



## CHAPTER TWO

### The Awakening

*"If you only knock long enough and loud enough at the gate, you are sure to wake up somebody."*

**- Henry Wadsworth Longfellow**

Max Bentley looked up to the sky as his eyes slowly opened. Where was he? Who was he? The blistering sun causes him to squint and blink. It is like waking from death; every cell of his body has closed from a short and temporary loss of consciousness.

Yet, his thoughts still raced like a horse exploding out of the gates of the Kentucky Derby. Max was barely conscious. Yet he still wanted answers. Where was he?

Was he just born, or had he been in a car crash, waiting to die? Was he a cage fighter that just hit the floor after a kick to the temple? Maybe he is a soldier heroically dying in a war somewhere on foreign soil.

In fact, he was a wounded Spartan struggling to fight again.

Max clenched his fist and wiggled his feet. At least he could still move. Yet he still wanted answers. He finally blurted out a breathless sentence. "What happened?"

Max looked with squinting eyes to see someone kneeling over him, his head eclipsing the sun. He couldn't yet tell who it was.

Suddenly, a soothing voice dropped through the air like a warm blanket. "Easy son, you are going to be okay. We are going to take care of you. Just keep breathing big."

He finally took the advice and felt a little better. Fresh oxygen invades his brain and wakes him up from a deep dreamless sleep. Then another voice breaks his darkened state, "Can you sit up?"

He clenched his lips and eyes again and answered in a slow, soft voice. "I think so?"

Gradually a huddle of more and more coaches and trainers shielded the sun from his eyes. He heard a protocol and diagnostic question, "What's your name, son?" His speech was still slow. "Maxwell Bentley."

Things are getting clearer now; like a jigsaw puzzle slowly assembling. The deep breaths give him new life as he wakes from a sleep that was only seconds long.

Confusion fades like someone turning down a dial on a radio.

"Football" he thought. "I was playing football!"

Each breath was a step-up on a stairway. He could now see the green and white uniforms as he grabbed his jersey from near the space of his heart.

He heard a voice again. This time it is a warning. "Take it slow. Make sure you're okay."

Consciousness has returned quickly now. "I guess I blacked out for a sec. Must have gotten blindsided."

The veteran female trainer put her hands on her knees and looked into Max's eyes. He is close to normal now. "Feeling better?" She flashed a still worried smile.

Max gave a slow "thumbs up."

A collective sigh filled the air as teammates gathered closer. Everyone felt a sense of relief, now knowing that this fallen DT was going to be okay.

Max heard a chorus of voices of players showing their relief. "That's it Max...Big Ben just took you to Jesus for a second, that's all! Go Max! You are a tough guy!"

Big Ben takes a knee next to Max, "I'm sorry bro! I didn't mean to..." Max cuts him off and then fist bumps his teammate.

"It's part of my job. Getting my ass kicked!"

Laughter explodes from the group, releasing a boatload of worry and tension.

It looks like one of their Spartan warriors is going to live to fight another day!

Max looked around and announced. "I want to get up. The group helps him slowly get to his feet, each grabbing part of his uniform and pulling upwards. Feeling better, he was now embarrassed about getting so much attention.

Everybody loved Max. He's one of those straight-laced guys who lights up the room wherever he goes. A born leader and hard worker.

He was also an aspiring MSU defensive tackle. A strong-bodied, tall, African American, who looked like he had all the tools and talent to be great.

His deep, brown eyes glowed when he spoke. He was a young man with an old soul and every inch a warrior, now a Spartan.

He was also a special kind of player.

Max was also what is called a “preferred walk-on.” The name and label bear consequences. Being a “PWO” is indeed a challenge...especially for a DT. It’s a grueling uphill battle and not for the faint of heart.

Walk-ons in football are deeply appreciated by any coach, but clearly not part of the chosen few who are scholarship players. Some call them “human tackling dummies.” Perhaps POW (prisoners of war) is a better description.

Walk-ons are often hopelessly captured and chained to an almost impossible dream.

PWO also means “work harder than everyone else.” Max needed to constantly impress the coaches, in hopes that one day he could enter the playing field on gameday.

The big prize in winning this battle was seductive and almost irresistible. When you win, you win big. You become “Rocky” in pads and a helmet.

Max, however, also had a back-story that fit into the mix. He had a fire in his belly because he was angry at the world and even God. And in football...anger (when properly focused) is almost always a good thing. When he really “got game” on the field, coaches called him Mad Max.

Here’s why...

When he was 14 years old his dad had a catastrophic stroke that left him with slurred speech, cross eyed vision, and a permanent seat in a wheelchair.

Max’s football success always made his dad smile. It was like feeding him ice cream that Max could taste.

And it became both his grand obsession and glorious passion.

Every block or QB sack on the field, or patch on his high school letter sweater was another spoonful of icy redemption.

Max had offers from smaller colleges throughout Michigan, however, his dream since he was a little boy was to play football at MSU.

Today was the last day of Spring practice. This “knockout” would surely prevent him from playing in what was called the “Spring Game.” And it was only three days away.

The game was pretty much a glorified scrimmage in full dress, with free tickets for anyone who wanted to attend.

However, the Spring Games were infinitely important to Max. He was now damaged goods. He lost the chance to show his best to the coaches and his teammates. "Concussion Protocol" would clearly keep him on the sidelines wearing street clothes and holding a clipboard.

As he got up and walked the whole team applauded and urged him on with a banter of encouraging words.

Max waved them off with an "I'm okay." Max looked at Big Ben. "I love you more than my jock strap, Bad Ass!"

More laughter exploded from his green and white comrades.

Head Coach Matt Davis walked up to Max. "I'm glad you're okay, son. The blocker pushed Big Ben into you, and it hammered your head into the turf. Ben feels terrible about this. He's not a cheap shot artist, as I think you well know."

"And he's also my best friend." The irony of that statement stayed in the air for a beat. Ben's "hit" almost killed him.

Max looked at his coach. "Comes with the territory coach. I'm fine." Max took a swig from a water bottle that one of the student managers handed him.

Coach D looked at him. "Go take a shower and relax for a while. Come in and see me this week and we can put together a game plan. But now...go rest!"

Max slowly smiled and pointed up. "I know... I guess it's in God's hands now."

Coach D winked.

Max turned and started a long and lonely walk towards the stadium tunnel. He couldn't help but think, "Is this my last walk to the Spartan locker room?"

Near the sidelines, we see the ancient and iconic equipment manager, "Bee" Bigsbee.

He was watching the whole thing.

Bee slowly nodded to himself as Max walked off the field and into the stadium tunnel. He looks down at Max's helmet, now cradles it in his arms like he was holding Baby Jesus himself.

"He's the one."