Chapter One

My name is Ryan "Replay" Hale. According to the local newspaper, I'm the greatest running back that Marathon High School has ever seen. The *Marathon Tribune* called me a "talent to watch." And "the golden boy of the Golden Warriors."

But they don't know about my pregame ritual—barfing quietly in a locker-room bathroom stall, hoping nobody hears me. The only one who does hear

me, unfortunately, is my best friend, Alex. He always stands guard outside.

"Replay?" he hisses through the stall door. "You almost finished? Game time in five."

My empty stomach lurches again, trying to hurl whatever might be left down there into the stained toilet bowl in front of me. The result of a nasty cocktail of nerves and fear. Not for the first time I wonder at the cruel joke of genetics that made me into a football superman. I'd much prefer to be Clark Kent. I have a love-hate thing with the game of football.

I'm distracted from my misery by muffled voices outside the stall door.

"Replay must have had a bad burrito, Coach," I overhear Alex say. "No big deal, sir. He'll be right out."

Alex thumps on the door. "Seriously, man! Ride the vomit comet and get out here."

There's no more putting it off. I can't disappoint Alex. My team. My parents. I wipe my mouth with the back of a gloved hand and adjust my neck roll.

My stomach feels like it's filled with battery acid. But it's time for my game face. I slide my helmet on, hoping it will hide my seasick expression, and open the stall door.

"Replay! Good to see you, man!" Alex checks his watch and raises an eyebrow. "Seventeen minutes and thirty-seven seconds of solid puke." His teeth flash white as he grins and slaps me on my shoulder pads. We walk out of the locker room and through the dim tunnel toward the brightly lit field. He's chuckling to himself all the way.

"What are you so happy about?" I ask. As we step out of the tunnel, the noise and sights of the field make Alex pause before answering. The big screen is flashing a pre-game show, throwing crazy shadows everywhere. The stands are like rippling sheets of gold, Warriors fans decked out in our school colors. It feels like a circus with the drums banging away and cheerleaders spinning and twirling, all blond hair and wide smiles.

We walk over to our place on the bench. It's occupied by a new guy, a freshman. Alex gives him the hard stare until he shoves over. Star treatment for the star players, like me and him. I guess football has some perks.

"Why am I happy, you ask? Well, I'm proud of you, son." Alex puts a fatherly hand on my shoulder.

"Proud of me? For what?"

"That was your personal best for a pregame spew-fest. The more you barf, the better you play. I've watched you do this for what, a dozen games?" He gives me a toothy grin. "Bet you didn't know this, but I timed all your barf-o-thons."

"That's actually kinda creepy."

"No, no. I'm a scientist, man. I have the data to back me up now. It's not just a theory. Longer barf session equals better game performance. It's a fact. You're going to be awesome on the field tonight." Alex suddenly looks serious and leans in toward me. The crowd roars louder. "Just don't lose your lunch while you're wearing your helmet. That'll get ugly."

"Thanks for the advice, man." Time for the other part of my pre-game ritual. I pull out a small video camera from my backpack under the bench. "Also, how come you know so many words for 'puke'? How many can there be?"

"Challenge accepted, my friend! Let's see...there's *blow chunks. Toss a sidewalk pizza. Chunder. Curl and hurl. Drive the porcelain bus...*"

I tune Alex out and flip open the little screen on the side of the camera. Pressing the red Record button, I scan the field. Two lines of players. We're in gold, they're in white. The quarterback barks out his call, then snaps the ball forward. Game on. I pan over to the stands. The drummers in front, thrashing away on their instruments. Behind and above them, rows and rows of fans wearing gold-colored T-shirts and hats. I pause for a moment and zoom in on a middle-aged