

BEANPOLE & FRIENDS

FOOTBALL
DETECTIVE

DICK BOHRER

*To the real
Danny Pruitt,
firstborn grandson,
a thinker, a writer,
football player,
scholar.*

©2005 by Richard W. Bohrer

Published by Glory Press, P. O. Box 624, West Linn, Oregon
97068

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form without permission in writing from the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews.

ISBN: 0-8024-4420-2

1 2 3 4 5 6 Printing/LC/Year 95 94 93 92 91

Printed in the United States of America

Contents

1. My Friend, the Pro	1
2. Not Everybody Likes What's Going On.....	8
3. Jerry Comes Through Again.....	12
4. It's Time for Strategy.....	17
5. We Really Watch	26
6. We Raise a Riot	26
7. We Punish Danny	32
8. The Roast	38
9. I Try to Find Another Friend	43
10. What Do I Do Now?	52
11. Grunt	57
12. The Final Test	60
13. Showdown.....	67
14. One Last Try	71
15. Trapped	77
16. My Get-away	83
17. The Next Day	88

1

My Friend, the Pro

When it comes to football, my friend Jerry Proe has the smarts. I don't know where he gets it—maybe from watching TV. But he remembers every play he sees. He knows all the players. He knows all their moves. And he's just a kid—like me. But he's in tenth grade. I'm in ninth.

He's the kind of kid adults don't like to have around. They think he's a know-it-all. And they're right. But this time, even he didn't have any answers.

It was the first game of our tri-county league. Our school was the new team in our conference. This was only the second year for Sunny Hills High. The bleachers on both sides of the field were packed. It was a home game for Newton High, not for us.

The bleachers we were in rocked a little when everybody stood up for the anthem and the kick-off. Our team, the Hilltoppers, received from the Trojans. The ball came high. Our receiver caught it and ran a mile—down to their 38.

Our guys huddled around our new quarterback, Danny Pruitt, a kid who had transferred in from Virginia. Practically our whole school has transferred in from somewhere—our town has grown so fast. People like living out in the country.

Anyway, our new quarterback, Danny, was sort of half-hunched, half-standing so he could keep his eyes on the defense. He had his helmet in his left hand. He didn't put it on until play began. I thought that was strange; but Jerry didn't say anything about it, so I didn't either.

The guys said, "Hup," as they broke huddle and went to their positions. They dropped into their crouch. It all looked and sounded sharp. Then Danny Pruitt ran up the middle on a keeper and hit a rock wall. No gain.

Next play, he ran left. The whole Trojan defense ran with him and stopped him a yard back. The next play, we tried a pass to our right end. Four Trojans were covering him, and one of them picked off the ball. He tried to run up field but tripped over one of his teammates and fell. The Trojans had the ball on their own 42.

They passed for 18 yards. They ran for 3 and 14. It was up the middle for 9 and a pass into the end zone from there. The kick was good, and the Trojans were rolling.

"I thought we were going to be good this year," I complained to Jerry. We'd won our city league championship last year, and I guess we were spoiled.

“Well, what can you expect,” Jerry said, “when they bring a teacher up from fourth grade and make him coach?”

Our coach from last year was hired away too late for us to find someone else. They’d gotten my old fourth grade teacher, Mr. Henry Pennington from Maple Avenue School. He’d played football in college and always talked about coaching it someday. I guess he had to work his way up from the bottom of some list. This was his first coaching job.

“Come on, Hilltoppers,” I shouted.

We took the kick-off and ran the ball back to our own 38. We tried an end run, and all the Trojans smelled the play and ran to that side.

“Quit leaning on me.” Jerry gave me a shove.

“I’m not leaning on you.”

“You are so.”

“I am not.”

“Not now. But you were. You were trying to help the team move the ball.”

“I was not. At least, I don’t think I was.”

“Well, you were. A lot of people do that. They lean—”

I wasn’t listening. Our team tried up the middle and hit another rock wall. We tried a pass, but everybody was covered.

“Open your eyes, you ninnyes,” I shouted. But my voice couldn’t be heard. Hundreds of other rooters felt the same way.

The Trojan back returned our kick 40 yards. Then it was a long pass and a run. But for some reason their offense sputtered, and it was fourth and 4 on our 20-yard line. They sent in a kicker and made three points. Ten to nothing, first quarter!

“This game’s going to be a drag,” I said.

“Don’t be too sure, Beanpole,” Jerry said. Everybody calls me that—or Bean. Because I’m skinny, I guess. I had asthma as a little kid. I wanted to go out for football, but I just don’t have the weight.

We ran the kick-off back to the 32, and, sure enough, every play went dead again. The crowd around us started getting rowdy. People were shouting nasty cracks. We kicked on third down, trying to surprise the Trojans. It was a great kick. Our new quarterback really had a good foot. The little old ball rolled and rolled with six Toppers hovering over it, urging it on downfield.

Play started on the 6. Our cheerleaders started, “Get that ball! Get that ball!” The fans around us picked it up. It seemed like now or never.

The Trojan halfback ran off-tackle and gained only a yard. Then the quarterback ran around right end and gained 2. Our guys were making a fight of it.

Then Jerry said something strange.

“They’re going to fumble on the next play.”

“How do you know?” I asked. “You don’t know.”

The center snapped the ball, and there was a scramble. It looked like both teams collapsed in the middle, trying to get the ball. The referees peeled each player off one by one. The fans on both sides of the field were shouting. The referees pointed up field. The Trojans retained possession.

“Told you,” Jerry said.

“But how did you know?” I couldn’t believe it.

Some man with a big moustache turned around and said the same thing. He must have heard Jerry telling me.

“I don’t know how I know,” Jerry said. “I just know.”

“Lucky guess is all I say,” I said. He thinks he’s smart because he’s fifteen. On fourth down the Trojans kicked.

“Go back! Go back!” Jerry shouted.

The ball went high and far—farther than our Toppers estimated. Their punter had a good foot, too. The ball went over our receiver’s head, and Trojans swarmed around him, grounding the ball on our 39.

“He should have moved back,” Jerry said.

The man with the moustache turned again and looked. I just shook my head. Jerry gave me a shove—and laughed.

The Hilltoppers hammered away at the Trojan line. Short gain up the middle off right tackle. No gain off left-guard. No gain around right end. Then we kicked.

“Our offense will never score,” Jerry said. “I don’t know why they don’t just kick on first down so the defense can score. It’s our defense that’s going to win this game.”

“You think so, huh?” I said.

“I know so.”

“How do you know?”

“I just know.”

“Well, why don’t you do something about it?”

“Like what?”

“Like telling Coach.”

“Not me,” he said.

“Why not you? Don’t you want to win this game?”

“Why should I? If we did, I wouldn’t have anything to try and figure out.”

“But this is our team. We want to win!”

“If you want to win, you go tell him.”

“Not me. I don’t want to go down in front of all those people.”

“That’s because you’re chicken,” he said.

“I am not.”

“You are so. Or you’d do it. You’re chicken.”

The Trojans bent over the ball at their 26. The quarterback faded back seven steps for a pass. He threw to his left. A red jersey flashed in front of the ball and a fat, lumbering Hilltopper named Grunstein picked it

off and ran clumsily downfield toward the goal. Everyone exploded in cheers and roars of laughter. Old Grunstein was no sprinter. He was a ten-ton truck, built to hold back a line.

“Run, Grunt!” we all hollered. “Run!”

Black jerseys raced after him and caught him at the goal line. But he had so much power he dragged four guys across with him.

You could hear us Hilltoppers clear to the next county. We shouted and roared. And when the kick was good and the band picked up, it was like a riot.

I looked at Jerry. He was looking at me and grinning. I didn't say anything, but he'd been right. It was our defense that scored.

The Hilltoppers kicked off. The Trojan receiver caught the ball and ran up field. Grunstein hit him so hard the ball shot up in the air. Our Topper number 47 snatched it and took off for the end zone.

The Trojans caught him on the 2.

Our offense came in and went up the middle. No gain. They tried left end. The whole Trojan team was there.

“What's going on?” I said. “How come they know what we're going to do every time?”

“I don't know, Bean,” Jerry said. “That's what I'm trying to figure out. All I know is that our defense is what's going to win this game.”

“But how do you know?”

“You wouldn't understand,” he said.

“Try me.”

I felt Jerry freeze, and I looked up. The man with the moustache was staring at us.

Our back fired a pass to the corner of the end zone. We had a guy out there, but he was covered by three Trojans. There was no way he could get the ball. We tried a field goal to tie the game, but it was blocked.

The Trojans took over on their 2 and in three plays were out to mid-field. Then with a pass, a long run, and two short passes they were in our end zone. They kicked the point and led 17-7. The quarter ended.

“They sure know what we're going to do every time,” I said.

“Sure do.” Jerry stretched.

“Will Coach know enough to kick on first downs?”

He shrugged. “Somebody'll have to tell him, I guess.”

“Not me.”

“Me neither.”

Second quarter was like the first. Nothing we did on offense got anywhere. Topper fans began muttering again. They knew someone was giving away the plays, and they were looking for the traitor.

Our defense got its act together and held the Trojans time after time. It boiled down to a punting duel—three downs and kick, three downs and kick. Neither team could go anywhere.

The Topper band struck up at halftime and began to march onto the field.

“Let’s get some hot dogs,” Jerry said.

“No. You go. I’ve got to—”

“OK.” He laughed as if he knew where I was going.

I left him and ducked down under the bleachers. I had to think this thing through. If we wanted to win this game, someone had to tell Coach. And I guess I would be responsible if I knew how to win it and never told him. But I didn’t want to go down there. It wasn’t that I was afraid. It was just that I was—afraid.

I knew what they’d say. “Who do you think you are, telling us how to play football? You’re just ninth grade.”

Lord Jesus, what’ll I do? I prayed. I usually ask the Lord when I don’t know what to do.

And then I thought about Mr. Pennington. He was my old fourth grade teacher. I knew him. He was an old friend.

I came out from under the bleachers and walked slowly to the end of the field where our team was sitting on the grass—Newton didn’t have a stadium. The managers were giving out drinks, and the players were all talking. I went up to the coach and stood waiting to talk to him. But one of his assistants turned to me as Coach moved away.

“What do you want?”

“I want to talk to Coach.”

“Why?”

“I want to tell him what to do to turn things around.”

“Oh, you do, do you? Go get lost, OK?”

“But I know what to do, I tell you.”

“I said to get lost. We don’t take advice around here unless it comes from a pro.”

“But this does come from a Proe.”

“No, you don’t. He’s got to be all-pro.”

“But he is all Proe. Head to toe.”

“Wait here.” He went over to the coach and pointed back at me.

I followed him over.

“A pro? Here?” Coach asked his assistant.

“That’s what this kid says. He’s all-pro, and he knows what we can do to turn things around.”

“Hey, don’t I know you?” Coach looked me up and down. “You aren’t—it is! Little Billy Spencer. I haven’t seen you since you were in fourth grade. I can’t believe it. You’re in your teens now, aren’t you?”

I just stood there grinning. “It’s been a long time, Mr. Pennington.”

“You really grew up, boy. What are you? Fourteen?”

“Yup.”

“I had this boy in fourth grade,” he told his assistants. “Billy—”

“The kids call me ‘Bean.’”

“OK, Bean. What’s this about an all-pro? Point him out to me.”

“I can’t, Mr. Penning—I mean, Coach,” I said. “He went to get a hot dog.”

“All-pro, huh? And he lives around here?”

“Honest,” I said.

“All right. What does he say?”

“He says somehow they’ve got your number, and you’ve got to surprise them by kicking on first down. Let them make the mistakes deep in their own territory, and you let your defense win the game.”

“Oh, he says that, does he? Well, why doesn’t he come down here and help me coach? We need someone like him.”

“He doesn’t want to be a coach,” I said. “He’s just a soph—”

He cut me off. He wasn’t listening. “Well, we’ll give it a try. Tell him thanks.”

“Will do.” I went to find Jerry. He was waiting for me back in our seats. He’d gotten me a dog.

“Hey, thanks,” I said.

“Where’d you go?”

“I just went.”

“Where?”

“Oh, you wouldn’t understand.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, you didn’t go tell Coach. You’re too chicken.”

“Tell me about it.”

The game started. We kicked off to them.

“We’re going to recover it,” Jerry said.

Their back dropped the ball, and there was a scramble. Old Grunstein fell on it. You should have heard the fans. And the first play of the half, we kicked a field goal. The coach didn’t even try to run it in. The score was 17-10.

“How did you know we were going to recover, Jerry?”

“You’ve got to really watch. You can’t just look. You’ve got to put two and two together. The guy that caught the ball is the same one that was injured in the second quarter. He’s been guarding his right shoulder. But he doesn’t want anyone to know he’s hurt. Then he won’t get to play. But the ball went to him and hit him right where he hurts. He had to fumble.”

I got the feeling someone was staring. That man was watching and listening again. Jerry and I moved away.

Third quarter was just like the second. Our offense got nowhere, but neither did theirs. Finally, half way through the fourth quarter they kicked to us, and we ran it back 10 yards. On the first play, Danny Pruitt punted.

It went over everyone's head and rolled out of bounds on the Trojan 4-yard line. You should have heard the fans.

"Finally," I said.

Jerry looked at me, but I just smiled and shrugged my shoulders. He knew now that I really had gone to see Coach during halftime.

The guys near us began shouting, "Grunstein! Grunstein!"

The Trojans tried three plays and went nowhere. They kicked from their end zone, but a Hilltopper blocked it, and we recovered on the 5.

Coach went for the field goal on the first play, and it was 17 to 13. The fans didn't know whether to complain or cheer. They knew the offense wasn't getting anywhere, but it seemed the Toppers were giving up.

We kicked off and stopped them cold. Three downs and they couldn't do a thing. They kicked to us, and our halfback ran it back to midfield. We kicked on first down again and nailed them inside their own 15. They tried to run up the middle, but we stopped that. They went around right end. One yard. Then they tried some razzle-dazzle that ended with a lateral, and guess who was there in the right place at the right time.

Grunstein!

He did it again. He picked off the ball in mid-air and lumbered across the goal. Talk about hearing our noise in the next county! This time it was the state line.

We won 20 to 17, and Grunstein got carried off the field. It took half the team to get him off the ground, but they did it. Boy, what hollering!

As we were leaving, the man with the moustache who'd been staring at us walked toward me.

"Your friend sure knows his football," he said. "What's his name?" He sounded mad about something.

"His name? It's Jerry Proe," I said.

"How do you spell that?"

"P-R-O-E."

Jerry pulled my sleeve. "Don't tell him my name, you ninny. You don't know who he is."

He was right. I didn't know who he was, and I'd made a mistake telling him Jerry's name—a mistake that would haunt us for a long, long time.

2

Not Everybody Likes What's Going On

The papers were full of the story the next day. There was a big picture of Grunstein about to intercept the lateral. The ball was frozen in mid-air. A big headline and a long story praised coach for his clever strategy of kicking on first down.

"But that wasn't his idea," I protested to Jerry. We were lying on the floor of his living room. "It was your idea. How come they don't give you the credit?"

The sports editor's name was Larry Day, and the name of his column was "Day-by-Day by Day." And did he rip our coach apart. He said Coach was a know-nothing, promoted from fourth grade, who should go back to teaching elementary school. He said any coach who would kick on first down this early in the season didn't know a thing about developing his offense.

He said that kind of strategy was something little kids do when they play backyard football.

"What does he mean by that?" I asked. "Does he know about us?"

"How could he? And, besides, we're not little kids."

"Right," I said. "He must mean those young guys the coach has for his assistants."

"Keep on reading. He explains what he means farther down."

I found where he meant. Larry Day said kicking on first down was something a freshman would do.

"Do you think he found out about us from Coach?"

"Beats me."

"Or maybe he talked to the assistant when I went over there at half-time."

"Who else?"

"Beats me," I said. "What else does Larry Day say?"

"Read it yourself."

So I read some more of "Day-by-Day by Day." He called on the league to kick out our school until we grew up, and he said our coach should keep his eyes open to see who was leaking our plays to the opposing team.

"Maybe he doesn't know who won the league last year—our first year. Tell him that!" I said.

At school on Monday everybody was talking about who the leak

could be.

Coach got up in assembly and said we shouldn't think someone was giving away our secrets. "It only makes us distrust one another." He said we had another tough opponent coming up and that we should concentrate on beating them.

"That sounds reasonable," I said to Jerry on our way to class.

"Sounds dumb to me."

"How?"

"If someone's ripping off your secrets and telling them—or selling them—to the team you play, you've got to find out about it and stop him."

"And just how do you do that?"

"Oh, you keep your eye on the coach's office for one thing."

"Twenty-four hours a day? Come on!" When did he think we'd eat and sleep?

"Then you get your mental computer out, and you write down everything you know and figure it out. Make it a math problem."

"Yuk," I said. "I hate math."

Jerry went through a door into his class and then turned back toward me. "Write down everything we know about this, Bean, and we'll compare notes at lunch."

Well, we got together in the cafeteria and compared notes. I'd written down just that—everything we tried, the other team figured out. Jerry had written out the whole scene—where we played, when, against whom, who played what position, and what happened quarter by quarter.

"We've got to see if there's any pattern here."

"What do you mean?"

"We've got to butter up one of the statisticians and see if we always run right on first down and left on second—"

"And pass on third," I said.

"Right. And we've got to make friends with the custodian."

"Why would we do a thing like that?"

"He'd probably know if someone strange was hanging around."

"What else?"

"We make friends with the managers."

"Why?"

"Sometimes they hear things."

"You think one of the players is leaking our secrets?"

"You never know."

"What else do we do?"

"We go to the practices—"

"And cover all the games and write for the newspapers and sleep in the locker room," I said. "What do we eat? Pigskin?"

"Well, you want to figure things out, don't you?"

"Yeah, but I don't want to live here," I said. Once Jerry gets an idea

or a problem to solve, he goes ape.

Well, we had our work cut out for us. We started to hang around the locker room and keep our ears open. We volunteered to carry equipment and pick up the laundry and do errands. The managers sort of liked having kids like us help out. It meant less work for them.

Everyone seemed to know his business, and we didn't hear anything that gave us a clue. Some of the fathers came to watch the practices, but they usually bunched up and kept to themselves.

Everybody really made over Grunstein that first week. The city papers named him player of the week. And when you realize there were eight high schools in our league, you know he's big time.

About Wednesday, Brian Sheetz, one of the assistant coaches, noticed me.

"Hey, aren't you the kid that told us what your friend the all-pro said—about kicking on first down?"

"Yeah."

"Well, bring him around sometime. His idea sure worked. We wouldn't have won that game if you hadn't told us what he said." Brian ran his hand through my hair and scrambled it. He liked me.

"Do you know Larry Day?" I had to find out if this guy had leaked anything.

"Are you kidding? Let me see that guy, and I'll tear him apart."

"He sure doesn't like Coach."

Brian spit. "Well, he's picked Madison to win the league. And, from the way he writes, you know he's bet a lot of money on it."

When I saw Jerry later, I told him about Larry Day and that betting business.

"It figures," he said. "The crook!"

I also told him about the "all-pro" bit. We had a good laugh.

And we decided we wouldn't tell anyone who our "all-pro" was. We figured we could use him again.

Thursday they had a closed scrimmage. They let only the dads come in. We were sort of hanging around outside the fence when Jerry gave me a nudge. One of the men going in to watch was the guy with the moustache that had stared at us Saturday at the game.

"What's he doing here?"

He wrote his name on a sheet at the gate and went in.

"Who's that guy?" Jerry asked the guard.

"What guy?" He didn't act too bright.

"The guy that just went in."

"I don't know."

"Well, look at your list where they sign in."

The guy looked at his list and said, "P-R-U-I-T-T."

He was the father of our quarterback!

“Does he come here much?” Jerry asked.

“He’s here every time there’s a scrimmage,” the guy said.

Jerry put his hand over his mouth. He leaned toward my ear and said in a low voice, “I’ve got a feeling he’s the one we’ve got to watch.”

3

Jerry Comes Through Again

Our win against the Trojans created such a fuss in the papers that you should have seen the crowd at our second game—against Grant High. Our school wasn't big, but Grunstein's being named player of the week seemed to bring out the people.

Jerry and I sat in the student rooting section. We got there early so we could see everything that went on.

"You think our offense is going to fold again?" I liked to quiz Jerry before the game and make him feel important.

"Can't tell. We certainly didn't find out anything all week."

"Is Grunstein going to star?"

"He's got the weight to throw around."

"There's Pruitt's father."

I pointed across the field to some men in suits and ties who were coming in just then. "I guess the dads are all going to sit together."

"They don't look like the kind of dads the kids at our school would have." Jerry was always coming up with something sensational. You never knew what he'd say next.

"Think they're scouts, come to see our stars?" I asked.

"They look more like gangsters to me," Jerry said. "Out to make an easy buck."

That's Jerry for you.

Well, the game started, and it was a repeat of last week. We couldn't do anything on offense. We'd run.

We'd do reverses.

We'd lateral.

We'd go up the middle.

We'd go over tackle or guard.

We'd pass.

Everywhere we went four Rams would be there. If we made 10 yards net rushing and passing the whole first half, I wouldn't believe it.

"Is the defense going to win this game, too?" I asked Jerry as the teams ran off the field at half time.

"Looks like it to me," he said. He'd really been studying what was going on. He'd hardly said a word.

"What's our 'all-pro' going to tell the coaches this time?"

He shook his head. "Not much. Let's go get some food."

Well, we went down to the hot dog stand and stood in line.

Mr. Pruitt and his friends were there, laughing and having a good

time.

“You’d think with his own son getting knocked around the field he wouldn’t be so happy,” Jerry said.

“There you go, being suspicious of everybody you see.”

We got our food and walked back to our seats. Jerry picked up a program someone had dropped.

“OK, all-pro,” I said, “what have we seen? What mathematical problem is solving itself in that big brain of yours?” I gave his head a knock.

“Well, we’re mixing up a lot of plays, and none of them are working. You can’t say we’re running right on first down and running left on second.”

“No, you can’t.”

“Even when we punt on first down, they seem to be ready for us.”

“Right.”

“Somehow, they’re getting our plays before we run them.”

“Right. But how?”

“I need more time,” he said. “And quit leaning on me.”

“I don’t lean on you!”

“Every time we get the ball, you lean.”

“I do not!”

“You think you’re some big tackle or guard down on the front line. You think if you lean you’ll move the ball up field.”

“I do not.”

“You concentrate too hard, Bean. You don’t even know what you’re doing. But just don’t lean on me, OK?”

Well, we watched the third quarter, and it was more of the same. When the score got to be 24 to 0, people started going home. Fans were booing. Everybody was so frustrated that it was no wonder we all turned sour.

I blamed Jerry. It was all his fault for not seeing through what was going on. If he had the brain he was supposed to have, he would know what we were doing wrong.

I should have been patient because, all of a sudden, he began to study that program he had picked up. He watched the next play closely and then studied the program again. I knew I didn’t have long to wait.

“OK, Bean,” he finally said. “I’ve got the answer.”

“What?”

“Go tell the coaches to get Danny Pruitt to put his head down when he calls the plays.”

“What?”

“Watch Ram number 22. See how he watches Danny when he’s calling signals? There, he’s doing it now. And then see how he talks to the guys around him? I know that guy. I used to live in his neighborhood. He’s part deaf. He’s reading Danny’s lips.”

“Hey, maybe you’re right!”

“Tell them to either have him put his helmet on when he calls signals or put his head down. I’ve never seen a quarterback take off his helmet so much.”

Well, I got out of there fast. I ran down the bleachers and out to where the coaches were. I went right up to Coach and pulled on his arm. “I’ve got the answer from my all-pro friend,” I said.

“You do, huh.”

“They’re reading Danny’s lips.”

“Reading his lips?”

“Yeah. Watch. When he’s in the huddle, he keeps his helmet off and his head up so he can watch the other team, right? But one of their players—number 22—is part deaf, and he’s been reading our plays off Danny’s lips. Tell him to either put his helmet on when he calls signals or put his head down so they can’t see his mouth.”

“Sounds reasonable to me,” Coach said. “Thank your friend for me, and tell him I want to meet him sometime soon.”

I ran back to my seat.

Sure enough, on our next possession Danny kept his head down. And the offense began to click. We went through the middle, left, right. We threw passes, and they were caught. We did everything right and scored. It was 24 to 7.

On our next possession, we did everything right again. And it was 24 to 14 in six plays. People who had left began running back when they heard all the yelling.

Johnny Doane—he plays both offense and defense—intercepted a Ram pass on the next series, and it was 24 to 21. Talk about excitement!

And now we had only one minute to play. Our team lined up for an onside kick, and Danny gave it a tap. We saw at once it wouldn’t go 10 yards, but somehow it danced and squirted and rolled, and a Ram fell on it. But it squirted out, and everybody tried to grab it. And wouldn’t you know who finally came up with the ball—Grunstein!

Now we had only thirty-eight seconds left.

Danny faded back to pass, and Johnny Doane outran his coverage. He was alone on the 5-yard line, but Danny seemed to be holding back. He just stood there, holding the ball beside his ear. We were roaring for him to throw—throw!—when he got tackled for a 15-yard loss. Coach called time out with only nine seconds left. Was Danny trying to keep us from winning? Why wouldn’t he throw the bomb?

Everybody was standing up, waving arms and screaming.

Danny went back on the last play of the game and seemed to throw without even looking. And did that ball sail. We were all holding our breath. Two Rams and Johnny Doane jumped for it at the goal line.

And Johnny caught it!

We went crazy. Our fans poured out of the stands onto the field to pound the team. You'd have thought we'd just won the Rose Bowl.

Well, they finally cleared the field and kicked the extra point—only we missed it. But the game ended 27-24, and were we limp!

“Let's go down and help the guys with the equipment,” Jerry said. So we went out to help. Since we'd been doing this during the week, the managers didn't mind our doing it again.

Everybody was dancing around the team and congratulating them. I looked for Danny, but somebody said he had already gone to the bus. He had some kind of injury.

We helped get all the gear on the pick-up truck, and then we climbed on for the ride back to school. The guys would shower there before going home.

As we followed the team bus back, cars were honking their horns and people were shouting. It was like being part of a parade for conquering heroes. Only I knew who the real hero was—my “all-pro” friend, Jerry.

“Sometime, I'm going to tell these people that you're the brains of this outfit,” I told him.

“Don't do it. As soon as you do, they won't take our advice. People don't listen to kids.”

Well, we helped them unload, and then we just stood around outside the gym. A lot of the students came back and had a rally by the door—even though it was late. As each player came out, they'd whoop and holler and chant his name.

One of the cheerleaders asked us, “Where's Danny Pruitt?”

“I'll go see,” I said. I went in the gym and looked in the lockerroom. No one was in the showers, and only a few guys were finishing getting dressed. Danny wasn't around.

I went out in the hall, but no one was there either. Then I heard someone talking in the basketball court. I opened the door and saw a man standing with his back to me. He had both his hands clenched in a hammer-lock behind Danny's head, and he was pulling him up so that only his toes touched the floor.

“I've told you forty times if I've told you once,” his father said. He jerked Danny, and his feet came off the floor. “I've told you, and still you don't re—”

Danny started to gasp. “Dad!”

The pain must have been awful.

I had to get out of there. I had to get help to stop that man from hurting Danny. I ran back to the coaches' office. I burst in and yelled, “Danny's father is killing him! Help me!”

Brian Sheetz was standing there in his underwear, combing his hair in front of a mirror. “Hey, don't you ever knock?”

“But Danny's father's killing him—in the gym!”

“And you want me to run out there and stop him in my underwear?”

“But he’s killing him!”

“Like I’m gonna kill you if this is a joke.”

“It’s no joke. I just saw them out on the court.”

“Well, I should know better.” Sheetz wrapped himself in a towel, and we ran down the hall to the basketball court—but no one was there.

“They were here—just a second ago. He was pulling Dan’s head so hard the poor guy was almost off the floor. He was gasping for breath. It was awful!”

“I guess you know I feel pretty funny standing out here in my underwear, Bean. I should murder you.”

He pulled off his towel and gave me a swat with it.

“Ouch!” I laughed. “I’m sorry, Sheetz.”

He ran after me and did it again.

“I said I’m sorry.”

We were both laughing now.

“If you and your friend hadn’t helped us out the way you did, I might have gotten really mad. It’s not every day I have to run through the gym in my Jockey shorts snapping my towel at some mean kid.” Brian knew how to tease, and he knew how to swat!

“Hey, I’m sorry, Sheetz. Look, I’ll go out and lock the doors so the girls won’t get the shock of their life. OK?”

“You do that.”

I looked for Jerry, but he’d gone. So had everybody else.

I didn’t know what else to do, so I went on home.

I sure couldn’t figure those Pruitts out.

4

It's Time for Strategy

The newspaper next day was full of our game. They thought it was marvelous that our team could come from as far as 24 points behind and win against as strong a team as Grant.

But Larry Day didn't think so. He thought we won because Grant started to coast, thinking they had won the game in the third quarter. He said it was pure luck on our part to upset Grant the way we did. He called Coach "Henny Penny." (Coach's name is Henry—Henry Pennington.) And he nicknamed our team the "Fourth Graders."

But Coach didn't seem to mind. He called me around ten o'clock Saturday morning.

"Hey, Billy, I sure like your friend."

"My name's Bean now, Coach."

"The tip you gave us about number 22. If it hadn't been for you and your friend, we would have lost the game."

"Nah."

"I mean it, buddy."

"Well, the guy lived on my friend's street for years. He knew all about him."

"Anyway, we never would have guessed that's what they were doing. Your friend was really clever to figure it out. I guess these professionals have that kind of savvy—they can see flaws the way the rest of us can't."

"Yeah."

"I'd sure like to meet your friend, Billy. What's his name? I'd like to call him up and talk to him."

What could I do? I had to tell him something.

"Well—" I let a sort of whiney sound come into my voice. "He—"

"I know. He's a private kind of person, and he's afraid that all of us small-time coaches would want free advice. You don't have to tell me his name."

"Thanks, Coach."

"What I can't figure out is why anybody would want to steal our plays. Reading lips only tells them the number or the name of the play we're going to use. They don't know what it means unless they crack our code."

"How would they get our code book?" I asked.

"Beats me, Billy. I can't even figure out why somebody would want it. We aren't anybody—compared to the biggies. You got any ideas on how they're getting our plays?"

“Not one,” I said. I was going to tell him Jerry and I were working on it when I remembered I promised not to tell.

“Well, you get your football pro thinking about that one. We could sure use some help.”

“OK, Coach, I’ll do that.”

“And bring him around sometime—if he wants to come. Tell him how much we’re in debt to him and that we’d all really like to meet him.”

“I’ll talk to him about it, Coach.”

“See you around, Billy.”

“But I’m not Billy anymore.”

But he’d hung up.

I hate it when he calls me “Billy”—like I was some little kid.

I’d no sooner gone back to the newspaper when the phone rang again—and so did the doorbell. I said, “Just a minute,” to the phone receiver and went to let Jerry in.

I went back to the phone.

“Hello. Who is it?”

The voice said, “Danny Pruitt.”

“Oh? Hi, Danny,” I said. “What’s up?” I pointed Jerry to the phone in the kitchen and motioned him to listen, too.

“Hey, Bean,” Danny said. “You promise you won’t tell anybody what you saw yesterday?”

“About the game?” Wow, this was Danny Pruitt calling. He knew my name!

“No, about what was happening in the gym when you came in. I saw you open the door.”

“Oh—I—uh—” I couldn’t think. Danny Pruitt was calling me! “Oh, I already told Jerry Proe and—uh—I told my mom.”

“Oh,” he said, and then I heard him telling someone else in the background what I’d said. He came back on the line. “Can you get them not to tell anyone? My Dad was just—he was just trying to—”

“Is that him there with you now?” I asked. I could hear a man’s voice in the background.

“Yeah, he’s here.”

“But he was hurting you, Danny. I didn’t want him to hurt you.”

“But he wasn’t. Not really. So don’t tell. OK?”

“Yeah. OK.”

“You promise?”

“Well, if it was just a family argument—”

“Just a minute,” he said, and then I heard him say to his father, “He thinks it was a family argument.”

The voice in the background said, “Tell him to forget it. It would take too long to explain.”

And then Danny told me, “Forget it, Bean, OK?”

"I'll see you around, Danny," I said and hung up. I didn't make him any promise that I'd forget. I'm a Christian, and I don't lie. This whole thing was something I knew I couldn't forget.

"What do you think?" I said to Jerry as he came back into the living room.

"Guilty. His father made him call. You could just see him prowling back and forth in the background."

"It's as plain as day, isn't it?"

"Plain as day."

"OK, put our mathematical problem out on the table," I said. And then changing my voice so I sounded like a barker at a circus, I said, "OK, folks, our Proe-fessional football hero, Mr. Jerry Proe, P-R-O-E, is about to call out the facts in this case as he sees them. Ready. Begin!"

"OK, ladies and gentlemen," Jerry said, "someone is leaking our secrets to the enemy."

"Right," I said.

"And the person who's leaking them has access to them."

"Right."

"If he has an important position on our team, he's already memorized them."

"Right."

"And he's probably able to explain them to someone else if he's asked to."

"Right."

"And we know that the fathers have an open door to our practices—even the secret ones."

"Right."

"Danny Pruitt has an important position on our team."

"Right."

"Danny's father can drill Danny on the plays and learn them himself if he wants to."

"Right."

"Danny's father keeps company with some strange-looking men we've never seen before."

"Right."

"Those men could be gamblers, coming to bet on an easy thing."

"Right."

"They know our team can't win if someone on the other team knows all our plays."

"Right."

"They bet a lot of money, but they lose when we win."

"Right."

"Mr. Pruitt was angry after the first two games."

"Right."

“Once angry at us and once angry at Danny. The first time he tried to get my name, and you gave it to him.”

“Yeah.”

“That was stupid.”

“But I didn’t know—”

“The second time he strings Danny up by the hair for winning the game, and he has Danny call you because you burst in on them in the gym.”

“Right.”

“He doesn’t want Danny winning games.”

“Right.”

“That’s why Danny didn’t throw the ball to Johnny Doane when he was standing all alone on the 5-yard line.”

“Right.”

“That’s why he didn’t kick the ball hard enough when we tried that onside kick.”

“Hey, you’re forgetting. We recovered it.”

But he went right on. “And if we don’t put people wise to what’s going on, we’re going to lose every game this season.”

“Well, only the Lord really knows that,” I said.

“The Lord? What’s He got to do with it?”

“Well, He knows what happened yesterday and what’s happening today and what will happen tomorrow.”

“So what do we do?” Jerry said.

“We could ask Him for help.”

“I think it’s too early to make any accusations.” Jerry went on as if he hadn’t heard a word I said. “We’ve got to test our theory and see if we’re right. We’ve got to keep doing the things we’re doing—helping the managers, talking to the coaches, getting to know the custodian and the players—and especially Danny Pruitt.”

“And we’ve got to find out why he keeps his helmet off,” I said.

“Right. I bet it’s because his father pulls his head when he wins a game,” Jerry said. “That way he doesn’t leave any welts on Danny’s body that someone would see when he takes showers in the gym. The guy’s head is probably so sore that he can’t stand to have his helmet on all the time.”

“You should have seen him in the gym,” I said. “His father was pulling so hard Danny’s toes were hardly touching the floor.”

“He’s a monster.”

“We’ve got to do something about it,” I said. “Not only is he killing Danny, but he’s leaking our secrets. We’ll never win our games if every team in the league knows what we’re going to do on every play.”

“But we can’t run right out and make accusations,” Jerry said again. “We’ve got to make sure Danny’s head really does hurt. That will prove

his father is abusing him.”

“You think he’ll tell us if we ask him?”

“Never. He’ll want to protect his dad. He probably doesn’t want him arrested.”

“What’ll we do?”

“You give him a knuckle-duster. You know, rub your knuckles in his scalp and see what he does.”

“Oh, I couldn’t do that to Danny,” I said.

“How else will you find out? I’ve got to make sure his father really knows the plays. Then we’ll know if he has the ammunition to give to the other coaches.”

“How will you do that?”

“Talk to him.”

“And how can we find out if he’s gambling on the games?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know any bookies. Do you?”

I shrugged my shoulders. “Mine haven’t come back to town from vacation. They’re still spending the money they made off me last year.”

We laughed.

“What else do we do?” I asked.

“Well, if we find we’re right, we’ve got to put an end to this business. We’ve got to tell Coach.”

“What if he won’t listen?”

“He’ll listen. He listens to his all-pro, doesn’t he?”

“We got it made,” I said. “But, still...”

“Still what?”

“I don’t feel right. I think we need to watch another game. I don’t think we’ve got enough evidence.”

“We’ve got all we need,” Jerry said.

“We’ve got to have enough evidence so Coach will be sure we’re right.”

Jerry nodded. He got my point.

“And one other thing,” I said. “I do think we should pray about this.”

“Pray about it? Why pray when it’s a matter of right and wrong? The guy rips us off and sells our secrets, and you want to pray about it? We’ve got to get off our knees and do something.”

“I don’t care about the father,” I said. “It’s Danny. He’s a nice guy. He could get hurt.”

“Yeah, he’s a nice guy, all right. He just tells his father all the plays, so he can sell them to the other coaches. And when he could throw a pass to the guy standing on the 5-yard line without anyone near him, he doesn’t see him and loses 10 yards.”

“15.”

“15. That’s worse. You want to pray he doesn’t get hurt? Go right ahead. But not on my time.” He went toward the door. “I’ve got better

things to do. I'm a man of action.”

“Don't slam the—”

He slammed the door.

Like I said, Danny was too nice a guy to hurt. But there was nothing I could do about it.

Nothing?

I could pray.

5

We Really Watch

All week long we kept our eyes open. Coach was really happy with me and my “pro.” He gave us the credit for having helped him win the game.

I didn’t get a chance to try my scalp burn on Danny. But I asked Coach why Danny didn’t wear his helmet all the time.

“The helmet’s too heavy, Billy.”

“But is he sick or something?”

“No, not that I know of.”

“Well, how many guys you ever heard of have to carry their helmet in a game?”

“None I remember,” he said.

“Then he’s sick.”

“He’s got doctor’s clearance. He’s not sick.”

“Beats me,” I said.

“Not me.”

Coach just didn’t have any suspicions about Danny. But I had a feeling he knew more than he was saying.

Jerry didn’t know how to go about talking to Mr. Pruitt, so we decided to wait till Saturday and watch him at the next game.

We got there early and found it was Dad’s Night and all the fathers were sitting on the bench with the players. So we decided we would stay on ground level behind the bench and see what we could see—or over-hear.

And sure enough. Everything went wrong in this game, too. We were playing the Northridge Royals, and they knew their stuff—and ours. When we went left—or, I should say, when Danny went left—they were there. Right, over tackle, over guard, pass, lateral—whatever we did, it seemed they knew in advance. It was weird.

All the dads were really angry—except one. He just sat there calmly, enjoying it all, and writing down a few notes on a pad of paper every now and then.

Jerry nudged me. “Look at him. You know that all our mistakes just mean more money in his pocket. He’ll take Danny out for a steak dinner tonight if we lose.”

Then Jerry got interested in the game. He didn’t take his eyes off Danny once.

I wandered over to near where his father was sitting. I hoped I’d be able to hear something that might give us a clue. But he didn’t talk much

to the men on each side of him. He did keep turning his head when he noticed Jerry. It was obvious he didn't like Jerry. You would have thought he'd have been more interested in watching the Hilltoppers get slaughtered since his kid was the one running the show. We were behind four touchdowns and a field goal by half time—31-0. The Royals were doing everything they wanted. We couldn't do a thing.

People began leaving. Some didn't know whether to leave or not. They remembered last week when we came from nowhere and won the game.

Then Danny's father spilled the beans. That's an old-time expression my pastor says all the time. He was talking to one of the dads. He said, "I bet you'd stay here if we were behind 63 to 0."

"Sure would," the man said. "I just really enjoy watching my kid play. But I just can't figure out—"

I went over and told Jerry.

"See? Everything he says is about betting. You were right. We don't need more proof. What are you finding out?"

"Danny's our leak, all right. Whenever he comes out of the huddle, he looks the direction the play is gonna go. If he's to throw a pass, he comes out biting his lower lip. All they have to do is keep their eyes on him, and they know exactly what we'll do."

"I'll go tell Coach," I said, and I took off around the field.

It seemed he'd been waiting for me. He grabbed my shoulder and said, "What does he say this time?"

I told him that Danny was leaking all the plays by the way he was looking when he came out of the huddle.

"That's just not so, Billy," he said. "Danny's too fine a boy to be doing something like that. You tell your pro to think of something else."

"But won't you try just once? Tell Danny to look the opposite way when he comes out of the huddle and see what happens."

"Well, we'll see," he said.

I went back to Jerry, and we watched the third quarter. And, sure enough, things began to change. The Royals went the wrong way, and Danny scampered through the line and scored.

The next time we had the ball, the Royals seemed all confused. They didn't know whether to rush right or left or what. Everything they'd done so well in the first half just fell apart.

"What'd I tell you?" Jerry said as Danny threw a pass to Doane in the end zone. "If we hadn't sprung the trap on Danny, we'd be behind 50 to zip by now."

Well, we didn't win that game. We were just too far behind to catch up. But we did tie them 31-31. Jerry and I were mad. We would have won if Danny hadn't put us behind 31 to 0 in the first half. Jerry was right about one other thing too. Danny told me later that his dad had taken him

out to dinner at a restaurant after the game. And he'd had steak.

We had all the information we needed. I took it to Coach myself. We still didn't want to give away that Jerry was the pro.

But Coach just laughed.

"But I've got the proof," I said. "Second half we scored points. Once you told Danny to stop leaking our plays to the Royals, we began to score. You did tell him what the pro said, didn't you?"

"Yes, I told him. But that's not what turned things around."

"What did, then?"

"We were just tight in the first half. Those Royals are a good team. They've held every opponent scoreless all year. It was them—not us. They're just a lot better team than we are."

"But they're not," I argued. "We're the best team in the league—or we would be if we didn't have a quarterback with a father that was betting against us in every game."

He laughed again. "You don't know Mark Pruitt, Billy."

He walked me to the door and held it open for me. He said he had a meeting. He wouldn't listen to a word against Mr. Pruitt.

Jerry was waiting for me outside. "He's not going to get away with this," he said when I told him what Coach said. "We're going to stop Danny Pruitt even if he won't."

"How?"

"The guys. Now that we know the truth, we'll tell everybody. They'll know what to do about it."

And that's just what we did.

6

We Raise a Riot

Jerry and I walked home separately that night.

“Pretty good comeback in the second half,” I said to some guys who were walking up Sixth Street in the direction I was going.

“Yeah, great! Considering no one has scored on the Royals all year,” one said.

“But we could have beat them if we hadn’t gotten so far behind in the first half.”

“They were good, man.”

“But we were better,” I said. “I’ve got a friend who’s a Proe, and he’s been watching all our games. He says that Larry Day is right—you know, the guy who writes in the paper? We’re leaking all our plays to the opposition. All they have to do is watch who gets the plays from Coach.”

“You mean Pruitt?”

“Pruitt.”

“Come on. How would you know?”

“Like I told you, man. I got a friend who’s a Proe. He knows.”

I was telling the truth, wasn’t I?

Then I went into what happened in the other games and how we stopped the leak and won. They really ate it up. I told them to tell their friends.

I called Karen when I got home. She’s a Christian girl who’s in some of my classes. I knew she’d tell her friends.

I talked about it all that Sunday at church. No one believed me at first, but they couldn’t ignore the evidence.

Larry Day’s column in Saturday’s paper had backed me up. He said our poor performance in the first half showed that we simply were not in the same league as the other high schools. He said a committee of coaches should get together and eject the Hilltoppers from tri-county competition. He said the Royals just let down in the second half.

He said,

Henny Penny and his Fourth Graders play with their eyes shut. They’re afraid of the other teams. That’s why their plays run into a stone wall—that and the fact that there’s a traitor on the team who’s leaking the plays to the opposition.

Jerry said Larry Day was just a bitter man.

I figured Larry Day needed help. He needed someone to pray for him. Someone like me.

Sunday afternoon my phone began to ring. Kids had heard how Jerry and I got the evidence together, and they were mad—not mad at us but mad with us.

Everybody was talking about it in school the next day. You heard it in the halls and in all the classes. The teachers didn't begin to pick it up until about Tuesday. And then people began to take sides. Some defended Danny and his father. The rest of us read the facts for what they were. I saw Danny once or twice. I could tell he knew what was being said. But he didn't say a word.

Karen called me up. She'd talked to Danny herself. She said he doesn't understand why we're picking on him. He says it's really taken all the fun out of playing football. But he says that the Lord knows all about it and, if this is part of His plan for Danny's life now, then he's going to take it because it's from the Lord.

"Wow!" I said, "I didn't know Danny was a Christian."

"Sure he is," she said. "He goes to my church."

That really got to me. I didn't know what to think.

But when I told Jerry, he said the guy's trying to make everybody else feel guilty, when he's the one who's leaking all our secrets.

It was then that I began to notice Jerry was changing. I noticed, but I didn't notice—if you know what I mean. Looking back on it now, I can see that something was going on in his head and it wasn't good. He was really into this ruckus over Danny Pruitt.

I didn't want to go to Coach again, but Jerry said he would do all the talking.

Coach looked up when we walked into his office. I stayed near the door.

"Hi, guys."

"We came to talk to you, Coach," Jerry said, not even saying hello. "We want to know what you're going to do about Danny Pruitt."

"What's up?"

"Do you mean that with all the proof Bean gave you that you're going to ignore the evidence?"

"I'm not ignoring any evidence."

"Then you're going to kick Danny off the team?"

"No."

"Then you are ignoring the evidence. We watched him for three games, and he's been telegraphing the plays to the other team. I saw him look left when he came out of the huddle, and, sure enough, he ran left. The Royals knew what to look for, and they were there."

"Coincidence."

I saw a gradual change come over Coach as Jerry argued with him.

"And why did they know what to look for?" Jerry said. "Danny's father knows all the plays. He told the Royals so he could make bets on the

game and earn a mint.”

“And just who do you boys think would bet on a game some little country high school plays in this state?”

“Plenty of people, that’s who.” Jerry was getting mad. “And just what kind of example do you think that is to us?”

I was shocked at Jerry. I would never talk to a teacher like that.

“You boys are trying to make two plus two equal five.”

“But we’ve got evidence. We were there to see it ourselves.”

“You boys are too young to know anything about varsity football. We’re playing first-class ball here, not backyard roly-poly. Now run along.”

“I know what I’m talking about,” Jerry said. His face was getting red.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about. You’re just a couple of kids trying to make trouble for a fine ball player. I talked a long time to Mr. Pruitt about you boys. I don’t know why you’re doing it or what you’re up to, and he doesn’t either. But Danny Pruitt is staying on this team.”

He got up from his desk. “He’s staying, and you boys are leaving.”

“We’re not leaving.” Jerry was really mad.

“Oh, yes, you are. And I’m not going to be talked to the way you’re talking to me, young man. For just a high school kid, you’ve sure got a lot of nerve.”

“I’m not ‘just a high school kid.’ I’m Jerry Proe. I’m the one who won your first two games for you. And if you’d listened to me last Saturday you would have won that one too.”

“And just what do you mean by that?”

“Tell him, Bean.”

Now I was fuming. He’d just leaked our secret. But I nodded slowly. “This is my friend the pro.”

“This kid?” Coach couldn’t believe it. “You told me your friend was all-pro. You lied to me, Billy.”

“I didn’t lie to you. He is all Proe—P-R-O-E. That’s his name. He’s smart about football. I told you what he said, and you won two games.”

“I don’t care if we won ten games. You lied to me, Billy. You tricked me into believing you were talking to a former professional football player.”

“But—”

“Nothing you can say to me can change things. Danny Pruitt is staying on this team, and you boys are getting out of my office. Now get off that boy’s back, and stay out of my business.”

He began moving us out the door.

“I’m really disappointed in you, Billy. I never would have thought that you would stoop to something this low.”

“You’re not getting rid of us,” Jerry said. “We’ll go to the principal.

We'll go to the newspapers if we have to. We'll—”

“You boys can do what you like, but I'm a conscientious coach. It means more to me that my players act like gentlemen than that we win games. We love good sportsmanship here, and we really care about one another on this team. None of my boys would sell our secrets, and none of their dads would either. I'd quit this team if I found that was true. Now, if you would please get out of my office, I would like you to stay out.”

“He's not going to talk to me like that,” Jerry said as we left the building.

“He just did,” I said. I felt all crumpled up inside. What Coach said—that he was disappointed in me—really hurt.

Jerry was not to be stopped.

“We're going to Scruggs,” he said.

He marched me into the principal's office and told the secretary we had to see Mr. Scruggs.

He was waiting for us. Coach must have called him.

“Coach tells me you boys are spreading trash around,” he said.

“It's not trash,” Jerry said. Then he told him the entire story—how he, Jerry, had noticed right from the first that things were wrong and how he'd figured out what to do about it and how we won games when Coach did what he said. And how he'd watched Danny's eyes the whole time and saw how he was telegraphing the plays to the opposing team.

“And you were standing where?”

“Right near the bench where the dads were sitting.”

“And that's about on the 35-yard line, isn't it?”

“Uh—yeah.”

“And it was a night game, wasn't it?”

“Yeah. What's that got to do with it?”

“And you could see clear across the field and through a group of twenty-two players and see where the quarterback was looking when he broke huddle? Is that what you're saying?”

“Yes.”

“You had binoculars?”

“No.”

“You have X-ray vision?”

“No.”

Then Mr. Scruggs began to talk to us in a nice fatherly way. “Now, Coach and I do appreciate your loyalty to our team, and we like the fact that our students are so interested in our honor. But you boys are carrying this thing just a little too far. You're about to ruin the life of one of our fine young players. Did you realize that?”

“No, sir,” I said.

Jerry didn't say anything.

“I don't want you to mention this matter to anyone again,” Mr.

Scruggs went on. “Do you hear?”

“Yes, sir,” I said.

“You’re going to forget what you think you’ve seen—even if we lose all the rest of the games this season. Do you hear?”

“Yes, sir,” I said.

“It doesn’t honor Sunny Hills High School to have you two making false charges like this about Danny and his father. We don’t want this kind of behavior at our school. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir,” I said.

“I talked to Mr. Pruitt for nearly an hour,” he said. “He and Danny have my full confidence. So I expect you boys to let this matter rest. You will let this matter rest?”

“Yes, sir,” I said.

Jerry didn’t say anything, at least not until we got outside the office.

“Sounds like Danny’s father’s really mad,” I said.

“But you notice he didn’t tell Scruggs how he scalps his kid for winning.” Jerry spit.

“Yeah,” I said.

“And I can’t just sit by and let these grown men excuse Danny for cheating.” He spit again. “It’s wrong—wrong—wrong.”

“So what are you going to do?”

“Student power.”

“What can students do?”

“You’ll see. Tomorrow’s Friday, isn’t it? We’ll get our homeroom behind us, and then you’ll see the fireworks.”

“But we promised Mr. Scruggs we wouldn’t do this anymore.”

“You did. I didn’t.”

“Aw, come on, Jerry!”

“You trying to chicken out of this?”

“No,” I said, “but I promised him.”

“You didn’t promise anything. He just put words in your mouth.”

Well, the next day in homeroom, when the teacher turned the class over to our student government and left the room, Jerry got everyone excited. Of course, he’d been working on them one by one all week, and now he had all the guys in ninth and tenth grades together.

“So, what are we going to do, guys?” he said.

“Did you call the newspaper?” someone called out.

“That’s my last weapon. If we can’t get satisfaction any other way, I’ll call the sport’s editor. What else can we do?”

“We can march on Danny’s house and throw tomatoes.”

“Yeah, and get arrested for making a public nuisance of ourselves. And then we’d have to pay for the damage. Think again.”

“We could march through school this afternoon waving signs that say ‘Danny must go,’” someone suggested.

“Yeah,” somebody else said, “and one that says, ‘And God said, Thou shalt not leak secrets.’” Everybody laughed. They knew Danny was a Christian.

“We could march on the rally after school and break it wide open,” someone else said.

Our school always has a big rah-rah rally after school on the Friday of a game.

Jerry didn’t look convinced. “Come on. You guys can do better than that. These are things girls would think of. Think it through.” Jerry was always big on thinking and analyzing.

Well, they started to think strategy, and they came up with an answer no one could blame on us. They knew we had to get rid of Danny if we wanted to have a winning season. They’d get the football team to stop protecting him.

The guys that suggested the march through the halls and out to the rally liked their idea too much to give it up. And, sure enough, after the three o’clock dismissal bell, they got it started. I don’t know where they came up with the signs so quickly, but they had them.

“Who’s leaking our secrets?” one read.

“Who’s the leak freak?”

“Let’s get rid of You-Know-Who-itt.”

They marched quickly through the halls, shouting and calling, and then turned outside when they got near the principal’s office. They marched across the lawn to the parking lot where we hold our rallies. The entire student body was there. Jerry grabbed the microphone and began making a speech. He sure had a lot of nerve. I couldn’t ever do a thing like that. But then, I wasn’t in tenth grade.

He told the whole story of what he’d discovered watching the games and how he’d tried to get the coach to drop a certain player from the team. He never mentioned Danny by name, but everybody knew who he was talking about. They all yelled and cheered.

And then Jerry started to chant, “Let’s get rid of You-Know-Who-itt! Let’s get rid of You-Know-Who-itt!”

Everybody picked up the chant and started shouting it as they got into their cars for the procession all over town. Car after car left the parking lot, and all the kids were hanging out the windows shouting those words.

Not me.

It made me sick.

I went home.

7

We Punish Danny

That afternoon Mr. Scruggs expelled Jerry.

I learned later that the principal called Mr. Proe on the phone and said Jerry had—how did he put it?—“disobeyed the instructions of the administration and had raised a demonstration that had injured the reputation of one of the families in the school.” It was behavior that he wasn’t going to put up with, and Jerry had to go.

He could come back second semester but only with a written apology to the people involved.

Mr. Scruggs told him the school would be fortunate if Mr. Pruitt didn’t sue for defamation of character.

But I knew it wasn’t just this ruckus. Mr. Pruitt had had it in for Jerry for some reason ever since that first football game. And I was the one who had told him Jerry’s name!

Then Mr. Scruggs called my mother at work and said the same thing. But because I hadn’t been involved in the rally and because I had seemed to be—he said—“cooperative and responsive,” he was going to let me stay in school. He said Coach had put in a good word for me. I couldn’t understand why.

Mr. Scruggs said one other thing. He said I had to promise to apologize to the Pruitt family.

Jerry’s father was furious. He benched him for the rest of the season. He couldn’t even come to the games, and he couldn’t go out at night. He had to go to another school, and the only time I could see him was on weekends. That meant I had to go to the game alone on Friday. But lions couldn’t have kept me away.

Another big crowd turned out. Even though we’d only tied the Royals, people knew we had the stuff to win if we could just get our act together. We’d come from behind before, and they believed we could do it again. Only this time we were playing the Jefferson Crusaders, and they were tough. Their seniors looked big enough for college teams. And even though they hadn’t scored against the Royals as we had, they’d held them to just 3 points.

We kicked off to them. Our guys dropped their receiver on the 27-yard line, and things got under way.

Talk about razzle-dazzle. The Crusaders had been watching the professional games on Sundays when they should have been in church. They even tried a triple reverse, but Grunstein kept his ground in the middle and got the guy who ended up with the ball. They showed they were good, but

they were also stoppable. They had to punt to us from their 36. The ball angled off the side of their kicker's foot and went out of bounds on their 48.

In came our offensive unit, and now we would see just how successful our homeroom guys had been with their strategy.

Danny handed the ball off to Johnny Doane and ran left. He did such a good job of covering the hand-off that a couple of their big tackles didn't notice he didn't have the ball. They tackled him—and hard. Johnny ran right up the middle to their 22. The crowd went crazy. It was a great play. But Danny shouldn't have gotten tackled like that. He should have had protection from his own linebackers—but they just weren't there when he needed them.

On the next play he dropped back for a pass. Johnny streaked toward the end zone. But Danny never got the pass away. He was sacked back on the 30. He got up slowly, but he was all right. Then wouldn't you know—he fumbled when he was hit on the next play.

The Crusaders recovered on their 28, and it looked like they had clear sailing to our goal line. They had a break-away play that took them to midfield. Then a pass got them to our 35. A run up the middle got them to our 27. But on the next play, they ran right into Grunstein, and we recovered the ball. That guy causes more fumbles! People don't expect him to be such a rock wall.

Danny had the wind knocked out of him on the first play from scrimmage. They had to walk him off the field. Coach led him to the bench himself and helped the trainer take care of him. I knew he was doing it to show the student body how much he cared about what happened to that particular player. He kept him out the rest of the quarter.

His assistants sent in the plays, and our guys really went to town. It was Doane to the 48 and Morehead around left end to the 30. A pass took us to the 10, and in no time we were in the end zone. The quarter ended with us ahead 7 to 0.

In the second quarter Coach sent Danny back in, and you should have heard the students boo. They knew things would go wrong with Danny calling the signals. And, sure enough, they did.

First time he had the ball, he tried going over left guard. He hit a stone wall. All the Crusaders were on that side. They knew exactly where he was going before he even got started.

He tried an end-around sweep to the right. He lost a yard. He tried to lob Johnny a pass and got sacked again. We kicked on fourth down.

The next time we got the ball, Danny dropped back and took the snap from center. He was going to punt on first down, but the defense got inside and deflected the ball. They covered it on our 24.

Maybe the homeroom strategy was working, maybe not. I really couldn't tell. On one play it looked like it was, and on the next it didn't.

The guys said they would work on the team itself and ridicule its sense of pride. They would get the players so mad at Danny for selling our secrets that they would let him get hit time after time.

Well, it sure looked to me that on some of those plays he had absolutely no protection. Yet on most of them he did.

Danny stayed out the rest of the half. In fact, we didn't see him again until fourth quarter. By then, it was 21 to 21, and things were tight. Our guys were really playing, and Jefferson was stunned.

Coach had spent a lot of time with Danny. I couldn't understand why. It was like he was a china doll and Coach didn't want him hurt. But things were so tight in the fourth quarter that Coach had to send him in. Danny was the best quarterback we had, even if he did make so many mistakes. When he was good, he was the best in our whole league.

But Coach should have kept him out. What happened then is a picture that will haunt me for a long, long time.

Danny faded back for one of his last-minute bombs. He was waiting for Johnny to get behind his defender way down the sideline. He was bringing his arm forward when he got hit from his blind side by one of the huge Jefferson linemen—only not one, but two, then three, then four. Of course, they got called for piling on. But Danny was a lump of putty. He didn't move.

Our coach and trainers were there in a minute. Then the team doctor ran out. He beckoned over his shoulder, and some managers with a walkie-talkie spoke to the ambulance crew down at the far end of the field. It was state law that an ambulance unit attend every high school football game. Lights flashing and siren moaning, it moved around the track to the point nearest Danny.

He still hadn't moved.

You could have heard a pin drop. A couple of our players had gone down on one knee and bowed their heads. You knew they were praying. Danny looked dead.

The hospital attendants loaded him on a stretcher—they picked him up so, so carefully. They carried him over to the ambulance, and in no time that van was moving out of the field area and onto the street. Its siren cut the air like a knife. We'd all wanted something to happen to Danny, something to punish him for betraying our school; but now that it had happened, we didn't know what to think.

We didn't want to kill him!

I don't know how the team got through the rest of the game, but it seemed they realized what they'd done to Danny and wanted to make up for it.

Coach had gone with the ambulance, so his assistants sent in the plays. And, boy, did things go right. Passes were caught. Our backs broke through for long runs. We scored every time we got the ball, and the final

score was 42 to 21.

We all cheered—but we were all sick about what had happened to Danny. There wasn't any rally back at the gym. Everybody just went home.

I called my mom and told her what happened. I said I had to find out how Danny was and that I was going to take the bus to the hospital. She said she'd be praying. She's a great mom!

I was the only one on the corner waiting. The bus seemed to take forever to come. I got on and sat in the back. I seemed to hear voices chanting in my ear: "Let's get rid of You-Know-Who-itt! Let's get rid of You-Know-Who-itt! Let's get rid—"

I started reading all the signs out the window—billboards, street signs, signs in store windows. I had to have something else in my head. Bible verses I'd learned began coming back.

"If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

I said that one over and over and asked the Lord to forgive me and cleanse me. I knew how big a part I'd had in doing what we did to Danny, and if he should die—

And then I thought of "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, Thou art with me."

I breathed a big sigh on that one. No matter what happened, the Lord would be with me—and with Danny.

When I got off the bus, I had sense enough to head for the emergency entrance at the hospital. But I couldn't begin to get close. Nearly the whole student body was there. They'd all come in cars. No one was saying much of anything. There was just a murmur of voices.

I asked someone, "Any news?"

The guy shook his head.

We stood there, waiting. Some woman up near the front started to sing a hymn, and some of us sang along with her softly:

"There's not a friend like the lowly Jesus,
No, not one! No, not one!
None else could heal all our soul's diseases,
No, not one! No, not one!
Jesus knows all about our struggles,
He will guide till the day is done;
There's not a friend like the lowly Jesus,
No, not one! No, not one!"

Then the door opened, and Coach came out. There was a stir. People called, "How is he? How's Danny?"

Coach cleared his throat. "Before I tell you how he is, I want to tell

you something you very much need to know.”

He cleared his throat again.

“When Danny transferred to our school last fall, he came to us from one of the biggest public schools in the East. The student body numbered over 3,000, and hundreds of guys turned out for football every spring. Danny was first-string quarterback back there.

“Then Danny got injured. No bones were broken, but he gets severe headaches when any pressure is put on his head. He never talks about it because he doesn’t want any pity. And he asked me not to mention it to anyone. But that’s why he held his helmet so much. As soon as the play was over, he would take it off. He’d carry it until play would start again.

“That was fine with me. I knew what was going on. I was only glad to have him in our school, playing for our team.

“His father says football, if it’s not too competitive, is like therapy for Danny. Last year’s coach tried to make football here a fun game to play, and I’m carrying that tradition on. We don’t pressure our players to win.

“Football’s a game. It’s not a life. Sure, we won the league title last year. But we didn’t kill our players doing it.”

He crossed his arms and stood as he does so often during a game, with one hand on the elbow of the other arm. I wished Larry Day could be here listening to him.

“But things have not been fun this year,” Coach went on. “Some of our younger students have taken it on themselves to try to analyze our game strategy and have us make changes. Then they and the newspapers interpreted those changes as indications that someone was leaking all our plays to the other side and that was why we kept hitting a stone wall when we played every game.

“Then these boys began to blame Danny. They didn’t understand why he didn’t wear a helmet. They thought he was telegraphing our plays to the opposing team by the direction he looked when he came out of the huddle.

“I haven’t figured out yet what went wrong tonight. Once I do, you can be sure some sharply corrective steps will be taken. If I find that someone has done something deliberately to bring about what happened to Danny, I just may recommend to our administration that we drop football as a sport at our high school for good.”

No one said a word.

“Some people charged Danny’s father—Mr. Pruitt—with being a gambler who was making a profit off our losses—that he would take the plays Danny told him and sell them to other schools. Then he would bet against our school and rake in the money. They said they knew this because his father was happy when our team was losing and mad when we won.

“The last thing Dan’s father wanted was for his son to lose a game.

But he would far rather have him lose than have him get uptight from all the competition. Mr. Pruitt is no gambler, and he does not sell secrets.

“But sometimes it seems it’s easier for people to analyze a situation on the basis of what they see and think rather than taking the time and trouble to find out the truth. I hope all you people who took part in that shameful rally yesterday will do some serious thinking. You’ve got a lot to answer for.”

Coach put his hands in his pockets. “I even heard that one of our homerooms tried to get the players to get even with Danny by dropping their protection and letting him get hit. Some of the plays tonight may have looked like that, but that was accidental. We are one team, and there is not one player who would do a mean thing like that to our quarterback to get even. And that’s for the record!”

He cleared his throat again. “I didn’t come out here to preach at you. I know you all want to know about Danny.” He paused. And, when he spoke again, his voice was crackly with emotion. “Danny’s—going—to be”—he paused “all right.”

Boy! Did we cheer!

Nurses looked out the windows of the hospital and made shushing signs. But we’d been so worried and under so much pressure that we just had to yell.

When we calmed down, Coach said, “Danny doesn’t have any broken bones. He’s covered with bruises. But, given a couple of weeks, he’s going to be back in uniform.”

We cheered again.

“He may even be able to play in our final game.”

We yelled and screamed and hollered. And then we started chanting, “Dan-ny! Dan-ny! Dan-ny! Dan-ny!”

The nurses came to the windows again.

But we just shouted louder. We wanted our noise to carry through those old stone walls. We had a quarterback named Danny Pruitt in there who had to hear that sound!

8

The Roast

Larry Day didn't only tell the story of Danny Pruitt the next day. He also told the story of Jerry Proe. He had done his homework. Every word was true. So there was nothing his folks could sue about even if they wanted to.

He didn't know my name, and he didn't mention me. But he might as well have. The kids at school couldn't think of anything else.

"Way to go, Bean. Some Hilltopper you turned out to be."

"You still here, Bean? Thought you left with Jerry Proe."

"Bean, the fiend" became my nickname. And then all of a sudden I was getting the silent treatment. I'd go up to a bunch of kids and say, "Hi, guys. What's up?"

I'd be really friendly—like I always am—and they'd go on talking as if I'd never come.

The conversations would sound like this:

"Hi, guys. What's up?"

"... scheduled the test without even telling us. You'd think she'd have given advance warning if she..."

"Hi, guys. What's up?"

"... big piece of cake with thick chocolate icing and..."

"Hi, guys. What's up?"

"... and he said he didn't even know her, so how could he have said he liked her. And so when..."

I'd ask if anyone was keeping up with the baseball standings, and nobody would say a word.

"Anybody study for the history test today?"

No answer.

"Read about the hatchet murder they had in New York?"

No answer.

I'd just turn and walk away. And then they'd all laugh once they thought I was out of earshot.

I'd go to class, and everybody would be talking before the bell.

"Want a Life Saver?" I'd ask the guy in the next seat.

No answer.

"Ready for the test?"

No answer.

At lunch, I'd go sit with my friends.

"Anybody want my apple?"

No answer. They just kept talking as if I hadn't come.

I thought it couldn't last more than a day, but it did. It started on Monday about ten in the morning. They kept it up all day Tuesday and all day Wednesday. On Thursday I started to get mad.

"Look," I said to some guys sitting on the school steps. "All I tried to do was protect the honor of our football team. Why all the punishment?"

No answer.

In math, I asked to make an announcement. The teacher said OK.

"Hey, I know you're all blaming me for what happened, but—"

Some girl interrupted and asked the teacher if we were going to have a test that period. The teacher answered the question, and the girl started to argue. Other kids entered in, and I just sat down. Nobody was listening to me, and nobody was going to.

In the middle of class when everybody was supposed to be working, I said out loud, "But I'm not the only one who's to blame."

"Bean," the teacher said sharply, "when I say no talking, I mean no talking."

"But these guys are—"

"None!"

I had to find somebody I could talk to. That left out Coach and the principal—and all the kids. I still hadn't figured out why Coach wanted me to stay in school, as he told Mr. Scruggs, and yet he scolded me in front of everybody at the hospital. I knew I couldn't be friends with him.

The teachers didn't seem to know what was going on. I'm sure some of them would have been extra friendly if they'd known what the kids were doing to me.

I called Jerry on the phone and asked if I could come over to his house.

"No. you can only come over on weekends. I told you what my father said."

"Well, I've got to talk to someone."

"Why? What's the matter?"

"No one's talking to me. They're asking why I didn't leave when you did. They're calling me 'Bean, the fiend.' At least, they used to when they were talking to me. This silence business is getting on my nerves."

"What are you going to do about it?"

"What can I do? Everywhere I go they pretend I never came."

"You could drop out and come to the school where I'm going."

"My mom wouldn't let me."

"My parents had to."

"They still mad?"

"Oh, they're getting over it," he said.

"What did they say when Danny got hurt?"

"They read the story in the papers."

"But what about what Larry Day said? He wrote all about you."

“They said I’d already had my punishment.”

“Do you think the team let Jefferson get Danny?”

“Nah! Those guys stick together like glue. It just looked like it because you knew the homeroom had that strategy.”

“But you weren’t there. I saw it. I just don’t understand why nobody blames the team. Even Coach doesn’t blame the team. He said he’d drop football if he found that any of the players were involved.”

“Maybe he doesn’t know. Why don’t you go tell him?”

“What good would it do?”

“It would shift the blame off of you.”

“And they’ll start talking to me?”

“Well, when they find out that you forced Coach to a decision and he drops football, you’ll really get it. They’ll blame you for that for the rest of your life.”

“So what do I do, Jerry? Think of something.”

“Go tell Coach you’re the one to blame. Admit that our homeroom told lies to the players. Take the blame, and be the big hero. He’ll like you again, and maybe the kids will forgive you for getting them so riled up.”

“Forgive me? But you were the one that got them riled up.”

“Yeah, but I’ve been kicked out of school. They’ve punished me already, remember?”

Jerry had a point. At least I could go to Coach and tell him the whole story. For some reason, I wanted him to like me more than anyone in the whole school.

I went to the gym and knocked on his door, even though it was standing open. There was no answer. So I stepped inside to see if he was there, and he came in the door behind me.

“Oh? Snooping in my office when I’m gone, are you? Might have known you’d be back to make more mischief.”

“No. Honest, Coach. I was just here, looking to see if you were in your office.”

“You think I’d be hiding behind the door?”

“No-o-o.”

“Well, what do you want? Another Danny Pruitt to pick on?”

“No. I came to—”

“You not only accuse him of betraying the team, but you get the entire student body all stirred up. I heard what you and Jerry did. Expelling him was too easy. He should have been whipped—and so should you!”

“But I—”

“There you go—making up an alibi again. Kids these days won’t admit when they do wrong. They’ve got all kinds of excuses.”

“But—”

“I’ve known you a long time, Billy—that’s why I talked Scruggs into letting you stay. But enough is enough. Now get out of here.”

“But I—”

“Nothing you can say can change my mind. You’d have to come in here arm-in-arm with Danny Pruitt before I’d listen to a word from you. Now, leave.”

“But—”

“Leave!”

“But—”

“Leave!”

I left.

I called Jerry when I got home, but he wasn’t much help.

All I could think of was asking my homeroom to get behind me. I put it to them the next day. “Look, it’s not fair. Why should I get all the blame when it was you guys that got to the football team and it was Jerry that spoke at the rally?”

“Sit down, Bean.”

“Dry up, Bean.”

“Tell that to Danny Pruitt, Bean.”

“But why blame me?” I said. “It was you guys—” I sighed and looked out the window. It was no use.

“And while Bean, the fiend, sits over there sulking, anybody got any new business?” The room president was changing the subject.

It was Karen—good old Karen—who stayed my friend. She saw me in the hall.

“You’re sure down at the mouth,” she said. “Is the silent treatment getting to you?”

“Sure is,” I said. “But why me?”

“Why not? You’re as good a victim as anybody. They’ve got to blame someone for what they did, and you’re the nearest target now that Jerry’s gone.”

“So what can I do to make them like me?”

“Why try?”

“I want friends.”

“Why?”

“A guy’s got to have friends.”

“Why?”

“Why?” I sure couldn’t understand girls.

“You’ve got the Lord. Isn’t He your Friend?”

“Oh, sure. But I need a friend I can talk to.”

“Talk to Him.”

“I do.”

“Yeah, when you say grace at meals.”

“I pray.”

“When?”

“When I go to bed.”

“Listen, Bean, maybe the Lord’s trying to teach you some things. Why don’t you ask Him?”

“Oh, sure.”

“Ask Him!”

“Yeah.”

“If you won’t, I will. *Dear Lord—*”

She started to pray right there in the hall in front of everybody.

“Bean needs help. No one’s talking to him, and they’re blaming him for what happened to Danny Pruitt.”

I rolled my eyes.

“Please let Bean learn the lessons he needs to learn. Help him to start thinking of someone else instead of himself all the time. In Jesus’ name. Amen.”

“What kind of prayer was that?”

“It was from my heart.”

“You think I think about myself all the time?”

“Why are you so mad about getting the silent treatment? You can’t think of anybody but yourself.”

“Fine friend you are.”

“At least I tell you the truth.”

“See you.” I walked away. Some friend she was!

But, you know, her words began to get to me. I was sorry for myself. I was saying I didn’t deserve getting roasted.

It was when I was eating my lunch—by myself again—that I began to piece together what everyone was saying. The Coach had said it. Someone in my homeroom had said it. And Karen said it—in a way.

What they were saying was that I should go to see Danny Pruitt. He was the one who needed to forgive me. He was the one I needed for a friend.

And Coach had said he would talk to me again if I came in arm-in-arm with Danny.

Then I knew what I had to do. I’d cut out of the rally after school and go see him. That’s what I’d do. I’d go make friends with Danny Pruitt.

I’d get him on my side.

9

I Try to Find Another Friend

I called the hospital, but Danny had been dismissed. So I looked up all the Pruitts in the phone book. I didn't remember his father's first name, so I looked in the yellow pages for a Pruitt who was an architect. There wasn't any.

I called the office at school.

"I'm sorry," the lady said, "but we don't give out students' home phones or addresses."

"But I want to go see Danny Pruitt."

"Who?"

"Pruitt. P-R-U-I-T-T. Danny Pruitt, the guy that got injured in the football game last week."

"Oh, Pruitt. No, I'm sorry. We can't give you his address or phone number. It's against policy."

"But I got to go see—"

"I'm sorry, but I can't help you." She hung up.

I didn't know who to call. I knew Coach wouldn't give me the number. And I didn't know any of Danny's friends. And then the light in my head turned on. Coach said that Danny had transferred to our school last fall—after the phone book came out. So I called the information operator. She had the number. But I needed the address.

"Is that the Pruitt on Harcourt Place?" I asked innocently.

"No, this family lives on Putnam Avenue."

"Thank you," I said. "I remember now—it's 1847, isn't it?"

"No, it's 1116."

I could have called the Pruitts, but I knew they would say I couldn't come. If I just appeared at the door, they might let me in.

I took the bus Wednesday after school. I'd called my mom, and she knew how upset I was. She thought it was a good idea that I go. It took me a half hour, if you include the time I had to wait for the bus. Then I had to walk up Putnam to the 1100 block. It was a big house. I rang the bell. A maid came to the door, and I asked to see Danny.

"I'm sorry, but he is too ill to have visitors."

"Oh," I said. "Uh—will you tell him that Bean came to see him?"

"Bean?"

"Bean."

"I'll tell him." She closed the door.

The next afternoon I went again.

Same maid. Same story. He was too sick.

“Tell him Bean—”

“I’ll tell him.” And she closed the door.

I couldn’t believe that he was too sick to see me when he didn’t have any broken bones—just bruises. That’s what Coach had said last week. Was it only last week? It seemed a year.

I went home, but I went back Friday afternoon. I had to see him. I’d promised Mr. Scruggs I would apologize. But it was the same maid and the same excuse.

We had a night away-game, so I had to be back at school at 6:00 to ride the rooters’ bus. Mom had a sandwich for me when I got home. I made the bus in plenty of time. I wondered if anyone would sit with me. A guy I knew did, but he turned and talked to the kid across the aisle the whole way there.

Actually, I was anxious to see how the team would do. With Danny gone, everyone would see the Hilltoppers really go places. We’d probably score 100 points, and everyone would realize that Jerry and I had been right all along.

Larry Day’s column in the city paper had been full of the whole story. Day made fun of Coach, fun of our team, fun of our school. He printed the whole story about Danny and put in Coach’s speech at the hospital word for word.

The first sentence of his column was,

**“Something’s gone wrong over at Henny Penny’s
Silly Hills.”**

He thought he was cute to call us “Silly Hills” instead of “Sunny Hills.” In the last sentence of his column he asked how the Toppers would get their points now—now that Danny was gone—and Jerry Proe was gone, too.

I wasn’t the only one who couldn’t wait for the kick-off.

I sat on the end of the second row of the visitors’ bleachers. I wanted to be where I could get out and walk around and not have to crawl over everybody.

We kicked off to the Lincoln High Rail-Splitters, and they kept possession for what seemed like half an hour. But they fumbled on our 12-yard line, and Grunstein recovered.

OK, now we’d see a pass to Johnny Doane on the sideline, and he would run all the way for a touchdown. I could see it coming.

First down, we ran up the middle. No gain. Second down, we went over left tackle. No gain. Third down, Coach tried a reverse. Three-yard loss. Fourth down, we kicked. I couldn’t figure it out.

We were playing the team at the bottom of the league, and we still couldn’t do anything. It was see-saw back and forth all night. They couldn’t move against Grunstein and his crew, and we couldn’t move against them.

The lady sitting in front of me had her hands full with a little kid. She was shouting to our team—urging them on. You’d have thought she was a cheerleader.

During a time-out, her kid turned to me and said, “What’s your name?”

“Bean.”

He leaned over to his mother and pointed one finger at me. “His name is Bean. Stringbean.”

“Sh-h-h,” she told him. Then she turned to me and said, “I’m sorry. He didn’t mean that.”

“Oh, that’s OK,” I said. “Everyone calls me that because I’m so skinny.”

They called time in, and play resumed. Neither team could get across midfield.

“What’s wrong with us?” the lady said. “My husband has analyzed Lincoln inside out, and still we can’t move the ball—and our kids do great in practice.”

“Your husband?”

“Oh, the coach.” She pointed, and then she turned to her little boy. “See your daddy, Tommy?”

The boy grinned and turned to me. “That’s my daddy.”

I had to get out of there. I had to think, and I couldn’t think this close to Coach’s wife.

“I’m going for a walk, Tommy. See you around.”

“Take me with you.”

“Not now, Tommy,” his mother said. “Later, maybe. OK, Bean?”

“Yeah,” I said.

I went out to the edge of the track and watched the team. I watched and watched. The Toppers weren’t doing anything they hadn’t always done.

Johnny Doane was all over the place. But the Rail-Splitters always seemed to know when the play was going to be a pass.

Our offensive linemen did what they were supposed to do. It was just that the Rail-Splitter defense always seemed to know the right place to be.

Our defense tonight was where we were strongest. Nobody could get by. The backs were quick to cover receivers. The line was big and strong and always seemed to hold. Grunstein was his big, fat, ugly self.

Finally, I just watched Coach. I wondered what was going on in his mind. He was there on the sideline with his arms crossed, as usual. But he seemed awfully restless. He was walking all around and changing position constantly.

He was probably wishing Danny was here. And he was thinking mean thoughts about Jerry and me. I know I was thinking mean thoughts about Jerry. He’d made such a case about Danny’s telegraphing plays to

the opposition, and it wasn't that at all. Danny wasn't here. His father wasn't here. And all the same things were happening that had been happening before.

And I thought Jerry was so smart. He was just as dumb as I was. We'd built our case on that and had ruined Danny's life. We really deserved what we got.

It got to me. I realized I was the cause of all that had gone wrong.

Lord Jesus, look at the mess I've caused, I prayed with my inside voice.

Poor Coach. We probably wouldn't win another game all season. If only I could make it up to him.

I watched closely every time we had possession. Coach would talk to his assistants. He'd turn to the guy going in and give him the play. Then he'd stand there. Our guys would huddle, a player from the other side would run in, and one would run off. We'd run the play and fall flat on our nose.

Somehow, that player coming in from the other side always knew what play we were going to run. But how did he find out? Were there wires running from our side over to the other side that let the coaches over there hear our plays?

I looked. No. No wires.

I watched the Lincoln coach and his assistants. They would stand at their sideline and watch what was happening on our side. And I mean watch. Once our player joined the huddle, they would tell their player something; and he would run to his team and tell them something.

I'd noticed this in other games we'd played, but I hadn't made anything out of it. Now I started analyzing the way Jerry used to.

First, we'd send in a play. Then their coach would wait about five seconds. That's how long it seemed to take for him to get the message about what play we were going to use.

I walked around the track to the other side of the field. I wanted to see if someone from our huddle was making a signal that the Rail-Splitters could see and we couldn't. I looked and looked, but I couldn't see any signal. A man with binoculars let me watch a play. I still couldn't see one signal coming out of that huddle.

I asked him if I could watch another play. I looked this time at the people around Coach—at the assistants and at the players on the bench and at the crowd. I still couldn't see anything.

I went over and stood as near the Lincoln coaches as the ushers would let a spectator get. I noticed they weren't watching the huddle. They were watching our sideline.

So I watched our sideline. I thought I might see a mirror flashing Morse code or something. There wasn't anything.

Suddenly it was halftime, and players left the field. I was hungry, so I

got a hot dog.

It seemed an hour later when the second half finally started. They kicked off to us, and we ran it back to our 34. Then Coach sent in the play.

On first down, we hit a stone wall again. Same on second down. By third down, I suddenly noticed that Lincoln wasn't sending in a player at the beginning of the down. Their team just stood around on the field and waited for our side to line up. There went my theory. But I hadn't studied with Jerry that long not to keep watching.

And then I noticed something just as strange. All the Rail-Splitters stopped talking when Coach sent in the play. They all watched him—and kept watching him while our player joined the huddle. Why would they do that?

Coach would give the play. Then he'd stand and watch. He'd cross his arms or put his hand on his hips or spit—but it was nothing he didn't do every game. Still, something was going on that was giving away the plays.

And then it hit me! It was nothing he didn't do every game! Maybe there was some pattern to what Coach was doing that was giving every team we played the hints it needed to bottle us up.

That seemed ridiculous. Of all people, Coach would be the last one to tell the opposition what we were doing. He'd lose his job if he lost all the games. No, it had to be something or someone else.

I watched the assistants. I watched Brian Sheetz. He didn't move through all four downs. He wasn't giving away any secrets. The other assistant often turned and talked to the player who had just come off the field. He wasn't communicating anything to anybody either. It had to be Coach.

So I watched him even more closely.

He sent in a play on our next possession. Then he put his right hand across his chest and held his left elbow.

On the next play he scratched his head. On the next play he spit. On fourth down, he tapped the ground behind him with the toe of his right foot. The kick was short and went out of bounds on our 40. We were leading 6 to 0 at this time, but it was our field goals that had given us the points.

Their back went up the middle for 8 yards. Then on next down, he faded back and threw a bomb. His left end caught it on our 5 and streaked across for the touchdown. They kicked the extra point and had us by 1.

We took the kick-off and got back to our 30. Coach sent in the play and then casually tapped the ground behind him with the toe of his right foot. We kicked on first down.

I stopped breathing.

The ball went dead on their 27, and they tried a couple of plays that got only a couple of yards. Then they kicked on third down, and the ball

went over our back's head and rolled down to our 35.

Coach sent in a play and put his left hand across his chest and held his right elbow. Our quarterback ran a sweep around right end and lost a yard. All Lincoln was there.

Coach sent in the play for second down and then put his left hand in his left pocket. Our quarterback tried to go over left guard—and hit a stone wall.

Coach sent in the play for third down and then scratched his head. We passed. But all our receivers were covered.

He never took his eyes off the guys on the field. He was concentrating so much he didn't even know what he was doing with his hands. Then a light came on in my head. Of course! He was doing what Jerry had accused me of doing. Jerry said that, whenever we had possession, I'd lean against him because I was trying to help the team move the ball up field. I was concentrating so hard I didn't know what I was doing with my body. He said a lot of people do that.

On fourth down, back came the toe to tap the ground; and we kicked.

I couldn't believe it. Coach was actually the one telegraphing our plays to the other teams. Everybody must know he does this because every team we played all season had bottled up our offense.

I had to see this again.

On our next possession, Coach sent in the play. The Rail-Splitters watched his every move. They saw him put his right hand in his right pocket. And they set their defense for a run over right guard or tackle. Their linebacker stepped that direction, too.

And, sure enough, the Hilltop quarterback went over right guard. After he called the next play, Coach crossed his arms. I guessed reverse, and so did all Lincoln. They stopped us for no gain.

On third down, he spit. I couldn't begin to guess what we'd try on spit. But it was right up the middle. We gained a yard.

On fourth down, back came the toe. And we kicked.

Boy, I had to think this one out. Our own coach was telling the world every play. Why hadn't someone else on our side cracked what was going on? Why did it have to be me? I knew he wouldn't listen to me. But I couldn't just stand there and not try to help somehow. He had to be the laughingstock of all the coaches in our league. I couldn't let my old fourth grade school teacher make a fool of himself.

I ran back to our side of the field. I ran in front of our bench to Brian Sheetz. But before I could even talk to him, someone big picked me up.

"You get out of here, Bean. We don't want you down here now or never." It was Grunstein.

He held me with one hand and walked me over toward the bleachers and threw me down. I landed on my wrist, and it hurt. Everybody saw what happened, and they all laughed and hooted and shouted and clapped

like I'd finally gotten the public humiliation I deserved.

I was so embarrassed. I know I turned beet red. I hurried behind the bleachers where no one could see me. My wrist hurt. And I was mad. Let them have their football. Why should I care if they lost every game?!

I started back to the bus, but something told me I couldn't just walk off and leave Coach. He needed me—even if he didn't know he did. I had to do something. We just had to win this game if we wanted to get into the championships. We'd had only one tie all season.

I had to figure out what to do. What would Jerry do? I walked behind the bleachers—back and forth. I had to think strategy, and I had to think alone.

Coach was the key to it all. If I could distract him at a crucial point and make him talk to me, then his assistants would have to call the plays. Lincoln wouldn't know what to expect, and we might come from behind and win the game.

I went down to the goal line that Lincoln would be defending fourth quarter. I figured if our team got down there anywhere close, I could go make Coach talk to me. But what would I say? What could I say that would make him forget the game—especially a close game?

I had to think like I never thought before. *Lord, what'll I do?* I prayed.

I could tell Coach his house was on fire, but that would be a lie. "You're wanted on the phone," I could say. No, that wouldn't be right. Anyway he'd just say, "Take a message." I could say, "Danny's dying." That would stop him, but it would be a lie, too. I knew the Lord wouldn't want me to lie.

I got desperate. I could pretend I had a heart attack and die at his feet. He'd have to pick me up and hold me, and then he couldn't communicate anything with his hands.

That was it!

Thank you, Lord!

I had to find something to put in his hands, something he would have to carry. He wouldn't be able to put his hand in his pocket if he was holding something big. He could spit and tap the ground and cross his arms, but if he was holding something big we'd have it made.

But what?

I walked up and down behind bleachers. There was a lot of crowd noise, but nothing was happening. Both teams were so bad that neither could do much damage to the other.

What could I make him carry?

I was sure it was fourth quarter by now. I walked around front where I could see the scoreboard. It was still 7 to 6. And I was right—it was fourth quarter with two minutes to go. We had the ball at midfield, second down. If only our guys could wear them down so we could get downfield.

And then we fumbled! Oh, no. I might as well go home.

“Hi, Bean.”

It was Tommy, Coach’s kid.

“Where’s your mommy?”

He turned and pointed toward the bleachers. She was standing on her bench, waving her arms and shouting encouragement to our team. She’d forgotten all about her own kid.

“Take me for a walk,” Tommy pleaded.

“I can’t. I gotta think.” This was the worst time for me to get distracted. I had to think—and be alone.

“Take me with you. Take me with—”

His mother saw me. But suddenly everybody roared. I looked at the field and saw that Grunstein had recovered a fumble. We had the ball on our 22-yard line with 38 seconds to go.

Coach’s wife was going crazy. “Come on, you guys,” she shouted. “Move that ball!” And when the crowd started to roar, “We want a touchdown! We want a touchdown!” she roared with them.

“Mommy!” Tommy called her.

But she wanted to watch the game. “Bean, will you take him? Go with Bean, Tommy. Thanks, Bean. I’ll remember you for this.” Then she started to shout again.

Coach called a play.

“Daddy! I want my daddy!”

Somehow, Tommy’s voice cut through the crowd noise to his father’s ears. He heard Tommy call him, and he looked to see where his kid was. When he saw me holding onto Tommy, he frowned and pointed me back to his wife.

But he’d broken the pattern. He hadn’t communicated the play to the Rail-Splitters, and they were counting on it.

Our back went across right guard and broke free. He was down to their 29-yard line before they caught him. You should have heard that crowd.

And you should have heard me! I whooped and hollered like all the rest of them because Tommy had just given me my answer—or the Lord had.

I picked the kid up and carried him across the front of the bleachers down to where his father was standing near the 30-yard line. He called another play and, like always, signaled what it was.

It went dead.

I said to Tommy, “There’s your daddy. Go get your daddy.”

I let him loose, and he ran toward the field, shouting, “Daddy! Daddy!” I disappeared so his daddy couldn’t make me take him back. And, sure enough, it worked.

Coach picked up his boy and turned to look for someone to take him.

But his assistants were busy, and I wasn't to be seen. He couldn't see his wife in the crowd, so he had to stand there and hold the little guy. That took care of his hands.

He called the plays, and you should have seen the confusion in the Lincoln team. They weren't getting any signal, and so they didn't know what to do or where to line up. Our quarterback called the play and ran for his life around left end. They pulled him down on the 5. We had 14 seconds.

The Lincoln coach called time-out so he could regroup. Coach looked around for someone to take Tommy, and an assistant held out his hands. But Tommy wouldn't be taken. He clung to his father.

The crowd laughed. They loved it. They might not have if we were at the other end of the field. But at the 5 with fourteen seconds to go and victory almost ours—they loved it.

The referee called time-in, and Coach sent in the play. Tommy, knowing everybody was watching him, grabbed his father by the ears, turned his head, and kissed him on the mouth. And it was good he did, or his dad would have spit. The next play was right up the middle—for a touchdown!

The place went wild. Talk about a riot!

We won that game on a kiss. It was the kind of story the papers would have loved. But the editors would never have believed it. No one but Jerry would believe it.

And we still had two games left in our season!

But, oh, Lord, I prayed, what'll I do next time?

10

What Do I Do Now?

The papers printed a picture of Tommy kissing his dad. Larry Day really went to town. He asked what coach in the league would stand on the sideline kissing his kid when his team was on the 5-yard line with 14 seconds to go. He said the rush up the middle that won the game was just a lucky shot in the dark and that the Toppers didn't deserve to win.

But Jerry didn't think so. "Bean, you're a genius," he said when I called and told him the whole story. "You cracked the case."

"I just did it the way I knew you would have if you were there."

"But I went up the wrong alley. You saw what happened to me. You're the one that's got the smarts."

"But what can we do about it now that we know the truth?"

"Go to Coach and tell him."

"He threw me out of his office the last time. He'll do it again."

"Are you kidding? Now that you've got the secret that'll turn all our games around?"

"Well..." I still wasn't too sure.

Jerry told me that I should at least give it a try. And, come Monday, I did.

I went to Coach's office at lunch time before he left for the faculty dining room.

"What were you doing with my kid?" he asked.

"I was just holding him."

"And then you put him down in that big crowd of people and just let him run around? My wife and I were mortified. Can't you ever do anything right, Billy?"

"My name is Bean."

"It's a good thing we won, or I would have gone after your scalp. An important game like that, and you let my kid loose? What if it had distracted me? What if I'd lost my ability to concentrate? We would have lost that game. And here you tell me how much you love football and how you're trying to save our team. Get out of here. I'm still furious with you."

"But won't you let me ex—"

"The only thing I'll let you do is get out. Now!"

I got out.

And then I realized that Jerry either didn't know Coach or he didn't know what he was talking about. He had said Coach would listen to me, and what happened? I got booted again. I needed another friend—one who could keep things straight.

And then the thought came to me—why not Karen?

I called her up after supper. I told her how I'd figured out that it was Coach who was leaking our secrets to the other teams.

She thought I was crazy.

"But it's true. I studied it out last Friday. He does it on every play."

"And you're telling me that the other team just stands around and waits for him to use some kind of body language to tell them what's going to happen next. Right?"

"Right."

"And he doesn't know he's doing it?"

"Right."

"And when he spits that means a forward pass?"

"No. It's a rush over center—up the middle."

"Have you ever thought of writing a book?"

"A book?"

"Yeah. A joke book." She laughed. "Bean, you're out of your cage."

"Aw, Karen, I thought you'd understand."

"Oh, I understand. I understand the whole thing. You're mad because of the silent treatment. You're mad because everyone is blaming you for getting us mad at Danny. You want someone else to get the blame. And since you're already mad at Coach, he's the one you're going to blame."

"That's not true, Karen, and you know it. I thought you were my friend."

"Not when you're such a sore loser, Bean."

"But I—"

"Look, why don't you just forget the whole thing? The kids'll forget about it in a few days. These things always pass."

"But we've got a game to win Friday so we can go to the championships. I've got to get Coach to stop doing what he's doing."

"Yeah, yeah. You want him to stop coaching so you can get some glory and win the crown for good old Sunny Hills High."

I knew I wouldn't make any headway with her. Girls! Why couldn't they understand my logic?

Tuesday, I talked to the kids I walk home with when I don't ride my bike.

"Don't let old Grunstein hear you talk like that," one said.

"Why not?"

"He'll tear you limb from limb. No one's going to say one word against Coach if he has his way."

"Then what can I do?" I asked.

"Try going to the newspapers. They like this kind of story."

"And let them make a fool out of Coach? Everybody would laugh at him. He'd resign and move away."

"Just don't let Grunstein hear about it. He'll use you for a football."

“That’s all I need.”

And wouldn’t you know? One of those guys went right home and called up Grunstein and told him what I was saying.

He called me right up on the phone. I knew it was Grunt from the first word he spoke.

“Meet me tonight at nine o’clock on the corner outside your house.”

“I’m not coming.”

“You be there.”

“No.”

“You been saying Coach is leaking our plays to the other teams?”

“It’s true, Grunt, but he doesn’t know he’s doing it.”

“You think it’s true. No one else does. You better shut up about this, or I’ll ram your head into your socks. And you better not let me see you at school, or I’ll tie you in knots! And you call yourself a Christian!”

He slammed the receiver down.

Wouldn’t anybody understand?

I needed a friend who would listen. And then the thought came to me—why not Danny?

But I’d already tried him. I’d been to his house three times, and he didn’t even want to see me.

“Go again,” that little voice inside my head said.

I called Mom at her work and then took the bus over to Danny’s house after school. The maid came to the door.

“Bean?”

“I’ve come so often you know my name,” I said, smiling.

She asked me to come in this time. She led me through a big hall and through a sunken living room. “He’s out here in the sun room,” she said.

He was sitting in a chair, reading a book.

“Hi, Bean. Come on in.”

“I thought you were going to be covered up in bandages and lying in bed,” I said. “What are you doing up?”

He laughed. “Oh, I’m black and blue all over, but it’s nothing a bandage would help.”

“We miss you at school.”

“I had a lot of visitors right at first—when I was too beat to see them. But you’ve been the only one to come back time after time.”

“Yeah. This is my fourth try.”

“How come you keep coming? We haven’t been friends before.”

“I know. I—uh—well—” And then I sort of choked up. My words came out slowly, one by one. I had my head down. “I—feel—responsible—for—for what happened—to—you...” I looked up at him. “I want to apologize for what I did.”

“But you weren’t involved.”

“Oh, yes, I was. I was everywhere.” And then I told him the whole

story from the very beginning—how Jerry and I had figured someone was leaking our plays—right on through the rally and the game.

It wasn't until I was through that I realized someone else was there listening, too. A nice looking man with curly dark hair, moustache, and glasses was standing in the doorway. He came over and sat down beside Danny. He looked like a doctor only he didn't have a white coat on.

"Dad, this is Bean—from school," Danny said.

"So you're Bean. I thought you were much older—"

"But you're not Danny's father," I interrupted.

"I'm not?" He laughed. "Who have I been all these years?"

"But—I mean—uh—you can't be!" I was confused.

"If I'm not, I don't know who else is," he said.

"But Danny's father has a big moustache."

"He's never had a big moustache," Danny said. "He just has this little one. He likes to tickle my sisters with it."

"But I've seen your father at a lot of games and practices," I told Danny, "and this isn't the man I saw."

"I've been to all the games but only one practice," Mr. Pruitt said. "You must be mixing me up with someone else."

"But I saw you beating Danny in the gym!"

"Oh, I was in the gym one time when Danny wrenched his neck."

"But you were pulling his hair so hard his feet were almost off the floor, and he was moaning and crying."

"I wasn't pulling his hair. I was holding his head. A bone specialist told me that when he wrenches his neck—and he can do it fairly easily—I can relieve the pain by applying traction. I keep telling him not to throw the bomb. He wrenches his neck almost every time he does it. If I've told him once, I've told him forty times—"

"That's what you were saying when I came in and found you," I said. "Only from where I was standing, I thought you were pulling his hair. I thought you were awful and that you made Danny call the next day so word wouldn't get out about how awful you were."

"No," Danny said, "he was helping me. It hurts while he's doing it, but it really puts the bones back in place and takes the pain away when he stops."

"Then why did you call me?"

Danny looked at his father.

"Dan's very sensitive about his condition," Mr. Pruitt said. "He doesn't want any pity. He was afraid you'd tell your friends."

"Well, we all thought your father was a monster."

Danny laughed and slapped his father on the back. "Wait till Joseph hears this," he said.

"Who's Joseph?" I asked.

"He's my brother. He's a year younger than I am. He and my sisters

are with Mom, visiting our grandparents for a couple of weeks. They'll be home for Christmas. You can meet them then."

"But what I'd like to know, Bean," Danny's father said, "is why the students went after Danny like they did? That was cruel."

"We knew someone was leaking secrets. Even the newspapers knew that. And Danny was the most likely one. But we were wrong. Couldn't you tell how sorry we felt about it at the hospital?"

"Yeah," Danny said. "I'll never forget the thrill of hearing all those people chant my name."

"Everyone's been very nice to us since then," Mr. Pruitt said.

"But not to me." And then I told them about the silent treatment and "Bean the fiend."

"Those guys!" Danny couldn't believe it.

"Well, I guess they felt bad about you," I said, "and they had to take it out on somebody." And then I told them my real news.

"Coach? Giving away our secrets?"

I told them my proof and about how I couldn't do anything to change things.

"He won't even give me a chance to explain," I said. "He was my fourth grade teacher, and he thinks I'm still a little kid. He won't give me any credit for growing up or for being able to think things through. He still calls me Billy."

"Oh, he'd listen if I told him," Danny's dad said.

"But he doesn't know he's doing it," I said. "He'd think you were just trying to pin the blame on him. He wouldn't understand at all."

"Maybe you're right. But you're sure Coach isn't conscious of what he's doing? Could he be giving away the plays on purpose?"

"He'd never do something like that to his own team. Like I said, I've known him since fourth grade. He's not that kind. He's a great man. Really."

"I can't even believe he's doing it," Danny said. "I've got to see it before I'll believe it."

"Well, we're playing a home game Friday. You going to be in shape to go?"

"If he keeps improving the way he's been, I see no reason why he can't," his dad said.

I told them we'd arrange later where to meet.

"Can't you come back before then?" Danny asked.

"Don't you have a home tutor?"

"Yeah, but you can play with my video games while he's here. Then we can talk about football when he goes."

Well, now you know where I went every afternoon the rest of the week.

Every afternoon but one.

11

Grunt

I called Jerry right away and told him we had the wrong Mr. Pruitt. We thought over where we went wrong and figured the guard at the practice gate didn't know what he was talking about the day he told us the man with the moustache was Danny's father.

Since we didn't know who else that guy could be, we decided to forget about him—for the time being.

By the following Friday, the silent treatment had all but ended. The fun had gone out of torturing me, I guess. The student body had a game to think about. We were playing Washington High. They were tied with us for first in our league. Whoever won Friday's game would go to the southern championship and maybe to the state finals.

That was all anybody in our homeroom could talk about. And all day long—in the halls, the boys' room, the classrooms, the lunch room, in the gym—that's all you heard.

Nobody had picked up on my idea that Coach was communicating our plays. Anyone who heard it thought I was cracked. I heard that somebody told Coach, and he said, "That sounds like another one of Billy's harebrained ideas."

By Friday, I'd forgotten all about Grunstein. After school, I was going over to Danny's, and we were going to plot strategy for that night's game as if we were the coach. The bell rang at 3:00, and I closed my math book and went to my locker. I'd already finished my Monday homework in study hall. All I needed to take with me was a book for a report I'd be giving next Thursday.

I slammed my locker and flipped the dial on my lock. And then I felt a hand grip my shoulder. I turned to wrench free because it hurt. But it was Grunstein, and he was looking at me nose to nose.

"You think you're going somewhere?" I heard threat in his voice, and I looked right and left for a teacher.

"Answer me." He shook my shoulder.

"I'm—going—to—Danny—Pruitt's—house." I don't know why my voice shook. Well—I do know. I was suddenly scared. This guy could skin me alive without half trying.

"That's a laugh," he said. "After what you did to him, Danny Pruitt has no time for you—or your homeroom." He dropped his hand over my shoulder to the muscle on my arm and dug in his fingers. "You're not seeing Danny Pruitt. You're seeing me."

He tightened his fingers and hit a nerve.

“Ow!” I called out, hoping some teacher would hear me.

“Walk!” he said.

Other guys came up. I recognized them as football players and one or two from the track team.

“How come you’re not at practice, Grunt?” If I could get him talking, he might loosen his grip.

“We don’t practice on Fridays,” he said in a high falsetto voice. “On Fridays we take care of business.” He wrenched my arm. He was holding it so tight it was going to sleep.

“Let go my arm, Grunt.”

“That’s not all I’m gonna grab,” he said. “Wait till we get in the car.”

We were walking across campus to the parking lot. I knew if he got me in a car I wouldn’t have a chance.

“What are you doing this for?” I had to keep him talking. Maybe I could wrench free.

“You’re blaming Coach for losing games. Nobody blames Coach for anything. We warned you before, but you keep on making trouble. Well, someone’s going to let you know that you can’t keep getting away with it. And you know who that is.”

A car came along and cut us off from the other guys. We had to wait a moment until it passed. Now was my chance—while Grunt was watching the car, looking to see if a girl was driving.

I gripped my library book tight with my free hand and swung my arm around. I aimed for his nose and hit it. I learned early—go for the nose.

He dropped my arm, and I took off. I had to get out of there, and I flew. I knew some of his friends would come after me, and I could hear their shoes on the pavement. If they caught me, I was dead. I could hear a guy panting right behind me. With a kind of sixth sense, I could feel his hand stretching out just about to grab my shirt. I just kept going. I don’t know where I got the speed, but I was scared to death.

Now the footsteps sounded farther away, but I was suspicious enough not to turn around. I’d lose speed if I did, and someone with tennis shoes might be right behind me and I couldn’t hear him.

I ran until I couldn’t run anymore. I figured if they caught me now, I could yell and scream and get someone to rescue me. I planted one foot and ducked to the side so whoever was behind me would go past. Then I looked back

No one was there.

They’d gone back to get their car. I ducked down beside a house and hid in someone’s backyard for a few minutes. I just sat on the grass, making sure I was really out of sight from the street. Talk about breathing heavy! It took me ten minutes just to catch my breath.

I was in no shape to go to Danny’s. After a while, I got up and reached for my book. No book. I must have dropped it when I hit Grunt.

Now I'd have to buy the book. I knew he'd never return it to the school library, and I sure wasn't going back to look for it.

I worked my way through the neighborhood, using trees to hide behind whenever I could. I darted across streets and worked my way over to my house, being sure to come at it from the back. I figured Grunt would be parked in front, ready to leap out at me the minute I appeared. Little did I know!

Once on my own block and walking up the back alley, I relaxed. I'd made it.

"There he is!"

A car door opened, and some guys came rushing out at me. I'd just passed them parked by someone's garage. I took off like a jackrabbit. I flew up the alley, ducked in beside my own garage, across the lawn, and up the back steps.

Oh, Mother, have that door unlocked.

I dashed into the kitchen and slammed and locked the door.

They were right there! Grunt shook his fist at me and then threw my book at the glass window in the door. But it was tough glass, and it didn't break.

"Who was that, dear?" My mother was standing at the sink.

"Oh, some of the guys from school."

"Won't they ever outgrow cowboys and Indians?"

"Not that bunch," I said.

12

The Final Test

Danny and his father picked me up that night about six. We wanted to get good seats. Dan's father had to sit in the general admission section. We wanted to sit in the rooting section, but when we got there the seats were all taken. We crossed in front of everyone, looking up. Danny was still limping a little, but he was a lot better.

Suddenly everybody noticed him.

"Dan-ny! Dan-ny! Dan-ny! Dan-ny!" They took up the chant and made a chorus out of it. He waved. It was like the return of the conquering hero you read about.

Someone made room for us halfway up the bleachers, and I helped steady Dan as he climbed. The kids were still yelling as we sat down. Danny had to stand up again and wave before they'd stop shouting and clapping.

"How does that make you feel now?" I said.

"Great! Just great!"

Then the teams poured out on the field, and we had the final huddles, the national anthem, and then the kick-off.

Washington was good. The Regulars took the opening boot back on their 10 and went right down the field in eleven plays. We put on a goal-line stand that had the fans on their feet. Washington had fourth and one inch and didn't make it. We didn't have 250-pound linemen playing there for nothing, I tell you. And they were all as mean as Grunstein.

Ask me. I know!

"Oh-oh," I said to Danny. "If Coach tries a play, they'll get two points."

Coach spit.

"They're going up the middle," I said.

"They wouldn't do tha—"

Before Danny could finish the sentence, we went up the middle—or tried, anyway. And I was right. They cut us down behind the line of scrimmage and scored two points.

Danny was wide-eyed. "You were right!"

"You just wait," I said. "This is only the beginning." And for the rest of the half, I told Danny every play. And, like clockwork, I was right every time. He was in shock.

At the half, we were behind 30 to 0. Some people were going home.

"I've got to talk to my dad," Danny said. We had to walk to the other side of the field. Danny shook his head all the way.

“Did you see what happened?” he asked his dad when we found him.

“Bean,” he said, “it was just like you were telling us. I couldn’t believe it. Boy, you’re brilliant.”

“Well, now do you see how easy it was for Jerry and me to think Danny was the one leaking the plays? He kept his helmet off, and we thought someone was reading his lips. And then when he put his head down...” My voice rambled off into nothing. I hadn’t thought that through yet. “Why did things come together and work when Danny put his head down?”

Dan’s father bit his lip and looked thoughtful. Danny rubbed his chin.

“Of course!” I said with a smile. “It’s like what happened last week. Tommy distracted his father. His father forgot to make any sign. The other team didn’t know what was coming because they’d keyed all year to the fact that Coach gives his plays away. When my ‘all-pro’ friend gave Coach a tip, he got so interested in seeing if it would work, he forgot to signal his plays.”

“This guy’s a genius,” Mr. Pruitt told Danny. “Sheer genius.” And then he turned to me. “Bean, you’re a regular J. Edgar Hoover.”

“Who’s he?”

“Who’s he? Why he was this country’s number one detective back when I was growing up. He was the head of the FBI—the Federal Bureau of Investigation.”

Danny’s face lit up. “Yeah, I can see it now. J. Edgar Beanpole of the FBI. And—that—stands—for—I got it! The Football Bureau of Investigation!”

We all laughed, and Danny slapped me on the back. “Way to go, J. Edgar!”

“But how are we going to win this game?”

“You figure it out, Bean. You’re the detective.”

“Yeah, detective! That’s a laugh. Detectives have all the answers.”

“Well, work on it. Do it like Jerry said. What’s the basic thing you want to do?”

“Well, if we could distract Coach all through second half,” I said, “our guys would have a chance to catch up.”

“You’re coming. Now figure out how.”

“I’ve got to walk,” I said. “I think better when I walk.”

“Well, then, why don’t we walk over and get a hot dog?” Dan’s father said.

And it was half way through that good hot dog that I got the idea for what we had to do.

Thanks, Lord, I said in my heart because I’d been praying as I walked, and Danny had just said he was praying for me too.

“I got it!”

“What?” Dan and his dad said at the same time.

“Coach likes you, doesn’t he, Danny?”

“Yeah, he seems to. He came a couple of times when I was in the hospital and once when I got home.”

“Think he’d let you stand alongside him on the sideline during the second half?”

“He might. Why?”

“Every time he calls a play, you could make some comment or ask him a question to get his mind off giving any kind of signal. It might not work every time, but it might work enough to get Washington confused.”

“Think that would work, Dad?”

“It’s worth a try.”

“I’ll walk you back to our side of the field, and then you go out to the sideline alone. If Coach thought you were a friend of mine, he might not let you come close at all.”

“But he’s not like that,” Danny protested.

“I know what I’m talking about. Come on. Half time’s about over.”

We walked back, and then I disappeared into the bleachers while Danny sort of hobbled over to the sideline. The students took up the chant again when they saw him. “Dan-ny! Dan-ny!”

Coach looked up and smiled when he saw him coming. The players all ganged around him, and when they put their hands in the middle of their huddle, Danny put his hands in too.

Evidently Coach didn’t mind having him stand beside him. He even put his arm around Danny’s shoulders. After all, his star quarterback was recovering and might be ready for the championship game—if we could win this one.

We took the kick-off and had a good runback. We had first and 10 on our 44. Coach sent in the play, and then Danny asked him a question. Coach turned to him and seemed to explain what he was going to try. He forgot to signal. Washington didn’t know what to do. They were hardly in position when the Toppers exploded up the middle. Our halfback scored.

The shouting stopped traffic out on the street. I knew cars all over town would be turning around and coming back.

That brought the defense alive. On the kick-off, they dropped the receiver on his own 14. Then they pounded the line and forced a fumble. We had the ball on their 12. The offense went in with the play. Danny pointed to the time clock on the scoreboard. He told me later he was showing Coach that if we scored again we’d have 14 points in the first minute of the second half.

The quarterback ran an end-around sweep to the left and scored. Washington was in a state of shock.

Coach was delighted. He was pounding Danny on the back as if he thought Danny had inspired the team.

I could see the coaches on the other side of the field talking together.

They knew they had to come up with something to stop our team. If they had their wits about them, they'd get Danny away from Coach. I knew from the way they were running around that something was going on over there.

We kicked off, and the Regulars held the ball for several series of downs. Then they tried a lateral, which Grunstein tried to intercept, but he was late, and the play swept right past him. They gained 20 yards on that one. They wouldn't have if Grunt had kept to his blocking assignment.

But I was watching the game when I should have been watching Danny.

The cheerleaders from Washington had come around the track and had walked up to Danny. They were talking to him and pointing back to their rooting section. I knew at once that they were trying to talk him into going with them.

But I knew the strategy behind that move. Those coaches over there were clever. They'd watched how Danny had distracted coach. They knew they had to put an end to that. How better than to send some cute girls over to lure Dan away.

Coach didn't notice that Danny was leaving. I slipped out of the bleachers and ran after them.

"Danny!" I called. "Hey, Danny."

He looked around.

"Hey, you can't leave. Coach needs you," I said.

"Not as much as we need him," one of the girls said. And she was really cute!

"They just want to introduce me to their student body," Danny said.

"It won't take long," one of the guys said.

I saw right through what they were trying to do. "But Coach needs you. You can't go!"

"You stay out of this, y'hear?" One of their cheerleaders pushed me.

"See what they're really like, Danny? They're mean. They just want to get you away from Coach."

"We wouldn't be mean to you," the cute girl said to Danny. She made me sick. "Our students just want to give you a big cheer. We all read about what happened to you." Her voice was like honey.

"All you'll get is a lot of razzing," I said. "Those kids have no reason to like you. You're the quarterback of their big rival." I grabbed his arm. "Come on back."

The cheerleader who had pushed me shoved me away. I tripped over my feet and fell down. Just then we heard a big cheer and found that Grunstein had made up for his big goof. He'd just intercepted a pass inside our 20-yard line.

Danny wasn't dumb. "I'll see you guys," he said to them. He helped me to my feet and leaned on me as we started to walk back to our side.

Then I heard shuffling behind us, and suddenly those guys picked Danny up and ran with him back to their side of the field. I ran after them.

“You can’t do this,” I shouted. “It’s kidnapping. I’ll report you to the police.”

They stood him in front of their student body and told them who he was. Sure enough, they booed and razed him. Then the guys started to walk him fast to the exit. I went after them.

“This guy came in without a pass,” they told the guard. And they shoved him out the gate and ran back to the field.

“Those rats!” If ever I wanted to beat someone up, it was then. I just prayed out loud, “*Lord—help us!*”

Danny was showing the guard that he did have a student pass, and the old guy let him in. He was shaking his head and muttering about “kids these days.”

We ran back to the field. Nothing was going on. Coach had called a time-out. He was trying to regroup, because it was third down and we were still back within our own 20.

So I did the only thing a guy could do at that point. I walked Danny right straight across the middle of the field. You should have heard our side shout. They’d seen what had happened. Some guys had already started running around the far end of the track to see what Washington had done with Dan.

“Dan-ny! Dan-ny!” Everybody started the chant. I felt dumb walking right in front of the whole world, but I had to get Dan to Coach fast; and that was the shortest way to go.

“You’re not getting out of my sight, Dan,” Coach said as we walked up. “And nice going, Billy. I’m almost ready to forgive you after that one.”

I laughed to myself. He didn’t even know what was going on. Wait till he really found out. He’d love me forever.

I wish!

The referee blew his whistle for time in, and the guys huddled back on the 10.

“Those guys wanted me out of the park, Coach,” Danny said. “They told the guard that I’d gotten in without a pass.”

That was all the time we needed to get Coach not to make his usual sign. Our guys went over the middle again and got the ball out to the 39.

“Pass over left guard to Johnny Doane,” Coach told the player going in.

“Did you see Bean running after me, Coach? He’s really fast. You ought to get him to come out for football next year—only he needs to put on some weight.”

We did it again. He got Coach thinking about something else. The pass went over left guard, and Johnny was down to the 23 before they

could catch him.

We walked with Coach down the sideline.

“Yeah,” Coach said. “Maybe. Some of the guys were talking about that in the locker room today.”

He called the next play. It was a double reverse.

“How did they find out Bean was fast?”

“Some of them were chasing him this afternoon, they said. They said he even outran Rob Pitts, our fastest sprinter on the track team.”

The double reverse worked like a charm. We were in the end zone in nothing flat.

The place went wild, and the Regulars were in a frenzy. The coaches were yelling at their team, but the guys just didn’t know what to do.

It was 30 to 21 at the beginning of the fourth quarter. I was drained. I didn’t know if I could keep up this strategy—much less Danny.

Washington’s coaches realized they had to work on ball control if they were going to pull this game out. So they did what they did best. They tried short runs. They figured if they could get 4 yards a shot, they could hold the ball for at least ten playing minutes. We’d need two possessions to score a touchdown and kick a field goal to beat them.

But they didn’t count on Grunstein. Every time they tried his side, they were stopped cold. He was playing inspired ball. And they found out that he was deadly when they went back to throw a pass. He just mowed down whoever got in his way and sacked the quarterback before he could get rid of the ball. The Regulars were forced to kick. Johnny Doane received the ball back on our 28, and he wiggled down the sidelines to the Washington 12.

“Goal! Goal! Goal! Goal!” The crowd wanted points.

“Up the middle,” Coach said.

“Why up the middle, Coach?” Danny asked him. I just kept my mouth shut.

“They’re expecting a pass. See how they’ve spread their backs?” He pointed out what he meant and forgot to spit.

Our quarterback went right up the middle and scored. The Regulars were paralyzed. We kicked the point, and it was 30 to 28.

“For some reason those boys over there don’t know what they’re doing.” Coach pointed over his shoulder with his thumb at the coaches across the field. “You’d think at the end of the season they’d have their act together.”

Danny and I locked eyes. He winked. We didn’t say a word. Anything could spoil this comeback.

Washington was expecting an onside kick. All the players had moved forward.

Coach told Bruce Stanton, our kicker, to lob it toward the corner—“just a nice little kick that’ll go over their heads and still stay inbounds.”

Leave it to Bruce. He did just that. No one was in position to scoop it up and run. Their fullback ran for it as it skittered across the grass. He was trying to bat it into his hands when his feet went out from under him.

But he'd touched it! Our linebacker, Bobby Bunn, snatched it off the grass, tucked it into his stomach, and loped across the goal line.

It's good those bleachers were strong. The kind of treatment they got that night could have splintered them.

We missed the extra point, but who cared? The game ended 34 to 30.

The team carried Coach off the field.

13

Showdown

Larry Day said our game with Washington High only showed how emotionally unstable the Hilltoppers are. He said our win was nothing more than noise because Danny Pruitt hobbled around the field a couple of times.

He marveled how a team of know-nothings and rag-tag ball players from Henny Penny's Silly Hills could win the league championship. He really laced into Washington for letting the game slip through their fingers. He said the Regulars just stopped playing at the half and packed up their things to go home.

If they'd just kept on playing the championship ball they knew, he said, they'd have given Sunny Hills the shellacking we deserved. Then he accused Coach of being the Judas on our team. That's all he said. That's all he needed to.

You would have thought Coach would come to his senses, hearing someone else tell him the same things I'd been telling him. But even taking Danny to his office didn't help.

"I don't care if you did come in here arm-in-arm with Dan, Billy. I really don't want to talk to you."

"But Danny can help me prove to you what's been going wrong all season long."

"I know what you and the newspapers are saying—that I'm the one who's telegraphing all our plays to our opponents. Poppycock!"

"But, Coach, you don't realize what you're doing with your hands," I said. "You're concentrating so hard on what's going on out there on the field, you don't realize it. We all know that. Nobody's blaming you."

"Listen, Billy, I may not have done much coaching, but I do know what I'm doing. Now I've got a lot of work to do to get ready for the championship game, and I'm going to do it now. It's nice seeing you back at school, Danny. And we'll be expecting you to suit up for practice this afternoon."

"You respect Danny, don't you, Coach?" I said. "Wouldn't you believe it if he told you I was right?"

Coach put his hand behind Dan's neck and looked him right in the eye. "Danny, I'd be so disappointed in you if you told me this kid here was right that—well, I don't know what I'd do."

"But—"

Coach slapped Dan's shoulder and said, "Thanks for coming in."

I looked at Danny as Coach pointed us to the door with a "see you

boys around” send-off.

“It’s hopeless,” I said.

“Yeah, I see what you mean.”

“Got any suggestions?”

“Not a one.”

“I think I’ll call Jerry.”

“Why?” Danny asked. “He didn’t help you any of the other times he gave you advice. Why go back to him? Do your own thinking.”

“But I don’t know where to turn.”

“Then think! You’ve got a brain. I’d stay and help you, but lunch period is almost over and I’ve got to git.” Danny gave me a slap on the back. “Just remember, J. Edgar, you’re not the only one who can pray.”

I thought and prayed about my problem all the rest of the day. I knew I couldn’t turn to Karen. She’d made fun of me the last time. My home-room wouldn’t cooperate. The guys I walked home with—I couldn’t trust them. My mom didn’t know a thing about it. There wasn’t any teacher I could go to. And Jerry was out.

Lord, what’ll I do?

Now, I don’t know what there is about water—whether it’s the water itself or whether I relax when I’m taking a shower. Maybe it’s the noise or my circulation going faster or something. But a lot of times I get the answer to my problems when I’m in the tub. Well, anyway, there I was soaping down that night when it all came to me in one word—Scruggs. I had to go to Mr. Scruggs and tell him the whole thing.

The next morning I went in to make an appointment.

“I’m sorry, but he’s out of town until Friday,” his secretary said. “I can make an appointment then for you after school.”

I couldn’t wait till Friday. But then, I had no one else to tell it to—no one who could do anything about it.

“OK,” I said. “I’ll take it.”

“3:30?”

“3:30.”

I had to carry that load two more days. I called Jerry, but he wasn’t home. I called Danny. He was in bed, exhausted from practice. His dad was out of town.

Everybody was out of town. I wished I could go out of town.

I heard a little noise at school about how I’d outrun Rob Pitts, the fastest man on the sprint team. But I didn’t pay any attention. People always have to talk about something.

Friday afternoon I missed the rally. We were in the southern state championship, and the whole student body and faculty—and I learned, the principal—were there. His secretary told me that he had to go to the rally and she didn’t know when he’d be back. She said if I went to the rally and he came back early, I’d miss him altogether.

So I sat there and waited and waited. The only magazine they had was one for parents, and it was four years old.

Finally, I heard a far door slam and the clopping sound a man's heels make when he's walking quickly on linoleum.

Then he stuck his head in the door.

"Is my appointment here?" he asked his secretary. "If not, I'll go on—"

His secretary nodded in my direction.

"Oh," he said, disappointed. And then he came in to get a better look.

"That you, Bean?"

"Yes, sir."

He walked in front of me into his office. "What is it this time?"

I couldn't tell if he was angry or not. He didn't even ask me to sit down.

"You look like a whipped puppy," he said.

"It's a long story."

"That's all I need at 4:30 on the Friday afternoon before our championship game."

I turned and walked to the door. "I'll leave."

"No, come back here and sit down." There was a nicer tone in his voice. "Now, what is it?"

"Well, you remember when I was in here with Jerry Proe—"

"I remember." His left eyebrow rose an inch.

"Well, we were wrong to say that Danny was the leak."

"Yes, you were. And did you ever apologize to him and his father as I told you?"

"Yes, sir. And you said then that I shouldn't mention it again—you know, the problem the team was having."

"Yes, I did."

"But—" And then I realized that he would never believe me.

"I better go," I said, standing up. "You won't believe me."

"Sit down and tell me what you have to say." He said that in a tone that told me to get busy and tell him fast.

Well, I told him what had happened at each game, and I told him about each one of Coach's signs. I told him that Danny and his father and Jerry were the only ones who knew and that they agreed I had the answer—only Coach wouldn't believe it and—

Mr. Scruggs got to his feet. "I think this is the silliest, most preposterous thing I've ever heard. He spits when we go over center? He scratches his head when we pass—"

"Bean, I told you once to forget this business. I don't care if we lose the championship. We will not have a student accusing a faculty member of betraying his team and giving plays to the opponents. I don't know where you get these outlandish ideas, but I've never heard anything

more—You're to go to that game tonight and sit there. I will not have you interfering in any way. You do, and I'll expel you—just as I did Jerry Proe.”

“But—”

“We won't have it, and that's that. Now you go home and consider yourself fortunate that I don't expel you here and now!”

“But if you saw it for yourself?”

He was shouting.

I left his office with my tail between my legs. Who could I go to now? Mr. Scruggs had been my last resort, and he had told me to forget the whole thing.

But I couldn't.

I couldn't!

14

One Last Try

You try everything you can think of to help people, and it all goes wrong. Nobody understands. What's the use?

Mr. Scruggs was probably right. I had to forget the whole thing. I'd hurt too many people, and trying to do any more would only make matters worse.

But I just couldn't let the thing lie. I walked slowly out of school.

Lord, what'll I do?

I sure didn't know.

What would Jerry do? I asked myself.

And then I answered, He'd make a math problem out of it.

OK, what was given? What did I already know?

I knew Coach was leaking secrets. I knew he didn't know it and wouldn't admit it if he did. Danny knew. His dad knew. Jerry knew. I knew. And—Larry Day knew.

I'd forgotten that.

Now, what was wanted? I wanted to help Coach see what he was doing. But how do you do that when you don't have any way to show him what he looks like when he's in the middle of a game? No one had taken any movies of the game that I knew of. Maybe some parent had taken a video, but no one I knew.

So I needed a method. I needed a way or a person who could convince Coach. I needed my "all-pro." I could still kick Jerry up and down for blowing our cover on that.

So who would Coach respect? Who could wake people up around here? Larry Day? I wondered about that. Would Coach respect Larry after all the junk about Henny Penny and his Silly Hills?

But Larry was the only one who was talking my language. He knew what was going on. He was the only one left now who could help. I had to try him out—just once.

I hopped on the next bus going downtown. I called my mother from the lobby of the newspaper building and told her where I was. I said I didn't know if I could see Larry Day and get home for supper and still be on time for the game. I asked her to put my food in the refrigerator and said I'd eat when I got home—whenever that was.

The girl at the information desk told me the sports desk was on the third floor. I took the elevator up, and the doors opened onto a room full of desks—rows and rows of them.

Mostly men were typing or answering the phone or standing looking

at copies of a newspaper. The place was a bee hive.

I asked the girl at the first desk, "Larry Day in?"

"You're in luck," she said. "He's usually out covering the high school games on Friday. You want a job?"

"No, I got to talk to him."

She pointed him out. His back was to me, and I walked down to one of the messiest desks in the whole room. As I got near, his phone rang. He just said, "Day," into the receiver and listened.

"No, Gabby, it's on the up-and-up," he said. And then he listened. "Madison knows all about him. Their coach has been studying him all season."

He paused.

"It's a no-risk deal—easy money. Some of these people around here are willing to bet their shirts that Penny'll get them the southern championship, but you and I know better."

He laughed.

"Yeah, we'll keep the distractions away from him. I got a lot riding on this, too."

He'd seen me out of the corner of his eye. He swiveled his chair around.

"Waddya want?"

It was the guy with the moustache—the guy we thought was Danny's father! I didn't know what to say. Now I knew why he'd been so mad that first game. It was because we were helping Coach win. And that was why he knew so much about Jerry Proe. He'd been happy at our games because we were losing.

He spoke again. "I said—waddya want?"

I knew I had to say something, but I had to have time to think. "The girl at the desk—" I pointed with my thumb over my shoulder.

"You want a job?"

Then he spoke in the phone again. "Hey, Gabby, I got the kid here. Don't worry. See you around."

He hung up.

Then he looked at me through narrow eyes. "Say, haven't I seen you somewhere?"

He scared me.

I shrugged my shoulders and dropped them. "All over town," I said.

He laughed. "That's what I want—someone who can go all over town. How old are you?"

"Fourteen."

"Too young. You got to be sixteen."

"But I know football," I said. I had to keep him talking.

"Yeah, but I cover all sports. I need someone who knows them all."

I don't know how I got courage to talk to him like this.

“You really know football, too,” I said.

“You like my column?”

“Yeah. But you don’t put everything you know in it.”

“Like what?”

“Like what you were just talking about on the phone. You know the Hilltoppers’ coach telegraphs his plays. He spits when he goes up the middle. He holds his left elbow when he sweeps left end. He scratches—”

“Who are you anyway?” His eyes had widened with interest.

“Oh, I just like football. I study it too. How come you don’t like the Toppers?”

“Too many Christians on the team.”

“So what’s wrong with Christians?”

“My father was a preacher. But he used to beat me within an inch of my life on Saturday night and preach love and Jesus on Sunday morning. I hate Christians.”

“But what about Christ? Do you hate Christ, too?”

He looked at me funny.

I went on. “I mean, you can’t blame Christ for what Christians do. Just like you can’t blame General Motors for what drunk drivers do. Christians aren’t perfect. But He is. And He’s the One who loves you.”

“What are you? A boy preacher or something? Get out of here. I’ve had all the religion I ever want.”

“You been telling the high school coaches all season about Coach Pennington?” I had to ask that question. I had to know who was at the bottom of this whole mess.

“Sure. Why not? I picked it up at the practice scrimmages he held. He wouldn’t have had a chance in this league if it hadn’t been for some freshman kids who figured it out—the—same—time—I—”

His eyes narrowed again. “That’s where I’ve seen you. You and Jerry Proe—P-R-O-E— You get out of this office!”

He got up and grabbed my collar. He marched me down that aisle to the elevator. All the way, he was telling everybody, “Henny Penny sent one of his smart aleck kids up here. He wants to tell us how to run our business.”

Everybody laughed.

He pushed the button and waited for the elevator to come. When the doors opened, he pushed me inside and let go. But just before the doors closed, he stepped in too.

As we went down, he held out his hand.

“Hey, I’m all wrong. I don’t know what got into me. I guess I hate Christians so much that I just exploded. Can I do something to make up to you for the terrible way that I’ve just treated you?”

I didn’t know what to say. He was warm and friendly all of a sudden.

“Look,” he said, “we’re going to have the press box open at the sta-

dium tonight. They're going to televise the game. How about coming and being my guest? Have supper with me now. It's the least I can do for embarrassing you the way I just did."

"Wow!" I said. I know my eyes must have lit up.

"And I might be interested in talking some more about—you know—about Christ—and all that."

"Hey, great!"

I don't know where I'd got the idea that Larry Day was any kind of a threat to Jerry and me. He was a nice guy! Well, he took me out to dinner. He asked me whether I needed to call my folks, and I told him about what I'd told my mom.

While we were eating, he said, "I can't believe you're only fourteen. Where'd you get those big hands and feet?"

"My mom's family—the Wahlstads—were all from Norway, and they were all big people," I said.

"Well, with hands and feet as big as yours, you're going to be somebody to watch around here, Bean."

I just smiled a nice humble smile.

"You going out for football in the tenth grade?" he asked when we got to dessert.

"I'm too light. No muscle. Did you play football in school?"

He went into his past and told me all about how he played football, baseball, and basketball in college and how he played baseball in the minors. But he'd majored in journalism in college. So when he got injured and had to quit professional ball, he'd gotten a job as a sports reporter in the South and had worked his way up to columnist here on our Sunny Hills daily.

Then he looked at his watch. "Hey, it's almost six. We have to be at the stadium early so I can get set up. I've got a lot to do before kick-off time."

The game was being played on the junior college field, so I was glad for the ride. I thanked him for the dinner since I'm a polite kind of guy. And then we got in his car. He made the tires squeal as he raced off.

"Tell me one thing," I said.

"What's that?"

"Why did you keep telling everybody we had a traitor who was leaking all our plays? You were the only one who knew the secret until I—"

"Until you figured it out? Well, like I said, when you've got a good thing going and you know no one's smart enough over there to figure it out, you sort of play around with it. You dangle it in front of them, hoping it'll make them even more confused. They start to distrust one another and everything falls apart. It would have worked if you hadn't—"

"Figured it out." I laughed.

"Yeah. How did you do that?"

And so I told him the whole story.

He interrupted me once to say he had to duck by his apartment so he could get some tape to hold his papers up on the concrete wall. He said he puts his statistic sheets up at eye level around him so he doesn't have to fish all over a messy desk to find the facts he needs.

We stopped near his apartment building at Tenth and Park, and he ran in. He was back in a moment with a big roll of masking tape. I held it for him the rest of the way. We parked in spaces reserved for the press and then went into the stadium. We walked down a hall to the elevator.

Already a lot of people were milling around.

"I've got to go down to the janitor's closet and get a rag," he said. "Some of these walls are so cruddy that masking tape won't stick. Still have it?"

I held the roll up.

"Still have it," I said. I didn't suspect a thing.

When the doors opened we got on, and he pushed the B button. We got off and walked down a long corridor to the janitor's room. It was quiet down there.

Of course. It was concrete. That's why.

But when we went into the janitor's room, we could hear all the crowd noise from the stadium.

"How come it's so noisy in here, Larry?" I asked.

He'd been thinking about something else, I guess. "Oh. What?"

"How come it's so noisy in here?"

He pointed to a lot of levers on the wall.

"They pipe in the public address system so the janitor can hear what's going on out in the stadium when he needs to adjust the lights for special effects. You know."

I stood looking at all the handles when Larry suddenly grabbed me from behind.

"Hey, what's going—?"

"You shut up!"

I twisted around to get away. But he had me down on my knees and then spread out on my stomach before I could bat an eye. He grabbed my hands together and taped them behind me. I kicked and fought and shoved to get away, but he caught my legs and brought them together and started rolling his tape roll around and around.

"I thought you were my friend. Hey, anybody! Help!!"

"I told you to shut up!"

"But why are you doing this?" I was scared.

"I knew you the moment I saw you—the smart kid that's onto Pennington. Well, this is one game you won't help him win, sonny. You're going to be in here with the brooms and mops while we make a killing on this game."

“But—”

“I could have retired if it hadn’t been for you. Would’ve won a mint on every game. But, no, you had to go stick your nose into somebody else’s business.”

He started putting tape across my mouth, but I bit him—hard.

And then I saw the side of his open hand coming at me.

15

Trapped

I came to, I don't know how long after. All I could hear was the noise of cheering and booing as I lay on the cement floor just trying to get the cobwebs out of my head. I couldn't move and I hurt.

A voice was saying something I couldn't understand. I felt sick to my stomach and threw up. That seemed to unscrew something that had been holding things tight inside my head. I relaxed and the words I heard began to make sense.

"No gain . . . Third down . . . Two yards . . . Fourth down . . . Stanton back to kick. . . ."

Then I heard a roar of voices and the solo voice saying, "Forty-five . . . thirty . . . ten . . . touchdown!"

I couldn't see a thing. Larry had turned out the lights. And he'd probably locked the door.

"It's good!" the announcer said. The crowd roared.

"Patriots 21 . . . Hilltoppers, zero."

Fortunately, that creep hadn't tied my wrists to my ankles. I could bend and sit up and scoot around on my knees. I had to figure out what to do.

I heard another roar the kind you hold on to when there's a kick-off.

"First and 10 on the 24. . . ."

I tried to remember what the room was like before that scum tied me up. But all I could think about was how he suckered me into his trap. He'd made me think I was something just like those cheerleaders did with Danny. And he'd been planning it ever since he first saw me. I wondered if he'd been planning it before that because he'd said something on the phone about keeping the distractions away from Coach. And he said, "Don't worry, Gabby, I've got the kid here." He knew who I was from the beginning, like he said. Why had I been so dumb?

"Doane, the intended receiver . . . Second down . . . Ball batted down—no gain . . . Third down. . . ."

I thought about the room. All I could remember was the brooms and mops and the levers on the wall. I couldn't think of anything else. I had to find a way to cut the tape and get out. So I got up on my knees and felt around with my head and face and lips. The mops smelled from the oil the janitors used on them. The bristles on the broom felt like I was kissing grampa. And there were a lot of trash barrels. Of course, the contribution I had made—my supper—didn't help the smell of things any.

The room wasn't large. Most of the stuff was around the walls, leav-

ing the center of the room clear. I inched around on my knees trying to think of some way I could get up on my feet. I tried to sit back on my feet and lift my rear and straighten my legs, but it didn't work. I'd banged my knees when Larry knocked me down and they hurt too much.

I tried to grab a broom handle behind me and work my way up it, but it fell over and I went with it.

Finally, I put my chin and shoulders across the edge of a plastic trash barrel full of heavy junk and arched my back up. It worked. Once up, I found I could shuffle in inch-long steps. I felt my way around the room, hoping the light switch was the kind I could turn on by getting my elbow or shoulder under it.

I found the door. I turned around and felt for the knob with my hands. I'd been right. It was locked.

The switch should be close by. I scraped my back along the wall, pivoting first on my toes and then on my heels as I moved. I hit a trash barrel first and nearly fell in. I stood back up and worked my way to the door again. Then I went the other way and found the switch. Only it was the kind you push in to turn on.

I pushed with my forehead but could only get the button in as far as the wall. Then it came out again. It was too high to reach with my hands. All I had was my nose. But the bone in my nose wasn't strong enough and, besides, it hurt to push on it so hard.

Lord, what'll I do? I prayed. Help me get out of here. Please.

I thought my way around the room again. What could I pick up that I could stick on the button and push with my teeth? And then I thought about my nose again. Could I push the top button with my nose and pull the bottom one with my teeth?

I tried it.

It was impossible.

But I had nothing else to do, so I kept trying. And, somehow, I got my teeth on the bottom one and pulled and it worked!

The lights came on! I'd won that part of the battle. Now, how would I get the tape off?

I looked around the room. There wasn't any nail sticking out of the wall I could reach and tear the tape with. No fan blade. No scraper. Just plastic trash barrels, mops, brooms and rags.

And a big sink.

But it had square sides and one blunt-nosed faucet. And the handles to turn the water on were too high for me to reach with my hands.

Lord, you helped me the last time. What do I do now?

If I could get the tub to overflow and the water to go out under the door, someone might notice it and come in. I turned the handle with my teeth and the water came on. But I hadn't put in the plug! How dumb can you get?

There was a plug attached to a chain attached to the faucet. I pushed it off the edge into the sink, but it fell to one side. I picked the chain up with my teeth and tried to dangle the plug over the hole, but the steam from the hot water kept me from seeing it.

I dropped the chain and tried to turn the hot water off. I couldn't get the handle to budge, and it was too hot besides. All I could do was turn the cold water on. I practically broke a tooth, but I got it on.

That took care of the steam, but the water was still hot. I picked up the chain again with my teeth, but the plug kept swinging like a pendulum and I couldn't get it to settle over the drain. When I finally did, the flow of water pushed it aside.

The only thing I could do was sit in the tub and put the plug in with my hands. Fortunately, I'm skinny enough so that was no problem.

I leaned across the sink face down, rolled over and sat down. I picked up the plug and worked it into the hole. Success. But it wasn't easy. Try it sometime when you're sitting on YOUR hands.

So there I was with all my clothes on, sitting in a tub filling with hot water. I hadn't realized the tub was so deep. I couldn't arch my back enough so I could roll out. I had to sit there while the water rose up my chest and began to spill over. Was I ever glad I'd turned on some cold.

I was sitting there wondering how long I'd have to wait until someone found me when the thought struck—what if the water doesn't go out? The room will fill up and I'll drown.

I arched my neck and looked. The water was two or three inches on the floor and I couldn't tell if it was going out the door or not.

At least the police would know I was murdered. They'd find my body in the sink and my hands and feet taped. I wondered whether Larry's fingerprints would still be on the tape.

Lord, I'd sure rather not have a watery grave.

There was a roar over the loudspeaker. I'd forgotten all about the game, I was concentrating so hard.

"At the half, it is Madison 28, Sunny Hills 0."

There was another roar and then the sound of a band playing.

And then there was an announcement. The voice on the loudspeaker said my name and told me to report to the Hilltoppers' bench at midfield. Was this another one of Larry's tricks? I could just hear him laughing. It was just like something he would do.

And then I wondered if Coach had changed his mind. Had he finally realized he needed me?

And then my nose started to itch. And, without thinking, I pulled my hand out of the water and scratched it.

Did I ever do a double-take. My hands were free! I looked at my wrist. The tape had come off in the hot water. I never knew hot water would soften masking tape. It must have been cheap tape. I pulled it all off

and rinsed my wrists. I was free!

I leaned over the side of the tub to get at my ankles, but it was too awkward trying to find the end of the tape. So I just hoisted myself out and down onto the floor. And in no time I got it off.

Now what?

First, I turned off the water. No use drowning. Then I tried the door again. But it was locked on the outside and I couldn't get out. I tried banging, but it was a heavy metal door. I knew no one would hear me over the crowd noise. And then I remembered saying how quiet it was in the hallway. So I kept banging.

I looked around the room for some other idea. Maybe I could make more noise if I banged with a broom. I tried it, but I knew I couldn't do it all night.

What else could I do? I had to get out.

There was a burst of applause and the announcer said the Hilltoppers' band was now coming out on the field. It was playing, "God Bless America."

While I looked around the room, I started singing the words:

*"God-bless-America-
Land-that-I-love."*

Dum-de-dum-dum.

Dee-dee-dum-dum.

*"Through-the-night-
With-the-light-from-above."*

I looked through the mops and brooms and janitor tools standing in barrels and leaning against the walls.

No key.

No crowbar.

Nothing.

"Dum-dee-dum-dum."

I looked for an axe.

Nothing.

"Dee-dee-dum-dum."

I looked for a steel pole.

Nothing.

I pulled open drawers.

I dug into boxes and barrels.

The band started playing the song again. I guessed it hadn't gotten into formation for its stunts yet. And then I had the feeling that there was something in that song I should think about.

"God-bless-America."

That was good. That's what I wanted.

"Land-that-I-love."

Why should that mean anything? Nothing there except it's a land I love.

“Stand-beside-her-and-guide-her.”

That’s for me. If ever I needed help, it was right now. But I couldn’t think of anything special in those words that I should think about.

I poked around in some more barrels looking for anything I could use to get out of jail with.

*“Through-the-night-
With-the-light-from-above.”*

I sang it again. I repeat a lot when I sing songs in my head.

Nope, there wasn’t any signal there unless God was saying He’d get me out of this dark hole and out into the sunshine.

I couldn’t figure it out. None of that meant anything special to me.

I looked around the room again at the sink, the water standing on the floor, the mops, the brooms, at all those levers on the wall the janitor used.

And then I looked up at the levers.

“Through-the-night with the light . . .”

Hey!

I was getting an idea.

It was coming.

Of course! The levers! I could bring that whole stadium to a standstill by just pulling those levers. All the lights would go out and someone would have to rush to this room to turn them on again. He’d open the door and I’d be free!

I was just reaching my hand up to pull them down when I stopped.

I was standing in four inches of water. I’d get fried.

Or boiled!

I looked closely to see if the levers had plastic handles. I couldn’t tell if the stuff wrapped around them was insulation or not.

It certainly wasn’t plastic.

What could I do? Here was my one way of escape, but even this wasn’t certain. Someone could come and open the door and let me out, but what would they think? They’d look around and see all the water and think I was a delinquent having fun. They’d take me to the police and arrest me.

If it wasn’t one thing, it was another.

Lord, what’ll I do this time?

It would be dark in the corridor when the person—the janitor or whoever—came in. If I slipped out the door in the dark, he would never know I was in here.

I looked for the master switch and found it. I took a broom in my hand and worked the lever out of its bracket and then I knocked it all the way loose.

Just as the power failed, I heard a sound like the sound of surprise from a lot of people over the loudspeaker. So I knew I had cut the power in the whole stadium.

I didn’t need to turn the light off in my room. It had gone off when all

the lights went out.

I felt my way over to the door and leaned back against the wall where
the light switch was.

The door would open.

I'd slip out.

And I'd be free!

All I had to do was wait.

16

My Get-away

I stood beside the door so that I could slip out without being seen. I didn't want anybody to stop me before I could get away. Then I heard the doorknob rattle. Someone was putting a key in the lock.

The door opened slowly. Whoever it was had to push into the dark because my light had gone out, too. He also had to push against the force of the water on the floor.

As whoever it was sloshed into the room, I slipped out and ran down the hall. I didn't know how far I'd get before the lights came on, and I didn't know if I would run into other people. I kept the fingers of one hand touching the wall as I ran so I'd know when I came to a corner.

And then the lights came on.

I had just passed the elevator. Evidently someone coming down had gotten stuck between floors when the power failed. Whoever it was ran out and started down the hall as soon as the door opened.

I was just about to call out when I saw it was Larry. I froze—just for a moment—and then made a quick move. I ran over and held the elevator doors open while I slipped inside. But he saw my face as the elevator door closed.

I pressed the button that said “1” and felt the elevator rise. Larry would look for the stairs, and maybe he'd be at the door waiting for me when it opened. But it was too late to push another button for a higher floor. I had to rush out and get lost in the crowd.

The elevator seemed to take forever. Then it stopped, and the doors opened. I ran out—right into the arms of Larry Day!

“Help! Help! He's killing me! Let me go!” I shouted at the top of my lungs. I had to make a scene. He loosened his grip on me as he looked to see if anyone was watching. I wrenched free and darted up a ramp into the crowd. I knew he was coming after me. I had to get down to the field. Coach would protect me. Whoever had called for me would protect me. But I hadn't counted on the police.

Evidently Larry signaled an usher and told him that the kid in the white shirt running down the stadium stairs was the kid who'd pulled the master switch. Suddenly I saw ushers with walkie-talkies coming toward me from different directions.

“*Lord*—” I just called His name and ran.

I vaulted over the low chain-link fence that kept the crowds off the track and ran toward mid-field. That meant that I had to run right through the marching band—wet, dirty me. I dipped and dodged through the for-

mation. I nearly got knocked down by one of those sliding trombones. How I ever made it I'll never know.

"Bean! Am I glad to see you!" Someone had me by the shoulder. It was Mr. Scruggs. "Where've you been? You're soaking wet. Where'd you get that black eye?"

I stood there shivering and gasping for breath. An usher came up and then Larry Day. They'd run through the formation, too.

"Get that boy," Larry Day shouted. "He's the one that turned out the stadium lights. Call the police! Arrest him!"

"Now you leave this boy alone," Mr. Scruggs said. "I'm the principal here, and I called for him over the loudspeaker. If he had to turn off the stadium lights to get here, that's fine with me. He'll be all right in my charge."

And then, putting his arm around my shoulders, he just walked me away from them and talked privately in my ear. I could see Larry Day still making a fuss and pointing in my direction, but some of the ushers led him off.

"Bean, I've been watching this game closely, and you're right—perfectly right. Every word you said to me this afternoon has been acted out right in front of my eyes."

"You believe me?"

"Bean, I'm convinced."

"Wow!" I almost saw stars I was so shocked. But I was wet and cold and my teeth started to chatter.

Mr. Scruggs beckoned to one of the managers. He sent for a blanket and wrapped it around me when it came.

"Bean, we've got to think this through. We've just got to think this through. I can't just send Coach a message and say, 'Stop putting your hand in your pocket. Stop spitting. Stop scratching your head.' He'd think I was crazy. Now, wouldn't he?"

"Yes, s-s-s-sir, he w-w-w-would," I said. I was still shaking.

Mr. Scruggs called the manager back and gave him a dollar.

"Get this boy some hot cocoa, and bring a sweatshirt." Then he turned to me. "So what do we do? You've a got a good head on your shoulders. You tell me what we should do to turn this game around."

Somebody had to distract Coach. That was all there was to it. That somebody would have to be onto every one of his little tricks. And the only person I knew that could do that was me.

"We've got to have s-s-someone beside him who will distract him and keep him from giving his s-s-signals," I said.

"Excellent idea—and that someone should be you."

"But he hates me. He wouldn't do a thing I said."

"No, he probably wouldn't," Mr. Scruggs said.

"But if you took me and went with me, and we s-s-stood beside him, you would have the authority and I would know when to distract him."

“Wonderful! We’ll do just that.”

And we did. But not before the cocoa came and the sweats. I finally began to warm up.

When the teams came back on the field, Mr. Scruggs told Coach he wanted to stand beside him during the second half and that he wanted me to stand with him. He said I’d done a great service to the school, and he wanted Coach and himself to honor me by letting me stand with them during the second half.

I couldn’t believe it.

I saw Danny and waved. He put his thumb and index finger together to make a “Great going!” sign and called out, “Way to go, J. Edgar!” Then he went out on the field and received the kick-off.

And, boy, did he go a mile. He had wings on his feet. He cut right through that whole team and went the entire distance.

Our side roared. And then they started their chant, “Dan-ny! Dan-ny!” It really reached my heart. He was such a great guy!

Coach was really pleased. “Well, it’s 28 to 7. At least they won’t have a shut-out now.”

“Oh, we’re going to win this game, Coach,” I said.

“You better believe it,” Mr. Scruggs said.

But on our next possession, Coach sent in for a sweep around right end. Before I could stop him, he put his left arm across his chest and held his right elbow. The play went nowhere.

I had to get him to mix the signals.

He called for a reverse and then crossed his arms. They stopped us cold.

“We’ve got to do something,” I told Mr. Scruggs.

“Henry! I’m tired of the way you’re communicating these plays to the opposition. Bean here has told you that you’re the one who’s leaking our plays, and he’s right. I’ve studied you this whole game. From now on you’re to call your play and then do exactly as Bean tells you.”

Coach gave me a look that would have turned a man to stone. He called a pass to Johnny Doane.

“Put your right hand across your chest and hold your left elbow,” I said.

He did that, and Johnny scored.

Coach gave me another look—a long one.

On our next possession Coach called each play, and I told him to do the wrong thing with his signals. We cut through that line like a hot knife through butter. It was first and 10 on their 13. Coach called for a field goal try.

“If there’s one thing I’ve learned all season, Billy,” he said, “it’s that we do best when we kick on first down. If we can get those three points now, we’ll win the game when we intercept and run it in for a touch-

down—assuming we get another touchdown, too. And with you calling the plays like this, I'm sure we will."

I could hear the knife edge in his words. He hated having me there and having me tell him how to coach his own team. He was still looking at me and seeing fourth-grade Billy.

"But you should go for six," I said. "At least get the six!"

"Henry Pennington," Mr. Scruggs spoke again, "you do what this boy says or you go back to teaching elementary school. I never should have taken you out of fourth grade."

That got to him. Coach called for a double reverse, and I told him to spit. We scored. It was 28 to 21.

We had eight minutes left, and Madison tried ball control. They kept the ball for four minutes. The crowd was getting anxious. But then there was a roar. Grunstein sacked the Patriot quarterback so hard he fumbled. Grunt just swept the ball under him and lay on it like it was an egg.

"They'll expect us to go up the middle," Coach told Danny when he came over to the sidelines while the chains were being set. "But you go over right tackle."

"And you scratch your head," I told Coach.

It was like I had my hand on the handle of a video game. I wanted Danny to turn the corner, and he did because I'd gotten Coach to turn him loose. He cut through the Madison backfield and made a first down. He sliced through here, around there. He was in and out and under and over like nobody we'd ever seen in our town before. He got the ball down to the Patriot's 14.

"OK, Bean, you win," Coach said. "I'm just a thick-headed Irishman, I guess."

I couldn't believe it. He'd called me "Bean."

"Let me take over now." He sent in the play—a pass to Johnny in the end zone out of field goal formation. Then he touched his toe on the ground behind him.

Our guys lined up. The kicker was ready. They snapped a ball to Danny. He stood and tossed a pass to Johnny Doane in the far corner of the end zone.

TOUCHDOWN!

Mr. Scruggs and I went crazy along with everybody else. And Coach just stood there with a big smile on his face.

"Now watch this," he said.

The teams lined up to kick the point that would tie the game.

Coach spit.

The Patriot defense scattered, trying to cover all the eligible receivers. Danny delayed like he was going to throw a pass, and then he went right up the middle and scored.

We'd won. We'd won the game! Oh, there were some 40 seconds

left, but with Grunstein in there, we knew we could hold them.

“You fooled everybody, Coach.” I was pounding him on the back and yelling with everybody else. We had the lead 29 to 28.

Bruce Stanton kicked the ball along the ground so that it would be harder to field, but Madison picked it up and cut through our entire team down to our 38. Our 38!

Our bleachers got quiet, and theirs exploded. Here we had another great comeback win in our hands, and they were threatening to knock it loose. All they needed was a field goal, and they’d have the victory.

Our crowd started yelling, “Grunt! Grunt! Grunt!” They were calling on Grunstein to do his stuff.

That’s all it took.

On the first play, Grunstein knocked guys over as if they were matchsticks and broke through to sack the quarterback. They lost 10 yards. On second down, they swept around the other end from Grunt and made 20 yards. That put them on our 28. And they had eight seconds to go.

They lined up for a field goal. Both sides of the field were screaming.

The referee called time out. There was no way the quarterback could call his signals with all that noise. But this was our biggest game of the year. We weren’t about to quiet down and be nice and polite. We were there to win that game, and we didn’t care who knew it.

So finally, because he couldn’t do anything else, the referee blew his whistle and signaled the clock to start.

Madison waited.

They were counting down the seconds so they could kick, win the game, and not have to give us the ball back.

Six.

Five.

Four.

Three.

They snapped the ball. Their quarterback fumbled it a second but got it down. It was kicked!

It was kicked, all right, but right into the outstretched nose of Grunstein. He had thrown himself through the air. The ball hit him in the face and broke his nose. Somehow, he caught the ball as he fell, and time ran out.

The whole stadium emptied onto the field. It took ten guys to get Grunstein off the ground. They carried him around the field. Blood was streaming down his face.

We were delirious!

I had Mr. Scruggs around the waist, and we were dancing around and around. There was a flash, and someone had a picture.

We’d won!

We’d won!

We’d won the southern championship!

17

The Next Day

Larry's "Day-by-Day by Day" column the next morning was written by someone named Boozer.

Larry had gotten fired. But that's not all he got.

I'd told Mr. Scruggs the whole story, and he called the editor-in-chief and the police. They spent more than an hour quizzing me. I told them the masking tape would still be in the sink. And it was. They knew then that I was telling the truth.

Larry finally confessed. He also confessed that he'd been the one tipping off the other coaches about our secrets and that he'd been involved in "a little betting" on the side. The police uncovered a gambling ring Larry had been operating illegally out of his newspaper office for people who wanted to bet on high school sports.

The police wanted me to press assault charges against him because he'd hit me. But I couldn't do that. He'd already been punished enough.

The next day's issue ran the whole story—about Larry, about me, and about our winning the big game. They used the picture they'd taken of Mr. Scruggs and me.

And did things ever change on campus.

They let Jerry Proe come back to school. Mr. Scruggs apologized to him publicly and to his parents, and Jerry apologized to Danny for the trouble he'd caused him.

Karen apologized to me for being so thick-headed, and the guys in my homeroom said they were sorry for the way they'd treated me. Even guys from the football team apologized to me and said they hoped I'd join the team when I got into tenth grade. They said they needed a guy with my speed and my kind of brain.

Grunstein never apologized. For some reason, he hated me. Probably because I knocked him in the nose when I hit him with my book.

But Coach apologized. He even hugged me. He said I'd saved his career as a coach. He said we would have lost every game all season if it hadn't been for Jerry and me—especially me.

He apologized for being so mean. He said he'd been too blind to see what was right in front of his face. He thanked me for sticking with him all season and for waiting for him to wake up. He said he'd save a place for me on the team when I got to tenth grade—if I got more meat on my bones.

I couldn't tell him how much it meant to me to have him call me "Bean." It meant he wasn't still seeing me as a little fourth grade kid. I

guess I stuck at the puzzle as long as I did because I had to prove to him that I wasn't "Little Billy" anymore.

Of all the teachers I'd ever had, he'd always been my favorite. All the time he was yelling at me and kicking me out of his office, I still liked him. And now that he had let me grow up, we could really be friends.

And he proved what a great coach he really is when our team went on to win the state championship. No first-year coach in the history of football in our part of the country had ever done a thing like that.

Mr. Scruggs included me in the awards assembly when our school got the big trophy. He told everybody that we wouldn't have had a winning season if it hadn't been for me.

I got a standing ovation. This time they were shouting, "Bean! Bean! Bean! Bean!"

I'll never forget it!

And Danny—my good friend Danny Pruitt—he's the only all-pro at our school as far as I'm concerned. He should have gotten the glory, not me. He's one in a million—and he's my friend.

But you know who really should have gotten the trophy? I don't know that they ever give trophies to the Lord, but He sure had a hand in our getting ours.

Why, if it hadn't been for Him, nothing would have ever turned out right.

Would it?

18

The Bonus

A car pulled up alongside me. I was walking home after school. My bike had a flat.

“Hey, Bean,” a man called.

I looked at him. It was Larry Day. I hadn’t seen him in weeks.

“Come on, get in,” he said.

“Not with you I won’t. You tricked me, you—you—“ I couldn’t think of any name bad enough.

“I came to apologize, Bean. I was wrong.” He opened the car door and held it for me.

I got in. But I sat with my hand on the handle.

“I underestimated you, Bean. I’m sorry.” He held out his hand for me to shake.

I looked at it but didn’t move.

“I mean it,” he said. “I thought you Christians knew how to forgive.”

What could I do? I shook his hand.

“You were pretty clever to pull that master switch. And you were clever to get loose. I taped you up pretty tight.”

I told him the water was hot. That’s what did it.

“You’re a thinker, you are,” he said. “I hope you go into journalism when you go to college. Be a sports editor like I—was.” He paused on that last word.

“What are you going to do now?” I asked. “Oh, turn right next corner.”

He was driving slowly.

“That’s what I came to talk to you about. I’ve been doing a lot of thinking.”

“Yeah?”

“It’s something you said in my office.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. It was something about—you can’t blame Christ for the awful things Christians do. You said they’re not perfect, but He is and that He’s the One who loves me. Are you sure about that?”

What could I say?

Tears came to his eyes.

“I’m sure about that,” I said. “Real sure.”

He stopped the car.

“I’ve had time to do a lot of thinking,” he said. “You Christians are something else. I’ve sure had the wrong idea all these years.”

I didn't say anything.

“When I was a kid—your age—I was a Christian. I got saved lying in my own bed. I'd been miserable about my sins, and I asked the Lord to forgive me and save me right there. I told Him I couldn't save myself or even help myself. I told Him I was repenting of my sins and trusting Him for the whole thing. And He saved me right there.

“But I got cold after that. I hated my father for beating me and I sort of drifted away—till now.”

Wow! This guy was for real.

And then tears came to my eyes.

To my dying day, I'll never understand how the Lord works.

But I can tell you this—like the first six words of John 3:16 say—I'll always know why.

GloryPressBooks.com
is designed for education, evangelization,
and edification.
If we may assist you in knowing more about
Christ and the Christian life,
please write us without obligation:

Prof. Dick Bohrer,
P. O. Box 624, West Linn, Oregon
USA 97068