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CHAPTER ONE

Marcus Jordan killed the motor on his Vespa and surveyed the flowering shrubs and tall maples surrounding him. Nice. Picturesque, even.

More like *The Twilight Zone*.

For starters, the name—Three Alarm Park, after some chili cook-off that used to be held there in the sixties or something.

Marcus jumped down, pulling the gym bag off his shoulders. From it, he produced the items that would turn Three Alarm Park into a practice facility—a regulation football, a length of rope, and a round, plastic picture frame with the glass knocked out.

He looked around, noting that the only other living creature was a squirrel. This was the fourth straight day he'd trained here, and he'd yet to exchange a word

of conversation with anybody but himself. Dead summer—great time to move to a new state. *Thanks, Mom.*

He tossed the rope over a high branch and strung up the picture-frame hoop. Then he started the target swinging gently and retreated about ten yards.

Hike!

Just like he'd done a million times before, he took three steps back and let fly.

The ball sizzled, a perfect spiral, missing the hoop by at least four feet.

Marcus snorted. Lonely *and* lousy. A one-two punch. With the added insult of having to chase down your own pass so you could mess it up all over again.

He worked his way up to four for ten, then eleven for twenty, and then he broke out the water bottle to give himself a party. Here in the middle of the open field, the only protection from the August sun was a large granite modern art statue titled *Remembrance*, which looked like a titanic paper airplane had fallen from the sky and buried its nose in the grass at a forty-five-degree angle. A river of perspiration streamed down the middle of Marcus's back. So he did what any self-respecting football player would do. He cranked it up a notch. Football was the only sport where adverse weather conditions made you go harder instead of quitting. He'd

still be out here if it were only ten degrees and he were slogging through knee-deep snow and blizzard conditions.

Intermission—a dozen laps around the field, to *really* feel the pain. Then he was throwing again, from different angles and farther away. His completion percentage went down, but his determination never wavered. There was something about launching a football thirty-five or forty yards and having it go exactly where you aimed it. To a quarterback, it was as basic as breathing.

Sucking in a lungful of moist, heavy air, Marcus pumped once and unleashed the longest pass of the day, a loose spiral that nevertheless seemed to have a lot of power behind it. It sailed high over the apex of the Paper Airplane before beginning its downward trajectory toward the hoop.

For the first time in four days, Marcus spied another human being in the park. The figure was just a blur across his field of vision. It leaped into the air, picked off the pass, and kept on going.

The receiver made a wide U-turn and, grinning triumphantly, jogged up to Marcus.

Marcus smiled too. “Nice catch, bro—”

He was looking at a middle-aged man, probably around fifty years old. He was tall and built redwood solid. But the guy ran like a gazelle and had caught the ball with sure hands, tucking it in tight

as he ran. He had definitely played this game before.

“Sorry,” Marcus added, embarrassed.

“For what?” The man flipped him the ball. “Making you look bad?”

“I just thought—never mind. My name’s Marcus. Marcus Jordan.”

With lightning hands, the man knocked the ball loose, scooped it up on the bounce, and bellowed, “Go deep!”

Starved for company, Marcus did not have to be asked twice. He took off downfield, glancing over his shoulder.

“No—*deep!*”

“I’m running out of park!” Marcus shouted, but kept on going, his breath growing short. Another backward glance. The ball was on its way. Marcus broke into a full sprint. The old guy had an arm like a cannon!

He took to the air in a desperation dive. For an instant, the ball was right there on his fingertips. He had it. . . .

The ground swung up quickly and slammed him, and the pass bounced away. He lay there for a moment, hyperventilating and spitting out turf. The next thing he saw was the fifty-something-year-old, beaming and pulling him back to his feet.

“Way to miss everything.”

“You overthrew me a little,” Marcus said, defending himself.

The man plucked the ball off the grass. “You couldn’t catch a cold, Mac.”

“It’s Marcus,” he amended. “And you are . . . ?”

The old guy scowled. “Your worst nightmare if you don’t quit pulling my chain.”

Marcus flushed. “What should I call you?”

“Try Charlie, stupid. *Heads!*” He punted the ball straight up in the air.

The kick was very high, silhouetted against the cobalt blue sky, tiny and soaring.

Marcus was instantly on board, shuffling first one way and then the other as he tried to predict where it would come down. For some reason, it was very important to make this catch, especially since he’d screwed up the other one. It was his natural competitiveness, but there was something more. This Charlie character might be weird, but his enthusiasm had sucked Marcus in.

The ball plunged down, and Marcus gathered it into his arms.

Something hit him. The impact was so jarring, so unexpected, that there was barely time to register what was happening. It was Charlie—he’d rammed a rock-hard shoulder into Marcus’s sternum and dropped him where he stood. The ball squirted loose, but Marcus wasn’t even aware of it. He lay like a stone on the grass, ears roaring, trying to keep from throwing up his breakfast.

Gasping, he scrambled to his feet, squaring off against his companion. “What was that for?”

“I love the pop! Sometimes you actually hear it go pop!”

“That was the sound of my head coming off,” Marcus muttered.

“Come on, you here to play or what?” Charlie tucked the ball under one arm and charged forward like a freight train, picking up speed.

Marcus was stunned. *He’s crazy!* Followed by another thought: *He’s an old man. What am I afraid of?*

Marcus held his ground, bouncing lightly on the balls of his feet, ready to strike. As a quarterback, he’d never had tackling at the top of his résumé, but he’d gone through the drills like everybody else. He focused on his opponent’s hips, hesitating at the sheer size of the guy and the power and athleticism of his stride. This was going to hurt, probably more than a little. Swallowing his nervousness, he sprang, catching Charlie just above the knees.

Hard contact resonated up and down Marcus’s body. The man was a strong runner with a surprisingly low center of gravity. In the end, though, physics was on Marcus’s side. The textbook hit knocked Charlie’s legs right out from under him.

As they crunched to the ground, Marcus’s pain mingled with remorse. What if he’d hurt the man?

But Charlie was cackling with glee. “That’s more like it!”

Relieved, Marcus grabbed the ball away and barked, “Now, *you* go deep!” It never crossed his mind that this “old man” wouldn’t comply.

Charlie didn’t disappoint. He was off and galloping. Not only was he going along with it, but he seemed to be running an elaborate pass pattern. He bumped an imaginary defender at five yards, then faked an out before breaking down the middle, running full bore.

Marcus got so involved in watching that he almost forgot to throw. But he did—a terrible pass that was sure to sail ten feet over Charlie’s head.

“Sorry—” His breath caught in his throat as he realized that his companion wasn’t stopping.

Adjusting his route, Charlie scampered right up one of the granite flukes on the *Remembrance* sculpture. Close to the top, he leaped, snatching the ball out of thin air as it sailed over the Paper Airplane. Marcus waited for the old guy to come crashing to the ground, twenty feet below. Instead, the toes of his sneakers somehow found the narrow ledge in the stone, and he landed, swaying as he struggled to maintain balance.

The cry of triumph was ripped from Marcus’s throat before the event had even fully registered. It had to be the greatest individual effort he’d seen since taking up

football. Quarterback and receiver celebrated like this was the winning touchdown in the Super Bowl.

Nor did Charlie feel any need to come down from his tenuous perch on the statue. He began a victory dance right where he was.

“I’m not calling the ambulance when you slip!” warned Marcus, laughing.

It only made the old guy show off even more. He was as sure-footed as a mountain goat, soft-shoeing as he waved to an imaginary crowd.

Time-tested football strategy held that when the passing game is working, you launch an air war. They ran slants, curls, posts, and flags, making acrobatic catches and spectacular wipeouts. After a week of only his mother and his own thoughts for company, Marcus wasn’t inclined to ask too many questions—like how come this middle-aged guy had nothing better to do than toss a ball around with a teenager.

“Over the middle!” Charlie commanded, waving Marcus into a crossing pattern about fifteen yards deep.

Charlie’s muscular arm snapped forward. The pass was on its way, drilling through the air at bullet speed. Marcus reached for it, but he misjudged the angle. It sizzled between his hands, practically leaving a trail of smoke behind it. Frozen in their tracks, he and Charlie watched it leave the park.

Crash!

They didn't see it happen, but the sound was unmistakable. When they got to the fence, there sat the football: in the passenger seat of a Toyota Camry, clearly visible through the shattered side window.

"Great," groaned Marcus. This definitely wasn't the introduction to the community he'd had in mind. "I guess we have to leave a note and offer to pay—"

Nothing could have prepared him for his companion's reaction to the crisis. Charlie took one look at the broken car window, vaulted the gate, and pounded down the street at an astonishing rate of speed. He never looked back. In fifteen seconds, he was simply a retreating dot.

Of all the strange things about a very strange person, this one had to take the prize. Here was the teenager, ready to own up and make restitution. And here was the mature adult, fleeing the scene like an irresponsible kid.