaper correction hurt Avery’s grade. Avery said there was no single grade, then admitted Kit would probably remember it when assigning the next difficult story.

“So there is,” Sam said.

“She also remembers whether I fix it.”

“Good.”

He finished the soup. Avery let him leave without requesting another example.

Before leaving, Sam had authorised Avery to ask Boone about the change. Boone confirmed the allocation and the missed identifications in a call that afternoon. He had used the summary alongside the film. When Avery asked about the accepted departure, he opened the detailed entry and went quiet.

“That one shouldn’t have counted against the steadiness review,” he said.

He would correct the review and restore the two mixed-front snaps in the next development block. Avery asked about the repetitions already lost.

“I can’t give him those snaps back,” Boone said. “I can give him the work next week.”

The university provided the evaluation criteria on Friday, with information about identifiable players removed. It also offered a statement describing continuous improvements in the system. Avery requested an interview with President Calder. They expected a communications officer to explain that the president did not select quartermasters.

Instead Calder gave them fifteen minutes between meetings.

Her office contained a framed drawing from a schoolchild and three chairs that were not equally comfortable. Avery chose the bad one. Calder asked whether they wanted to switch, and Avery said no before considering the question.

"I have read your article," she said. "I don't want to pretend I oversee the construction of each athletic evaluation."

"Who oversees the priorities?"

"Ultimately, I'm responsible for the institution. In practice, responsibility is distributed."

"Did anyone review whether reducing decision variance might also reduce opportunities to develop judgment?"

"I don't know whether that is occurring."

"Neither do I. I'm asking whether it was considered."

Calder folded her hands. "We consider education, health, and opportunity. We also employ people to make decisions in their fields. If I override a coach's evaluation because I prefer an abstract idea of creativity, I may damage all three."

Avery had prepared for a defensive answer. This answer required another question.

"Would you review the way the evaluations are used?"

"Yes. Reviewing their use doesn't mean suspending them."

"Who participates?"

She said athletics, student support, the relevant scientific staff. Avery asked about athletes. Calder nodded once and wrote something on her notepad.

"Yes," she said. "Athletes."

At the door, she stopped Avery to clarify that she was not announcing a commission or a policy change. She was agreeing to examine a question. Avery wrote that down too.

Caleb caught them outside the newspaper office that evening. He had a paper bag from the campus store and wore a knit cap pulled down over his ears. Avery had answered his interview requests earlier in the season; now he looked at the office door as though it offered him access to a part of his own story he had not been allowed to read.

"You found more?" he asked.

"Some."

"They've been doing this from the beginning."

"The beginning of what?"

“Making the numbers say what they want.”

Avery set their backpack down.

“That’s not what I found.”

“The way they grade us.”

“People decided what to grade. The calculations appear to do what they specified.”

Caleb’s fingers tightened on the bag. Something inside crinkled.

“You know what I mean.”

“I’m trying to know exactly.”

He looked down the stairs. A student below them was asking the shop cashier to hold a package until Monday.

“If they took that part out, I’d still be starting.”

Avery did not have his private evaluations. They did not know what Harker had shown him. They asked whether he had evidence for the claim.

“I was eight and zero.”

“Now you’re ten and zero.”

The sentence landed harder than Avery intended. Caleb looked at them, and they resisted the urge to soften it into something untrue.

“I’m not saying the choice was right because they won,” they said. “You can’t say it was wrong because it cost you the job.”

“I’m the one who’s been telling people.”

“Then you should want me to find out, including the parts that don’t help you.”

For a moment they thought he would leave. Instead he set the bag on the sill. It contained cold medicine and a packet of pens.

“What do you need?” he asked.

They arranged an interview. Avery told him that nothing he shared about himself would authorise them to publish someone else’s information. Caleb said he understood. He sounded tired rather than offended.

Later, Kit read the new draft with her shoes off under the desk. Avery had titled it *The Objective*. Kit crossed out the first paragraph,

which tried to explain the entire problem before anyone entered the story.

“Start with the two repetitions,” she said.

“That makes it sound small.”

“It is small. That’s why someone could do it.”

The final version began with the two repetitions Sam had lost and included Boone’s correction. It quoted Simone’s defence of consistent assessment, her concern about the summaries, and Calder’s promise precisely. Sam read his passages before publication and asked them to remove the location of his residence hall, which they had never included.

At midnight Dacey came to collect Avery. She had a laboratory shift in the morning and refused to wait while they checked the page one more time.

“It’ll still be there tomorrow,” she said.

Avery closed the laptop. Downstairs, the shop lights were out, but the delivery dolly stood against the wall, finally inside. They stepped around it and went home.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Wrong Objective

Jonah's mother wanted to know whether he had bought a coat. He told her he had two coats. She asked whether either of them was warm.

"One's team-issued."

"That tells me who paid for it."

He stood in the narrow kitchen above Vic's repair shop, pressing the phone to his ear while he tried to separate two frozen pieces of bread. Downstairs, the dog began barking at something that had occurred, or might occur, outside the front window.

"It's warm," Jonah said.

His mother was grading papers. He could hear her pen striking the desk when she put it down. She had watched the Lakeshore game and understood enough to ask about the interception without pretending she had seen an answer he had missed.

"I thought the window would stay open," he said.

"It didn't?"

"It didn't."

"Well."

He expected more. There was more, but it concerned a bill sent to his parents' address and a cousin who was having trouble finding work. By the time they hung up, the bread had thawed enough to separate.

Allerton was ten and zero. Jonah's face appeared on a banner at the entrance to the athletic complex, although he had not yet become used to seeing it there. He noticed that the photograph came from spring practice. The school could make him into its new starting quarterback faster than it could take a new picture.

On Tuesday, an adviser from the athletics office asked him to approve a promotional appearance during the examination period. It would take ninety minutes, including transport, and the sponsor had offered a fee that would pay several months' rent. Jonah asked for the full schedule.

"We'll make it work," the adviser said.

"I have a project review."

"We can talk to your department."

"I don't want to move the review."

The adviser did not argue. She adjusted the proposed date and sent it back. Jonah had expected the negotiation to be harder. For several hours he felt foolish for having prepared so carefully for a conflict that had not happened.

That evening Lydia called him foolish for a different reason. Their project team was evaluating a bridge drainage design. Jonah had rebuilt a calculation without telling the other two students because he thought he had found an error.

"You found one," Lydia said. "Then you made a new assumption we couldn't see."

"It was in the notes."

"Your notes. On your machine."

They sat in a laboratory that smelled of warmed electronics. The other students had gone to buy sandwiches. Lydia turned his screen so the revised figure could be compared with the old one.

"It's a better estimate," Jonah said.

"Great. We still have to use it."

He put the assumption into the shared file. Lydia checked it, disagreed with part of it, and changed the boundary condition. He did not like the change until she explained it a second time. When the

sandwiches arrived, they worked for another hour and obtained a result none of them had brought into the room.

At the end, Lydia asked whether he wanted to see a film on Sunday. He said yes, then asked which film.

“That was nearly spontaneous,” she said.

Against Westerton on Saturday, he did not feel spontaneous at all. The wind crossed the stadium in fitful intervals, stronger in the open end than under the upper deck. Boone had built the opening script to give him throws toward the sheltered boundary while establishing the run. Westerton responded with a heavier front than its recent games suggested.

Jonah checked the first play to a pass. He gave the protection word, waited for Luis’s echo, and completed a six-yard throw to Owen. The recommendation had anticipated the front. On second down Darius gained five. The offence moved through the opening series without a spectacular play and scored on a short pass to Bennett.

Westerton tied it after a long drive that kept Allerton’s defence on the field for almost six minutes. Jonah stood beside Caleb, watching Trey follow a back across the formation.

“They’re making him take the long way,” Caleb said.

Jonah nodded. On his own side, Westerton was doing something similar to Bennett. The tight end had to help the tackle on an edge defender before entering his route. Sometimes the defender backed away, leaving Bennett to recover the time he had already spent waiting for contact. Sometimes he drove directly into him.

It was legal, purposeful football. It also made one player pay for two parts of the play.

Allerton scored again before halftime, Owen catching a ball at the back of the end zone and dragging a toe inside the line. Westerton answered with a touchdown. A Allerton field goal made the score seventeen-fourteen at the break.

In the locker room, Bennett sat with his forearms on his thighs while a trainer asked about a scrape under his chin. He said it was nothing. The trainer cleaned it anyway.

Jonah went through the adjustments. Bennett answered each assignment correctly. His face was flushed, but so were other faces. He had played more snaps than they had planned because Westerton's front made the heavier personnel useful. He had also blocked well enough to keep himself on the field.

"You good?" Jonah asked.

"If you stop hitting Owen in the hands, maybe I'll get a catch."

He had four catches. Jonah smiled.

The second half began with two punts. Allerton took its next possession at its own twenty-eight and moved into a quick rhythm. Boone used tempo after two first downs to keep Westerton from changing its front. Jonah completed a ball to Micah, handed to Darius, then found Bennett underneath for eight.

When they came together for the next call, Bennett was still swallowing. He put a hand against his thigh and lifted it quickly, as though he had only needed to test that the leg was there.

Jonah asked whether he needed out.

"Give me a play," Bennett said.

"Out?"

"A play to breathe."

They were on Westerton's thirty-seven. Darius gained four on first down. The offence stayed on the field. A substitution would allow Westerton to substitute too, which was not a catastrophe; it was merely one reason the staff wanted to keep the sequence moving.

The next packet arrived before the communications cutoff. It favoured a pass that sent Bennett across the formation after a firm chip on the edge. Owen would clear the outside. Micah would run underneath. Bennett's crossing route offered the most favourable matchup and the best estimated result for second-and-six.

Jonah knew the play. He had completed it twice already. Bennett had gained fourteen yards on one of those catches.

At the line, Bennett bent to hear the last word from the tackle. He was slower straightening than he had been in the first quarter. When he raised his hand to indicate readiness, the fingers did not close

cleanly around the air. There was nothing in the current packet that said he was hurt. Jonah did not think he was hurt.

He thought Bennett had asked for something, and that he had almost chosen not to hear it because the next instruction was good.

He checked to the quick boundary hitch. The word changed the routes, not the five-man protection. He repeated the protection anyway and heard Luis return it. Darius moved a half step to confirm his outlet assignment. Bennett would release into the near flat, away from the edge defender, and did not have to carry the primary route across the field.

The corner squatted on Owen. Jonah threw anyway, placing the ball low and outside. Owen caught it, turned, and was tackled after three yards.

Third-and-three at the thirty. Bennett took his time returning to the formation. Jonah asked again if he wanted out.

"I'm good now."

Micah caught the next pass for five. Darius gained two on first down at the twenty-five. Jonah's second-down throw was incomplete; on third down he checked to Keon for three when Westerton took away the deeper routes. Allerton kicked from the twenty, a thirty-seven-yard field goal that made the score twenty-fourteen.

On the sideline, Boone asked about the second-down check.

"Corner was sitting there," he said.

"I saw him."

"You liked three yards?"

"Bennett needed a breath."

Boone looked toward the bench. Bennett was drinking from a bottle, his helmet between his feet.

"He tell you that?"

"Yes."

"Then we can get him out."

"We were at the line."

"You can signal it."

"I could. I changed the call."

Boone waited. He was not shouting. The stadium was loud enough that Jonah had to lean toward him to be sure he heard the question.

“Was he unable to run it?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t want him to have to do that rep.”

For the first time, Jonah felt how vulnerable the answer was. It was not an injury report. It was not an estimate that could be verified on a chart. Bennett might have run the route beautifully, gained twenty yards, and come off the field pleased with himself.

He wanted Bennett to look tired when Boone turned toward him. The wish arrived fully formed, meaner than anything Jonah had said. Bennett was laughing at something Keon had told him. Jonah looked away.

If he had kept the call and missed, they would review the throw. Now they would review why he had departed. He had helped make that difference sound reasonable when Caleb was the one explaining.

“We’ll talk tomorrow,” Boone said. “Make sure we know when somebody needs out.”

Westerton kicked a field goal early in the fourth quarter. At twenty-seventeen, the game offered no reassurance that Jonah’s choice had been harmless. Allerton had traded one possible opportunity for another and taken three points. Now three points separated the teams.

Caleb stood beside him while the kickoff unit went out.

“He looked tired,” Caleb said.

“He was.”

“That call could still have worked.”

“I know.”

Caleb did not smile. Jonah realised he was not making an argument against him.

On the next drive, Bennett began on the bench. His replacement missed a block and Darius had to step around the penetration. A pass to Owen restored the down and distance. Bennett returned after a short rest, caught a ball against the same edge package, and helped seal the outside on Darius’s six-yard touchdown run.

Allerton led twenty-seven to seventeen. Trey's defence forced a punt, and Jonah managed the last possession without giving Westerton another useful opportunity. He kept the ball on a short run when the backside end finally committed to the back. He slid before the safety arrived. The crowd made more of the four yards than it had made of several harder throws.

When he came back to the bench, Caleb said, "You don't need to be me."

"Good," Jonah said. "That hurt."

He had landed on his hip. There was a bruise waiting there, ordinary and deserved.

The review took place Sunday with Harker, Boone, Simone, and Bennett present. Jonah had expected to explain himself to the coaches. He had not expected Bennett to be invited. The tight end came in carrying breakfast in a paper wrapper.

"Am I allowed to eat?"

"If you can answer questions with your mouth shut," Harker said.

Simone stopped the film before Jonah's check. She asked Bennett what he had felt.

"Tired."

"Different from normal?"

He considered. "I needed to stop doing two jobs for a minute."

Boone asked whether he could have executed the crossing play. Bennett said probably. Boone asked whether he had wanted to be replaced.

"Not for the whole series."

"You wouldn't have been replaced for the whole series."

"I don't know that when I ask."

The room went quiet in a way Jonah recognised from questions that sounded simpler before someone answered them.

Simone displayed the current workload information. It showed a demanding sequence, not an alarming one. The injury estimates had not crossed the limits set by the medical and coaching staff. The sys-

tem had not captured Bennett's spoken request. It had accounted for his accumulated work using the data available to it.

"There are observations it doesn't have," she said. "That doesn't mean everything a player feels is more accurate than the estimate."

"I wasn't predicting an injury," Jonah said.

Harker leaned back. "What were you doing?"

"Giving him a less demanding assignment."

"At a cost."

"Yes."

"How much cost?"

Jonah looked at the screen. The original concept had a better expected outcome. The alternate had not become the superior football call because its purpose was sympathetic.

"I don't know exactly. I knew it was worse for the down."

"Still a playable call?"

"Yes."

"Properly communicated?"

"Yes."

Boone confirmed that. Harker asked Bennett whether he was satisfied with what Jonah had done.

"Yeah. But I don't want every time I'm breathing hard to become a meeting."

"Neither do I," Harker said.

They discussed a signal for a short relief substitution, and how a player could ask for it without the request sounding like an inability to continue. Boone pointed out that they could not promise an opponent would make the substitution convenient. Simone said the revision she and Tamsin had drafted would put accepted contextual departures directly on the summary, not only behind its links.

"That's a reporting change," she said. "It won't tell us what the right choice was."

Harker looked at Jonah. "You can make that check. You're also responsible for telling us the condition that prompted it. Earlier, if you can."

"I understand."

"And you don't get to make Bennett into somebody who can't speak for himself."

Bennett lifted his breakfast. "Working on it."

Jonah stayed after the others left. He wanted Harker to say whether the choice had been good. The coach was sorting his notes into a folder.

"You don't look convinced," Harker said.

"Would you have kept the call?"

"I wasn't standing beside him."

"You saw it."

"On film. That's not the same."

Jonah felt the answer fail to give him what he had come for. He also knew it was honest.

On Sunday afternoon he went to the film with Lydia. He bought popcorn because she wanted it and ate most of it before the lights went down. Halfway through he began thinking about the second-and-six again. Lydia touched his wrist when he reached into the empty tub.

"It's gone."

"Sorry."

"You don't have to apologise to the popcorn."

He watched the rest. Outside, she asked whether the film had been good, and he admitted he had lost part of it. She said she would tell him what he missed if he bought dinner.

He did. She told him about a woman in the film who had chosen to leave a job, and about the daughter who thought she should have stayed. He asked a question that revealed he had missed more than he admitted. Lydia stopped explaining and picked up the menu.

"I'm sorry," he said. "We reviewed a check this morning."

"I know. You told me in the car."

He had. He moved his water glass onto its damp ring.

"I want to know whether they trust the decision."

"Did they say they didn't?"

"They asked me to explain it."

"Which you did."

"It isn't always that simple."

She looked at him over the menu. "I believe you. I'm also not at the meeting."

"I just don't want one check to become the thing they remember."

"Instead of all the games you've won?"

He nodded, then wished he hadn't.

"Caleb won games too, didn't he?"

"That's not the whole evaluation."

"Okay."

The waiter came. Jonah ordered the first thing he recognised. Lydia asked about the sauce and changed her order. He waited until the man had gone.

"I earned this job."

"I didn't say you hadn't."

"Everybody thinks I'm there because I'm easy to tell what to do."

"I don't."

He could have stopped there. "It's easier for you. Nobody's waiting for your project to fail so they can put the other person back."

Lydia set the menu down. "You don't know who's waiting for me to fail."

He began to answer, then remembered how little he knew about the placement she was applying for. She had described it twice. He knew the name of the firm and almost nothing about the interview.

"You're right," he said.

She thanked the waiter when he brought their food. For several minutes she spoke only about the meal. Jonah ate too quickly and slowed when he noticed her plate.

"I liked having a reason they couldn't argue with," he said at last. "Not just for the team. For me."

"That sounds more likely."

He had wanted her to tell him that it was understandable. She asked whether he wanted the rest of her bread. He took it.

On the walk back he asked about the placement. She gave him the interview date and the travel problem she had already solved. He put the date in his phone. She did not make a joke about his calendar this time.

On Monday, Caleb asked him to look at Oldbury's pressure package. Before they started, he said, "I used to think you needed somebody to tell you what to do."

Jonah turned in his chair.

"I know."

Caleb had apparently hoped the admission would be less familiar. He looked down at the remote.

"I don't think that now."

Jonah could have asked what had taken so long. He could have mentioned all the decisions he made before a recommendation existed. Instead he said, "I still think you make it harder than it needs to be sometimes."

"I know."

They watched the pressure. On the first clip, the defence showed six and brought four. On the second, it brought a safety from the opposite side. Caleb stopped the screen before the movement declared itself.

"Look at the backer's hands."

Jonah leaned closer. He saw the tell, then watched the next five clips in which the same hands did not lead to the same pressure. Caleb watched too.

They began making a list.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

What We Owe

Marcus had learned the distances in the apartment by what each cost. Bed to bathroom, fourteen steps with the crutches. Sofa to kitchen, eight if the chair was tucked in. Front door to the elevator, twenty-six and a turn that required him to think before moving.

The university called the apartment accessible. It was. That did not mean every object in it had been put somewhere he could reach.

He stood beside the kitchen counter with his weight on the crutches and looked at the coffee filters on top of the cabinet. His mother had put them there the morning she left. She had wanted to clear the counter so he could use it. The arrangement made sense until someone wanted coffee.

He considered reaching. He considered the conversation he would have if he fell. Then he made tea, which he did not want.

The surgery had taken place after enough of the initial swelling had settled and he had regained the movement the surgeon wanted before reconstruction. Marcus had sought the second opinion he had requested. The second surgeon agreed with the diagnosis and the general plan, though the two had described the recovery in different ways. One spoke in milestones. The other spoke in ranges.

Both had said there was a long way to go.

The right ACL had been reconstructed. The lateral meniscus had been repaired. That repair meant restrictions he could not shorten by

wanting a better calendar. He wore the brace, followed the surgeon's limits, and discovered that doing the right amount of work could be harder than doing all the work he could endure.

The first week after surgery had divided itself into sleeping, waking, and the uncomfortable uncertainty between them. Now, a little more than a week later, he could read for longer. He could also spend an hour reading the same paragraph because his phone kept offering him better versions of the life he had expected.

Draft projections. Training videos. Allerton eleven and zero. Jonah making a play with another receiver in the space Marcus used to occupy.

He liked Micah. This did not make the videos easier.

At the performance centre, Erin asked him whether he had been sleeping.

"More than I was."

"How much?"

"Depends whether you count closing my eyes and resenting things."

She did not smile until he did. Then she checked the notes from his surgeon and asked about changes in pain and swelling. He answered accurately. He had learned that minimising a symptom did not make it smaller; it made the next question less useful.

Their work that morning was slow and unglamorous. Erin measured, watched, and made him stop before he wanted to. Across the room an uninjured player drove a weighted sled over the turf. The sound of it seemed unnecessarily loud.

"Another set?" Marcus asked.

"Not of that."

"I feel okay."

"Good. Let's preserve okay."

He looked toward the sled. Erin followed his eyes.

"You can be annoyed," she said.

"I appreciate the authorisation."

"I'm generous."

Afterward she helped him adjust the brace and asked whether he wanted assistance getting to the waiting area. He said no. Halfway there, he wished he had said yes.

His career adviser met him in a room near the elevator. Shreya Nguyen worked with athletes on employment and professional transitions. She had helped Marcus compare a promotional contract the previous spring without telling him that the largest fee made it the best contract. Now she brought a list of possible contacts and no prediction she could sell as reassurance.

"Some clubs will want to see you later," she said. "Some may make a decision from medical information and prior film. We can't promise what they'll do."

"Can we promise I'll be somewhere they can see me?"

"We can plan for it."

She explained the difference between sharing film, sharing selected performance records, and authorising medical disclosures. Marcus had read the forms. He asked her to read them again with him.

An estimated availability window appeared in the proposed packet. It was broad and qualified. He still disliked it. A reader could turn a range into a date and then hold him responsible for missing it.

"Does it have to go?" he asked.

"They will ask."

"That's not what I asked."

Shreya nodded. "No. We can provide the operative report and the surgeon's current assessment separately, with your authorisation. We don't need to send this summary today."

He asked whether waiting would hurt him.

"It might reduce what someone is willing to decide now. It might also prevent a bad assumption. I can't rank those for you without knowing which matters more."

He wanted her to rank them. He was tired of choosing between harms no one could measure in the form his life would take. He asked for a day, and she gave him one.

Outside the room, Nate was waiting with a bag of groceries. He had bought coffee filters as well as food.

"You already have these," he said.

"I can see the ones I have from the floor. That's not the same."

Nate put the bag on the floor beside Marcus's chair and began telling him about an essay he was writing on a nineteenth-century strike. He had found a photograph of men outside a factory and could not identify the person in the middle.

"Maybe he's the photographer's brother," Marcus said.

"That would actually explain something."

Nate drove him home. At the apartment, he moved the coffee filters and assembled a small shelf that had arrived in a flat box. The instructions required a screwdriver that neither of them owned. Nate used the driver on his key ring, which worked until it did not.

They ordered lunch and left the shelf half built.

"You don't have to make every visit productive," Marcus said.

"Good. Because this is not."

They ate on opposite ends of the sofa while an old crime series played without sound. Marcus had watched the episode twice and did not remember who had done it. Nate guessed the victim's lawyer. Marcus said that seemed too obvious and then hoped it was the lawyer, because he did not want to be obliged to watch a third time.

When Nate left, he set the unfinished shelf against the wall and put the screws in a mug. Marcus could reach the mug. It was a kindness small enough that it did not ask him to be grateful aloud.

Caleb came on Thursday. He had texted first and arrived at the time Marcus gave him. The bag he carried contained oranges and a screwdriver.

"Nate told you?"

"He said you were living with a failed public-works project."

"It's on schedule. The schedule just changed."

Caleb worked on the shelf while Marcus sat at the table marking a course reading. They had both missed a class discussion about employment policy. Caleb had attended the next one; Marcus had

watched the recording and been irritated by the sound of his classmates turning pages.

"Denise was good," Caleb said.

"Denise is always good. We were supposed to disagree with her."

"I did."

"How'd that go?"

"She was good."

Marcus laughed. Caleb fitted the last screw and pressed down on the shelf to test it. The whole thing listed slightly left.

"You're hired," Marcus said.

Caleb put the screwdriver on the table. He did not immediately leave. Marcus recognised the waiting and closed his book.

"What?"

"I wanted to talk about Cresthaven."

Marcus leaned back. The apartment heater made the same dry clicking sound it made every afternoon.

"Okay."

"I've watched it."

"So have a lot of people."

"The throw was late."

"We said that already."

Caleb looked at his hands. "I'm sorry."

Marcus did not answer immediately. He was not deciding whether to forgive the injury. He did not know how to forgive a throw for a knee. He was deciding whether he had enough energy to hear what Caleb meant.

"For the throw?" he asked.

"For putting you there."

"I run that route. I wanted that route."

"I know."

"Do you? Because you keep talking like I was a chair you moved into traffic."

Caleb raised his head.

"I'm trying not to pretend it wasn't my choice."

“Then say what your choice was. You changed the play. You threw it late. I reached for it. The guy hit me. My foot stayed where the rest of me didn’t.”

Caleb sat very still.

“None of that means it had to happen,” Marcus said. “None of it means your part doesn’t count.”

“I understand.”

“I’m not finished.”

The words came out sharper than he intended. He let them stay.

“Before that, you were talking about taking risks like you were the only one taking them. If you throw a ball into a crowd, you have to answer for the interception. I have to go get it. Those aren’t the same cost.”

“No.”

“I don’t want you afraid to throw. I don’t want safe football until I’m useless. I want you to remember I’m there before you decide how brave the play is.”

Caleb’s face changed at the word brave. Marcus had not chosen it to hurt him, but he knew it could.

“You think that’s what I was doing?” Caleb asked.

“Sometimes.”

“On that play?”

“I don’t know what was in your head. That’s what I’m telling you.”

Outside, a garbage truck stopped beneath the window. For a minute they could not hear each other without raising their voices. Neither did.

When the truck moved on, Caleb said, “I wanted the first down.”

“Me too.”

“And I thought the call gave us a way to get it.”

“It did.”

Marcus saw relief begin and stopped it.

“That doesn’t settle it.”

“I know.”

"Maybe it was the right call and a bad throw. Maybe it was a bad call that we almost got away with. I'm not going to decide that for you just because I'm the one with the brace."

Caleb rubbed both hands over his face.

"I don't know how to do this without making it about me."

"Try not asking me to make you feel better."

The shelf stood beside the wall, empty. Marcus had wanted a visit. Now Caleb was looking at the screwdriver as if the next thing to do was pick it up and leave. Marcus was not certain he had been entirely fair.

"You can still come here," he said.

Caleb nodded, but did not look relieved this time.

They talked about Oldbury. Marcus asked how Micah was doing against press coverage. Caleb described a footwork adjustment, then showed him a clip only after asking whether he wanted to see it.

Marcus watched Micah release outside, lose the first step, and recover with a clean turn of his shoulders. It was good work. Marcus said so. He also pointed out where the corner would be able to drive on a shorter route.

Caleb sent the note to Boone with Marcus's permission. He did not attach the rest of their conversation.

On Saturday, Allerton beat Oldbury twenty-four to fourteen and finished the regular season twelve and zero. Marcus watched from the apartment with his brother. Andre had driven up after a flooring job and brought a bag full of work clothes because he had not had time to go home.

He was asleep before the second quarter. Marcus let him sleep through the halftime studio discussion of Allerton's playoff prospects.

When Andre woke, he apologised. Marcus told him he had missed a commercial in which three former quarterbacks disputed whether a pickup could be called intelligent.

"Can it put down a floor?" Andre asked.

"No."

"Then they've got work to do."

The next morning they argued about the dishwasher. It was working beautifully at home, their mother said, but Andre had charged part of the installation materials to his own account. Marcus wanted to pay him back. Andre wanted him to stop treating everything he did as a job Marcus had hired him for.

"You don't have to pay me to be your brother," Andre said.

Marcus looked at the brace. "I didn't say I did."

"You act like it."

He had no ready answer. They made breakfast, and Andre put the pan where Marcus could reach it without being asked.

Jonah visited on Monday before the conference championship week began in earnest. He brought no food. He had asked whether Marcus needed anything, and Marcus had said he needed someone to stop bringing food.

They discussed the Westerton check. Marcus had seen the newspaper's brief mention of Jonah explaining a departure, and the team had talked about it without turning it into a public incident.

"Bennett asked for a breath," Jonah said.

"Then good."

"Coach said I should have got him out."

"Maybe."

"He didn't want out."

"Then you had two people to listen to."

Jonah sat forward, elbows on his knees. Marcus could see him seeking an answer that would remain true after the people changed.

"I don't want a player making himself available because he thinks he'll lose his job otherwise," Jonah said.

"Me either. I also don't want someone saying that's why I want to play every time I want to play."

"You know what I mean."

"Yeah. Do you know what I mean?"

Jonah looked toward the shelf. It now held books, a charger, a packet of coffee filters, and the mug of screws left over after Caleb finished it.

“What would you want us to do?” he asked.

“Ask. Make it possible to answer. Don’t make the answer into proof you knew better all along.”

“And if what you want is too risky?”

“Then tell me why you won’t do it. Don’t tell me it’s what I really wanted.”

Jonah nodded slowly. Marcus did not mistake the nod for agreement. He asked Jonah about classes, and Jonah described the drainage project and Lydia’s corrections with the mild irritation of someone who was secretly impressed.

After he left, Marcus called Shreya. He authorised the selected film and medical information they had agreed on, with the recovery assessment presented as a current range rather than a promised date. He did not feel safer after making the choice.

That afternoon, he recorded a short presentation for his public-policy course. The first attempt stopped when his phone rang. The second stopped when he lost his place. On the third, he spoke for seven minutes without looking at the clock and finished with a sentence that was less elegant than the one he had written, but said what he meant.

He uploaded it, checked that the file opened, and closed the laptop.

Then he went to the kitchen. The filters were on the new shelf. He took one down and made coffee.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The Right to Decide

Harker disliked undefeated seasons as a subject of conversation. They encouraged people to speak about the next game as though it existed to complete a pattern. Ridgeline had no obligation to complete Allerton's pattern. Its defence had changed since September. Its quarterback was healthier. Its coach had spent the intervening weeks preparing for the possibility of a second meeting.

At the conference championship hotel, Harker watched a maintenance worker replace a burned-out bulb over the elevator. The worker checked the new bulb, checked another that was still working, and descended the ladder. Nobody congratulated him for remaining undefeated at maintenance.

"You're smiling," Peg said on the phone.

"No, I'm not."

"I can hear it."

He told her about the bulb. She said he had been away too long if he was beginning to envy light fixtures. Then she told him which train she would take to the game, and he wrote the arrival time on the back of the hotel stationery.

The postseason brought more people into every decision. The medical staff arranged follow-up care around travel. Tutors arranged remote examinations. Families requested tickets. Commercial partners wanted photographs that could be released immediately if Aller-

ton won. Calder's office asked whether athletes would miss final assessments. Harker answered what he could and delegated the rest to people who knew more than he did.

It was possible to be surrounded by assistance and still seek a place to put blame. He had become attentive to the distinction.

At the Friday walkthrough, Caleb ran the backup period with the first-team line. The balls were clean, the words audible, the pace correct. He did not turn the allotted repetitions into an audition for a job Harker had already assigned.

Afterward, Harker stopped him.

"You're ready?"

"Yes."

"That's a football question."

Caleb looked at him. "It's a football answer."

Harker let him go.

The conference final was played in a roofed stadium that amplified the band until separate instruments became one hard brightness. Ridgeline scored first, and Allerton answered with a drive Jonah finished by throwing to Micah. A field goal on each side made it ten all. Ridgeline then forced a punt and scored from a short field after a good return. Jonah brought Allerton back before halftime, finding Bennett in the seam for a touchdown. Seventeen all.

Neither offence had dominated. Both had found answers that stopped working once the other sideline recognised them.

Early in the third quarter, Jonah missed Owen high on a throw he usually completed. Owen reached for it and came down hard, rolling to his knees before standing. The medical staff checked him on the sideline. He was cleared to continue, but the sight reminded Harker that clean decisions could still end with a body on the ground.

Allerton kicked a field goal. Ridgeline answered with a touchdown, then extended its lead to twenty-seven to twenty with a fourth-quarter field goal. There were nine minutes left.

Boone wanted a shot down the sideline on the first play of the next possession. The packet supported it. Ridgeline had begun pressing

the short throws, and the protection could hold with an additional blocker.

Harker approved it. Jonah took the snap, watched the safety carry the receiver, and threw to Darius underneath. Five yards.

Boone exhaled through his nose.

“That was the chance,” an assistant said.

“It was a chance,” Harker replied.

On the next play, Darius gained six. Jonah completed to Bennett, then checked a run when the defence spread. Allerton crossed mid-field. At Ridgeline’s thirty-two, a holding penalty made first-and-twenty. Harker saw Jonah clap his hands once and gather the huddle.

He threw for eight, then six. On third-and-six, Micah came free against a pressure and caught a ball for five before a linebacker stopped him. Fourth-and-one at the twenty-three. Allerton trailed by seven, with a little more than five minutes remaining.

The field-goal unit was waiting. Boone looked at Harker. The forecast favoured going for the first down under the current game conditions. Harker did not need a forecast to know that a field goal would still leave them requiring a touchdown; the estimate helped him compare that need with the risk of handing Ridgeline the ball.

He kept the offence out.

The defence crowded the middle. Jonah gave the protection word and moved Bennett from one side to the other. Luis echoed it. Darius took the handoff, hit the narrow gap behind Nate, and gained two before being pulled down.

There was nothing elegant about the conversion. Nate’s jersey had ridden up under his pads. Luis lost his balance and landed on a pile he had helped create. Darius came out carrying the ball with both hands. Each had done something the others needed.

Three plays later Jonah threw to Owen for the touchdown. The extra point tied it at 27.

Ridgeline reached its own forty-three before Trey stopped a third-down completion short of the marker. Its coach punted rather than

gamble on fourth down. Allerton took over at its eighteen with 2:16 left and two timeouts.

Harker watched Jonah manage the last possession. A completion to Micah gained twelve; Darius gained seven, and Jonah used a timeout after the next run gained two but failed to reach the marker. On third-and-one, he threw to Bennett after the defence committed to the back. Bennett caught the ball beyond midfield and ran to Ridgeline's forty-two.

The clock was moving. Jonah gathered the offence without rushing it into confusion. Owen caught a sideline pass for eight and stepped out. Darius ran for five, and the remaining timeout let Boone set the next two calls. A short completion moved them to the twenty-six. Jonah centred the ball on the following run and hurried the field-goal unit on.

Harker had chosen not to seek one more risky throw. He would have to own that choice if the kick missed.

It did not. The forty-three-yard field goal put Allerton ahead with four seconds left. On the kickoff, Allerton kept the return contained. Ridgeline's first lateral was legal, its second hit the turf, and an Allerton player recovered as time expired.

Thirty to twenty-seven. Harker folded the play sheet and put it in his pocket. Later he would review the decisions that had worked and those that had not. For the moment, players were coming toward him, and he met them where they were.

In the locker room Jonah sat with his shoulder wrapped and his shoes still tied. Harker crouched beside him.

"Good work."

"Missed Owen."

"Yes."

Jonah nodded. Harker had learned not to make every compliment into permission to forget.

"You stayed with the game," he said.

Across the room Caleb helped Sam identify the protection on the fourth-down conversion. Marcus, who had travelled under the ar-

rangements cleared by his medical team, sat with his leg supported while players passed him the conference trophy. He held it for the photograph, then returned it. Harker noticed that nobody tried to put it on his lap.

During the week that followed, Allerton received a first-round playoff bye. Harker gave the players a short interval away from the facility, not from their examinations. He spent one morning at home while Peg sorted books for the community sale.

"Keep?" she asked, holding up a coaching book he had bought twenty years earlier.

He opened it. There was a note in the margin beside a section on quarterback judgment: Let him make the mistake in practice.

The handwriting was his. He did not remember writing it.

"Keep," he said.

"You say that to everything with a football on it."

"That one doesn't have a football."

"The argument remains weak."

He put the book on his desk. Later, at the facility, he asked Boone how many practice periods they had reserved for unannounced defensive changes.

Boone showed him. There were some, but fewer than there had been two seasons earlier. Preparation had become more opponent-specific because opponent-specific preparation worked.

"We can add a period," Boone said.

"Not more work. Replace one."

They chose a period whose results had become reliably good and therefore less instructive. Pike agreed to have the scout defence present look the offence had not rehearsed that morning. Simone would record the response, with the period's objective specified as recognition and coordinated adjustment rather than conformity to the initial recommendation.

"We'll get uglier numbers," Boone said.

"Then put the reason on the page."

The first session was ugly. Jonah checked into a pass against a late pressure, protected correctly, and threw incomplete because the receiver read the same signal differently. Caleb kept the original run on another repetition and was stopped for a loss when the defensive tackle slanted across Luis's face. Both plays had explanations. Neither explanation made the work satisfactory.

They rehearsed the communication again.

The quarterfinal against Port Allen was a different kind of game. Port Allen's offence played fast enough to make Allerton's substitutions difficult. Its defence conceded short gains and tried to force Jonah into throwing over them. For most of the first half, he refused the invitation. Darius and Keon shared carries. Bennett caught underneath. Owen ran a route all the way through even when he knew the ball had gone elsewhere.

Allerton led twenty-one to thirteen at halftime and twenty-eight to twenty early in the fourth quarter. Port Allen was still close enough to make one turnover matter. Jonah completed a third-down pass after being hit as he released it, then led a drive that ended with Darius scoring from the three. A later field goal made the final score thirty-eight to twenty.

Caleb entered for the last possession after Port Allen had exhausted its timeouts. He took the snap cleanly, handed off twice, and knelt. There was no opportunity to display the part of his game that had once defined the programme.

In the handshake line a Port Allen assistant told him to keep his head up. Harker heard the remark as he passed. Caleb said thank you and kept walking. That restraint seemed neither heroic nor small to Harker. It seemed expensive.

After the quarterfinal, Simone brought her proposal for the evaluation summaries. Accepted contextual departures would be visible beside the alignment measure. Decision reliability would be presented through its separate components as well as a combined assessment. Staff would have to identify the purpose of a practice period before using its results in a player comparison.

The revisions did not eliminate judgment. They made it harder to conceal which judgment had been applied.

Harker approved a trial for the spring. He declined to change the quarterback comparison retrospectively, not because he wanted to protect the decision, but because a revised presentation could not reconstruct every conversation that had informed it. He agreed to provide players a clear route to question a grade and receive a recorded answer.

“That will take time,” an assistant said.

“It already takes their time,” Harker said.

Simone did not smile at that. She had been asked to find staff hours she did not yet possess. They went through the workload and removed a report that three departments received but only one used.

Calder’s review proceeded in the same imperfect manner. An athlete representative asked why a development tool could become evidence of employability without a new explanation. A coach asked whether every grade now required negotiation. Marcus participated remotely in one session and said an explanation was not the same as a veto.

There was no announcement that Allerton had solved the relationship between expertise and choice. There was a short statement describing changes to reporting and review. Avery asked whether the alignment component would retain its weight. The university answered that the weight was under review for different uses, and that it would continue collecting the underlying information.

Harker expected Avery to call that insufficient. Their article called it limited. He could live with limited.

The semifinal paired Allerton with Ashford State, the team it had beaten thirty-four to seventeen early in the season. Ashford had lost only once since and had improved enough to make that first score look distant. Its young quarterback had stopped treating every broken pocket as a request to run. Its defence had become excellent at showing a pressure and bringing another.

Allerton's first possession ended in a punt. Its second ended in an interception when Jonah and Micah disagreed about the route against a rotating safety. Ashford used the short field to take a seven-zero lead.

On the sideline, Jonah described the error without trying to divide it into a percentage that belonged to someone else. Micah arrived beside him and described his own reading. Boone corrected the rule. Caleb pointed to the safety's depth on the replay.

"That's the piece," he said.

They returned to the field. Allerton tied the game, went behind fourteen-seven, and scored again before halftime. Fourteen all. At the break Harker did not promise the players that superior preparation would prevail. Ashford had prepared too.

The third quarter belonged to both defences. Each offence kicked a field goal. Early in the fourth, Ashford completed a deep pass over Trey's zone and finished the drive with a touchdown. Allerton trailed twenty-four to seventeen.

Jonah's next drive took eleven plays. Twice he chose a short outlet before pressure arrived. Once he moved in the pocket and threw across his body to Owen, a ball Harker would not have recommended from the sideline and could not fault after watching the actual window. Owen caught it for a first down. Darius scored from the five. Twenty-four all.

Ashford punted with 4:06 remaining. Allerton took the ball at its own thirty-one and drove far enough for a field goal, using most of the available clock. Harker kept one timeout rather than spending it to seek another offensive play. The kick from forty yards was good. Twenty-seven to twenty-four, with forty-nine seconds left.

Ashford began at its twenty-five with one timeout. A sideline completion gained eleven and stopped the clock. A second pass was incomplete. The quarterback then found a receiver inside for nine; Ashford used its timeout with twenty-seven seconds left. At its forty-five, the offence faced third-and-one.

Pike sent four rushers and kept the coverage deep enough to discourage the first long throw. Ashford completed underneath for six. The receiver was tackled inbounds at Allerton's forty-nine. The offence hurried up and spiked with thirteen seconds remaining.

They still needed distance for a realistic field-goal attempt. Trey broke up the next pass near the sideline. With eight seconds left, Ashford tried a deeper route. The throw travelled farther than the receiver could reach. Three seconds remained.

There was no suitable field-goal range. Ashford sent receivers toward the end zone for the last throw. Allerton's rush forced the quarterback to release from behind his original spot. The ball descended into a cluster of blue and white, struck two raised hands, and fell.

Harker waited for the official's signal before moving. He had seen games end late enough to distrust celebration that preceded the end.

Allerton had reached the national championship.

Jonah hugged Luis and then stood still in the middle of the field while people moved around him. Caleb reached him, touched his helmet, and said something Harker could not hear. Jonah answered. They went toward the band together, not arm in arm, simply headed to the same place.

Two days later, Western Plains University occupied every screen in the quarterback room. Its defence had held opponents to fewer points than any team Allerton had faced. It was large in the middle, fast at the edges, and particularly good at making an offence feel it had recognised something just before revealing something else.

Boone admired it enough to be angry.

"They'll let you have the picture," he said. "Then they'll change the frame."

Simone showed the major conditional forecasts. The strongest recommendations remained useful; the uncertainty increased around rare combinations and late disguises. Western Plains was not invisible to the model. It was difficult for everyone.

Caleb asked about the boundary corner. He had seen the player drive hard on short routes when the slot receiver widened.

"Sometimes," Simone said.

She showed the clips in which he stayed deep. The same initial foot position appeared in both groups. Other details changed: field position, safety leverage, the route distribution, whether the offence had shown the formation before.

"He's selling it," Jonah said.

"Sometimes," Caleb replied.

Simone left the word alone. They needed to examine the possibilities, not win a conversation.

Boone retained the aggressive double-move check in the red-zone package. They had practised it, and there were defensive conditions in which it could be useful. He was equally clear about its costs: time in the pocket, less favourable spacing, a receiver having to beat leverage rather than merely reach an open spot. It could look available before it was.

At the end of the meeting, Harker asked both quarterbacks to stay. Boone stayed too. Simone remained by the display, closing the clips.

"Jonah starts," Harker said. "Caleb, you prepare to enter at any time. We are not making the package simple enough that the backup can learn it on the sideline."

"I know it," Caleb said.

"Then prove it in practice."

He laid the audible sheet on the table. The sheet listed approved changes, protection tags, receiver signals, and the situations in which each check had been taught. It had always contained authority. Harker had once assumed that putting the words on a sheet made the authority clear.

"You can change a call," he said. "A recommendation isn't a prohibition. You need a football reason, and you need to get all eleven into the same play. If you can't communicate it, you don't get to run your private version."

Jonah nodded. Caleb looked at the sheet.

"If the estimate still favours the original?" Caleb asked.

"Then you have to take that seriously."

“I’m asking whether I’m allowed.”

Harker did not answer quickly. He could make the question disappear by requiring the quarterback to keep the call whenever the system preferred it. The instruction would be clear. It would also require someone standing yards from the defence to surrender the judgment Harker had trained him to exercise.

“Within this package and these procedures, yes,” he said. “That does not mean every choice you’re allowed to make is a choice I want you to make.”

Boone pointed to a protection tag. “This is not optional. And don’t use a hard count as a substitute for checking that the outside receiver heard you.”

Jonah asked what happened if the defence moved after the communications cutoff. They reviewed the line signals. Simone confirmed that outside communications would stop with fifteen seconds left on the play clock. The wrist display would retain the latest packet but would not supply a fresh recommendation after that cutoff. A changed picture could make the cached estimate less applicable. It could also tempt the quarterback to imagine a difference that was not important.

“You can be wrong about what you see,” she said.

“So can the estimate,” Caleb said.

“Yes.”

There was no satisfaction in her agreement. Harker was glad of that.

“If the change goes badly,” he said, “we will review the decision and the execution. We don’t call it good because it was yours. We don’t call it bad only because it failed.”

“And if we follow it?” Jonah asked.

Harker looked at him.

“Same review. You’re not excused from seeing the field because the call came through your helmet.”

They worked through two examples. Jonah rejected one check because the back could not reach the new protection responsibility

from his alignment. Caleb rejected another because the supposed advantage depended on a safety continuing a movement he had not committed to. Their answers were good. Harker did not confuse good answers in a quiet room with a guarantee.

After they left, Boone gathered the sheets.

"You could have narrowed it," he said.

"I know."

"Would've been defensible."

"So is this."

Boone did not ask which would win. Neither man had the answer.

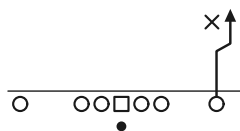
At the last practice before travelling to the championship, Harker stood behind the offence during a red-zone period. Marcus watched from a chair beyond the boundary, his leg supported. Jonah approached the line and gave a protection word. Luis returned it. The defence shifted. Jonah checked the route combination and repeated the protection.

The pass was incomplete.

Boone corrected the receiver's depth. Jonah explained what he had seen. Caleb, waiting for his repetition, listened with his helmet on.

They reset the ball. The band was rehearsing somewhere across campus; a phrase reached the practice field and faded before its ending. Harker watched the players take their places again. He would ask them to make decisions, and they would make some he disliked. He could still decide how much authority to give them. He had decided.

He blew the whistle for the next repetition.



ACT IV

Zero Point One

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The Championship

Jonah woke before the alarm and lay still until he knew where he was. The curtains did not quite meet. A narrow blade of daylight crossed the carpet and stopped at the leg of the other bed, where Sam had left one shoe upright and the other on its side.

Sam was asleep with his mouth open. He had asked three questions about Western Plains before turning out the light. Jonah had answered two and told him to stop on the third. Now he hoped Sam had not taken that personally.

He got up, dressed, and went downstairs. The hotel had put the team breakfast in a room normally used for weddings. A chandelier hung above the scrambled eggs. Someone had placed a little sign beside the coffee urn: STAGS ONLY. Jonah imagined a disappointed tourist being prevented from drinking it.

Luis was already there, eating oatmeal.

"How's your back?" Jonah asked.

"Attached."

"That's good."

"It's my preferred arrangement."

They ate without talking for a while. Outside the room a university employee was sorting envelopes of family tickets. Another checked the time on two devices and then asked a third person what time the buses left.

Jonah's parents had arrived the previous evening. They had texted a photograph from their room: his father beside the window, his mother holding up the hotel's ridiculous robe. She had brought their own coffee because she distrusted the price of room service. He had almost gone to see them, then decided he needed to stay with the team. There had been no rule preventing the visit. He wanted them close and wanted nothing to change the arrangement of the hours he had prepared.

His phone lit up beside his plate.

No need to call. We'll see you out there. Wear the coat.

He put it away, smiling.

His parents were in the lobby when he went to refill the cup. They had come down to find their transport to the stadium, not to wait for him. His mother held a folded map the hotel had printed although her phone contained a better one. His father was trying to identify the correct entrance on it.

"We're early," his mother said.

"You're always early."

"And yet we are seldom lost."

Jonah sat with them for a few minutes. His father showed him a photograph his aunt had sent from the town where he grew up: the barbershop window, with a blue ribbon beside an old newspaper photograph of Jonah. The photograph was from high school. His throwing elbow was too low, his back foot nearly off the ground.

"That one?" Jonah said.

"They like that one."

"I was late."

"They don't know that."

His mother looked at it. "You threw it where the boy could catch it."

"He did catch it."

"Then I can see the appeal."

He remembered the play. He had forced the pass and been pleased with himself afterward because it worked. His coach had corrected

him on Monday. The coach had also sent that clip to colleges. Both things had been true, and one had led to the other without giving Jonah a guarantee about where he would end up.

His father folded the map along the wrong crease. Jonah took it, found the entrance, and pointed out the shuttle stop. He began explaining the route, then stopped because his parents had travelled together for longer than he had been alive.

"You've got it," he said.

"We do."

His mother asked whether he wanted them to wait for him after the game or go back to the hotel. He said the hotel, unless the team arrangements changed. She wrote it on the map. She did not ask what arrangements would follow a win and which would follow a loss.

For the first time that morning, he felt frightened. The lobby was ordinary: luggage, people checking out, a stain on the carpet the cleaners had almost removed. He could lose something enormous and return to a place where none of those things would have altered.

His father noticed the silence.

"You should get back," he said.

Jonah nodded. He hugged them both, managing the coffee cup awkwardly, and went to find Caleb. He did not feel calmer. He felt less alone in being unable to arrange what the day would become.

At the next table, Gabe Sutton was explaining to Keon why the second tight end should receive the first target of a championship game. He offered three reasons. None concerned whether he would be open.

"I appreciate that you've prepared a case," Keon said.

"You can tell the quarterback."

"He's right there."

Gabe looked at Jonah. "I have tremendous upside."

"Eat your eggs."

Gabe had been the reserve who missed the block against Westerton. He had worked on that assignment for weeks afterward. In the championship package he would have a larger role, helping protect

against Western Plains' edge rushers and allowing Bennett to move away from the line. Jonah knew which of those repetitions Gabe had executed well. He knew the two on which he had needed correcting. The knowledge made him more comfortable than Gabe's jokes did, but he liked the jokes too.

Caleb arrived with a cup of coffee and sat beside Sam, who had finally come downstairs. He asked Jonah whether he wanted to go through the red-zone checks after breakfast.

"We did them last night."

"The receiver signals."

Jonah looked at him. Caleb had named the one part Sam had not asked about.

"Yeah," he said. "Ten minutes."

They spent twelve. Caleb gave the signals without saying the names; Jonah identified the routes and protection. Then they reversed it. On one check Jonah held his hand too low to be easily visible beyond the formation. Caleb made him repeat it at shoulder height.

"Owen's not looking for your opinion about your own thigh," he said.

Sam laughed. Jonah repeated the signal.

The championship stadium was larger than it had looked on the screen. That was Jonah's first thought when he came through the service entrance. He looked across at the opposite doors and judged the distance. The building had swallowed the field and left enough space around it for everyone who wanted to be associated with what happened there.

Workers were laying cables behind the team benches. A camera operator tested a low wheeled rig near the sideline. The band members carried their instruments through a gate and looked around with the same amazement the players were trying to conceal.

Jonah walked to the right hash. The grass was firm and cut short. He pressed the toe of his shoe against it, turned gently, and checked

how it released. The field had been inspected by people whose job was to inspect fields. He still wanted to feel it.

Across the fifty, Western Plains was warming up in maroon and cream. Its cornerback, Adrian Stowe, caught passes from an assistant and handed each ball back rather than tossing it. Behind him, the safety Malik Serrano worked backward through a set of cones. Stowe was number four. Serrano was number six. Jonah had seen them together on film often enough to feel he knew the time between their movements.

He did not know either man.

In the locker room, Boone gave the opening calls. Harker spoke briefly. He told them which sideline was theirs, where substitutions would enter, how to find the medical staff if the bench area became crowded. Then he looked at the players.

"You don't have to play the whole season again," he said. "Play this game."

Marcus sat near the end of the room with his leg supported. He had made the trip under the medical arrangements agreed for him, with enough time built in that getting to a meeting did not become a test of endurance. Before the players went out, Jonah stopped beside him.

"Anything?"

"Stowe uses his hands early. Micah knows. Make sure he remembers when the crowd gets loud."

"I will."

Marcus touched Jonah's forearm.

"And don't ask me every five minutes if I'm okay."

"Okay."

"That counts as the last one."

Allerton received the opening kickoff. A touchback put the ball at the twenty-five. Jonah gathered the offence and waited until the noise had become a single condition rather than several noises he could separately hear.

Western Plains showed four down linemen and two linebackers inside. The safeties held a split shell, each far enough back to suggest patience. Stowe aligned outside Micah with his hands loose, as though they would arrive only if needed.

The opening packet favoured the run. Jonah kept it. Darius gained three behind Luis and Nate. On second-and-seven, Jonah threw the short ball to Bennett for five. Third-and-two.

Serrano came down late, stopping just outside the box. Jonah saw him, changed the identification, and waited for the echo. The pass went to Owen beneath a linebacker who had widened with Bennett. Six yards and a first down at Allerton's thirty-nine.

He felt the familiar relief of a conversion, followed by the need to begin again.

They crossed midfield with a run and a completion to Micah. At Western Plains' twenty-six, the defence finally compressed the available space. A run gained nothing. Jonah's second-down pass was incomplete. On third-and-ten, he found Keon underneath, but a linebacker stopped him without a gain. The field-goal unit came on, and the forty-three-yard kick made it three-zero.

On the sideline, Boone asked whether the seam had been available on third down.

"Serrano was inside it," Jonah said.

Boone showed the clip. He was. Gabe had held the edge long enough; the coverage had held longer.

"Good," Boone said. "Next series."

Western Plains answered with a touchdown. Its quarterback completed two throws outside and made Allerton bring the safety nearer the run. Near the goal line, he hit his tight end for six yards. Seven to three. The extra point had barely cleared the uprights when Jonah put on his helmet.

He had thought he would feel the score more personally. Mostly he wanted the ball.

Allerton's next possession ended in a punt after a third-down throw to Micah arrived a fraction late. Stowe drove through the

receiver's hands and knocked it free. Jonah watched Micah get up, irritated, and saw Stowe turn away without celebrating.

"I need that earlier," Micah said when they returned.

"You'll get it."

"You don't have to promise. Just throw it."

Jonah nodded. Western Plains drove far enough for a field goal. At ten-three, late in the first quarter, the crowd sounded as though it had decided which team was superior.

Jonah did not consult the crowd.

He began the next drive at the twenty-five with the same route to Micah and released on time. Nine yards. Darius gained two. Against an interior pressure Jonah checked the protection and completed a ball to Bennett, who turned upfield for twelve. Darius gained ten on the next run, reaching Western Plains' forty-two as the quarter ended.

The players changed ends. Jonah used the walk to ask Luis whether the left guard had heard the last identification. Luis said he had heard it and passed it on.

"Don't do his job too," Luis said.

"I'm checking."

"I checked."

Jonah looked at him, then nodded. There was preparation that helped people and preparation that asked them to prove they had prepared.

On the next play, Western Plains sent Serrano toward the boundary and brought a linebacker through the middle. The packet had identified that exchange as a possibility. Jonah stepped away from the first interior pressure, set his feet again, and threw to Owen behind the linebacker. Owen gained nineteen before being forced out at the twenty-three.

A run gained five. A pass to Bennett gained four. On third-and-one, Darius pushed behind Nate for two. First down at the twelve.

Boone's voice called the next concept before the cutoff. Jonah saw Stowe glance inside. It could have meant several things. He kept the

call, moved the back to improve the protection, and waited for the coverage to declare itself.

Owen released inside, bent back toward the sideline, and came free just beyond the goal line. Jonah threw before he looked free. Touchdown. The extra point tied it at ten.

Owen handed the ball to the official and ran back with both arms down. At the sideline he leaned his forehead briefly against Jonah's helmet.

"That's the one."

Caleb met them by the bench. He pointed toward Western Plains' safety.

"He's holding the seam even when he comes down."

"I saw."

"Make him finish coming."

Jonah nodded. It was good advice. He did not need to resist it because Caleb had delivered it.

Trey's defence forced a punt on the next possession. Allerton got the ball at its thirty-one. Jonah completed two short throws and took a hit after releasing the second. It was legal and hard. He rose with grass pressed into his elbow pad.

On second-and-four near midfield, Western Plains showed the same split shell it had shown at the beginning. Jonah expected the outside linebacker to carry Bennett. Instead the linebacker stopped underneath Owen's route while Serrano took Bennett from above. Jonah recognised the exchange as he began the throw and could not undo enough of it.

The linebacker caught the ball at Western Plains' forty-four and returned it to Allerton's forty-seven.

Jonah chased him until a teammate made the tackle. He did not get a hand on the runner. On the sideline, he removed his helmet before anyone asked.

"I put it where he could take it," he said.

Boone replayed the snap. Jonah watched the linebacker's shoulders remain square. The player had made a good decision. Jonah had made a bad one.

"What was the exit?" Boone asked.

"Darius. Or get rid of it."

"Right."

No one described the interception as uncharacteristic. That would not have helped him take the next snap.

Western Plains scored from the short field. Seventeen to ten. The stadium display replayed the interception during the change of possession, then again after the touchdown. Jonah drank water and kept his eyes on the field.

Caleb sat beside him.

"They did it well."

"Yeah."

"You still had the back."

"I know."

Caleb waited a moment, then stood. Jonah appreciated that he did not touch his shoulder.

Before halftime, Allerton moved the ball through a series of shorter gains. The two-minute timeout stopped the game with the offence approaching midfield. Jonah used the pause to ask Micah how Stowe was handling the inside release. Micah described the contact, then showed the angle with two fingers.

"He wants you to stop fighting him," Jonah said.

"I'd like him to stop fighting me."

They found Micah twice after the pause. The second catch carried the offence to Western Plains' thirty. Jonah threw incomplete against a late rotation, handed to Darius for four, then checked the next pass to Bennett for three. Fourth-and-three at the twenty-three.

Allerton kicked the forty-yard field goal. Seventeen to thirteen, forty-four seconds remaining. Western Plains took the kickoff, gained eleven on a pass and three on a run, and let the half end without taking an unnecessary risk.

Jonah walked to the tunnel with Luis. He could hear the band clearly for the first time since the opening series. A phrase he had heard at every home game sounded different in this enormous building, less like the property of a place and more like something people had carried here.

“Your dad’s down there,” Luis said.

Jonah followed his glance. He could not find his father. He saw blue coats, bare hands clapping, a woman trying to return to her seat with two cups. Then he saw the coat his mother had insisted his father buy, and his father inside it.

He lifted a hand. His father lifted one back. It was possible that he was waving at someone else. Jonah chose to believe he had been seen.

At halftime the coaches changed two route tags and adjusted the protection against the inside exchange. Harker listened while Boone asked players to repeat the revisions. Jonah ate half a banana and put the remainder on a towel where he could finish it later. Gabe asked whether his tremendous upside was still under consideration.

“You’re blocking well,” Jonah said.

“That’s how they get you.”

Everyone laughed more than the remark warranted. It was useful laughter. Then Harker called them together and they went back out.

Western Plains received to begin the third quarter. Allerton’s defence allowed one first down, then forced third-and-six. Trey read a screen, got across the receiver’s path, and made the tackle for a two-yard gain. Western Plains punted. Allerton began at its twenty-two.

Jonah led a drive that used most of the third quarter’s first half. He took what Western Plains gave him without making that phrase sound passive. A five-yard run required the line to move people who knew where the ball was going. A six-yard completion required Bennett to hold the route through contact. On third-and-four near midfield, Jonah stepped up between two rushers and put a ball on Micah’s outside shoulder, away from Stowe’s hand.

Micah caught it and ran to Western Plains’ thirty-three.

The next three plays moved Allerton to the fourteen. Gabe helped hold the edge on the last of them, then came to the huddle breathing through his mouth.

"You want your target?" Jonah asked.

"Don't make it charity."

It was not. Darius gained three on first down at the fourteen. On second-and-seven from the eleven, Gabe slipped off the line after contact and crossed behind Bennett. The defence followed the more frequently targeted tight end. Jonah threw to Gabe at the four. Gabe secured the ball, lowered his shoulder through an attempted tackle, and fell across the goal line.

The official raised both arms.

Allerton led twenty-seventeen after the extra point.

Gabe returned carrying no ball and wearing the expression of a man who had learned something flattering about himself. Jonah congratulated him. Boone asked about the next series. Across the field, Western Plains was already gathering for its possession.

Jonah sat down and reached for the half banana, remembered it was inside, and accepted a fresh one from a trainer. He peeled the banana carefully and watched Trey take the field.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The Replacement

Caleb had stayed warm through the third quarter without expecting to play. He threw into a net, loosened his shoulders, walked back to the bench, and put his helmet where he could take it in one movement. The routine was so familiar now that he could do it while watching the defence.

Allerton led by three. Western Plains had the ball near midfield. Its quarterback moved a receiver across the formation, checked the alignment, and handed off into a space the motion had helped create. Six yards. Caleb watched Trey make the tackle and get up looking toward the sideline for the next call.

"He's making them answer twice," Sam said.

"He is."

"Like the Lakeshore end."

Caleb nodded. Sam had remembered. It pleased him, and the pleasure had no obvious place to go during a championship game.

Western Plains drove to Allerton's twenty-one. There the defence stopped two runs and forced an incomplete pass. The thirty-eight-yard field goal tied the score at twenty with 2:51 left in the third quarter.

Caleb met Jonah as he rose from the bench.

"Their six is leaning into Bennett early," he said. "Even when he's still in the split."

"I've got it."

"Yeah."

He almost added more. Jonah was already going to the huddle. Caleb let him go.

The kickoff produced a touchback. Darius gained five on the first snap. Jonah completed to Owen for thirteen, reaching Allerton's forty-three. A run gained three. Second-and-seven at the forty-six.

Caleb watched the defence show pressure from both edges. Jonah moved Darius, made the identification, and called the protection loudly enough for Luis to hear. The pass went to Bennett crossing behind the nearest linebacker. Bennett caught it and gained eight, moving the ball to Western Plains' forty-six.

The hit on Jonah came just after he released. An interior rusher reached the pocket as the right tackle tried to carry another defender beyond it. Their bodies crowded the space where Jonah had planted. When the quarterback went down, one defender landed across his lower right leg while his foot remained against the turf.

It happened without the violence television liked to isolate. A collision, a turn, a body that did not get up.

Caleb put on his helmet.

He did it before Boone said his name. He was ashamed of the speed and knew there was no useful reason to slow down. Jonah was on the field. The offence would need a quarterback.

The officials stopped the clock for the injury. Forty-two seconds remained in the quarter. Trainers reached Jonah and began their assessment. Bennett came back toward the sideline with the ball already handed to an official, looking over his shoulder.

"He's down," Sam said.

"I see him."

Boone stood in front of Caleb.

"First-and-ten, their forty-six. Same personnel. Stay with the sequence."

"Fourteen, then the attached quick."

"Right. Make sure Gabe hears the second tag."

Caleb repeated it. The words were routine. They were the kind of words he had spent months saying while angry about the possibility that saying them well would be mistaken for all he could do.

Gabe came close enough to hear the check. He had been facing the field, watching the medical staff, but now his attention moved to the quarterback.

“Your set’s deeper,” he said.

“Not on this one.”

“On the next one.”

Caleb considered the protection. Jonah set nearer the designed landmark. Caleb sometimes drifted farther back, making the edge block harder to maintain because the defender could shorten his path without going through the blocker.

“I’ll stay at the landmark,” he said.

“Then I know where I’m holding him.”

Gabe looked toward Jonah again. Caleb followed his eyes. The trainers were still working. Nothing in their pace suggested they were waiting for the offence to be comfortable.

Micah joined them and asked which outside tag they would use. Boone answered. Micah repeated it and looked at Caleb.

“Same timing?”

“Same timing.”

“Good. Don’t wait for me to look back.”

“I won’t.”

They went toward the huddle. Caleb had imagined returning to the field as a restoration of something taken from him. The players needed no restoration. They needed a throw on time and a pocket where they had prepared to hold it. He checked the depth of his first set in his mind and made himself keep it there.

The trainers helped Jonah sit, then assisted him off without asking him to test the leg through a run. He could not put normal weight through the right foot. His face looked less like pain than concentrated disbelief.

Caleb passed him near the sideline.

"I've got it," he said.

Jonah gripped his arm for a moment. "Serrano's coming from farther out than he looks."

"Okay."

Then Jonah was beside the medical staff and Caleb was walking toward the huddle.

The crowd noticed him. He felt the noise turn toward him. People remembered a version of him they had seen in September. Some wanted that version. Some wanted the other quarterback back. Nothing in the sound told him which expectations he could meet.

Luis looked at him over the ball.

"You here?"

"I'm here."

"Then get us lined up."

The first call was a run. Western Plains kept the same front, its safeties a little deeper than before the injury. Caleb identified the linebacker, waited for the echo, and handed to Darius. Four yards. Second-and-six at the forty-two.

On the next snap he threw the attached quick route to Micah. The ball was slightly harder than it needed to be. Micah caught it, turned inside Stowe's pursuit, and gained six. First down at the thirty-six.

The quarter ended before they ran another play.

Caleb joined the sideline meeting as the teams changed ends. Boone asked about the throw. Caleb said he had rushed the release. Boone told him not to make the receiver pay for his nerves.

"I know."

"Then settle."

Harker was beside them. He asked no questions about destiny, redemption, or the season. He asked whether Caleb knew the next three calls. Caleb gave them in order. Harker nodded and moved to the defensive staff.

Marcus watched from beyond the bench, seated with his leg supported. Caleb looked toward him and then away. He could not ask the injured receiver to tell him what this moment meant.

He went back out.

Western Plains changed the front while Allerton was setting for the quarter's opening snap. Luis turned to repeat the new identification, but Caleb could see the play clock running out before everyone had it. Harker used Allerton's first timeout. They checked the assignments at the sideline and went back with the same call.

On first down, Western Plains showed a pressure that left the middle briefly open. Caleb held his shoulders toward Owen, waited for the linebacker to widen, and threw to Bennett for eleven. First down at the twenty-five.

The ball had been where he intended. He felt that before he felt the gain.

Darius carried for three. Caleb completed to Owen for seven. First down at the fifteen. Allerton had taken the ball from midfield into a part of the field where a mistake would become permanent very quickly.

Boone called the run. It gained two. On second-and-eight, Caleb saw Stowe move toward Micah's inside shoulder and considered an adjustment. The packet preferred the existing combination. He kept it, set the protection, and watched the safety carry the route he had expected to open.

He threw out of bounds.

Third-and-eight at the thirteen. The next call gave him two routes at scoring depth and an outlet below. Western Plains covered both deeper options. Caleb moved left as an edge rusher passed the tackle's outside hand. He could have attempted a throw from the turn, hard and across the closing space. Instead he tucked the ball and ran.

The nearest linebacker stopped him after three yards, at the ten.

Fourth-and-five. The field-goal unit came on. Caleb went to the sideline as the twenty-seven-yard kick made it twenty-three to twenty, with 11:19 remaining.

He wanted more than three points. That did not mean he should have thrown the ball he had refused to throw.

Boone met him with the replay.

"You had the outlet early."

"I was waiting for Bennett."

"He was capped."

Caleb watched. Bennett's defender had remained above him. The outlet might have gained enough to make fourth down different. Might have. Caleb nodded without turning the possibility into a rescue of the result.

He had moved the offence, protected the ball, and left an available answer unused. All of it was in the series. He could no longer make one part stand for the whole.

Jonah was not on the bench. Caleb asked a trainer where he was and was told he was being examined. Nothing further was ready to report.

"Okay."

He sat with his helmet between his feet and studied the next defensive sequence. Western Plains began at its twenty-five. Its quarterback completed a sideline pass, handed off twice, then converted a third down against an interior pressure. Allerton's defensive front kept pursuing. Trey changed the call when a tight end motioned across, and Western Plains threw into the space that change had left.

Caleb saw the exchange from the sideline. He could not tell whether Trey had changed correctly. He saw why he had changed.

At the Allerton thirty-four, Western Plains ran a play-action pass that sent the corner route behind a defender who had stepped toward the back. The completion carried the ball to the seven. Two runs gained four. On third-and-goal from the three, the quarterback rolled right and hit a receiver beyond the goal line.

The extra point made it twenty-seven to twenty-three, Western Plains ahead, with 6:42 left.

Trey came off the field breathing hard. Caleb passed him on the way to the huddle. Neither apologised to the other. Both had work left.

Jonah returned to the bench while the kickoff unit was on the field. His right ankle was supported, and a medical staff member walked with him. He used crutches and sat where he could keep the leg clear of the traffic around the bench.

Caleb approached before taking the field.

“You coming back?”

The question left his mouth before he considered whom he was asking. Jonah looked toward the clinician.

“No,” she said. “He’s not available.”

She did not offer the diagnosis to the circle of people standing there. The examination had established enough to prevent a return. Imaging and further assessment would establish more. Harker had received the same answer and accepted it.

Jonah’s jaw tightened. Caleb knew that expression. It was the effort to make an answer change without saying anything foolish aloud.

“You’re seeing it?” Jonah asked him.

“Most of it.”

“The backer’s not staying with the first fake anymore.”

“I saw.”

Jonah nodded. He wanted to play. Caleb wanted him to want Allerton to win. The wants could coexist without either young man being gracious enough to enjoy it.

Allerton began at its twenty-five after another touchback. Caleb’s first pass went to Owen for nine. Darius gained two. At the thirty-six, first-and-ten, Western Plains showed its front and shifted after Caleb made the initial identification.

He changed the protection and waited for Luis. Gabe repeated his responsibility. Darius touched his helmet. Caleb took the snap, felt the pocket hold, and threw to Micah on the outside.

Stowe stayed through the receiver’s turn. The ball struck Micah’s hand and went beyond the sideline.

Caleb wanted the throw back. It had needed to be lower, nearer the receiver’s body. He had chosen the right opportunity and placed the ball where a good defender could still reach it.

On second down, Western Plains took away the shallow routes and opened a lane through the middle. Caleb ran for five and slid at Allerton's forty-one. The nearest linebacker arrived just after he went down, stepping over him rather than into him.

Third-and-five.

The call put Bennett over the middle with Owen working above him. Caleb saw the inside linebacker settle under Bennett's route. He turned toward Owen. Serrano rotated from outside into the deeper window. Caleb came back to the outlet, but a defender was already there.

He threw beyond the sideline.

Allerton punted. Western Plains took possession at its eighteen with 4:48 remaining.

Caleb returned to the bench while the crowd on the opposite side stood. The last series had cost time and produced nothing. His body still felt ready. That was almost insulting.

Boone showed him the third down.

"You could have stayed on Bennett a fraction longer."

"The linebacker was there."

"At first. He releases."

Caleb watched it again. The linebacker did release. Bennett entered a small window after Caleb's attention had moved. Jonah might have found it. Caleb might have found it on another day. Neither possibility would give them the first down now.

"Right," he said.

Boone put the screen down.

"Be ready if we get it."

If. Four minutes and forty-eight seconds were enough for a winning possession to disappear into handoffs. Allerton had two time-outs. Western Plains needed first downs more than it needed imagination.

Caleb stood beside Jonah. The injured quarterback had watched the replay on a staff tablet. He handed it back before Caleb could ask what he thought.

“You’re getting enough time,” Jonah said.

“Yeah.”

“Trust the time.”

Caleb nodded. He had spent part of the year believing Jonah’s patience came from having less available to him. Now he knew patience could be something a gifted player failed to learn because he could keep escaping its necessity.

Western Plains handed off. Two yards. Trey and a defensive tackle brought the runner down. The clock began consuming the space between plays.

Caleb moved away from the heater. He could not bear to feel comfortable.

Sam joined him, holding the backup signal sheet.

“Do you need this?”

“I know it.”

Sam began to lower it.

“Keep it there,” Caleb said. “In case.”

They watched the second run gain four. Third-and-four. The stadium noise grew as Allerton’s defence prepared to answer a decision Western Plains had spent the whole season learning to make.

Caleb set his helmet on his head and fastened the chin strap. He did not know whether there would be another possession. He wanted one badly enough that the wanting seemed separate from the rest of his body. Beneath it, the assignments remained available, each one belonging to someone who would have to perform it.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The Last Drive

The third-down pass went underneath. Caleb saw the receiver sit between two zones, saw the ball reach him, saw Trey close. Six yards. Western Plains had a first down at its thirty. The clock showed 3:12 when the receiver was finally down.

Caleb looked away from the display and then back. There was no reason to expect it to give him anything different.

Western Plains used most of the play clock. Its next run gained three. Harker called Allerton's second timeout with 2:28 remaining. Players on the far side walked to their bench. Allerton's defenders came a shorter distance, some stopping near the numbers to receive the next call.

Trey took water from a trainer and poured a little over his head. He had played enough snaps that his movements were beginning to lose the unnecessary parts. Caleb had once admired this as efficiency. Now he could see the exhaustion in it.

The next run gained two. Third-and-five at the Western Plains thirty-five. The clock continued until the scheduled two-minute timeout.

Caleb stood beside Boone while the staff discussed what they would call if Allerton got the ball. It was not a promise of a possession. The defence still had to stop the next play.

“Two-by-two to start,” Boone said. “Keep the field open. If they stay split, take the inside break. If six closes it, the outlet.”

Caleb repeated the sequence. Sam held the sheet beside him. On the other side of Boone, Jonah sat with his ankle supported, watching the defensive front.

“They’ll keep a man under Bennett,” Jonah said.

“Then he’ll hold him,” Boone replied.

Gabe leaned close enough to hear. Darius came from the bench. Owen and Micah stood together, checking the fastening on their gloves. Caleb looked at each of them, not because a look could ask for forgiveness or promise a result, but because he needed to know where they were.

The timeout ended. Western Plains lined up with two tight ends. Allerton put enough bodies near the line that an unexpected pass would have space behind them. Trey shifted the front and pointed toward the back.

The ball was snapped at two minutes. The runner took the handoff, cut behind his right guard, and met the defensive tackle before reaching the line to gain. Three yards. Fourth-and-two at the thirty-eight. Allerton used its last timeout with 1:55 left.

Trey rose and turned toward the sideline. He did not celebrate the stop. He looked for the punt unit.

Western Plains sent its punter out. Harker put Allerton’s safe return alignment on the field. A block attempt could produce a short field; it could also give Western Plains the first down it needed to end the game. Allerton would need to travel with the ball rather than acquire it through that gamble.

The punt hung above the field. The returner moved forward, raised his hand for a fair catch, and secured it at Allerton’s twenty-six. Six seconds had elapsed. One minute and forty-nine remained.

Caleb went onto the field.

The noise seemed to follow him, though it had been there the whole time. He could feel the turf through the front of his cleats. His helmet pressed against the same places it always had. Somewhere in

the stands his parents were watching a son they could not help. On the sideline Marcus was watching an offence he could no longer join. Caleb did not let either thought finish.

Luis held the ball against his stomach while the official set the spot.

“No timeouts,” he said.

“I know.”

“Say it in there.”

Caleb gathered the huddle. “No timeouts. Get out when you can. Everybody stays ready. If we go fast, we still hear the word.”

Owen nodded. Micah looked toward the defence. Gabe touched Bennett’s shoulder to confirm which side he would take in the next personnel grouping. For the opening snap they used one tight end and three wide receivers; Gabe would wait on the sideline. The extra wide receiver had an outside route designed to keep a defender away from the middle. He knew that might be his entire contribution to the drive.

Caleb gave the call. They broke.

Western Plains kept two safeties high. Its linebackers showed enough width that the intermediate middle appeared available if Caleb could hold the nearest one. The packet favoured the inside break to Micah. Caleb checked the protection and watched Luis point, Nate turn, Darius settle beside him.

The ball came back. Caleb held his eyes toward Bennett for one beat, then turned to Micah. Stowe followed the receiver from outside, trying to close the route without giving away the deeper space. Caleb threw before the corner could get underneath it.

Micah caught the ball at the thirty-eight and drove two yards farther before the tackle. Fourteen yards. First down at Allerton’s forty, 1:42 on the game clock.

The officials stopped the clock briefly to establish the first down. Micah handed the ball to the nearest official rather than tossing it. Luis went to the spot. Caleb called the next formation as the clock resumed.

He had to hurry. He did not have to make hurry mean confusion.

They snapped the next play at 1:31. Before it, Western Plains walked a linebacker toward the right edge while an interior defender moved backward. Caleb saw the apparent exchange and began to identify the inside threat. Then he saw Serrano's feet: the safety was moving down, but not toward the same side as the linebacker.

It was the opposite pressure.

"Lake," Caleb called. "Lake. Fifty-three."

Luis turned his head and returned the word. Darius shifted to the protection side. Nate pointed to the new responsibility. On the far edge the tackle widened his set without moving before the snap.

The defence came. Darius met the rushing safety inside the tackle's shoulder, not across the pocket after the danger had already arrived. The contact was hard, but he was set for it. Caleb had enough time to find that the deeper route remained covered.

He threw beyond Owen's reach and beyond the sideline, away from anyone who could intercept it. Incomplete. Second-and-ten at the forty, 1:26 remaining.

Darius got up. Caleb looked at him. The back gave one small nod and took his place. There was no time to say anything about the difference between this protection and the one at Eastgate. The difference had already been done.

On second down, the Oracle packet preferred Bennett underneath. Caleb thought Owen might have room behind Stowe if the corner continued driving forward. He saw the beginning of that movement. He also saw Serrano sitting at a depth that could erase it.

He kept the recommendation.

Bennett caught the pass for eight and went down at Allerton's forty-eight with 1:19 left. The clock continued. The offence moved to the ball without a huddle. Caleb gave the third-down call and waited until both wide receivers had acknowledged it.

Third-and-two. The defence showed six near the line, then removed two of them as Luis settled. Caleb had expected the linebacker

to fall under the short inside route. He watched him do it and took the second answer.

The snap came at 1:05. Darius released into the opening behind the dropping edge defender. Caleb threw to him for four yards. Darius was tackled at Western Plains' forty-eight with fifty-nine seconds left.

First down.

The sideline seemed farther away now. Boone's next instruction was brief and arrived while communications were still permitted for the new play. Caleb could see the staff signalling the formation. He could see the extra wide receiver going out and Gabe coming in for the twelve-personnel package: two tight ends, two receivers, one back. The officials allowed Western Plains its substitution opportunity. The defence made a change too.

Seconds disappeared while bodies changed places. It was part of the choice to substitute. Caleb could not make the lost time a surprise.

They were ready to snap at forty-nine seconds.

Western Plains presented a single high safety for the first time on the drive. Serrano began near the middle, shoulders turned slightly toward Micah. Stowe stood closer to Owen than he had on the previous grouping. The front crowded the right side.

Caleb gave the protection. Luis returned it. Gabe set to help on the left edge. Darius would check inside before releasing. Bennett would work beneath Owen's route and make the safety account for a second depth.

The picture changed after the snap. Serrano rotated toward the left-side receiver while another defender climbed into the middle. It looked like the single-high shell becoming something else, and it was. Caleb had seen the rotation begin with the safety's shoulders before the ball moved.

He held the middle defender with his eyes, stepped into the pocket, and threw to Owen near the right sideline.

Owen caught it at Western Plains' twenty-eight, turned outside the corner's angle, and stepped out at the twenty-five. Twenty-three yards. Forty-two seconds remained.

The crowd became so loud that Caleb could not distinguish the sound of the Allerton section. Owen handed the ball over, stood where he could see the next signal, and pressed two fingers to his helmet.

Ready.

Caleb did not think about how well he was playing. He thought about where the ball was.

First-and-ten at the twenty-five. They remained in the same personnel, with Gabe attached on the left and Bennett moving to a wing on the right. Micah was wide left; Owen was toward the right boundary. Darius stood beside Caleb in the shotgun.

Western Plains showed a split shell again. The packet favoured a pass with an inside option and enough protection to let it develop. Caleb gave the identification. The safety on Micah's side had the receiver from above; Stowe had Owen from outside. The defenders were guarding places as well as people.

Micah released hard outside, made the corner turn, and broke underneath. Caleb delivered the ball at the break. The receiver caught it near the fifteen and ran to the nine before two defenders closed on him.

Sixteen yards. First-and-goal. Thirty-four seconds remained.

Micah rose slowly enough to frighten Caleb, then jogged toward the next alignment. He was not injured. He had been tackled by two men who did not intend to make the next play easy for him.

The clock paused for the first down and resumed when the officials were ready. Luis settled over the ball. Caleb gave the call. Bennett repeated the wing tag. Gabe waited until the left tackle had acknowledged the protection.

Caleb could hear his own breathing. It was too fast. He slowed the next breath without delaying the snap.

First-and-goal from the nine, twenty-four seconds on the clock when they began.

The call asked Owen to cross the goal line and turn back into an outside window. Bennett occupied the inside defender. Micah worked from the opposite side, available if the safety followed Owen. Western Plains kept depth where Caleb wanted it to collapse.

He threw toward Owen's outside shoulder. Stowe stayed attached, forced the receiver nearer the boundary, and made the catch require more space than the ball supplied. It landed beyond Owen's hands.

Incomplete. Twenty seconds left. Second-and-goal at the nine.

Caleb looked to the sideline. Boone's voice gave the next call before the cutoff. The package stayed on the field. No substitution, no timeout, no reason the offence had to pretend it was calmer than it was.

The second-down concept had Darius release into the right flat after checking the rush. Owen carried the corner deeper, Bennett crossed above the linebackers, and Gabe protected the opposite edge. A quick ball to the back could leave him turning toward the goal line with room to work. It could also leave him short. Caleb knew both possibilities.

At the snap, Western Plains brought four and dropped the nearest linebacker inside. Caleb looked at Bennett first, held the ball through his crossing window, and then saw Darius clear of the defender in the flat.

He turned too quickly. His upper body began the throw before his feet had established its direction. The ball went low, striking the turf beside Darius's shoes.

Darius reached down and then stopped. There was no catch to attempt.

Fourteen seconds remained.

Caleb felt the mistake in his shoulder before he looked at the clock. It was a throw he had made thousands of times. The back had been available. That did not prove a touchdown had been available; it did

mean Caleb had failed to give Darius the ball and let him attempt the next part.

Darius came back, eyes on him.

“Next,” he said.

Caleb nodded.

Third-and-goal. The same nine yards. Another call, another chance to make the distance smaller or make it irrelevant.

Western Plains changed its rush alignment. Gabe pointed to the end, Luis identified the inside threat, and Caleb made the full protection call. The defence sent a rusher through the left interior gap while the end looped behind him. The tackle passed the first man toward the guard; Gabe stayed with the looping end long enough to keep him outside the pocket.

Caleb moved right. Bennett was working across the back of the end zone. Micah drew a defender through the front portion. Owen settled near the sideline, not open enough for the first throw.

The interior pressure followed Caleb. He took another step, saw Bennett momentarily separate from the defender’s hip, and released toward the back line.

Serrano closed. His hand reached the passing lane before Bennett’s did. The ball changed direction and fell inside the end zone.

Incomplete.

Caleb turned toward the display. Seven seconds.

Fourth-and-goal from the nine. Allerton trailed twenty-seven to twenty-three. It had no timeouts. A field goal would not be enough. Every person in the stadium understood that the next play might be the last useful thing Allerton could do.

The game clock was stopped. The new play clock began at forty, providing time to communicate but no additional seconds in which the ball could remain live. Boone’s voice arrived with the call. The wrist packet displayed the formation already on the field and two practised concepts from the approved family.

34 — TD 0.320.

17 — TD 0.100.

The numbers concerned scoring on this snap. Three hundred and twenty in a thousand estimated repetitions of the first situation. One hundred in a thousand of the second. Not the score of the man making the decision. Not a promise that either route would be open.

Caleb gave the original call in the huddle. Luis looked around before they broke. Darius repeated his protection responsibility. Gabe and Bennett separated toward their sides.

At the line, Stowe stood outside Owen with his knees slightly bent and his inside foot forward. Serrano held the split shell, deep enough to see both the wing and the receiver. Caleb had watched this arrangement on film. He had watched the corner drive on the short route when the inside receiver widened.

Bennett widened now, as the formation required.

Stowe shifted his weight toward the front of his inside foot.

Caleb looked at the safety. Then at Owen. Then at the two estimates, still available on his wrist as the communications light went dark.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The Audible

Owen was near the right boundary, wide enough that the throw would have to arrive where the defender could not use the sideline as another hand. Micah stood wide on the far side, off the line. Gabe was attached to the left tackle on the line, with Owen the other eligible end. Bennett, off the line on the right, had widened to his wing position. Darius waited to Caleb's right, slightly behind him.

Five linemen. Two tight ends. Two receivers. One back. Caleb.

Western Plains had four down linemen, two linebackers, three corners, two safeties. The linebackers did not need to pretend they were expecting a run. Stowe was outside Owen, his inside foot forward. Serrano waited above Bennett and Owen's side, three yards inside the end zone. The second safety held the opposite half.

The called play sent Owen to scoring depth before a quick outside break. Bennett would offer an inside target, Micah another across the deeper portion. Darius would check protection and release underneath. Several answers, none guaranteed. The packet estimated a touchdown on the snap at 0.320.

Caleb saw Stowe's weight settle forward. He saw the corner's eyes move briefly inside as Bennett finished widening. The defence knew the short route mattered. It had seen enough Allerton film to expect the combination.

He believed the corner was preparing to drive on it.

The alternate kept the formation and asked for something narrower. Owen would sell an out before turning upfield toward the back corner of the end zone. Bennett would carry his route inside the safety's attention. Micah would cross deeper from the far side. Gabe and Darius would stay in protection.

17. Cedar. Lock.

0.100.

Caleb raised his left hand.

"Cedar! Cedar!"

Luis turned his head. "Protection?"

"Lock. Lock. Fifty-three."

Luis repeated it, pointing. Nate turned toward the right tackle. The left guard looked to Gabe. Darius stepped into his revised set, no outlet release. Caleb gave the outside signal at shoulder height, visible past Bennett.

Owen touched his helmet and repeated the signal. Micah returned it from the far side. Bennett pointed inside, confirming the route. Gabe held his hand low beside his leg: staying.

Eleven on the play clock. Then nine.

Caleb looked at Serrano. The safety had not moved far enough to prove anything. His shoulders remained loose, his feet underneath him. Stowe's front foot was still forward.

Caleb called the cadence.

The ball came back with five on the play clock and seven on the game clock.

Luis and the right guard took the interior rush on their side. The left guard met the other tackle. Gabe helped the left tackle carry the end outside. Darius stepped into the right edge of the pocket as the rusher tried to shorten his path. Every assignment Caleb had changed was being performed.

Owen released vertically. Stowe moved with him, keeping the outside shoulder above the receiver's. Bennett went inside, then climbed toward the goal line. Serrano took one step with him.

There. The first part looked the way Caleb had expected.

Owen reached the point of the false break, planted, and turned his shoulders toward the boundary. Stowe shortened his stride. For an instant Caleb saw what looked like commitment to the out.

The receiver turned upfield.

The corner did not come forward.

He had shortened the stride to remain above Owen, not to drive underneath him. His hips opened toward the end zone. The space Caleb had expected behind the defender remained occupied by the defender.

Serrano released the inside route to the coverage beneath and moved outside.

Caleb had already brought his arm forward. He tried to place the ball higher and nearer the boundary, making room where the expected room had not opened. The protection was still holding. It had given him the time the play required.

The throw travelled toward the back corner.

Owen ran under it, turned his head, and reached. Stowe stayed on his inside hip. Serrano arrived above the route, his movement cutting into the lane the ball needed. There was no free catch between them.

Owen left the ground. His right hand rose above Stowe's shoulder. The corner lifted his own hand through the space between the receiver's hands and the ball. Serrano's arm came from the other direction.

For a fraction of a second the ball was against Owen's fingertips.

Then Stowe's hand displaced it.

It spun away, hit the end-zone turf, and rolled to a stop beyond the boundary. Owen landed on his side. Stowe landed on his feet and looked toward the official. Serrano stepped around the receiver rather than over him.

Incomplete.

Caleb heard the whistle but not the first increase in crowd noise. He looked at the official's arms moving horizontally. No catch. No flag

on the field. Nothing awaiting interpretation that could return the ball to Allerton.

Two seconds remained.

The official signalled the change of possession. Western Plains would have the ball at its own nine. Allerton had no timeout with which to interrupt what came next.

Owen got up slowly. He looked at the place where the ball had stopped, then walked out of the end zone. Caleb took three steps toward him and stopped when the offence began coming off.

Darius was beside him.

"That it?"

Caleb looked at the clock again.

"Yeah."

The back removed his mouthguard. He had not released, because Caleb had asked him not to. There was nothing wrong with his execution. Caleb could see the contact mark on the front of his shoulder pads.

Luis handed the ball to the official, although another ball was already arriving from the sideline. It was a habit: give the next person what he needs. Then he followed the offence toward the bench.

Western Plains sent out its victory formation. The quarterback stood behind the centre with backs positioned to secure any loose ball. Allerton kept the defence on the field. Trey aligned, looked toward Harker, and looked back at the ball.

The game clock would start at the snap. Western Plains had only to complete the exchange and kneel. It did both. The quarterback's knee went down with a second still showing. The clock continued to zero.

Western Plains 27. Allerton 23.

Caleb stood at the edge of the bench area with his helmet still on. Confetti began falling above the opposite sideline. The championship officials had known how to arrange a celebration for either result. That ordinary competence felt unbearable.

Someone touched his elbow. An equipment assistant was asking for room to move the heater. Caleb stepped aside.

The stadium display showed the final pass. Owen's false break, Stowe's maintained depth, Serrano's rotation, the ball struck away. Beneath the replay, the broadcast graphic carried both packet estimates, released to the network under the conference's disclosure rules: 0.320 and 0.100. From this angle the closing window looked obvious. Caleb knew it had not been obvious to him soon enough. He did not know what the recommended play would have met after the same snap. The display did not show that. There was no picture of it to show.

Boone walked past him and stopped.

"We'll talk inside," he said.

Caleb nodded.

Boone's face was controlled, but there was no softness in it. He had sent a different call. He had trained the check Caleb used. He had expected a better decision.

Owen came to the bench and pulled off his helmet. His hair was flattened where the pads had pressed it. A scrape marked his forearm.

"I couldn't get above him," he said.

"I thought he'd come down."

"He didn't."

Caleb looked at him. "No."

Owen shook his head once. He was not agreeing with Caleb or forgiving him. He was trying to make the last movement stop repeating in his body.

"Could you reach it?" Caleb asked, and knew as he said it that the question could sound like a transfer of responsibility.

Owen's eyes sharpened.

"I reached it."

"I know. I didn't mean—"

"I know what you meant."

He put his helmet on the bench and went toward the field for the handshakes.

Caleb followed. Players were moving in several directions at once. Western Plains' reserves ran toward the end zone. Its older players stayed long enough to find their opponents. A cameraman walked backward between them, searching for an expression he could broadcast as the meaning of the game.

Caleb shook hands with an offensive lineman whose name he did not know. He congratulated a linebacker. The linebacker said, "That was a game," and Caleb could not tell whether he was being generous or merely accurate.

Stowe approached with his helmet in one hand.

"Good game," he said.

Caleb took the offered hand. It was warmer than he expected.

"Good play."

The corner nodded. He did not explain the coverage. He did not tell Caleb he had almost fooled him. He turned toward a teammate who was calling his name.

Caleb watched him go. The defender had made a choice too. It had met the ball.

He found Trey near midfield. The linebacker had taken off his gloves and was holding them together by their straps.

"We got it back," Trey said.

"I know."

Caleb expected more. Trey looked toward the opposite sideline, where players were being gathered for the presentation.

"I'm going inside."

"Yeah."

Trey walked away. Caleb did not ask him to remain and listen.

The university staff were directing Allerton's players toward the tunnel. Families leaned over rails. A woman called Owen's name. Someone called Caleb's, not angrily, and he did not look up. He had no expression ready for the people who had come to see him.

Jonah sat by the bench while a staff member arranged assistance to the locker room. His ankle remained supported. Caleb stopped in front of him.

Jonah looked at him without speaking.

"I changed it," Caleb said.

"I saw."

"I thought Stowe was jumping the out."

Jonah glanced at the field. "He stayed high."

"Yeah."

The staff member returned. Jonah stood with the crutches, angry at the difficulty of an ordinary movement. Caleb reached toward him and stopped when the clinician took the position that would actually help.

There was no dramatic embrace. Jonah went ahead of him, making his way carefully. Caleb carried his own helmet and followed.

At the mouth of the tunnel, a child in Western Plains colours was trying to catch a piece of confetti that had drifted outside the presentation area. Each time he reached, it moved away. His father told him to leave it and keep walking. The child reached once more and caught it.

Caleb saw that tiny victory and felt nothing generous. He was twenty-one, and in that moment he did not want other people to be happy.

Inside, the air was cooler. A security officer opened the locker-room door, checked the lanyard of a staff member, and closed it behind the last player. The sound of the stadium became muffled.

Caleb went to his locker. He put the helmet down carefully because throwing it would make everyone attend to another thing he had chosen to do. He sat. His wrist unit still held the final packet.

34 — TD 0.320.

17 — TD 0.100.

He unfastened the strap and laid the unit beside the helmet. The numbers did not change when he stopped looking at them.

Across the room, Gabe was pulling the tape from his wrists. One strip tore and he began again. Darius sat with his elbows on his thighs. Luis took his shoes off before touching anything else. Players

who had not been on the final snap waited among players who had, sharing the result without having shared every choice that produced it.

Caleb's phone vibrated in the locker above him. He did not reach for it.

He could hear the shower running. Someone had gone in without waiting for the team meeting. Someone else asked where a missing bag was. A student assistant answered quietly. The room was full of things that still needed doing.

Caleb pressed his hands together until his knuckles hurt. The play had not been an act of sabotage. It had not been a demonstration he had decided to stage. He had wanted the touchdown. He had trusted what he thought he saw more than the estimate and the call sent to him.

The wanting was not enough to make the choice good.

Owen came back to his locker and sat beside him, leaving one empty place between them. Caleb looked toward him but did not speak. Owen removed one shoe, then the other. He set them under the bench with their toes pointing toward the room.

At the far end, Harker closed his folder. The small sound carried.

CHAPTER TWENTY

The Men Who Were There

Harker did not ask the room to be proud. He waited until the player coming from the shower had found his locker, then stood where everyone could hear him without his raising his voice.

"We lost," he said. "They made plays. We left some there. We'll review the game when we're back."

Caleb looked at the floor between his shoes.

"Nobody needs to answer a microphone before he's ready," Harker said. "There are obligations we'll handle. Medical staff will tell you where they need you. Listen to the travel people. We're not leaving anyone in this building."

He thanked the seniors for their work. It took him two sentences. Caleb could hear what it cost him to keep it to two.

When the room began moving again, Harker came to Caleb's locker. Boone was beside him. They did not take him into a separate office. They kept their voices low enough that the exchange belonged to the people near it.

"What did you see?" Harker asked.

Caleb described Stowe's weight, Bennett's width, the short route he believed the corner expected. He did not describe the feeling that had accompanied the picture. He did not yet know how to separate that feeling from the confidence he had once been rewarded for showing.

"You knew the estimate," Boone said.

"Yes."

"You knew the original call."

"Yes."

Harker's jaw moved before he spoke.

"We had a better chance with the call we sent."

Caleb did not answer.

"I'm asking whether you understand that."

"The estimate was better."

"Don't hide in a smaller sentence."

Caleb looked up. "I understand why you say it was the better call."

"Do you believe it?"

He wanted to say that he had seen something. He had already said it. Saying it again would not make the corner take the step he had expected.

"I think I gave that foot too much," he said. "I thought it meant more than it did."

Boone nodded once. It was not approval. It meant the explanation had reached something they could review.

"We'll look at all of it," Harker said. "Not now."

He moved away. Caleb remained sitting while players around him took apart the equipment that had made them look alike. Shoulder pads went into bags. Tape gathered on the floor. The room filled with the smell of soap over sweat.

Darius stood in front of him.

"I stayed," the back said.

"I know."

"We held it."

"I know."

Caleb understood that Darius was not offering a defence of the check. He was establishing what he had done.

"You did your part," Caleb said.

"Yeah."

The back waited, then went to his locker. Caleb watched him remove the last strip of tape from his wrist. He could not ask whether the acknowledgment had been enough.

An athletics employee approached with the interview schedule. Caleb was listed among those requested. Harker had said he could wait; waiting did not mean someone else should have to describe his choice for him.

"I'll go," Caleb said.

The employee asked whether he wanted a few minutes. He took them. He showered, dressed, and found that the knot in his tie would not sit straight. Owen, passing him, pulled the narrow end once and adjusted it. Neither spoke.

In the interview room, the lights were bright and the chairs too close together. Caleb sat between Boone and a university representative. He could see reporters setting their devices in a row, each one intended to preserve what he said accurately enough to be used elsewhere.

The first question concerned the drive. He answered it. The second concerned the check.

"You changed the play at the line?"

"Yes."

"With a ten-percent touchdown estimate?"

"That was the estimate for that play, yes."

"Why?"

He explained the corner's anticipated reaction. He named the protection and the route without turning them into a lecture. The reporter asked whether Boone had authorised the change.

"We have procedures for checking," Caleb said. "I used them. Coach sent thirty-four. I chose seventeen."

"Do you stand by it?"

Caleb looked at the reporter. The question seemed to require either pride or surrender. He did not have a clean version of either.

"I'm responsible for it," he said. "I can tell you what I saw. I can't tell you that makes it a good choice."

Someone farther back asked whether he thought the model had been wrong.

"It said the play was unlikely to score. It didn't score."

"Does that prove you should have followed it?"

Caleb shook his head, then stopped himself from making the motion sound like an answer about the call.

"The other play didn't happen," he said. "But that doesn't give me a reason to say it was worse. I had the better estimate in front of me."

Boone remained quiet beside him. Caleb was grateful and resentful at once. The silence left the answer entirely his.

There were questions about his professional future. He said he did not know. There were questions about Jonah. He said Jonah had played well, which was inadequate but true. Then the university representative ended the session.

In the hallway, Caleb checked his phone for the first time. He had messages from his parents, his sister, teammates who had not travelled, people he had not heard from since high school. Some wanted to defend him. Some had already decided what he should learn.

He called his mother.

"We're downstairs," she said.

"I have to go with the team."

"We know."

"I can come out for a minute."

His father stood when he saw him. Caleb waited for a hand on his shoulder and advice about instinct. His father put both arms around him instead. The hug was awkward because Caleb was still holding his bag.

"I watched," his father said.

"I know."

His mother asked whether he had eaten. He said he would. She gave him a packet of crackers from her coat pocket, a thing she had brought for herself and could offer without pretending it would repair anything.

He took it. They stood together until the travel employee called his name.

* * *

Jonah's ankle had begun to throb beneath the support. The medical staff had explained what they suspected and what would require further imaging. He heard the words clearly. He still wanted to negotiate with the part of the examination that had kept him out.

The doctor sat opposite him while a trainer checked the arrangement for returning to the hotel.

"You couldn't bear weight normally," she said. "You couldn't make the movements you needed. We were not going to test it through another play."

"I could have handed off."

She waited.

He looked away. "I know."

The injury was consistent with damage to the structures above the ankle that helped hold the lower leg bones together. The preliminary imaging had not shown a fracture. That did not make the joint ready for football. The next examination would clarify the sprain and the treatment plan.

Jonah asked the questions he actually needed answered: travel, swelling, follow-up, whom to call if something changed overnight. The doctor answered them. She did not tell him he would be better soon enough to make the championship injury feel temporary.

When he returned to the main room, most players were dressed. He could see the place Caleb had occupied by the helmet left in front of it. The wrist unit lay beside it, its screen dark now.

Jonah did not pick it up. He had seen the packet on the sideline. Thirty-two percent and ten percent were not close. He could imagine situations in which a lower estimate deserved consideration. He could not make the difference between these two numbers smaller by wanting to understand Caleb.

He had wanted Allerton to win after his removal. That had not been politeness. He had watched Caleb move the ball and had wanted each completion. He had felt the first-and-goal at the nine as a chance they had earned together.

Now he kept seeing the double move begin and the corner remain above it.

Luis stopped beside him.

"Need anything moved?"

"My bag."

Luis moved it where Jonah could reach it. Then he sat in the empty place next to him.

"You heard the check?" Jonah asked.

"Yeah."

"Everybody did?"

"Everybody I can answer for. We got it."

"Why didn't anyone—"

Jonah stopped. Luis looked at him.

"What?"

"Tell him to keep the call."

"We had seconds. I was checking the protection."

"I know."

"You want eleven votes out there?"

"No."

Luis rubbed a thumb against the seam of his pants. "Then don't ask me why I didn't become the quarterback on fourth down."

Jonah felt the rebuke and accepted it. He had spent the season insisting that assignments mattered. Luis had performed his assignment. His knowledge of the whole offence did not make him secretly responsible for overruling its quarterback.

"You're right," Jonah said.

"About that part."

They sat without talking until the travel staff began calling groups.

At the hotel, Jonah's parents met him near the elevator. His father had the awkward expression of someone trying to keep his eyes off

the crutches. His mother looked directly at them, asked whether he had what he needed, and waited for the answer.

They went to his room. Sam was downstairs with friends from the team. Jonah's mother unfolded the hotel's spare blanket and placed it under the supported leg as the trainer had shown them. His father found the cold-water bottle in the bag.

For several minutes the room had only tasks. Jonah preferred that to comfort.

Then his father said, "You played well."

"I threw the pick."

"I saw."

"They scored off it."

"I saw that too."

Jonah looked at him. His father was not trying to make the interception disappear. He was telling him that he had watched more than one play.

"Thanks," Jonah said.

After they left, Caleb knocked. Jonah had expected him, and found that expecting him did not settle how to begin.

Caleb stood inside the door with his hands empty.

"I heard you're getting more imaging tomorrow."

"When we're back."

"Okay."

He looked at the second bed. Jonah nodded toward it. Caleb sat.

"I don't understand it," Jonah said.

Caleb's eyes moved to him.

"I know what you saw. You said it. I don't understand how it outweighed everything else."

"At the line, I thought the corner was giving us the answer."

"He was giving you a look."

"Yeah."

"You know those aren't the same."

Caleb leaned forward, hands between his knees. "I know."

Jonah did not want another admission that would sound good and change nothing. He wanted the touchdown. Beneath that, he wanted Caleb to have made a different decision before a different outcome could become possible. There was no route back to either want.

"I would have kept it," he said.

"I know."

"Not because they told me to."

Caleb looked up. "I know that now."

Jonah sat back against the pillows. He had wanted Caleb to understand that for months. Hearing it now gave him no pleasure.

"I'm not asking you to agree it was good," Caleb said.

"Good."

The word was harsher than Jonah had intended. He left it there.

Caleb asked whether he wanted him to leave. Jonah did not immediately know. He asked instead about the third-down pressure on the final drive. Caleb described the loop, Gabe's block, the movement right. It was football they could discuss without pretending discussion would recover the game.

They found one detail on which they disagreed and watched the clip to establish it. Jonah had thought the guard passed the rusher too early; Caleb pointed out where the centre received him. The guard had done his work.

"Okay," Jonah said.

Caleb stood after a few minutes. At the door he turned, then decided not to add another sentence. Jonah was grateful for that too.

When Sam returned, he asked whether Jonah wanted the light left on. Jonah said no. The room darkened. He remained awake, listening to the ventilation unit start and stop, with the last call still available in his mind and no way to replace it.

* * *

Harker faced the reporters after Caleb. He had seen part of the quarterback's interview on a screen outside the room. Caleb had not claimed that the university prohibited thought, or that freedom made

the audible correct. Harker was grateful for the restraint. He was still furious.

A reporter asked whether the quarterback had exceeded his authority.

"No," Harker said.

The next question came quickly. "Then was this your decision?"

"The check was his decision. The authority was mine to give. He used the procedures we teach."

"Should you have given him that authority?"

Harker looked at the reporter long enough to see that she was not seeking a particular answer. She wanted him to answer the question.

"We'll review how we prepare and communicate," he said. "I'm not going to tell you every bad choice could be prevented by giving the quarterback fewer choices."

"Was it a bad choice?"

"I preferred the call we sent. I still do."

He could have added that Western Plains had made an excellent defensive play. It had. Adding it now would have blurred the answer she had asked him to give.

There were questions about the injury, which he answered only within the information the medical staff and Jonah had authorised. There were questions about the next season. He said there would be one. The remark drew a little laughter and did not deserve it.

When he returned to the locker room, Peg was waiting in the hallway. She did not hug him until he stopped walking. Then she held him briefly, as she had after losses when the stakes were smaller and their lives were less crowded.

"You need to get on the bus," she said.

"I know."

"Then go."

At the hotel he called Calder. She had attended the game and was still dealing with the university's guests. Neither needed the other to describe the result.

"I'll have the review when it's ready," he said.

"I'm not asking you for it tonight."

He leaned against the desk. "What are you asking?"

"Whether the players have what they need to get home. Whether the medical arrangements are in place. Whether you need help handling the public response."

He answered all three. She did not ask him to reconsider his contract, promise compliance, or denounce the audible before donors. He had been preparing to defend against an argument she had not made.

"People will say the system would have won it," she said.

"They don't know that."

"I know."

"It gave us a better chance."

"Then say that if you believe it."

He did believe it. He also knew that institutional language could turn a better chance into an outcome owed. He would have to remain precise when precision sounded less comforting than certainty.

After the call, Boone came to his room with the final drive loaded. Harker told him they would not review the whole game tonight. They watched the last four downs anyway.

"The second-down ball," Boone said.

"Yes."

"We can't only grade the check."

"We won't."

The missed throw to Darius stayed low on the screen. Harker watched the back turn, reach, and stop. That error had also cost an opportunity. Earlier there had been an interception, a coverage check the defence had lost, a field goal where a touchdown had been available. He would not distribute the loss into so many causes that Caleb's choice disappeared. He would not let one choice make everyone else's work unreviewable.

They stopped before the audible and watched the formation.

"We kept it in the package," Boone said.

"We did."

“You think we should have pulled it?”

Harker considered the reasons they had retained it. There were defences it could exploit. They had taught the signal. They had practised the protection. They had warned both quarterbacks about the safety and the corner’s maintained leverage.

“I think he should have kept thirty-four,” Harker said.

Boone looked at him. “That’s not the same answer.”

“No.”

They did not manufacture the same answer because the night would have been easier with one.

At home two days later, Harker put the final play sheet on the desk beside the old coaching book. Peg was in the kitchen, trying to remove a label from a jar. He watched her soak it instead of scraping harder.

“You’re going to ask,” he said.

“What?”

“Whether I’d let him check it again.”

She turned toward him. “Would you?”

“I’d teach it better.”

“You’re good at that answer.”

He looked down.

“I don’t know yet,” he said.

She nodded and returned to the jar.

On Tuesday afternoon Boone brought a proposed addition to the audible procedure. In a decisive fourth-down situation, a change to a play with less than half the leading call’s touchdown probability would require a coach’s approval if the alternative was also below twenty percent. With communications closed, the quarterback would keep the authorised call. Protection adjustments and an uncovered-receiver alert would remain available.

Harker read the paragraph twice. Thirty-four would have stayed the call on Saturday. That was a substantial argument for the paragraph.

“Who wrote the thresholds?” he asked.

"I did. Simone checked what they would have flagged this season." Simone sat opposite Boone. "I checked the cases. I didn't approve the rule."

"Nobody said you did."

"Your email said reviewed by Football Intelligence."

Boone opened the message. Harker could see the phrase. It had looked reassuring when he read it that morning.

"Change it," Harker said.

Boone deleted the phrase. "We still need an answer for the guys who did what they were supposed to do."

"This could be an answer," Harker said.

Simone looked at him. He had expected her to argue; he disliked her surprise more.

"They had the better chance," he said. "He gave it away."

"Yes."

"Then help me understand what we lose by preventing that."

She pulled up the flagged cases. One involved a late defensive substitution that changed the matchup after the last packet. A quarterback could still throw to the uncovered player under Boone's exception. Another involved an unexpected safety alignment, with no uncovered receiver and a legal, practised alternate whose cached estimate was low.

"The rule keeps the old ranking in charge there," she said. "Maybe properly. We'd be choosing that."

"That's my job."

"Then put your name on it. Not validated by the model."

Harker pushed the page away. "I wasn't planning to hide behind your system."

Simone looked at the deleted phrase on Boone's screen. Harker followed her eyes and felt his face get hot.

Boone brought them back to the first example. "If we widen the emergency exception, Caleb can say he saw an emergency. If we don't, we can trap a guy in a call we'd change ourselves."

"Sometimes keeping him in the call is the point," Harker said.

He thought of Owen making the turn he had been told to make. He would not ask the receiver to accept every possible quarterback mistake as the price of keeping authority on the field.

"Let the players see it before we decide," he said.

"They won't all agree," Boone said.

"I know."

Simone asked whether he wanted her to prepare a comparison of the flagged decisions. He said yes, including the uncertainty in each packet. The meeting ended without the new rule on the installation sheet. Harker kept the draft in his folder.

On Wednesday he met the seniors in small groups. Some wanted to discuss football. Some wanted references, medical arrangements, help with professional contacts. One wanted to know whether he could still use the study rooms after the season. Harker said yes and checked with the academic staff to make sure the answer was true.

Caleb came last. Harker showed him the film, asked him to explain, and made him separate observed movements from movements he had anticipated. They agreed about more of the play than Harker expected. They did not agree that the same distinction would always make the next choice obvious.

"I'm not taking you off the record as a player because of this," Harker said.

"I wasn't asking you to."

"You'll get an honest evaluation."

Caleb nodded. There was relief in his face and something harder behind it. An honest evaluation would include the final call.

* * *

Marcus had watched the locker room from the chair the travel staff found for him. He could stand and move with his prescribed support, but he did not want the room to become concerned with his getting out of it. He wanted to remain until he was ready.

He had seen Harker speak to Caleb. He had seen Darius establish that the protection held. He had seen Owen say he had reached the

ball. Each man was trying to keep his own part from being rewritten by the result.

Marcus understood the effort. His injury had become an illustration in arguments he had not volunteered to illustrate. Now the championship would become another one. People would point to the last play and say instinct was courage, or data was duty, or a quarterback had ruined a season. They would use the men in the room without learning what each had been asked to do.

Caleb stopped beside his chair before going to the interview.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"I know."

"I didn't mean to—"

He stopped. Marcus waited.

"I thought we could score," Caleb said.

"So did everybody."

Caleb looked at him. Marcus had not meant it as a rebuke, but he was too angry to make every sentence gentle.

"You knew they'd go with you," Marcus said.

"Yes."

"Did you think about them?"

"I got the check to everybody."

"That's not what I asked."

Caleb looked down at the brace, then corrected his eyes toward Marcus's face.

"I thought about whether we could run it."

"Okay."

"I thought about the protection. Owen's route. Bennett holding six."

"And the chance you were passing up?"

"I thought the estimate wasn't seeing the corner the way I was."

"It saw enough to disagree."

"Yeah."

Marcus did not want Caleb to end with the word and make it a substitute for everything still owed. He also did not know what else to

demand tonight. An apology could be true without changing the loss. An explanation could be complete without making a decision good.

"Go answer your questions," he said.

Caleb nodded and left. Marcus watched him go, then was irritated at himself for watching. Other people were in the room.

Owen sat nearby, rubbing the scrape on his arm with a towel. Marcus asked whether the skin needed cleaning. Owen held the towel away and looked at it as though he had not noticed.

"It's fine."

"Let them look."

"You too?"

Marcus almost answered sharply. Instead he said, "Yeah. Me too, apparently."

Owen smiled without humour and took the arm to a trainer. Marcus had just done the thing he disliked: made another player's welfare sound obvious from outside his body. The request was still reasonable. Disliking paternalism did not make every suggestion an intrusion.

At the hotel, his mother and Andre brought him dinner in containers. They had eaten earlier but did not tell him they were full until he asked them to take some. Andre put the food on the new tray the travel staff had provided, then moved the tray back when Marcus said he could do it himself.

"I'm not mad at you," Marcus said.

"You're allowed to be mad."

"Not at you."

His mother sat on the bed and took off the shoes she had bought for the trip. The soles were still almost clean. She had walked farther in them than she expected.

"You didn't get to play," she said.

Marcus put his fork down.

She did not add that he was lucky to have attended, that the team had done him proud, or that there would be another opportunity. He

was a senior. There would not be another opportunity to play this game with these people.

“No,” he said.

They ate. Andre described a problem at work involving a doorway too narrow for the material they had brought. He made it funny until Marcus laughed, then returned to the part that had actually required solving. Marcus listened to his brother’s competence with an attention he had not always given it.

Before leaving, his mother asked which photographs he wanted sent to relatives. He chose three from before the game and one from the bench. He rejected the close-up in which he had been looking at the final replay.

“That one’s mine,” he said.

She deleted it from the group she was preparing and kept it in her own collection, with his permission.

Back at Allerton, Shreya called about the professional contacts. The game had not altered his medical records. It had altered the amount of attention people were paying to everyone associated with the programme. One evaluator wanted a conversation. Another wanted an updated recovery assessment before committing to one.

Marcus authorised the conversation. He requested the assessment be reviewed with him before it was sent.

Then he went to rehabilitation. The session contained no reward for having suffered through a championship loss. The movement limits remained. The work remained. He did what he had agreed to do and told Erin when the knee felt different.

Afterward, he sat with Owen in the student union. Neither had anywhere urgent to be for the first time in weeks. Owen asked whether Marcus wanted to watch the final play together.

“Not today.”

“Good.”

Owen put his phone away. They ate soup and discussed an instructor who had given them both an extension but expected the work to be better for having more time. Marcus thought that was un-

reasonable. Owen thought it was fair. They argued about it until the soup was gone.

* * *

Simone had closed the portable analysis station before leaving the stadium. The system had retained the final packet, the observed defence, the audible, the timing of the signals, and the outcome. It had recorded no sensation of inevitability.

In the locker room, a staff member had asked whether the failed check would damage the model's credibility. Simone looked at the man until she understood that he was trying to prepare for questions, not asking her to comfort a machine.

"It estimated a low probability," she said. "We'll review the forecast in the normal way."

"And thirty-four?"

"Wasn't run."

"We can simulate it."

"We can examine it. We can't make it happen."

The distinction sounded severe in the exhausted room. She did not elaborate. Outside, people were celebrating a game the simulation would never join.

On Monday, her team assembled the technical review. They checked the data delivery, communications cutoff, cached packet, timestamps, assignments, and observed coverage. There was no missing transmission, no unauthorised update, no model malfunction that could explain away the choice. The play had been what the offence called.

Tamsin read the description of the corner's movement.

"We've got that cue in the features," she said.

"Yes."

"It didn't weight it very heavily."

"Given the other conditions."

They checked those conditions. Stowe had sometimes driven on the out from a similar stance. He had also maintained depth.

Serrano's leverage made an outside recovery plausible. The double move required the receiver to win against two defenders whose responsibilities could meet. The seven-man protection improved the time available without improving the receiving matchup enough to make the alternate preferable.

The estimate could have been imperfect. Its imperfection was not evidence that Caleb's weighting was better. One incomplete pass could not establish the exact calibration of a ten-percent forecast either.

Simone wrote the technical conclusions narrowly and sent them to Harker.

He asked whether the original call would have beaten the coverage.

"It had more available answers in the forecast," she said.

"I know what it had in the forecast."

She watched him look at the frozen screen.

"We don't get a second defence held still for a different play," she said.

He nodded. She knew he understood. Understanding did not prevent him from wanting it.

They reviewed the decision notes without grading the play solely by its failure. The choice rejected a substantially better estimate on the basis of a cue the quarterback had interpreted too strongly. That was a meaningful criticism before the ball touched the turf. The failure added consequence. It did not supply the whole argument.

Simone's draft originally used the phrase independent authority exercised. She deleted it. It sounded like a credential bestowed on the check. She wrote quarterback-initiated change instead, then described the actual authorisation separately.

The report would be used by people who might read only one sentence. She had helped make that habit possible. Now she owed them sentences that did not invite more certainty than the record contained.

Avery interviewed her Wednesday. They asked whether the championship proved the university should require strict adherence to the highest-probability recommendation.

“No,” she said.

“Would that requirement have prevented this call?”

“If followed, yes.”

“And would you support it?”

Simone looked at the questions on Avery’s notebook. She could not read all of them. She could see that there were more.

“Not as a blanket rule,” she said. “I would support clearer decisions about which choices are delegated, and for what purposes. Coaches will still disagree about the boundaries.”

“Does that help the ten other players who wanted the better chance?”

She took her time.

“It doesn’t return their chance,” she said.

Avery wrote the answer down without looking pleased to have found it.

They discussed the proposed changes to evaluations. The Oracle would remain. The underlying alignment information would remain. The combined score would lose its presumption of completeness, if Simone could persuade the staff to present it that way and keep presenting it that way after the public attention moved elsewhere.

She had no guarantee that the institution would remember. She could make the revisions concrete enough to be used.

After Avery left, she opened the workload planning for spring. The system identified a schedule that would reduce overload while preserving the repetitions the staff needed. It also identified a young defensive back whose improvement had been obscured by the units he practised against.

Simone called the position coach. He looked at the comparison, asked two useful questions, and agreed to give the player a more demanding assignment.

* * *

Caleb returned to the quarterback room on Friday to collect a charger. He had left it under his usual chair. For a moment he did not recognise which chair had become usual: the one he had occupied as the starter, or the one from which he had watched Jonah's games.

He looked under both.

Sam came in carrying a notebook. He stopped when he saw Caleb, then asked whether the next identification session was still going ahead.

"With you?" Caleb asked.

"You said Friday."

Caleb had said Friday before they travelled. The promise had survived the game because Sam had remembered it.

"Yeah," Caleb said. "Give me a minute."

He found the charger behind the second chair and put it in his bag. Sam sat near the display. He was trying not to look at Caleb as though he might break.

"You can ask," Caleb said.

Sam's eyes moved toward him. "Would you do it again?"

"Knowing what happened?"

"Without knowing."

Caleb sat down.

"I don't think I can get back to without knowing," he said. "I can tell you the part I need to do better."

He brought up the play before the audible. They studied the safety's position, then the corner's foot. Caleb showed Sam the clips in which the same beginning led to different movements. He did not claim the final check had revealed a truth the programme needed to learn at the cost of a championship.

Sam asked about the protection. Caleb explained why Darius stayed.

"So it worked?" Sam said.

"The protection worked."

“Right.”

They went to the next clip, one from a midweek practice that had nothing to do with the final drive. Sam identified the wrong line-backer. Caleb asked him to look again. He found the right one and described why it mattered.

When the session ended, Sam went to class. Caleb closed the display and remained seated a little longer. The room was warm. Someone had left a paper cup beside the board. He put it in the trash, took his bag, and went out.

EPILOGUE

The Next Call

By August the chairs in the quarterback room had been reupholstered. The frames were the same. Caleb recognised the place where one leg tilted slightly because he had spent four years compensating for it with his own foot.

He arrived early and put a cup of coffee on the table. The cup came from the student union, where the employee at the counter had asked whether he was still taking classes. He said he had graduated. She congratulated him, then asked whether he wanted room for milk.

He had attended two professional workouts. One team had declined to offer him a place. Another had told his representative to stay in contact. Staying in contact was an activity, not a job. Caleb still trained. He had not decided what waiting should cost.

For the summer he worked three days a week at a municipal housing office, a temporary position Denise had told him about. He logged inspection requests, checked addresses, and learned which questions he could answer without asking someone else. The pay was modest. The work was more difficult than he had expected in ways his arm could not improve.

He had made one promise to a tenant that the office could not fulfil. His supervisor made him call back and correct it. The woman was angry. He did not explain that he had intended to help.

Now he checked before promising.

Jonah came in with a notebook and a new pair of practice shoes. His ankle had healed enough for the medical staff to clear his planned football work. He still did the exercises prescribed for it, with the same patience he gave his throwing mechanics. Caleb had watched him run the day before and seen no favouring of the injured side.

"You found the bad chair," Jonah said.

"I'm attached to it."

"That's an option. The equipment staff can fix it."

"Then fix it."

Jonah sat beside him. They had arranged the film session by text. It was not the first time either had reviewed the final play. It was the first time since the season that they had agreed to look at it together without another meeting to get to immediately afterward.

On the screen Allerton had fourth-and-goal at the nine. Seven seconds. Four points behind. The offence broke the huddle.

Caleb stopped the picture after Bennett widened.

"That," he said.

Jonah looked at the corner's feet.

"You still see it."

"I still see the movement."

"And the safety?"

Caleb pointed. "Still inside enough to get outside."

"He doesn't have to choose until he sees the route."

"No."

They advanced the film. Luis received the protection word. Darius changed his set. Owen returned the signal. Gabe stayed. The corner began with the receiver, held depth, and opened his hips. Serrano moved toward the throw.

"We gave the protection enough," Caleb said.

"The protection gave you enough."

Caleb nodded at the correction.

They watched the ball hit the ground. The outcome was unchanged by the better chairs, the summer light, or the fact that nobody in the room had a game to win that afternoon.

"I would have stayed with thirty-four," Jonah said.

"I know."

"I still think it was the better choice."

Caleb looked at the frozen defender.

"I gave the foot too much," he said. "I didn't give the safety enough. That's what I can say."

"Is that different from saying it was the wrong call?"

He thought about it. "Not much, on this play."

Jonah waited.

"It's different from saying I should never make a call," Caleb said.

"I didn't say that."

"No. You didn't."

There had been a time when Caleb would have made Jonah defend a position he had not taken. He could still feel how easy it would be. He let the film run to the kneel instead.

Western Plains exchanged the ball cleanly. Its quarterback went down. The clock ended. Caleb closed the clip.

Jonah brought up the first touchdown from the championship. The throw to Owen. They watched the linebacker widen and the safety hold Bennett. Caleb asked about the timing. Jonah showed him where he had begun to set his feet.

"You're earlier than I thought."

"Had to be."

"You could have waited another beat."

"Then I'd have been throwing through him."

They watched it again. Jonah was right. Caleb drew the route on the board, shortening the stem by the amount the receiver had actually used, and Jonah corrected the final angle. The room became a room where two quarterbacks were discussing football.

Afterward they went through the student union for lunch. Jonah asked about the workouts. Caleb told him what had happened without describing either team as incapable of appreciating him. Jonah said he hoped the second one called.

"Me too."

They saw Avery at a table covered with applications. They had graduated too and were looking for reporting work. A folded copy of their final article on Allerton lay beneath a cover letter.

“Interview?” Caleb asked, pointing to Avery’s papers.

“Hopefully.”

“Good luck.”

“Thanks. You too.”

They did not ask which of his possible futures needed it.

At the performance centre, Marcus was finishing a supervised running session. He had progressed through months of rehabilitation and remained short of unrestricted contact clearance. His pace was controlled, the change of direction planned rather than improvised. The work had become athletic again without becoming finished.

Caleb watched from the doorway until Marcus saw him and beckoned him in.

“You don’t need to hover outside like I’m defusing something.”

“I didn’t want to interrupt.”

“Then you can stand here and not interrupt.”

Caleb stood where he pointed. When the session ended, Marcus sat and checked a message from his representative. A club wanted the next medical update. Another had seen his earlier film and asked about an assessment later in the year. Neither had offered certainty. Marcus was still arranging the information himself.

“Your mom’s dishwasher?” Caleb asked.

“Still the best thing I’ve bought.”

“That’s a low bar?”

“I bought professional-quality cleats that didn’t make me a professional.”

Caleb laughed, then felt the laughter stop near the injury. Marcus shook his head.

“You can laugh.”

They discussed Owen, who was preparing for a professional camp, and Luis, who had taken a job while waiting for another opportunity. Trey had sent them a new music track and threatened to stop send-

ing them if their only response was a flame symbol. Marcus had written a proper sentence. Caleb promised to listen.

As he left, he told Marcus when he would be back in town. Marcus said to text first. It was a small condition and an invitation. Caleb understood both.

* * *

The next morning, Jonah went to the field before the first team period. The stadium beyond the practice fence was still empty. Workers were checking the brick concourse, and the band had begun its rehearsals for the new season. Sound carried across the campus in pieces.

On the workload display, one lineman's repetitions had been reduced after his recovery measures changed. He moved to the sideline with a trainer while the next group went in.

Boone stood beside the display while Harker watched the players gather. The staff had kept the periods for unannounced defensive changes.

Sam took the first sequence and missed an inside rotation. He came to the sideline, described it, and listened to the correction. Jonah did not confuse the boy's ability to explain with an ability he had yet to develop on the field.

Then it was Jonah's turn.

He joined the huddle. New linemen occupied places Luis and the other seniors had left. Bennett stood beside Gabe. Darius was at the back of the group. Micah rolled his shoulders and looked toward the defence.

"Hear the whole word," Jonah said.

They broke. He approached the line in a two-by-two formation, the back to his right. The defence presented a split shell and an interior pressure look. One safety moved down as the offence settled. A linebacker turned his shoulders toward the near edge.

The recommendation arrived. Jonah read it. The preferred concept had a useful inside answer if the linebacker continued outward and a

second answer if he stayed. The protection assumed an interior threat the safety's movement might change.

Jonah looked across the line. He saw the defensive end widen and the linebacker's hand loosen beside his thigh. He looked back at the safety. The player had not committed to the rush. There was time to establish the protection before deciding which route mattered.

He gave the identification and waited for the centre's echo. Bennett repeated his tag. Darius moved a half step, then stopped where the assignment required him to be. Micah raised two fingers to show that he had heard.

The play clock reached fifteen. Outside communications ended. The recommendation remained on Jonah's wrist.

He studied the defence once more.

Then he called the play.