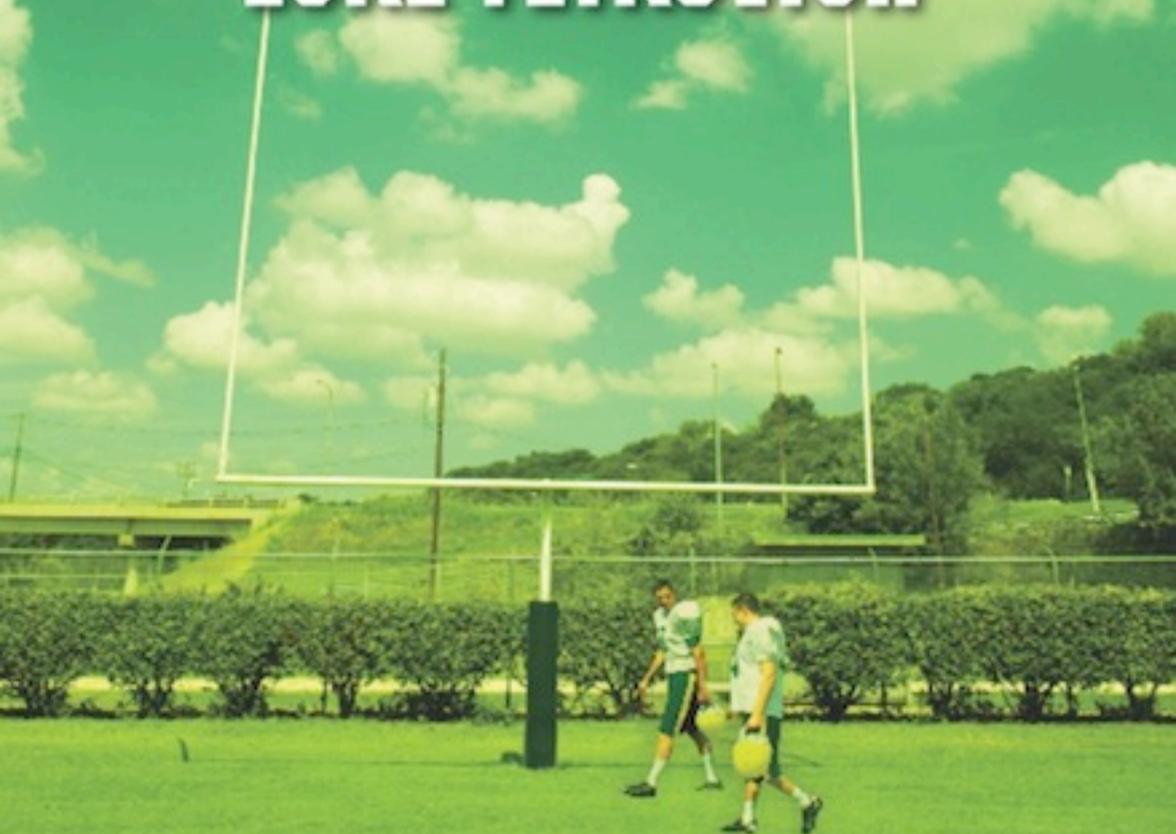
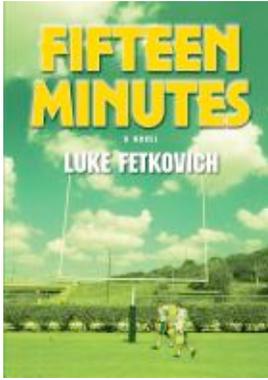


FIFTEEN MINUTES

A NOVEL

LUKE FETKOVICH





Adam Dorsey is the starting quarterback for a prestigious college football team and he has it all. So, he's shocked when he is unfairly kicked off the team, and reluctantly ends up at a small FCS school. During the offseason, Adam must navigate an uncomfortable road with his new teammates. And, his journey reveals far more about the intangibles of football than he ever could have imagined.

Fifteen Minutes

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Fifteen Minutes

Luke Fetkovich

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BookLocker.com, Inc.

2013

First Edition

To my Grandma F.
who taught me the game of life
and
to the players, managers and staff
of the
2011 Penn State Football Team
WE ARE...

Table of Contents

Game On - Chapter 1	9
Battle in the Blizzard - Chapter 2	17
3 + 86 = 7 - Chapter 3.....	22
Thompson's Tangle - Chapter 4	31
The Shoe Room - Chapter 5.....	40
An Unexpected Arrival - Chapter 6	47
St. Bruno's Academy - Chapter 7.....	56
The Lodge - Chapter 8	61
Deifer Hall - Chapter 9	72
Roster Revelations - Chapter 10.....	83
The Yellow Slip - Chapter 11	90
A Seventh Floor Startle - Chapter 12.....	101
Cowboys & Coyotes - Chapter 13.....	107
A Night at Retone's - Chapter 14	113
Fifteen Minutes - Chapter 15.....	124
The Crypt - Chapter 16.....	131
The Homecoming - Chapter 17.....	143
Pizza & Poodles - Chapter 18.....	149
Where the Hash Marks End - Chapter 19	160
The Dream - Chapter 20.....	164
The (End)Zone - Chapter 21.....	170
A Tale of Two Halves - Chapter 22.....	178
Second-and-5 - Chapter 23.....	185
The Waiting Room - Chapter 24	193
The Final Minute - Chapter 25.....	199
Afterword.....	207

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You, because you're reading this

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Game On

Chapter 1

"Tell me a fact, and I'll learn. Tell me the truth, and I'll believe. But tell me a story, and it will live in my heart forever."

--Ed Sabol

"Adam."

The voice came from somewhere in the back of his mind.

"Adam, it's game time, man."

Slowly, he slipped back into consciousness. A tall boy donned in shoulder pads and tight pants stared down at him. He clutched a helmet in one hand.

"Wha—? Did I fall asleep or something?" he yawned.

"Nah, you were actually abducted by aliens," the boy answered.

"Yeah, they just left. Said they wanted to come back and see you after we win the national championship, though." This time it was a lanky player with dreads. He threw a wet Gatorade towel at him and added, "Get your ass off the floor."

Adam Dorsey threw the towel aside and sat up. He was lying in the middle of the locker room with football gear, athletic tape and plastic water bottles carelessly strewn about the floor. His teammates huddled over him and chortled as he rubbed his head. His own shoulder pads proved to be an uncomfortable pillow.

"I don't remember...who are we playing?" the first boy asked.

"Nobody important, Chris," the teammate with dreads answered. "Just another Mountain Valley team. Nothing special."

"Yeah, I agree, Deion," Chris replied sarcastically. "It's only the game that's going to win us the conference title and get us into the national championship. And it's going to have the draft analysts buzzing about you this offseason," he added, pointing at Adam.

"Oh, *and* it's against Michigan," Deion added as an afterthought.

"Shut up, guys," Adam protested as he rubbed his eyes. "Can't you cut me a little slack today? I know who we're playing."

"Then why aren't you getting ready for warm-ups?!" Deion laughed, gesturing towards the other players and their newly-donned game outfits. "Quarterback drills are starting in ten minutes!"

“What?!” Adam cried, scanning the cavernous room for the clock. “Oh *shit!* Why didn’t somebody wake me up?”

“Because we were having too much fun taking pictures of you snoring with your mouth hanging open,” Chris chuckled as Adam began stuffing on his gear.

He took one huge gulp from his Gatorade bottle, threw it back into his locker, grabbed his helmet and headed for the door. He didn’t even glance at anyone else in the messy room as he brushed past.

“Hey, Adam! You snore like my grandpa!”

“Shut up, Bowser.”

“Adam, I think your hair got messed up a little—”

“I don’t want to hear it, Jamal.”

“Adam, are we going to win today?”

The quarterback stopped just before the door. He stared at the floor for a moment. It was such a simple question, but at the same time it was extraordinarily difficult. Some days the answer was easy, and others it was a little harder. But it was always the same. It was *always* the same. And there was no reason to change that now.

“Yes, Joey. We are going to win today,” he told his center softly, without even looking up. Then he turned and left.

* * *

“And welcome to Sunset Vale, Pennsylvania, where we are preparing for an outstanding football game between the Keystone State Gargoyles and the Michigan Racers in the 2012 Mountain Valley Conference Championship Game!” an off-screen voice exclaimed as sports channel SportsNetwork streamed an aerial shot of the massive stadium. An early December snowfall had blanketed the field and stands, so that the Gargoyles’ midfield logo was barely visible in the fading afternoon light.

“Corey Cousins here with Mike Mays,” the younger ex-coach announced, flashing his short blonde hair and charming smile to the TV audience. “And Mike, what’s not to like about this match-up?”

“You sure are right, Corey,” the older, play-by-play commentator Mays replied. He provided a stark contrast from Cousins, with a gray mustache and heavy build. “The Gargoyles have clearly been the best team in the conference this year, and the Racers haven’t been far behind. We’ve got a 12 – 0 team featuring the nation’s most prolific passing attack going up against an 11 – 1 squad with one of the premiere defenses in all of college football. Folks, this is what it’s all about, right here. This game has received a ton of hype over the past few weeks, and it shouldn’t disappoint.”

“And with that, let’s remind our viewers what the stakes are,” the color commentator Cousins added, and a flashy screen flew onto the broadcast.

Fifteen Minutes

Current BCS Rankings

RANK	TEAM	BCS AVG.	RECORD
1	SCU Sharks	.9968	13-0
2	KSU Gargoyles	.9463	12-0
3	Michigan Racers	.9124	11-1
4	Texas Tornadoes	.8879	11-2
5	Miami Gators	.8342	12-1
6	Arizona Coyotes	.8331	11-1
7	New England Clams	.7954	11-2
8	Ohio Valley Bears	.7822	10-2
9	Florida Hurricanes	.7126	10-2
10	Alabama Arrowheads	.6508	10-2

“Now, the Southern California Sharks have already won the Pac-West Conference Championship Game and have effectively punched their ticket to the national championship,” Cousins went on. “Keystone State will certainly clinch the No. 2 spot with a win today. But if Michigan wins, they are expected to jump Keystone State in the standings, meaning they will make the trip to the Texas Dome instead.”

“High stakes indeed,” Mays agreed as the two commentators were shown once again. “And let’s not forget, the winner of this game will take two of the past three MVC championships.”

“Well, Mike, you don’t win titles without great leadership at the top, and these two powerhouses have very accomplished head coaches. On one sideline you’ve got Paul Eberly—already a legend at Michigan. His defenses have finished with a top-10 ranking every single year since he took the job. And this year’s defense has a chance to finish No. 1 with a good performance today.”

The broadcast showed the Michigan coach walking the sidelines and brushing snowflakes out of his hair as the kicking teams warmed up.

“But you know what, Corey? With all that Eberly has done at Michigan, it’s hard to believe Randy Thompson has done even more at Keystone State.”

“It’s simply astounding, Mike. When he was hired eight years ago, this football program was in shambles. They needed a new direction—a new energy—and Coach Thompson has provided that to an amazing degree. Under his watch, the Gargoyles have an outstanding 91 – 16 record, with two

Luke Fetkovich

national championships, two Heisman winners and four MVC conference titles. And in addition to all of that, the man is 6 – 1 in bowl games.

“Sure, there have been some hard times. Everyone knows about the recruiting violations three years ago, and many people question some of his coaching tactics. But his supporters counter that he wins games, and any little indiscretions pale in comparison to the success he’s brought this Gargoyle team.”

“And it’s not just the victories, but what he’s brought to the program on a recruiting level,” Mays added as another chart appeared on the screen.

Quarterbacks at KSU under Randy Thompson

NAME	YEARS AS STARTER	CAREER STATS
Kyle Stafford	2005-2008	12,342 passing yds, 87 TDs, 29 INTs
Derek Bridges	2009-2010	7,103 passing yds, 62 TDs, 17 INTs
Adam Dorsey	2011-2012	7,582 passing yds, 64 TDs, 11 INTs

“Keystone State has been an offensive juggernaut since Thompson’s arrival, and the numbers just keep getting better,” he continued. “Adam Dorsey boasts great stats to begin with, but if you separate the two years you can really see his progress. He chalked up 28 touchdowns and seven interceptions in 2011 after he took over for injured senior Derek Bridges. This year? He’s got 36 TDs against just four picks while leading the Gargoyles to an undefeated record—undefeated. Corey, the Heisman ceremony is just a week away, and if he can pull out this win, he has a great shot at claiming that trophy.”

“He would certainly deserve it, because both teams know how to play some ‘D,’” Cousins remarked.

“Should be tough sledding for both quarterbacks,” agreed Mays, turning to face the camera. “It’s No. 2 vs. No. 3 coming up next on SportsNetwork.”

* * *

Snow was falling heavily by the time Adam jogged onto the field. The student section erupted in cheers as he emerged from the locker room. The dividing wall showcased banners reading things like, ‘DORSEY FOR PRESIDENT,’ ‘WE BELIEVE IN #3’ and ‘YOU CAN’T SACK THE DORSEY ATTACK!’ But he didn’t pay any attention. He loved it last year, when he was

Fifteen Minutes

just starting out. Now it was old news. He didn't need his fan base telling him how good he was.

"ADAM!"

He glanced through the snowfall to see quarterbacks coach Pat Peterson rushing towards him, his glasses askew and his disheveled gray hair sticking out from beneath his winter cap.

"Sorry Coach, I—"

But the words barely left his mouth when he realized his coach wanted him for a different reason.

"No, no. I don't care about your warm-ups. You're scheduled for a pre-game interview with SportsNetwork, and they've been looking for you!" he explained, gesturing towards a small group of reporters on the sideline.

"Aw, I gotcha Coach."

He turned and headed towards the reporters, dodging a few footballs that sailed past from the kicking teams' drills. He noticed a sexy sideline reporter with a fluffy fur jacket and microphone, and hoped she was doing the interview.

"Hi, Adam. I'm Jennifer Rush," she said as he approached. "Thanks for your time."

"No problem," Adam grinned back. "I do this all the time. I'm used to it."

Before he knew it, Jennifer was talking to the camera five feet away, and Adam realized they were on the air.

"Thanks, Corey. I'm here with Keystone State starting quarterback Adam Dorsey, who has been enjoying a phenomenal year on the field. Adam, what do you think has contributed most to your success this season?"

"I mean, I'm really good," he answered without thinking, as the microphone was stuffed in his face. "I've been winning games since junior high, and I've got a 77 – 10 record overall, so I guess it just comes naturally. When you've got an arm like mine, you can pretty much do whatever you want."

"A couple of your teammates are poised to break some school records this year, specifically Chris Cook and Deion Carter," Jennifer continued. "How has that arm of yours helped them succeed?"

Adam paused. "Well, they're breaking records because they get to play with me."

Jennifer pursed her heavily-lipsticked lips. "But in terms of team camaraderie, is there some special connection you have with those wide receivers that has helped the chemistry between you three?"

"Oh, yeah, definitely," Adam replied as he grasped what she was looking for. "Me and those guys were in the same recruiting class, and we both arrived at Keystone State that spring before our freshman year. You know how it is when you first get to a new school—you don't really know anybody. So me,

Deion and Chris kind of bonded together and formed our own little group, because we were all in the same boat.”

“So you and those two receivers have been pretty close since you first came to KSU?” Jennifer prodded.

“Yeah. We started throwing together after spring practices, to kind of get a feel for each other, you know? And that continued into summer work-outs. So that whole spring and summer we became really close, not just because of our positions as wide receiver and quarterback, but also ‘cause we felt like we needed each other to survive up here...that really started our friendship. And now I’m still throwing to those guys, just in front of a hundred thousand fans,” he finished.

“Adam, one more question. Do you three still throw after practice?”

“Yeah, all the time,” Adam explained. “It really does help with team commodery, or whatever you call that stuff.”

“Thanks, Adam. Back to you, Corey.”

He was slightly disappointed about ending the interview with Jennifer, but he snapped out of it and reminded himself there was a game to play. Fans were screaming for him in the nearby student section, but he ignored them and jogged towards the quarterbacks.

The three other signal-callers were warming up near midfield, and Coach Peterson instructed him to throw with back-up Danny Thompson.

“How’d the interview go?” Danny spat through his face mask as he hurled the cold football at Adam.

“It would have gone better if she’d asked me out on a date,” he replied grudgingly.

“Hey, at least you actually *get* to do interviews,” his back-up pointed out. “Me? Nobody ever wants to interview me, even though my dad’s running the show.”

“Yeah, and if he wasn’t running the show, you wouldn’t even be here, so quit complaining,” Adam shot back as he caught another pass.

“So why don’t you leave early for the draft? If you end up winning the Heisman, you’ll be a top-10 pick!”

“Yeah, but three national championships as a senior is a hell of a lot better than one this year as a sophomore. Trust me, DT. I’m going to be a top-10 pick when I get outta here, and I’m going to make boatloads of money, and I’m also going to win lots of Super Bowls...just not this year.”

“But my dad wants—”

“You’re full of it, DT. Your dad might be the head coach, but that’s only going to get you so far. He’s in this business to win football games, just like I’m in this business to win football games. And you’re not part of the plan. That’s just how it is.”

“Aw, go *fuck* yourself,” Danny shouted, and he chucked his next pass so off-target that Adam had to jump up and tip it out of the air. DT was storming

Fifteen Minutes

away, and for a second Adam wondered where he would go, but it didn't matter. A whistle blew in the distance.

Well, what's wrong with telling it like it is?, he thought as he jogged towards the huddle. *What do I owe him? I don't owe him anything. Sorry, DT. It's time to wake up.*

The crowd was on their feet, applauding them even though he could hardly see the surrounding stands through the snowfall. He gathered in the end zone with his teammates, and the applause from the fans seemed to come from the swirling snow itself as it whirled around their outstretched arms.

"OK, win on three!" offensive coordinator Tim Bauer declared as he stood next to the mountain of hands. "One, two, three, WIN!!"

Their shout echoed away, answering the fans' cheers. The huddle broke. The crowd's roar reached a peak.

He was jogging through the tunnel back to the locker room with his black Gargoyle helmet clutched firmly in hand. The cheering grew more distant as they made their way beneath the support beams of Keystone Stadium, fading into a low rumble that seemed to make the surrounding structure tingle with energy and anticipation.

"Heard you got asked about your buddies in your pre-game interview," the player next to him said as he reached his locker.

Adam turned. Joey Callahan was grinning at him with that boyish look he wore so well.

"Eh, they don't want to hear about your fat ass," he joked.

"I heard it from one of the trainers. They were watching the broadcast on the TV in the training room. She asked about your relationship with Chris and Deion, and you didn't even mention me!"

"Look, she was asking about them, not you," Adam chuckled. "What was I supposed to say? 'Oh, and by the way, I'm really good friends with that fat kid that plays center?'"

"You told them the whole story about how we throw after practice!" Joey persisted. "Come on, Adam, you left out the best part! About how you and Deion and Chris decided you needed somebody to snap the ball? About how I was a freshman too, and I didn't have *any* friends until you found me, and wanted me to snap balls with you guys? And then how you helped me fit in up here, when I'm from a small high school and a small town? And we became really close, just from all of that happening that first spring?"

Adam nodded as he cinched up his laces. "OK, so I left out the best part of the story."

Joey just laughed. "I'm teasing you, Adam. You know I don't really care. Centers never get any attention. It's always the wide receivers and the quarterbacks that get that. I'm used to it."

"Next interview," Adam chuckled. "Next interview, I'll talk about you."

"You do that."

Randy Thompson had burst into the crowded room and was striding purposefully towards the clearing. He was wearing his usual teal Gargoyle ball cap over his square face and prominent jaw (even though it was barely 30 degrees). His black team polo was tucked into his pants, highlighting his bulging muscles and strong build.

Adam and Joey took a seat on the locker bench. If they hadn't known the man in front of them, they might have thought he was a boxer ready to knock out his opponent, the way he was pacing about the room now.

"Alright, men! Shut your mouths and listen up. There ain't no game bigger than this," he declared. "This, right here, is our chance to prove how good we are to the rest of the country. Everything we've worked towards the whole season, everything we've accomplished...men, it don't mean a damn thing if we don't win this one."

He paused, a blazing fury in his eyes, and pointed towards the doors. "That team over there wants to intimidate you. That's how they win games—by winning the battle in the trenches and breaking their opponent's will. They want to beat you down and force you into mistakes, until you finally give up. But ya know what?! They don't know what you're made of! They don't know what's about to hit them! So you *show* them!!" he screamed, pausing only to take a breath. "You run them over! You outmuscle them and beat them at their own game, and you don't stop until they run home crying and screaming to their mommas! You show them whose house this is!!"

Everyone was on their feet now, ready to give their head coach a rousing applause.

"SIXTY MINUTES OF HARD-NOSED FOOTBALL, RIGHT NOW!! LET'S GET TO WORK!!" he spat.

"Hey! HEY!" Adam screamed, when it was apparent that Coach Thompson had finished. He'd given pre-game speeches before, but this one was extra special. "When I came here three years ago, I came here to win a national championship. Now, I can. This is the time—right now. We've *annihilated* 12 teams so far, but we still have two left. The first one wins us the Mountain Valley Conference, the second one wins us the national title. Now just like Coach said, let's go out there and kick some ass!"

There were shouts of approval from his teammates as everyone put their hands together one last time.

"MVC champs, everybody!" Adam cried as he looked around at Chris, and Joey, and Deion, and all his other friends and teammates who were about to win him his first conference title. It was finally here. He almost couldn't believe it was finally here!

"One, two, three, MVC CHAMPS!!"

Battle in the Blizzard

Chapter 2

“It was an ideal day for football – too cold for the spectators, and too cold for the players.”

--Red Smith

The roar was always loudest when you ran out of the tunnel.

The captains would lead the way through the damp concrete passageway, followed by the other players and assistant coaches, with Coach Thompson bringing up the rear. Then they would come to a long tunnel with the exit molded in the shape of a giant Gargoyle, painted to look like the patina monsters of Gothic cathedrals. Its jaw was frozen in an endless roar, with the bottom half sunken into the ground so that the team could burst from its mouth.

The team mascot and captains would gather just inside the stone fangs. Then they would wait for the band to finish playing the school anthem, and the color guards would raise their teal and copper flags high and rush onto the field—that was the signal to go.

The tumultuous cheer from the fans was deafening. Adam felt like he was charging out to war with his fellow soldiers, or maybe like a gladiator sprinting from the bowels of the Coliseum.

“Welcome back, folks! We’re just getting underway here in Sunset Vale, as the Gargoyles have won the toss and deferred their choice to the second half,” Mike Mays announced as the broadcast resumed. “OK, here we go. The anticipation and hype is all over, and we’re off!”

The student section jumped up and down on the bleachers brandishing pom-poms. The crowd noise reached a peak as the place-kicker raised his hand high into the snowy air and ran forward, sending the football spiraling away towards the gray misty atmosphere above...

Adam knelt near the field as his teammates rushed past him, his helmet at his side. He waited just long enough to see the Michigan return man get tackled at the 25. Then he turned, walking purposefully along the sideline without talking to anyone. There was too much energy inside of him to just stand. He had to walk around and get at least some of it out, until he could finally take the field.

“And the senior running back takes it in for the Michigan touchdown!” Mays announced a few minutes later as the Racers capped an impressive drive.

Adam swore under his breath. They were losing, and losing was something he hated more than most people.

“Hey, why don’t you do us all a favor and quit the team?” he jabbed at defensive back Darius Frazier as he jogged off the field. “Go play ping pong or some sport like that...you know? Maybe something where you don’t have to tackle? Because you can’t tackle worth shit.”

“It’s my bad, Adam,” Frazier muttered through his face mask.

“You too, Porter, you big baby,” he went on as defensive tackle Terrence Porter panted his way to a halt beside him. “You can’t even get off your block against their freshman! I saw you out there. You all looked like shit, and that’s why we’re losing. How come I’m always the one that has to save our asses? You know, we’d probably be 2 – 10 without me, the way you guys have played all year.”

“Now here’s something you don’t see every day,” Corey Cousins exclaimed from the booth. “It looks like Adam Dorsey’s having a little heart-to-heart talk with some of the defensive players after they gave up that score.”

“You know Corey, this just shows how much of a leader Dorsey has become in his second year. What do you think he’s saying to his defense right now?”

“He’s probably telling them to keep their heads up and keep fighting,” Corey surmised. “He’s probably letting them know that it’s just one score, and there’s still the entire game left to come back strong. That was always my mentality as a quarterback, and I know that’s what I’d be telling my teammates. You win as a team, you lose as a team, and if Adam is anything like me, he’s hammering that home to his defense with that little chat.”

“But offensively, this is a huge drive for Dorsey and his side of the ball,” Mays continued. “With this clock-eating Racer offense, the Gargoyles aren’t going to get as many drives as they’re used to.”

“You can’t underestimate the importance of every possession.”

Adam jogged onto the field with his teammates 150 feet below the commentators. He could barely make out the yard lines under the light frosting of snow, but he didn’t care—it brought back some of his favorite high school memories of playoff games in November and December.

Fifteen seconds on the play clock.

He surveyed the Michigan defense. They were in their base formation, playing man coverage. This was the best part of quarterbacking right here, down by a touchdown with the home crowd at his back. Sure, it wasn’t always fun when a 300-pound lineman took him down or he threw an interception. It wasn’t always fun or easy, but *damn*, was it his favorite thing.

Ten seconds.

Fifteen Minutes

The play call was simple—a quick slant across the middle. His intended target was Jaden Hall, a shifty little wide receiver from Florida. The actual pass was only a short gain, but Jaden could always dodge linebackers and pick up extra yardage.

“Set...HUT...Hut!”

The football was in his hands again. He surveyed the field as his linemen shuffled around him, diverting his eyes from his intended receiver until the very last moment. Jaden made a skilled cut to the inside, and the defensive back was just a tad too slow...

Adam delivered a perfect pass right to the numbers on his receiver's chest. Maybe it was the weather, or maybe it just wasn't his day, but Jaden's gloved hands closed on the ball for a split-second before it bounced away over his shoulder...

“And Dorsey's pass is...INTERCEPTED by Michigan at the 35-yard line!” cried Mays. “And he's going to run it back. Oh, what a move there! And he runs it back all the way for a touchdown! *What a play!*”

They were running the wrong way. Everyone was running the wrong way. Adam stared in disbelief as he relaxed his muscles. It was a perfect pass. How? *Are you kidding me?!*

“What an incredible turn of events this is!” Cousins exclaimed as the broadcast showed an instant replay. “Look at this! Dorsey isn't even bothering to run the Michigan player down! Most quarterbacks will at least make an attempt at catching the intercepting player when something like this unfolds, but Dorsey looks like he's been struck dumb. He just stands there while the other 21 players go running in the other direction. Mike, he looks like he's insulted that this is even happening.”

“Well, 99 percent of the time that's going to be a completion for a good five to ten yards. But Corey, that ball is extra slick out there today, and sometimes it bounces the other way,” Mays commented. “So now the Gargoyles are down by double-digits, and this is going to be a different kind of challenge for Adam Dorsey and this explosive offense. You saw the way he reacted to that pick. Well, he's going to have to shake it off and keep his team focused here, or things could get ugly fast.”

“And losing by double-digits is something this team hasn't experienced,” the ex-coach remarked. “You know, we're talking about a quarterback who won most of his games in high school, came up here, took over this team last year and went 10 – 2 with a win in the Beach Bowl. Now they're 12 – 0, and most of those contests have been blowouts. Dorsey is a guy who's experienced success, but it's success that's come easily for him. You're the starting quarterback for one of the biggest programs in the country, you've got a rocket arm, and your team is winning. That's all been there for Adam Dorsey, but success doesn't just come with talent. It comes with sacrifice and perseverance.”

“We mentioned how Dorsey has become a leader for this team. That’s unquestionable, but what *is* questionable are his credentials for leading a team through this kind of test. And with the way this offense has cakewalked through the rest of the conference, I just can’t say how they’ll respond against this top-ranked defense.”

The Racer fans were screaming in the far corner of the stadium, but everyone else was too quiet. It wasn’t supposed to be this way, Adam thought angrily. Their own fans were always the ones screaming, every other home game this year...

“The extra point is good, and the senior linebacker has just added seven to his team’s lead!” Mays announced. “It’s the Michigan Racers 14, the Keystone State Gargoyles nothing halfway through the first quarter. We’ll be right back.”

* * *

“*What happened?!*” Adam hissed angrily as he caught up to Jaden in the locker room an hour later, slamming his fist against the frame of an empty locker. He’d cornered him in a small alcove where a set of extra lockers had been placed for injured or red-shirt players.

They were trailing 17 – 3 in the biggest game of their lives, and he wanted answers.

Out in the main room, Coach Thompson was in a frenzy as he kicked wadded-up balls of athletic tape, screamed at the top of his lungs and threw anything he could get his hands on. Most of the players were getting taped up, changing their wets socks, slurping down chicken soup and fruit, or just flat out trying to avoid getting hit by whatever object their head coach had in his hands. No one wanted to sit there and stare him straight in the eye as he yelled a thousand different criticisms—poor coverage, lousy-ass tackling, too little emotion, running the wrong routes, butterfingers, brains filled with cotton candy, babies, diapers, his 92-year-old grandma (who he apparently thought would be a better alternative to their starting middle linebacker), his taxes, the broken water pipe in his basement and, for some reason, his bloodhound named Devil.

“It was slick,” Jaden replied as he and Adam hid behind the dividing wall. “I don’t know what else to say.”

Adam felt like he was about to explode. “*But it was a perfect pass! You always catch the ball on that route—always! Why did you have to go and screw it up now?!*”

Jaden lowered his eyes as his quarterback stared him down. “Listen, Adam. I’m not perfect, you’re not perfect. We can’t just stand here and yell at each other, we have to work as a team—”

Fifteen Minutes

“But that was a perfect pass!” Adam reiterated angrily. “I did my part! That interception wasn’t my fault, it was your mistake! *You* didn’t catch the ball, and that’s what the problem was! Now, we’ve *got* to win this game today, so all I’m asking is that you make sure that doesn’t happen again! Because we’ve got to play a perfect second half to come away winners here, Jaden, we’ve *got* to!”

He waited, expecting more out of his receiver and refusing to believe it was that simple. And Jaden did go on, but it wasn’t what he was anticipating.

“You know we trust you, Adam? All of us wide-outs? We trust you to get us the ball. So you gotta have that same trust in us. You can’t let one little mistake get to you. Just trust us back. That’s all *we* want. You think we aren’t trying our best, when there’s a spot in the national championship on the line? Come on, man!”

Adam just shook his head in frustration. “No, no, don’t give me any of that sappy feel-good crap, Jaden! That’s not gonna win us the game. You catching my touchdown passes is gonna win us the game!”

Jaden rolled his eyes, as if to say, “*Honestly? No shit!*”

“But Adam, what I’m saying is, you gotta keep your poise when things get tough. Just because my pass got intercepted doesn’t mean I ain’t trying my hardest, you know?”

He couldn’t take any more.

“Yeah, yeah, I know,” he spat sarcastically, and pushed Jaden out of the way as he stormed back to his locker. He looked up as he entered the main room and dodged a flying tape ball from Coach Thompson. It whacked Jaden right in the nose, and the little receiver rubbed it uncomfortably as he slumped to his own locker.

“And where the *hell* did you two come from?! Making out in the back room, I guess? Sit your asses down and hear me out! Ya just missed my entire speech about how we won the Super Bowl back in ’94! We came back from a 14-point halftime deficit, just like you pansies have gotten yourselves into right here! So buckle up and get ready to win this game, or yer gonna have the worst December of your pathetic little lives! What time is it?!” Coach Thompson roared at the head equipment manager, spit flying from his mouth.

A short man with a hat and glasses leaned his head out of the equipment room window and looked up at the digital countdown clock.

“Three minutes, Coach! You know it’s right up there if you ever need it.”

Coach Thompson glared at the little man dumbfoundedly, like he’d just realized the clock was even there.

“Thanks, Brad,” he muttered in a softer tone. “Three minutes...damn. What the hell am I going to do with three minutes? I can’t think of anything else to yell about.”

3 + 86 = 7

Chapter 3

"Gentlemen, it is better to have died as a small boy than to fumble this football."

--John Heisman

Every team loses.

If you're good, then you'll win more games than you lose. If you're really good, then you'll win almost all of them. You might even go undefeated, but when the next season comes around you'll lose then. It's inevitable.

Unless you are Adam Dorsey.

If you are Adam Dorsey, you line up under center with a tremendous amount of talent and skill. You are determined to squeeze every ounce of that talent out of you, doing every last thing possible to ensure that next first down, and then that next touchdown. And you don't let up until that last second ticks off the scoreboard, and your team has won.

It's true that Adam Dorsey isn't perfect. He is 22 – 2 as a starting college quarterback. But he lies awake at night, thinking that those two losses could have just as easily been two wins. He thinks about the interception in the fourth quarter of the first loss—the tipped ball that wound up in the hands of the defensive back. Then the fumble with two minutes left in the second. Neither of those were truly his fault. If it weren't for his teammates, he would be 24 – 0. Undefeated.

He remembers lying in his bed and crying after that second loss—the one that put the national championship out of reach for good. He hated crying. If his girlfriend Kelsey ever saw him doing that...well, he didn't want to think about it.

That would never happen again. Because that was when he vowed never to lose again. And ever since that game, Joey had asked him the question before they went out for warm-ups, and the answer was always the same...

"Teal 18! Teal 18! Set...HUT!!"

The Michigan defense swarmed around him once more. The powerful stadium lights made the black helmets of his teammates shine like giant eight balls. Deion's flashed by in a streaking blur as he cut across the middle of the field and caught Adam's pass for a gain of 15.

Fifteen Minutes

He walked calmly to the new line of scrimmage, not celebrating, not happy...not yet.

“Dorsey takes the snap from center and hands it off to running back Jamal Harris,” Mike Mays exclaimed. “Harris runs to the right...looks like he’s trying to get outside and turn the corner...now wait a minute, folks. Harris stops and throws a lateral back to Dorsey, who’s got all the time in the world to throw...”

The excitement in the announcer’s voice grew with every passing second. Even he could sense it was a touchdown before the ball ever left the quarterback’s hands.

Adam Dorsey let it fly, hurling a perfect spiral into the air as Jaden made the final cut on his route. The wide-out was too quick for the defender, and by the time the ball arrived he was miles ahead.

“And that’s wide receiver Jaden Hall coming down with it in the end zone, and the Gargoyles have their first touchdown of the evening!” shouted Mays as an explosion of cheers erupted inside the stadium. “A 47-yard touchdown strike from Dorsey to Hall with 8:35 remaining in the third quarter!”

Adam ran down the field to high-five his receiver. “Now, that’s what I’m talking about!” he screamed. “That’s how we get it done, man!”

“Did I make up for that interception yet?” Jaden had to ask as they trotted off the field.

Adam really wasn’t sure why, but he smiled to himself. It was easy to hide with his helmet and face mask on. “Just keep catching those footballs, man, and we’ll win this thing.”

And so the waiting game began again for the offense. Adam squatted on the sideline as the kickoff team rocketed the football back to Michigan, hoping that his defense wouldn’t allow any more points.

Fourth down.

Chris ran the punt back to the 28. It was a long way to the end zone, but Adam didn’t care. As long as he had the ball in his hands...

“And Dorsey finds Deion Carter in the back corner of the end zone for an 8-yard touchdown pass!” Mays announced ten minutes later. “What an impressive drive by the Gargoyle offense to end this third quarter. Folks, we’ve got a good one here in Sunset Vale as the score is all tied up, 17 a piece.”

“You know Mike, we’ve talked about how this Keystone State team needed to show they could respond to adversity, and they’ve done that to this point. But now the Racers need to show they can take a punch and still win the fight. We could be in for a wild fourth quarter.”

Corey Cousins could have saved his breath, because the 20 million people watching on TV weren’t about to budge. They waited to see Michigan and Keystone State trade three-and-outs, and then watched as the Racers drove to

their own 20 and kicked a field goal. Then they saw a calm but determined Adam Dorsey walk onto the field after the clock-eating drive.

He looked up at the scoreboard. It was 20 – 17 with 5:53 left. Do or die? Maybe. Actually, yes, he decided. They needed a touchdown. A field goal would only tie the game, giving the ball back to Michigan for a possible winning score as time ran out.

“Grenade! Grenade!” he audibled, checking his teammates’ positions to his left and right as the hungry Racer defenders stared him down.

Jamal Harris ran it for a gain of five on first down. Deion caught a screen pass on second, but the Michigan defense stuffed it after a gain of three.

Third-and-two.

Coach Peterson was calling for a run up the middle. Adam stared. That wasn’t going to work, he knew it. The Racer front seven was too solid. He thought about running over and arguing, but the clock was ticking and they couldn’t afford to burn a time-out.

“Pony, pony, pony!” he shouted as he read the new defensive formation, changing the play from a run to a pass. He could only imagine what Coach Peterson was thinking right now...

He’d called a play-action pass. Adam coolly faked the hand-off to Jamal and scanned the field with his nerves tingling.

He thought he had him. Chris had run a slant to the middle of the field and looked open. He fired the ball, putting his faith in his talents and trusting—no, hoping—that it would zip perfectly over the head of the Michigan linebacker and come down in his receiver’s arms. But the linebacker reached up and got just enough of the football that it changed direction and wobbled through Chris’s fingertips.

Adam glanced to the sideline and saw Coach Peterson rip off his headphones in frustration. That was a telling sign—Peterson rarely got mad during games. He was the definition of composure.

His teammates were leaving him. They were jogging off the field for the punting unit.

“No, no, no, get back here!” he screamed angrily. “We’re not going anywhere!”

He practically dragged his offensive tackle back to the spot of the ball, and he was about twice his size. “Fourth-and-two,” he yelled fiercely. “Fourth-and-two. Jamal, *stop staring at the sideline! Fuck the coaches! We’ve busted our asses all year for this!*”

Chris and Deion and Jaden had all lined up and were waiting for his play call. They trusted him...at least *they* trusted him...

“Rocket reddy 28 blue!” he screamed, checking his teammates’ positions as the play clock counted down to 10...five...

Fifteen Minutes

Whistles were blowing left and right. Joey and the other linemen relaxed and stood up. Adam swore under his breath and kicked the frost-covered ground. Time-out.

“Dorsey, what the *hell* are you thinking?!”

Coach Peterson’s ill-tempered expression bore down on him 30 seconds later.

“We have to go for it, Coach.”

“And it looks like Dorsey and his quarterbacks coach are having a heated discussion on the sideline,” Mike Mays commented. “An interesting decision here, Corey.”

“Yeah, Pat Peterson might be Adam’s favorite assistant coach, but it looks like the two are at odds right now. It’s interesting, Mike, because Peterson was a big part of the reason why Dorsey came to Keystone State. He’s the one who recruited him and promised him big things as a part of this offense. And it’s been a fun ride for both of them so far, but it looks like they’re having their differences with this play call.”

Adam glared into the eyes of his coach as he argued, and knew that Pat Peterson the savvy recruiter had been replaced by Pat Peterson the conservative play-caller. Their relationship had gone from good to great over the past year, and it was probably a testament to the pressure of the situation that Peterson was so reluctant to put the ball in his star quarterback’s hands.

“Adam, what did I tell you during film study? *Take what they give you!* You’re not taking what they’re giving you right now! You’re trying to force the issue, and it’s costing us!”

“You called for a run up the middle on third-and-two! And in case you haven’t noticed, Coach, we’ve gone 0-for-2 with that play so far! See, I’ve been keeping track! We’d be punting anyway!”

Coach Peterson looked something between outraged and speechless. “We can’t risk giving them the ball at midfield! There’s four minutes left. That’s plenty of time for us to get the ball back! We’ve still got two time-outs!”

“It doesn’t matter where we give them the ball! There’s only four minutes left, which *means* that once we punt, and they run it up the gut every single down, they’ll run out the clock and it’s game over anyway! We *have* to go for it! It’s our best shot!”

Peterson just stared at him, his mouth half open as if he wanted to speak but could not.

“Let him go for it.”

The gruff voice belonged to Coach Thompson, who had been watching them casually with his arms crossed 10 feet away. The quarterbacks coach turned and glared incredulously at his boss. Adam could tell he was buckling under the pressure and was about to give in.

“He’s your starting quarterback. Let him win the damn game.”

Adam was almost surprised that the same man who had thrown a fit at halftime could look so composed now, but it gave him a sense of confidence. Coach Thompson liked to lose his temper, but he had spent 16 years as a head coach, and he wasn't stupid. He knew what they were up against with the Racers' clock-eating offense, and he knew that his quarterback provided him with the best chance to win the game. *Smart man*, Adam thought. But he couldn't get too full of himself—not now.

"Rocket reddy 28 blue!" he repeated two minutes later, and the entire stadium seemed to hold its collective breath. "Set...*HUT!!*"

Now, in the most pivotal play of his football career, the snap of the ball seemed to happen in slow-motion. He watched as the defensive linemen and linebackers all blitzed towards him in a frenzy. He felt the presence of the relentless defensive ends closing in...

Jamal Harris was supposed to pick up a block for him. *Man, I hope he's doing his job*, he thought for a fleeting second.

Chris was open. It was the same route they'd tried on the previous down, but with the linebackers blitzing, he was more open this time than last. All he had to do was place the ball so that his teammate would catch it and not the defender...

Instinct overwhelmed him. A tiny gap had formed between the struggling linemen, but with the opposing ends nearly grabbing his jersey it seemed like a chasm to Adam. He tucked the ball and ran.

He wiggled through the opening, but hands were pulling at him. Something tugged his cleat for a fraction of a second; he kicked it free. Almost there, almost to the first down, but time seemed to have halted...

He fell forward as strong hands grabbed hold of his ankles and pulled him towards the ground. Someone came crashing in from the side as he fell, and the football popped from his grasp before his knees hit.

Adam slammed onto the cold grass with empty hands and looked up to see the frozen ball rolling away. He reached out and desperately swatted it towards him, tucking it beneath his chest just as more hands swooped down, clutching at his arms and torso.

There must have been three players on top of him, at least, and he had no sense of who anyone was or how many of his teammates were there with him, fighting off the opponents. All he could think was to protect the football, as fingers and elbows nudged and pounded their way under his chest, searching and grasping. He held the football so tight, it felt as though he were clutching his soul.

He was sure the whistles had blown by now, but he could not hear or see anything in the dark mass of bodies. So he lay there, pinning the ball to the chilly grass surface with his chest and inhaling the aroma of sweat, turf and stinky shoes.

Fifteen Minutes

“Folks, we may as well take a commercial break while they try and unpile these players!” Mays joked as the overhead sky cam showed a dozen athletes—some wearing blue jerseys and others teal—bunched together just past midfield. The referees began pulling players off the pile one by one, slowly revealing Adam.

“Yeah, and even if Keystone State recovers this fumble, it might be Racer football,” Cousins pointed out. “They look very close to that first down marker.”

“It will be a close one,” Mays affirmed. “But I believe I saw Dorsey regain control before he was lost beneath that pile. Interesting decision to run for it, though, with a couple of wide receivers open downfield. Don’t you think, Corey?”

“I’m not sure if Dorsey saw that Jaden Hall was open. But it sure looked to me like he was going to throw the ball to Chris Cook. That would have been an easy catch for him too.”

“And you would think, with all the games these guys have been through together, and all the records they’ve broken this year, that Dorsey would trust his receivers to pick up this crucial first down,” added Mays. “But with Cook missing on that last attempt, I’m not certain that didn’t factor into his decision.”

Adam was finally able to stand and give the ball to the referee. Every muscle in his body ached, and the fact that they had to measure for the first down didn’t make him feel any better. The nose of the football beat the down marker by two inches, and he felt as though an invisible weight had been lifted, freeing him to go and finish the game.

A SportsNetwork assistant with a red hat and headphones was walking onto the field. That meant there was a commercial break.

“I was open.”

Chris was glaring at him.

“I would have caught that ball. You know I would have caught it.”

Adam suddenly realized he couldn’t look one of his best friends in the eye. “Don’t worry about it. I got the first down.”

Chris wouldn’t go away.

“I got it. Don’t worry,” he repeated.

“Why didn’t you throw that ball to me? You were eying me down for like five seconds. I saw you. Why didn’t you throw it?”

Adam felt a twinge in his stomach, and he knew it wasn’t associated with the tension of the game.

“Tell me why you didn’t throw it.”

“Uh...your favorite play. The deep bomb down the sideline. You’ve got the height advantage on their defender, and we haven’t called that one yet. Let’s do that next.”

Chris glared.

“I’ll go ask Coach Peterson right now. There’s no way he’d say no, not on first down.”

“The winning touchdown pass? Alright, fine. You can make it up to me that way.”

Adam nodded half-heartedly and shrugged his friend off with a sigh of relief. He ran to the sideline and met his quarterbacks coach, who was all for it.

Seconds later, Joey snapped the ball on what would be their last offensive play of the game.

Adam grasped the football with a renewed sense of confidence. He watched the play unfold before him as if he were a mere overseer, only there to ensure that everything went according to plan, and that there was no unblocked linebacker racing towards him and no cornerback smothering No. 86 on his way to the end zone.

Of course there wasn’t.

Chris made a brilliant cut and raced down the sideline. The deep safety couldn’t possibly reach him before he crossed the goal line...

After a game so physical, so emotional and so intense, it was almost ironic the way the football gracefully sailed through the night air in a perfect spiral.

The fans rose to their feet while the ball was still ascending. The ones in the first row leaned over the handrails with their heads craned for a better look. There was a fleeting moment of silence before a thunderous roar of approval echoed around the field.

Adam ran after his teammate with his fist raised. It was 45 yards, but his feet were so light that it felt like 10. He nearly jumped on Chris as they met in the end zone, the stadium lights casting a warm glow over the scene and the fans screaming wildly. Coach Thompson had to stop the whole team from running onto the field, and so they were greeted by one high-five after another on the sideline. His teammates thumped him on the back as he pulled off his sweaty helmet, and he felt like he’d just returned from a far-off battle as the hero of some ancient war.

Before he even realized what was happening, the game was over. They were free.

Those last three minutes flew by faster than any other game in his life. The Racers desperately tried to mount a scoring drive from deep in their own territory. And as the last Hail Mary fell incomplete at the 10, another roar erupted from the crowd and the celebration seemed to begin all over again.

“And that’s it!” Mays announced to the television audience. “The Keystone State Gargoyles have won the contest, 24 – 20, and are going to the national championship for the third time in six years!”

Adam could see it now—thousands of KSU students jumping up and down in their apartments and dorm rooms, with empty soda cans and beer

Fifteen Minutes

bottles littering the floor and the TVs blasting loud as the sportscasters announced that Keystone State was still, indeed, the team to beat in college football.

“All season long, people pointed to the Gargoyles and Sharks as the most complete teams in the country. Well, they’ve both proven themselves today, and we’re in for quite the national championship, don’t you think, Mike?”

“No doubt about it, Corey! And how about Adam Dorsey? Heisman winner?”

“He sure has established himself as the favorite with his performance in the second half,” Cousins remarked. “What a quarterback. What a team. What a game!”

Down on the sideline, fans were stretching their arms over the handrails to give he and his teammates high-fives as they paraded towards the locker room. People were taking pictures of him, of the scoreboard, of the aftermath and the celebration that *he* had caused. There would be a more exclusive celebration tonight, after the media frenzy died down, but that was only a small thought now—he had to claim his prize first.

“Jaden! Jaden, get up here, man!” he called through the crowded locker room ten minutes later.

The scene was nothing like the somber gathering at halftime. He was pushing his way through a crowd of media members and KSU administrators, fighting to get to the tiny and somewhat claustrophobic clearing in the middle. The Mountain Valley Conference commissioner was there, holding a three-foot trophy in his arms. Chris and Deion and Jamal Harris were already waiting with their MVC Champs hats donned.

Everything was a whirlwind as they were presented the trophy. It felt like the Oscars, the Olympic awards ceremony and the post-game coverage of a Super Bowl all rolled into one. Cameras flashed as the commissioner gave a short speech, and Adam hoped the whole world was watching as he lifted the trophy high, then passed it to Jaden, Chris and Joey. Free safety Darius Frazier triumphantly lifted it over his head. Then he passed it to linebacker Lukas Bowser, who grabbed it simultaneously with their other top defender Terrence Porter.

A reporter from SportsNetwork interviewed him right then and there—What was it like? What did this mean to him? What was he thinking when they were down 17 – 3? He couldn’t even think, so he just blurted out words like, “awesome,” “great” and “amazing experience.” This really was an amazing experience. He’d never felt like this before, not in junior high or high school or college. Even when they won the state championship, it wasn’t like this...

As they walked downtown on the way to Terrence Porter’s apartment an hour later, fans cheered and waved and ran up asking for pictures and autographs. The bars were absolutely hopping. Drunken students with beer

cans in their hands meandered down the sidewalk singing fight songs. People were shouting and applauding him from their apartment balconies. It felt like Mardi Gras had come to Pennsylvania.

His girlfriend of two years was waiting in the apartment lobby, and she gave him a long kiss as they embraced. Kelsey Stuart smelled like vanilla, with her long golden-brown hair flowing over her shoulders and a teal Gargoyle claw-print painted on her cheek. No doubt she had been in the front row of the student section hours before the game, staking her seat with friends and cheering him on even as she fell behind by two touchdowns.

They walked up the stairs together, and he received another standing ovation as they entered the spacious apartment. There was more alcohol here than he could ever dream of (and not the cheap stuff you found at frat parties either).

Adam found the perfect spot on a giant leather chair in the living area, and he lost track of time as the night wore on. More people showed up. Deion and Chris were here, and so was Jamal Harris, Joey, Darius Frazier, Lukas Bowser and his girlfriend, *plus* his girlfriend's friend...he had a feeling there were lots of girls here, but that was definitely OK if not planned in the first place.

Hours passed, and he slouched lower and lower in the plush chair as the empty beer bottles piled higher and Kelsey ran her fingers through his hair.

Terrence came over, sat on the couch and asked if they wanted anything else to drink.

"Yeah, yeah," Adam replied. "Whatever, bring it over. So where were you in the first half, huh? I told you your big fat ass couldn't sack their quarterback!"

Terrence laughed out loud. "Took me a half to warm up."

"Yeah, I knew you'd get him," Adam chuckled. "I knew you would, Big T. You were great."

Everyone had been great—hell, they'd played almost as well as he had. Did he finally have a team that respected him enough to give him their best, each and every game? It sure felt that way as his teammates came and went and the hours blurred together. And he was their leader, their king, as he sat here on his throne with his queen. Soon he would lead them onward in battle, on to the national title game and the Southern California Sharks as they completed their quest to conquer the college football landscape.

Nothing could stop him now. He would go undefeated for the rest of his college career, he was sure of it as he threw yet another empty bottle onto the nearest table. He was invincible, the greatest college quarterback ever, a No. 1 draft pick for sure. He had won it all—the treasure was his—and he sure as hell deserved it. Every last bit of it.

Yes, he had won...

He had won.

Thompson's Tangle

Chapter 4

"What the hell is going on out there?"

-- Vince Lombardi

His phone was buzzing.

Adam slowly became aware of his surroundings as warm rays of sunlight crept in through the brown curtains.

He got up on all fours, scanned the room with his head throbbing, and finally located his phone on the nightstand.

"*Fuck,*" he whispered to himself as he stumbled off the bed and rubbed his head. He felt like he'd just been run over a truck. His body was aching from the game and his hangover was the worst. Kelsey rolled over but continued snoozing. He stumbled into the hallway so he wouldn't wake her.

"Hello?" he said groggily.

"Hey, buddy. How's it going?!" Coach Thompson's enthusiastic voice replied.

"Coach? What—er, it's going good, I guess."

"Hey, if you've got an hour or so, there's something I'd like to discuss with you. In my office. Tell you what—I'll pick you up. I'm heading down South Street now. I can be there in ten minutes."

Adam rubbed the crust from his eyes. "Uh..."

"You sound a little out of it," the coach chuckled. "Probably best if I pick you up."

"Uh...I guess. I mean, no, I can come over myself."

"No, no, I insist. I'll be outside your place in ten minutes. See you then!"

Adam ended the call and stared blankly at the screen as he scratched his head. He couldn't quite make sense of things—it was too early. What had just happened? Coach Thompson was coming to pick him up...yeah, that was it...in ten minutes...

Ten minutes?

I'd better get some clothes on. I'll be back before Kelsey even wakes up...

He staggered into the bathroom, shut the door and opened the window. The cold December air was the perfect antidote for his hangover.

Adam flicked on the light and stared into the mirror. He looked like shit. His dark brown hair was pushed every which way. His eyes were red. There

were a couple of odd bumps and cuts on his chest and abs. He needed to shave, too—he didn't want to meet Coach Thompson looking like a slob.

So he wanted to meet with him in his office? His heart seemed to jump with anticipation as he thought about it more and more. The day after he'd completed the season 13 – 0 and landed his team in the national championship? This had to be something good. Maybe they had just decided on the Heisman finalists, and his coach wanted to be the first to tell him?

He shaved quickly, slapped on some deodorant and snuck back into the bedroom to grab his shirt and jeans, being careful not to wake Kelsey. What if she woke to the news that they were headed to New York for the trophy presentation this weekend? He didn't want to tell her until he was absolutely sure. Yeah...he would come right back and she would be the first to know, even before his parents.

Down on the street, Randy Thompson's high-powered white pick-up cruised to a stop on the curb. Adam felt like he was climbing into a monster truck as he hopped into the passenger seat.

The coach's frame looked even bigger sitting in the two-door truck. He wore the same teal ball cap from last night's game, and his muscles bulged in the outstretched arm that guided the steering wheel.

"Have a party last night?" he asked casually as they pulled back into the street lane.

"Yeah," Adam replied, not wishing to go into details.

Thompson grinned. "I wouldn't expect anything less from you guys. Work hard, party hard, Adam...work hard, party hard, that's what I preach."

The truck's engine revved as they turned into campus and climbed a hill.

"You know, Adam, that was a really great performance you put on last night. I don't think I've praised you enough for everything you've done to get us this far. And I want you to know how very honored I am to be your coach."

"Thanks."

"I really mean that, Adam. You've really stepped it up this year. I don't think I've ever been as impressed with any of my players, in college or the NFL."

"Thanks, Coach."

"Now, were your parents at the game last night?"

"No, they couldn't make it. My grandfather had hip replacement surgery yesterday. But they'll obviously be at the national championship."

Coach Thompson seemed to lose his voice for a second as he swallowed.

"The national championship? Well...I hope they get to come down there, Adam, I really do. How are they doing these days? Doing well?"

"Yeah."

"It's a shame they couldn't be here for that performance yesterday. Boy, what a show you put on. I can only imagine how proud they are, Adam."

"Thanks."

Fifteen Minutes

They pulled into the parking lot of the football training complex, and Adam hopped down from the truck.

The head coach's office was located in a spacious corner of the main building, up a wide staircase and through two wood-paneled double doors adorned with a golden nameplate. Inside the room, mahogany bookshelves lined the walls and a glass display featured various trophies and awards from Coach Thompson's playing days. The massive desk was littered with pictures, papers and small statues—the largest frame held a photo of the coach as an offensive lineman decades ago. He was beaming with his teammates and hoisting the Lombardi trophy into the confetti-filled sky.

"So, Adam! I've been thinking," he began as he settled down in the black squishy chair behind his desk. "Have you ever thought about transferring?"

Adam almost missed the seat as he sat down.

"Have I ever—*what?* No!" he gasped, not sure if he should sound surprised, but sounding that way regardless. Did Coach think he wanted to transfer? Is that what he wanted to talk to him about? And if so, where the *hell* did he get that idea?

"Ah," Thompson said, leaning back in the chair thoughtfully. "I think you should transfer."

"What? Why? Coach, I've never wanted to transfer. I've always wanted to be a Gargoyle, I thought you knew that—"

But the head coach merely waved his oversized hand as if he didn't want to hear any of this.

"Of course you always wanted to be a Gargoyle, Adam! I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about what's best for both you *and* the team in the near future. You know, you're so good, Adam, I don't think we've even got room for you here!" he finished, chuckling lightly as if this were some kind of joke.

Adam stared.

"Let's face it. This is just a stepping stone in your career. Pretty soon, you'll be headed to bigger and better things. *That*, right there," (he pointed at the picture with the Lombardi trophy), "is your future, Adam. This place? Well..."

His voice trailed off, and the coach shifted in his seat.

"You know, my son, Danny—he's a pretty damn good quarterback, too. And I think he deserves a shot at the starting position. But you *are* the starter, Adam! And you're a hell of an athlete. So what can we do about this? I mean, can't you see my position?"

And now he chuckled again, looking more and more like a madman to Adam.

"I can't start both of you."

Fear and panic were boiling inside of him like a volcano about to explode.

"I'm not transferring."

“I think that would be the best move for everybody,” Coach Thompson replied, nodding his head as if Adam had just said the exact opposite—“Sure Coach, I’ll transfer!”

Words crept back into his mind from what seemed like a long time ago...

“But my dad wants—”

“You’re full of it, DT. Your dad might be the head coach, but that’s only going to get you so far. He’s in this business to win football games, just like I’m in this business to win football games. And you’re not part of the plan. That’s just how it is.”

His stomach curled into a knot. Had he been wrong?

“I’ll tell you what we’ll do, Adam. Seeing how I’m the head coach here, I think it would be best if Danny stays, and you go somewhere else. That way I can coach my son, and you can make some other coach ridiculously happy by going to their school and winning them a bunch of football games. You’ll both be starters, and everybody will be content,” he finished, as if this all made sense in some sick, twisted way.

“I—I’m not transferring.”

Coach Thompson gazed at him intently for a few seconds, then nodded to himself and rapped his knuckles on the desktop. “Well, Adam, I guess the only question now is *where* you’ll be transferring!”

Adam jumped to his feet.

“That’s crazy. Absolutely crazy, Coach! You want to kick me off the team? Is that what you’re saying?! You want to kick your best player off the team?!”

“Adam, of course not, of course not,” Thompson said delicately, as if he were afraid his quarterback might explode and was trying to cool him down. “You’re transferring. Just *transferring*.”

He could see the stress in his coach’s face. He wasn’t acting. This wasn’t a joke. He was dead serious.

“But that’s the same thing!” he screamed, unable to keep his anger inside any longer. “Whether you make me transfer or not, you’re still saying that you don’t want me on the team anymore!!”

“Adam, it’s not like that,” Thompson sputtered desperately, holding out his hand.

“I JUST WENT 13 – 0 AS A SECOND-YEAR STARTER FOR ONE OF THE BEST TEAMS IN THE COUNTRY AND YOU WANT TO KICK ME OFF THE TEAM?! I TOOK OVER FOR DEREK LAST YEAR AND WENT 10 – 2, AND NOW I JUST LED YOUR TEAM TO THE NATIONAL TITLE GAME, AND YOU’RE GOING TO REWARD ME BY KICKING ME OFF THE TEAM?!”

“Now, Adam—”

“I see how it is up here, Coach!” he shouted, drowning out his feeble attempts to argue back. “Now I see why there’s so many nasty rumors flying around about you! It’s not just the recruiting violations, is it? *Is it?! No, it’s*

Fifteen Minutes

about cheating the players after they get here, for your own good, huh? It's about back-stabbing, lying, stealing—"

"I DO NOT CHEAT MY PLAYERS!!" Thompson screamed, thrusting himself up from his chair and slamming his hands on the desk. "I RUN A CLEAN PROGRAM, AND IT'S SELFISH LITTLE PRICKS LIKE YOU THAT GET ME IN TROUBLE!!"

His face had turned beet red. Adam had never seen him so vicious.

"Now, Adam, we can do this the easy way, or we can do this the hard way," he spat. "I am trying to protect your reputation as a college football player! That's why I want you to transfer! But if you can't cooperate, for your own good, then you are going to leave me with no choice but to ruin the reputation of this entire team! *Are you going to make me do that?!*"

They stared at each other across the wide desktop like enemies, for what seemed like minutes.

"I'm not transferring."

"Then we're doing this the hard way—"

But Adam already had his back turned and was headed out the door.

He was startled when he realized that three assistant coaches and the secretary were all eavesdropping in the hallway, but he was too pissed off to care. Offensive coordinator Tim Bauer jumped back in surprise as he flung the door open, and they made eye contact for a second before Adam hurried down the steps.

No one said anything to him as he burst into the lobby and out the door. He was angry—angrier than he'd ever been in his life. He'd just won the MVC Championship and a berth in the national title game. This couldn't be happening *now*...

He felt a strange impulse to clutch something big as he stormed back to his apartment. He wanted his friends. He wanted his girlfriend. That's what he would do—he would take off his jacket and crawl back into bed with Kelsey, pretending like he'd never woken up and nothing had happened. Then they would get naked and make out, and that would make him forget about everything else.

Kelsey was still asleep when he got back.

He could crawl into bed with her right now, just like he wanted. It was there for the taking. But that felt like a cowardly thing to do for some reason. So instead he ended up sitting on the living room couch and staring at the dirty stained carpet. Thoughts whizzed through his mind, and he felt more alone than he ever remembered feeling.

"Let him go for it...he's your starting quarterback, let him win the damn game..."

"Have you ever thought about transferring? I think you should transfer..."

Luke Fetkovich

“Now, Adam, we can do this the easy way or we can do this the hard way...then we’re doing this the hard way...the hard way...the—”

A sudden thought hit him like lightning. He bolted to his feet, searching frantically for the remote. He flipped through the channels and found SportsNetwork. A Sunday afternoon basketball game was on—the station’s news program wouldn’t air for another three hours. Unless it was on SportsNetwork Plus...

He changed the channel, and two analysts stared back at him. They were discussing the pro football games airing right now. He caught his name on the news stream at the bottom of the screen, and his heart skipped a beat, but then he realized it was just his stats from last night’s game. There was nothing...not yet, anyway.

No, Coach wouldn’t do it. He *couldn’t*. And he was overreacting about what had happened in the office. But he still felt the need to keep the TV on with the volume down as he began texting everyone he could think of.

* * *

“He did what?!”

It was comforting to hear Deion’s mellow voice over the phone, although his receiver was just as shocked as he was.

This was the seventh teammate he’d talked to since he’d arrived back at the apartment, not to mention his parents. Kelsey was sitting on the couch and surveying the TV in case anything popped up.

“I can’t believe that, Adam,” Deion went on. “I mean, I sort of can, ‘cause I wouldn’t put it past Coach Thompson, but...wow. That’s crazy, dude.”

“But what do you think I should do? Just ignore him and act like nothing happened?! That’s pretty much what my parents told me to do, but I don’t think it’s gonna work—”

“Nah, that won’t work, trust me. You gotta make him see that starting DT instead of you is a bad idea. But *hell*, that shouldn’t be too hard, should it?” he chuckled.

“That’s what worries me! He knows how good I am! So what’s the point in arguing?! He’s obviously made up his mind. He’d rather have his shitty little son start instead of win national championships with me!”

“Well, I don’t know, Adam. Our position coach hasn’t said anything to us wide-outs about a quarterback switch, so maybe it’s not a done deal or anything—”

“What?!”

Deion stopped short as Adam yelled at his girlfriend. She had just shouted his worst fears.

“What?!” he repeated as he stomped into the living room.

Fifteen Minutes

“It’s two topics away,” Kelsey continued, pointing at the lime green SportsNetwork sidebar that displayed upcoming news.

“*Turn on SportsNetwork! Turn it on right now!* There’s something about me! Quick! It’s coming up in a few seconds.”

“Alright man, I am.”

Right then, nothing existed except the two of them and the TV. The anchor’s chatter seemed to drag on forever and ever. Every video clip felt like an eternity.

“Speaking of which, we have some breaking news coming in just now from Keystone State’s athletic department regarding starting quarterback Adam Dorsey. SportsNetwork reporter Jeff Regata has more. Jeff?”

The screen switched to a stately man in a suit and tie.

“Thank you, Sarah. This may come as a shock to many in the college football world, but the athletic department has just released a statement announcing that Adam Dorsey has been removed from the team—”

Adam punched the wall so hard that his knuckles started bleeding.

“—for a violation of team rules. Now, Keystone State isn’t saying exactly *what* the violation was, but I recently spoke to an inside source who seemed to hint that Dorsey was caught with marijuana after last night’s game. He was very reluctant to get into specifics, even though I made it clear that he would remain anonymous. But all signs point towards this being about drug possession.”

“Thanks, Jeff,” the anchor continued. “We also have a statement that was released a few minutes ago by Keystone State’s athletic director.”

The broadcast switched to a fancy orange box with the athletic director’s statement on the left and a picture of him on the right. The anchor read the words as they flew on and off the screen.

“Keystone State prides itself on the integrity of its football program, and we hold all athletes accountable for any violations in team policy, regardless of their popularity or athletic ability.

“As such, we regret to announce that Adam Dorsey has been suspended from the team for a serious policy violation. He will not be expected to participate in the upcoming championship game, and we will review his status in the upcoming weeks and make a final decision at a later point.

“It’s unfortunate that a model student-athlete would engage in behavior that is damaging to the team, but we hope this serves as a lesson to other players.”

The news anchor reappeared, looking absolutely thrilled at being the first to report this exciting update. Adam wanted to smack her in the face. He suddenly realized that Deion was talking to him.

“Adam? Adam, are you still there, man?”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“Well, I guess it’s time to freak out,” his teammate chuckled ominously.

What was he trying to do, cheer him up?

“Deion, that’s complete bullshit, that whole marijuana thing,” he retorted. “It’s all lies! You know that, right?!”

“Of course it’s made up, dude! You know most of the guys on the team wouldn’t believe it for a second.”

“Yeah, and what about the ten million other people that are watching TV right now? You think they know that? You think some—hold on a second—”

There was an incoming call. It was Danny Thompson.

“Hold on, I’ll call you right back,” he spat as he switched lines.

“Sure, man.”

“*This is all your fault, you little pussy!* It’s all your damn fault! You should have jumped off a cliff or something when you were little, you good-for-nothing, cock-sucking—”

“That’s no way to treat your new starting quarterback,” DT jeered through the phone.

Adam paused, only because he was searching for a nasty retort to throw back at him.

“I told you that you should have left early for the draft, Adam.”

“I wouldn’t have left until after the championship game anyway, so what does it matter?!”

“My dad would have probably let you play out the season if he knew you were leaving, just to save face.”

“Oh, just to save face, huh? Well guess what, DT? You can tell him I’m going to fuck up his face so bad that he won’t even recognize it when I’m done. You and your dad are going down. Just wait. Just you wait.”

“How exactly are we going down?”

“You...you can’t get away with this,” Adam stuttered.

“We’ll see about that.”

“OK, so why did you call me? Just to have a laugh, I guess?”

“Not exactly. Just wanted to let you know that my dad’s in this business to get me into the NFL, just like I’m here to get into the NFL. And, uh, *you’re* not part of the plan.”

Adam hurled his phone at the wall, and it went spinning behind the couch.

“Good luck trying to get ahold of me now, you asshole!” he spat as he stormed down the hall to his bedroom. Kelsey ran after him.

“That was DT, wasn’t it?” she asked cautiously after he’d collapsed on the bed.

“Yeah, and I can’t decide what to make of his initials anymore. Should I call him ‘Dick Turd’ or ‘Douchebag Tw—Terd...fuck, I don’t know. What the *fuck!*”

He pounded his fist on the mattress.

“It’s not his fault,” Kelsey whispered. “You shouldn’t blame him.”

Fifteen Minutes

“It’s *not his fault?! Kelsey, it’s all his fault!* If the little prick hadn’t been born, none of this would be happening...oh, don’t you start now, too! You can’t possibly think—”

But Kelsey had tears streaming from her eyes. She backed out of the room and quietly closed the door.

Adam shook his head and closed his eyes. He was losing his mind, and so was his girlfriend.

He lay there on the bed, not wanting to get up for a long, long time. Nasty thoughts chased each other through his mind as he mulled what to do next.

He could go to the team meeting planned for tomorrow. Yeah...he would go to the meeting and act like nothing had happened. Plan A. And if that didn’t work he would think of something else.

Really, they weren’t just going to throw him out the minute he stepped inside, were they?

This couldn’t be real.

The Shoe Room

Chapter 5

"The road to Easy Street goes through the sewer."

--John Madden

"I won't let them throw you out," Joey promised as they walked into the football complex the next morning. "You're my quarterback, and you just won us the MVC Championship. As long as I'm here, they're not going to touch you."

"Thanks, Joey."

Adam had gotten ten hours of sleep since the craziness of last night, and he felt a renewed sense of confidence. His parents had helped him decide that his best option was to attend the meeting, and then talk to the other coaches—the ones who had recruited him and mentored him these past two years. Pat Peterson was at the top of that list.

They walked through the lobby and past a giant mural of the Gargoyles' game-winning touchdown in the national championship three years ago. Through the double-doors, down the spacious hallway...

Adam had that knot in his stomach again as they neared the meeting room, but before they could reach it, a door opened nearby and his quarterbacks coach stumbled out. He glanced up, saw them and froze. Adam couldn't help but freeze in return, as a dozen thoughts about what to do next invaded his mind.

"Dorsey! *You can't be here!*"

Coach Peterson looked up and down the hall frantically.

"I...Coach, I have to be here. It's a mandatory team meeting," he responded, going along with Plan A—act like nothing had happened.

They stared each other down, and Adam felt a sudden surge of power. Coach Peterson had embraced him like his own son these past two years. He would not go along with Randy Thompson's plan, he just knew it. The man had too much integrity.

"Adam, come here. Quickly!" he said decidedly, and grabbed his quarterback by the arm. Adam glanced back at his trusty center, and Joey truly looked like he wanted to say something—his mouth was half open—but he simply stood there, dumbfounded, until he disappeared from view.

Fifteen Minutes

They were heading towards the equipment room, and Adam suddenly found himself surrounded by washing machines and dirty laundry hampers. The little equipment manager, Brad, was leaning over the table in the middle of the room as he screwed a face mask onto a helmet.

“Oh, hey Coach!” he said as he looked up and saw them.

“Brad, I’d like to keep Dorsey in here while I attend the meeting,” Peterson declared urgently as he led Adam deeper into the room. “Is that alright with you?”

“Yeah, sure!” Brad answered. “Always love company!”

Peterson wasn’t even paying attention anymore—he was marching purposefully towards a small side room.

“In here...*quick!*”

Adam was nearly pushed into the room as his coach blurted out instructions over the loud hum of the laundry machines.

“Just stay here until the meeting is over, and then I’ll come back for you. And make sure no one sees you! If they find out I’m helping you, my head will be next on the chopping block. Just sit tight. I’m going to close the door...”

The white door slammed in Adam’s face, and he saw his coach glance around nervously through the small door window. Then he disappeared around the corner.

He turned, and realized he was inside what Brad liked to refer to as “the shoe room.” It was a musty, claustrophobic space for storing extra equipment and athletic apparel. Massive teal game trunks were lined against the wall, unused helmets were piled in the corner and the shelves were stocked with orange shoeboxes.

He got restless after a few minutes and climbed onto one of the larger trunks so he could sit down. He dangled his feet over the edge and gazed around the room, as the steady buzz of the dryers and the *slosh! slosh!* of the washing machines throbbed in the distance.

Peterson returned sooner than he was expecting. He snuck back into the room, closed the door and sighed. He leaned against the wall and removed his glasses, wiping them on his Gargoyle tee.

Adam realized for the first time just how tired he looked. His lanky figure didn’t seem so tall now that he was sitting high on the trunk. His hair looked grayer and thinner than ever, and he could have passed as a grandfather with the wrinkles on his forehead and fingers.

“Well, Adam, let’s talk.”

There was a pause. Peterson rubbed his eyes and put his glasses back on.

“Do you know why you were recruited here three years ago?” he asked softly.

Adam didn’t quite know what to make of the question. “To play football for the Gargoyles.”

“Yes...and no. You see, Adam, Randy has always envisioned his son playing quarterback for Keystone State, where he could personally train him and protect him from anything that might hinder his success at the collegiate level.”

Adam waited. He'd assumed this much—Coach Thompson was ditching him in favor of his son.

“Danny's success here is crucial to his future,” Peterson went on. “Unlike yourself, he currently lacks the fundamentals necessary to be a starter at the professional level. He has difficulty reading complex defenses. He lacks downfield accuracy. I'm sure you're quite aware of all this.

“The problem is, Danny also isn't very bright. He's a slacker, and he expects other to do the work for him. This is why his dad will be the one who gets him a job, and he'll do it through his contacts in the NFL. Coach Thompson's played on two Super Bowl-winning teams, coached three different NFL teams, led one to the Lombardi trophy, and has now brought our football program back to its elite status. You can imagine the kind of power he has, and the strings he can pull to get his son on an NFL roster.”

“That's crazy,” Adam scoffed. “He's not good enough to be a starter.”

“Oh, no,” Coach Peterson agreed. “He will never be a starter. Even someone as powerful as our head coach can't pull that off. But he can get him a place as a back-up, if he works hard enough in college. Which is *why* his success here is crucial.

“Coach Thompson is a pretty damn good coach, Adam. He knows the obstacles that must be overcome to ensure success. And if it all works out? They'll be one happy family, with Danny making a hefty sum as a back-up while his dad continues to coach. He won't be a nobody. He'll honor the family name. And this is the only way that it's possible.”

“And I got in the way,” Adam remarked proudly. “I'm screwing everything up, so that's why I have to go, isn't it? DT's only a year younger than me, so—”

“—he would only have one year of eligibility remaining after you graduate,” Coach Peterson finished. “And Randy knows that's not enough time. He wants three years, and he's going to get three years.”

Adam stared at the concrete floor and the tips of his sneakers as they dangled from the trunk. “So why bother recruiting me in the first place?”

“Well, Adam,” Peterson began, but then he paused. His long fingers were pressed against his face, and he stared at Adam with a look that seemed to evoke both admiration and pity. “You were *part* of the plan, as a matter of fact.”

“I...what?”

“You were recruited to be Danny's back-up. Last season, if you recall, you were a red-shirt freshman. Danny was just a red-shirt. Derek Bridges, the senior that you filled in for last year, was supposed to go out on a high note,

Fifteen Minutes

leaving the void for Danny to fill in his first season of eligibility. You were then supposed to be the back-up for your three remaining years.

“Well, then Bridges got hurt in the first game, and we had to put you in or throw Danny into the fire, which Coach Thompson did not want to do. He would never run the risk of embarrassing his son by starting him before he was ready.

“So you know what happened then. Ten wins as a freshman, 28 touchdown passes, nearly leading us to a BCS bowl game. And then your spectacular play in the Beach Bowl against Arizona. Randy had no choice but to name you the starter this year. How could he start his son now, with the way you were playing?”

“They’d call him biased.”

“Oh, they would call him much worse than that!” Peterson replied, waving his arm in the air. “Starting his own son over the guy who saved our season last year? You can imagine the fall-out. They’d call the program corrupt, his national image would take a hit, and it would probably even hurt our recruiting! It ruined his whole plan.”

“Small comfort,” answered Adam, “but it’s nice to know.”

“The only way he could fix things,” his coach continued, “was to take you out of the equation altogether. Either have you transfer, or...well, you know what he did.”

There was an awkward pause, but Adam felt like things were starting to make sense.

“So why not just can me before the season started?” he asked resentfully. “Or better yet, why not just kick me off after the championship game in January? You’d think he would at least give me a chance to win the title, after everything I’ve done. Or is he that much of an asshole?”

He’d never called his head coach anything like that before, and now he was doing it in front of his quarterbacks coach.

“It’s all part of the plan,” Peterson said solemnly. “I only wish I could have stopped it.”

“What plan?”

“Well, of course, if Randy had to start you this year, he would take advantage of it, wouldn’t he? He would use you, Adam. Start you all 12 games and let you reach your full potential, throwing for record numbers of touchdowns and passing yardage. We couldn’t be stopped. *I* even knew that, and I am a coach! It’s my job to keep my players humble and cautious.

“Adam, this is the best offense I’ve ever coached—ever, and I’ve been here for 20 years. Thompson was kidding himself if he didn’t think you’d lead us to the championship, and that’s exactly what he was counting on.”

His blue eyes fixed on Adam, and he waited, as if expecting him to solve the riddle.

“But he never intended on having me *start* in the championship? He always wanted DT to be the quarterback who won it.”

“Exactly,” Peterson whispered. “You see, Adam, while you deserve credit for landing us in this game, very few people will care about that now. The talk shows and sporting news are going to focus on Danny—on how an inexperienced freshman will handle being thrown to the wolves on a national stage. He will get the positive media exposure, especially if we win the game on the strength of our defense, which is what Randy’s hoping for. They’ll still talk about you, obviously, but the only thing they’ll care about is how you managed to hide a drug habit and what a sad example you are for the rest of the college football world.”

“And so if we win the game, he’ll already have a national championship under his belt,” Adam thought aloud. “But he never would have gotten there by himself. He never would have gotten there without me.”

“He will be the new Keystone State hero—the guy who filled your shoes and finished the job that you couldn’t,” agreed his coach. “Nobody will care that he only threw for a hundred yards and no touchdowns.”

Now there was only silence, besides the faint buzz of the machines in the adjacent room. Adam felt like a fly trapped in a spider web, carefully constructed to catch him off-guard and hold him there while the insect sucked him dry. And there was nothing he could do about it now.

“I tried saving you, Adam, I really did,” Peterson went on, and now he sounded like a guilty father. “If I were a better man, I wouldn’t stand for this. I’d quit. But I can’t. I have a family to provide for, and a good salary here. I hope you understand.”

What was he supposed to say? “*Yeah, I completely understand?*” What a lie that would be. If he were in his coach’s shoes, he’d quit for sure. But maybe it wasn’t that simple. So he just nodded.

“It’s not my program,” Peterson stressed. “I’m just a cog in the wheel—that’s become very clear to me these past couple of days. Adam, if you only knew how many people are in on this—”

“The athletic director?” he guessed. “I never liked him to begin with.”

“Sure,” his coach nodded. “And our very own offensive coordinator, Tim Bauer. And our sports information director. I have a hunch the school president’s helping him out too, although he can keep his profile nice and low since he doesn’t work directly with the team. Randy’s got this entire university wrapped around his finger, Adam, and the worst part about it is, I don’t think anyone seems to mind.”

He envisioned his offensive coordinator in a whole new light now. He hated his guts, too. He’d never disliked any of his coaches, and now he hated most of them with a passion. How long had they been in on this? Since his arrival three springs ago? Had they known all along that he would never be a

Fifteen Minutes

four-year starter while they praised him with their fake smiles and handshakes? It made him feel sick.

“Nobody in this school’s administration is man enough to go against the coach that took our football program from rags to riches,” Peterson explained. “His record is 92 – 16, Adam. Nearly a hundred wins in just eight years! With a record like that, and two national championships to boot, nobody will dare question him. He’s brought our schools lots of money, Adam, and in this business, money talks. And I’m so sorry this had to happen to you under my watch. I hope you can forgive me.”

He nodded again, realizing for the first time that he wasn’t the only one hurt by Coach Thompson’s schemes.

Pat Peterson looked like he was finished lecturing. And so Adam put his anger aside and asked the question he knew he must.

“So...what do I do now?”

“You transfer to a lower division, win them the next two national titles, and show everyone where you really belong—as a starting quarterback in the NFL.”

“But everyone thinks I’m smoking pot. It was all over SportsNetwork last night.”

But Peterson waved his hand. “That won’t stop schools from recruiting you because A, it’s not true, and there’s no evidence of it. B, you’re just too talented. And C, you’re going to tell them the real story of what happened after you leave here. Which brings me to another point.”

The coach shifted uneasily against the wall.

“Until this whole thing blows over, Randy will try and keep you as far away from the media as possible. He *will* grant you a release from the team, but not for a few weeks. That way, our sports information department can control you. It’s his way of making sure you keep your mouth shut.”

“Which I won’t,” Adam stated defiantly.

“You will until you leave here,” Peterson ordered. “I would strongly advise you not to try anything brash, Adam, for your own safety. Remember, as long as you’re enrolled at this university, Randy and his partners have access to you, and they’re powerful people with an agenda.”

“So you’re saying I can’t just pack up and leave now? ‘Cause that’s really what I want to do.”

“You have to finish your classes,” his coach insisted. “Take your finals, get your grades. Then you can worry about transferring for the spring semester. By that time Randy will have granted you your release, because the major media outlets will have moved on to a different story.”

“You don’t think they’ll want to update their viewers when they hear what I have to say?” Adam asked bitterly.

“But you’re still outnumbered ten to one. You will be the only person telling that story, while Randy, and our athletic director, and our school

president, and countless others will deny everything. And I warn you, Adam, as a friend, that you might be better off saying nothing publicly. People might think you're lying, so that other schools will offer you a scholarship. Save the real story for the dozens of coaches who I'm sure will be knocking on your door over winter break. Don't worry about the media. They're not worth it."

Yet he still felt like it *was* worth it, if only to get revenge. That was all he could think about now—revenge on Coach Thompson and the whole corrupt school. He wasn't going to a lower division, that much he was sure of. He would make the jump to the NFL, although he was kidding himself if he didn't think his draft stock had just plummeted.

Peterson glanced at his watch. "I've got to go," he said regretfully.

Adam jumped off the giant trunk and made for the door, but his coach held out his hand.

"Wait until I'm gone. I don't want to be seen with you. I'm on thin ice already, after the past few days."

He reached for the doorknob, stopped and turned. The quarterback and mentor exchanged a meaningful glance. Adam couldn't find anything to say, even though he knew this might be his last chance in person.

"Good luck at your new school," Peterson said softly. "I wish you the very, very best. I'll be watching your games when I have the chance, I promise."

Adam nodded once more, hoping that would be good enough, because there was simply no way to describe his mixed emotions.

Pat Peterson finally turned his back and walked out the door. Adam stood alone in the shoe room, absorbing everything they had just discussed. After five minutes, he calmly walked out of the building and never looked back.

An Unexpected Arrival

Chapter 6

"The measure of who we are is what we do with what we have."

--Vince Lombardi

It was over.

Everything they had worked towards, all those happy memories of late-night movies and cuddling under the sheets. All the post-game parties and the lazy summer beach trips. There wouldn't be any more of that for him. Not with Kelsey, anyway.

Adam was slumped on his bed at his parents' house in Rochester, New York, twiddling his phone between his fingers and thinking about everything that had transpired the night before.

"I just don't think it's a good idea, if you're going to be transferring to a different school," she'd insisted over the phone.

"But we can still be together! We can still hang out in the offseason and during holidays. I'll call you every week. How about that? I'll promise to call you at least once a week."

"Oh, Adam, get real. You know what college is like. I don't want a long-distance relationship right now. I want someone that I can actually see more than a few times a year. And I've had a good time with you the last two years, and I love you, hun, I really do. But I'm just not committed enough to keep it going with you off to another school. Trust me, I'm doing this because I don't want to hurt your feelings later on down the road."

"Oh, well, that makes me feel a lot better! You've had a good time with me? That's what this is all about, huh? You want a man to tote around town and take to parties, and get with in bed whenever you feel like it, and now that I won't be around, there's no reason for you to keep me? I see how it is."

"Hun, don't take it that way—"

"Don't call me 'hun!' I'm sick of your name-calling! You're a seductive little bitch is what you are!"

"Oh, that's real mature, Adam. Real mature. I feel bad for the next girl you decide to date."

"And I feel bad for you, because you're a pathetic little tramp, and that's all you'll ever be!"

And then he'd hung up, and it was over. Just like that. Coach Thompson had taken his football team from him, and now he'd taken his girlfriend, too.

He threw his smartphone into the air. The moonlight caught the tiny device as it hung suspended beside his window for a brief second before landing in his hands. Outside, there was nothing but dark shadows and their endless backyard as it stretched to the woods.

He remembered back when he was a kid. His dad used to play catch with him in that yard, teaching him the fundamentals of quarterbacking and helping him learn the tricks of the trade. During high school, they'd talk for hours about the previous night's football game—what he'd done right and what he'd screwed up. Then they would shuffle back to the house through the autumn leaves, following the delicious scent of his mom's homemade turkey.

Life was so carefree back then—hanging out with his dad or his high school friends, playing catch in the backyard and watching the trees paint a colorful picture in the sloping hills as summer changed to autumn. Everything had fallen into place exactly as he'd imagined, and maybe he'd taken that for granted. Maybe that's what made this all so hard.

The door opened, and light filled the dark bedroom.

"I'm making dinner for you," Michelle Dorsey announced as she surveyed him from the hallway.

"Don't bother," Adam groaned. "I don't have a life anymore, so why waste your time feeding me? I'll just sit up here and rot."

His mom frowned. "Honey, you really should get out of this room. Why don't you come downstairs and look over the information from these coaches—"

"I'm not going. I've already told you. I don't want to play for *any* of them."

"Oh, stop sulking. It won't do you any good. You need to decide on a school and get settled in. Then you can get out of this frame of mind you've been—"

"Go decide on a school for me then," Adam interrupted. "I really don't care. They're all the same to me."

"Sweetheart, listen to me. There's nearly been a line out our front door with all the coaches who want to recruit you. It's your responsibility to return the favor and choose the school you think is best. I can't do it for you. Now, dinner will be ready in half an hour. I'll see you downstairs."

She didn't bother to close the door behind her. Adam hated that—he really didn't want to get off the bed. Instead he stared at the ceiling fan and listened to the raindrops as they pounded against the window. It was a warm night for January, and the icy rain came down in droves.

He found the remote buried beneath his sheets and flicked on the TV. A debate show titled *The Ball's in Your Court* was running on SportsNetwork.

Fifteen Minutes

“—every single FCS school is out to get this kid! There hasn’t been this much hype surrounding a transfer in years! Do you really think those schools would go to these lengths to recruit a troublemaker?”

Adam froze. They were talking about him.

“But Jerry, my point is, we’re still talking about a guy who was good enough to win the Heisman and *still* got released by the Gargoyles,” a large man countered. “I know Keystone State won’t publicly state why he was kicked off. But the administrators know they have to give the media something, and I think we can all agree they’ve dropped breadcrumbs indicating that he was caught with marijuana. And if he was willing to break one team rule, how do I know he wasn’t using steroids as well?”

“But you *don’t* know, Mel, that’s my point,” the skinnier anchor with neatly-trimmed hair and glasses argued back. “There have been instances the past few weeks where we’ve heard rumors that this stuff isn’t true. And let me remind you that Randy Thompson would have incentive to frame Dorsey like this, because his son is now the starter. Just yesterday, during national championship media day, a wide receiver from Keystone State said he didn’t believe any of this stuff—”

“I believe the player you’re referring to is Chris Cook? You can’t take his word for this, Jerry, he was one of Dorsey’s best friends on the team!”

“But he’s not the only one,” Jerry stressed. “There have been others. The bigger question, in my eyes, is whether or not Dorsey will *want* to transfer to a lower division. Because he’ll lose a year if he stays at the top level.”

“NCAA rules require an athlete to sit out a year, unless he transfers to a lower division,” Mel explained casually while nodding his head. “And since Dorsey’s already used his red-shirt, he’d only have one year of eligibility at a big school. But if he transfers down, he’d have two. I think we’re in agreement that transferring down is the best option for him, Jerry, because nobody’s going to spend a high draft pick on him now.”

A bell rang, and the host appeared. “Well, we can agree to disagree on the subject of Adam Dorsey, but our next topic is tonight’s national championship match-up,” she announced. “Quite a lot to discuss here! The undefeated tilt, the Gargoyles’ quarterback situation and the high-profile coaches. Mel, the ball’s in your court first.”

“I think I have to start with the quarterback situation,” Mel chortled.

An excited butterfly awakened in Adam’s chest—he’d forgotten that today was the day. The game would start in half an hour.

* * *

“Where’s the remote?” he questioned hastily as he entered the kitchen.

“Over by the fridge,” Michelle answered as she ladled chicken soup into a bowl. “I wasn’t sure if you’d be interested in that,” she added cautiously.

“Oh, yeah,” Adam drawled. “I’d love to see them lose. Can’t wait.”

He grabbed a Coke from the refrigerator, took the bowl of soup, and sat down on a stool at the counter with the flip-down kitchen flat-screen straight ahead.

Sharks 7, Gargoyles 0. Perfect start.

Danny Thompson had stepped onto the field for his first snap as a starter. Adam stared at his tiny image and gleefully envisioned how nervous he must be.

A sack on the first play.

He banged his fist excitedly on the bar, causing his spoon to shiver in the bowl. It felt so good to see DT like this—on the ground, aching, and scared that he was going to lose the game for his team.

14 – 0 Sharks.

He slurped the last bit of chicken soup and watched greedily as DT threw an interception on the next possession. He wanted more and more. If only they could lose the game by 100.

Yet as he gazed at the TV with the lopsided score blaring in his eyes, he realized he’d never felt this way before. Ever. He wanted his team to get killed. He wanted to see Coach Thompson and DT stuttering in the post-game press conference, wishing to themselves that he was still on the team, because then the outcome would have been different.

But even so, a twinge of guilt flickered inside of him as he thought of Chris, Deion, Joey and all his other friends who were losing the biggest game of their lives. And he wanted that. He *wanted* them to lose. Well, he didn’t, really—he wanted Coach Thompson and DT and offensive coordinator Tim Bauer to lose. He wanted Thompson to get fired, and for the new coach to reinstate him, concede that there was a big mistake, and then make everybody play the game over again with him as the quarterback. But that was impossible.

“Adam?”

“What?”

“There’s somebody here to see you.”

He groaned. “Who is it now? Tell them I’m not home.”

“I think it’s the coach from that one Catholic school. The one you talked to on the phone yesterday,” his mom called as she hustled into the foyer. “He said he was going to try and stop by today.”

Adam stared at his empty soup bowl, cursed under his breath and got up. *So the Catholic school coach actually made the effort to come here? I can’t just brush him off. Now I have to waste more time pretending like I’m interested. Great! It just gets better and better.*

He crept down the hall and leaned against the doorframe marking the entrance into the foyer. His mom opened the door, and he saw a black man standing on the doorstep. He was soaked from head to foot, and wore a black

Fifteen Minutes

raincoat and matching black ball cap with a green and yellow logo embroidered on the front.

“Mrs. Dorsey?”

“Come in, come in!” his mom gasped, and she hurried the man into the house.

He stepped onto the large area rug and removed his soaking-wet cap, revealing a shiny bald head. Raindrops shimmered on his neatly-trimmed beard. There were some gray hairs here and there, hinting that he was probably past 50.

The coach glanced in his direction for a second, but didn’t address him.

“Mrs. Dorsey, I’ll be taking my shoes off, if you don’t mind. I don’t want to dirty your floor any more, seeing how I will most definitely be dampening it.”

“Oh, not a problem at all. And please, call me Michelle. Can I offer you a towel, or possibly some coffee, Mr...?”

“Morgan,” the man replied. “Teddy Morgan.”

“Mr. Morgan?” she finished as she helped him take off his jacket.

“I’d love some coffee,” the coach answered. “Thank you.”

“Adam, come and introduce yourself,” his mom called as she hung the jacket on the coat rack.

“Hi,” he said uneasily as he approached the man.

“Adam, Teddy Morgan,” he replied, extending his arm for a firm handshake. “I am sorry I’m a bit late. But as I was in the area, I thought it would be prudent to make a stop today, since I’m sure you are eager to make a decision about your future. And I apologize for interrupting the championship game.”

The man waited for his response, and Adam felt like he was trying to read his thoughts and figure out whether or not he even cared about the game, or who he was rooting for.

“I honestly don’t care,” he answered. “It’s not a big deal to me. They’re losing anyway. The game’s pretty much over.”

He’d had to catch himself there. He’d almost said, “*We’re losing.*” He couldn’t think like that anymore.

The coach simply nodded.

“We can go in the living room,” Adam suggested, and he led the way over to the sitting area near the fireplace.

He and the coach sat on opposite chairs in the dark room, with a wide coffee table between them and the only light emanating from the nearby kitchen. His mom had lit a fire for the other coaches, but she was busy preparing coffee now.

“Well, Adam, I’m sure you know why I’m here,” Coach Morgan began as he leaned back in his armchair. “So let me cut to the chase and ask you what

you think of becoming a St. Bruno Beaver and playing football for our school in southwestern Pennsylvania.”

Wow—he’d thrown him for a loop there. He was expecting the same old campaign. “*You know, Adam, our school is one of the top competitors in the Football Championship Subdivision...Adam, we’ve got so many great receivers on our team, we need two different starting line-ups! Imagine what our offense would be like with you at quarterback!...Hey Adam, let me tell you about our stadium. It’s the biggest in the entire conference...*”

But this coach sat down, and the first thing out of his mouth was, “What do *you* think of becoming part of our team?” It wasn’t about them. It wasn’t about their school. It was about him. He kind of liked that. But he had no idea what to say.

“Did you receive the information packet we mailed to you?”

Adam shook his head. He was reluctant to listen to recruiters in person, let alone something that came through the mail.

Coach Morgan seemed to read his mind. “Well, I should have expected that, with the amount of interest that you’ve been receiving in recent weeks,” he said, waving his hand as if dismissing any notion that he was disappointed.

“As I stated yesterday, St. Bruno’s Academy is a private Benedictine university near the town of Waddlesburg, Pa. We offer a quality education and superb athletic programs to students who enroll at our school. Now, you will—as I’m sure you expect—be offered a full scholarship to play for our team. The other coaches and I have researched your background, your highlights and all of that. We feel like you can contribute to our team from the get-go, with your experience and knowledge of the quarterback position. And on top of that, you will not be required to sit out a year, since you’ll be transferring to a lower division.”

Adam figured now would be a good time to explain his side of the story, just like Coach Peterson had told him to. He’d explained everything to all the other recruiters, but Coach Morgan simply waved his hand when he started talking.

“Forgive me for interrupting, Adam, but I don’t care about any of that.”

This was the first time a coach had ever told him *that*.

“You...you don’t?”

“Adam, if I’m here then I obviously want you on my team. I’ve already heard your side of things from my colleagues. Whatever happened between you and Coach Thompson, save that for a different time. I would be glad to discuss that with you in private, if you like, but only after you become a member of our team. What I care about right now is, what do you think of our school?”

Adam paused. He fidgeted uncomfortably in the chair. His mom bought him a few extra seconds when she entered the room with a steaming cup of coffee.

Fifteen Minutes

“Thank you,” Coach Morgan repeated, and she left for the kitchen.

What do I say? I still haven't got a clue what this school's like. I'll just tell him the truth...yeah...there's nothing else but to go for it...he doesn't seem like he'll be mad at me if I just tell the truth.

“Actually, Coach, I have to be honest with you. I don't think I can play for an FCS school. That's just not where I feel I belong. I don't want to brag or anything, but I feel like my level of play is more in line with, you know...bigger schools.”

“Being in the FCS division does not mean that we can't compete with the big schools,” the coach stressed. “What it means is that we play in a different league, with a playoff instead of bowl games. That's about it. Yes, most FCS schools don't make as much money from their athletic programs. We're one of those schools. Most of us do not get the national media exposure that the bowls schools get. You can count us in that category as well. But every school is different.

“At St. Bruno's, you'll find that we place greater importance on your academic life, but that we're also passionate about our football program. And while we do not invest a lot of money into athletics, our teams—especially football—have been quite successful in recent years. We're interested in making a name for ourselves by offering competitive, quality athletic programs that prepare students for life after college, and that's why our recruits choose to play for us. It's not about the fame or the glory of playing in front of a hundred thousand people. Our players come here to get a good education and play for a well-respected football team, however under-the-radar we might be.”

Being in the FCS division does not mean that we can't compete with the big schools? He had a hard time believing that. That had to be PR bullshit.

“So what's your offense like?” he asked casually, just to be polite.

“We've run the option for the past couple of years now. Our starting quarterback was an exceptional ball carrier as well as an adept passer, and he's won us a lot of postseason games over the past three years. He recently graduated, so we've got big shoes to fill in that department.

“With you, we would revert back to a more traditional spread, as you've proven yourself very capable in that particular offense as a starter for Keystone State. Our wide receivers are very talented. We as a coaching staff feel like that would be the best choice moving forward, if you were to become a member of our team.”

With that, Coach Morgan sat back in his chair, focusing intently on Adam.

“That...yeah, I would like that.”

The coach nodded, then took a deep breath. “So, Adam, what do you think? Will you come to St. Bruno's and play for the Beavers?”

Every other coach had asked the same question, and he'd always responded the same way: *"I need some time to think about it and consider my options. Bull I'll get back to you as soon as I make my decision."* His mom had written that down for him, and he'd memorized it after the very first coach had walked out the door. He'd told that one, "I don't know. Maybe," and she had been furious.

But something felt different this time.

He really wasn't sure what made him say it. Maybe it was the heat of the moment, or the presence that Coach Morgan seemed to possess—that calm, composed, no-nonsense attitude.

"OK."

He was almost surprised when the words left his mouth. *Oh shit, what did I just do?*

Coach Morgan allowed himself to break a smile. "Well then, Adam, welcome to the team."

He sat in his chair, partly glad that this whole process was over with but more horrified at what he'd just done. He suddenly realized his expression might give away his feelings, and forced a smile.

"This coffee is delicious, by the way," the coach added, chuckling as he drained his mug. "The university cafeteria could use some lessons from your mother, Adam."

"Oh," he grinned, not knowing what else to say, but thinking that his new coach at least had a sense of humor. "I'll go and get her," he finally added, and his heart skipped a beat as he entered the kitchen.

"I just told him I'd go."

Michelle Dorsey nearly splattered coffee on the counter as she poured some into her own steaming cup. "Oh, honey..."

Before he knew it, his mom had wrapped him in a big hug. It didn't make him feel any better.

"Mrs. Dorsey," Coach Morgan said as he extended his hand in the foyer ten minutes later, "it's a real pleasure to have your son on our team."

"Thank you, thank you," his mom beamed.

"Adam, we're very excited to have you. Thank you for your time and your hospitality," he said as he turned to his new quarterback and offered another firm handshake.

There was no mistaking it—Teddy Morgan definitely had an extra bounce in his step as he prepared to leave. But he wasn't smug. He wasn't about to call up his colleagues and brag that he'd just captured the biggest prize of the offseason when they had failed, Adam was sure of it. For him, it was just another day at the office and another recruiting trip, however high the stakes were. He liked that about his new coach.

"I'll be in touch shortly, and I'll be sending you the necessary paperwork as soon as I return to my office," he added as he slipped on his black raincoat.

Fifteen Minutes

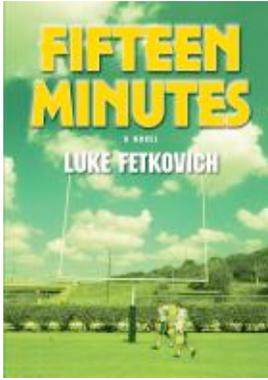
“In the meantime, Adam, I would like you to take a look at that packet we sent you earlier. I have already given you my number, so feel free to call if you need anything else.”

Adam nodded. “Thanks.”

The nervous butterflies were flying away now, and they had been replaced with a whole bag of mixed emotions. What did he feel? Relieved? Excited? Bitter? He didn't want to go to this place, but what choice did he have? It was better to just get it over with. The head coach seemed like a cool enough guy.

Teddy Morgan gave a final wave, placed his Beaver ball cap on his bald head, and turned away from the door and towards the freezing rain. He gazed uncertainly at his car in the darkness far ahead. One foot was already on the wet doorstep when he turned back.

“Mrs. Dorsey?” he asked politely. “Do you think I could get another cup of coffee for the road?”



Adam Dorsey is the starting quarterback for a prestigious college football team and he has it all. So, he's shocked when he is unfairly kicked off the team, and reluctantly ends up at a small FCS school. During the offseason, Adam must navigate an uncomfortable road with his new teammates. And, his journey reveals far more about the intangibles of football than he ever could have imagined.

Fifteen Minutes

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