



CHAPTER SEVEN

The Church

"I learned that courage was not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it. The brave man is not he who does not feel afraid, but he who conquers that fear." - Nelson Mandela

The meeting with Coach Davis left Max with plenty to think about. To be honest, Max was somewhat disappointed. He had been looking for answers, and all he got was more questions.

As he walked down the stairs of the football building, he couldn't help but study the giant photos and trophies that filled the room with fresh eyes, "Did all of these heroes go through this? Is all this the price of greatness?"

Suddenly, something strange gripped him

"Is all this simply symptoms of a broken helmet and a broken brain? Should I go see a doc for some meds to heal my head?"

One thing's for sure, if Bee left him with an empty canvas and clean slate, things would fill up fast.

He also had another unexpected symptom. His sessions with Bee and Coach D have been exhausting. He was feeling a little punch drunk.

He needed time to think and time to recalibrate.

It was like those times on his laptop when everything was overloaded, the screen was frozen and all you can do to fix it is shut everything down.

No doubt about it. Max needed time to reboot.

He was also feeling something new and unexpected. Fear.

Max was at the crossroads of something big and beautiful, and he was afraid he would “blow it” and make the wrong decision. He read somewhere that fear was really an illusion. False Evidence Appearing Real.

“However, maybe fear is good.” He whispered to himself now. “What if fear is just the juice to get you ready for the battle? It puts you on high alert and gets you ready to fight like a mother bear protecting her cubs.

Max exited the football building and walked over to his car. The rain had stopped, and the cool Spring air was easy to breathe. It felt good to be outside.

Before getting into his car, Max felt an urge to go inside the stadium. The sun was breaking through the storm clouds and it was turning into a beautiful sunny day.

Inside the stadium, he walked to the middle of the field near the fifty-yard line and did a 360. He did this regularly during his year at Michigan State.

The empty space felt good. It was a giant, cement, and open-air cathedral.

He loved it more than a church because there was no roof. There was no barrier between God and His creations. The clouds were the only ceiling and the open air reminded him that, “the sky’s the limit.”

Max liked empty churches. Back in his days in high school at Roseville Sacred Heart, he would always visit church and pray before a game, when no one else was around.

After a while, it became a ritual and unbreakable habit. It seemed that “the more he prayed, the better he played.”

It was easy to pray in this massive Spartan church.

As he looked at the stadium tunnel, he remembered last year’s Spring Game. He was a freshman DT and his mom and dad surprised him and showed up with his two younger sisters to see him in uniform.

He remembered how proud he was to see his mom push dad through the tunnel in his wheelchair, his sisters by their side.

Max remembered his words when his dad waved him over and he looked his dad in the eye, “the real Spartan has just arrived.” He then gripped his dad’s fists with both hands and kissed his forehead.

His dad smiled big.

However, as brave as his dad was, Max got most of his strength and inspiration from his mother, Beatrice.

She was always the one pushing the wheelchair. She was the one who took the family life challenges and one by one, wrestled them to the ground.

Beatrice was a true warrior; fully engaged in the battles of life. For almost 7 years she devoted her life to caring for the man she loved and creating an environment still filled with laughter and joy for their four grown kids and two younger sisters.

His dad wasn't really a sports fan. Before his stroke, he loved to fish. And some of Max's fondest memories were fishing with his dad on Sunday mornings on lake St. Clair. After 5:30 mass they would hitch up his trailer and boat to go to his dad's real church. "The middle of the lake."

Dad used to say, "Church isn't a place, it's a state of mind."

During his illness he would often scream and cry out of frustration and anxiety.

He would shout with broken words, "middle of the lake, middle of the lake" as if he wanted his mind to go there to escape the chains and prison of his sickness and disability.

Max had quit asking God why such a good man had to suffer so much. It was one of his biggest life revelations.

Some questions are never answered, and you just move on and move forward.

During the Spring Game last year, Max got a chance to play a series of downs in the last quarter. He caught the opposing QB and wrested him to the ground for a "big time sack." As Max ran off the field, he locked eyes with his old man and traded a "thumbs up."

Stroke or no stroke, no one could take away that moment between father and son.

Max thought about what Coach D said about the flashlight.

Maybe his problem was living too much in the past and not enough in the future. Maybe he was pointing his light downwards instead of upwards. Maybe he wasn't pointing the flashlight anywhere at all.

It seemed that everything in the past was bolted into the cement, like the seats in the stadium. It seemed like painful memories were as toxic as hate.

He remembered a quote he read from Nelson Mandela, who spent 18 years of his life in prison for a crime he did not commit.

It was short, sweet, and simple. "Forget the past."

One thing for sure, Max could not change what had already happened in his life. He could only change the future.

Max laid back on the turf in the middle of the field. The grass was still wet from the morning rain.

However, he didn't care.

If anything, it made him feel more connected to the energies of earth. It was the kind of glue that bonded him to something bigger.

His arms and legs spread like a kid creating a “snow angel.”

For a beat he felt connected to everyone and everything. He could see life unfolding for him like yard markers on this gridiron.

“Football is not a game. Maybe, the white paint of the field is a path not a place,” he whispered to himself.

The spring sun warmed his body. In the middle of this field of play, he felt like the center of God’s universe.

And all he had to do was shine. Just be who he was. A thought hit him as his eyes slowly closed. “The sun doesn’t think or remember... it just radiates life to anything and everything it touches. It just is!”

He took a short breath as he looked upwards. “Is this just concussion talking again?”

Maybe all Max needed to know was in the game played on this very field. “Maybe the answer was right here.”

He shut his eyes and felt this magical state. This time he didn’t care where it came from. He wanted more.

In the tunnel, Bee had been watching the whole thing.

It was like a mother who opened the stove to check and see whether an apple pie was ready for consumption.

His sly smile gave the answer... “Yes.”

Later in the parking lot...

When Max approached his car, he noticed a Post-it notes on the driver’s side window.

Bee was famous for his posted notes. He used them for everything. He would place them on each new piece of new equipment he gave to his Spartan players.

It read: “Meet me tomorrow in front of the library at the Red Cedar at 6pm...to start what needs to be finished... Bee.”

Max looked back at the stadium.

It looked like a giant pyramid in the middle of nowhere and everywhere.

He wondered what hidden treasures were inside.