



## Tuesday

The road to Rake Field ran beside the school, past the old band hall and the tennis courts, through a tunnel of two perfect rows of red and yellow maples planted and paid for by the boosters, then over a small hill to a lower area covered with enough asphalt for a thousand cars. The road stopped in front of an immense gate of brick and wrought iron that announced the presence of Rake Field, and beyond the gate was a chain-link fence that encircled the hallowed ground. On Friday nights, the entire town of Messina waited for the gate to open, then rushed to the bleachers where seats were claimed and nervous pregame rituals were followed. The black, paved pasture around Rake Field would overflow long before the opening kickoff, sending the out-of-town traffic into the dirt roads and alleys and remote parking zones behind the school's cafeteria and its baseball field. Opposing fans had a rough time in Messina, but not nearly as rough as the opposing teams.

Driving slowly along the road to Rake Field was Neely Crenshaw, slowly because he had not been back in many years, slowly because when he saw the lights of the field the memories came roaring back, as he knew they would. He rolled through the red and yellow maples, bright in their autumn foliage. Their trunks had been a foot thick in Neely's glory days, and now their branches touched above him and their leaves dropped like snow and covered the road to Rake Field.

It was late in the afternoon, in October, and a soft wind from the north chilled the air.

He stopped his car near the gate and stared at the field. All movements were slow now, all thoughts weighted heavily with sounds and images of another life. When he played the field had no name; none was needed. Every person in Messina knew it simply as The Field. "The boys are on The Field early this morning," they would say at the cafés downtown. "What time are we cleaning up The Field?" they would ask at the Rotary Club. "Rake says we need new visitors' bleachers at The Field," they would say at the boosters' meeting. "Rake's got 'em on The Field late tonight," they would say at the beer joints north of town.

No piece of ground in Messina was more revered than The Field. Not even the cemetery.

After Rake left they named it after him. Neely was gone by then, of course, long gone with no plans to return.

Why he was returning now wasn't completely clear, but deep in his soul he'd always known this day would come, the day somewhere out there in the future when he was called back. He'd always known that Rake would eventually die, and of course there would be a funeral with hundreds of former players packed around the casket, all wearing their Spartan green, all mourning the loss of a legend they loved and hated. But he'd told himself many times that he would never return to The Field as long as Rake was alive.

In the distance, behind the visitors' stands, were the two practice fields, one with lights. No other school in the state had such a luxury, but then no other town worshiped its football as thoroughly and collectively as Messina. Neely could hear a coach's whistle and the thump and grunts of bodies hitting each other as the latest Spartan team got ready for Friday night. He walked through the gate and across the track, painted dark green of course.

The end zone grass was manicured and suitable for putting, but there were a few wild sprigs inching up the goalpost. And there was a patch or two of weeds in one corner, and now that he'd noticed Neely looked even closer and saw untrimmed growth along the edge of the track. In the glory days dozens of volunteers gathered every Thursday afternoon and combed The Field with gardening shears, snipping out every wayward blade of grass.

The glory days were gone. They left with Rake.

Now Messina football was played by mortals, and the town had lost its swagger.

Coach Rake had once cursed loudly at a well-dressed gentleman who committed the sin of stepping onto the sacred Bermuda grass of The Field. The gentleman backtracked quickly, then walked around the sideline, and when he drew closer Rake realized he had just cursed the Mayor of Messina. The Mayor was offended. Rake didn't care. No one walked on his field. The Mayor, unaccustomed to being cursed, set in motion an ill-fated effort to fire Rake, who shrugged it off. The locals defeated the Mayor four to one as soon as his name appeared on the next ballot.

In those days, Eddie Rake had more political clout in Messina than all the politicians combined, and he thought nothing of it.

Neely stuck to the sideline and slowly made his way toward the home stands, then he stopped cold and took a deep breath as the pregame jitters hit him hard. The roar of a long-ago crowd came back, a crowd packed tightly together up there, in the bleachers, with the band in the center of things blaring away with its endless renditions of the Spartan fight song. And on the sideline just a few feet away, he could see number 19 nervously warming up as the mob worshiped him. Number 19 was a high school all-American, a highly recruited quarterback with a golden arm, fast feet, plenty of size, maybe the greatest Messina ever produced.

Number 19 was Neely Crenshaw in another life.

He walked a few steps along the sideline, stopped at the fifty where Rake had coached hundreds of games, and looked again at the silent bleachers where ten thousand people once gathered on Friday nights to pour their emotions upon a high school football team.

The crowds were half that now, he'd heard.

Fifteen years had passed since number 19 had thrilled so many. Fifteen years since Neely had played on the sacred turf. How many times had he promised himself he would never do what he was now doing? How many times had he sworn he would never come back?

On a practice field in the distance a coach blew a whistle and someone was yelling, but Neely barely heard it. Instead he was hearing the drum corps of the band, and the raspy, unforgettable voice of Mr. Bo Michael on the public address, and the deafening sound of the bleachers rattling as the fans jumped up and down.

And he heard Rake bark and growl, though his coach seldom lost his cool in the heat of battle.

The cheerleaders were over there—bouncing, chanting, short skirts, tights, tanned and firm legs. Neely had his pick back then.

His parents sat on the forty, eight rows down from the press box. He waved at his mother before every kickoff. She spent most of the game in prayer, certain he would break his neck.

The college recruiters got passes to a row of chair-backed seats on the fifty, prime seating. Someone counted thirty-eight scouts for the Garnet Central game, all there to watch number 19. Over a hundred colleges wrote letters; his father still kept them. Thirty-one offered full scholarships. When Neely signed with Tech, there was a press conference and headlines.

Ten thousand seats up in the bleachers, for a town with a population of eight thousand. The math had never worked. But they piled in from the county, from out in the sticks where there was nothing else to do on Friday night. They got their paychecks and bought their beer, and they came to town, to The Field where they clustered in one raucous pack at the north end of the stands and made more noise than the students, the band, and the townsfolk combined.

When he was a boy, his father had kept him away from the north end. “Those county people” down there were drinking and sometimes fighting and they yelled foul language at the officials. A few years later, number 19 adored the racket made by those county people, and they certainly adored him.

The bleachers were silent now, waiting. He moved slowly down the sideline, hands stuck deep in his pockets, a forgotten hero whose star had faded so quickly. The Messina quarterback for three seasons. Over a hundred touchdowns. He’d never lost on this field. The games came back to him, though he tried

to block them out. Those days were gone, he told himself for the hundredth time. Long gone.

In the south end zone the boosters had erected a giant scoreboard, and mounted around it on large white placards with bold green lettering was the history of Messina football. And thus the history of the town. Undefeated seasons in 1960 and 1961, when Rake was not yet thirty years old. Then in 1964 The Streak began, with perfect seasons for the rest of that decade and into the next. A month after Neely was born in 1970, Messina lost to South Wayne in the state championship, and The Streak was over. Eighty-four wins in a row, a national record at that time, and Eddie Rake was a legend at the age of thirty-nine.

Neely's father had told him of the unspeakable gloom that engulfed the town in the days after that loss. As if eighty-four straight victories were not enough. It was a miserable winter, but Messina endured. Next season, Rake's boys went 13-0 and slaughtered South Wayne for the state title. Other state championships followed, in '74, '75, and '79.

Then the drought. From 1980 until 1987, Neely's senior year, Messina went undefeated each season, easily won its conference and playoffs, only to lose in the state finals. There was discontent in Messina. The locals in the coffee shops were not happy. The old-timers longed for the days of The Streak. Some school in California won ninety in a row and the entire town of Messina was offended.



To the left of the scoreboard, on green placards with white lettering, were the tributes to the greatest of all Messina heroes. Seven numbers had been retired, with Neely's 19 being the last. Next to it was number 56, worn by Jesse Trapp, a linebacker who played briefly at Miami then went to prison. In 1974, Rake had retired number 81, worn by Roman Armstead, the only Messina Spartan to play in the NFL.

Beyond the south end zone was a field house that any small college would envy. It had a weight room and lockers and a visitors' dressing room with carpet and showers. It too was built by the boosters after an intense capital campaign that lasted one winter and consumed the entire town. No expense was spared, not for the Messina Spartans football team. Coach Rake wanted weights and lockers and coaches' offices, and the boosters practically forgot about Christmas.

There was something different now, something Neely had not seen before. Just past the gate that led to the field house there was a monument with a brick base and a bronze bust on it. Neely walked over to take a look. It was Rake, an oversized Rake with wrinkles on the forehead and the familiar scowl around the eyes, yet just a hint of a smile. He wore the same weathered Messina cap he'd worn for decades. A bronze Eddie Rake, at fifty, not the old man of seventy. Under it was a plaque with a glowing narrative, including the details that almost

anyone on the streets of Messina could rattle off from memory—thirty-four years as Coach of the Spartans, 418 wins, 62 losses, 13 state titles, and from 1964 to 1970 an undefeated streak that ended at 84.

It was an altar, and Neely could see the Spartans bowing before it as they made their way onto the field each Friday night.

The wind picked up and scattered leaves in front of Neely. Practice was over and the soiled and sweaty players were trudging toward the field house. He didn't want to be seen, so he walked down the track and through a gate. He climbed up thirty rows and sat all alone in the bleachers, high above Rake Field with a view of the valley to the east. Church steeples rose above the gold and scarlet trees of Messina in the distance. The steeple on the far left belonged to the Methodist church, and a block behind it, unseen from the bleachers, was a handsome two-story home the town had given to Eddie Rake on his fiftieth birthday.

And in that home Miss Lila and her three daughters and all the rest of the Rakes were now gathered, waiting for the Coach to take his last breath. No doubt the house was full of friends, too, with trays of food covering the tables and flowers stacked everywhere.

Were any former players there? Neely thought not.

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The next car into the parking lot stopped near Neely's. This Spartan wore a coat and tie, and as he walked casually across the track, he, too, avoided stepping onto the playing surface. He spotted Neely and climbed the bleachers.

"How long you been here?" he asked as they shook hands.

"Not long," Neely said. "Is he dead?"

"No, not yet."

Paul Curry caught forty-seven of the sixty-three touchdown passes Neely threw in their three-year career together. Crenshaw to Curry, time and time again, practically unstoppable. They had been co-captains. They were close friends who'd drifted apart over the years. They still called each other three or four times a year. Paul's grandfather built the first Messina bank, so his future had been sealed at birth. Then he married a local girl from another prominent family. Neely was the best man, and the wedding had been his last trip back to Messina.

"How's the family?" Neely asked.

"Fine. Mona's pregnant."

"Of course she's pregnant. Five or six?"

"Only four."

Neely shook his head. They were sitting three feet apart, both gazing into the distance, chatting but preoccupied. There was noise from the field house as cars and trucks began leaving.

"How's the team?" Neely asked.

"Not bad, won four lost two. The coach is a

young guy from Missouri. I like him. Talent's thin."

"Missouri?"

"Yeah, nobody within a thousand miles would take the job."

Neely glanced at him and said, "You've put on some weight."

"I'm a banker and a Rotarian, but I can still outrun you." Paul stopped quickly, sorry that he'd blurted out the last phrase. Neely's left knee was twice the size of his right. "I'm sure you can," Neely said with a smile. No harm done.

They watched the last of the cars and trucks speed away, most of them squealing tires or at least trying to. A lesser Spartan tradition.

Then things were quiet again. "Do you ever come here when the place is empty?" Neely asked.

"I used to."

"And walk around the field and remember what it was like back then?"

"I did until I gave it up. Happens to all of us."

"This is the first time I've come back here since they retired my number."

"And you haven't given it up. You're still living back then, still dreaming, still the all-American quarterback."

"I wish I'd never seen a football."

"You had no choice in this town. Rake had us in uniforms when we were in the sixth grade. Four teams—red, blue, gold, and black, remember? No green because every kid wanted to wear green. We

played Tuesday nights and drew more fans than most high schools. We learned the same plays Rake was calling on Friday night. The same system. We dreamed of being Spartans and playing before ten thousand fanatics. By the ninth grade Rake himself was supervising our practices and we knew all forty plays in his book. Knew them in our sleep.”

“I still know them,” Neely said.

“So do I. Remember the time he made us run slot-waggle-right for two solid hours in practice?”

“Yeah, because you kept screwin’ up.”

“Then we ran bleachers until we puked.”

“That was Rake,” Neely mumbled.

“You count the years until you get a varsity jersey, then you’re a hero, an idol, a cocky bastard because in this town you can do no wrong. You win and win and you’re the king of your own little world, then poof, it’s gone. You play your last game and everybody cries. You can’t believe it’s over. Then another team comes right behind you and you’re forgotten.”

“It was so long ago.”

“Fifteen years, pal. When I was in college, I would come home for the holidays and stay away from this place. I wouldn’t even drive by the school. Never saw Rake, didn’t want to. Then one night in the summertime, right before I went back to college, just a month or so before they fired him, I bought a six-pack and climbed up here and replayed all the games. Stayed for hours. I could see us out there

scoring at will, kicking ass every game. It was wonderful. Then it hurt like hell because it was over, our glory days gone in a flash.”

“Did you hate Rake that night?”

“No, I loved him then.”

“It changed every day.”

“For most of us.”

“Does it hurt now?”

“Not anymore. After I got married, we bought season tickets, joined the booster club, the usual stuff that everybody else does. Over time, I forgot about being a hero and became just another fan.”

“You come to all the games?”

Paul pointed down to the left. “Sure. The bank owns a whole block of seats.”

“You need a whole block with your family.”

“Mona is very fertile.”

“Evidently. How does she look?”

“She looks pregnant.”

“I mean, you know, is she in shape?”

“Other words, is she fat?”

“That’s it.”

“No, she exercises two hours a day and eats only lettuce. She looks great and she’ll want you over for dinner tonight.”

“For lettuce?”

“For whatever you want. Can I call her?”

“No, not yet. Let’s just talk.”

There was no talk for a long time. They watched a pickup truck roll to a stop near the gate. The driver

was a heavyset man with faded jeans, a denim cap, a thick beard, and a limp. He walked around the end zone and down the track and as he stepped up to the bleachers he noticed Neely and Curry sitting higher, watching every move he made. He nodded at them, climbed a few rows, then sat and gazed at the field, very still and very alone.

“That’s Orley Short,” Paul said, finally putting a name with a face. “Late seventies.”

“I remember him,” Neely said. “Slowest line-backer in history.”

“And the meanest. All-conference, I think. Played one year at a juco then quit to cut timber for the rest of his life.”

“Rake loved the loggers, didn’t he?”

“Didn’t we all? Four loggers on defense and a conference title was automatic.”

Another pickup stopped near the first, another hefty gentleman in overalls and denim lumbered his way to the bleachers where he greeted Orley Short and sat beside him. Their meeting did not appear to be planned.

“Can’t place him,” Paul said, struggling to identify the second man and frustrated that he could not. In three and a half decades Rake had coached hundreds of boys from Messina and the county. Most of them had never left. Rake’s players knew each other. They were members of a small fraternity whose membership was forever closed.

“You should get back more often,” Paul said when it was time to talk again.

“Why?”

“Folks would like to see you.”

“Maybe I don’t want to see them.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know.”

“You think people here still hold a grudge because you didn’t win the Heisman?”

“No.”

“They’ll remember you all right, but you’re history. You’re still their all-American, but that was a long time ago. Walk in Renfrow’s Café and Maggie still has that huge photo of you above the cash register. I go there for breakfast every Thursday and sooner or later two old-timers will start debating who was the greatest Messina quarterback, Neely Crenshaw or Wally Webb. Webb starred for four years, won forty-six in a row, never lost, etc., etc. But Crenshaw played against black kids and the game was faster and tougher. Crenshaw signed with Tech but Webb was too small for the big-time. They’ll argue forever. They still love you, Neely.”

“Thanks, but I’ll skip it.”

“Whatever.”

“It was another life.”

“Come on, give it up. Enjoy the memories.”

“I can’t. Rake’s back there.”

“Then why are you here?”

“I don’t know.”