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BEANPOLE & FRIENDS

VOLLEYBALL
SPY

DICK BOHRER

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*To the real
Rebecca Joy Pruitt,
competitive, sensitive,
studious, fun to be with,
respectful, a leader, a
follower, a girl who
loves the Lord
Jesus.*

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1

Trapped

I won't do it. I hate girls!"

"But they're on their way over. We want you to do it."

Kimberly King had my head pressed against the wall outside my English class. She actually had the heel of her hand on my forehead, and she was leaning on me. I couldn't knock her loose because my hands were full of books.

"I hate girls. What good are they? They don't know sports."

"What do you mean we don't know sports? We're athletes! We play other schools. Reporters cover our games whenever we play."

"Yeah, play. That's what you do out there. You play. Beanbag, hopscotch, volleyball. What's the difference? Like I said, you don't know sports. I won't do it."

"Look. I'm your friend. I'm your editor. You've got to do it. I'm assigning you this."

"No. Let me go!"

"You did it for the football team. Why can't you do it for me and my volleyball team?"

"No. No. No. No. How many times do I have to say it? The answer is no!"

"You can have a sports column with your name on it."

Some other girls walked up.

"Won't he do it, Kim?" Becky Pruitt said. She's Danny Pruitt's sister. There were Pruitts all over my school.

"Come on, Bean, help us."

"Bean, we need you."

There were more girls, and they were ganging up on me.

"You did it for the football team. Why won't you do it for us?"

"Yeah, and they won the state championship."

"Come on, Bean. Help us, too. Please!"

They were all yelling and begging. A crowd was gathering.

"No," I shouted. "The answer is still no!"

Then they started piling on. "Everybody kiss him!"

I slid down the wall and tried to sit on the floor where they couldn't reach me. Everybody was laughing.

"Hey, what's going on here?" It was Mr. Scruggs, the principal.

"Bean helped the football team, but he won't help us," Becky said.

"We didn't win *any* games last year."

"We just want him to figure out what we're doing wrong so we can win all our games this year."

“He won’t do it.”

“He’s mean.”

Everybody was talking at once.

“Stand up, Bean,” Mr. Scruggs said.

I stood. My books were all over the floor.

“Why won’t you help these girls?”

“I hate girls,” I said.

“What’s the real reason?”

“Girls are dumb.”

“The real reason!”

“Well, I can’t work miracles. Just because I figured it out once doesn’t mean I can do it again.”

“Is that all?” Kim asked.

Everybody started talking again.

“Cool it,” Mr. Scruggs said. When everybody had stopped talking, he turned to me. “How do you know until you try?”

“Yeah,” the girls said.

“But they’re girls. They don’t know sports.”

That made them groan. “Listen to *him!*”

“Bean has to do it, Mr. Scruggs,” Kim said. “I’m his editor, and I’ve given him this assignment.”

“Listen, Bean,” Mr. Scruggs said. “You take this as an assignment from me. The girls volleyball team has never had a winning season. Who knows? Maybe there *is* a reason. You know how to use that head of yours. Go watch them play. Go think this thing through. Maybe there’s something wrong here that you can fix.”

“But—”

“We’re not expecting you to work miracles, Bean,” Becky said. “Just come and see what’s going wrong.”

“Well—”

They all started to shout and clap like they’d won a big victory.

“You go with them after school, Bean—as my representative,” Mr. Scruggs said. “And who knows? You may be the means of bringing us another state championship. Think of that! Two in one year!”

“Yay!” all the girls shouted, jumping up and down.

What could I say?

After supper that night my phone rang. It was Mr. Scruggs.

“I’m getting complaining letters from the parents of our volleyball girls. They don’t understand why the girls aren’t winning. They want a second state championship.”

“What does the coach say?”

“Well, I send her copies of the letters—so she knows about it.”

“So what do you want me to do?”

“I just want you to keep your eyes open, Bean. Nobody suspects a

ninth grade boy of being a detective. Just go over there and keep your eyes open. You know. Snoop.”

“But—oh, all right.”

“Good boy!”

“Hey,” I said, “you really think they have a chance at going to State? I mean—really?”

“The way they’ve been doing? No. But that’s the funny thing about sports, Bean. Let something click—the right combination and the right time, the right people and the right place—you never know.”

We hung up, and I kicked myself.

Why can’t I ever—*ever*—learn to say no?

2

What I Overheard

No one heard me come into the gym, I guess. At least no one looked up.

All was quiet, except for the voice of one person. The bleachers were down, and the coach was sitting on the bottom step about halfway down the row. Kim and her volleyball girls were sitting on the floor in front of her. Abe Grunstein, our big Sunny Hills football star, was standing off to one side.

The coach, Miss Leilani Stumpf, was doing all the talking. I didn't want to disturb anyone, but I did want to hear what she was saying. I needed all the material I could get for my column for the school paper. And I really needed to know how she was coaching the team.

I stepped back among the girders of the bleachers where they couldn't see me and sidled down toward everybody. I didn't want them to think I was eavesdropping—which I guess I was.

Miss Stumpf had a beautiful voice. It was low and rich—like a cello. “It's as you give devotion to one another, really love one another, and think of yourself as a child of the universe, a part of a divine process, that you'll come together as a team,” she was saying. “When you accept your divinity, your godliness, you find how much it can work for you. You'll have greater strength, greater endurance, a greater capacity to win when the going gets difficult. It's because you are goddesses.”

Miss Stumpf's voice rose. “When you begin a game, come out like Venus and Minerva. Show the world you have strength and power. You are angry elephants, ready to charge. You are bulls in the bull ring, eyes bloodshot with anger. You are lions, roaring—kings of all you see. You are eagles, soaring—bold and strong and free!”

She was speaking like an orator.

“When you stand poised with your toe on the line and the ball in your hand, pause for just a moment. Look at the crowds hanging on your every move. Then look for Grunt here, our Zeus, our football hero, our student trainer, our personification of strength and anger and freedom. Take a deep breath and draw his power in, and then go on to victory!”

She paused, evidently to let that sink in. Talk about hocus-pocus! I felt I was back in the Garden of Eden and the serpent was trying to get me to eat the fruit. I could feel the spell she was putting on the girls. It was smooth and silky.

She started again.

“I want each of you to create your own god or goddess. Have him or her in your heart. Be able to share with one another the special powers

your god or goddess possesses. But don't tell anyone on the outside. We're a family here. We have secrets only we can share. We love one another. We're celestial."

Her voice faded away.

No one said a word.

It was as if she had hypnotized everybody—even Grunt.

All this was too spooky for me. I had turned toward the door when she started in again.

"Give your god a name so you can commune with him in your heart while you are playing. Call on him to help you when you need a particular lift. You can say, 'Oh, Mercury, help me to kill this ball. Help me to plant my feet. Help me to leap high. Help me to serve you with excellence and power.'"

Wow! What right did she have to teach this stuff to these girls? The Bible says, "You shall worship the Lord your God and Him only shall you serve." She made me mad.

"Give him a name that reminds you how wonderful he is," she went on. "So that your heart will glow as you tell him how worthy he is to receive worship and honor and adoration from your heart. Think. What will you call him? What beautiful name will you hear coming through the air to tell you how glorious he is? Listen."

Everyone was silent, sitting like dorks, waiting for a name to come to them through the air.

I knew I should keep out of this. It was really none of my business. But I wanted them to see how silly it was. I leaned forward and softly sang out in a mysterious voice, "Mick-ey Moussssse." I said it slowly and let it hang in the air.

Now I'm not usually the kind of guy to do a thing like that. But she was asking for it.

Well, you should have heard the girls. It was like a thunderclap had shocked them. They thought it was hilarious. They leaped up and screamed and clapped. I'd broken the mood. They were hysterical.

Miss Stumpf turned, quick as a flash, and saw me. She looked me right in the face, and that look could have turned a guy to stone.

"Grunt! Get him!" She pointed at me.

I ran for my life. I was out the door, across the lobby, down the street, and half-way home before Grunt even got to the door.

There was no way I was going to be Mr. Scruggs's representative to that bunch of screwballs.

That night, he called me up.

"How did it go, Bean?"

"Oh, I went by, but the coach was giving the team a lecture."

"But you'll go back tomorrow?"

"Well..."

"Yes?"

"Well—Coach Stumpf sort of freaks me out. She's weird."

“Hey, that’s just because she has her own approach. A lot of women athletes have their own way of looking at things. She knows what she wants to do to get Sunny Hills a winning team. So go on back tomorrow, and see what you can do to help her.”

“But--”

“Remember, she’s not what the parents are complaining about. I need you to find the real reason those girls aren’t winning.”

“Oh, OK.”

I hung up. Why was I always so weak? Why couldn’t I tell him that all they needed to do was forget this goddess junk and just practice?

He wasn’t the only one to call me that night. I also heard from Becky Pruitt, who is in ninth grade like me.

“Was that you behind the bleachers? Were you the one who called out ‘Mickey Mouse’ when Coach told us to listen to a voice coming through the air?”

“Yeah. I couldn’t resist.”

“Oh, Bean.” She couldn’t stop laughing. “It was *so* funny! She was filling us with her garbage about gods and goddesses, and you broke the mood. We laughed for half an hour after you left. There was no way she could get us to take her seriously after that.”

“Good.”

“Yeah. She’s been shoveling that stuff at us all year. I’ve been praying for the Lord to show me some way to help the girls see how silly it is—and you came along and did it with two words.”

“Well,” I said, “I wanted to do it with one, but it wasn’t the time or place.”

“One?”

“Jesus.”

“Oh, why didn’t you? That’s what she needed.”

“Well, I knew everybody would laugh. I felt it was better that they laughed at Mickey Mouse.”

“Yeah. I wouldn’t want them to laugh at Him either.”

“Come to think of it—I wonder if that’s why you guys didn’t win any games last year. Has she been filling you with that god and goddess junk all along?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, maybe you haven’t been able to concentrate.”

“And in two words you solved the whole problem. Bean, you’re a marvel!”

“The Lord’s the marvel.”

“Of course, He is. But you let Him use you. Thanks again for what you did, Bean. Be seeing you.”

We hung up. She was still laughing.

Well, I said to myself, that settles that.

That’s what I thought then.

How dumb can you get?

3

Practice

I went to see Mr. Scruggs before school next morning. I told him the girls weren't winning because of that gods and goddesses junk, but he didn't buy it. He said mythology had nothing to do with it. He said he wanted a better reason, and I was to go back to the practices.

So I walked slowly to my locker when school was out. I had time to burn. The girls had to change into their gym clothes. But I had nothing better to do, so I walked over to the gym. Maybe I could get Brian Sheetz, my trainer friend, to check me out a ball so I could shoot some baskets. But as I walked toward his office, I heard some noise and the sound of a bouncing ball coming from the gym.

I opened a door and saw some older guys shooting a few. I recognized a wrestler named Eddy. Another was Grunt, our football hero who broke his nose stopping a field goal with his face in our last home game. I stopped in my tracks. Grunt hated me.

The doctor had taken the hook out of Grunt's nose when he set it. He'd also got him to take off a lot of flab, so now he was all muscle. The guy was really good-looking and he knew it. He thought he was God's gift to the women of the world. He tried a three-pointer that missed. He caught the rebound and missed a jump shot.

I reached back for the door without turning around. He'd seen me, but he kept on shooting and rapping with his friends.

And then my mind cleared. He hadn't known it was me under the bleachers yesterday. Coach Stumpf was the only one who saw me, and she didn't know my name. I'd been out of sight by the time Grunt got to the door. So I went on into the gym just as I would have if nothing had ever happened.

"Hey, over here," I called as I ran toward them. I had my running shoes on so I didn't need to change.

"Here comes Loverbean," Eddy said. "Hey, man, the whole team? Kissed by the whole team?"

"What you got that we don't?"

"Yeah, you're just a skinny ninth grader. You don't even shave."

"Muscles, man. Good looks. Brains," I said. "Some guys got it. Some guys don't." I did a sort of broken-legged shuffle with my hand behind my head and my elbow waving in the air.

We all laughed. I have as many muscles as a bar of soap.

Someone passed me the ball, and I arched up a shot. It swished through the net nice and easy.

"Not bad, Bean," Eddy said. "How come you're not going out for jayvee?"

“Can’t do everything. Maybe next year. Here, let me feed.”

I stood under the basket and caught the ball as it dropped. Then I fed it to each guy as he made a run at the basket for a lay-up. “How come you’re dressed for gym, Grunt?” I said.

Eddy answered for him. “He’s the girls’ assistant coach.”

“He’s the Number One Cockroach,” another guy rapped back.

“You guys do this every day?” I said, falling into their rhythm. Each guy rapped back at me as he caught the ball and took a shot.

“We get to watch the girls this way,” the first one said.

“We get to watch them try to play,” the next one said.

“Big Coach says, ‘Don’t watch my girls.’”

“She’s afraid we’ll steal her pearls.”

We laughed at each one. These guys were quick—and clever.

“She forgets her girls are rotten.”

“Can’t play ball and can’t pick cotton.”

“Her pearls don’t like our football player.”

“Call him names and pull his hair.”

“How come you’re not wrestling, Eddy?” I said.

“Season’s over and done already,” he rapped.

A whistle shrilled from the other end of the court.

“Grunt!”

Coach was calling him. He tossed Eddy the ball and trotted down the court.

The guys started shooting again.

“Big Coach likes our big boy Grunt.”

“Likes to have him down in front.”

“Likes his muscles, likes his nose.”

“Makes her tingle to her toes.”

We doubled up laughing at that one.

“How come these girls don’t like Grunt?” one of them asked.

“They don’t like him ‘cause he’s blunt.”

“Hey, guys, they like him,” Eddy said.

“That’s a laugh,” someone said.

“So what we gonna do about it?”

“We got to do something.”

“Got any ideas?”

“Nope.”

“What are you guys talking about?” I hate it when guys talk about things in front of you like it’s their own little secret. But no one answered me. They chattered on as if I wasn’t even there.

“Think we ought to start being extra-special nice?”

“Could,” Eddy said.

“But would it work?”

“Should.”

“Any risk?”

“Not if we play it cool.”

“Who would know?”

“Nobody, if we do it right,” Eddy said.

“Nobody but ninth grade here.”

“What-are-you-guys-talking-about?” I emphasized every word. I was getting ticked.

“He don’t know nothing.”

“Keep it that way,” Eddy said.

Then the girls came out and began their warm-ups. The guys stopped shooting and just watched.

“They’re real good at exercises,” somebody said.

“Yeah, but that’s all.”

I started walking toward the girls, but Grunt saw me coming.

“Hey, you can’t come over here.” He grabbed me by the arm. “This isn’t football.” He’d fought me when I helped the football team. “She doesn’t want you over here. Nobody comes over here.”

“I’m not afraid of you, Grunt.”

“You’re not coming over.” He dug his fingers into the nerve in my arm. “Nobody comes over without going through me.”

“Let go, Grunt! You don’t own me.” I twisted and yanked to get my arm away.

He held on tighter. “Those are *my* girls. You keep out!”

I yelled as he gave my arm a final twist.

All the girls looked up. They must have been looking for me, because they set up a big yell when they saw me fighting Grunt.

A bunch of them came running over.

“Let go of him!”

“Get out of here, Grunt!”

“Go mind your own business, Grunt!”

Now I saw what the guys were talking about. The girls didn’t like anything about Grunt, and they didn’t mind letting him know.

Squealing and chirping, they led me over to where their coach was standing. I felt like a nerd.

“Miss Stumpf, this is Bean. He’s a reporter for the school paper,” Becky said. “He’s Mr. Scruggs’s personal representative to our team.” She kept a straight face. She knew I was dead if she mentioned Mickey Mouse.

But the coach froze anyway. She recognized me. A cold, hard look came into her eyes. She didn’t say a word. She knew she couldn’t—not with my being Mr. Scruggs’s personal representative.

“He’s going to get us a lot of publicity in the school paper,” another girl told her. “He knows a lot about sports.”

The coach still didn’t say anything. She acted like she didn’t even want publicity.

I felt awkward, but I knew enough not to tell *her* I didn't want to be there.

I said, "Oh, I know all about volleyball." But I was getting rattled. She made me nervous. "I mean—what can go wrong in volleyball? It's not like football where the coach sends in the plays. In volleyball, it just depends on where the ball bounces."

"You just sit over there, Bean," Becky said, pointing to the bleachers, "and you watch."

Miss Stumpf still just stood there. She didn't like anything about me. I was invading her territory.

Then she blew her whistle. "Grunt, time for the roll." She used her nice voice when she talked to him.

I went over to the bleachers and sat down. This was going to be a drag.

Grunt had the clipboard. He called the names and checked off the ones who were present.

"Anderson."

"You pig!"

"Beckett."

"You klutz!"

"Donovan"

"You ape!"

"Flory."

"You nerd!"

"Harris."

Coach blew her whistle.

"Watch it!" she warned.

"Well, he deserves it," Ruby Ruberg, the team captain, said.

The coach was mad, but I thought it was a riot.

"He thinks he owns us! He thinks he can do anything he wants around here. He walks through the locker room with a camera while we were dressing," Kim said. "Any creep who does that deserves—"

The whistle blew again.

"Grunt is Zeus around here, ladies. There's the power of Mercury in his arms. There's the glory of Adonis on his face. He's our lover, aren't you, Zeus?"

"Hey, he may be your lover, lady," Kim snapped, "but he's not ours!"

"King, that's enough out of you! I'm sick and tired of your dirty remarks. All you do around here is lip off. Well, I've had enough. You're off the team. You hear? Get out!"

"But—"

"*Out!*" She pointed to the locker-room door.

The girls all groaned. Kim slapped hands with each one. Her face was red. She was embarrassed and hurt and madder than I'd ever seen her. Af-

ter the last slap, she ran off the court. I noticed out of the corner of my eye that Eddy left, too.

Miss Stumpf looked up into Grunt's eyes. "You wouldn't walk through the girls' locker-room while they were dressing, would you, Zeus?"

"Me?" He pointed his finger at his heart and shook his head. "Never."

"Call the roll, Zeus," she said as she walked away.

"Lane."

"You pain."

"Morris."

"You horse."

That got the girls laughing again. They didn't care what the coach said.

"Pruitt."

"Here." She cared.

"Ruberg."

"You yuck!"

The girls cheered.

The whistle blew again. "I said—knock it off!" The coach meant business. "A-team over here. B-team over there," she barked. She didn't even finish roll call.

Well, first they had serving practice. A girl would serve the ball, and, if it went over the net, someone would catch it and roll it back. It was serve the ball, roll it back, serve the ball, roll it back, serve—

While some girls were doing that, others were jumping. They would slam a foot on the floor and leap in the air with their right arms making a complete circle up, down, and around.

I didn't belong here. I'd been set up. They didn't want me to find out why they were losing. They knew why they were losing. They just wanted free publicity. I was surprised they would lie to me like that. They didn't need free publicity. They had the editor of the school newspaper on their team—before she blistered the coach, that is.

Why hadn't they told the coach what they told me—that there was some reason they weren't winning and I was to find out what it was? I felt dumb. But I couldn't just walk out. So I sat there and watched. Grunt's friends moved up and watched, too.

I could see why the girls didn't win any games. Most of them couldn't even serve the ball over the net. The ones in the back row stood around with their hands on their hips while they waited for the ball to come their way. They should have had their hands up—or folded in a fist so they could field a slam.

Front row would bat the ball right back over the net without even trying to volley it back and forth. They couldn't do the simplest things. All they could do was shout, "Way to go, babe, way to go," as if that was all

there was to high school sports.

Girls!

I walked over to the coach. Everybody stopped and came over to hear what I had to say.

“You guys don’t need me. All you need to learn is how to play. It’s called practice. That’s all.”

They didn’t like what I said. They groaned.

“Oh, Bean.” Becky’s disappointment showed in her face.

The coach didn’t even look at me. She just blew her whistle and barked, “OK, girls, back to work. B-team, do serves. A-team, volley.”

She blew her whistle again.

I walked toward the door. This was easier than I’d thought.

“Bean?”

I heard a voice behind me.

Becky was following me. “Bean, there’s more to it than that. We all want you to stay.”

The whistle blasted.

“Pruitt. Get over here.”

“She doesn’t want anyone to know--”

The whistle blasted again. “Pruitt! I said get over here!”

Becky turned and ran back.

Now what was that supposed to mean? There was more to this than what? Why didn’t the girls want me to leave? What didn’t the coach want anyone to know?

They just needed to get to work. That’s all.

I got my stuff from my locker and went by the library to check out a book. I figured that would give the girls time to get through with their practice and get showered and dressed. I wanted to see Becky again. I needed to find out what she meant.

OK, so I’m curious. If I was going to write up this in a column, I had to know my facts.

I wasn’t the only one hanging around the door to the girls’ dressing room. The guys who’d been playing basketball wanted to watch the girls come out.

“He’s only fourteen.” They were still talking about me.

“How come you’re just skin and bones, Bean? You just eat spaghetti?”

“Beanpole the Great.”

“Loverbean!” That was Grunt talking. He’d finished his assisting and gotten outside before the team. “You like girls, do you?”

“Why not?” I wasn’t going to tell him what I really thought about girls. He was just jealous.

He grabbed my arm again. “What do you know about girls?”

“Ow!” I yelled, yanking away and rubbing my arm. “No wonder the

girls don't like you." He made me mad.

He grabbed me by the hair and jerked my head back. "What do you know about that?"

Girls began coming out the doors. They all looked to see if some guy was waiting for them. No one was. Grunt let me go and stood waiting.

When Becky came out, I went up to her. "What did you mean?"

"I can't talk about it, Bean. Coach said she'd drop any girl from the team who talked to you again. She was furious we'd asked you over. See you around."

"But—"

"Just keep coming. Please!"

She ran and caught up with some other girls and didn't even look back.

I felt a sharp karate chop on my shoulder. It hurt!

"Is that how you do it, Loverbean?"

It was Grunt.

I stood there rubbing my shoulder while he walked away.

He was laughing.

I called Jerry Proe, my tenth grade buddy who'd gotten me started figuring out the mysteries around school. I told him about my new assignment from Mr. Scruggs.

"The whole girls volleyball team kissed you?"

He'd heard.

"It's all over school," he said. "You lucky. Why didn't they come to me?"

"Well, they'd heard what I'd done for the football team, and now they want me to see why they're not winning."

"Got any leads?" he said.

"Nah. All they need is practice. They can't even get the ball over the net."

"You're kidding!"

"Nope. They can't even roll it back to the server under the net. They're sick."

"Well, keep your eyes open, and if they want to do any more kissing tell them I'm ready day or night."

I was sorry I told him I'd call if they wanted any more kissing. That was all Jerry wanted to talk about anymore. I decided I wouldn't call him. I needed a friend who liked what I liked. So I dialed Kim.

"Wow! You sure stirred up a hornet's nest, Kimberly. How did you have the nerve?"

"She makes me so mad. She thinks she owns Grunt. She makes him look like a fool in front of everybody, and he just eats it up. She's ruining him. It makes me sick!"

"But she's a teacher! I'd never talk to a teacher like that."

“But you don’t know what she’s really like. Listen, I’m not the first to go.”

“You mean there were others?”

“Sure. This has been going on all year.”

“Well, why don’t you tell Mr. Scruggs?”

“We did. But he said this was only her second year here, and we should let her do her thing her way. He was no help.”

“Well, why didn’t you write her up in the paper?”

“I couldn’t because I was on her team. It was like I was in her class. He said it’s legal to criticize a game or a performance but not for a student to criticize the teacher of her class.”

“So what’ll you do now that you’re off the team?”

“You don’t kick Kimberly King off a team and not hear about it. This is my senior year, Bean! I’ve been pointing for this all through high school. I was going to be All-State this year!”

“So you’ll have something in next issue?”

“No. But I’m going to really get Miss Stumpf. And when I do, boy, you better duck.”

“So what do you want me to do now, boss? Keep going back?”

“Yup, and you keep your eyes open. I want to know everything she does and says. Go do your stuff, J. Edgar.”

That was the name Danny Pruitt started calling me when I figured out what was going wrong with the football team. J. Edgar Hoover was head of the Federal Bureau of Investigation before I was even born. He was a great detective.

We hung up. I had a column to write.

I thought I was so smart. But I hadn’t really listened. If I’d only used my head, I could have kept a lot of people from getting hurt.

4

I Write My First Column

I was mad. The more I thought about it the madder I got. It had been a set-up. They had just played on my sympathies to get me to the gym. They just wanted free publicity.

Well, if it was publicity they wanted, I'd make sure they got it. I got out my mom's old typewriter. I hadn't taken typing yet, but I knew how to use two fingers on each hand.

I knew I couldn't call my column "Day-by-Day by Day," since my name wasn't Day and I wasn't writing for the downtown newspaper. I just called it "Bean-by-Bean by Bean" and started in. Maybe someone would think that was funny. I wrote the column just the way I felt.

And then the phone rang. It was Mr. Scruggs.

"How did it go, Bean?"

"They just need practice."

"Practice?"

"Yeah. That's what I told them. They don't work hard enough. They just stand around with their hands on their hips. They don't even volley the ball."

"But they've been practicing for weeks."

"Some of them can't even serve the ball over the net."

"I can't believe it."

"Well, it's not Miss Stumpf's fault. She keeps after them."

"So it's just a matter of practice, then."

"Yup. Guess so."

"You only guess?"

"Well, Miss Stumpf doesn't want me around. She told the girls she'd drop anyone from the team she caught talking to me."

"But you're my representative. You're there in my place, Bean. Doesn't she understand that?"

"No," I said. "She doesn't like me."

"Well, I want you back there. You go every day."

"But Miss Stumpf will--"

"I'll take care of Miss Stumpf. You be there."

"Yes, sir."

"I want that championship. You hear?"

"Yes, sir."

He hung up.

I didn't tell him what I'd written.

5

It Hits the Fan

I said I hated girls. Especially Kim. All she could do was laugh—and hold hands with Eddy, who was sitting beside her in the “Chronicle” office when I got there.

“Bean, you’re not serious,” she said.

“Of course, I’m serious.”

“You think this is good writing?”

“Why isn’t it good writing?” I had learned early to answer a question with a question.

“You can’t go into orbit and write about everything you think is wrong. Journalists have sense. And we’re cautious. We don’t like getting sued.”

“But it’s the truth. Those girls don’t know one single thing about—”

“But you can’t print this stuff. You can’t write about her temper. You can’t tell all about the gods and goddesses and Mickey Mouse like this.” She held up her hand to keep me from interrupting. “You’re making Coach look ridiculous. We can’t do that in a school paper. I thought you said you’d never talk to a teacher the way I did. I did it to her face. You’re doing it in front of the world.”

“But I’ve just told the truth. They can’t sue you over the truth.”

“But this is nasty. Here, Eddy, read this.” She handed my paper to him.

“It’s the truth,” I said.

“It’s the truth. It’s the truth,” she said in a snide little voice. “Well, all this is not going in my paper.” She took it back from Eddy and with a red pencil crossed out half of what I’d written. “And, remember, when you write for the school paper you double space.”

“But you’re crossing out half my story!” I whimpered. “There won’t be anything left!”

“Oh, there’s a lot left, and it’s hot enough.”

“It better be.”

“I’ll let the adviser read it. If he passes it, we’ll print it in the next issue.”

“Good.”

“Just be prepared.”

“Why?”

“This is going to hit the fan.”

She gave me my paper. This was all that was left:

They call it a sport. They give it a coach and uniforms and a place to practice. They set up a schedule of

games. They get students to come in and watch. It all looks and sounds like high school volleyball. But is it? Really?

You watch a practice and what do you see?

The girls who have been practicing for weeks can barely get the ball over the net. They can't even roll it back to the person who served. They need to go back to the games little girls play with a golf ball up and down the sidewalk. Maybe then they'll learn how to handle a ball.

During scrimmage, the girls in the back row wait for the ball with their hands on their hips. The front-row girls bat the ball right back over the net without volleying it back and forth. They all jump up and down, playing windmill with their arms and shouting, "Way to go, babe, way to go!"

The girls volleyball team didn't win one game all last year. Any half-baked onlooker can tell what they need. It's called practice.

If these girls can't keep their minds on the ball and concentrate on practice, the school might as well drop girls' sports altogether and put the money in boys' sports where it will do more good.

Sunny Hills High would be better off if these girls just went home after school and helped their mothers.

* * *

Kim got our adviser's OK. He said the school didn't mind controversy as long as the opinion was signed. Students have a First Amendment right, he said, to print what they think about things that are public—like sports and plays and concerts.

"I'll print it," she said, "but I'm not responsible for what happens."

"But it's the truth."

"Yeah, the truth as you see it."

I left the room on that dig, and I went back to the practice after school.

This time the girls were walking in circles, one circle inside the other and going different directions. They were planting their feet—slap, slap—against the floor and chanting with each slap-slap.

"We're gonna win, babe! We're gonna win, babe! We're gonna win, babe! We're gonna win, babe!"

They were psyching themselves up so that they'd take the league championship. *How dumb can you get?* I asked myself.

Then they stopped that and went the other direction, calling out, "Zeus! Zeus! Zeus! Zeus!"

I shook my head. They make such a fuss when you mention God in public school, and then they worship Zeus and think nothing of it.

Dorks!

Miss Stumpf blew her whistle, and the girls scattered for practice.

It was the same batting-the-ball-over playtime it was the day before. The girls would screech and scream when someone got the ball over the net. They still couldn't roll it straight.

I just sat on the bleachers and put in my time. No one talked to me, and I didn't talk to them. Until Thursday.

The paper came out on Thursday.

You could hear the roar from anywhere you stood in that whole school.

The guys thought my column was great.

"Fantastic, Bean. Fan-tastic!"

"Bean strikes again!"

"Way to go, Bean!"

The girls were furious.

Girls I didn't even know came up and pulled my hair.

"You rat!"

"What do you know about girls sports?"

"You wait till the volleyball team gets through with you," one said. "They'll take you apart."

They were really steamed.

I just laughed. Until math class. It was then the class phone rang.

"Bean, you're wanted in the office," the teacher said.

You should have heard the class erupt. The girls whooped and clapped. The guys shouted, "Go, Bean, go!" over and over.

I didn't know what this was going to be about. Mr. Scruggs had told me to cover volleyball. I was probably going to get some kind of award. Maybe a medal.

The secretary told me to sit down and wait. I could hear shouting from Mr. Scruggs's office.

I stood up and went over to the counter. "Is he mad?"

"You better have an asbestos suit on when you go in there, Bean. They're talking about you."

"Me? What did I do?"

"What did you do?" A girl named Jennifer was walking toward me as if she was the bull in a bull ring and I was the one holding the red cloak. "What did you do? You think girls should stay home helping their mothers, do you? You think girls don't know anything about sports, do you?"

Well, you'll find out what's going on in there, and when you come out the girls volleyball team is going to skin you alive."

She turned to the secretary with a laugh. "And he says"—here she mimicked my voice—"Me? What did I do?"

"Well, I just wrote the truth!"

"Well, I just wrote the truth!" she repeated in that funny voice.

The door opened behind me.

"Bean? You get in here!" It was Mr. Scruggs, and he was really mad.

I walked into his office as I said, "Did you send for me?"

"Did he send for *you*!"

Standing right in front of me with her hands on her hips and her face as red as a beet was Stumpf. Er, I mean, Miss Stumpf.

She grabbed my shirt under my chin and pulled me up right in front of her face.

"And who do you think you are to write your punk little articles in the school paper about something you know absolutely nothing about? You think you can write anything you want without regard to the facts?"

She shook me when she said "the facts." She was so mad she was shaking.

"Eat him up, Miss Stumpf. Eat him up. Just leave me the hair and the toenails!" That was Mr. Scruggs! My friend Mr. Scruggs!

"But you told me to go over there," I said. "I didn't want to do it."

"Yes, you were my representative," he said. "But I didn't authorize you to write what you found out in the school paper. You didn't tell me that's what you were going to do."

"But it was the truth. I only wrote the truth!"

"You don't know the truth when it's looking you in the face." Miss Stumpf let go of my shirt and gave me a push. She was shouting. "Those girls aren't standing around with their hands on their hips because they have nothing to do. *That's the way you play volleyball!*"

"It is?" I couldn't believe this woman.

"And those girls are *supposed* to bat the ball and jump around like that. *That's the way you play volleyball!*" she was really yelling now.

I gulped. "It is?"

She bent over Mr. Scruggs's desk and looked him in the eye. "I don't want this boy to set one foot in that gym. You hear? Not one foot!"

Then she started pacing around the room.

"I have enough trouble getting girls to come out for volleyball," she said, "and even more getting them to stay on the team. I can't have some screw-loose reporter shooting off his mouth and ruining everything I've worked for."

I knew she was still mad at me for telling her girls they should name their god Mickey Mouse. I should have made her tell him what she did to Kim—and why.

“Expel him, Mr. Scruggs. Get rid of him. He’s no Hilltopper. If he had an ounce of loyalty, he wouldn’t do a thing like this.”

“Good idea!”

“What?”

“I said that’s a good idea,” Mr. Scruggs said. “We’ll expel you and get rid of the problem.”

“But I’m not the problem! Besides, don’t I get a second chance?”

“Should you get a second chance?” He turned to Miss Stumpf. “Should he get a second chance, Miss Stumpf?”

“You let this boy stay, and you’ll have nothing but trouble. I can see it in his eyes. He’s a trouble-maker.”

“Oh, I don’t see Bean as a trouble-maker,” Mr. Scruggs said. “Why, if it hadn’t been for him, we wouldn’t have had a winning season in football. No, I don’t see him as a trouble-maker.”

He tapped his pencil on his desk.

“Actually, Bean has a very good mind,” he went on as if he were talking to himself. “A very good mind. He knows how to think.”

“Hah!” Miss Stumpf didn’t believe him. “Not if he writes like that.”

“Well, that was a matter of ignorance.”

“Not ignorance. Stupidity!”

“No. Bean isn’t stupid. He does have a lot to learn. But, then, we all have a lot to learn,” he went on as if she hadn’t said a word. “Actually, I can count on Bean to tell me the truth. That’s why I like him to be my personal representative. I’ve heard all sorts of things about the girls volleyball team. And I thought Bean could tell me what was going on without my having to disturb you, Miss Stumpf.”

“So he’s a spy, is he? Your own personal spy!” That set off her rockers’ red glare.

“No-no-no-no. Bean’s no spy. And never once have I asked him to report to me about you. Have I, Bean?”

“No, sir.”

“I’m perfectly pleased with your coaching, Miss Stumpf. I’ve just wanted Bean, as a boy who uses his eyes and who thinks, to see if he can do for the volleyball team what he did for football. Nothing more than that.”

“It still sounds like spying to me.” She sat down on one of his chairs. She didn’t seem as angry now.

“Well, I want you to see Bean as doing you a service. He can tell us if there is any resentment in the student body or any kind of pressure being brought against the girls. You only see them in the gym, Miss Stumpf. Bean’s grown up with these young people. He knows them all very well.”

“Well...”

“Think you can keep us informed about things like that, Bean?”

“Oh, sure. Isn’t that what reporters are for?”

“Well, I don’t want any more eavesdropping,” she said. “No creeping up behind a person and listening in on personal conversations.”

“Bean, did you do that?”

“Yes, sir. She was talking to the class, and I didn’t want to disturb her by coming in. She was telling them about how they were goddess—”

She cut me off. “That incident is over, Mr. Scruggs. I just don’t want it to happen again.”

“So you’ll let Bean return to the gym? You won’t object to his keeping his eyes and ears open for you—and me—and, of course, the school newspaper?”

She sighed and thought a minute. “Oh, all right. But I will not have any more spying and no more stupidity in the ‘Chronicle.’”

“Bean?” Mr. Scruggs looked at me.

“I’ll be careful.”

“I have just one more thing to say, Miss Stumpf.”

“Yes?”

“I am expecting you to produce a championship team. I want that second championship. No high school in our tri-counties has ever won two state championships in a single year. We have one. Let’s get two. How about it, gang?”

Well, the final decision was that I would stay, but I would have to write a column of apology in the next school paper.

Mr. Scruggs got up in assembly the next day and said, “It gives me great pleasure to announce, despite what our esteemed student newspaper says, that girls’ sports will continue at Sunny Hills High.”

You should have heard the cheers and applause that rocked the auditorium. I scooted down as low as I could in my seat.

I’d felt like a nerd when I’d gone to watch the volleyball team.

Now I knew why.

I was one.

6

I Eat Crow

So I went back to the gym next day after school. I could tell that Grunt couldn't wait to get his hands around my neck. He wanted revenge for that article. I know hate when I see it. But I was Mr. Scruggs's special representative. He couldn't lay a finger on me.

When he wasn't watching the girls, he was watching me. I felt like a mouse in a cage with a rattlesnake. When I wasn't looking, that guy was going to strike. There was no way I could solve this volleyball puzzle with Grunt like this. I had to figure out a way to get him off my back.

Coach had the girls lying on their backs on the floor. She was walking all around, saying, "In, slowly. Out, slowly. In, relax. Out, relax."

I went high up in the bleachers and sat on the top bench next to the wall. I leaned back and watched.

I yawned. She was getting to me, too, with this relax bit.

Then she changed her pitch.

"In, Zeus. Out, confusion. In, Minerva. Out, tradition. In, Venus. Out, resentment. In, Mercury. Out, hatred."

When Becky saw me watching, she rolled her eyes.

Talk about religion in the schools! This witch was converting our girls. I was sure Mr. Scruggs didn't know about this. This wasn't just mythology. I got out my pen and paper and took notes. And I was sure to put the day's date on it. I wanted to be able to say that on this day she said such-and-such.

Well, she got them on their feet and into practice. She blew her whistle and pointed some girls to one side of the net and some to the other. Then she walked around, shouting, "Keep the ball up. Get it up. High in the air. Get it up."

Grunt began bossing the girls around too. I could tell they didn't like it. He was talking mean to them, and they were dishing it right back. He really got after Ruby. She didn't like being told what to do—especially by another student.

"Up in the air, horse!" he shouted at her. "Up in the air! You can't kill the ball if you're nailed to the floor."

"Don't you call me a horse!" she said. "You think you're so cute with your new nose and your new lady friend. Think you can go around with your camera and take pictures in the girls' locker-room to show the guys. Well, don't tell me what to do, or I'll—"

She was furious.

A whistle blasted. Miss Stumpf walked up. She put her arm around Grunt. "Thunder and lightning on Mount Olympus? That's no way for Zeus and Venus to rule the world. We love each other, remember? Love,

love, love!” She lifted the fingers of one hand above her head and turned like a dancer. Then she shouted, “Time in! Play ball!” as she walked away. The girls had all stopped to listen. But now they began moving around and bouncing the ball.

Miss Stumpf kept shouting, “In the air. Get the ball up. Keep it up.”

I wrote down what had happened and who said what. And then it came to me. I’d write an apology and have it printed in the “Chronicle” for everybody to see—including Grunt. I’d eat crow and make him think I was sorry. He’d forget about me and leave me alone. I’d be able to look and listen without having to worry about him.

I walked down the bleachers and across campus to the classroom building. As I went into the newspaper office, I said, “Here comes brightness. Oh, hi, Eddy.”

Kim was behind her desk, editing something on her computer with one hand. Eddy was holding the other. “You’re more blight than bright,” she said.

I could have given her a smart answer, but I knew the Lord wanted me to guard my mouth so I could be a good testimony. I just smiled at her and sat down behind a computer. I put in my disk and turned the switch.

“The kids read my column,” I said.

“Everybody read your column. I was up half the night talking about you.”

“Half the night?” I couldn’t believe it.

“People don’t understand how you have the nerve.”

“He’d tell you, but he’s too modest,” Eddy said.

“He’s just too humble,” she said.

“But she deserves it,” I said. “She’s turning those girls into a bunch of tweets. I had to do something.”

“It’s all over school,” Eddy said.

“You’re the laugh riot of Sunny Hills High,” Kim said. “Ever thought of being in the school play?”

“Tell him about it,” Eddy said.

“I don’t have the heart.” Kim rolled her eyes.

“But what else can I do?” I said. “You were there. You know she’s turning that team into a cult. And the way she makes eyes at Grunt—”

“You never did like Grunt, did you?” Kim said.

“Oh, I don’t know. Did you?”

“Well, I think we better watch him.”

“Me too,” I said. But she hadn’t answered my question.

“What are you doing here?” Eddy said.

“Eating crow,” I said.

“Eating crow?”

“Eating crow.”

“Why?”

“Those girls aren’t so dumb. They know what they’re doing.” There was no way I was going to tell him my strategy. He wouldn’t understand.

“The mighty Bean eats crow,” he said. “Will wonders never cease?”

I started typing. I called my column “Half-Baked Beans,” because I’d written in the first one that any half-baked observer could tell these girls needed to practice.

I wrote:

It’s called crow. You put it on a plate in front of everyone, and you eat it. There’s nothing sweet about it, even though some people call it “getting your just deserts.”

Here I thought I was so smart because I’d helped the football team. Even though I didn’t know much about volleyball, I figured I knew all I needed.

I didn’t.

I hurt a lot of people because I’m a dumb ignoramus.

I’m sorry, girls. You know more than I do. We need girls’ sports at Sunny Hills, and we don’t need a “half-baked observer” to realize that.

We have our first pre-season game coming up when we play Jefferson High. Use it to show your stuff, girls.

Get out there and BEAT JEFF!

By the time I was done, Kim and Eddy had left. I turned off the machine and put my disk in the box.

I wondered whether my eating crow would get the snake out of my cage.

And I wondered why Kim let Eddy hold her hand.

7

Talk About Hopeless!

There was no way we were going to beat Jeff. These girls didn't know a thing about strategy.

They had a practice game between our A-team and our B-team, and a lot of the student body came out to watch.

Our girls did what Miss Stumpf told them to do, and they made lots of noise. They came out with a lot of this "Way to go, babe" stuff when Grunt, on a pretend microphone, introduced our teams. They flexed their muscles to show their power, just like in the muscle magazines. The A-team won the toss and went into formation.

Amy Wilson, first girl up, held the ball in one hand and glared across the net like an angry ape. The other girls slumped over, their hands up, their eyes glaring like angry bulls. Amy looked around at the crowd, paused, sniffed in Grunt, and then pitched the ball in the air. It seemed to hang there, suspended. Then she gave it a swat. It didn't even make it to the net.

"Change serve," Grunt announced.

Anderson on the B-team served underhand. The ball went over the net, but it also went over the A-team and sailed out of bounds. It was half an hour before anyone scored any points.

B-team served. Ruby put her fists under the ball and got it high, but the forward who took it misjudged. The ball went off her fingers and out of bounds. "Point!"

The next serve came to Wilson. She lunged and missed the ball.

"Point!"

The next serve was lobbed a couple of times, but Harris tried to slam it, and it went into the net.

"Point!"

From there on it got worse. Nothing the A-team girls could do would break the serve. Finally, the B-team server sent it over everyone's head again and out of bounds.

A-team served. It went into the net.

B-team served. It went into the net.

Finally, Coach called out, "OK, that's it! Let's go home! Practice over. Go get dressed."

It was hopeless. This team would be laughed right out of the league. Miss Stumpf and Grunt had their heads together. Miss Stumpf was biting her nails. She looked worried. Well, she had reason to be. Championship team? Hah!

Grunt turned and looked for me. When we locked eyes, I saw him

nudge Miss Stumpf and point at me with his thumb. I knew he was blaming me for making the girls nervous.

I just hoped I lived till the day my new column came out.

I walked over to Becky and Ruby. "You guys have got it all wrong."

"Like what?"

"You can't inhale Grunt. He can't help you. If I were you, I'd pretend the ball was his head. Sock him every time you hit the ball."

The girls shrieked. They loved it. Then they ran laughing to the locker-room—to tell the other girls, I guess.

I didn't leave, even after everyone had gone home. I had the feeling something else was wrong, and I had to figure it out. Isn't that why Mr. Scruggs had me over here?

Why weren't the girls any better? Something was making them nervous. But what? The gods and goddesses stuff? I'd killed that with Mickey Mouse. I was sure they weren't taking that "in Zeus and out Minerva or whatever it was" stuff seriously.

Was it the noise?

They were practicing in a gym by themselves. It must be that the noise of the crowd was getting to them.

Was it the boys? Maybe they weren't used to having the male half of the student body cheering for them. I didn't know.

Maybe they really were depressed over my column. I'd given them a hard kick while they were down. Maybe they needed a lift. But my new column wouldn't be out till Thursday.

I talked to Mr. Scruggs again about the gods and goddesses stuff, but he still wasn't bothered by that. He thought it was just using mythology in the classroom and that there wasn't any religion to it.

I also told him about the boys and the noise. He thought that made sense. He must have contacted Stumpf—er, Mss Stumpf—because at the next practice someone brought a radio and turned it up loud near a public address system so that there was a lot of noise blaring out all afternoon.

And boys were there. The teacher in charge of detention had brought the whole class to the gym. No one knew why, but I did. Mr. Scruggs had gotten to work on what I'd found out.

And sure enough, practice was great all week. Miss Stumpf walked around blowing her whistle and shouting, "Keep the ball up! Get it up! Keep it high!"

The girls settled down, once they got accustomed to the noise. And they seemed to enjoy having the guys there. Most of all, they whammed and bammed on that ball all week. They pretended it was Grunt's head. Sometimes they even got it over the net.

I sort of strutted around inside myself, pretty happy that I'd come up with the right answers. Maybe I did have a good mind that could figure these things out.

Sometimes I thought so. Sometimes I didn't. Like the other job I picked up.

We were practicing shots in the gym—Eddy and his friends and I. They were rapping as they often did—two steps ahead of me. I had trouble keeping up with what they were saying.

We were running in a big circle. Eddy was feeding us the ball.

“Let's do something, do it fast,” he said as he tossed the ball out.

The guy who caught it said, “Yeah, before the season's past,” as he took the ball and put up his lay-in.

The next guy said, “Get the girls to kill the ball,” as he took the ball and dunked it.

The next guy say, “Beat Big Jeff, and win it all.”

Each one said something in seven sounds.

“Gotta get the girls to fight.”

“Feed them grits, build up their might.”

“Gotta get the girls to think.”

“Gotta keep them in the pink.”

“Need a lift. How will we lift 'em?”

“Need a gift. How will we gift 'em?”

“Find a way to raise their grade.”

“Sugar, joy juice, lemonade.” That was Eddy.

I didn't know what they were talking about. I didn't say anything when it was my turn to take the ball. I just made my pass at the basket and ran around. Sometimes I scored. Sometimes I didn't.

“Need to find some stim-u-lation.”

“Need to make them a sen-sation.”

“Need to open up their eyes.”

“Need to give them a surprise.”

“Need to help them raise their grade.”

“Sugar, joy juice, lemonade.” We were back to Eddy again.

I didn't see how those guys could think so fast.

“Who to do? Not me. Not you.”

“Who to do? I ask you. Who?”

“How about good old boy Grunt?”

“He's too busy down in front.”

“How about our wrestler, Eddy?”

“Season's past on him already.”

“Who will lead them from the shade?”

“How about our ol' ninth grade?”

“Ol' ninth grade? Our ol' ninth grade?”

“He can lead the girls' parade.”

“Sugar, joy juice, lemonade.”

“What are you guys talking about?” It was my turn. But I stopped. I'd lost the drift. Were they talking about me?

“We’re just rapping.”

“Yeah,” someone else said.

“We think we know what’s wrong with those girls and why they can’t play right.”

“You do?”

“Yeah.” Eddy nodded. “We think they’ve got low blood sugar. We’re trying to figure out a way we can do something about that.”

“Oh, that’s easy,” I said. “Serve them Kool-aid or lemonade, something that has sugar in it that’ll give them a lift.”

“Hey, this dude can think!”

“Why didn’t we think of that?”

“But how can we pull it off? She’ll kill us for interfering.”

“Who? Miss Stumpf?” I said. “I’ll get Mr. Scruggs to OK it. She’ll have to let you if he says so.”

“Boy, talk about power. You sure know all the right people, Bean,” Eddy said.

I just grinned.

“But she won’t want us down near her girls. Who’ll set up shop?”

“Yeah, who’ll pour the drinks?”

“Who’ll keep them filled?”

“Oh, I can do that,” I said. “I’m already down there. They don’t mind if I’m near the bench. They like me.”

“But who can we get to make it up?”

“My mom would do it, but she works.”

“Hey! We’ll do it, man!”

“I’ll bring the sugar!”

“Where’ll we get a jug?”

“What about the lemons?”

“And the squeezer.”

“No, you don’t,” I said. “You can’t do all that. The city health code won’t let you. You’ve got to do it through the cafeteria.”

“Bean—” one of them slapped me on the back. “You’ve got a brain that works. I’ve heard about your brain.”

“Why didn’t we think of that?”

“Yeah. We’re dumb, man.”

“Bean, the brain.”

“Ninth grade whiz kid,” Eddy said.

“But the cafeteria doesn’t deliver,” I said.

“Oh, we’ll pick it up. That’s no big deal,” Eddy said.

“Well, I’ll get Brian Sheetz to set up a table for us and get us a long sheet of butcher paper for a tablecloth. We’ll need cups. The cafeteria can supply them. We don’t need napkins. I’ll tell Mr. Scruggs about all this and get him to clear it with Miss Stumpf. Hey—” I smiled. “This might be just the thing to turn the trick.”

“Yeah,” all the guys said.

“Bean, the brain,” Eddy said.

Well, I told Mr. Scruggs.

“Good idea, Bean. You call the cafeteria and set it up. Tell them to use 4761 for the requisition number—that’s our account for sport specials. They have ladies who can squeeze the lemons and mix up the juice. How many gallons do you think we need?”

“Well, those big coffee urns hold a lot. Athletes really drink, you know.”

“You take care of that, Bean, and I’ll call Coach Stumpf to make sure this is all right with her. I know she’ll want the girls to drink during games to keep up their stamina, especially if the drink has a little sugar in it.”

He said to go ahead as if everything was A-OK. He’d get back to me if we had to call it off.

I liked the idea. I would be closer to the players, and the girls would hear me when I cheered them on.

Kim was in the “Chronicle” office when I went by to tell her. “You live here or something?” I said.

She gave me a look. “When you are in the work-a-day world, young man, you devote yourself to your profession.”

I slumped down in a chair and put my feet on her desk. “I got a new job,” I said.

“Yeah?”

“Chief cook and bottle washer.”

“McDonald’s?”

“Nope. Lemonade.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“The guys think the girls’ blood sugar is low, so I suggested we feed them some lemonade. A little sugar at the right time will give them energy and maybe then they can get the ball over the net. Seems to me it’s worth a try.”

“I don’t like it.”

“Well, it’s not bad if you put a lot of sugar in to help the lemons. You’d like it then. We’re going to get it from the cafeteria. I already talked to Mr. Scruggs. He thinks it’s a good idea.”

“I’m not talking about not liking it. I like it. It’s the idea I don’t like.”

“Why not? Don’t you want to win?”

“It’s a stimulant. For every up side there’s a down side. Nope. I don’t like it.”

“You never like anything I suggest. You don’t like my columns. You don’t respect my opinions. You don’t like my ideas.”

“It’s just a dopey idea. If those girls aren’t good enough to win on their own, let them lose. That’s what high school sports is all about. You

can't go around giving people sugar so they'll win a game. It's not fair."

"Well, Grunt's friends thought it was a good idea. And Mr. Scruggs thought it was a good idea. And if Miss Stumpf thinks it's a good idea, then you'll see a table at the next game. It's that simple."

"You're the one who's simple."

Women!

I was halfway down the hall when I heard my name being called. I turned around. Kim had stuck her head out the office door.

"Hey, Bean!"

"Yeah?"

"Whose idea was that—about the lemonade?"

"Mine—and Eddy's."

"Eddy's?"

"Yeah."

"Oh! If it's Eddy's—"

She pulled her head back in and shut the door.

Now what was that supposed to mean? She didn't like the lemonade if it was my idea, but it was OK if it was Eddy's. What did Eddy have that I didn't have?

I called Becky that night and told her about the lemonade and how it would raise the girls' blood sugar.

"So that's what they're up to."

"What do you mean, 'up to?'"

"Well, those guys are always hanging around. The girls are afraid of them. It's like they're vultures waiting for one of us to—oh, I don't know."

"Is that why the girls don't like Grunt?"

"It's mostly that he scares the nice guys away. They don't date us. They don't wait for us after practice. Grunt thinks he owns us. He keeps us off balance. We never know what he'll do next."

"I knew there was some reason. What about--"

"Bean, I've got to hang up. I've got a big test tomorrow. See you."

Hey! Now we were getting somewhere.

8

Jefferson and Madison

We had a good crowd out, and they made lots of noise. Brian Sheetz brought in a table and a long sheet of paper for a tablecloth. I'd made arrangements with the ladies in the cafeteria, and Grunt's friends had picked up the coffee urn and a stack of paper cups. They had made a big sign on butcher paper that ran the length of the table like a skirt. It said, BEAN'S CANTEEN. In little letters underneath they had written, "For Ladies' Volleyball Team Only." They didn't want all the students coming over for drinks.

Our girls came out with a lot of this "Way to go, babe" stuff when the teams were introduced. They flexed their muscles to show how powerful they were—just as Miss Stumpf told them to.

While the referee and the captains were tossing the coin, the girls came over to my table and helped themselves.

"Look alive there, Harris," I said. "Grind them into the floor, Jonesy."

We won the toss, and the girls took the court.

Ruby Ruberg, first girl up, held the ball in one hand and glowered across the net like an angry ape. The other girls slumped over, their hands up, their eyes glaring like angry bulls. Ruby looked around at the crowd, paused, took a deep breath to inhale Grunt's power, and then pitched up the ball. It hung there, suspended. She gave it a swat. It went over the net like a bullet and fell into pay dirt on the other side.

"Point!" the guy on the mike announced, and our crowd cheered. Ruby turned and winked at Becky.

The girls were calling out to each other, "Way to go, babe. Way to go. Let's go. Come on, babe."

Ruby got four more points. Then one of our backs missed a dig and sent the ball out of bounds. It went over to the other side.

The Jefferson server went to the line. Her teammates had their hands up, but not one of them was glaring. There was a lot of chatter like they were having fun. Here came the toss and *wham!* The ball zinged over the net and stomped one of our girls into the floor.

Point!

After that it was point, point, point, point, point. The Jeff server was really good. She had a jump-serve that gave her power no other girl on either side had. She got the ball over the net every time. She knew how to place it, too, and she'd put it in a corner or down in a spot where a girl had gotten out of position. *Wham!* Point!

She won that game. It was 15-4.

The girls switched sides.

Most of our girls stopped by my table.

“Play ball.” The referee called.

Jefferson served. And I watched. Really watched.

Ruby put her fists under the ball and got it high. Jones, playing forward, misjudged the ball. It went off her fingers and out of bounds.

Jefferson served again, and our girls returned the ball. The Jeff girls stayed in their positions and synchronized their returns. They seemed to have strategies for offense and defense we never knew existed. Our girls all swarmed after the ball whenever it came over the net. None of them knew a thing about staying in position.

I wondered why.

A Crusader whammed it out of bounds.

“Change serve!”

Rotation put Wilson on the line. She had an underhand serve that soared up near the rafters. It dropped like a bomb. A Jefferson gal had her hands up and ready, but they were too far apart. The ball went between them and smacked her in the face.

Did we ever cheer. It never occurred to us that it might have hurt her. She was Jefferson. We hated Jefferson. And finally we had a point.

The Crusaders were ready for Wilson’s next bomber, and they lobbed it back. And our girls started to volley! It went from Anderson to Harris to Smith and over. Next time back it was Ruberg to Jones, who was front court left, to Smith, who was front middle, and *wham*. Smith had really inhaled Grunt on that one. She leaped high, and the ball almost went through the floor.

Talk about surprises! Miss Stumpf hadn’t taught them how to do that. At least, I hadn’t seen her. I guess they’d read my column, asked some questions, and practiced this on their own. Wow!

Our girls were hyper. They weren’t scoring all that many points. In fact, they got creamed. But they were enjoying playing so much that some of them wanted to keep playing after the game was over. Coach had to snatch the ball away or they would have.

The girls went screaming and chirping into their locker room like they’d just won the battle of the planets. I wondered if it was the thrill of learning a new technique, or was it something else?

I stayed around after the teams left the floor and everyone had gone home.

I had to go over my notes and make sure I saw what I thought I saw. Isn’t that why Mr. Scruggs had me over here?

Some things I just didn’t understand.

I had thought the girls just needed some energy, but the lemonade certainly hadn’t helped us win. We’d been humiliated.

So why were our girls so bad? Why didn’t they know what to do out

there? Did they think they'd win because of that hocus-pocus stuff about Venus and Minerva? Was Grunt keeping these girls so off balance that they couldn't get the ball over the net? What was wrong?

And what were they so happy about?

I didn't know.

The phone rang that night. It was Kim.

"Come to think of it, Bean, now that you've got the volleyball team all fixed up—uh—I've decided to move you to another sport."

"But we didn't win."

"Well, the girls seemed pretty happy there at the end. Now, let's see. What other sport needs help? We haven't done too well in track, and our tennis team is bummers. Want to take on one of them?"

"Well, I don't know about that."

"Girls' softball?"

"No, I—"

"Boys' hardball? Now, there's a sport that's all mixed up. How about soccer?"

"Well, I'll have to check it out with Mr. Scruggs first. He made me his personal representative to volleyball, you know."

"But you've solved that. You saw how they played Jefferson."

"I haven't solved anything. He'll have my hide."

"But you did what he wanted. You gave it your best shot. Don't ride the thing into the ground. Take soccer."

"No, I—"

"But I tell you—yes!"

"Not until I check with—"

"Listen, I'm your editor, and I'm assigning you to soc—"

"Sorry 'bout that. I'm not moving till I clear with Mr. Scruggs."

"Oh, you make me sick!"

"So, what's the big deal?"

"Nothing you'd understand!" And she hung up.

Well, what was that all about? I said to myself. And then I smiled. I hadn't let her talk me out of what I wanted to do.

Maybe I wasn't so weak after all.

Little I knew.

* * *

My new column came out on Thursday, but it didn't help any. Oh, it took Grunt off my back. But it didn't inspire the girls to win any games.

In our game against Madison, the girls were deader than dead. They didn't start out that way. In the beginning, it looked like this was going to

be a Sunny Hills one-two-three-you're-out kind of game.

The girls came onto the floor with the very same savvy they'd showed with Jeff. They looked good in warm-up. They made lots of noise and "Way to go, babe" ruckus and stuff.

I was in a tizzy because the guys hadn't gotten there with the coffee urn and cups. How were we going to keep our girls' throats lubricated if we didn't have our juice? I went to the door and looked up and down the hall, but there was no sign of anyone lugging a big urn.

We lost the toss, but we got the serve soon enough.

Ruby put her toe on the serving line and looked around at her team. She paused and looked at the crowd. Miss Stumpf had told her to look for Grunt. She must have found him because she tossed the ball in the air and *splat!* It hit the net.

Nothing made sense. Madison didn't have a good team. A lot of their serves went into the net too. But the Patriots won the first game 15-2.

What puzzled me was that their captain would hold up three fingers and signal something to her team. Ruby never did that.

The second game was no better. We didn't score a point, and the Patriots slowly built up a good lead.

I knew it was because our girls needed some sugar. I went out in the hall to look for the guys and almost bumped into them.

"We had to take it back. They didn't have the right kind of juice," Eddy said.

"Oh, it doesn't have to be any certain kind," I said. "Just so long as it's wet. These gals are dying of thirst."

We got set up quick as we could. Coach called time out, and the girls all crowded around the table. They were so dry they practically drained the tank then and there. In fact, they were so thirsty they got half of it down their shirt fronts. But not Ruby. She was the only one who had any manners. She didn't spill a drop.

Seeing them drink made me thirsty. I took a paper cupful. It had a tangy taste, but it was good. I drank another cup.

"Hey, that's not for you. That's for the girls," Eddy said.

"Yeah, what do you think you're doing, Bean? That's not for you."

"Put that down!"

"Get out of here!"

"But I worked for this!" I said. Boy, you would've thought the walls were going to come crashing down the way they were carrying on. Here I was doing all their work, and they wouldn't even let me have a drink.

No sooner did our girls get back into position than Eddy and his pals poured what was left of the juice back into the urn, folded up the table, carried it off the floor, and left. And those guys weren't the only ones pushing their way out the door. There's one thing our school doesn't like, and that's losers.

So what if we were behind 10-0? If there's one thing that makes me mad, it's when the student body runs out on a team that's trying its hardest to win.

I ran down the bleachers and toward the door, yelling, "Stop! Hey, stop! This is no time to leave. Give these gals a chance. Come on back, hey! Give them a chance."

I don't know what got into me. I'd never done a thing like that before. But someone had to speak up. Some of them came back, but a lot more didn't. And it was just as good they didn't. They didn't miss anything. Here, I'd thought the girls would be inspired because I believed in them and wanted everybody to stay and see them win. But it didn't work. We lost every game.

Madison went home laughing. That's what made me mad.

I had to think this thing through. What were we doing wrong? Why were we so dumb? With all our practice, why weren't we better players?

Didn't the girls want to win? I knew Becky and I knew Ruby. They wanted to win, all right.

So what was going wrong?

Was it that they were too proud and wouldn't do what Coach wanted them to do? No, they hadn't won a game last year. And they certainly weren't winning any this year.

So what was wrong?

I had to lay out the facts like a math problem.

What was given?

We hadn't won a game ever. We practiced every day. Coach made sure they stayed in good physical condition with their exercises. Coach made them keep the ball in the air. Coach—

What else did she do? Grunt took the roll. She didn't.

She blew her whistle and called out, "Keep it up. Get that ball up." But I'd never heard her teach the girls anything, had I? She had no strategy sessions. She didn't show the team how to get the ball over the net or how to defend against a slam. I'd never heard her say one word about how to play the game.

Was that what Becky meant the first day? She said the coach doesn't want anyone to know something. Could it be that she doesn't want anyone to know that she doesn't know one thing about volleyball?

That made sense to me. A lot of teachers have to teach classes they don't know much about. Their principal needs someone to take a class. They aren't teaching a class that hour, or they need the extra pay a coaching job will give them.

It wasn't her fault, I guess. But I could see why she was pumping that New Age stuff into them. She was hoping they'd psych themselves into winning. Only it wasn't working.

But why did she have Grunt?

To keep the girls scared so they wouldn't tell anyone?

Probably.

And why did she get so mad at me for writing that column about the girls just needing practice?

Because it was the truth, that's why.

And truth hurts.

She didn't want Mr. Scruggs to know that she hadn't taught these girls one single thing about volleyball. That's why they hadn't won a game ever. She was a New Age missionary with a captive audience. She got to preach her message and make converts, and no one said a thing because volleyball at our school was new and everybody thought she just needed time to develop a good team.

It's funny how things were beginning to make sense.

So what was I supposed to do about it? Tell Mr. Scruggs? I knew he wouldn't believe me.

And I knew we wouldn't win a game, much less have a chance for a championship with Miss Stumpf and Grunt in charge.

Lord, I prayed. Help me to get rid of them.

And help me to get rid of this headache.

My head was throbbing. Maybe all the thinking I'd been doing had given me a headache. I was feeling jittery inside, and I felt sick to my stomach. I had to get out of there and get home.

And fast!

9 Grant

He didn't believe me.

"I knew you had a good brain, Bean, but it never occurred to me to analyze your imagination. You can't expect me to believe that a credentialed teacher doesn't know how to teach her subject."

"I didn't say she didn't know how. I said she wasn't teaching it. She doesn't do anything but walk around yelling, 'Keep the ball up! Keep it up! In the air! Keep it high!'"

"She taught them the rules before you ever got there."

"Excuse me, Mr. Scruggs, but she didn't. Everything I wrote in that column she got mad at was true. They don't have the slightest idea what to do in a game. They don't keep their positions. They don't know strategy."

"And you do?"

"Well, I know more than they do."

"You want to coach the team?"

"Sure. Why not? I'll take them clear to the championships. How about it?"

"Because I don't believe you. Miss Stumpf is thoroughly qualified. She knows what she's doing. I trust her completely."

"Then come to our next game, Mr. Scruggs. See for yourself."

"I just might do that."

* * *

I knew I was going to be late. One of my teachers made me stay in after school—well, to be honest, it was detention. I was tardy too many times. It seems that I hate to leave the thing I'm doing—like lying in bed.

I asked Kim to cover for me with setting up the table and filling the cups when Eddy and his guys brought in the urn. And, sure enough, they had the cups all out, and the girls were drinking away by the time I got to the Grant game.

This may have been only the last preliminary game before the start of the season, but it was a big game for Grant. Every game was a big game for Grant. They were planning to go to State. The gym was packed. Grant's student body had come in a line of buses that stretched halfway around our school. There was no way I could get down to the table. I could barely squeeze in the door.

The game started with a lot of that "Way to go, babe" stuff. But as

before, we didn't do much on offense. Oh, we kept them from getting points, but we couldn't seem to put any long drives together. Not even Ruby. It was as if the girls weren't concentrating.

Then one of them went over and spoke to the guy at the mike. We heard him say over the PA system, "If there's a student here named Bean, will he come down to the Sunny Hills bench?"

I pushed my way through the standing-room-only crowd. "Let me through, please. That's me they're calling for. Let me through, please."

The girls cheered me as I came out of the crowd. They jumped up and down and made their squealing sounds like a bunch of idiots. How do you look cool when they've stopped a game and are waiting for you to cross the floor and join the girls' team?

There's no way. You just say to yourself, "Here comes the nerd."

"Our good luck charm is here," one of them said. "Now let's get to work."

They had me sit on the bench with the team members who weren't on the floor. Ruby was up to serve. She jumped into the ball. *Zing!* It hit the net.

The girls on the Grant bench leaped to their feet and screamed and laughed and waved. Good luck charm, hah! They knew it. Everybody knew it. You can't ask for luck when you don't even know how to play the game.

Grant served.

"Point."

It was point, point, point, point.

There was no contest. Grant won the first game. But they didn't wipe us out. Ruby made some great saves and a couple of good slams. She even served the ball over the net a couple of times and made some points.

The teams changed sides. Some of the girls went over to the refreshment table. I noticed Ruby didn't. She sat down next to me.

"Hey, Ruby, babe," I said. "Nice going."

"Nothing works. Venus doesn't work. Zeus doesn't work. Having you here doesn't work. We don't understand."

"You don't believe that junk about Zeus, do you?"

"Why not? What else is there to believe?"

My heart leaped. "Hey, the Lord Jesus is the One who died for you sins, kid. Minerva never did that."

She gave me a look that showed she hadn't thought about that before.

"I don't want to talk about it, Bean, OK?"

"Yeah, sure. Say, tell me, how come you're not drinking the lemonade?"

"I guess I don't like it."

"Bitter?"

"No, it's not bitter. I just don't like what it does to me."

“Gives you energy?”

“No. It makes me feel all jittery inside, and it gives me a headache. I don’t know. I just keep away from it. It doesn’t seem to bother the other girls.”

“Hey, that’s what happened to me when we played Madison. I drank two cups.”

“Think someone’s putting something in it?”

“How come it doesn’t bother the other girls?”

“Beats me.”

“Besides, who would do a thing like that?”

“Beats me.”

The whistle blew, and she went out on the court. In a minute, she was back.

“Grunt said I’m to sit out this one. He wants to give some of the other girls a chance.”

“What’s he got to do with it?” I said. “He’s not the coach.”

“He might as well be. Coach Stumpf gives him a lot of say.”

“I’ve noticed,” I said. “Wonder why.”

We watched the game. Grant was good, and without Ruby in there we didn’t have any zip.

“We want Ru-by! We want Ru-by!” the kids in the bleachers howled.

She flipped her pony tail out of her face and leaned out to watch Grunt. She couldn’t go in unless he gave the sign. He didn’t move.

“Ruby! Ruby! Ruby! Ruby!” The guys weren’t giving up.

Grunt motioned Ruby to go in. You should have heard the cheers.

She took Harris’s place—front row left. Tina went to the bench and practically collapsed on it. She put her head in her hands and sat as if she was feeling sick to her stomach. Nobody else seemed to notice. Everyone was watching Grant serve.

The ball went to a back, who gave it a dig. Ruby lobbed it to the forward on the other corner. That forward leaped up and slammed it down on the other side.

The crowd roared. We were back in style.

Ruby moved into the back row on the rotation and waited, her hands folded in front of her, while Lizzy Smith served. Net ball.

Ruby danced around behind Flory, gave Liz a pat on the back, and said something to her.

Grant served, and the ball came to Liz. She lunged to get it, missed, sprawled on the floor, and just lay there. She didn’t get up.

I looked at Grunt. For some reason I just didn’t trust him. He ran over to the crowd around Lizzy. Miss Stumpf was there, helping her up and getting her to a bench where they could stretch her out. The game started up again while Coach was feeling her pulse.

I looked at Tina. She still had her head down.

Grant served again. Ruby got the ball and sent it into the air. The girls batted it back and forth across the net several times. Then Morris and Jones, jumping up side by side, blocked the ball, and we got our serve back.

Flory was just about to serve when the guy on the mike said, "Is there a doctor in the house?"

I quick looked at Lizzy. She was still down on her back. Tina was lying on the floor on her stomach.

The game stopped, and the girls all stood around while the school nurse came out of the stands and reached for Tina's wrist.

Eddy and his friends were slopping their cups of juice back into the coffee urn as fast as they could. That didn't look right to me. I didn't know what was wrong, but I had to do something.

I darted past the crowd around Lizzy and Coach. At the end of the table was a cup of whatever it was, and the guys hadn't gotten to it yet.

I picked it up and started back across the gym floor.

"No, you don't!"

Eddy came out of nowhere. He had his claws dug into my arm. "Put it back." He'd hit a nerve, and he knew it. He wormed his fingers on it till I screamed.

I was putting the cup back when Becky ran up and snatched it out of my hands. She'd seen Eddy come at me, and she knew something was up. She had enough wits to figure that the drink might be connected to Lizzy and Tina and their konking out.

She started running back across the floor with the cup of juice held out in front of her.

"Get that girl," Eddy shouted at his friends.

He dropped my arm and ran after her. He crashed into some of our girls and knocked them down.

"Get him!" They hadn't seen who hit them. They thought it was Grunt. They took off after him.

All I could see was a lot of guys running around over by the other bleachers. People were passing the paper cup up on a diagonal through the crowd. I had to get it. I ran to the foot of the bleachers and made a fuss.

"Hey, that's my cup. I want my cup. Pass it down here. My cup. Hey, my cup!"

People got the idea and began handing it down toward me. It was coming closer, down, down. I looked to my left to make sure Eddy wasn't about to pounce. I couldn't see him. Down, closer. It was coming. Just one or two more rows.

I reached for it.

Just one more row.

"Don't give him that cup!" Eddy shouted. He was coming on the run. But he was too late. I had it.

I turned toward the door. I had to get out. But the pep band was marching across the floor toward me, trying to distract the crowd from the problems we were having with Lizzy and Tina.

I had to bee-line for the door, but I couldn't holding the cup in front of me. I darted into the band formation. I cut left, then right. I had to lose Eddy. How I dodged those trombones, I'll never know.

"Stop him! *Stop him!*" Eddy was shrieking behind me.

What could I do? I had to do something. The fuss he was making over this juice made me all the more suspicious. Had he been trying to poison our girls?

I could feel his hand reaching for my back.

I was trapped. People were standing everywhere. There was no way I could get through the door.

And then I saw Mr. Scruggs.

"Here." I put the cup in his hand. "Guard this with your life. They're after me."

And then, pretending I still had the cup, I pivoted right and ran off in another direction. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Eddy. He seemed mixed up. He didn't know whether to come after me or go after Mr. Scruggs.

He stopped. One of his friends was right behind him. They talked for a second, and then they both ran right at Mr. Scruggs. When they got to him, his friend pushed Eddy.

"Nobody says that about Sunny Hills, you jerk," he said as he pushed. Eddy sprawled in the air and fell against Mr. Scruggs. Both of them went down, and Eddy made sure the cup went down with them.

From the way everything happened, you would have thought they'd rehearsed it.

Eddy got up apologizing and helping Mr. Scruggs get to his feet. Then he pretended he slipped in the juice and went down again. Did he want his clothes to soak up the stuff so there would be no evidence? I pulled out my handkerchief and went right over.

"Hey, we better get this stuff off the floor before someone slips," I said.

I swabbed the juice into my handkerchief. But Eddy, scrambling to get up again, snatched it away from me and jammed it in his pocket. His friend came up with a mop, and there went my evidence.

I looked around for the coffee urn. That was gone, too. These guys knew how to cover their tracks.

I felt a finger on my chest. "You keep your nose out of our business, Bean," Eddy said. "You're gonna get hurt."

"Says who?"

He pointed to his friends walking out the door. "That's who."

10

Miss Stumpf

What with the band playing and the crowd shouting, Mr. Scruggs sprawling, and my effort to get away with the cup of juice, I hadn't noticed what was happening to Lizzy and Tina.

I turned and watched. Mrs. Dyck, the school nurse, had come down when the guy on the mike called for a medic, but Miss Stumpf was waving the lady away.

"No. Don't touch her! She's all right. Both of them will be all right. I'll take care of them. They're all right."

But Mrs. Dyck didn't want to go. "I will so touch her," she was saying. "I'm a nurse, and these girls need help. Now, get out of the way."

"This is my team and my court," Miss Stumpf snapped back. "You will not touch these girls." Then she turned to Grunt. "Keep this woman away from my girls, Grunt," Miss Stumpf said. "And get your friends to take Tina and Lizzy to the cots in the girls dressing room."

Grunt whistled for Eddy and his friends. He hadn't seen that business with the cup. "Help me with these girls," he shouted. He thought they were still around.

He stepped between the nurse and the girls, then butted her out of the way as he bent over to get Tina up off the floor.

"Don't you lay a finger on those girls," the nurse said. She gave Grunt a knee and sent him sprawling. He was so surprised he just sat on the floor where he landed.

Miss Stumpf was down beside Tina. She was talking in her ear. There was so much noise I couldn't hear what she was saying.

Tina just lay there with two fingers in her mouth like she was konked out. Coach kept talking. She put her hand on Tina's shoulder and shook her. But there was no response.

Mrs. Dyck got down on the other side of Tina and reached for her pulse. A worried look came over her face. She looked around for someone to talk to.

I ran over to her. "You need help?" I said.

"Find Mr. Scruggs. Didn't I see him here? This is an emergency!"

As I turned to look for him, Miss Stumpf reached across Tina's body and gave the nurse a shove. "I told you to keep away from this girl. She's a goddess. She can take care of herself. She has all the power she needs to heal whatever's wrong with her, and I won't have you interfering."

"That's all right, dearie," Mrs. Dyck said in a soothing voice. "We'll get you back to the funny farm just as soon as we take care of this poor girl."

Miss Stumpf flared. “Don’t you talk to me like that! I won’t stand for it.”

I spotted Mr. Scruggs. He was talking to the Grant coach. I just barreled in.

“Coach won’t let Mrs. Dyck touch the girls. Mrs. Dyck says it’s an emergency. She needs your help right now. Hurry!”

He looked up and saw Coach and Mrs. Dyck shoving each other. We ran back. “What’s going on here, Miss Stumpf? What’s wrong? Why won’t you let Mrs. Dyck help? She’s a fully qualified nurse.”

Coach looked up. She had that turn-a-guy-to-stone look in her eye. “Leave us alone. Tina’s all right. She just needs a moment to collect her thoughts.”

“Rubbish!” Mrs. Dyck said. “That girl has had a seizure! She needs medical help at once!”

“You put one finger on her and I’ll—I’ll—” Miss Stumpf’s eyes were flashing.

“Miss Stumpf,” Mr. Scruggs said, “I order you to let this nurse examine that girl. I will not have any interference from you or anybody else!”

“But she already has the power to heal herself. She just needs time,” Miss Stumpf barked back.

Mrs. Dyck gave Mr. Scruggs a look that told him Miss Stumpf was crazy. She reached for Tina’s wrist and said to Mr. Scruggs, “Her pulse is racing. Has she had a stimulant of some kind?”

“Only the lemonade,” I said.

“We serve the girls lemonade,” Mr. Scruggs told her.

“Well, there was something more than lemons in it, then,” she said.

Well, the band started playing, and people were wondering what was going to happen next.

The Grant coach came over to Miss Stumpf and tapped her on the shoulder. “You calling this game off, Miss Stumpf? You ready to forfeit?”

That got Miss Stumpf on her feet. “Forfeit? Never!”

“Well, get the show on the road then. We don’t have all day.”

Miss Stumpf didn’t know what to do. She was fighter enough not to want to forfeit, but she didn’t want to leave Tina in Mrs. Dyck’s control.

“Grunt,” she called, “tell the girls to get back in formation so we can finish the game. Tell them to win it for Venus and Minerva. Tell them Mount Olympus is watching.”

Grunt blew his whistle, and our girls gathered around him.

“Venus and Minerva, is it?” Mrs. Dyck laughed bitterly. She looked at me. “The dimwits they get to coach these days. I never!” She shook her head and rolled her eyes.

They were going to start the game again, but the crowd didn’t know enough to get off the floor. Someone had to tell them, so I did. I ran to the man with the mike. “Tell them to clear the floor and get back in the

bleachers. Tell them the game will be starting again in just a few minutes.”

He reached for the mike, and we heard his voice boom out. “Everybody clear the floor, please. Get back in your seats. Everybody clear the floor, please. Get back in your seats. The game will begin again in a moment.”

He paused as people began to move. “Clear the floor, please.”

Well, it was like a three-ring circus. The girls were getting into formation, and the game was starting up again with Grant serving. Mrs. Dyck was helping Tina to the bench where she could sit down. Then she seemed to change her mind. She turned and led Tina to the locker-room. I guess she remembered the cots in there.

I turned to see about Lizzy. She was sitting up now. Some girls were helping her to the locker-room too.

The crowd was slowly settling into the bleachers.

We heard the short, sharp sound of a whistle, and the game got under way. Our girls were mad. You could tell. They were out to send Grant back to his tomb, but it didn't work. It was Ruby setting up, Ruby slamming, Ruby serving. But it wasn't Ruby scoring. It wasn't anybody scoring.

Grant swept the three games and, like Madison, left the gym laughing.

Brian Sheetz came up and cupped his hand behind my ear. In a low voice he said, “Watch out for Grunt. He's telling everybody he's holding ‘Bean's Canteen’ responsible for all this, and you know what that means.”

I grabbed my hair in my hands.

“Oh, no!” I whimpered. “That's all I need!”

11 Police

Police cars were all up and down the street in front of the school when I rode up on my bike next morning. But I didn't have time to think about them. I was late.

I'd lost track of time again—this time reading *Second Chronicles*. My mother leaves for work before I have to leave for school. I have no one but myself to get me out the door.

I parked my bike and went in to my locker and first class. Everybody was in his seat, and I just made it the second—the absolute second—the tardy bell sounded. I was glad my desk was near the door.

The teacher gave me a look and said, "Page 167, please." Everybody turned to the page and we settled down to business.

And then the class phone rang.

"Mikie," the teacher said. That was his first name.

He listened and then said a short, "OK." He hung up and reached for a hall pass.

"Bean. Office. Get."

"Yes, sir," I said. I liked to show the teachers I was polite. But inside I was trying to answer, *Why me?*

Naturally, I looked up and down the hall before I put my foot out. I never knew when Jennifer might be trying to call me into the office so that Grunt and his muggers could roll me in the dirt out in the halls. But nobody was there except the student hall monitor who looks at passes.

Jennifer didn't make any cracks either when I got to the office.

"You sick or something?" I said to her. She wasn't saying a word, and she did look sort of gray.

"You can go right in," Mr. Scruggs's secretary said.

Mr. Scruggs was sitting behind his desk. Several police officers were sitting and standing near him. The secretary followed me in and sat down near the door. She had a pad and pencil in her hand.

I hesitated. "You called me?"

"Yes, Bean. Come in," Mr. Scruggs said. "Sit down." He motioned me to a chair in front of his desk. He turned to a policeman. "Officer? This is the boy."

"You've had a lemonade stand for the volleyball girls? They call it—ah—'Bean's Canteen'?"

"Yes, sir."

"You like sports, do you, Bean?" another officer said.

"Oh, yes."

"Bean has a very fine mind," Mr. Scruggs told the men. "He helped

us figure out what was going wrong with our football program last fall. Without him, we wouldn't have had the state championship."

I smiled humbly and looked at the rug.

It was then, out of the corner of my eye, that I saw the secretary was taking down every word on her pad.

Why would she do that? I wondered.

"You really want Sunny Hills teams to win, do you?" the officer asked.

"Oh, yeah," I said. "I'll do anything I can to help them win."

The officers looked at one another.

"Anything?"

"Sure. Why not? Mr. Scruggs asked me to help figure out why the girls were losing in volleyball. I was his personal representative to the team as well as a reporter for the school paper. If I can help figure out why they're losing, why, I'm glad to help. Mr. Scruggs knows that."

"You really think it's important for the girls to win?"

"Well, that's what sports are all about," I said. "You have a winner and a loser. I can't see going to all that work and thinking you're just there to play catch."

"And you think you helped them win?"

"Well, they like having me around. They called for me to come sit with them on the bench yesterday. Ruby called me their lucky charm—but I don't believe in luck."

"You don't?"

"No. I believe you trust the Lord."

"The Lord?"

"Bean goes to church," Mr. Scruggs told him.

"You know the Lord?" the officer asked.

"Oh, yes, I do. Do you?" He'd asked me a question only Christians ask in that way. I guess I sort of lit up.

"Officer," Mr. Scruggs said, "we're getting off the track."

"Well, you want to know if he has it in his head or in his heart," he said. "Religious talk is easy if you're in a tight spot."

"Tight spot?" I asked.

He didn't answer.

"Tell me, Bean," the first officer said, "if you thought your girls volleyball team wasn't going to win its games, would you feed them something that might give them a lift?"

"You mean, like lemonade? Sure. It's the least we can do. If it just takes a little sugar to get them up and help them win—why, sure. Let's do it."

"I think we have all the evidence we need, Mr. Scruggs. Would you have Bean sign the confession, and we'll pick it up this afternoon."

"Confession!" I stood up. "I didn't make any confession. You just asked—"

“You’re going too fast, officer,” Mr. Scruggs said. “We’re talking on two levels here.” He turned to me. “Sit down, Bean. Tell me, do you know what ‘sugar’ is?”

“Sugar? Sure. Everybody knows what sugar is.”

“Well, we didn’t think you knew—at least, I didn’t think that you knew. You’re only in ninth grade, and you go to church. I just thought probably you’d lived a protected life.”

“What’s knowing about sugar got to do with living a protected life?” I couldn’t understand what he was talking about.

“Your mother works? Outside the home?” Mr. Scruggs asked.

“Oh, sure. She has a job as a clerk in a health food store downtown.”

“And your father?”

“Oh, he died when I was nine.”

“Brothers? Sisters?”

“I have an older sister, but she’s married. She doesn’t live at home.”

“You’re fourteen?”

“Yes, sir.”

“All right, officer. I have no more questions to ask him. Do you?”

“No. We’re satisfied. We’ll be back to press charges later this afternoon. If you’d have him ready, we’ll take him on down. You might notify his mother.”

“What?” I wasn’t getting something straight.

“Did you search his locker, Mr. Scruggs?” the officer said, ignoring me.

“No, we didn’t. My secretary will get you the combination.”

“Search my locker!”

“Empty your pockets on the desk, Bean. We want to see what you’re carrying around with you,” the officer said.

“My pockets! What’s all this about?”

“Your pockets.”

I emptied my pockets on the desk—my yo-yo, my skate key, my used paper handkerchiefs, two sticks of gum, a marble, a ball-point pen.

One officer left the room.

“I tried to call you at home last night, Bean,” Mr. Scruggs said. “I let the phone ring and ring and ring, but you never answered.”

“Oh, I thought it was Grunt. The last time he was mad at me, he called and wanted me to meet him down on the corner so he could beat me up. I didn’t want to talk, so I didn’t answer.”

“Didn’t you think it could have been someone else?”

“No. I never did. Why? What happened?”

“I wanted to talk to you about Tina and Lizzy. They were really sick.”

“I was there. But what’s that got to do with me?”

“The only thing they both ate or drank was your lemonade.”

My eyes opened wide. “My lemonade? You think I—? You think—”

“Well, you’ve said as much,” the officer said.

“I did?”

“You said you’d do anything to help them win. You said you would put something in their lemonade if you thought you could help them win. We don’t need any clearer confession than that.”

“But I didn’t say that.”

“We all heard you. Didn’t we, men.”

They all nodded yes. Even Mr. Scruggs.

“But I didn’t say that.” I asked the secretary, “Did I?”

“I have it all down on my pad in black and white,” she said. “Every word.”

I went back to the chair and sat down. “How could I have said that when I didn’t do it. Where would I get any drugs? I wouldn’t do a thing like that.”

The officer that went out came back in. I guess he went to my locker. He slapped the desk and took his hand away. Three red capsules lay on the table.

The men all stood up.

“We’ll notify his mother and have him ready at three,” Mr. Scruggs said. “Bean, you can go back to class now. Report here after the final bell.”

The men shook hands and left.

Mr. Scruggs and his secretary left the office too.

So did I, but I kicked myself halfway to my next class. I’d done it again. I’d buckled under pressure. Why didn’t I stand up for the truth? I wasn’t the only one involved with that lemonade.

Why was I always so weak?

And why do I always think of what I should have said when it’s too late to say it?

12 Grunt

No one said anything to me when I got back to class. It wasn't until class was over and I was on my way to my locker that I realized I was getting another silent treatment. I didn't know what the school newspaper would print, but I could imagine.

"Ninth Grade Monster Poisons Girls Volleyball Team."

"Juvenile Drug Lord Cripples School Girls."

Well, this was Sunny Hills. If there was one thing our student body could do better than any other high school, it was the old silent treatment.

I got my books and made my way to my other morning classes.

No one said a word—to me. I could hear them buzzing around me, and all of them were talking about me.

At lunch, I walked into the cafeteria and stood in line. I picked up my tray and got two hamburgers and a can of cola, paid for them, and turned to look for a seat.

Before I knew it, my tray with my burgers and drink was clattering across the floor. I went down with it. Someone had given me a shove.

I looked up.

It was Grunt.

"What's wrong with you?" I scrambled to get up, but he shoved me down again.

I leaned on one elbow. "What's wrong with you, Grunt?"

By this time kids from all over the cafeteria had run up to circle us and see us fight.

"Go get him, Grunt."

"Beat him up, Grunt."

"Make him drink his own punch, Grunt."

He didn't say a word. He just stood over me and then, holding his elbows pointed right at me, he dropped his whole weight on me. He would have crushed me if I hadn't moved at the last second. I dodged the elbows but his hips knocked the wind out of me. And then I saw him make a fist and eye my stomach.

There was no way I was just going to lie around and let him maul me. I scrambled to get up and get away. My only trouble was that he was quick. He threw himself across the floor and knocked me down again.

He was mad, and I was getting mad. But I knew I had to keep my head. I had to be quick. He was 250 pounds dropping on my 98. And I was mad at the kids for egging him on and cheering.

He picked me up and threw me down. I cracked my wrist as I tried to break my fall. It hurt! I knew he was going to drop on me again. I could

feel him coming. I rolled out of his way, and his elbows hit the floor with a crack. His jaw came right after them.

He was stunned.

I leaped up and ran for my hamburgers. I put one in my pocket and stuffed the other in Grunt's open mouth. I scooped up my canned drink and pushed my way out. I heard a lot of screaming and shouting, but I had to get out of there before Grunt got to his feet.

I flew down the hall and out the door. I ran to the classroom building and down the halls till I got to the "Chronicle" office. Grunt might not think to find me there. If he did, I could hit him with a I-pod—or my can of cola.

I slammed the door and sat on the floor in one corner—out of sight of the window in the door.

"What's wrong with you?" Kim was eating at her desk.

"Fight."

"You? The beanpole? You've got to be kidding. Who'd pick on a blade of grass like you?"

"Grunt."

"Grunt? That mammoth?"

"Don't you know what's going on around here?"

"You mean the silent treatment biz?"

"Why do they do that to me?"

"You deserve it."

"I *what*?"

"You deserve it. We all saw it. It said, 'Bean's Canteen.' You served poisoned punch to our championship team. You're not the only one who thinks, you know. You're the reason we haven't won a game this year."

"But I'm not like that. You know I'm not like that. And they do too. My columns showed how gung-ho I am over our team."

"Yeah. Save the money on girls sports and give it to the boys."

"But I didn't make that lemonade."

"I'm just telling you what all the guys are saying. They say you set up your slick operation right under our noses, and you thought you'd help the girls win all their games. So you jiggered their lemonade and really gave them a lift. They're saying, 'Some Hilltopper you are!'"

"It's not true."

"Does Grunt know you're here?"

I groaned and rubbed my wrist. "He's not all I'm worried about."

"What else is there?"

"The police."

"The po—"

"They're coming back after school to pick me up. They're all hung up over my putting sugar in the lemonade. What's so wrong about sugar?"

"Ninnie! Sugar's speed, crack, dope. Where've you been all your

life? Don't you know anything about sin?"

"I told them I'd do anything to give the girls a lift."

"Like sugar."

"Yeah. I was thinking real sugar," I said. "They're coming back for me after school to take me to jail."

"And you're going?"

"What else?"

"Good. That's where you belong."

"*Kimberly!* You know I had nothing to do with making that stuff."

"I don't know anything of the kind."

"But I thought you were my friend."

"Think Grunt will find you here?" she asked.

"I hope not." I rubbed my wrist. It still hurt.

"What'll you do if he finds you?" She took a bite out of her sandwich. "Hit him with a book?"

The door crashed open.

"Where's Bean?" It was Grunt.

"Bean, who?" That Kim. She just looked up at him with big teasing eyes as if she'd never even heard of me. I scooted low on the floor, but I could see them through the desks.

"Bean who! Don't give me that trash."

"Well, he was in here this morning. Did you want to leave a message?" She was talking sweet as honey.

He hesitated.

"You tell him I'll skin him alive. He thinks he's so smart. He thinks he can write anything he wants, say anything he wants, do anything he wants, and drug anybody he wants. Well, not anymore. You tell that jerk when I find him I'm going to break his head."

He leaned over the desk and leered at Kim. "And if I find that you set him up for this, you're going to wake up some morning with your 'Chronicle' in a rope around your neck. You keep your drugs out of our sports, you hear? And you of all people, Kimberly. You were one of us!"

He went out and slammed the door.

"Oh, I wish he hadn't gone out," Kim said. "I was just about to ask him about those drugs in your locker. He looked so angry he might have told me the truth."

I just slid out flat on the floor and lay still.

"Bean? You dead?" She came over and nudged me with her foot.

"I might as well be with that elephant after me." I sat up and then I stood up. That was my mistake.

The door crashed open again. Grunt stood there, grinning. "I knew you were in here, you skinny squirt."

"Oh, hi, Grunt. Looking for someone?" I said. And then, over my shoulder, I said, "Say, Kim, turn on the tape recorder and let's ask Grunt

some questions while we've got his attention." I got a couple of tables between him and me.

"OK, Bean." She picked up an interviewing microphone and flipped the switch as she walked toward Grunt.

"Tell me, Grunt, how come you let Miss Stumpf make eyes at you all the time? What do you see in an old woman like that? What's she got that other girls—younger girls—don't have? Can't you see she's made a sucker out of you in front of the whole team? You're too good for that, Grunt. You've got too much to offer people. Your real friends like you for who you are, not just for how you look."

She was distracting him from what he came to do. I got the feeling she was asking him questions she'd wanted to ask for a long time.

It was also obvious that Grunt couldn't think about two things at the same time. Not that he was dumb. It was just that he was picking up the vibrations cute Kim was sending his way. "Get that mike away from me," he said through his teeth as he pushed aside a table and came at me.

I danced to one side and then back, like a basketball player trying to dribble past a guard. Grunt didn't know which way to come at me. He made a quick decision, and it was the wrong one. I had a clear shot for the door, and I flew. I was down the hall and around the corner before he could get back to the door.

Me—I had Goliath after me and nowhere to hide.

13

My Getaway

I had to think. Where could I hide? Grunt would do anything to get me. I had to find the key to this whole thing. Why were people blaming me for something I never knew existed? I had to get through my classes in one piece if there was going to be anything left for the police to take away. But I had to figure out why they were after me. I decided the best place I could hide would be in the middle of as many people as I could get around me.

I went to math class and just sat down as if this were any other day. It wasn't any other day, and all the kids knew it. You can't keep a major fight between a football hero and a skinny ninth grader a secret—especially when David stuffed his hamburger into Goliath's mouth.

"I need you men," I told the guys sitting around me. "He's out to get me, and he's mad."

"Yeah!" They grinned. They liked this. As long as I was the one doing the fighting, they thought it was great. At least I got a "Yeah" out of somebody. That was better than the silent treatment I'd been getting.

I was telling them about how he'd come into the "Chronicle" office when the teacher said, "OK, you guys, eyes front. This is where the action is from now on. Get out your homework, and let's check the facts."

Well, it was all work and no play.

I did look out the door once to see if Grunt was waiting. I saw some of his friends on the prowl, but I didn't see him. I groaned. I didn't only have to fight Goliath. I would have to fight the whole Philistine army.

When the bell rang, I got in the middle of everybody else and walked with them out the door and down the hall to our last class, social studies. Grunt's friends were all over. I didn't look at any of them. I just wanted to get in the door and into my seat.

The teacher started the class, and I sighed with relief. And then the class telephone rang.

The teacher answered it.

"Bean, you're wanted in the office."

I put my head in my hands and groaned—out loud this time.

"I'll never make it," I told him. "They're out to get me."

"Who is? Nonsense. Mr. Scruggs isn't out to get anybody. Now you get along and get right back. I have a quiz to give, and I don't want to have to give it twice."

What could I do?

"Could someone go with me?" I asked him. "Tommy?" I picked the biggest kid in the class.

"Get out of here, Bean. The principal is waiting. Tommy, sit down."

I walked slowly to the door and looked out—both ways. I could see Grunt’s friends at both ends of the hall.

I turned around. “I’m not going. If Mr. Scruggs wants me, he can come and get me.” I went back to my seat and sat down.

“You can’t say that!” The teacher was astonished. “He’s the principal. Now, you get out of here and go.”

“No, and I don’t mean to be disrespectful, Mr. Kramer. But I’m not going to go.”

“In all my years of teaching, you’re the first—”

“Would you call Mr. Scruggs and see if he really wants me to come? There’s a girl in his office named Jennifer who hates me. She’d love to see me get beat up.”

Shaking his head—in shock, I guess—Mr. Kramer picked up the phone.

“Mr. Scruggs, please.” He paused. “Mr. Scruggs? Kramer. I have a student named Bean here who refuses to answer a call to come to your office. He wants to know if you called him to come yourself.”

Pause.

“You didn’t? But the phone rang here, and someone told me you were calling Bean into the office.”

There was another pause.

“I see. All right. Thank you.”

He hung up the phone.

“You were right, Bean. He says there’s unrest in the building, but he’ll take care of it. There’s no need for you to come. He didn’t call you.”

“Whew!”

Some kids laughed. Some sneered. They liked seeing me in trouble, and they were mad at what they thought I’d done to the team.

“Well, let’s get on with class,” Mr. Kramer said.

We opened our books and talked about how to run a business. That was the longest class I’ve ever had to sit through. I had bruises all over my body, and my wrist still hurt. I let the lesson swirl around me. I didn’t listen. I couldn’t listen. I had to think—and pray.

Lord, what have I gotten myself into? They’re taking me to jail today. Help me know what to do and what to say. Please?

I knew, when the bell rang, that the police would be at the door. They wouldn’t want to take any chance that I’d try to make a run for it. They would walk me to my locker.

“You better take your homework with you,” one of the officers will say. “You’ll have a lot of time on your hands.”

“Thanks,” I’ll say.

I’ll open my locker and see that someone has been scrambling around inside. We’ll get my books and walk down the hall to Mr. Scruggs’s office. Kids will move out of the way to let us pass. No one will say any-

thing. It'll seem as if Tina or Lizzy has died and everybody but me has heard about it.

Mr. Scruggs will be in his office when we get there.

"Sit down, Bean."

"Did you call his mother?" one of the officers will ask.

"Yes, but she couldn't get off work. She said she'd be down to headquarters after five."

"You have the confession?" he'll ask.

"Yes. I have it here." He'll point to several papers on his desk and hold a pen toward me. "Sign here."

I'll take the pen. There'll be a line at the bottom of the page with a check mark in front of it, and Mr. Scruggs will point to it . . .

I'll be scared.

Lord? I'll pray.

And then I'll get mad. "You guys just burn me up!" I'll stand up and make a fist.

"Bean! These are police officers!"

"But you don't think! None of you think! You get a notion in your heads, and you think you know it all."

"I won't have you talking to these men like that!"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Scruggs," I'll say, "but I'm not about to let them take me away to jail. I didn't do what they say. I have my rights!"

They'll take a step back when I say that.

"Look what you did this morning when you hauled me in here," I'll say. "You got me talking about sugar in the lemonade. Sure there was sugar in the lemonade. I was talking about real sugar and you guys were thinking crack, dope and drugs. You can't pin this on me. I didn't make that stuff. Why didn't you ask me where it came from and how it got in the gym? Oh, no. You had your little monster and you were going to nail him to the wall. Okay, take me to jail. Take me to court. I'll tell the judge what you guys are really like. I'll get this whole town laughing. You call yourselves detectives."

I'll look around at each one of them and sneer. "You guys make me sick."

Mr. Scruggs will burst out laughing. "I told you guys this kid thinks. He's got you. Nice going, Bean!"

The officers will look at one another.

"We'd like to talk this over among ourselves, please. Could we have this office for a moment?"

"Come on, Bean. Let's go get a drink."

Mr. Scruggs'll take me by the arm and we'll walk out into the other office and then down the hall.

"You got 'em, boy. They've got a lot more work to do before they take anyone to jail. I'll give your mother a call and tell her to go on home

after work.”

‘I’d appreciate that,’ I’ll say.

He’ll take me into the faculty lounge and point me to an easy chair. He’ll dig in his pocket for change and get us some cold drinks out of the pop machine.

“Drink deep, Bean,” he’ll say. “You deserve—”

“Bean. Bean? *Bean?* Hey! Wake up!”

“Wha—?” Someone was shaking me.

“I said wake up. The bell rang, and the whole class is gone. Get out of here. I want to go home.” It was Mr. Kramer.

I stood up. He was right. The room was empty.

I looked at the door for the police, but no one was there. I picked up my books.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Kramer. I’ve been under a lot of pressure lately.”

“I’ve heard about it, Bean. We’ll be rooting for you.”

I went down to my locker. The halls were empty. There wasn’t a policeman anywhere.

I got my books, closed the locker, and headed out for my bike. I figured if the police weren’t there, they didn’t want me or need me. I might as well go home. They knew where I lived. They probably had gotten some new evidence from Mr. Scruggs that they were following up on.

There was only a scattering of kids around the school.

I rode out the yard. I never in a million years would have thought that I’d be going home free after all I’d been through. I was so sure I was going to jail.

Lord, I appreciate what you did for me, I prayed. I know You’re watching over me. But we’re not home yet. I sure need—

Someone grabbed my handlebars.

I looked up.

Kids were pouring out from all around. I’d ridden into a trap.

I looked at the guy who was holding my handlebars.

It was Grunt.

14

Ninth Grade Against the World

What do you want, Grunt?”
He shoved me.

I hopped on one foot so I wouldn't fall. “Keep your hands off me, Grunt. What did I ever do to you?”

“You touch my girls, you touch me. *Hey, get this guy!*” Grunt shouted at the hundred kids—at least it seemed like a hundred—that were all around us.

He gave me another shove, a hard one, and I went over. I was all tangled up in my bike. I looked up and saw him reaching for me. But before that claw got to me, a fist hit Grunt in the nose.

The fight was on.

My friends from ninth grade had come to my rescue.

You should have heard the yelling. Everybody was beating on everybody else. The minute you knocked one guy down, you turned and jumped on someone else.

I got out of my bike and ran after Grunt. But six other ninth graders were on top of him. Everywhere I turned there was fighting—and noise. People had stopped their cars and were honking their horns. People we didn't know were shouting and running toward us to break up the fights.

We thought we had Grunt down for the count, but he rolled over and broke loose. That guy has the strength of a bull. He looked over and saw my bike on the street where I left it. And before I could stop him he was jumping up and down on it, breaking the spokes and bending the frame.

“Hey, get off my bike,” I shouted, running toward him.

And then we heard the sirens!

Boy, if you want to see a hundred guys scatter in seconds—Grunt included—call in the police. Talk about a desert island. I was left standing alone in the middle of the street with my bike in pieces on the pavement. My nose was bleeding, and my hair and clothes were mussed up. Where could I go?

The police car weaved around cars stopped on both sides of the street and came to a halt right in front of me.

“You were told to be in the principal's office at three,” the officer shouted at me. “What are you? Some kind of drug lord?” He was mad.

He got out of his car and threw open his trunk lid. He scooped up what was left of my bike and threw it in.

“Get in the car.”

I got.

“You think you can fight in the streets any time you want? Stop traffic? Cause a ruckus? You think you can do what you want where the law’s concerned? You think you’re above the law? Well, do you? Answer me!”

“No, sir.”

What could I say? I didn’t remember that they told me to come to the office when school was out.

I wiped my nose on my arm. I guess I looked helpless. He reached into his glove compartment and got out a box of tissues.

“Wipe that arm off. And don’t get it on the upholstery.”

I wiped off the blood.

“I feel like a trash collector. Any kid who would poison the girls in his school just to get them to win is trash.”

“Yes,” I said. “Even ‘trash’ is too good a word.”

“I was talking about you.”

“Not me,” I said. “I didn’t poison those girls.”

“Yeah? Well, you can tell that to the judge.”

He was driving me back to school. He parked in front in the “No Parking” spot, and we got out.

The secretary was still in Mr. Scruggs’s office. She looked at the clock as we came in the door.

The officer grabbed me by the shoulder and walked me right in to Mr. Scruggs.

“I found him gang fighting in the street.”

“They weren’t my gang,” I snapped.

“Who were they, Bean?” Mr. Scruggs asked.

“Grunt.”

“Why Grunt?”

“He thinks I drugged the girls. He calls them his girls.”

“Why weren’t you here at three as you were told?”

“I thought the cops—the officers, I mean—sorry—were going to come to my room and pick me up. When they didn’t come, I thought they probably had found the guys that really put the drugs in the juice. I knew I didn’t.”

Mr. Scruggs pointed to the three red capsules that were still on his desk.

“I never saw those before in my life,” I said. “Somebody just stuck them through the air slits in my locker door.”

“Yeah, tell me about it,” the policeman said.

“Well, were they in a nice neat little row in my locker like they are now or were they scattered inside like they would have been if someone flipped them through the slits? Answer me that.”

“Lieutenant?”

“They were scattered in his locker on top of his things.”

“Well, if I were using drugs on someone, I would have made sure

they were as out of sight as I could get them. Wouldn't I? Wouldn't you?"

The officer rubbed his chin.

"And, besides, how come you didn't ask me if I made the lemonade? I didn't make it at all. I didn't even see it until Eddy and his friends brought it into the gym. How come you don't go after the ladies in the cafeteria? How come you don't go after Eddy? How come you don't go after his friends? I'm not even sure they're students here. I've never seen them before. Why don't you go after Grunt? Go after Miss Stumpf. Go after Kimberly King. There's a ton of people who could have done it. Why just pick on me? And how do you know the lemonade has anything to do with it? It could be something else. You don't know."

"Does he have a point?" the officer asked Mr. Scruggs.

"I told you this boy thinks. He's scored some very real points."

"Well, we better look into them one by one."

"No," I said. "You're wrong—er—officer, sir."

He raised an eyebrow. "Wrong?"

"Yeah. You're not the one to do it."

"Oh?"

"No. You scare people. We don't know you. There's no way you'll get anybody here to confess to you."

"And you suggest?"

I looked at Mr. Scruggs and then at the officer. "Let me do it. I'm just ninth grade. Nobody's afraid of me."

"He's right," Mr. Scruggs said. "And he's already proved he thinks. I'd say give him a week and let him solve this."

"But he's just a kid!"

"But he's done more thinking here than we adults have. I'd say give him a try."

"And you guys need to stay away," I said. "We don't want anybody to think the police are still in on this."

"Well—I'll have to talk to the captain about this."

"Want me to call him?" Mr. Scruggs reached for the phone.

I stood up. "Do you need me anymore? I've got a lot of work to do if I'm going to crack this case."

"Lieutenant?" Mr. Scruggs asked.

He nodded and stuck out his hand to me. "Just keep us informed."

"Count on it, sir," I said.

And, boy, it was like breathing fresh air for the first time when I walked out of there. I didn't know what I'd do, but I knew I had a lot of thinking ahead of me.

Something told me I already knew everything I would need to know.

I remembered that the officer had my bike in his trunk. So I sat on the fender of the police car and waited for him.

"Are they taking you to jail?" Kim's voice jolted me out of my

thoughts.

“Oh, this cop has my bike in his trunk, and I’m waiting for him to let me have it.”

“I thought they were taking you to jail.”

“Oh, they were. But they decided not to. Not enough evidence.”

“How come he’s here?”

“Oh, he broke up a big fight I was in. Grunt got all his guys to lay for me. Ninth grade turned out and punched his nose.”

She laughed. “Break his nose, and he’ll go back to looking Jewish.”

“Jewish?”

“Yeah. Grunstein. That’s Jewish. Abraham Grunstein. He’s Jewish. What’s so wrong with that?”

“Nothing.”

“You look surprised.”

“I’ve just never known a Jew before.”

“Oh, sure you have. I’m Jewish.”

“You are?”

“Sure.”

“King is Jewish?”

“Sure, it’s Jewish. Why isn’t it Jewish? What’s your last name? I bet it could be Jewish, too.”

“Spencer.”

“No. I don’t know any Spencer Jews. I didn’t know your name was Spencer. What’s your real first name?”

“Billy.”

She laughed again. “I never would have thought you’d have a name like Billy. But I like Bean. So what do the police think about Liz and Tina?”

“Well, they talked to Mr. Scruggs. They’re pretty satisfied it’s just school business. They’re going to let him look into things.”

“Here he comes now.”

I stood back as the lieutenant came up. “My bike,” I said.

He opened the trunk and lifted my wrecked bike out.

“Not much left, is there?”

I turned to Kim. “Grunt was jumping up and down on it. You’d almost think he was mad at me for something.”

“Make him pay,” the officer said.

“You better believe it,” I said. “In more ways than one.”

“Well, let me know if I can help any.”

“Will do.”

He got in and drove off.

“So how will you?” Kim said.

“Will I what?”

“Make Grunt pay?”

“You like Grunt, don’t you?”

“Me? What makes you say that?”

“You only like Eddy because he’s close to Grunt. You sit near Eddy at games because Eddy is sitting next to Grunt. You wouldn’t be able to sit so close unless people thought you were with Eddy.”

“I dropped Eddy.”

“Why? Because Eddy isn’t Jewish? Or are you afraid of Eddy? Or both?”

“You think you’re so smart. But you’re just a creep.” She turned and walked away.

“I may be a creep, Kimberly, but I listen and I watch—and I remember.”

She didn’t answer. She just walked faster.

“Walk fast, Kimberly, but watch you don’t trip,” I called after her as I watched her go. And then I laughed to myself.

Lady, you already have.

15 The Rally

Sunny Hills High was desperate. Our girls had played all the preliminary games before the real start of the volleyball season. We'd lost every one. The cheerleaders thought that a big rally would inspire the girls to win all their games and take us into the state championships.

The day of the rally, kids walking through the halls to class would spell out "S-U-N-N-Y H-I-L-L-S" and chant, "Let's go, girls," even with no cheerleader in sight. Classes began with yells and cheers. You could feel the static. The tri-county newspapers picked it up. We were big news!

Grunt tried to keep the silent treatment going, but it was impossible. I knew he was the one at the bottom of it. Well, actually, Coach Stumpf was at the bottom of it. She hated Christians and anything to do with religion. And I knew she'd never forgiven me for my "Mickey Mouse" thing. She was the one who was keeping Grunt on my tail.

Anyway, we were all sky high. Everybody turned out for the rally.

Our student body president called the girls up one by one and told a little bit about each. Then we'd shout her name—whatever it was—and say, "Becky! Becky! Get the gold!" "Ruby! Ruby! Get the gold!"

We sang our school songs and screamed all the yells we knew.

Then Mr. Scruggs told the student body and the team how proud we all were of them. He told how they hadn't won a game all last season but that now we were hoping Coach Stumpf could bring them through a perfect season and take us right into the state finals. We knew—and we knew that he knew—it was all a dream. But this was high school. High school's the place for dreams.

Then he introduced Coach Stumpf.

The kids all cheered.

I didn't.

She walked up to the podium and folded her hands in front of her. She leaned forward and spoke into the microphone in that deep, golden voice of hers. "When I came to Sunny Hills High School, I knew at once that students here wanted to live up to all of their human potential. They want to be the best—"

Everybody cheered. I did too. I want us to be the best.

"They want to achieve high goals—"

More cheers. I wasn't cheering for her. I was cheering for Sunny Hills.

"They want to find power to control their world—"

More cheers.

"They want the gold!"

We all cheered for five minutes for that line. Finally the school band started playing our fight song, and we cheered and sang and cheered some more.

When we calmed down, Miss Stumpf said, “We are walking through the doorway to power. Let’s prove that together right now. Let’s try a little exercise that will show our volleyball team we’re behind them. Let’s help them, you and I, right now, to bring home the gold.”

Everyone cheered again. We were ready for anything.

“I want you all to hold your arms at your sides and to shake them. You need to relax for this exercise, and this is a way to do that.”

We all shook our arms.

“Now, you may feel silly doing this, but do it anyway—as if you were in gym class. Let your head drop down and then roll it around on your shoulders. This will help you relax even more.”

We all rolled our heads around. We started to laugh. It looked so funny.

“Now, close your eyes.”

We closed our eyes.

“We’re going to use the power of all our minds, working together, to bring victory to our girls. Let’s think of the first game this coming Wednesday. Picture in your minds the numbers on the scoreboard. Who wins the first match?”

We all shouted, “We do! We do!”

“And who wins the second match?” Her voice was rising in excitement.

“We do! We do!”

“And who takes the game?”

“*We do!*” Everybody cheered on that one.

I looked at Becky. She didn’t have her eyes closed. She looked angry. Miss Stumpf went quickly through the rest of the season and then into the playoffs.

“Who’s going to win?”

“We are! We are!”

“And who’s going to win the gold?” she shouted at the end.

“*We are! We are! We are!*”

The band picked up our fight song and then our alma mater.

And then it was over.

Kids walked around, cheering and screaming. On the platform, Mr. Scruggs was shaking Miss Stumpf’s hand and grinning from ear to ear. Becky was walking off the stage where all the volleyball girls had been standing. She was shaking her head “No.”

She didn’t like it.

Not one bit.

And I knew she knew why.

* * *

“Did you close your eyes for her, Bean?” Becky asked me on the phone that night.

“Sure,” I said. “Why not? I want to win.”

“That whole thing was New Age,” she said. “She was simply using one of her New Age techniques to pull the wool over everybody’s eyes.”

“How’s that?”

“It’s called ‘visualizing.’ I’ve been reading up on it. First, you relax. Then you focus your mind on something you want. You picture yourself winning and getting what you’ve set your mind on.”

“So what’s wrong with that?”

“It’s a cult. It’s all wrapped up in you—*your* mind, *your* self, *your* power to change the world.”

“Well, I want to change the world. I want to win.”

“But, don’t you see, Bean? This is just one of their techniques for getting what *you* want *your* way.”

“So?”

“Aren’t you a Christian?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, Christians want the Lord’s will. We want what *He* wants *His* way.”

“Oh, yeah.”

“It’s Satan’s lie all over again.”

“How?”

“Satan told Eve she would be like God if she ate the fruit. God didn’t tell her to do that. She was trying to get what she wanted *her* way.”

“Yeah.”

“We can’t *do* anything to be like God. The only way we can be like God is to be born again into His family.”

“So how is that different from New Age?”

“New Age says you can become like God your way. God says we must come His way—by trusting the Lord Jesus to be our Savior.”

“Sure.”

“New Age has ‘channeling,’ too, where you invite a spirit—a demon—into your heart. She was doing this to us when you called out ‘Mickey Mouse.’ Remember?”

“It was awful. Why didn’t you tell Mr. Scruggs?”

“I talked to him when she first started coaching us. You said you talked to him, too. He doesn’t see anything religious in her mythology. But it’s there.”

“The kids at the rally all think this’ll help us win,” I said.

“But you and I know it won’t. I’m going to leave the team if we can’t

think of a way to get rid of Miss Stumpf and Grunt.”

“Leave the team! But you can’t—”

“I don’t want to help the New Age win the championship and get all the credit. The Bible says we’re not to have anything to do with wickedness like that.”

“But there’s no way you guys are going to win the championship. Miss Stumpf doesn’t know one thing about volleyball. Why they ever hired her is more than I can figure out.”

Becky sighed. “Oh, Bean! I thought I was the only one who thought that. I tried to tell you she didn’t want anyone to know her secret. Remember? That day when you first came to help us?”

“The other girls don’t see it? Not even Ruby?”

“Well, they’re just now talking about it—since your column came out. No one had sat down and analyzed us like that before. But now we don’t know what to do. You’ve got to get rid of her.”

“Me? I can’t get rid of Miss Stumpf. How can a freshman get rid of a teacher?”

“Well, you’ve got till tomorrow, Bean. I don’t like the pressure. I can’t take it anymore.”

“But you can’t leave the team.”

“I’ve given it a lot of thought, Bean. And I’m not the only one that’s thinking like this.”

“Ruby?”

“At least half the team.”

“But tomorrow? I can’t work that fast!”

“You’re coming to our team meeting after school, aren’t you? We’re going to tell her then.”

“Tomorrow?”

“We’re afraid she and Grunt are going to pull some new tricks out of their hat. We’d all feel better if you were there.”

“You’re sure the girls want me to come?”

“They told me to ask you. That’s why I called tonight.”

“OK,” I said slowly. “But pray for me. I’ve just got until tomorrow.”

“I will, J. Edgar. You know I will.”

We hung up.

J. Edgar? Lord, it’s You. It’s not J. Edgar. J. Edgar’s nothing.

It has to be You at work here. I want what You want—Your way.

And, You know this about getting rid of Miss Stumpf and Grunt?

Lord, I can’t do it. You do it.

And You get the credit.

But, Lord, could you do it by tomorrow?

16

The Team Meeting

I got there late. I had a good reason for not being on time. I'd gone by Mr. Scuggs's office. I wanted him to come with me. But his secretary said he was busy and I'd have to wait.

Well, I waited and I waited and I waited. How a person can find so much to do after school's over is more than I can figure out. Finally, I got in and talked to him about all the things I was thinking about—about Miss Stumpf's not coaching the girls and about her New Age religion.

He'd gotten the report from the police about the girls. Mrs. Dyck was right about the stimulant. Something had been put in the lemonade.

"You've got to come with me, Mr. Scuggs. The girls are going to quit the team today. They're mad, and they're scared at everything that's been happening. We need you."

"You think it's that bad?"

"Yeah. But I don't think you should sit with the team. She won't show her real colors if she sees you there. Slip in behind the bleachers and listen. In fact, you might wait till I've gone in first and gotten their attention by coming in. Then they won't see you open the door."

I walked into the gym first. Kimberly was sitting on the far end of the bleachers. She was covering the meeting for the school paper.

No one else noticed me. The girls were sitting in a circle around Ruby, who was lying on the floor with her eyes closed and her hands crossed on her chest. Each girl had one hand under Ruby's back.

Miss Stumpf was crouched behind them. She was saying, "I want you to concentrate on how light she is. Close your eyes and say to yourself, 'She's light as a feather. She's light as a feather.' And, Ruby, you say over and over to yourself too, 'I'm light as a feather. I'm light as a feather.'"

Miss Stumpf paused, waiting for the girls to finish concentrating. "Now. All of you. Lift her up. Lift." Her voice was low and warm.

The girls lifted Ruby off the floor—Ruby, the one Grunt called a horse. She was a good-sized girl. She came right up off the floor as if she really had been a feather. And then I guess the girls realized what they were doing, and Ruby came crashing down to the floor.

"Ow! That hurt! You guys were gonna let me down easy."

But they were all talking.

"See. I told you," Miss Stumpf said. "Mind control does work. You have power in your minds to control your future. By thinking positively and by concentrating on our games, you can win them all."

Now she crouched on the other leg. "You remember when Tina and Lizzy got nauseated during our game with Grant? The school nurse and

Mr. Scruggs wanted to call in the rescue squad. But I told them that the girls just needed to have time to collect their thoughts. And you remember what happened. Tina realized that something she had drunk—”

Miss Stumpf paused and looked right at me. There was that look again that could turn a guy to stone.

“What’s Bean doing here? He doesn’t belong here. Get out!” She stood up. “I want you out—now!”

“Oh, please, Coach. We asked him to come,” Becky said. “He’s been such a help to us. Please let him stay.”

“Yeah,” all the other girls said. “Yay, Bean!” They began to clap and cheer.

Miss Stumpf glared harder to show them she really didn’t like it. But I guess she figured she could ignore me, and she went on, talking about Tina.

“Something Tina drank was making her sick. Her mind told her that she could walk into the locker-room and lie down. Zeus and the gods had given her the strength of mind to know what to do and how to do it. So I want you to remember you are goddesses. You have the power of the divine in you.”

She pointed her finger at me. “You say one word, and I’ll tear your scalp right off your head.”

She was remembering “Mickey Mouse.”

Then she turned to the girls again. “You are Minerva. You are Venus. You are Aphrodite. You live on Mount Olympus. You are winners. You commune with Zeus, the god of all gods.” She turned and swept her hand toward Grunt.

I know I should keep my mouth closed. Why won’t I ever learn to mind my own business? But I started to snicker.

She heard it. “I told you not to say one word.”

“I’m not saying anything. I’m just laughing.” And then I laughed right out loud.

“And what are you laughing about?”

“You’re calling Grunt ‘Zeus.’”

“Grunt is Zeus. He’s the living reincarnation of Zeus. He’s divine.”

“Well, you shouldn’t call him ‘Zeus’ if he’s divine. You should call him Jehovah. Grunt’s a Jew. Abraham Grunstein is a Jewish name. Isn’t that right, Grunt?”

He landed right on top of me, growling like an angry lion. He bit my shoulder, and he banged on me with his fists. He was furious.

I screamed for all I was worth. He was killing me! “Help! Get off me! Ow! *Ow!*”

The girls started beating on Grunt to get him off. I don’t know what Miss Stumpf was doing.

I would have been a bloody pulp if it hadn’t been for Mr. Scruggs. He

came out of nowhere, got a hammerlock on Grunt, and peeled him off.

I couldn't move. My nose was bleeding. My eyes felt as if they were swelling shut. My shoulder felt as if he'd gone through my skin to the bone.

"And just what's going on here, Miss Stumpf? Is this a class in religion or what? I want an explanation, and I want it right now."

Mr. Scruggs was mad. He got Grunt to stand up, but he didn't let go. "You move a muscle, and you'll be out of this school for good."

"Put him out! Get him out of here! He deceived me!" Miss Stumpf was in shock. "I thought he was Zeus in the flesh, but he's not. The true Zeus merely speaks, and people do his will. Zeus never attacks. Take him to your office. Do anything, but get him out of here. I will not have anyone that vicious in here assisting my girls."

"But you can't do this to me—" Grunt was furious. "I'm—"

"Girls? Three times around. On the double. And then we'll talk strategy for Wednesday." She was ignoring Grunt, but I could tell she was upset. She was shaking the way she did in Mr. Scruggs's office when she was bawling me out for writing my column.

And I knew why. She hated God so much that she hated Grunt now that she knew he was a Jew—one of God's chosen people.

The girls began to run single file in loping steps around the sides of the gym.

Becky whispered as she went by. "Thanks, Bean. You're a marvel."

"The Lord's the marvel, Beck," I called softly after her. "He gave me the idea." I was still sitting on the floor. I was OK, but I hurt all over.

"Stop your girls, Miss Stumpf," Mr. Scruggs ordered. "I want to talk to all of you right now."

Miss Stumpf blew her whistle. "Over here. Line up."

The girls gathered in a line in front of their coach.

"Mr. Scruggs wants to say a few more words."

"I don't like what I saw here today, Miss Stumpf. And I think I need to say something to all of you together. You're a team that we were all hoping would win another state championship for our school. But there are things going on here that I simply will not put up with."

He let Grunt go and gave him a push. "You stand over there, Grunt. You're a part of all this, too."

He cleared his throat.

"What does this gods and goddesses business have to do with volleyball, Miss Stumpf? Bean's right. You're preaching New Age religion when you should be teaching these girls how to play their sport. From what I've seen of this team, they don't know one thing about playing volleyball. And who's fault is that, Miss Stumpf?"

She didn't say a word.

"I've received a number of complaints from parents about what you

are doing with our team.”

The girls all murmured.

“And my personal representative to your team, Bean Spencer, has given me day-by-day reports with dates on each report, telling me what you have said.”

Miss Stumpf’s eyes narrowed again as she turned and looked at me. “So he was your spy. You lied to me, Scruggs.”

He raised an eyebrow at that. He didn’t like being called a liar. And he didn’t like being called by just his last name.

“I told you when you and he were in my office that he was my personal representative. At that time, I did not have anything against you, Miss Stumpf. But as I have received more complaints from parents, I’ve sent notes to you to tell you. I dated those notes. I have kept you informed of my concern all the way through this season, Miss Stumpf.”

And then he turned to the girls.

“And what’s this I hear that you don’t like your student trainer? Is it true he walked into your locker-room on several occasions when you were dressing?” He turned to Miss Stumpf. “And just why was I not notified about that at once?”

He turned to me.

“Bean, do you have anything to say at this time?”

I stood slowly to my feet.

“I’d like to ask Tina and Lizzy something.”

“Yes?” he said.

“Were you girls really sick?”

“I was,” Tina said as she turned and looked at Lizzy. “I had a terrible headache, and I felt all jittery inside. The room was swimming, and I just passed out.”

“Is that what happened to you, Lizzy?” I said.

She nodded. “Tina and I were so thirsty. We drank it down before—we—remem—”

I didn’t let her finish. “The rest of you girls weren’t drinking any of that lemonade, were you?” I said. “That’s why your blouses were always covered with juice. You were putting the cups up to your lips and keeping your mouths closed, weren’t you?”

“Mr. Scruggs,” Ruby said, stepping forward from the line. “May I speak for the girls?”

“Yes, Ruby.”

“When Bean told Becky that Eddy and his friends were going to bring in lemonade to help raise our blood sugar, we got scared. We don’t trust those guys. We decided we’d pretend to drink it, but we’d keep our mouths closed. We’d let it spill down our shirts. I drank it the first day to see if they’d doctored it up. I got a bad headache, and I felt all jittery. Bean drank some too, and he felt the same way. Right, Bean?”

I nodded.

“And why didn’t you report this to me?” Mr. Scruggs asked.

“Well, we’d talked to you before when we were having problems, and you didn’t believe us. We figured we wouldn’t get anywhere if we talked to you again, I guess.”

“And this Eddy and his friends?”

“Ask Grunt,” I said.

“Grunt?” Mr. Scruggs turned to him. “I want an explanation.”

“Oh, they’re some guys I know.”

“Students here?”

“No. They come in after school to shoot a few baskets.”

There was no way Mr. Scruggs could object to that because we’re a public school.

“They are your—friends?”

“Well, yes—guys from my neighborhood.”

“With a police record?” I asked.

“Well—” He held up his hands. “Well—maybe—one or two.”

“Drugs?” I asked.

“Well—maybe. A little.”

“I’ll follow through on this, girls,” Mr. Scruggs said. “Or better yet—the police will.”

“I need to ask Grunt some things, Mr. Scruggs,” I said.

“Go ahead.”

“You weren’t in the gym when Eddy and his friends were rapping about ‘Sugar, joy-juice, lemonade,’ were you?”

“No. This is the first I’ve heard about it.”

“Eddy didn’t tell you about it?”

“No. I would have remembered.”

“Why would he want to do that?”

“So they’d win, I guess.”

“Or so they’d lose?” As I said that, I got a new idea. I turned and looked across the gym. “Kimberly,” I called. “I have some questions I’d like to ask you, too.”

She got up and walked quickly across the floor to the door. She was leaving fast.

“Uh-oh,” I said. “I need her.”

“Kimberly?” Mr. Scruggs called.

She let the door close behind her, and then she opened it again.

“Yes?”

“We need you here.”

“Me?”

“Come back, please.”

“But I have an important—”

“It will have to wait,” Mr. Scruggs said. “I want you to come back

here.”

She closed the door slowly and walked just as slowly to where we were standing.

“Do you know anything about this lemonade business?” Mr. Scruggs asked her.

“Me?”

“Yes. You.”

“Well, I’ve heard about it from the girls and other people.”

I knew he wouldn’t get anything out of her with questions like that. “May I ask her something?” I said.

“Sure, Bean. Go ahead.”

“You hate Miss Stumpf, don’t you.”

“Why—I wouldn’t call it hate—”

“She kicked you off the team because you smart-mouthed her. But you didn’t say what you did because you were mean. You said that because you hated to see her making a fool of Grunt. Isn’t that right?”

“Well—” Her face was turning red.

“You hate her for making a fool of Grunt, don’t you? And that’s why you asked Grunt those questions in the ‘Chronicle’ office the other day. You didn’t ask him about the drugs in my locker, like you said you would. You asked him why he let an old lady flirt with him when he could have any girl he wanted. You like him, huh?”

She was getting mad. But she just stood there and didn’t answer.

“How come you knew about those drugs in my locker, Kimberly? Only Mr. Scruggs and the police and I and whoever put them there knew about them. Did you put them there?”

Her face had turned a bright red. She was furious. “No-I-didn’t-put-them-there.” She spoke fast, *ratta-tat*, like a machine gun.

“Do you know who did?”

“No-I-don’t-know-who-did.”

“Then how did you know they were there?” She didn’t say a thing.

“Answer him!” Mr. Scruggs said sharply.

“Oh, all right,” she said. “I hated Miss Stumpf for ruining Grunt. He used to be such a great guy.” She pressed her fist against her lips and took sobbing breaths. “She made him think he was a Greek god and so high and mighty. We all thought that if we were mean to him, he’d wake up.”

Tears were rolling down her face. “When she kicked me off the team, I got so mad I dreamed this whole idea up. I figured if the girls got drunk they’d lose, and she’d get fired. I told Eddy my idea, and he and his friends pulled it off.”

“What did they put in the lemonade?” I said.

“Vodka.”

“Vodka?”

“Yeah. It doesn’t smell, and you can’t taste it. But it works fast.”

“You didn’t use drugs?”

“No. I didn’t want anyone to get hooked.”

“Why did you drop Eddy?”

She hesitated. She didn’t like that question. She’d explained the mystery, but everything came together too easy. Nobody had committed a crime. Nobody had done anything really wrong. Spiking lemonade is bad, but you don’t go to jail.

Nope. Kim was scared. She wasn’t telling everything she knew. She was scared of Eddy. She knew something the rest of us didn’t know.

“We’re waiting,” Mr. Scruggs said.

“I don’t want to tell,” she said, looking around. “It’ll get out that I told. I’m afraid they’ll try to get me.”

“OK,” I said, “let me ask you a question. If the answer is no, tell us it’s no. But if the answer is yes, don’t say anything. Then no one can accuse you of ratting on him.”

“The question?” she asked.

“Did you drop Eddy because he wanted to start putting drugs in the lemonade? He wanted to get the girls hooked so he could start a little business of his own on the side by supplying them with drugs?”

We waited.

Kim didn’t say a word.

“And what about ‘Bean’s canteen’ and the drugs in my locker?” I said.

“Well, I tried to get you to change to soccer. But, no! You had to get Mr. Scruggs’s permission. You were his special representative.”

“But that doesn’t explain why you did it,” I said.

“I was trying to put the blame on you because you get on my nerves. You never smart-mouth. You never swear. You’re always sweet Jesus. You’re always so blamed right. Why don’t you ever do anything wrong?!”

Everybody laughed and applauded and cheered when she said that. It was as if they all felt that way.

I smiled. But inside, I was saying, *Thank you, Lord. You’re getting through to these guys.*

“Hey, it’s called ‘new life,’ not New Age,” I said. “It’s what you get when you trust Jesus as your Savior.”

“See? What did I tell you, Mr. Scruggs,” Kim said. “This kid is too smart.”

Everybody laughed again. Any mention of Jesus made them nervous.

“You’ll pay for Bean’s bike, Grunt,” Mr. Scruggs said.

“Yes, sir.”

I hoped Grunt would learn a lesson—that he didn’t have to be a tyrant or pretend to be something he wasn’t in order to have friends.

Mr. Scruggs said, “I’ll meet you and Grunt and Kimberly in my office now, Miss Stumpf, please. Kindly wait for me there.”

Miss Stumpf hadn't said a thing, and she certainly didn't wait for Grunt. She stomped out ahead of him and didn't look back.

When the three of them had gone, Mr. Scruggs turned to the team. "I have an announcement to make, girls. I've made up my mind. I'm going to transfer Miss Stumpf and find you a new coach."

You should have heard those girls. They screamed and clapped and whistled and yelled and squealed. They ran up and hugged him like he was giving them a million dollars.

"Hey! Wait a minute! I'm not through." They calmed down just a little. "It's probably going to take some time to find the right person, so I've decided to give you another student trainer. I'm asking Bean to take over."

He'd no sooner mentioned my name than all of them screamed and rushed over to me. Talk about hugs and kisses!

I tried to lift my arms and hide behind my hands, but Grunt had bitten so hard I couldn't. I got so tickled that I just laughed and laughed and let them do it.

And, say, it wasn't that bad either.

Hey! I knew these girls weren't Grunt's girls anymore.

They were—mine.

17

Who'da Thunk It?

Well, did we go to work. You'd have thought we had a gale warning and we had to get ready. I sent out a call through the student body for anyone with real volleyball experience to come help us. I got books out of the library. I had Ruby make friends with that server from Jefferson who'd pounded our noses through the floor. And I called for practice, practice, practice.

Those girls lived volleyball. Every waking minute they weren't in class or doing homework they were on the court, practicing and playing our games. Me, too.

And it showed. It was like Mr. Scruggs told me. When something clicks—the right time and the right combination, the right people and the right place—you can go all the way to the top.

Well, we had all four right things and then some because these girls were natural athletes. It was like getting ketchup out of a bottle. You struggle to get the first drop and after that it floods.

Our game Wednesday—we were even ready on that first Wednesday. Hey, you could even smell the difference. Talk about attitude and enthusiasm. Man, were we ready! We slaughtered them.

We went right on through our season like we were cutting through butter with a hot knife, and the games I got the most kick out of were the ones with Madison and Grant.

We got the last laugh on both those teams. We laughed them right off the floor while we carried off the league cup.

Love it!

18

We Make the Playoffs

The entire student body was at the bus to wave us off. In fact, everybody who had a car loaded it with kids and trailed us out of town, honking horns and banging on the doors. They were yelling, “Go, Toppers! Beat Plainfield! Go, Toppers! Beat Plainfield!”

Boy! Talk about thrills! And the girls were more excited than I was. They were rid of Miss Stumpf and rid of Grunt. We’d won our tri-county league. We felt like the whole world was our cookie.

Some of the mothers came along as chaperones. They were as hyped as the rest of us.

Our first game would be against Plainfield, champions of the Southern Cities conference. We would be playing on a neutral court at the high school in Warrenton. Not as many kids from our school would be at our games on Wednesday as would come on Thursday if we won. Mr. Scruggs said that if we made it through Wednesday he would excuse school a half day Thursday and all day Friday.

Warrenton was an hour’s drive from Sunny Hills. That gave us time to settle down. One by one the cars trailing us turned back.

“OK, girls!” I called to everybody. I was standing beside the driver, looking back at the passengers. “Since I’m in charge, as your student trainer, I want to set up strategy. We need a spokesman for the team. Who’s it gonna be?”

“Ruby,” several girls said at once. That seemed right since Ruby was the captain.

“OK, Ruby. Why don’t you come up here, and we’ll talk about what we’re going to do.”

She came out of her seat and walked up the aisle, slapping hands with the girls she passed. She turned around when she got to the front and put her arm around my shoulders. All the girls laughed. I guess I turned red. That made them laugh all the more. But I let her keep it there, and we talked strategy.

“OK, Ruby, do you know who we report to when we get to Warrenton?”

“Mr. Scruggs said that a tournament official will meet us at the high school. He’ll get on the bus and direct us to our motel. We’ll leave our suitcases in our rooms and go to the school for lunch.”

“What’s our bus number? Anybody?”

Nobody knew. I asked the driver, and he told us it was number eighty-two.

“OK, everybody, it’s eighty-two. If you get lost around all the school

buses—and there will be a lot of them—just ask the other drivers to help you find eighty-two. Remember? Eighty-two! Shout it! Eighty-two!”

“Eighty-two!” everybody shouted.

“We’ll ask the official how long we have at the motel and how long we have for lunch. The reason I’m going over all of this is because I’ve heard of guys losing the Olympics because they got mixed up on where they were supposed to be and when. Let’s pay close attention every time we get directions. And don’t believe any changes unless they come from an official.”

“Way to go, babe,” someone shouted from the back.

“One other thing I want to do is count off. The number you get is the number you keep all through the tournament. Every time we have a team meeting or have an appointment with the bus driver or whatever, we’re going to count off. We’ve got to know who’s here and who’s missing. Make a note of who has the number in front of you and after you so we can always know who we’re waiting for.”

They counted off all around the bus. I even made the chaperones take a number and I did too.

“And one more one-more-thing. Anybody who’s late three times has to eat a red hot jalapeno pepper in front of everybody. Eat it and swallow it. Mrs. Finster, will you pick up a bottle of Mexican red hots at some store?”

“For any reason?” someone asked. “Late for any reason?”

“For any reason,” I said.

I got some whistles and cheers. They all knew what a bummer it was to have to wait for late people.

“Now, what do we know about Plainfield?” I asked.

Ruby took over then and told the girls everything anybody had told her and everything she’d read in the papers. She had a mind like a sponge. It seemed that everything she heard she memorized. She knew which players were good and what plays they were good at. By the time she was finished, we were nearly to Warrenton.

“OK, gang. Any questions?”

“Yeah,” someone said. “Why did Coach get mad when you told her Grunt was Jewish?”

“Because New Age people hate anything to do with God,” I said.

“Well, how did you know to tell her?”

“I pray about everything I do. I just asked God for help. Then I thought of that and said it. Hey, God answers prayer, guys. Not Minerva. Not Zeus. It’s God.”

“Way to go, God,” someone shouted.

Everybody applauded. Some girls called out, “Amen! Amen!” and, “Thank you, Jesus.” Hey, they weren’t being sassy or rude to God. They weren’t Christians. Those were the only religious words they knew.

There were no more questions.

Ruby and I sat down in two empty seats by the door.

“You were good, Ruby,” I said. “You can always count on Ruby to come through.”

“You didn’t do so bad yourself. Grunt could never have done it like you did. The girls wouldn’t have listened to a word. And, hey, I haven’t forgotten what you said about Jesus, Bean. I’m just not ready yet.”

“Take your time, kid. But don’t keep Him waiting for too long. Just remember. He’s the One who forgives. He loves us.”

Just as we were told, an official met us at the Warrenton high school and took us to our motel. We got our stuff in our rooms and met back at the bus. We counted off. Everybody was there on the minute.

“It’s good we got you, Bean,” Amy Wilson said. “If it had been Grunt, we would have waited till Christmas.”

On the way to the cafeteria, I put Becky in charge of rounding up everybody about 2:00. We were to play at 3:00.

I don’t know why they were letting me be so bossy. I never got away with any of this at home. But someone had to, and I figured it might as well be me.

Well, we ate and found someone to take us to the gym and show us where the locker-rooms were. Now, it’s not that I’m suspicious. But I checked with a couple of officials to make sure that what the guide was telling us was correct. I could see someone from Plainfield telling us to go to the wrong place so that we would miss our game completely and forfeit our way out of the tournament.

We found that the high school had gotten a lot of mats and blankets for the locker-room so that our girls didn’t have to leave the gym to find a place to rest. They rested and got dressed and out on the floor on time. Everybody was in place at the whistle.

Our game started, and we were off with a bang, winning the first one 15-2.

“Now, don’t get overconfident,” I told the girls in the huddle. “Take your time. Keep your cool.”

It worked.

Plainfield caught fire halfway through the second game and tied the score at 10-10. But we kept cool and walked off with that match and the next one.

We’d put one opponent down.

We had another game that night at 8:30.

The State High School Athletic Association took us to dinner. They had a little program and introduced the winners of the first round. We whooped and hollered for ourselves. I was glad that the girls didn’t flex their muscles or glare like bulls. That had always seemed like little-kid stuff to me.

We played Orange High School of the Central Cities of the League that night. We had scattered our scoring in the game against Plainfield. Neither Ruby nor Becky seemed to be the star. But both of them began to establish themselves as the players in control. It was point-point-point-point from Becky and more of the same from Ruby every time they rotated up to serve. Of course, that meant that the other girls had to do their part.

And, boy howdy, they sure did.

We walked over Orange in nothing flat.

Reporters surrounded me while the girls were getting dressed. They wanted to know all about Ruby and Becky and why a ninth grader like me was here as the student trainer. Everything I said seemed to make them ask more and more questions. I just told them the truth.

Then I looked at my watch. And, boy, did I beeline it for our bus. Everyone else was already on board.

“Look! I’m sorry. It’s just there were a whole lot of reporters who wanted to know all about you.”

“Yeah. Yeah,” Ruby said. “We know. She was a cute ninth grade redhead from Orange. We saw her making eyes at you.”

“Redhead? Me? Never. It was reporters.”

“Yeah, we know all about it. Sunny Hills girls aren’t good enough for you, huh?”

Everybody laughed.

“We’re just joshing you, Bean. Don’t take it seriously.”

“OK. That’s better. You had me scared for a minute,” I said. “But there’s one more warning I need to give you girls.”

“What’s that?”

“I know reporters. Any time there’s a dark horse team they’re going to play it up. We need to promise that none of us will read the papers while we’re here.”

They groaned.

“How will we know how good we are?” someone called out.

“It’s called the final score,” I said. “Just read the final score. Mrs. Finster, will you have somebody buy one copy of all the newspapers for each girl on the team, one for our ‘Chronicle,’ one for Mr. Scruggs, and one for me?”

She nodded and said she would.

“That way,” I told everybody, “we’ll all get a copy to keep of every paper and none of you will get a big head.” And then I shouted, “*Cause we’re good, and we’re going to win the gold!*”

Talk about noise! We screamed and shouted all the way back to the motel.

When the bus pulled to a stop, I said one more thing.

“Hey! It’s called discipline. You can run around this motel all night

just because you're away from home and go home with the memory that you won two games. Or you can go right to bed and get a good night's sleep and be state champions. Take your choice!"

They got off the bus, chanting, "*We want the gold! We want the gold!*"

Tomorrow, we would find out.

We'd see just how much they wanted the gold.

19

Almost

The gym was packed and noisy. All Sunny Hills was there. Buses and cars had snaked across the countryside in a long, long stream, Danny Pruitt told me. The whole Pruitt clan had come to root Becky on to stardom.

You could feel the electricity. It was like everyone was on tiptoe... waiting... waiting...

And then the place exploded!

Ruby opened the door to the locker-room and led our girls in for their first Thursday game.

The cheering and yelling was so loud it caught them by surprise. They just stood—shocked—where they'd come running in for the game. And then it dawned on them that the ovation was for them and that all of Sunny Hills was rooting them on to victory.

“Run!” I called to Ruby over the noise. “Circle the court. Show ‘em you’re going to win!”

Ruby led off and the girls followed, loping around the court, their hands clenched high. The band was playing our fight song, and the cheerleaders were doing flips and somersaults. The place had gone crazy.

They huddled when they got back to me.

“Springfield thinks you’re a bunch of nerds who live back in the hills. Keep your cool, but go show them who’s going to get the gold.”

They broke the huddle when the announcer began to introduce the starting players. We were playing Springfield, champions of the Northern Cities league. Our girls had watched them play in the quarter-finals and had figured out their strategy.

Just a handful of Springfield fans had come down for the game, so only a few people were cheering for their starting line-up.

But thunder and lightning struck when they introduced our girls. You’d have thought the walls were going to cave in from all the noise.

It wasn’t even a contest. We wiped them out, 15-2, 15-4, and 15-6. They didn’t know what hit them.

That win moved us up to the semi-finals. We had two games to go. My problem was keeping the girls isolated. All they needed was for their friends to tell them how wonderful they were. They’d get a big head, and then they’d be useless. I explained the problem to Mrs. Finster, our head chaperone.

“It’s important that they watch the other games, but I don’t want our fans to spoil them. What should I do?”

“You can’t keep them from their friends, Bean,” she said. “They need

the encouragement. But tell the girls your feelings. Talk things over. They like that about you, Bean. They respect what you think.”

Well, that made me feel better. So I called a short meeting for after they got dressed. We went into a side room, and I explained how I felt.

“Way to go, babe,” one said. They saw the problem and agreed that they’d talk to their friends just a little bit and then they’d sit together to watch the other matches.

We ate supper with the other athletes, and there was another little program to salute the winners. Half the number of players were left because the losers had packed up their things and gone home. But something got started at supper that put me on edge. I admit it. I’m suspicious.

Some good-looking guys sat down among our girls and with bright eyes and big toothy smiles told them how wonderful they were.

“Who are those guys?” I asked an official from the host school.

“That’s the New Haven cheerleading team. They won the state championship last year. They’re back for another try at it, and they’re everybody’s favorite to walk off with the gold.”

“Thanks,” I said. That was all I needed to hear. Not that I don’t trust cheerleaders from opposing schools, but I’d had enough trouble during football season with guys like that trying to get rid of Danny Pruitt.

I had to do something but didn’t know what. I could go over to their tables and tell them their coach had called an emergency meeting for all members of the yell squad. But that would be lying. That was the way people who don’t know the Lord often act. I didn’t want to be like that.

But what could I do?

Lord? I need wisdom again.

I decided not to make a scene. I waited until our team meeting after supper.

The girls came in high as kites. I don’t know what it is about girls. They make you think when they’re out in public that they don’t even know there are guys walking this earth. But get them alone together, and they can’t talk about anything else.

“Oh, that Jimmy! Wasn’t he a doll!”

“And those shoulders on Ted! What a man!”

They were going on and on about these creeps. It was enough to make a guy want to bring up his supper, if you know what I mean.

“OK, girls. OK. It’s time for serious talk.”

“You be like that when you grow up, Bean—big and bright and goood looking.”

I told them, “Hey, I’m scared. I know those guys look great. But they’re on the New Haven team. If you win tonight and they win tonight, you’re going to play them for the gold. So, why do you think they’re loving you up? What do you think they’ve got on their mind?”

“Oh, Bean!” Amy Wilson said. “You’re so suspicious. Why can’t we

have a little fun?”

“Have all the fun you want,” I said. “Take your choice. You can have fun with boys or win the state championship. You can’t have both.”

“Why not?” Amy said.

“Yeah! Why not?” some others joined in.

“You guys have been through this once. I don’t understand why you can’t see what’s going on here.”

“What?”

“It’s Grunt all over again. He wanted you to be his girls. And you saw through him. How come you can’t see through these guys? They’re just the same.”

“Bingo!”

“Way to go, babe!” They got the point.

My two and two made four. Grunt had given them the glad eye and the toothy smile, and they all knew they couldn’t trust him. I was almost glad they’d had that experience because now they could see how good-looking guys can say one thing and mean another. Especially when they come from the school you’re going to fight in the championship—if you make it that far.

Our game at nine was with Silver City, winners of the Long River Valley conference. They’d been in the finals with New Haven the year before, and we knew they were tough.

Our fans were ready. There was the same explosion as the night before when our girls came out on the floor. Only there were hundreds of people there for Silver City and New Haven, which had won the preliminary. So we knew the winner of our game would be playing New Haven.

Our girls were mad that those guys had tried to distract them. They were ready for Silver City. I don’t know how such nice girls could be so mean.

We took the first game 15-0. It was the first time in the history of the championships that one team had beaten another 15-to-zero. Boy! Did our fans rock that place.

The next game was almost the reverse. Silver City woke up and tried to pound us into the floor. The game tied at 12 and again at 13. They were serving and sent a deep serve over the net.

“Let it go! Let it go!” Ruby called. Anderson let it go, and the ball hit in bounds. It was a point for SC.

On game point, both teams volleyed back and forth, back and forth. It seemed to be going on forever. Neither team could find a weakness in the other’s defense. Then a Silver City forward looked one way and slammed the ball another to win the game.

Our fans groaned. It was one game apiece.

The third game was a repeat. The teams tied on practically every point all the way up to the end. And then the serve changed sides time af-

ter time. You only win a point when you serve. We set the record that night for the longest game in tournament history. Both teams were getting tired, and our girls were really tense.

I called time out.

“You girls have forgotten one thing. That’s why you’re not putting this game away,” I told them in the huddle.

“What’s that?” Ruby asked.

“That ball isn’t a volleyball. It’s Grunt’s head.”

That got them laughing and relaxed. They went back out and won the game.

“We won it for Grunt,” they said. They laughed all the way to the locker-room. They’d won it for Grunt. They’d won it for the guy who had almost ruined their season—almost, but not quite.

I wondered what they’d do in the final game for the guy who had helped them get this far—me.

20

The End

Reporters held me up again. They couldn't understand how girls from our small town could have so much—what did they call it?—poise. They said we seemed to have nerves of steel. They kept asking questions. It was hard to get away.

Everyone was on the bus by the time I got there.

“You talk about us, Bean. You won't let us talk to those sweet boys, and yet you hang around with all the girls from these other schools. How come you can, and we can't?”

They laughed. They loved to tease me. They knew I'd been with reporters.

“Hey! Big team,” I said before they got off the bus at the motel. “We've got one more to go. Those guys from New Haven are going to be in this motel. They're going to call you up and keep you up if they can. They want to get your emotions all stirred up, and they want to tire you out so you'll be a wreck tomorrow. Are you going to let them? Is it worth the gold?”

Wilson patted me on the cheek as she got off the bus. “See you in the morning, Bean Mother.” She laughed.

I didn't laugh. I said to Becky when it was her turn to get off, “Keep your eye on Amy, OK?”

“Will do, Bean Mother,” she said, laughing.

She must have kept Amy in line because I didn't hear about any funny stuff that night. And everybody was bright and bushy-tailed next morning.

The host school had tours and amusements for the girls in the morning. In the afternoon the consolation game was played. There was a banquet for the teams and fans of both schools in the finals that night about 5:00.

We got all the honors.

Ruby got the “Most Inspirational Player” award, and Becky got the “Best Sportsmanship” trophy. It was the first time that award had gone to a girl in the ninth grade.

After the banquet, we had to walk through a pep rally the kids from New Haven had started on the cafeteria stairs. I'd had a sweater on in the cafeteria because they kept that place cold. I took it off as we walked down the steps.

I'd been talking to Becky about her award and looking where I was going when I suddenly became aware that a group of guys was standing in the middle of the stairs. I didn't think anything about it. There were people

all over the place.

I was saying to Becky, “And, boy, were those guys from New Haven surprised that you and Ruby won all the trophies—” when somebody smacked a piece of tape across my mouth and someone else grabbed me by the arm and twisted it high behind my back. I yelled the noise you yell when your mouth is taped shut. New Haven was yelling too, so nobody heard any sound I made.

They marched me over to a van in the parking lot. I fought—as much as you can fight when pain is shooting through your shoulder and you’re walking on your toes.

They shoved me through the door of the van, and someone inside grabbed me by the hair. The driver revved the motor and took off—I wasn’t looking where. All I could see was two eyes riveted into mine.

“I told you we’d get you, Bean, if you didn’t mind your own business. But no. You had to—”

It was Eddy. And with him were the other guys I’d played ball with, rapping and shooting and laughing. Not one of them was laughing now.

“We had a good thing going, man. First, a little vodka that would give them a high. And then we were going to color that with crack and hook ‘em good. They would’ve eaten out of our hands to get more. Rich families—we would’ve made a mint! But, no. Little ninth grade had to—”

He gave me a karate chop on the back of my neck and threw me down. I was barely conscious of a heavy weight dropping on me—one of the other guys.

I blacked out.

I don’t know how long I was unconscious. I came to, moaning. I hurt—*oh, Lord. I hurt.* I lay there—I could feel grass. I could taste blood—a lot of blood. I tried to bring my hand up to touch my face, but I couldn’t. I clenched and unclenched my fists to see if my arms were broken. They weren’t, but they hurt. And my right shoulder hurt. I had a splitting headache.

I tried to move my feet but couldn’t. I slowly realized I was taped up—my hands at my waist and my ankles taped together. I could hear crowd sounds and the sound cars make when they drive in gravel. I went unconscious again—I don’t know for how long.

I came to and moaned and then went out again. I heard the sound of a dog far away, as if he was crying at the moon.

The next time I came to, I heard the crackle of a walkie-talkie and felt someone gently turning me over. I heard Becky’s voice. I went out again.

I was lying on my back, and I felt being lifted. I could see a light going on and off. I felt as if I was surrounded by loving people—people who cared about me and wanted to help me. I started to cry.

A man put his hand on my shoulder and leaned his face close to mine. “We’re here, Bean. Just relax. You’ve been beaten up pretty bad,

but you'll be OK. Just relax.”

I felt the van moving.

Someone put a cool cloth across my forehead. I felt comforting fingers tousling my hair. I felt a rush of love for whoever it was that found me and was taking care of me. I felt the sharp prick of a needle. I was getting a shot. And then a warm feeling of peace seemed to lift me and soothe me.

I came to in the emergency room of a hospital. They'd wheeled me in and nurses with baggy dresses and hats were working around me. A man was standing nearby. I could tell by the sound of his voice that he was the one who rescued me.

He came up beside the table I was on.

“You're going to be fine, Bean.”

“But I'm going to miss the game.” I started to cry again. I couldn't stop it. I was so disappointed. “I don't want to miss our game.”

“How's he doing, nurse?” he asked the lady.

“Most of these are welts and bruises, Tony. His shoulder is sprained, but it's not broken. We'll put his right arm in a sling. His nose isn't broken. It just bled a lot. His teeth will be fine.”

“Any chance I could take him back to the game?”

My face lit up. I know it did.

“Well, he doesn't look very nice. But, if he can walk with those crutches—do you mind getting them, Tony?—then maybe he could go.”

“Oh, boy!” And then I started in again with the tears. These folks were so thoughtful and so nice. It really got to me.

“Is Mr. Scruggs through with the paperwork?” Tony asked the nurse.

“Want to see? He was with the cashier.”

“Mr. Scruggs? I didn't know he was here,” I said.

“He drove over as soon as he got word. Now, if you'll try these crutches, we'll see whether you can get back to your game.”

She held them out to me, and I put them under my armpits. I leaned down, but my right shoulder hurt too much.

“I can't use this one, but I think I could walk with just the other one.”

“Well, let's see.”

I took a few steps, using the one crutch. Even if it had hurt, I wouldn't have said. I had to get back to our game. But it didn't hurt any more than it should. I was limping, but I could make it.

“I don't believe it, Bean!”

I looked up. Mr. Scruggs was standing in the doorway.

He came toward me with his hands out to give me a warm welcome.

“Don't touch him!” the nurse said quickly. “He's a mass of aches and pains. Treat him nice and gentle.”

“Hey, boy.” There was a tear in his voice. “You had us really worried. Who beat you up?—as if I didn't know.”

“Eddy.”

“Might have known. Wait here. I’ll talk to the officer in the lobby.”

“Don’t take long. We’ve got to get back for the game.”

“I won’t be long.”

“Why don’t you practice using your crutch, Bean?” Tony said.

“How can I thank you guys for finding me and bringing me in?” I was crying again. “Why do I cry like this?” I knew I had to grow up and get hold of myself. But these guys had given me back my life. I loved them!

“Hey, boy.” Tony put his arms around me and held me. “You were beaten to a pulp. It’s normal for you to cry. That’s part of the healing process.”

And then he looked me up and down. “And you don’t need to thank us. That’s what rescue teams are for. Besides, we didn’t find you. The police dog found you. I don’t know how, but he did. Your girlfriend, Becky something, called the police when she saw some guys carrying you off. She was with the police when the dog found you. She identified you. She wanted to come back to the hospital, but Mr. Scruggs told her she should go in and play the game. He told her to tell the girls you’d be all right.”

“Wow!”

Mr. Scruggs came back. “Ready to go?”

“Ready,” I said, smiling. “And, Tony—” I had to bite my lips. “Thanks again.”

“Hey, I’m coming with you. I wouldn’t miss this for the world.”

They got me into the car with Mr. Scruggs. He drove, and Tony drove his van.

“We need to make tracks. The game’s started by now,” Mr. Scruggs said.

He had me tell him what had happened, what Eddy had said, and what I remembered about the beating. He said a bus had broken down across the exit and there was no way for Eddy to get his van out of the parking lot at the time he would have wanted to get away. He figured that was why they’d dumped me in the bushes there on the school campus. He said they probably never would have found me if it hadn’t been for that.

I knew Who had made sure that bus had broken down.

Thank you, Lord Jesus.

Well, Mr. Scruggs parked near the door, and so did Tony. And then they helped me get out and walk into the gym.

You should have heard the yelling and screaming when everybody saw us. The voice on the loudspeaker said, “Bean Spencer, ladies and gentlemen.”

I learned later he had announced I was missing and then that I had been found, beaten to a pulp. That’s why everybody in that whole place stood up and yelled when we came in.

Our team ran across the floor and mobbed us. They were crying.

Mr. Scruggs wouldn't let them touch me, but they were so happy I was there. They'd been worried sick, they said. They just hadn't been able to concentrate on the game.

I looked at the scoreboard. New Haven had won the first game 15-6. The second game was already in progress, and the score was 10-4, New Haven's favor.

"We got here just in time, Bean," Mr. Scruggs said to me after the girls had gone back onto the court. "Maybe they can pull out of this slump."

The crowd sensed their excitement. You should have heard the roar!

New Haven served. The ball soared over the net. As Wilson took it in back court, I shouted, "Go!" as her hands touched the ball. She lobbed it forward to Flory, and I shouted, "Go!" as she lifted it toward Ruby. Ruby slammed it into the floor, and I shouted, "Go!" as she did it.

Our cheerleaders must have heard me, because they got the students and all our fans to shout, "Go! Go! Go!" each time our girls touched the ball.

Becky rotated up to serve.

And guess what! Surely you know by now.

It was point-point-point-point-point-point. Her eye was deadly. For a ninth grader, she had power in her arms; and she could put the ball in the exact spot she wanted. If she saw an opposing player move even slightly out of position or shift weight to the other foot, she put the ball right there.

In six serves she had tied the score. New Haven hadn't been able to field even one of them. And then the ball did come back on the seventh serve. Anderson went to her knees to get it and missed.

The ball went over to New Haven, but those girls were out of it. They served into the net.

We got one point on our next serve and then two points on the two serves after that. Wilson took us to victory, 15-10.

Talk about noise! Those bleachers were getting a work-out like they'd never had before.

And guess who moved up to serve first for our side!

Ruby!

It was Ruby all the way. She had twelve straight serves and not one of them was returned. It had never happened before in the history of volleyball.

Did you hear me? In the *history!!!*

Talk about control. Talk about the dead eye. She had it all. She was feeling the pressure when she put her toe to the line to serve for the thirteenth point. The place went dead quiet. Even New Haven knew we were setting world records in this game.

Ruby took a deep breath and let it out. She took all the time she

wanted. Nobody but nobody was rushing her. She lifted the ball in the air. It seemed to hang there, suspended. And then she gave it a swat that sent it over the net with hardly an inch to spare. A New Haven girl tried to get her hands under it, but the ball shot off her hands and out of bounds behind her.

Thirteen.

Two more to go for a world record.

Ruby was toeing the line again and waiting when the New Haven coach called time out. No way did he want a world record scored against his team. He wanted to do anything he could to get Ruby to think about each serve.

Our girls wanted to go up to Ruby and encourage her, but they knew enough to let her alone. They didn't want to break her concentration. She just walked around the serving corner. She bounced the ball. She waited quietly.

But our fans weren't waiting quietly. We had the band and the cheerleaders and the fight song and yells.

I looked over at the team and saw that Grunt had come down out of the stands. He was talking to the girls. They were hugging him and holding his hands!

Mr. Scruggs saw my questioning look. "That boy's had a real change of heart. He wanted to come and apologize to the girls. I let him come." It was obvious they'd forgiven him.

"Where's Coach Stumpf? Is she here?"

"No. I put her on temporary leave. We'll be deciding what to do about her later."

"Time in!"

The girls took their places.

The crowd quieted down.

Ruby put her toe on the mark and took a deep breath. She must have inhaled Grunt because she sent that ball zinging over the net again like a cannonball. The New Haven girls scattered, thinking the ball was going out of bounds.

"Point!"

It was inbounds by inches.

The place went crazy. Fourteen straight points. It was unheard of. Now could she do the impossible?

New Haven called time out again.

Some of our girls sat on the floor. Others lay out flat. Others walked around the court with all their fingers crossed. They didn't know the Lord. They didn't know anything about real prayer, but I was sure each one was asking God for help.

Ruby came over to where Mr. Scruggs and I were sitting. "Bean," she said, "this one's for you."

Oh, Lord, I prayed, I know it's just a game. But use it, if You can. Use it to show these girls that it's not Zeus. It's You, the Lord God, who is in charge of miracles.

"Time in!"

Ruby put her toe on the mark. Inhaled. Exhaled. Tossed. Gave it a swat—

And won the game!

We were delirious! Everybody—Sunny Hills, New Haven, the world—had been rooting for Ruby. Our team swarmed over her. The New Haven team. Everybody. There was hugging and laughing and crying.

And, hey, man! Guys don't cry. I'm too old to cry. *Oh, Lord. Why am I crying?*

We'd won.

We'd won!

Our Sunny Hills Volleystoppers had won!!!

21

The Gold

You'll never guess who had to eat the jalapeno pepper. Even that made the front pages of the newspapers. Our Sunny Hills story had caught the newspaper world by surprise, and practically everything we did made the headlines. When I told the reporters they had made me late the third time, they insisted on coming with me.

Sure enough, Mrs. Finster had the pepper bottle out, and the girls were shrieking with fun. Some of them thought I shouldn't have to eat it, but—hey!—I made the rule.

I ate it all right, and wouldn't you know—it went down the wrong way. I coughed and wheezed and coughed again. They all thought it was hilarious. And the next day I was on the front page, my face looking all screwed up like a prune, surrounded by laughing girls.

The caption read, "Injured Sunny Hills mascot/manager eats jalapeno victory pepper." The story told about my getting beaten up and how I was found and all. We never saw Eddy or his friends on campus again.

Well, we had a train of honking cars and buses across the hills of our state that night as our whole town escorted us home.

And, when we got back to the high school, we had a rally that wouldn't stop. It was songs and yells and speeches and stories. Mr. Scruggs had his second championship. You never saw a happier guy.

And Kimberly was there, holding hands with Grunt. She'd been sharply scolded for what she'd done, and her parents had been called in to the office. Mr. Scruggs had really landed on her. But no charges were filed.

Becky gave me back my sweater when she was introduced to everybody. She said she'd found it in the grass where Eddy and the guys had marched me off. They used it to give the police dog my scent.

Isn't that just like the Lord? He'd put it in my head to take off my sweater as we were leaving the cafeteria so she would have something of mine to show the dog. Like the Bible says, we can cast our cares on Him because He cares for us.

Everybody was making a fuss over me, but I had just been doing my job.

When Ruby was introduced, she said, "I want all of you to know that we girls got pretty jealous over there in Warrenton. There was some pretty redhead who flirted with our student manager. He liked her so much that he decided he wanted to become a redhead himself. So we gave him a jalapeno pepper to eat and it did the trick."

Everybody laughed.

And then Ruby held up her hands to quiet everybody down.

“But, seriously, we would never have even made the championships, much less won the gold, if it hadn’t been for God—and someone else.”

Here she faltered. She had a tear in her voice.

“We girls made a discovery over there in Warrenton.”

She cleared her throat.

“We discovered we weren’t over there to win the gold. We already had the gold.

“We had Bean.”

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