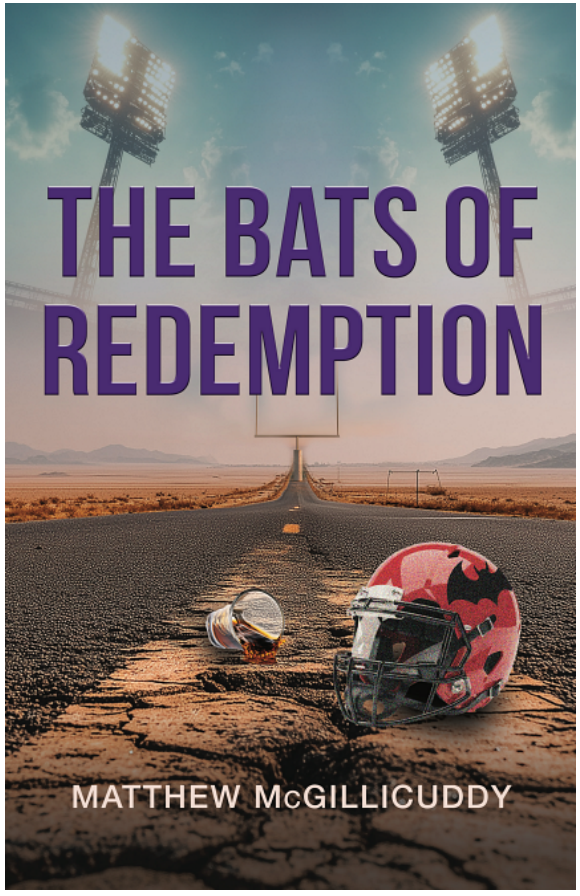

Ever wonder what might happen if someone enlisted all the talent from athletes who feel from grace due to bad mistakes or poor choices? This is your chance to find the answer to those questions!

The Bats of Redemption

By Matthew McGillicuddy

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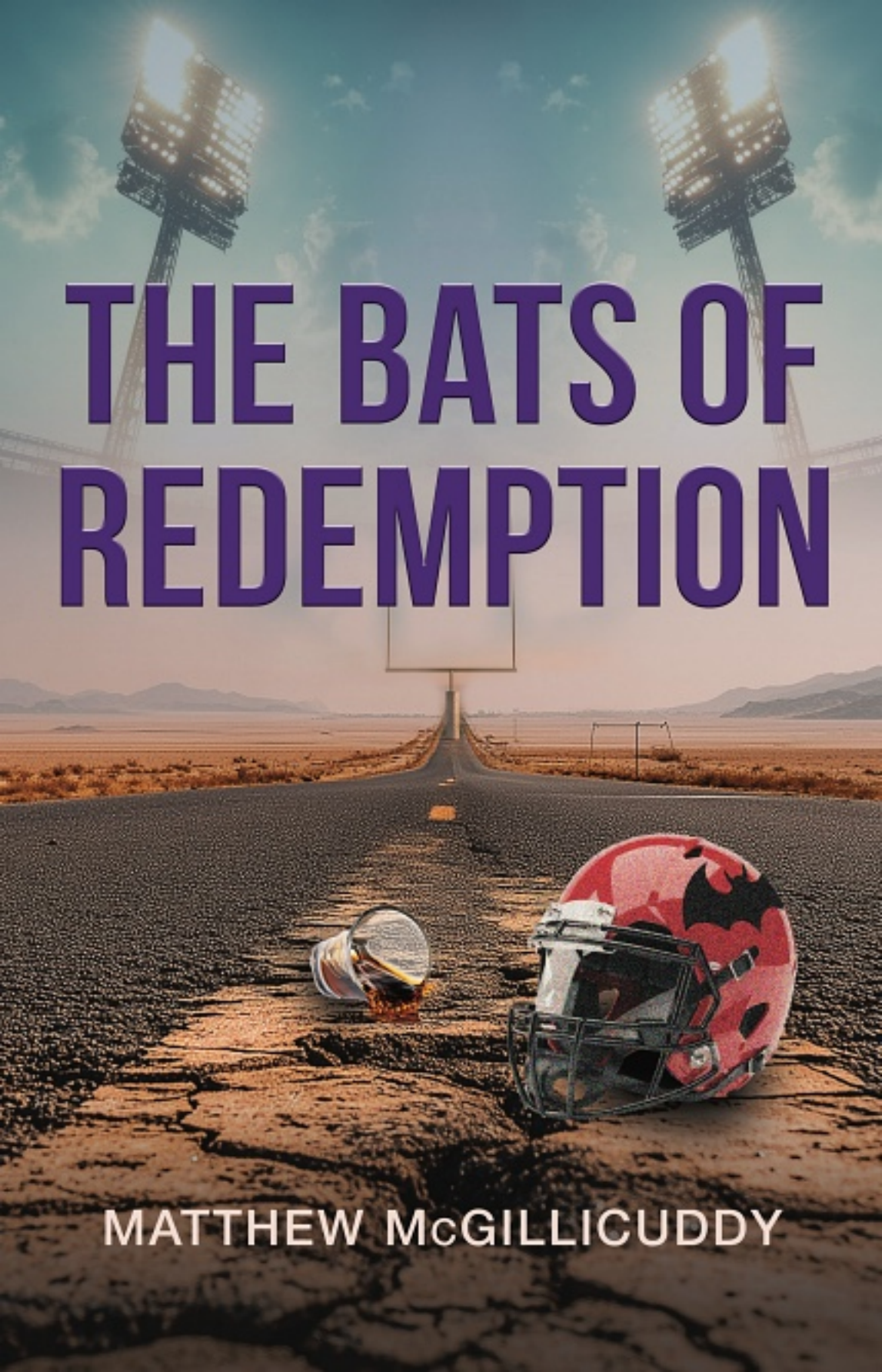
THE BATS OF REDEMPTION
MATTHEW McGILLICUDDY

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PROLOGUE: THE COMPOUND

They say every man gets what he deserves. I used to believe that was bullshit—the kind of thing people tell themselves to sleep better at night, to pretend the world makes sense when it clearly doesn't. Then I met Jazz Callahan, and he built us a prison we called paradise, and I learned that maybe the truth is more complicated than a fortune cookie philosophy.

My name is Xavier Gentry, and I used to catch footballs for the Denver Broncos—past tense. That's the important part. Now I catch them for The Bats.

If you haven't heard of us yet, you will. We're the team that shouldn't exist. Fifty-three men with criminal records, living in a compound in the Nevada desert, playing professional football like it's some kind of twisted social experiment, which I suppose it is. Jazz Callahan, billionaire tech mogul with more money than God, has got a vendetta against the NFL's moral high ground, so he decided that convicted felons deserved a second chance at glory, or maybe he just wanted to prove a point. With Jazz, it's hard to tell where philanthropy ends and ego begins.

I'm sitting in my room right now, and yes, I still call it a room, not a cell, though the distinction gets blurry sometimes. As I look out at the desert that stretches beyond our twelve-foot walls, the sun is setting, painting the sky in shades of orange and purple that would make a poet weep. It's beautiful out here in a desolate kind of way; beautiful and isolated, which I'm starting to think was the whole point.

The compound sits forty miles outside of Las Vegas, far enough from civilization that we can't cause trouble, close enough that Jazz can helicopter in whenever he wants to check on his

investment. It's state-of-the-art: a full NFL-regulation practice facility with weight rooms that would make a professional bodybuilder jealous, and a cafeteria that serves meals prepared by a chef who once worked at a Michelin-starred restaurant in San Francisco. We have a medical center, a film room, even a goddamn movie theater. Everything we could possibly need, all contained within walls topped with cameras that Jazz swears are for our protection, not surveillance. I believed him at first.

The thing about second chances is that they come with strings attached. Always. You just don't see them until you're already tangled up, but I'm getting ahead of myself. That's the problem with hindsight: it makes you want to skip to the end to the part where everything falls apart because at least then you know why you're telling the story in the first place. Stories don't work that way, though. You have to start at the beginning, or close enough to it that the middle makes sense. So let me back up.

Three years ago, I was twenty-three years old and on top of the world. I'd just finished my second season with the Broncos, caught eighty-seven passes for damn near nine hundred yards and nine touchdowns. I was fast, reliable, and just cocky enough to be marketable. Endorsement deals were starting to roll in. My agent was talking about a contract extension that would set me up for life. Then I got behind the wheel after three whiskeys and a shot of tequila I shouldn't have taken, and I killed a man.

His name was Robert Chen. He was forty-three years old, a high school math teacher, and father of two. He was crossing the street in a marked crosswalk when I ran a red light and hit him at forty-five miles per hour. He died at the scene. I barely had a scratch.

The details of that night are burned into my memory with the kind of clarity that trauma provides. I remember the sound—a thud that was somehow both soft and devastating, like the world breaking in

half. I remember stumbling out of my car—my legs not quite working right, and seeing him there on the pavement, his body bent at an angle that bodies shouldn't bend. I remember the sirens—the flashing lights, the police officer's face when he recognized me. I remember thinking, absurdly, that my career was over.

I didn't think about Robert Chen's daughters, who would grow up without a father. I didn't think about his wife, who would have to explain to those daughters why Daddy wasn't coming home. I thought about myself, about my stats, and about the contract extension that was evaporating like morning dew.

That's the thing they don't tell you about being a professional athlete. The narcissism isn't a side effect. It's a requirement. You have to believe you're special—that the rules don't quite apply to you the same way they apply to everyone else. Otherwise, you'd never have the audacity to think you deserve to be paid millions of dollars to play a game.

The trial was a media circus. My lawyer was a bit too expensive and slick. He was the kind of guy who wears cufflinks that cost more than most people's monthly rent. He wanted to argue for leniency. “First offense,” he said. “Remorseful,” he said. “Promising career,” he said, as if my ability to catch a football somehow balanced the scales against a man's life.

The prosecutor wanted to make an example of me. Celebrity justice, she called it—a chance to show that fame and fortune don't put you above the law.

In the end, I pleaded guilty. I got four years—vehicular manslaughter, DUI, and a handful of other charges that my lawyer managed to plea down. I served eighteen months in a minimum-security facility in Colorado before Jazz Callahan's lawyers showed up with an offer that sounded too good to be true. It was, but I'm still getting ahead of myself.

The compound houses fifty-three of us—a full NFL roster. We've got players from every position, every background, every flavor of fuckup you can imagine. There's Marcus Webb, a linebacker, my roommate, who did three years for armed robbery before he was old enough to buy a beer; Darius "Tank" Thompson, a nose tackle, who put a man in the hospital during a bar fight and served five years for aggravated assault; Jackson Rivers, cornerback, drug trafficking; Tommy Stubbins, offensive lineman, fraud and embezzlement.

And then there's me, the drunk driver, the guy who killed a man because he couldn't be bothered to call an Uber.

We're not supposed to talk about our crimes. That's one of Jazz's rules. "You're not defined by your worst moment," he told us during orientation, his voice booming through the compound's auditorium like a televangelist promising salvation. "You're defined by what you do next."

It's a nice sentiment. Sounds great on a motivational poster. But the truth is, we're all defined by our worst moments. That's why we're here. That's why Jazz picked us. He wanted criminals, wanted the controversy, wanted to prove that even the worst of us could be redeemed if given the right opportunity, or maybe he just wanted to stick it to the NFL establishment that blackballed him years ago over some business deal gone wrong. Like I said, with Jazz, it's hard to tell.

The first time I saw the compound, I thought it looked like a resort. Palm trees lined the entrance; imported, obviously, because nothing grows naturally in this part of the desert. The main building is all glass and steel—modern architecture that screams money. The practice fields are pristine—the grass so green it looks fake.

"Welcome to your new home," Jazz said, spreading his arms wide like a game show host revealing a prize. He's a big man—Jazz

Callahan, six-foot-four, broad-shouldered, with the kind of presence that fills a room even when he's standing outside. His hair is silver, perfectly styled, and he wears suits that probably cost more than my first car. "Everything you need is here. Training facilities, living quarters, entertainment, education. You want to finish your degree? We've got online courses. You want to learn a trade for after football? We've got vocational training. You want to just focus on being the best damn football player you can be? We've got that too."

"What's the catch?" I asked—because I'm not an idiot and nothing in life is free.

Jazz smiled. It was the kind of smile a shark might give a seal. "The catch, Mr. Gentry, is that you play for me. You live here, you train here, you follow my rules. You represent The Bats with honor and integrity, and you show the world that second chances aren't just for the privileged few who can afford good lawyers and PR teams. You prove that redemption is possible."

"And if we don't?"

"Then you go back to prison to finish your sentence. The deal I've worked out with the state is contingent on your participation and good behavior. You're still technically serving your time—just doing it here instead of behind bars." So not a second chance, exactly, but like a different kind of cage. Thing is, it was a cage with a weight room and a chef and a chance to play professional football again, so I signed the papers.

That was eight months ago. Eight months of living in the compound, training six days a week, learning plays, and building chemistry with guys who, in any other context, I'd probably cross the street to avoid. Eight months of Jazz's speeches about redemption and second chances and proving the doubters wrong.

Eight months of wondering if this is really about us or if we're just pawns in whatever game Jazz is playing with the NFL.

The league didn't want us, of course. When Jazz first announced his plan to create a professional football team staffed entirely by convicted felons, the NFL's response was swift and unequivocal: absolutely not. No way would they sanction a team that made a mockery of their values, their brand, and their carefully cultivated image of wholesome American entertainment.

Jazz sued. Antitrust violations, he claimed. Restraint of trade. He had lawyers, lots of them—the expensive kind, and he had a point. The NFL is technically a business, and businesses aren't supposed to discriminate based on criminal history, especially when those criminals have served their time. The legal battle is still ongoing, but Jazz is confident. He's always confident. That's what billions of dollars and an ego the size of Texas will do for you. In the meantime, we train. We prepare. We wait.

My room is on the third floor of the east wing overlooking the practice fields. It's nice as far as rooms go—bigger than my cell in Colorado, smaller than my place in Denver. I've got a bed, a desk, a TV, and a private bedroom. The walls are white, sterile, like a hospital or a very upscale prison. I've tried to personalize it—a few photos, some books, a poster of Jerry Rice that I bought at a thrift store when I was twelve, but it still feels temporary, like I'm living in a hotel that I can never check out of. There's a window, but it doesn't open. “Climate controlled,” Jazz says. Energy efficient. I think he just doesn't want us getting any ideas about leaving.

Not that there's anywhere to go. The desert stretches for miles in every direction—empty and hostile. The nearest town is forty miles away, and none of us has cars. We're dependent on Jazz for food, shelter, transportation, and our very freedom. It's a dependence that sits heavy in my chest sometimes, especially late at night

when I can't sleep and the walls feel like they're closing in. But then morning comes, and I'm back on the field, running routes, catching passes, doing the thing I was born to do. And for a few hours, I can forget about the walls and the cameras and the fact that I'm only here because I killed a man.

Football has always been my escape. Even as a kid growing up in South Dallas, when things at home were bad, and they were often bad—my father's temper as unpredictable as Texas weather—I could lose myself in the game: the precision of it, the strategy, the way your body and mind have to work in perfect sync. On the field, everything makes sense. There are rules, clear objectives, a scoreboard that tells you exactly where you stand. Life should be so simple.

Marcus Webb is the closest thing I have to a friend here. He's twenty-eight, built like a Greek statue, with dark skin and darker eyes that have seen too much for someone his age. He grew up in Detroit, ran with a bad crowd, and made bad choices. The armed robbery that landed him in prison happened when he was nineteen: a convenience store—a gun that he swears wasn't loaded, a clerk who was too scared to take that chance.

"I was stupid," he told me once, during one of our late-night conversations in the compound's common area. "Young and stupid and desperate. My mom was sick, we didn't have insurance, and I thought I could just...I don't know...fix it. Like money was the solution to everything."

"Was it loaded?" I asked. "The gun?"

He looked at me for a long moment, his expression unreadable. "Does it matter?"

I suppose it doesn't. Intent, action, consequence, they're all tangled up together—impossible to separate. He pointed a gun at

a man. I got behind the wheel drunk. The specifics are different, but the core is the same: we made choices that hurt people, and now we're paying for it—or trying to.

The thing about redemption is that it's not a destination—it's a process. You don't just serve your time and get a clean slate. You carry your mistakes with you, a weight that never quite goes away. Some days it's manageable, a dull ache you can ignore. Other days it's crushing, a reminder that you can never undo what you've done.

Robert Chen's wife sent me a letter about six months into my sentence. My lawyer advised me not to read it—said it would only make things harder. I read it anyway.

She didn't curse me out, didn't call me a monster, didn't demand that I rot in hell. That would have been easier, I think. Instead, she told me about her husband—about how he loved teaching, how he'd stay late to help struggling students, how he'd coach their daughters' soccer team on weekends. She told me about the hole his absence left in their lives—a void that could never be filled.

And then, at the end, she wrote: "I don't forgive you. I don't know if I ever will. But I hope you find a way to live with what you've done. I hope you find a way to make your life mean something because Robert can't anymore." I keep that letter in my desk drawer. I don’t know what else to do with it.

Jazz talks about redemption like it's a PR campaign, something we can achieve through good behavior and winning football games. But redemption isn't about public perception—it's about looking in the mirror and being able to live with what you see. I'm not there yet. I don't know if I ever will be, but I'm trying.

The sun has fully set now, the desert darkness absolute in a way that city darkness never is. No light pollution out here, just stars

scattered across the sky like diamonds on black velvet. It's beautiful and lonely, and I wonder if this is what the rest of my life will look like—beautiful and lonely, contained within walls I can't escape.

Tomorrow, we have practice at six in the morning. Jazz is bringing in some sports journalists—carefully selected media who've agreed to tell our story the way he wants it told: redemption narrative, second chances, the American dream repackaged for the social media age. We'll smile for the cameras, say the right things, pretend that we're grateful for this opportunity, and maybe we are. It's hard to tell sometimes. Gratitude, resentment, hope, and despair all blur together out here in the desert under Jazz Callahan's watchful eye in this compound that's either our salvation or our tomb. I guess we'll find out which.

The Bats. That's what Jazz named us, and at first, I thought it was stupid. Bats: nocturnal creatures, blind, associated with darkness and disease. Not exactly the image you want for a football team trying to prove it deserves respect.

But Jazz explained it during one of his speeches, the kind he's so fond of giving. "Bats navigate in darkness," he said. "They've evolved to thrive in conditions that would leave other creatures helpless. They're misunderstood, feared, but essential to their ecosystem. That's you. That's us. We're going to navigate the darkness, thrive where others said we couldn't, and prove that we're essential too."

It's growing on me—the name. The symbolism. We even have uniforms now, black and silver and red—sleek and intimidating. Our logo is a bat in flight, wings spread wide, fierce, and unapologetic.

The more I think about it, the more it fits. Bats are widely feared, people recoil from them, see them as threats, as carriers of

disease. But they're also creatures that work best together, in colonies, supporting each other through the darkness. That's us too. Alone, we're just ex-cons trying to survive. Together, we might actually be something more. Whether the NFL will ever let us prove it on their fields remains to be seen. We look like a real team. We train like a real team. We're starting to play like a real team.

Jazz is confident. He's always confident. And me? I'm just a wide receiver with fast hands and a guilty conscience, trying to catch passes and outrun my past. I'm Xavier Gentry, and this is the story of The Bats—how we came together, how we rose, how we fell, how we learned that second chances come with a price. Sometimes that price is higher than any of us could have imagined. But that comes later...

For now, there's just the desert, the compound, and fifty-three men trying to figure out if redemption is something you earn or something you're given. I'm betting on the former. I have to because if redemption is just a gift, something Jazz Callahan can bestow with his billions and his lawyers and his carefully orchestrated PR campaign, then it's not real. It's just another transaction, another deal, another way for the powerful to control the powerless, and I've had enough of being powerless.

So, I'll catch the passes. I'll run the routes. I'll smile for the cameras and say the right things and pretend that living in a compound in the Nevada desert is somehow freedom. And maybe—if I do it long enough, if I'm good enough, if I can help this impossible team succeed against impossible odds—just maybe I'll start to believe it. Maybe I'll start to believe that I'm more than the worst thing I've ever done.

Maybe...

The desert wind picks up, whipping the scrub desert below, and somewhere in the compound, someone's playing music, hip-hop,

bass-heavy, the kind that makes your chest vibrate. Life goes on, even here—especially here.

Tomorrow, the journalists come. Tomorrow, we start showing the world what The Bats can do. Tomorrow, the real story begins.

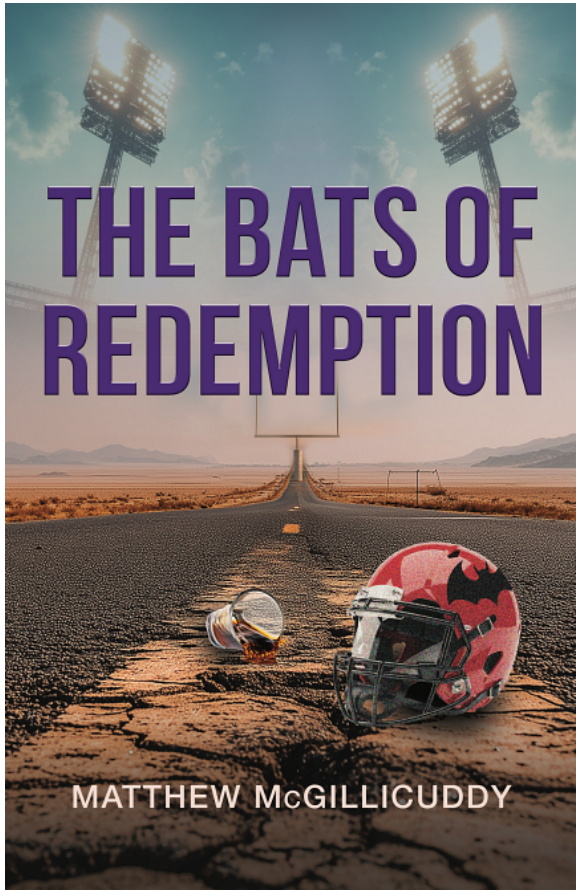
But tonight, I'm just Xavier Gentry, sitting in my room, looking out at the stars, carrying the weight of a man named Robert Chen and wondering if the distance between who I was and who I want to be is a gap I can ever really cross.

I guess we'll find out.

Welcome to The Bats.

Welcome to the compound.

Welcome to our shot at redemption—whatever that means.



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