

SILENT WITNESS

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Richard North Patterson



St. Martin's Paperbacks

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Acknowledgments

Teaser

Praise for *Silent Witness*

Also by Richard North Patterson

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PROLOGUE

T O N Y L O R D

THE PRESENT

Gina Belfante murdered her husband at one-fifteen on a Tuesday morning. By Tuesday afternoon she had lied to the police; by Thursday, the police and the medical examiner had concluded that Donald Belfante, who had been shot to death while sleeping in his own bed, had not been killed by an intruder. The police did not find the prenuptial agreement—giving Gina a pittance should the Belfantes ever divorce—until Monday. The next day, after they charged Gina Belfante with murder, the lawyer she had consulted about a divorce posted bail and referred her to Anthony Lord.

Although San Francisco was a small city, and the wealthy society in which the Belfantes moved was smaller yet, Tony Lord did not know her. But, inevitably, Gina knew Tony Lord; she had seen him at the Oscars, she told him brightly, on the night that his exquisite wife, Stacey Tarrant, won an Oscar for Best Supporting Actress. Sitting behind his desk, Tony let Gina chatter nervously, without appearing to watch her as closely as he did. Finally, he asked a few questions; it was several hours later—well after Gina Belfante had tearfully admitted putting a bullet through her husband's brain—that Tony learned she was a battered wife and had doctors' records to prove it. That, he decided, would be his defense.

It was not simple. Given that Donald Belfante had died without waking, it was hard to argue that Gina had felt in imminent danger of violence. The prenuptial agreement made matters worse yet—terms of money, it rewarded murder and punished divorce. There were almost no witnesses: like many abusive husbands, Donald Belfante had usually beaten his wife's body, often in ways both sadistic and intimate, while leaving her face unmarred; like many abused wives, Gina Belfante had lied to everyone save her doctor. And a society woman who stood to inherit twenty-five million dollars would not strike most jurors as so helpless that she had shot her sleeping husband in fear and desperation. His only choice, Tony knew, was to put her late husband on trial.

Donald Belfante had been a large man; like many entrepreneurs who retained absolute power over his own creation—in this case, a company that made computer disk drives—he was charming, egotistical, sensitive to slight, and a bully. If Gina was to be believed, he beat her often, and at random: he had beaten her four hours before his death, and had she not killed him when he stirred awake, he would have beaten her right then. It did not take much to anger Donald Belfante, and he enjoyed his anger; Gina lived in fear of each new beating, and of that final day—vivid in her imagination—when he would go too far and kill her. The prenuptial agreement, she insisted in tears, was not an incentive: it was the symbol of his unfathomable rage at the idea that she might leave him. Should she ever try, Donald Belfante had promised his wife, he would find and kill her; her belief that this would happen was both reasonable and heartfelt.

That was what she told the jury. That was what the defense psychologist told them. And, with all the empathy that he could muster, Tony Lord tried to make them feel what, in his best imagining, Gina Belfante must have felt.

At forty-six, Tony retained the all-American look that seemed to invite confidence—blond hair cut to a moderate length, a youngish face that was strong but not threatening, candid blue eyes—and a jury persona to match. He was never arrogant, never overused his gift for irony, never took the obvious pleasure in his own skill that might cause some juror to dislike him.

The jury trusted Tony Lord. And, a few seconds earlier, to his profound relief, it had acquitted Gina Belfante.

* * *

The courtroom burst into sound—spectators turning to each other, reporters running for the minicams or computers, jurors embracing in sheer gratitude that this was over, and, from Donna Belfante’s elderly mother, an involuntary moan of anguish. Gina Belfante collapsed in Tony’s arms.

Her body was fragile, her frame slight. When a reporter called out, “Mr. Lord,” he did not turn.

“Thank you,” Gina murmured again and again. “God, Tony, thank you.”

She was absorbing, Tony knew, the gift of freedom. She looked up at him with red-rimmed eyes.

“I think I love you,” she said.

“A married lawyer?” Tony smiled. “I don’t know which part’s worse. You promised you’d start making better choices.”

“Then I will.” Gina’s laugh was shaky, as if the sound of it startled her. “God, what do I do next?”

Tony stopped smiling. “Just sit quietly with this, Gina. After a while, you may want help.”

“I *do*.” Suddenly she burst into an ingenuous smile, which crinkled the corners of her eyes as it brightened them. “I’m rich, and I can do any damn thing I want.”

Tony shook his head. “You can do *almost* any damn thing you want.”

Gina looked around the stark courtroom, bleak with fluorescent light, and was pensive again. “All I want right now, Tony, is to leave this place and never come back.”

Over her shoulder, Tony signaled to the bodyguards.

Moments later, they stood on the steps of the Hall of Justice. There was a cool spring breeze, but the sun was bright, and the camera lenses reflected its light like chips of mica. Tony would speak for his client; as he raised his hand, and reporters thrust their microphones to hear him, Tony admitted to himself that for a defense lawyer, the next best thing to a client whose innocence seemed certain was winning a case you were supposed to lose.

The questions went quickly; in some form or another, Tony had answered them many cases ago. When CNN asked if he thought Gina Belfante had won because she could afford him, he shot back, “Does that make Mrs. Belfante too wealthy to be battered? Or is it that because other defendants may effectively be deprived of the presumption of innocence, she should be too. Then this country would truly be a prosecutors’ paradise—”

“Speaking of the DA,” Channel Five cut in, “we’ve just had a statement from Mr. Salinas. He told us the verdict is ‘emotional’ and that there is ‘no credible evidence that Mrs. Belfante was in a reasonable fear of imminent danger.’ ”

Drawing Gina closer, Tony gazed at the young Asian woman who asked the question. Mildly, he said, “That’s not a very gracious response, is it? And more than a little unfair to the jury. But then—unlike the jury—Mr. Salinas has been nowhere near this courtroom these past three weeks. Any more than he was there when Mrs. Belfante’s husband was beating her...”

Enough, Tony warned himself abruptly—he had to keep doing business with Victor Salinas. He waved away more questions, saying, “Mrs. Belfante needs peace now, and I hope you can give it to her.”

Quickly, he kissed Gina Belfante on the cheek. "Have a good life," he said quietly. She smiled up at him, and then two bodyguards hustled her away to a waiting limousine and whatever life she would have, while Tony Lord, feeling both loss and relief from this severance of their complex bond, reclaimed the life that was his own.

At the foot of the stairs, Tony saw his black Lincoln, but not the driver. Snaking through the last of the reporters, he opened the rear door.

Concealed by the opaque windows, Stacey sat behind the wheel. It was so unlike her that, just as she had intended, Tony laughed aloud. Closing the rear door, he slid into the front seat next to her.

Blue-green eyes looking into his, Stacey kissed him. She took her time about it and then leaned back again, pleased at his surprise.

"Do you come here often?" she asked.

* * *

For a moment, Tony was content to look at her.

She was slim and honey blond, and the clean lines and angles of her face held several contradictions—a bright smile that did not erase a certain wariness in her eyes; an ingenue's fresh skin touched by fine lines at the corners of her mouth, which, when she smiled, reminded Tony that his wife was now forty-one. She wore little makeup: for a singer and actress whose face was so widely known, day-to-day indifference to how others saw her was both a luxury and an act of self-definition. But what made her presence at the Hall of Justice so surprising was that she made a practice of avoiding Tony's trials—she did not like courtrooms, and this building held bad memories for her.

Twelve years before, Stacey had given a concert to raise money for her lover, Senator James Kilcannon, a Democratic candidate for President in the California primary. As Stacey stood next to him, Kilcannon was shot and killed by a Vietnam veteran, Harry Carson, who was in the throes of post-traumatic stress syndrome. Or so had claimed Anthony Lord, who became Harry Carson's lawyer.

At the outset, Stacey had despised both men equally: even now, she could not fully account for how she had come to separate Tony from his client, and then to love him. But she had.

"Congratulations," she said.

Her gaze combined affection with a quiet inquiry. "Still," Tony said, "you're wondering what I've gotten away with, aren't you?"

Stacey smiled a little, though her eyes did not: while she had learned to accept, and even to understand, the reasons for Tony's sometimes ruthless devotion to protecting his clients, she could never share it. "Not you," she said at last. "But Gina Belfante did kill him, after all. I understand the battered woman's syndrome, but did *this* woman 'reasonably' believe that she couldn't leave him?"

Tony shrugged. "With a state-of-mind defense, all the lawyer can do is let the jury decide. In this case, I hope, the jury saw Gina Belfante as she really is. Or perhaps they just concluded that her new husband is safe enough, and the last one no great loss." This was not, Tony saw at once, the right thing to have said. "If it's any comfort, Stacey, I've never had a client I've walked on a murder charge get out and do it again. At least that's some comfort to me."

Silent, Stacey considered him. "Well," she said finally, "I'm just glad it's over. I missed you."

Tony pulled her close, burying his face in her neck. Her hair and skin smelled fresh. "Not good enough," she murmured. "Why don't we go home."

* * *

Their home in Pacific Heights was on a private block with a view of the bay. Like the car and drive the house afforded both security and privacy. It was good, Tony had dryly remarked, that Stacey could afford it. Stacey had suffered stalkers, and some of Tony's clients were deeply unpopular: even had their lives not imposed on them certain lessons, both had genuine reason to worry for their safety and that of Christopher, Tony's son.

This was but one of the prices they paid for a celebrity that was, in the main, unsought: the gazes of strangers in restaurants; the careless gossip of people who barely knew them but pretended they did; the too-quick friendships of others drawn to "fame" for its own sake. But at least Tony and Stacey disliked all this in common, just as they disliked the assumption that they were somehow exempt from what would be stressful for any other busy couple—doubts as to their own careers; the need to keep their marriage fresh; the knowledge that both worked too hard; lingering questions as to whether, as Stacey was unable to bear children, they should adopt; their occasional worries over some change or another in Christopher. Most of all, they shared something that many people did not and that they understood in each other very well: an awareness that happiness was fragile, good fortune a gift.

True, they did not have to worry about money and, thanks to Stacey's success, never would. But they were happy—and more often than not they truly were—it was less because of money than because they loved Christopher and each other, yet respected one another's separateness. This perhaps helped explain why they remained so close. Stacey had never asked Tony to turn down cases out of town, he just did; just as, on her own, Stacey had become more selective about what roles she considered—the Oscar was five years behind her, and she had grown less willing to accept the total removal from reality, and from their life, that shooting on location required. Lately she had returned to writing and recording her own songs—somewhat like Bonnie Raitt and Carly Simon, she had her own popularity—but now was reading an unusually good script of the kind, she had said to Tony wryly, suited to a woman her age: no nude scenes, car chases, dinosaurs, or child actors. Some of the fleeting dinners during the Belfante trial had been spent mulling this: Tony and Christopher had given Stacey's life a center, and she was reluctant to leave it.

When they entered the living room, Christopher was there, his Nike-shod feet flopped up on the couch, the rest of him looking somewhat like a clothes pile—baggy jeans, baggy sweatshirt, baseball cap. From beneath the cap, a face remarkably like a seventeen-year-old Tony Lord's regarded them with a pleasant smile.

"Hi, guys," he said without moving. "How're things?"

He was fresh from baseball practice, Tony knew, and this air of sloth amidst affluence was his current persona: Christopher viewed his fortunate circumstances as an elaborate joke, which might end by sunset. It was, Tony knew, a reflection of his son's inherent caution; though he never spoke of this, Christopher seemed to remember the conflicts of his first six years of life—his parents' fight over money, his father's ambitions, his mother's discontent—and of the three years, after the divorce, when his mother's insistence on raising him seemed less from love than a weapon aimed at Tony, the real constant in Christopher's life. Tony adored his son: he could never understand how Marcia could cede the pleasure and responsibility of raising Christopher by moving to Los Angeles to live, in Tony's view, a shallow life with her shallow second husband. But she had, and Tony was deeply thankful.

He stood next to Stacey, hands on hips, gazing at his mock-lethargic son. "Things," he informed Christopher, "are just dandy."

"Great," his son said cheerfully. "So do you think I can borrow the car tonight? Aaron and I are studying for finals."

Eyeing her stepson, Stacey cocked her head. "Is that all? Weren't you about to ask why your father's home so early?"

Christopher gave her a blank look, and then Tony saw the comprehension dawn. "Oh, yeah—the trial. Sorry." He turned to Tony. "Did you win?"

"Yup."

"Cool." Now Christopher sat up. "Did she do it?"

"Of course she *did* it," Stacey said dryly. "But your dad informs me that's not the point."

Christopher looked from one to the other, amusement in his eyes. And then he got up, took three steps across the living room, and gave his father an awkward hug. "Well, congratulations, *padre*."

Tony took the opportunity to hold his son tight. Leaning back, he said with a smile, "Thank you for this spontaneous interest in my life."

Christopher grinned. "No problem," he said, and mussed his father's hair. "Anyhow, you're doing fine without me."

With that, Christopher Lord went looking for the keys to his father's car.

Tony made a pitcher of martinis and, sitting next to Stacey, poured a drink for each of them. Together, they looked out at the sailboats dotting the bay.

"Whatever will we do," he remarked, "when Christopher heads off to college."

Stacey checked her watch. "The same thing we're going to do in, I'd say, about fifteen minutes." Smiling over at him, she added, "I gave Marcella the night off."

Tony put down his drink at once. "You first," he said. "I like watching."

Stacey preceded him up the stairs to the master bedroom.

After five or six steps, she began taking off her clothes—sweater, then bra, then blue jeans. Watching her slim body climb the stairs, Tony saw her pause as she reached the top, not turning. With a single undulation halfway between sensual and mocking, Stacey let her panties fall to the floor.

"Cool," Tony said, and then no one was joking.

* * *

"I love you," he told her. Stacey smiled at him with her eyes.

They lay in the shadows of their bedroom, Stacey beneath him, sated, both of them, the moisture of lovemaking cooling on their skin. Tony still felt his warmth inside her, her breasts against his chest. His limbs had a pleasant lassitude.

"How many times," Stacey asked, "do you think we've made love?"

Tony smiled. "Not enough, lately."

She kissed him, then said, "During a trial, it's as if you're in another place. Like acting, I guess."

"At least actors know what everyone else is going to say. And how the story ends." Tony slid from inside her and down the bed, kissing her as he went, and laid his head on the hollow of her stomach. He saw her face turn to the window, absently gazing at the pastel sky of early evening.

"I've been thinking about that script," she said.

"And?"

"I don't know."

Tony raised his head. "I can't decide for you, Stace. I don't even want to vote."

She turned to him, raising her head from the pillow. "Not even for yourself?"

He shook his head, watching her. "You like this story. You don't, usually."

"I know, and they need an answer." She frowned. "It isn't such a great time for me to give the one. I feel like you've just gotten back."

Smiling, he said, "I'll take off work for a couple of days. Then you'll be ready."

"If you did, I might never be ready." She turned to the closed door of the bedroom. "Maybe we can just raid the refrigerator and bring it back up here—wine, cheese—I don't really care. Whatever you want."

"Smoked oysters."

Stacey made a face, and then the telephone rang.

It was their private line, reserved for close friends and emergencies. Tony felt himself tense.

"Let it go," Stacey murmured.

"I can't. Not when we've got a seventeen-year-old running around in a car."

Stacey gave him a look of understanding and then nodded toward the phone. Tony got it on the third ring.

"Mr. Lord," a man's voice said. "This is your answering service...."

"Jesus Christ," Tony murmured in irritation.

"We've had two long-distance calls," the man went on. "From a Sue Robb. It's an emergency, she says...." Tony sat up on the edge of the bed, instinctively turning from Stacey. "I have her on hold, Mr. Lord. Shall I say you'll call back?"

Tony hesitated. "No," he said to the operator. "Put her through."

* * *

Tony stood at the window. From the bed, Stacey watched him.

"If you go back there," she said, "the whole thing will come up again."

He was quiet for a moment, feeling the truth of this. "I know."

"If I understand you at all, Tony, you've tried your entire adult life to put that time behind you. But you still have the nightmares, even now. And sometimes when I look at you, it's like you're *there*, not here."

Tony did not answer. "Sam and Sue were my closest friends," he said at last. "Part of me feels guilty about how I left it."

"As I recall the story, one of them was more than a friend." Stacey made her voice softer. "Leaving was a matter of survival, Tony. Sometimes I don't know how you got through it all."

Turning, Tony walked to the bed. "What's happening now could ruin them both. I needed a lawyer then, and they need one now."

Stacey shook her head in dismay. "This is eerie. It's too much like before...."

"And that wasn't fair to me. This may not be fair to him. I know too damned well what that town can be like." He paused, fighting his own dismay. "I have to go, lover. At least for a couple of days. Even if there's no part of me that wants to."

Stacey looked down at the bed and slowly nodded.

He did not want it like this. "I can never explain...."

She rose from the bed, putting her arms around his neck. "You never have to, Tony. The script can wait for a few days." Stacey paused a moment. "If it comes to that, I'll watch after Christopher. Real life has its demands, I know. And the one you lived before me *always* has."

* * *

On the flight that would take him to Lake City, Ohio, the home of his youth, for the first time in twenty-eight years, Tony Lord found himself remembering, like pieces of film, each moment of the

night that Alison Taylor died.

~~The images were indelible—not just of Alison, or of Sam and Sue, whose crisis this was now, but~~ the months that had followed Alison's death. He owed this heightened clarity, Tony was certain, to what he had found in the grass of the Taylors' rear yard, and all that he had felt since that instant had bisected his life like a fault line. What was much harder to retrieve was who he had been in the hours before, still innocent of the knowledge that tragedy, like passion, could be summoned at random.

They were Christopher's age, seventeen.

PART ONE

A L I S O N T A Y L O R

NOVEMBER 1967-AUGUST 1968

Tony Lord stood in a bowl of light.

The night air was crisp and cold: it smelled faintly of burning leaves and Bermuda grass, popcorn oil wafting from the bleachers. Beneath the klieg lights, the football field was a fluorescent yellow-green, surrounded by darkness. The cheers and the stomping of feet in the wooden stands carried the energies of a town of thirteen thousand, a place unto itself, thirty miles from the rust-belt city of Steelton, where fathers might work but their families seldom went.

Half the town was here—parents and grandparents and other adults and most of the kids in high school, as well as their younger brothers and sisters, in search of an excuse for milling and talking and finding each other. But for the rest, bundled in coats and wool caps and leather gloves, the Erie Conference Championship was about school pride and town history and bragging rights at Rotary meetings and on business calls and in Elks Club smokers. Their raucous screams were etched with anxiety: Lake City was losing ten to seven, and Riverwood had the ball on the fifty-yard line, with one minute forty left. It was third and five to go; the Lakers' last chance was to stop this play.

Riverwood broke the huddle, seven kids in red jerseys and white pants coming toward the line, their shadows moving with them, the quarterback and fullback and two halfbacks settling in behind them. Their quarterback, Jack Parham, set his hands between the center's legs as the seven bodies bent over the chalk that marked midfield. Opposing them were four bulky players in Lake City blue—the defensive line—with the linebackers behind them and then, protecting against the pass or the ball carrier who might break away from the pack, two defensive halfbacks and two safeties. One of the halfbacks was Tony Lord; the other was Sam Robb, his best friend.

Jack Parham barked his signals. At the corner of his eye, Tony saw Sam edging forward, catlike. The center snapped the ball.

Parham stuffed it into his fullback's stomach. As the fullback hit the line, Tony saw Parham put the ball back and tuck it under his own right arm—a quarterback sweep, meant to gain the last few yards and run precious seconds off the game clock.

Sam was already headed toward Parham as Tony called out, "Sweep..."

Parham ran alone along the right side of his line. But Sam was sprinting all out; as Parham turned down the field, he spotted Sam coming for him from ten yards away.

Trailing Sam, Tony could see Parham hesitate, wondering whether to run out of bounds. But that would stop the time clock; in the moment of indecision, Parham slowed and stood up.

Tony knew Sam Robb far too well not to know that this was a mistake.

Three feet from Parham, Sam leaped. His body was a taut line, which ended in his helmet crashing beneath Parham's face mask.

There was a sickening crack; Parham's head snapped back, and the ball flew from his hands. The crowd screamed as it flopped spinning onto the grass, five feet in front of Tony.

Tony dived. As his face hit the grass, Tony swept the ball in both arms and cradled it beneath his chest, bracing himself as three red-clad bodies hurtled into him, jarring his spine and rib cage and clawing at his arms and hands to steal the ball. Tony could smell their sweat.

The whistle blew.

Slowly, Tony stood amidst the sound of near hysteria, feeling the raw scratches on his arms.

handing the ball to the referee with a calm he did not feel but felt obliged to feign. But Sam stood facing the Lake City stands, arms raised in the air, helmet in one hand so that his straight blond hair shone in the klieg lights. He did not seem to know that Jack Parham had not moved.

The crowd appeared to stand for Sam as one, their noise rising into the darkness. Only when Parham remained still, and the Riverwood coach and trainer ran toward him, did the cries die down.

Tony looked at neither the stands nor Parham but at the clock. Reading a minute nineteen, he wondered how to channel his fullback's aggression, what plays could win this game, how to keep Sam under control.

On offense, Tony was the quarterback. But the next minute, the last of their careers, belonged to them both.

They had been waiting for this moment since ninth grade, two weeks after Tony came to the public high from Holy Name—the parochial school where his Polish Catholic parents had sent him as long as they could—and the coaches had given Tony the job that Sam Robb thought was his.

At fourteen, Sam was already tall and fast, with a strong arm and an assertive manner that made most kids defer to him, a swift temper which made some a little fearful. It was clear that he expected no competition, least of all from this Catholic interloper.

For several days they drilled beside each other, barely speaking. Tony saw that Sam was the better athlete; what Tony had was quick reflexes and something he could not define but which the coaches seemed to like. Among the team there was palpable tension; in the folkways of a small town with schoolboy sports at its center, everyone knew that Coach Ellis was picking not just the ninth-grade quarterback but the one who would be groomed to quarterback Lake City High.

At the last practice, George Jackson, who coached the varsity, watched from the sidelines.

Sam drove the team harder, favoring plays that showed his arm and running skills. At the end of the practice, Coach Ellis took Sam aside.

Tony was the quarterback.

In the locker room, he accepted the congratulations of some teammates but not Sam, who seemed to have vanished, and then Tony went to the stands and sat alone, puzzling over his good fortune. He heard heavy footsteps on the wooden planks; looking up, he saw Sam Robb, climbing toward him with the arrogant carriage that was all his own.

Silent, Sam sat next to him. Tony braced himself for the suggestion that he get out of Sam's way.

"These coaches don't know shit," Sam said at last. "You're still throwing off your back foot."

Tony turned to him. "How's that?"

Sam gave him a narrow look. "I've got a big backyard. I'll show you."

After a moment, Tony nodded. "Okay."

Quiet, they walked the few blocks to Sam's house, carrying their books and binders.

At first hand, Tony knew little about Sam's life. But in Lake City it was impossible to know nothing at all: though the Robbs belonged to the country club, where Tony's parents were never asked, Sam's father's hardware store was widely believed to be failing. So Tony was not surprised that Sam's white frame house, set in a spacious, oak-lined yard, was large but a little dingy. Nor was he surprised that the Robbs' living room mantel featured several trophies earned by Sam's brother, Joe, Lake City High's Athlete of the Year in 1962, a year before he went to Vietnam and died there. Tony knew that Sam's tall but somewhat paunchy father, an athlete gone to seed, was past president of the Lake City Athletic Booster Club. What startled Tony was Sam's mother.

Dottie Robb was a blonde whose smooth face, snub nose, and china-blue eyes were very like Sam's, though the faint ravages of her own lost youth showed in the slight sag of her chin and upper arm.

She lay on the couch in a bright, incongruous sundress, and her gaze seemed blurred. Ignoring Tony she said to Sam, "You promised me you'd mow the lawn today."

Her tone was funny, slurred and demanding and a little pouty. Sam's body went stiff. "We were going out back, to practice."

Dottie Robb raised her eyebrows. "Oh," she answered in a somewhat derisive tone. "Football."

Shifting from foot to foot, Tony noted the half-empty tumbler of what looked like whiskey on a side table near the couch. He stepped forward. "I'm Tony Lord." Some cautionary instinct kept him from adding, "ma'am."

She gave him a slow look, up and down. Then she rose from the couch quite smoothly and extended a graceful hand. Her skin was cool and dry, her blue eyes direct and somewhat mocking. "I'm Dottie, Sam's mother."

Dottie Robb inspected him for another instant and then went to Sam, giving him a kiss on the cheek, which he neither fled nor accepted. As she hugged her son, his eyes were expressionless.

Sam was quiet as he led Tony to the backyard.

The grass was thick, the flower beds untended. Hanging from the branch of a buckeye tree was an old truck tire on a rope.

Without preface, Sam said, "Watch my feet," and backed twenty feet from the tire. Sam danced on the balls of his feet; when he threw, Tony saw that his weight was on the front foot. The ball sailed through the tire.

"Your arm's not that bad," Sam said. "But like Joe said—my brother—if you don't have your weight right, you short-arm it. No zip, no distance."

Knowing that the words were those not of a fourteen-year-old but of his now dead older brother, Tony was struck by how much stake Sam's family must have placed in his success. For the first time, Tony sensed Sam's generosity; losing the quarterback spot would cost much more in this family than in Tony's.

"Your turn," Sam told him.

Tony began throwing, Sam standing by him with hands on hips, offering terse pointers. Tony went seven for ten.

At the end, Sam nodded without comment, tossing the ball underhand to Tony. "Sideline," he said, ran out a few feet, then sped toward a bed of roses along the left side of the yard.

Tony threw.

The ball sailed lazily over Sam's head. Sam picked up speed, trying to catch it, and then suddenly broke stride, leaping over the rosebushes as the ball thudded to the ground beyond him.

Behind them, a screen door squeaked open. Suddenly shrill, Dottie Robb's voice called out, "Watch the roses—those are my babies."

They turned. She faced them, leaning against the frame with both hands. Standing near the rose bed, Sam faced her, reddening in silent acknowledgment. Only Tony could hear him mumble, "Fuck you," under his breath.

Satisfied, Dottie Robb closed the door. Tony wondered how long she had been watching. Cautious, not drinking.

"Do it again," Sam said. "A little less arc on the ball, okay? And don't ruin her stupid roses."

With a mixture of solidarity and pride, Tony answered, "I'm at my best in the clutch." The next four passes were close to perfect.

"All right," Sam said abruptly. "We need a play. Someday in high school, some big game will be on the line and it'll be up to me and you." Sam paused, eyes on Tony, smiling for the first time. "I'm

going to be the greatest pass-catching end in the history of Lake City High School. You'll need one."

Tony studied him to see if he was joking. Sam stopped smiling. "The other guys like you," he said bluntly. "They'll play for you. But you're going to need me."

Tony felt something poignant in Sam's admission, and in his desire to cover it with braggadocio. "Run a sideline pattern," Tony said at length. "Like we've been doing. Only hip fake the guy covering you and cut back over the middle, deep."

Sam flipped the ball back to Tony.

Tony paused, trying to visualize what he wanted. The day—the soft light of late afternoon, the deepening green of the grass and trees—faded around him. What was vivid was the moment he wanted to create.

He sensed Sam waiting patiently, as if he understood. "Go," Tony said.

Sam ran left toward the roses. Tony skittered back, light on his feet now, avoiding an imaginary tackler by running to his right.

Abruptly, Sam broke for the middle of the yard. Tony stopped at once, lofting the ball over Sam's head and to his right. Sam followed its flight, running as hard as he could as the ball slowly fell. With a last burst, Sam grasped the football in his fingertips.

He glided to a stop and turned, holding the ball aloft. For a moment, it seemed to Tony that Sam was no longer there but hearing an imagined crowd, which called his name. His eyes were half shut.

They opened abruptly. "Touchdown," Sam called out to Tony. "That's the play."

* * *

Their moment had come.

That Alison watched from the stands, or Tony's parents, meant nothing to him; Jack Parham's injury meant only the advantage of a time-out. As he ran to the sidelines, passing the cheerleader, Tony was barely aware of Sue Cash's wave of encouragement, her curly brown hair and bright smile, the faint smell of her perfume as the cheer she led sang out. *We are the Lakers, the mighty, mighty Lakers ...*

On the sidelines, Coach Jackson was pacing and staring at the clock, plainly dying for a cigarette. At forty-five, he had already suffered a heart attack, and only smoking kept the pounds off his thick-chested body. His narrow snake eyes stared at Tony from a red, sclerotic face.

"What do you want to run?" he demanded.

Tony told him.

Jackson's eyes widened, the look he used to intimidate. "Sam's been covered all night."

Tony shrugged. "So they won't expect it."

Something like amusement crossed Jackson's face, a bone-deep liking for the boy in front of him, his own pride in judging character. These were the moments, Tony realized, that Coach Jackson lived for.

"Just win the goddamned game," Jackson said.

As Tony led the offense onto the field, a Riverwood player and a trainer were helping Jack Parham to the sidelines. Trotting next to Tony, Sam said, "That felt good—a fumble and a time-out."

There was a primal joy in Sam's voice, adrenaline pumping. As the offense huddled, Tony paused to look at each of them—the offensive linemen; Sam; the muscular fullback, Johnny D'Abruzzo; Tony's friend from Holy Name; Ernie Nixon, the halfback, the only black in high school. Their faces were taut, anxious. Tony kept his tone matter-of-fact.

"We're gonna take this one play at a time. No fumbles, no penalties. No losing our head or trying to

be heroes. We just do what we need to do, and the game belongs to us. I'll worry about the clock."

The team seemed to settle down. Tony called the play and they broke the huddle, taking the positions with an air of confidence. Standing behind them, Tony looked at the defense. The clock still read one-nineteen; it would not start until the center snapped the ball.

Tony stepped behind the center, aware of the screaming crowd only as a distant noise, feeling Johnny D'Abruzzi in back of him, Ernie Nixon to his right. He began barking signals.

The ball slipped into his hands. With the first pop of shoulder pads, the linemen's grunts of pain and anger and aggression, Tony spun and handed the ball to Ernie Nixon.

Ernie hit the line slanting to the left, then burst through a hole for five more yards until Riverwood linebacker stuck his helmet in Ernie's chest and drove him to the ground.

The next play, a run by Johnny D'Abruzzi, gained almost nothing.

"Time," Tony shouted at the referee. Only then did he look at the clock.

Forty-four seconds. He had just used their last time-out.

The team huddled around Tony, Johnny D'Abruzzi screaming, "Give me the ball again..." Stepping between them, Sam clutched Tony's jersey, his face contorted with panic and frustration. "I'm open. You've gotta start throwing—we're running out of time."

Tony gazed at Sam's hands, stifling his own anger. "There's plenty of time," he said. His tone said something else: *This isn't our moment.*

They stared at each other, and then Sam dropped his hands. Tony turned to the others as if nothing had happened. His heart pounded.

"All right." He looked into Johnny D'Abruzzi's fierce eyes and made his judgment. "We're running Johnny again, this time through the left side. Then I'll run an option."

He saw Sam's astonishment, Ernie Nixon's disappointment; ignoring them both, he called the numbers for the next two plays. But when the huddle broke, he grasped Ernie's sleeve. "I'm counting on you to cut down the left side linebacker."

"I'll do it."

Turning, Tony ambled behind the center with deceptive casualness. Then he suddenly barked, "Huddle three," and the ball was in his hand, then in Johnny D'Abruzzi's arms as he ran to the left behind Ernie Nixon. Ernie shot through the liner; with a fierceness that was almost beautiful, he coiled his body and slammed shoulder-first into Riverwood's right linebacker, knocking him backward as Johnny ran past and then tripped, suddenly and completely, over the legs of the falling player.

"Shit," Tony said under his breath. The clock read thirty-one, thirty, twenty-nine. Still twenty yards to go ...

The blue bodies scurried up from the turf to re-form along the line of scrimmage. Twenty-two seconds ...

The center snapped the ball to Tony.

He ran along the line, with Ernie Nixon trailing him. His option was to run himself or flip the ball to Ernie.

As the crowd began screaming, a wave of blockers formed in front of Tony.

Ernie was behind him to the outside, in good position for a pitchout. But Tony could see the play opening up for him; ten yards down the sideline and then out of bounds, stopping the clock again. The screams rose higher as he crossed the line of scrimmage.

From nowhere a red jersey appeared at the corner of Tony's vision—Rex Stallworth, their quickest linebacker. Tony heard the crunch of Stallworth's helmet into the side of his face before the shock shivered his body and dropped him into darkness.

The next sensation that came to him was the smell of dirt and grass. Tony rose to his knees, time lost to him.

“Tony!” Sam cried out.

By instinct, Tony looked up at the clock.

Sixteen seconds, fifteen, fourteen. Tony staggered to his feet and loped to the center of the field. “Spike,” he shouted. “On one.”

Raggedly, the line took its position. “Ten,” the Riverwood fans started chanting. “Nine...”

“One,” Tony screamed. The ball was only a second in his hands before he spiked it to the ground. An incomplete pass, stopping the clock.

Five seconds left.

Tony backed from the line of scrimmage, taking deep breaths. He was nauseous, dizzy. His head rang.

Sam was the first one to reach him. “You okay?”

“Yeah.”

“Gotta pass to me, Tony. *Please.*”

The team circled him again. Tony shook his head to clear it, then said to no one in particular. “Screwed that play up, didn’t I? Sonofabitch rang my bell for Parham.”

Tony felt their quiet relief. Only Sam seemed too tight.

“Okay,” Tony said. “We’ve got five seconds, twenty yards, no time-outs. Time to put this game away.” He paused, looking at everyone but Sam. “Thirty-five reverse pass.”

The huddle broke. Under his breath, Tony said to Sam, “It’s ours now, pal.”

Sam nodded, ready. For the last time, they walked to the line with their team.

Tony paused, taking it all in—the crowd, the light and darkness, the blue line of teammates, the reformation across from them shouting jeers and insults. And then he shut out everything but what he meant to do.

Time slowed for him. The cadence of his own voice seemed to come from somewhere else. But there was no other place that Tony wished to be.

“Hut two...”

The ball popped into his hand.

Tony slid the ball into Ernie Nixon’s stomach. Bent forward, Ernie plowed into the line in feigned determination as Tony pulled back the ball, spun, and slapped it into Johnny D’Abruzzi’s chest.

But only for an instant.

Johnny stood upright, crashing shoulder-first into a blitzing linebacker who was headed straight for Tony. And then Tony was alone, sprinting with the ball along the right side of the line.

In front of him, he saw bodies scrambling—two linebackers running parallel to block his path, believing he would run for the end zone, his own blockers forming in front of him.

Without seeming to look, Tony saw Sam break to the left sideline. Sam looked irrelevant, a decoy so far was he from the sweep of the play.

Abruptly, Sam broke back across the center of the field, three feet ahead of the back who covered him.

Perfect, Tony thought.

All at once he stopped, cocking the ball to throw. The crowd cried out in warning.

From Tony’s blind side Stallworth charged for him, head down.

Tony jerked back the ball, scrambling forward. As Stallworth swept by, his outstretched arm grasped Tony’s ankle.

Tony stumbled, losing his balance. Then he caught his fall, left hand digging into the grass.

~~Ahead of him, two more linemen charged forward. Tony had nowhere to go. He could not see Sam~~
if he tried to pass, he would be defenseless against the onrushing tacklers.

Tony stood straight, cocked his arm, and threw, with his weight on his front foot, toward where he thought Sam's speed would take him. The ball left his hand an instant before the first defender hit Tony's unprotected ribs.

Tony felt his insides shift; the pain went through him as he hit the ground. By instinct he rolled onto his side, sat up.

The ball arched above the players who turned to watch it, helpless. Its flight seemed to slow, a sphere sailing through light and shadow toward the rear of the end zone, accompanied by shrieks of hope and uncertainty.

I've overthrown it, Tony thought, and then he saw Sam Robb.

Seemingly without a chance, Sam sprinted for the ball as it fell to earth. Three feet from the ball, two feet from the back of the end zone, Sam timed his leap.

It took him parallel to the ground, feet leaving the grass as he stretched, arms extended, and clasped the ball in his fingertips. He fell beyond the end zone, feet trailing in a last effort to touch in-bounds. Tony could not see whether he had done so; he saw only, as Sam rose to his feet and turned to the referee, that the ball was in his hands.

Tony stood, pain forgotten as he gazed at the referee, a silent prayer forming in his head.

Slowly, the referee raised his hands aloft.

A lump blocked Tony's throat.

Touchdown. Mother of God, a touchdown. He began to run toward Sam.

Sam stood in the end zone, arms aloft, clutching the ball in his hand. Above him, the scoreboard registered six more points for Lake City. Sam's helmet was off; beneath the klieg lights, Tony could see the tears on his face.

Sam stood frozen. And then, suddenly, he saw Tony.

He turned, flipping away the ball, and ran toward him.

They met on the goal line. For an instant, they stopped there, then they threw their arms around each other.

Wordless, Sam held Tony close. In that moment there was no one Tony loved as much as he loved Sam Robb.

"Touchdown," Tony said in a thick voice. "That's the play."

Their teammates pressed against them at the goal line, whooping and hugging and pounding each other. Nothing coherent was said: it was a moment they could share only with each other, and needed no words. At some unspoken signal, they broke away and headed through the exit gate toward the darkened tan brick building that had always looked to Tony more like a factory than a high school, the cheering fans who had poured from the stands forming two lines around them from the gate to the doorway.

Inside the door, Tony stopped in the narrow corridor as the line of teammates slowed to pass him, shaking their hands as he waited for Coach Jackson. As was his custom, the coach held himself aloof, trailing behind the team as if nothing much had happened. He would save his emotions for his players.

As he reached the door, Jackson found Tony waiting.

The coach gave him a look of mock annoyance, a man diverted from his business. “What you want, Lord?”

“Give him the game ball, okay?”

Jackson put one hand on Tony’s shoulder, not smiling. “I’ll do what I goddam want,” he said, and headed for the locker room.

Why, Tony wondered, did the coach deny Sam the recognition he craved, even a thing so small? Sam played hard for Jackson and, beneath his bravado, feared the coach as much as most kids did. There was something skewed here: once more, Tony thought of the rumor that he devoutly wished Sam would never hear—that Coach Jackson was fucking Sam’s mother. Tony hoped the coach’s head would be held up.

Turning, he went to the locker room.

The team sat on wooden benches in front of battered gray lockers, heads bowed, newly quiet. Coach Jackson—who Tony was confident had not seen the inside of a church for years—spoke a terse prayer.

“Thank you, Lord,” he finished. Then his head snapped up abruptly, and he stepped atop a bench, his communion with the Almighty done.

“All right,” Jackson said brusquely. “I won’t tell you all that bullshit—that you’re the greatest team I ever coached, that I’ll think of you on my deathbed. ’Cause I hope to live long enough to forgive about you all.

“The only thing that matters is what *you* take with you when you leave here.

“They don’t keep score out there. This championship may be the last thing you ever win. But the most important job you did tonight was not to win but to *achieve*.

“You did your best. You worked with the other guy. You respected yourself. Take that with you, and things just may turn out right.”

The sweaty faces looked up as one to Jackson. In spite of himself, Tony was moved: Jackson had helped him learn that he could keep his head and make things turn out right. This was better than the game ball, because Tony could take it with him.

Jackson snatched the ball from an assistant and held it out in front of him.

Tony glanced at Sam. His friend sat gazing up at Jackson with a hope and need so naked that Tony looked away.

“Still,” Jackson said, “there’s this ball. There are a lot of guys that I could give this to. But some of you might fumble.”

Some laughter now. But Tony saw that Sam did not laugh at all. His eyes were stuck on Jackson.

Jackson turned to Tony. “So I’m giving this to Tony Lord. I don’t need to tell you why—you’ve played with him all season.”

As Tony stepped forward, the team began clapping and cheering; when Johnny D’Abruzzi stood and then Ernie Nixon, they all did. Tony did not look at Sam.

What to say. Quickly, Tony rejected some slop about sharing the game ball with Sam—this would slight the rest of them and, he decided, condescend to Sam.

Tony stood on the bench next to Jackson, looking out at them as he gathered his thoughts, and the crowd began in solemn tones.

“I owe this ball to every one of you guys. So I want to share it with you.” Pausing, Tony grinned. “Visiting hours are nine to five.”

The team laughed in surprise.

Encouraged, Tony went on. “If you think about it, though, if it weren’t for Sam Robb’s catch, Jack Parham would be holding this game ball in some hospital, trying to figure out if it’s a football or a world globe. So in honor of Jack Parham, Sam gets to sleep with the ball on weekends.”

Amidst rising laughter, the young faces turned to Sam. “*All right, Sam,*” someone called. Sam grinned with pleasure and surprise. Tony waited until the laughter died, and tossed the ball underhand to Sam.

“Nice catch,” he said. “Again.”

The team turned back to Tony. His tone was quiet now.

“You guys are the best. Coach Jackson may forget you—he’s got a lot on his mind. But I never will.”

He stepped down from the bench before they could applaud, embracing the players who stood nearest him. But when he got to Sam, he said only, “Where are our girlfriends hiding?”

Half smiling, Sam spun the football on the end of one finger like a world globe, watching it with great concentration. “The parking lot,” he answered, and flipped the ball back to Tony.

A half hour later, dressed in oxford shirts and khakis, they left the building together.

Outside, a few students and fans and a couple of local reporters still waited, milling about in the cold night air. Raggedly they applauded. Tony felt both pleasure and puzzlement: it was like celebrity, but only for a season, and it happened too young and passed too quickly to seem quite real. Already the heroes of two years ago were half ignored when they visited the team; often Tony sensed that they left without whatever they had come for, not knowing that they had only borrowed it in the first place.

But this was *their* season, his and Sam’s: as the two reporters came forward, one young and one middle-aged, pads in hand, a certain pride entered Sam’s face, which, to Tony, seemed close to innocence.

“Move closer, Tony,” the young reporter called out, and snapped a picture of the two of them. “You know,” he said, “you guys look like brothers.”

They didn’t, Tony knew: Sam’s hair was close to white, Tony’s caramel blond; Sam’s smooth face was deceptively young, Tony’s angular, his thin nose somewhat ridged; Sam was stronger and, at six feet, a good inch taller than Tony. But this season, Tony knew, people would see them as they wished.

The older man stepped forward, voice jocular. “So which one of you boys gets Athlete of the Year?”

Tony felt his goodwill vanish. “Who knows?” he said carelessly. “There are a lot of guys at the

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