

**Masters  
of the Veil**  
*Book One of the Veil Trilogy by*

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## CHAPTER 1

Samuel Lock's fingertips pierced the soft turf up to his first knuckle. His hand, which at that moment supported his entire upper body weight, had been mummy-wrapped with strips of white tape over an array of cuts.

Like his coach always said, "The redder, the better."

The green Carver High helmet with the Grizzly logo barely muffled the screams of the seven thousand cheering fans. The stadium was only supposed to hold five thousand, but this was the championship game and a few rules had been bent. Even Channel Four's reserved portion of the field had been overrun.

As a wide receiver, Sam wasn't the captain of the team, but he might as well have been. Even though Doug was their quarterback, the team really looked up to Sam. At six foot three and two hundred pounds of human iron, Sam was made for football; it was in his blood. Not only were scouts from every major college looking at him, they were looking at him right now.

This game—this moment—was the culmination of his entire high school career. His team was good, very good, and he was lucky for it. As Coach DeGrella always said, "The ripest apple still goes unpicked if everyone thinks the tree's dead." This particular tree was full-on green. Right now, they had a great shot at taking the season title. That undefeated record boosted their confidence... and made the pressure all the more brutal.

Skyline High—Carver High's rivals for as far back as anyone could remember—had also come into this game with an undefeated record. Sam had spent time at their games, disguised in a dark hoodie, so he could watch how they moved. The Skyline Hornets played like their mascots—coordinated and ferocious—and they'd set the very same goal as Carver: a Championship win, whatever the cost.

Campy, hand-painted signs peppered the stands: "Lock and Load," "Lock Down the Victory," and Sam Lock's personal favorite, "Lock has the key to my heart." Most days he couldn't even walk down the hallway to his locker without getting a kiss on the cheek from a cheerleader—sometimes even from Samantha Douglas. It was every high school boy's fantasy, and he was living it. Yep, between his athletic talent and his blond-and-blue-eyed good looks, he

was pretty much the king of Carver High—and he had the attitude to prove it.

The only problem was the pressure—all those expectations that now piled onto Sam’s shoulders.

Talk of football filled the hushed whispers during class, became a not-so-hushed roar in the cafeteria, and even the stoners who snuck away into the bathroom stalls for a smoke rambled on about Carver High’s chances against Skyline.

Skyline’s jerseys glared an angry yellow under the stadium lights. Sam’s eyes zeroed in on the cornerback in front of him. He had to get around him, but the guy was powerful and quick, one of the best he’d come up against.

The scouts are sure getting their money’s worth.

The cornerback had been keeping up with him all night, even managing to intercept a crisp pass in the first half. Sam had to do something—and quick—if he wanted to give the town something to brag about for the next year.

The giant scoreboard mocked the hometown fans in big neon numbers. With only thirty seconds left in the second half, the visiting Hornets led twenty-one to seventeen. If Curt hadn’t recovered that onside kick, the game would’ve been over already.

The Grizzlies were in possession on their third down, forty yards from the end zone. Sam already had his route planned out. Doug would fire one of his “bullet” passes twenty yards downfield, which Sam would catch and then run out-of-bounds to stop the clock.

The cornerback is just a feather, and I am a hurricane.

“Red nineteen, red nineteen,” Doug bellowed. “Set... Hut, hut, hike!”

Hard pads crunched as the titans of both teams collided. Sam took off. The muscles in his legs strained as he twisted past his opponent and looked for the open spot. The noise of the crowd faded away as his focus narrowed on getting that ball in his hands. He exploded down the field, not holding anything back. Five yards, ten... no one could catch him... fifteen... almost there... TWENTY. Planting his cleat hard into the ground, he turned just as the ball was about to reach him. He caught it with the familiarity of thousands of practices behind him. With the ball secure in his hands, he took a quick step across the sideline.

Screams erupted from the stands. Sam pointed the ball at Coach DeGrella, but that was all—it was too early for celebration. Sam would rejoice only after the win, when the clerk at the corner store would gladly misread the birthdates on the team’s ID’s and sell the senior players each a six-pack.

It’s going to be one heck of a celebration.

The clock stopped with eighteen seconds left in the game, and the Grizzlies were on their last down. Soon enough Sam would have his memory. He would bask in the glow of affection from every girl at the school—and the envy of every boy. Only twenty yards to go, and his name would live on in the tales of Carver High forever.

It was going to be so monumental that Sam could already see the statue.

Tracy Goodman’s parents had already agreed that she could have as many

people over as she wanted, so long as they turned in their car keys at the front door. Only twenty yards to go. Losing was not an option—not for Sam, not for the town of Stanton.

Sam's team raced down the field toward him. After a barrage of chest bumps and head slaps they huddled for the next play.

"The ball goes to Sam," Doug managed to get out between heavy breaths. "It's only right."

Most of the team nodded in agreement. Sam deserved to be the hero.

"Give it to me," the running back said. "I can do it."

"Shut your mouth, Rodney. The ball goes to Sam." Doug slapped a hand on Sam's shoulder. "Ready to make history, Lock?"

"You use that cannon to get the ball into the end zone, and I'll catch it."

Doug nodded. "What play?"

"Post on two. I'll burn him to the outside."

"Couldn't have called it better myself. BREAK."

The team took their positions on the line, warriors setting up to send fear and chaos across the line of scrimmage. The linemen scowled at their opponents with looks that said, "I will crush you like the bug you are, Hornet." Sam took his rightful place on the field as his heart raced.

This was it. The final play of the final game of the final season—until college ball, at least. Sam felt like he was submerged too far underwater, but he refused to let the pressure take over. He would push past the doubt and fear. He had to. The scouts were all watching; the fans were all hoping. If he failed...

Failure isn't an option.

Sam's legs were poised for the initial burst, all his muscles taut, ready to spring. The cornerback was close, just inches away from the line, giving Sam a menacing stare above his mask's wiring.

He's gonna stick on me like his life depends on it.

A surge built inside Sam, a bubbling that pushed energy to his extremities as though every heartbeat delivered a fresh pump of adrenaline. It was bringing out the monster in him.

Coach DeGrella would be so proud.

Energy radiated through him, pulsing outward down the field. His knees began to shake and everything looked a little too red. It felt like crap, but the intensity was just what he needed.

Here we go. Just call the snap.

The pressure held no power over the cornerback. Sam could tell by his stance. He was like a statue, holding steady, waiting to see what Sam was going to do.

Skyline had trained him well.

The noise from the stands had vanished—all Sam could hear was the wind. The hiss of the air and his heartbeat thudded against his eardrums, almost to the point of making him woozy.

Weird. Doug usually doesn't take this long to snap.

Sam checked his peripherals and saw the rest of the team poised—oddly still—but ready to pounce. Sam wondered if the pressure was getting to be too much for them as well.

His eyes moved back to the cornerback. The guy hadn't budged an inch, the intense scowl still on his face. The glaring yellow jersey ruffled in the breeze, but the player didn't move in the slightest. No shifting, no scratching: it was very impressive stuff.

C'mon, Doug, what are you waiting for? Call it! Let's do it!

A few more seconds went by. Sam thought he was going to explode. He wondered if all the adrenaline was messing with his perception of time. His heartbeat was getting louder in his ears. He couldn't take it anymore. He knew he shouldn't get out of his crouch in case of a false start, but something weird was happening.

He stood up straight and surveyed his team.

Doug had his hands low, ready to take the snap, but he wasn't moving. The line in front of him just stood there, like they'd all turned to stone or something. More pounding filled his head.

Whatever the hell was going on, it wasn't just confined to the field. He twisted around to look at the bleachers. Like wax figurines. Some fans had their hands covering their faces; others had outstretched fists. Lips had frozen in mid-yell. Couples clasped their palms together; people held giant foam fingers absolutely still, a few fans had stopped with cups just sitting patiently at their lips—no sound and no movement at all. Everyone was just... frozen. Sam couldn't wrap his mind around it. The most important moment of the whole year... and what was happening?

The pounding in his head reached a crescendo; any more and he knew it would burst. His stomach twisted. Had the pressure had actually made him go crazy?

Sam lowered into his crouch and stared back into his opponent's eyes. All signs of life had vanished. The intensity was still there, but it was like a photograph. His gaze was stuck in time.

Dry heaves pushed up from his gut, and his head felt like it would split at the seams. He gasped as the pounding pressure stopped, leaving the horrible sense that his skull was inflating like a balloon. He brought a hand to his helmet. "What the—"

"HIKE!"

In a flash, everything started moving again.

Life flowed back into everyone. The stadium noise returned in a crashing wave as a bulky lineman threw his weight like a Sumo wrestler. The Hornets' defense slid into action, buzzing onward.

But Sam didn't budge.

What just happened? Did anyone else see that?

"Sam, RUN!"

The call snapped him out of his daze. He leapt forward, trying to get to

where he was supposed to be to meet the ball.

The momentary lapse was all the cornerback needed. Sam tried to break past, but his opponent was too good, and he was ready. He stuck with Sam, who was already behind schedule.

Sam could see the spot where Doug would throw the ball. He dug deep, but he already knew it was futile. Doug was always so consistent, and the rendezvous was usually flawless.

Sam knew what was going to happen.

He dove, stretching his fingers to their absolute limits, but the ball was too far to the right. The Hornet cornerback snatched the ball out of the air, changed directions, and sprinted down the field.

Sam hadn't been fast enough. He'd hesitated. It was all over.

The gasp from the crowd made his heart sink.

Skyline's cornerback ran the ball in, broke past Carver's safety, and scored. The buzzer sliced through the shouting from the stands, and Sam felt the shameful cloak of defeat drape his soul.

Ripping off his helmet, he rubbed his forehead with the palm of his hand. Already, boos came from the crowd. He'd disappointed the whole town.

But that can't count. Everyone froze. It doesn't count.

Skyline's team was already downfield, dancing and celebrating in Carver's end zone. The cornerback had been hoisted on his team's shoulders as they piled together and whooped.

It should have been Sam's victory. It should have been him spiking the ball.

He ran over to the nearest official.

"You saw that, right?"

The official frowned. "Yeah."

"What happened?"

"It's called choking." The man huffed as he turned to walk away.

The jeers and catcalls swelled from the crowd.

Sam followed after the official. "No, everyone froze up!" he yelled. "You didn't see it?"

"I saw one player freeze up, yes."

"No! It was like everyone turned into statues. You have to do something!"

"Yeah, have a stiff drink on ice and try to forget what shoddy playing I saw out there."

"NO!" Sam shook his head. "I can't be the only one who saw it!"

The official gestured to the crowd. "No, son. Judging by what I hear, the whole town saw it."

The pounding in Sam's head, along with the strange energy, started to return. He pressed a hand against his temple and squeezed his eyes shut. "Sir, you have to—"

"Go home, boy. The game's over."

Sam could feel the fire in the spectator's insults, the pain in their hearts.

Didn't anyone else see what happened?

Sam ran over to Doug. His quarterback groaned as he rubbed the skin on his cheeks.

“Doug, didn’t you see that?”

Doug opened his eyes. The corners were wet, with poison lurking behind his gaze. “Don’t you dare try to blame this one on me.”

Sam was taken aback. “What? No, I mean, didn’t you see everyone freeze?”

“It’s not my fault.”

“You’re not listening to me. Everyone froze, I mean everyone. They were like statues.”

Doug took his hands away from his face and glared at Sam with narrowed eyes.

“Don’t you dare try to blame this on the team, either. You’re the only one who froze up.” Doug shook his head and curled his lip. “How could you choke, man? It was all about tonight.”

What happened? Was I hallucinating?

“I...”

“Just get out of here.” Doug scowled at him. “I don’t want to be seen with you, especially when you’re about to make up some lie to try and save face.”

Sam looked over at the Hornets. They’d huddled together in a ring of ecstatic bodies, jumping up and down in unison.

“That’s supposed to be us,” Sam said.

“Well, thanks to you, it isn’t.”

The beating in Sam’s head got stronger.

The rest of Sam’s team headed toward the locker room like they were going to a wake, their heads hung low. On the sidelines, cheerleaders crammed pom-poms away and wiped glitter paint off their faces.

At the midfield sideline, Channel Four began packing up their gear. Sam rushed over to them just as they were about to put away the large camera.

“Excuse me!”

A cameraman with a goatee looked up, and then frowned in annoyance.

“You have to check the tape on that.”

The man turned his back to Sam. “I expected more from you, kid.”

“I swear, something crazy happened. You have to look at the tape. Everyone just stopped moving, right before the play.”

The man started wrapping up cords. “That’s what normally happens on the line.”

Sam felt something break within him. Spit sprayed from his mouth as he yelled, “Don’t you think I know what happens on the line of scrimmage?”

The man turned back around. “You really think something happened?”

Finally, he was getting through. “Yes! Please, just watch the last play.”

The man picked up the camera and opened the side panel, revealing a small screen. He flipped a few switches and rewound the scene to show the last down.

“You see?” Sam asked. “Everyone just stopped moving.”

The man looked at Sam with a small amount of compassion. “C’mere.”

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Sam moved in so he could see the little screen.

“Now watch closely,” the cameraman said, “so there can be no doubt.”

Sam watched as they all lined up, ready for the last down. Right as Sam got in his crouch, a tiny flash of static warped the scene. Then everything continued—at normal speed. The digitized version of Sam looked around, stunned, for a moment while the game went on around him.

From the viewer’s perspective, Sam had choked.

Sam didn’t understand. “But, the static. It must have—”

The cameraman threw his hands outward. “Kid, you lost. Stop deluding yourself.”

“I swear!” Sam yelled. “Something—”

“Hey!”

Sam turned as the Hornets’ cornerback jogged up to him.

“What do you want?” Sam asked.

“You played a heck of a game, man.” He reached out a hand. “Best I’ve been up against by far. It was a great game.”

Sam stared at his hand in disgust. “No, it wasn’t.”

The cornerback retracted his hand.

Sam felt his feet start to feel light. “The game’s not over. Something happened.”

The cornerback looked up at the scoreboard. “Looks pretty over to me.”

“Sam here thinks that you guys cheated somehow,” the cameraman said.

Sam felt the anger inside of him taking over. “That’s not what I said.”

“You calling us cheaters?”

Sam felt like he was going to explode again. “No, it’s just that—”

“Whatever, man.” The cornerback turned to walk away.

The crazy energy was back. “Hold on.” Sam went to grab the cornerback’s shoulder.

And then the cornerback was on the ground, yelling in pain.

The stands hushed as thousands of eyes turned in their direction.

The insane energy stopped again, along with the pounding in his head. Only the screams of the cornerback, writhing on the ground in agony, broke the silence.

The Skyline coach ran up. “What the heck happened?”

Sam honestly didn’t know. All he’d done was try to grab the kid’s shoulder. “I... I just...”

“He hit him.” The cameraman’s face had gone pale.

“What? No, I—”

“You hit my player?”

Sam stared wide-eyed down at his opponent. “No, I swear, I just grabbed his shoulder and—”

“He hit him, hard,” the cameraman said, “really hard.”

“I didn’t hit him!”

From down near his feet came more screams of pain. The cornerback

whimpered, curled in a fetal ball on the grass, and blood seeped through the back of his jersey.

“Back off!” The coach scowled at Sam. “Someone call the medics!”

Sam’s hands clenched into fists as he turned to the cameraman. “Why would you lie? I didn’t hit him.”

The cameraman held up defensive hands. “Don’t hit me, too.”

The muttering took on a dangerous edge.

“Loser!”

“Leave him alone!”

“How could you?”

Why do they hate me? I didn’t do anything wrong!

The Skyline coach bent over his shrieking player. Blood darkened his once-yellow jersey. Sam stumbled backward and kept his hand tight against his forehead as the pounding started up again. In seconds everything had been ruined—his career, his reputation, his life.

Did I really choke? Did I really hit him? No, something weird happened. I wouldn’t have...

Everyone—the fans, the players, the cheerleaders—now looked at him like he was some freak. Their animosity swept over him like a tidal wave. Both teams’ coaches started toward him. He had to get away. He needed space to think.

Why won’t that damn pounding stop?

He grabbed the sides of his head, squeezing like a vice, but the force within his skull wasn’t going away.

All he could think to do was run.

He pushed past the cameraman and ran toward the parking lot. He couldn’t focus with the full drum line in his ear, but at least he could run fast. Even though his brain might be exploding, the energy filled his body—supercharging it. People jumped out of his way as he flashed through the crowd, and then past them.

Thankfully, no one followed him. At that speed, no one could. Once out of the mayhem, he ripped off his pads and put his jersey back over his t-shirt. He took a deep breath as the throbbing pressure released his cranium, but all of that extra energy drained away with it. His eyelids started getting heavy and his lips went numb.

Am I going to pass out?

He spotted his car over in the corner, sandwiched between two large pick-ups. Just seeing it inspired a bit of relief. He stumbled over and knelt down by the back door. As he dropped, he felt his whole body shutting down. He reached underneath the car and grabbed the spare key duct-taped next to the muffler. His regular set—along with his street clothes—were still in the locker room.

He stripped off the gooey white bands of tape and pulled the key free. His vision went black as he forced himself upright, and he fell against the side of

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the car. Sam found the lock by sense of touch, forced the key in with shaking fingers, and finally maneuvered himself into the seat.

Just as he locked the door behind him, the world went away.