

ONE

My father had been dead seven years the day his first letter arrived. But before I received the message that would change my life so much, tenth grade started out like any other.

At lunchtime, I sat down next to Ethan Jones. “Hey, Mike.” He flicked a chicken nugget with his finger. “Can you believe they feed us this crap? There’s no actual food in this food.”

I picked up a nugget and took a bite, but chomped down on one of those tiny hard pieces and spat the gristle into a napkin. “I think they’re supposed to be educational. Life is like a high school chicken nugget.” I smiled. “It can be pretty good, but you have to learn how to deal with the tough bits.”

Ethan laughed. “Dude, that’s so gross. True, but gross. Do you think . . .” His words dropped off as his attention focused behind me. I turned to see Coach Carter marching up to our table.

“Hey, Coach,” Ethan said.

Carter put his hands on his hips and nodded to him. “Mr. Jones.” He fixed his gaze on me. “Wilson! Did you give any more thought to what we talked about this morning?”

The guy was persistent. “I thought about it, Coach.”

“And?”

“I don’t know. I . . .” It was hard to talk around him. “I have to work a lot. Plus, my mom doesn’t think . . . you know . . . that I really should.”

“Yeah, but I bet if you asked her really nicely, she’d say yes,” Ethan said. “Mike’s real good, Coach.”

“I know that,” said Carter. To me, he added, “I saw you play in junior high. You have some real talent, and we need you. Your biceps are about to split the sleeves of your T-shirt. You’ve been working at Derek Harris’s farm, right?” I nodded. “Mr. Wilson, you have the rest of your life to work. You only have three more years to play football. Don’t miss out on the best years of your life.”

I did want to play football. It was just complicated for me. “I don’t know, Coach.”

“Look, I don’t chase everybody down like this. The rest of the guys have been busting their butts for over a week in camp and two-a-day practices. I can get you caught up if you start this week. But Friday’s the first game. If you’re not on the team before then, you never will be. Think it over.” He turned and marched away across the cafetorium, his fists held out from his sides and his arms cocked back a little like always.

“Wow,” Ethan said. “I thought he was on his way over here to chew us out about something. You never can tell when the Volcano is going to erupt. But he’s right, dude. You need to get back on the team. You were so good back in seventh grade. What did the junior high coach call you? ‘Hands’ Wilson or something?”

“Something like that,” I said.

“Well, are you going to —”

“Did you not just hear me talking to Coach?”

“I know, but can you at least ask your mom again? You’ve been kind of a hermit or something these last couple years. All you do is go to school, work on the farm, and do homework. Playing football might help you fit in more. I don’t know, maybe you could even score a date to the homecoming dance.”

I snapped my fingers. “Hey, speaking of the dance. I have good news about your quest.”

“The quest?” Ethan leaned forward. “What did you hear?”

“The quest” was Ethan’s name for his unending efforts to regain the affection of Raelyn Latham, his freshman-year homecoming date. To hear him tell it, his night at the dance with her had been more romantic than *Cinderella*, the royal wedding, and *Romeo and Juliet* combined. But the guy never made his move, never asked Raelyn out again, and Chris Moore moved in as her boyfriend in the meantime.

“Well, it could be nothing. You know how Hailey and the rest of the gossip girls aren’t always so accurate,” I said. “But in first period geometry . . .”

“Dude, what?”

“Well, they were saying Chris cheated on Raelyn, and the two of them are breaking up.”

Ethan swore. “He never did treat her right.”

I ate another spongy nugget. “Yeah, because you’re *so* hoping they have a nice, happy relationship.” He sat back in his chair, trying to look casual as he sneaked glances at Raelyn across the cafetorium. She was one of those pretty pale girls with white-blond hair who seemed perpetually sunburned all summer. “Anyway, as soon as you’re sure she and Moore have broken up, you should ask her to homecoming,” I said. “Get your second chance.”

“Homecoming is weeks away,” Ethan said.

“The quest is the quest,” I reminded him. “Don’t give them time to make up.”

“How could they make up after he did that to her? I’d *never* cheat on her.”

“I know you wouldn’t,” I said. “Not even while she’s going out with someone else.”