



Barry Sturtz finally ran out of patience.

“T. J.’s numbers for the last two years have been *incredible*,” he said for the third time. “No one here can debate that. Last year alone—eighty-seven receptions for eleven hundred and forty-four yards and thirteen touchdowns. The best stats for any tight end in the *whole damn league!*” He pounded his fist on the burnished mahogany table to underscore the last three words.

“No one’s denying his value, Barry,” Palmer responded. “We all know he’s one of the best at his position.” Thirty-six-year-old Chet Palmer had been the Giants’ general manager for the last three seasons. With his thinning hair, dark suit, and tortoiseshell glasses, he looked more like a corporate accountant.

“No, Chet,” Sturtz corrected, almost out of breath, “he *is* the best at his position.”

“Okay, okay,” Palmer said, hands up defensively. He didn’t have much of a stomach for confrontation. “But we have a contract already, and we expect him to honor it. He’s got one year left. After that, we’ll be happy to discuss a renegotiation.” The third man in the conference room remained silent, as he had throughout most of the meeting.

Sturtz shook his head. “No, we’re discussing it now. T. J. has put up the best stats of any tight end in the league for the last two seasons, and what has he been getting for it? *League minimum*—this year he’ll make less than five hundred grand. Dinkins, meanwhile, will get two point seven million from the Cardinals, Schaefer will get two point one from Denver, and Barone will get one point eight in Miami. T. J. is performing better than *all of them*.”

“Barry,” Palmer said calmly, as if his greatest concern during this exercise in organizational thievery was to remain civil, “we took him in the sixth round. We gave him sixth-round money and a sixth-round contract. He didn’t have to take it, but he d—”

“*He’s being ripped off!*” Sturtz screamed. An icy silence followed, during which the ticking of the wall clock became noticeably louder. Palmer seemed a little nervous now, whereas head coach Alan Gray continued to appear unaffected.

Of course Brookman was being ripped off. They both knew that. The whole team knew it. The team, the league, the sportswriters, the fans—anyone who knew the first thing about the business of professional football knew that T. J. Brookman was being grossly underpaid for his services. He was the best new tight end the game had seen in ages—amazing considering he was a nobody from a nowhere school out west. His statistics had been damn good there, but then most of his opponents had been a joke, barely a notch

above high school talent. He did well at the combines, too, but he was still written off. That was what most scouts did to anyone who wasn't playing at the top schools in the top systems. In spite of decades of evidence to the contrary, the pros still turned their noses up at anyone who wasn't considered elite. When T. J. started shining in New York—beginning the second half of his rookie season when the starter went down with a broken leg—Gray was quick to take credit for the “find.” “I knew he had something to offer,” he told the media after Brookman's third game—eighty-eight yards, two touchdowns, and eleven key blocks against the Redskins. The fact that Gray had to be talked into drafting T. J. by the scout who had *actually* discovered him seemed to have slipped his mind.

Sturtz laid his hands flat on the table and leaned forward. “We're not asking for top money, even though T. J. is the league's top tight end. We're asking for an average of the three top salaries. That's more than reasonable. T. J.'s younger than those guys, so he'll be productive for a long time. He signed for nothing, he's played his heart out, he's lived for this team day and night. He deserves this, and you damn well know it.”

Palmer said, “I'm sorry, Barry, we just can't do it. Not at this time.”

Sturtz shot into an upright position, shaking his head and looking out the window at a perfect summer afternoon. He'd rather be anywhere else in the world than in here with these two bastards.

“Okay, then,” he said, “I'm going to have to insist that he sit out until we get something done.”

“Sit out? You mean a holdout?”

The shock in Palmer's voice was pleasing. “That's right.”

“Camp is right around the corner. Be reasonable.”

“I’m trying to be,” Sturtz said quickly. “But I see no other way. I’m doing this with a clear conscience, believe me.”

This wasn’t completely true—Sturtz hated contract holdouts. While they did create leverage for a player, they usually accomplished little else, and the long-term damage was always considerable. Bruised egos, hurt feelings, seeds of mistrust, not to mention the time that the player missed practicing and learning the team’s system. Also, the agent’s reputation took a hit, as other teams would be wary of him—and his clients—in the future.

“Barry . . .”

“You’ve left me with no other option. You’ve backed me into a corner.”

Alan Gray smiled as he ran a hand over his hair. It was short and neat, a bit longer than a military cut. It had once been dark brown, almost black. Now it was evolving into a pewtery silver. The face wasn’t exactly handsome, but the features were strong and fully realized. His eyes were particularly striking, small and watchful, and they seemed to burn with a kind of sinister intensity.

“No,” Gray said quietly as he spoke for the first time in almost a half hour. “No new contract. I need your kid on the field, in camp and practicing, in less than two weeks.”

Sturtz laughed. “I’m sorry, Coach, but I’m afraid I’m going to have to insist that T. J. sit out until he gets a fair deal.”

Sturtz was happy that Gray had finally jumped into the mix. He had wanted to address him directly from the start. In his view, this was the man who had the most to lose if T. J. didn’t play.

“This team suffers without him,” Sturtz went on. “Last season he was the most productive receiver you had.” This was an incredible fact, but a fact nonetheless. The Giants’ wide receivers had all

been spectacular years ago, but they had drifted beyond their prime and were now in the twilight of their careers. Last season had been a comedy of errors—dropped balls, missed routes, easy interceptions. T. J. was the bright spot. The experts were saying he was their future, as well as the future of the tight end position—one that was becoming increasingly important in modern football.

Some even said T. J. Brookman was Alan Gray's only hope of keeping his job.

Gray pursed his lips and began nodding. "Yeah, maybe you're right," he said, rising to his feet. "Maybe we need to get this matter settled, and right quick, too."

"I couldn't agree more."

"As of this moment, consider your boy on the bench."

"Excuse me?"

"If he doesn't practice, he doesn't play," Gray told him. "That's my rule."

Sturtz studied Gray for a moment, then chuckled and tucked his hands into his pockets. "You're bluffing. You can't afford to do this. Your offense will crumble."

"I doubt that. We can always find someone else."

"There's no one else like T. J., and you know it."

"We'll have to alter the system a little bit, but . . ." Gray finished the sentence with a shrug.

"Okay," Sturtz said, a fine layer of perspiration breaking out across his brow, "then release him. Let us get a deal somewhere else."

Gray smiled, and in that smile Sturtz saw that he had already considered this option. The sonofabitch had huddled with Palmer and forged a tag-team strategy long before this meeting.

“Sure, that sounds good,” Gray said. “But I doubt you’ll find a team that’ll give us what we want for him.”

“And what would that be?”

“Oh . . . two first-round picks.”

“That’s absurd. No one in their right mind would . . .”

Sturtz trailed off, his mouth hanging open. *They know this. They know no one would agree to such a deal.* “You can’t do this,” he said angrily. “You can’t. I won’t permit it.”

“Of course we can,” Gray replied in a tone so casual he could’ve been discussing the weather. “Right, Chet?”

“According to the contract that T. J. signed, we have tremendous latitude in what we can request if we decide to put him on the trading block.”

“I can’t believe you’re doing this,” Sturtz said unsteadily. “After everything he’s done for this team.”

“We’ll make him plenty expensive,” Gray ploughed on. “Or we can keep him and just sit him. Since we’re not paying him much, we can find some other guy. Yes, I believe we’ve got lots of options here.”

Of all the ruthless scumbags Barry Sturtz had dealt with in his life, from the meeting rooms of zillion-dollar sports franchises to the ruthless Bronx neighborhood of his youth, these were the only two who had succeeded in making him feel physically ill.

“You’re just trying to create leverage for yourselves,” he countered, feeling like a dying animal on its back, flailing at its tormentors. “You know you’re ripping him off. Everyone does.” He gathered up his things and stuffed them into his shoulder bag. “And I’m still telling him to sit until he gets a new deal.”

“Watch out, Barry,” Chet Palmer warned. “You have your reputation to think about.”

He was right, and Sturtz knew this. But today he just didn’t feel like giving a damn. Not with these guys.

“You need T. J. here, playing,” Sturtz told them. “Your own butt is on the line if he doesn’t. Both of you, in fact.”

“Don’t bet on it,” Gray replied.

“That’s just what I’m going to do,” Sturtz said as he opened the door and went out.

Alan Gray’s office was large but not spacious, not like something on the top floor of a corporate skyscraper. And, like its occupant, it was cold and utilitarian, giving away nothing personal. A huge flat-screen TV hung on one wall with wires running to a DVD/VCR combo. There was a pile of game tapes stacked on a nearby file cabinet, each neatly labeled. A markerboard larger than the TV was attached to another wall, decorated with the X’s and O’s of some play that was still in development. The handsome walnut furniture had been chosen and delivered at the team’s expense. Notably, there were no framed family photos, no indication that the man had a life outside of here. Anyone who bothered to read the bio that had been written up for the team’s media guide knew that he had been married to a woman named Lorraine for thirty-three years, and that the couple had two daughters—Eleanor and Marilyn. Independent research by the curious revealed that Eleanor was in her second year of law school and Marilyn was a marketing major at Brown. The only time anyone had seen Lorraine in the flesh was during the first party the team threw after Gray’s hiring, but that

was only for the rest of the coaching staff and select front-office personnel.

Shortly after returning to his desk, Gray summoned two of his coaches—offensive coordinator Dale Greenwood and tight ends coach Jim O’Leary. He almost didn’t need to bother, as word of the meeting with Sturtz spread like flu in a daycare center. In fact, it would be on *SportsCenter* by the following morning, courtesy of a loose-tongued member of the organization that the top brass had yet to identify.

The door was half open, but Greenwood, leading the way, still knocked.

“Come in,” Gray said, reviewing some papers. “Take a seat.”

Greenwood was a large figure with a round face, steel-rimmed glasses, silver hair with faint traces of its former black, and an easy smile framed by a light rosiness to his pudgy cheeks. Every article of clothing on his body was flawless, from his pressed khaki shorts and team polo shirt to the fresh white socks and out-of-the-box sneakers. Holding the shorts up was a brown leather belt, and attached to it were a cell phone, a pager, and a PDA. He was never without these devices.

O’Leary, who was Greenwood’s subordinate as well as Gray’s, was a bit more pedestrian. He also wore a collared shirt bearing the Giants’ familiar blue-and-red logo in concert with khaki shorts and sneakers. It was not at all unusual to see a great percentage of a club’s staff dressed almost identically, as if they all worked in the same fast-food restaurant. He had boyish features, spoke softly, and was notably good-natured as long as the boys under his tutelage were performing well. His neatly cut red hair was barely noticeable

under the team cap that he wore every day, which protected his fair Irish skin from the brutal New Jersey sun.

The two men took their seats on the other side of the desk. Gray went on reading for a few seconds, then looked up and, without any transition, said, “You both need to know that I just told Barry Sturtz I was going to sit T. J. Brookman this season.”

Dale Greenwood felt something die inside him. “He’s the best guy I’ve got, Alan.”

“I’m aware of that,” Gray replied, “but Sturtz wants to renegotiate his contract. He wants more money.”

Jim O’Leary said, “But T. J. *is* the best tight end in the league right now, Coach. We kind of figured he’d be asking for a new contract anyway.”

“I think it’s a bad idea for any team to continually give in to this kind of thing,” Gray responded. “He signed a contract, and we expect him to stick to it. And if that means we get him cheap, then we get him cheap. We don’t need to compromise. Besides, we’re already neck-deep in cap problems.”

Thanks to Chet Palmer’s management blunders, was the unspoken sentiment that lingered between them.

“So what now?” Greenwood asked.

“Get some replacements in here, and fast.”

“Replacements? For T. J.? No one plays like T. J.”

Gray shrugged and picked up another piece of paper. “Then we’ll have to make some changes to our system.”

Dale Greenwood knew what this meant—*he* would have to make changes to *his* system. A system he had painstakingly created and nurtured over the many years of his career. A system known

for its innovation and originality. Parts of it had been designed with Brookman in mind, based on his unique skills and abilities. It was more than just a collection of plays—it was his masterpiece. Having a guy like T. J. Brookman in your arsenal was a joy for any offensive coordinator, particularly considering the fact that this team refused to spend much on offense. A lucky “find” like Brookman was the only way to put a decent unit together in such a skewed environment.

“I know that’ll be a pain,” Gray said, “but I’m confident you guys can handle it.”

Alan Gray had a defensive pedigree and, much to Greenwood’s relief, had never interfered much with the way the offense was managed. As far as the offensive guys were concerned, Dale Greenwood was their head coach. Gray didn’t get too involved, as his great love was keeping opponents from putting points on the board. Scoring them was something he left to others. But, as Dale Greenwood had also discovered, Gray was always willing to let the credit for the team’s offensive achievements fall into his lap. He had done so in the bright glare of the media many, many times. Greenwood played the good sport and remained tight-lipped on these occasions, but many who knew him suspected his patience was wearing thin.

“There’s no chance that Maxwell could fill the role, right?” O’Leary mumbled halfheartedly. Glenn Maxwell was the Giants’ other tight end—as well as an occasional receiver, special teamer, and, in a pinch, both lineman and punter. He was serviceable at everything but an expert at nothing.

“No chance,” Greenwood said. “He has to stay right where he is. He doesn’t possess the kind of skills we need.”

“That’s what I figured.”

“Look,” Gray said, “the real bottom line is that we can’t just give in to any of the Sturtzes in this business. If we cut this deal, agents for every other guy on the team will be marching in here the next day. It’s time to move on. We need to find someone else, and someone cheap.”

“Do you have anyone in mind?”

“No, I’ll leave that up to you two. Let’s get, say, three new guys on the field. Training camp is less than two weeks away. Send them what they need and tell them we’re looking forward to having them.”

“Sure, okay.”

“Does Kenner know about this yet?” Greenwood couldn’t help invoking the name of the team’s current owner. Mostly he wanted to gauge Gray’s reaction.

“I haven’t said anything to him, but I’ll call him later, although my guess is he’ll be too busy with whatever he’s got going on in Europe right now.”

Dorland Kenner, the team’s owner for the last five years, was the son of the previous owner, a billionaire entrepreneur who passed away at the age of ninety-six. Few people in the organization had even met him, but those who had came away with a favorable impression—smart, focused, decent. The problem was, he was so busy with the numerous other business interests he’d inherited after his father’s death that he had no choice but to rely on Alan Gray and Chet Palmer to run the team.

“I’d like to maintain my moratorium on press interaction among the coaching staff about this,” Gray went on. “No talking to anyone. Not about anything else, and not about this. They’ll find out things from other people, but not from us, okay?”

“Yeah.”

“Good. All right, get to it.”

Everyone stood.

“This really is a big gamble,” Greenwood said as he headed for the door.

“I know that,” Gray replied, slapping him on the shoulder. “But I’m a gambling man, Dale.”

At the same moment that Greenwood and O’Leary were exiting Gray’s office, Barry Sturtz was turning onto the New Jersey Turnpike and heading south, away from Giants Stadium in the Meadows and toward Newark International Airport. He hated the Northeast, with its miles of traffic jams, oppressive legislation, and ludicrously high prices. When he finally had enough money to buy a home, he packed up and headed south to the Carolinas, where sales were booming and people from the Northeast were migrating en masse. He found a three-story farmhouse and twenty acres of untamed land for less than half the asking price of anything in the Garden State. He dumped another sixty thousand into renovation and ended up with a fully modernized castle.

He attached a Bluetooth headset to his ear and pressed a speed-dial button on his cell phone. It rang twice before Brookman picked up.

“T. J.”

“Yo, what’s up?”

“How are you?”

“Doing okay, how about yourself?”

“I’ve been better.”

“Oh yeah? How’d it go?”

“Not good.”

“No?” The kid sounded surprised. “What happened?”

Sturtz took a deep breath. “They don’t want to renegotiate. They’re digging in their heels.”

“You’re kidding.”

“No, no kidding. And it gets worse.”

“Worse?”

“I tried threatening them with a holdout. You know, like we discussed?”

“Yeah?”

“And they said they’d sit you.”

Brookman’s response was instantaneous. “*What?* Can they even do that?”

“Yeah, they can,” Sturtz replied. “They can sit anyone they want to. They could sit the whole team if they felt like it.”

“I can’t do that. I’d lose a year of stats, a year of exposure.”

“I know.”

“And who wants to sit? I want to *play*.”

“I figured you would.”

“What about the contract? Does anything there help me?”

“Not really. It doesn’t specify that you *have* to play, only that you have to make the team. Like I’ve told you before, since it was your rookie contract and you were a low draft pick, they had a lot of leverage. Unfortunately, your last agent gave in to everything they demanded.” Sturtz tried to say this with as much objectivity as possible—he knew T. J.’s last agent, knew the guy was a bit of a lightweight, but he didn’t like to say it in so many words. He derived little pleasure from bashing his contemporaries.

“Damn . . . I wish you’d been my agent then,” T. J. said. He’d expressed this sentiment several times in the past.

“Yeah, me, too.”

“I’m losing money every day.”

“I know.”

According to the amended 2006 Collective Bargaining Agreement, a team is allowed to fine a player who is voluntarily sitting out of training camp the maximum sum of \$14,000 per day. Exact amounts varied per team, and the Giants had thus far made it clear that Brookman would be paying \$3,500 per missed day for the first week, and another \$3,500 per day would be added in each successive week. Thus, if he still wasn’t in camp during the fourth and final week, he would be charged the full \$14,000 for each day of absence. Furthermore, the team was allowed to charge him another \$14,000, *plus one week’s salary*, for each missed preseason game.

“I mean, I can afford it, but . . . it’s going to be pretty rough. I hope to hell this works out.”

“I know, and they know it, too. It’s more leverage for them. That’s the whole point of the fines in the first place.”

“So what about being traded? Is that possible?”

“I suggested that, and they said they’d do just what I told you they would—make you too expensive. No one would pick you up. They’re not going to give you away, T. J. They’re going to want a fortune for you—and that’s because they *don’t* want you going to another club.”

“So . . . they don’t want me there, but they don’t want to let me go?”

“No—they *do* want you there, but they don’t want to pay you any more than they are now. That’s really what it comes down to.”

“That’s crap.”

“I know.”

“These guys . . . oh, man. I can’t believe it. I just can’t believe they’d do this.”

“Tell me about it.”

“I’ve given them everything I have.”

“I know. I don’t like it, either.”

Sturtz heard him exhale deeply, and it made him feel worse than he already did.

“So what do we have to do?” Brookman asked.

Sturtz turned onto southbound Exit 14. “Hang loose for a few days and see what happens. That’s the most sensible option right now. Remember that you’re one of the best tight ends in the league, maybe *the* best. The position has been changing and evolving, becoming more valuable, so our timing is pretty good. We have that going for us.”

Whereas the duties of many positions had remained more or less static over the years, the tight end spot had unquestionably increased in importance, particularly over the last decade. Defenses were faster now, more nimble and, in a word, more brutal. Defensive schemes had also gotten more complex as coordinators became better at figuring out offensive formations and how to get to the quarterbacks. In the modern era of professional football, therefore, defenses were gaining the upper hand. It was no coincidence that many D-side wizards were being elevated to head-coaching positions over their O-side counterparts. Bill Belichick, Marvin Lewis, and Tony Dungy all had defensive pedigrees—and all went on to become successful head coaches. The Age of Defense, it seemed, had arrived.

In order to survive, therefore, the offense had to evolve as well. Quarterbacks had to rely more on running plays and short

passes—passes that got the ball to receivers quickly, before the pocket inevitably collapsed and the quarterback found himself under a pile of linebackers. And with the advent of the quick-passing game came the increased value of the previously underused tight end. Because the tight end had to be a big man, he added blocking power. But because he could also catch the ball, he was able to confuse defenders, creating new matchups and one more person to watch out for. Tight ends became Renaissance guys, able to perform multiple tasks and fulfill many roles. They were suddenly moving around in the backfield, replacing fullbacks, and sometimes throwing a pass or two. They drew linebackers and safeties out of their zones, opening routes for primary and secondary receivers. When they were ignored, they provided a safety net for quarterbacks who found their intended receivers unavailable. And due to their size and toughness, they were often assigned the generally unpleasant chore of running routes over the middle—truly the Valley of Darkness in the National Football League. More teams ran double tight end sets; more teams viewed them as not just key blockers but extra receivers. They were getting four or five passes per game, for sixty or seventy yards. Some could run deep routes. A few found themselves scoring eight or ten touchdowns per year. In short, the tight end was becoming an offensive VIP, and his importance would only increase in the years ahead.

“Twenty years ago,” Sturtz went on, “we wouldn’t even be having this conversation. But now, I know a lot of teams can use you. Gray and Palmer know that, too. All of this might just be a bluff. I think it is, so we’ll wait for them to blink.”

“Okay,” T. J. replied. “Damn. . . .”

“I know, this is bullshit. Let’s see what happens. Meanwhile,

keep yourself in shape, keep working out. Remember, these guys are animals, but we'll get 'em. Okay?"

For a moment Sturtz thought he'd lost the call. Then Brookman said, "Sure, okay."

"Trust me. Have I let you down yet?"

"No, you haven't. I know it's not your fault. It's just . . . I've given everything to these guys. Everything. I can't believe any of this." He sounded defeated now, tapped out.

"We'll figure something out. Just hang tight. I'm not letting these bastards beat us. They're out of their friggin' minds if they think I'm going to make it easy for them."

"Okay."

"Talk to you later."

Sturtz ended the call and put the earpiece back into his bag, which was sitting open on the passenger seat. As he slowed to a halt at the toll booth, he thought about Gray and Palmer again and muttered a few words that would've been unrepeatable in mixed company.

Jim O'Leary came into Dale Greenwood's office just as Barry Sturtz was boarding his flight back to North Carolina.

"I've got them," he said.

Greenwood, who had been sitting behind his desk working on the offensive itinerary for the first week of camp, looked up. "All right, let's see."

It was a simple sheet of white paper with a list of names. There were eleven in total, but eight had already been scratched out by O'Leary. Greenwood studied the other three for a few moments.

"Oh, sure, I know these guys. Good choices."

“Thanks.”

Greenwood kept looking at the list while massaging his chin, then set the paper down and shook his head. “This is crazy, Jimmy. Just sheer lunacy.”

O’Leary, who had never been a fan of internal politics—even after he became convinced this was one big reason why he hadn’t climbed higher on the coaching ladder—simply shrugged.

Greenwood sighed. “All right. You’ll make the calls?”

“Sure,” O’Leary said. “I’ll take care of it.”

“Thanks.”