

BODY SLAMMED!

A pair of red and blue wrestling boots lying on a dark, textured surface. The boots are positioned horizontally, with the toe of the boot on the left and the heel on the right. The red is the primary color, with blue accents on the sides and the interior of the footbed. The background is black, and the boots are lit from above, creating highlights and shadows that emphasize their form.

Ray Villareal

Author of *My Father, the Angel of Death*

BODY SLAMMED!

Ray Villareal



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Sequel to: *My Father, the Angel of Death*.

Summary: Feeling not as big, tough or athletic as his father, a professional wrestler, high-schooler Jesse becomes friends with a brash young wrestler who offers to help Jesse bulk up.

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For my son, Mateo, whose ideas and encouragement helped me write this story

The poem, “Tragedia de Julia Hernández,” was written by my father, the late Fermin Villareal, and is based on true events.

CHAPTER ONE

Erastus “Deaf” Smith High School hadn’t had a winning football team in thirty-six years. It usually finished its seasons with a zero and ten, a one and nine, or in the best cases, a three and seven record. Even with numerous coaching changes, the school had remained at the bottom of the list in their district.

Until this year.

Duane Blaylock, a former defensive tackle with the Cleveland Browns, had been brought in as the new head coach. Under his leadership, the Deaf Smith Sidewinders, with a record of four and three, had already won more games in two months than they had in their previous five years. Not only did the Sidewinders expect to finish this season with a winning record, there was even talk in the locker room of a possible district championship.

If the Sidewinders were to win district, Jesse Baron knew it wouldn’t happen because of him. Although he was listed on the roster as a center, Coach Blaylock seldom put him in the games. Instead, Jesse spent most Friday nights on the sidelines, watching his teammates play.

He could accept that he was the second-string center, and that Sam Morales was a better player, but Jesse couldn’t see anything wrong with being allowed to play every once

in a while. How else was he going to improve as a center unless he got out on the field?

"You just don't have the size or strength, Baron," Coach Blaylock had told him bluntly. "If you were built more like your father, I'd have no problem putting you in. Dang, son, I'd build the whole Sidewinders team around you."

That was a cheap shot. There was no way Jesse could physically measure up to his father, and Coach Blaylock knew it.

Joining the team had been Jesse's father's idea. He had played football in high school and in college and had even been drafted by the Dallas Cowboys, although, due to injuries, he never played for them. He thought Jesse would enjoy playing football, too. And he might have, if he had something more to do than use his rear end to keep the bench warm.

On the third Friday night in October, late in the fourth quarter, the Deaf Smith Sidewinders were headed toward their fifth win, leading the Houston Ravens, 41 to 10. The drumline pumped up the crowd with a rousing cadence. The crowd, in turn, jangled tambourines to simulate the sounds of rattlesnakes as the cheerleaders danced along.

Jesse wanted desperately to get in the game.

After the Ravens kicked a wobbly, thirty-four yard punt, and the Sidewinders took over on offense, he pleaded with Coach Blaylock for the millionth time. "What do you say, Coach? Can I play? Please?"

Coach Blaylock glanced up at the scoreboard, then at the play clock. He ran his hands through his hair and sighed. "Yeah, go ahead."

"Thanks, Coach." Jesse slipped on his helmet and gestured an "okay" sign to his grandparents, who were

sitting in the stands. He wished his father was up there with them, but his job didn't allow him a lot of free time.

Jesse ran out on the field and switched places with Sam Morales.

Riley King, the quarterback, called the play, and the Sidewinders broke huddle. Jesse squatted on the line of scrimmage with the ball between his feet and waited anxiously for Riley's snap count. Because he'd had little practice time, and even less playing time, he became confused with Riley's signals. At the first "hut," he tried to hand him the ball. Riley jumped back but didn't take it. The referee blew his whistle, threw a yellow flag and penalized the Sidewinders five yards for a false start.

"I said on three, Baron!" Riley spat out.

Back in the huddle, Riley called the next play. "This time on two." He turned to Jesse and sarcastically added, "Think you can remember that, Baron?"

Jesse didn't answer him, the jerk.

They returned to the line of scrimmage, this time in shotgun formation. At the second "hut," Jesse hiked the ball to Riley. But somehow, the ball slipped out of his hands, and he sent it sailing high above Riley's head. In a panic, Riley scrambled after the ball and managed to scoop it up, but he was sacked for a fourteen-yard loss.

The drumline stopped playing. The tambourines stopped rattling, and a smattering of boos could be heard from the Sidewinders' side of the field. Riley jumped to his feet and said something Jesse couldn't make out, but he was sure it wasn't anything he'd want to repeat in church. Coach Blaylock stomped his foot and exploded with a few colorful words of his own. Then he formed a T with his hands to call a time out.

Riley hurried up to him. "It wasn't my fault, Coach. Baron bungled the snap."

Jesse tried hiding behind Wendell Cooley, a linebacker, who was standing on the sidelines, to avoid Coach's icy stare. It didn't work. Coach Blaylock reached around Wendell, grabbed Jesse by his face mask and thumped him several times on the helmet with his whistle, causing Jesse's ears to ring.

"What's your problem, Baron? My three-year-old daughter can snap a ball better than that!"

Jesse turned his eyes away. "Sorry, Coach. The ball just got away from me."

"Well, sorry don't win games, Baron. Good plays do!" Coach Blaylock let go of Jesse's face mask when he realized that the people in the stands were watching him.

It was now second and twenty-nine. Back on the line of scrimmage, Jesse snapped the ball to Riley without messing it up. Immediately, a lineman the size of a rhino charged forward and knocked Jesse over like a bowling pin. Riley pitched the ball to Goose Guzmán, who picked up eight yards. On the next play, the Sidewinders gained five more yards, but they were still far short of a first down. Bucky Henderson kicked a forty-four yard punt, and the Ravens took over on offense.

After a quick three and out, the Sidewinders got the ball again. This time, Coach Blaylock put Sam Morales back in the game, leaving Jesse stranded where he had spent most of the evening—the bench.

Minutes later the horn sounded, signaling the end of the game. The tambourines rattled once again, and the fans clapped and cheered. The Sidewinders players whooped ecstatically over their win. Jesse should have

been as excited as they were, but after his performance, or lack of it, he couldn't muster the same enthusiasm.

As he made his way to the locker room, his grandparents stood and clapped for him. Jesse returned a dispirited wave. He was glad his father wasn't up there to witness his fiasco. But then, he hadn't attended any of Jesse's games, this year or last, when Jesse played on the JV team.

Behind Jesse's grandparents, Sara Young blew a kiss in his direction. Jesse wished it was for him, but unfortunately, she was aiming at Riley King.

Jesse met Sara in middle school when he stopped some thugs from mugging her. It wasn't anything dramatic. He merely stalled those guys until a teacher showed up. One of the thugs, a kid named Chester Leonard, was a student at Jesse's school, but he didn't act so tough, now that he didn't have those other Neanderthals to hang out with. After that, Sara and Jesse became close friends, but for whatever reason, things didn't work out between them. At the start of the school year, she hooked up with Riley King, and from what Jesse could tell, they had become much more than close friends. Apparently, Sara had a preference for smug, arrogant jerks.

The locker room was hot and humid; it reeked of mildew, body odor and cheap cologne.

Coach Blaylock joined the players in the locker room to congratulate them on their win. "We did good out there, men. But we need to continue to give a hundred and ten percent each time we go out on the field. You hear what I'm saying?"

Jesse didn't know how good Coach's math was, but if a hundred percent is the maximum, how could anyone give more than the maximum – ten percent more?

"We've gotta raise our game. We've gotta hunker down. If we're gonna be a playoff team, we've all gotta take our game to the next level," Coach Blaylock went on, dishing out his usual clichés. Of course, his speech wouldn't be complete without his all-time favorite line: "Remember, men, there's no 'I' in TEAM." That was the one he used when Jesse complained about not being given more playing time.

After the meeting, Jesse stripped off his uniform and was about to step into the showers when the smack of a wet towel stung his butt.

"Nice going out there, slick," Riley said, twirling the towel in his hand. Mitch Maloof stood next to him. "Who did you think you were playing for out there, the Sidewinders or the Ravens?"

"We won, didn't we?" Jesse said, wishing he had a stronger comeback.

Riley sneered at him. "Yeah, and we'll continue to win, as long as we keep you and the ball as far apart as possible."

"Why are you taking a shower anyway, Baron?" Mitch asked. "The showers are for players who actually worked up a sweat."

"Careful, Mitch," Riley said, pretending to hold him back. "Baron might tell his old man to come beat us up."

"Nah. His old man only knows how to fake fight. He wouldn't know what to do if he had to throw real punches."

The two of them walked off, laughing.

Jesse would have loved to ram his fists down their throats, but that wasn't going to happen. First of all, they were both bigger than he was. Second, he wasn't going get himself suspended over those morons. And third, Jesse hated to admit it, but he probably deserved what he got. He was a lousy football player, and everyone knew it. He

couldn't wait for the season to be over so he could put this crummy year behind him. He had no intention of signing up to play again, not that anyone would care.

While he got dressed he studied his reflection in the mirror. Coach Blaylock was probably right. He wasn't strong enough to be the starting center. Nor did he have the size or quickness to play any other position. Jesse stood five-ten and weighed two hundred twelve pounds, so he wasn't exactly a shrimp. Still, he thought he looked puny next to some of the gorillas he played against.

But for Coach Blaylock to compare him to his father? That wasn't fair. How could he possibly be anything like the six-foot, seven-inch, three hundred-twenty pound, skeleton-face monster from the lower regions of the Netherworld . . . his father, the Angel of Death?