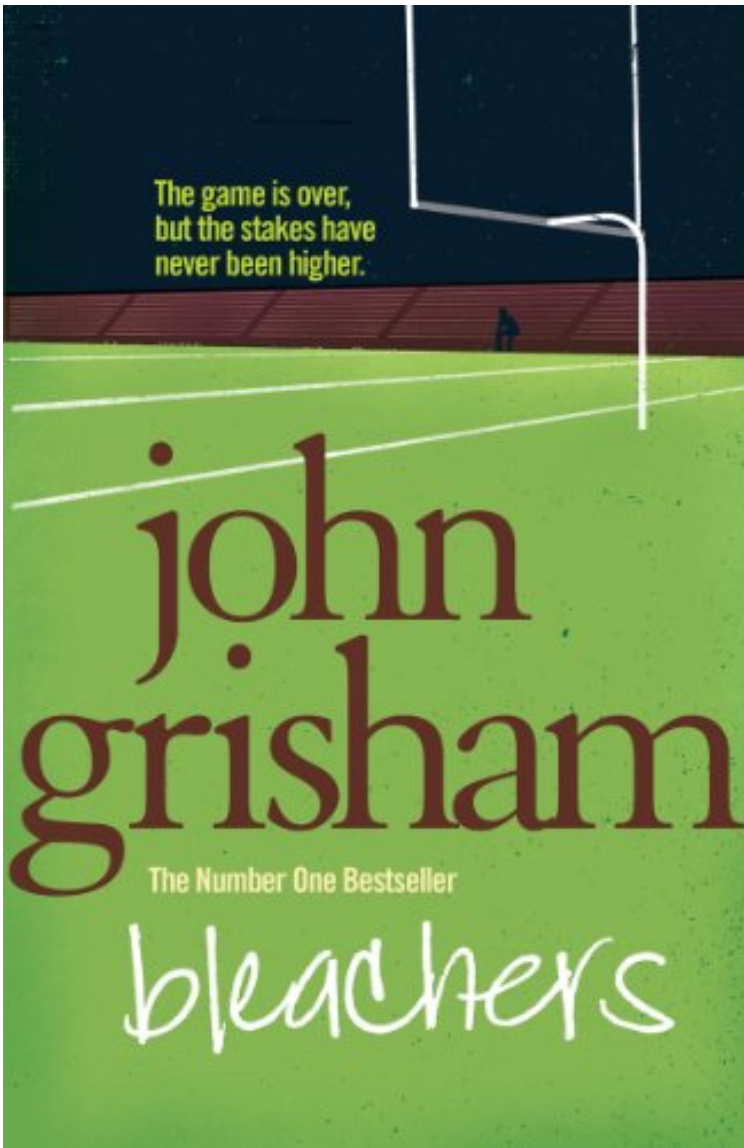


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Description : Description du produitHigh school all-American Neely Crenshaw was probably the best quarterback ever to play for the legendary Messina Spartans. Fifteen years have gone by since those glory days, and Neely has come home to Messina to bury Coach Eddie Rake, the man who molded the Spartans into an unbeatable football dynasty.Now, as Coach Rakes boys sit in the bleachers waiting for the dimming field lights to signal his passing, they replay the old games, relive the old glories, and try to decide once and for all whether they love Eddie Rake or hate him. For Neely Crenshaw, a man who must finally forgive his coach -- and himself before he can get on with his life, the stakes are especially high.

Prsentation de l'diteurA high school football hero returns to pay homage to his coach - from the no.1 bestselling master thriller writer.High school All-American Neely Crenshaw was probably the best

quarterback ever to play for the legendary Messina Spartans. Fifteen years have gone by since those glory days, and Neely has come home to Messina to bury Coach Eddie Rake, the man who molded the Spartans into an unbeatable football dynasty. As Coach Rake's 'boys' sit in the bleachers waiting for the dimming field lights to signal his passing, they replay the old glories, and try to decide once and for all whether they love

Eddie Rake or hate him. For Neely Crenshaw, still struggling to come to terms with his explosive relationship with the Coach, his dreams of a great career in the NFL, and the choices he made as a young man, the stakes could not be higher. With Bleachers John Grisham departs again from the legal thriller to experiment with a character-driven tale of reunion, broken high school dreams, and missed chances.

While the book falls short of the compelling storytelling that has made Grisham a bestselling author, it is nonetheless a diverting novella that succeeds as light fiction. The story centers on the impending death of the Messina Spartans' football coach Eddie Rake. One of the most victorious coaches in high school football history, Rake is a man both loved and feared by his players and by a town that relishes his 13 state titles. The

hero of the novel is Neely Crenshaw, a former Rake All-American whose NFL prospects ended abruptly after a cheap shot to the knees. Neely has returned home for the first time in years to join a nightly vigil for

Rake at the Messina stadium. Having wandered through life with little focus since his college days, he struggles to reconcile his conflicted feelings towards his former coach, and he assays to rekindle love in the ex-girlfriend he abandoned long ago. For Messina and for Neely, the homecoming offers the prospect of building a life after Rake. Physically a narrow book, Bleachers is a modest fiction in many respects. The emotional scope is akin to that of a short story, with a single-minded focus on explorations of nostalgia and regret. The dialogue, especially that of Neely's friend Paul Curry, is sometimes wooden as characters recall

Messina history in paragraphs that were perhaps better left to the narrator. But Grisham has otherwise written a well-made, entertaining--if a bit sentimental--story. --Patrick O'Kelley Extrait 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 cabs 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. 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 cocaptains. 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 heavysset 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 linebacker 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 Caf 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 started 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." A telephone buzzed from somewhere deep in Paul's nice dark suit. He found it and said, "Curry." A pause. "I'm at the field, with Crenshaw." A pause. "Yep, he's here. I swear. Okay." Paul slapped the phone shut and tucked it into a pocket. "That was Silo," he said. "I told him you might be coming." Neely smiled and shook his head at the thought of Silo Mooney. "I haven't seen him since we graduated." "He didn't graduate, if you recall." "Oh, yeah. I forgot." "Had that little problem with the police. Schedule Four controlled substances. His father kicked him out of the house a month before we graduated." "Now I remember." "He lived in Rake's basement for a few weeks, then joined the Army." "What's he doing now?" "Well, let's say he's in the midst of a very colorful career. He left the Army with a dishonorable discharge, bounced around for a few years offshore on the rigs, got tired of honest work, and came back to Messina where he peddled drugs until he got shot at." "I assume the bullet missed." "By an inch, and Silo tried to go straight. I loaned him five thousand dollars to buy the old Franklin's Shoe Store and he set himself up as an entrepreneur. He cut the prices of his shoes while at the same time doubling his employees wages, and went broke within a year. He sold cemetery

lots, then used cars, then mobile homes. I lost track of him for a while. One day he walked into the bank and paid back everything he owed, in cash, said he'd finally struck gold." "In Messina?" "Yep. Somehow he swindled old man Joslin out of his junkyard, east of town. He fixed up a warehouse, and in the front half he runs a legitimate body shop. A cash cow. In the back half he runs a chop shop, specializing in stolen pickups. A real cash cow." "He didn't tell you this." "No, he didn't mention the chop shop. But I do his banking, and secrets are hard to keep around here. He's got some deal with a gang of thieves in the Carolinas whereby they ship him stolen trucks. He breaks them down and moves the parts. It's all cash, and evidently there's plenty of it." "The cops?" "Not yet, but everybody who deals with him is very careful. I expect the FBI to walk in any day with a subpoena, so I'm ready." "Sounds just like Silo," Neely said. "He's a mess. Drinks heavily, lots of women, throws cash around everywhere. Looks ten years older." "Why am I not surprised? Does he still fight?" "All the time. Be careful what you say about Rake. Nobody loves him like Silo. He'll come after you." "Don't worry." As the center on offense and the noseguard on defense, Silo Mooney owned the middle of every field he played on. He was just under six feet tall with a physique that resembled, well, a silo: everything was thick--chest, waist, legs, arms. With Neely and Paul, he started for three years. Unlike the other two, Silo averaged three personal fouls in every game. Once he had four, one in each quarter. Twice he got ejected for kicking opposing linemen in the crotch. He lived for the sight of blood on the poor boy lined up against him. "Got that sumbitch bleedin' now," he would growl in the huddle, usually late in the first half. "He won't finish the game." "Go ahead and kill him," Neely would say, egging on a mad dog. One less defensive lineman made Neely's job much easier. No Messina player had ever been cursed by Coach Rake with as much frequency and enthusiasm as Silo Mooney. No one had deserved it as much. No one craved the verbal abuse as much as Silo. At the north end of the bleachers, down where the rowdies from the county once raised so much hell, an older man moved quietly up to the top row and sat down. He was too far away to be recognized, and he certainly wanted to be alone. He gazed at the field, and was soon lost in his own memories. The first jogger appeared and began plodding counter-clockwise around the track. It was the time of day when the runners and walkers drifted to the field for a few laps. Rake had never allowed such nonsense, but after he was sacked a movement arose to open the track to the people who'd paid for it. A maintenance man was usually loitering somewhere nearby, watching to make sure no one dared step on the grass of Rake Field. There was no chance of that. "Where's Floyd?" Neely asked. "Still in Nashville picking his guitar and writing bad music. Chasing the dream." "Ontario?" "He's here, working at the post office. He and Takita have three kids. She's teaching school and as sweet as always. They're in church five times a week." "So he's still smiling?" "Always." "Denny?" "Still here, teaches chemistry in that building right over there. Never misses a game." "Did you take chemistry?" "I did not." "Neither did I. I had straight A's and never cracked a book." "You didn't have to. You were the all-American." "And Jesse's still in jail?" "Oh yeah, he'll be there for a long time." "Where is he?" "Buford. I see his mother every now and then and I always ask about him. It makes her cry but I can't help it." "Wonder if he knows about Rake?" Neely said. Paul shrugged and shook his head, and there was another gap in the conversation as they watched an old man struggle in a painful trot along the track. He was followed by two large young women, both burning more energy talking than walking. "Did you ever learn the true story of why Jesse signed with Miami?" Neely asked. "Not really. Lots of rumors about money, but Jesse would never say." "Remember Rake's reaction?" "Yeah, he wanted to kill Jesse. I think Rake had made some promises to the recruiter from AM." "Rake always wanted to deliver the prizes," Neely said, with an air of experience. "He wanted me at State." "That's where you should've gone." "Too late for that." "Why'd you sign with Tech?" "I liked their quarterback Coach." "No one liked their quarterback Coach. What was the real reason?" "You really want to know?" "Yes, after fifteen years, I really want to know." "Fifty thousand bucks in cash." "No." "Yep. State offered forty, AM offered thirty-five, a few others were willing to pay twenty." "You never told me that." "I never told anyone until now. It's such a sleazy business." "You took fifty thousand dollars in cash from Tech?" Paul asked slowly. "Five hundred one-hundred-dollar bills, stuffed in an unmarked red canvas bag and placed in the trunk of my car one night while I was at the movies with Screamer. Next morning, I committed to Tech." "Did your parents know?" "Are you crazy? My father would've called the NCAA." "Why'd you take it?" "Every school offered cash, Paul, don't be nave. It was part of the game." "I'm not nave, I'm just surprised at you." "Why? I could've signed with Tech for nothing, or I could've taken the money. Fifty thousand bucks to an eighteen-year-old idiot is like winning the lottery." "But still--" "Every recruiter offered cash, Paul. There wasn't a single exception. I figured it was just part of the business." "How'd you hide the money?" "Stuffed it here and there. When I got to Tech, I paid cash for a new car. It

didn't last long." "And your parents weren't suspicious?" "They were, but I was away at college and they couldn't keep up with everything." "You saved none of it?" "Why save money when you're on the payroll?" "What payroll?" Neely reshifted his weight and gave an indulging smile. "Don't patronize me, asshole," Paul said. "Oddly enough most of us didn't play football at the Division One level." "Remember the Gator Bowl my freshman year?" "Sure. Everyone here watched it." "I came off the bench in the second half, threw three touchdowns, ran for a hundred yards, won the game on a last-second pass. A star is born, I'm the greatest freshman in the country, blah, blah, blah. Well, when I got back to school there was a small package in my P.O. box. Five thousand bucks in cash. The note said: 'Nice game. Keep it up.' It was anonymous. The message was clear--keep winning and the money will keep coming. So I wasn't interested in saving money." Silo's pickup had a custom paint job that was an odd mix between gold and red. The wheels glistened with silver and the windows were pitch black. "There he is," Paul said as the truck rolled to a stop near the gate. "What kind of truck is that?" Neely asked. "Stolen I'm sure." Silo himself had been customized--a leather WWII bomber jacket, black denim pants, black boots. He hadn't lost weight, hadn't gained any either, and still looked like a nose tackle as he walked slowly around the edge of the field. It was the walk of a Messina Spartan, almost a strut, almost a challenge to anyone to utter a careless word. Silo could still put on the pads, snap the ball, and draw blood. Instead he gazed at something in the middle of the field, perhaps it was himself a long time ago, perhaps he heard Rake barking at him. Whatever Silo heard or saw stopped him on the sideline for a moment, then he climbed the steps with his hands stuck deep in the pockets of his jacket. He was breathing hard when he got to Neely. He bearhugged his quarterback and asked him where he'd been for the past fifteen years. Greetings were exchanged, insults swapped. There was so much ground to cover that neither wanted to begin. They sat three in a row and watched another jogger limp by. Silo was subdued, and when he spoke it was almost in a whisper. "So where are you living these days?" "The Orlando area," Neely said. "What kind of work you in?" "Real estate." "You got a family?" "No, just one divorce. You?" "Oh, I'm sure I got lots of kids, I just don't know about 'em. Never married. You makin' money?" "Getting by. I'm not on the Forbes list." "I'll probably crack it next year," Silo said. "What kind of business?" Neely asked, glancing down at Paul. "Automotive parts," Silo said. "I stopped by Rake's this afternoon. Miss Lila and the girls are there, along with the grandkids and neighbors. House is full of folks, all sittin' around, just waitin' for Rake to die." "Did you see him?" Paul asked. "No. He's somewhere in the back, with a nurse. Miss Lila said he didn't want anybody to see him in his last days. Said he's just a skeleton." The image of Eddie Rake lying in a dark bed with a nurse nearby counting the minutes chilled the conversation for a long time. Until the day he was fired he coached in cleats and shorts and never hesitated to demonstrate the proper blocking mechanics or the finer points of a stiff arm. Rake relished physical contact with his players, but not the slap on the back for a job well done. Rake liked to hit, and no practice session was complete until he angrily threw down his clipboard and grabbed someone by the shoulder pads. The bigger the better. In blocking drills, when things were not going to suit him, he would crouch in a perfect three-point stance then fire off the ball and crash into a defensive tackle, one with forty more pounds and the full complement of pads and gear. Every Messina player had seen Rake, on a particularly bad day, throw his body at a running back and take him down with a vicious hit. He loved the violence of football and demanded it from every player. In thirty-four years as head Coach, Rake had struck only two players off the field. The first had been a famous fistfight in the late sixties between the Coach and a hothead who had quit the team and was looking for trouble, of which he found plenty with Rake. The second had been a cheap shot that landed in the face of Neely Crenshaw. It was incomprehensible that he was now a shriveled old man gasping for his last breath. "I was in the Philippines," Silo said at low volume, but his voice was coarse and carried through the clear air. "I was guardin' toilets for the officers, hatin' every minute of it, and I never saw you play in college." "You didn't miss much," Neely said. "I heard later that you were great, then you got hurt." "I had some nice games." "He was the national player of the week when he was a sophomore," Paul said. "Threw for six touchdowns against Purdue." "It was a knee, right?" Silo asked. "Yes." "How'd it happen?" "I rolled out, into the flat, saw an opening, tucked the ball and ran, didn't see a linebacker." Neely delivered the narrative as if he'd done it a thousand times and preferred not to do it again. Silo had torn an ACL in spring football and survived it. He knew something about the knee. "Surgery and all that?" he asked. "Four of them," Neely said. "Completely ruptured the ligament, busted the kneecap." "So the helmet got you?" "The linebacker went for the knee as Neely was stepping out of bounds," Paul said. "They showed it a dozen times on television. One of the announcers had the guts to call it a cheap shot. It was AM, what can I say?" "Must've hurt like hell." "It did." "He was carried off in an ambulance and they wept in the streets of Messina." "I'm

sure that's true," Silo said. "But it doesn't take much to get this town upset. Rehab didn't work?" "It was what they sadly refer to as a career-ending injury," Neely said. "Therapy made things worse. I was toast from the second I tucked the ball and ran. Should've stayed in the pocket like I'd been coached." "Rake never told you to stay in the pocket." "It's a different game up there, Silo." "Yeah, they're a bunch of dumbasses. They never recruited me. I could've been great, probably the first nose tackle to win the Heisman." "No doubt about it," Paul said. "Everybody knew it at Tech," Neely said. "All the players kept asking me, 'Where's the great Silo Mooney? Why didn't we sign him?'" "What a waste," Paul said. "You'd still be in the NFL." "Probably with the Packers," Silo said. "Making the big bucks. Chicks bangin' on my door. The life." "Didn't Rake want you to go to a junior college?" Neely asked. "Yeah, I was headed there, but they wouldn't let me finish school here." "How'd you get in the Army?" "I lied." And there was no doubt that Silo had lied to get in the Army, and probably lied to get out. "I need a beer," he said. "You guys want a beer?" "I'll pass," Paul said. "I need to be heading home soon." "What about you?" "A beer would be nice," Neely said. "You gonna stay here for a while?" Silo asked. "Maybe." "Me too. It just seems like the place to be right now."