

SINK IT! SINK IT, BECKY P. by Dick Bohrer © 2005 by Richard W. Bohrer

J. EDGAR BEANPOLE
& FRIENDS

SINK IT, SINK IT,
BECKY P.

DICK BOHRER

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1

A Star Is Born

I couldn't figure it out. People were yelling and cheering and pointing at me. Some girls from my home-room came up behind me, lifted me up and started to parade me around the gym, carrying me like I'd just won the basketball game all by myself.

But I hadn't done a thing.

I was just standing by the bleachers talking to my own family before our game with the alumni when some knucklehead slammed a basketball at my little sister Anna. She had just come back that day from a concert tour she and Mom had taken. She'd played her solo violin with some symphony orchestras. People call her a second Mozart. That's pretty neat for an eight-year-old.

So we were at the first boys varsity basketball game of the season. Our girls team was playing their alumni as the pre-game special. We were celebrating as a family. Mom, Dad, Danny, Anna and I were sitting together with my friend Bean Spencer. My other brother Joseph didn't want to "sit with his faaamily" so Mom let him sit

nearby with his friends

Anyway, as I said, I was standing with my back to the court, talking a blue streak. Anna had just bent over to pull up her socks when the ball came crashing in. It hit her on the back and bounced up.

That made me mad. I didn't even turn around to see who did it. I just snatched the ball and tossed it back over my head to the girls behind me on the floor.

That's when the roaring started.

"What's this all about?" I yelled down to the girls carrying me. "Put me down. Come on!"

They just laughed and jostled me on around the court. When they got back to where they started, people were still yelling and laughing and now they were shouting, "More! More!"

"What did I do? Tell me."

"You scored a basket, dummie," one of them said. "How'd ya do that?"

"Yeah, Becky," Bean held out his hand to help me up the bleacher. "How DID you do that?"

"I don't know," I said. "I just threw it."

Danny, my brother, was still laughing. "You should have seen it. It flew up high in a perfect arch and dropped in the basket with a swish. How did you learn to do that, Beck?"

I was just sitting down beside Bean when the girls from my homeroom came back and grabbed at me.

"They want you to do it again," one of them said.

People were still shouting, "More! More!"

I tried to shake them off. I couldn't ever do that again. But they kept pulling me.

"Be a sport and try, Beck," Bean said.

"You come with me then." I pulled him out of the

bleachers and went out on the floor.

Some cute guy cheerleaders brought me a basketball and led me out to the middle of the court. There was so much noise and shouting I couldn't hear what they were telling me.

One of them pointed to the line across mid-court and another one pointed to where I should put my toes on the edge of it.

People were standing up cheering. They just liked to see a girl make a fool of herself. So I played the part. I laughed and waved at them. I turned to see where the basket was and then turned back facing away from it.

"This is dumb. I can't do this," I said to no one in particular. Then, with a heave, I tossed the ball back over my head as hard as I could.

The crowd went quiet; and, as I turned around to see where the ball went, a roar went up. I'd done it again.

"How do you do that?" Bean said as he shook my hand in congratulations.

The band started the "Star Spangled Banner" just then so I didn't have to explain how I did something I didn't know I could.

We went back and stood beside Anna. She looked up at me and grinned when we got to the rockets red glare and bombs bursting in air.

Then the singing stopped and the game started.

As I said, our girls team was playing last year's varsity in a pre-season scrimmage that Coach Demmery arranged. All those players had lettered. Our team—we had Ruby Ruberg, a senior and my volleyball teammate. We had Libby Walsh and Lorrie Isako—they were sophomores. We had big Abby Moldonado—we all call her Molly. She was a junior. We had Kyra Ingram and

Meagen Erickson—they were sophomores, too. So we had all sophomores and one junior and one senior who was our only returning letterman. We just had six players. We didn't even have a real bench.

It showed.

Our guys couldn't keep up at all. In no time it was 12 to zip. Then we made a free throw. At least it wouldn't be a shut-out.

Then we got some momentum going and it was 19 to 5. When it got to be 30 to 7, the crowd—and it was a big home crowd that night—started getting restless.

Then some clown started it and people began picking it up. They were chanting, "We want Beck-y! We want Beck-y!" Pretty soon the whole place was roaring, "We want Beck-y! We want Beck-y!"

"Let's get out of here," I said to Bean. "There's no way I'm—"

"You're too late." He nudged my arm with his elbow and pointed down court with his head. "They're coming."

I looked. One of the players was running toward me from down where Coach was sitting. Coach had her arm up in my direction. She was nodding her head and beckoning for me to come.

The people in the bleachers let out a cheer. They'd been watching.

"Coach wants to see you, Becky," she said when she got to me.

"I'm not coming," I said, shaking my head.

"You're not?" Bean couldn't believe it.

"Do it, Beck," Danny said, as he patted me on the shoulder.

"Yeah, Becky, do it," Anna said. "Do it for me."

“Yeah, do it for your eight-year-old sister,” Bean laughed. He stood up and pulled me to my feet. Then he pushed me down toward Coach.

“Anna, come with me,” I turned and called back.

Everybody cheered and clapped.

Coach stood up and called time out. “I want you to suit up,” she said. “Hurry.”

“But I’m not in shape,” I said. “Besides, I get asthma sometimes when I run a lot.”

“Who said anything about running? You just stand in mid-court and toss that ball over your head like you just did.”

“You’ve got to be kidding,” I said. I could talk to her like this because she was my math teacher during the day.

“Well, we’re not scoring any points without you. And these people here want a show.”

“But—”

“It’s not an official game. It’s practice. The season hasn’t even begun. Go on. Suit up. Kyra, set her up.”

I followed her to the locker room. Anna came with me. Kyra found me a uniform. I got some socks and shoes out of my own locker. She left me to get dressed.

“What have I gotten myself into?” I asked Anna as I rushed to change.

“Hey, relax. It’s just a game. Have fun. Besides, the Lord’ll help you relax.”

“I know,” I said. “He does.”

I finished tying my shoes and stood up. I handed her my coin purse. “Keep this for me. You never know who goes through clothes in a locker. Okay. Let’s go.”

When we came through the door, we got an ovation. You’d have thought some conquering hero had just

come home.

Coach had called a time out.

“You play center, Becky. Do your stuff and have fun. Libby, Molly, Lorrie, Kyra stay in. Feed the ball to Becky every chance you get.”

Then the five of us yelled, “Yo!” and ran out on the floor.

Now, don’t get me wrong. I’ve played a lot of basketball and even did pretty well on our girls volleyball team. And I’ve watched a ton of basketball on TV. So I knew what to do.

It’s just that this crowd was expecting some kind of razzle-dazzle miracle from a klutz like me.

There was no way I could deliver.

The alumni center got a cramp when we jumped for the ball at tip-off. I sent it to Lorrie. She bounced it to Kyra, Kyra to Molly, Molly to me. I was down near the basket, and I just gave it a straight-arm lob. The ball went up and in.

You should have heard the guys in the bleachers crow.

I glanced at the scoreboard. It was now 36 to 9.

Well, Libby intercepted the ball right off and scored. And, wouldn’t you know, we were off to the races. I can’t explain it. There was something about us that just jelled.

We didn’t even have one turnover. We danced up and down that court like a bunch of idiots. We yelled and howled and slapped our legs like apes as we ran up and down the floor. We screamed and wiggled our fingers in their faces, and the referees didn’t stop us.

The alumni didn’t know what hit them. They’d never played a bunch of wild hoodlums. Our craziness threw

them off their game.

They managed only four more points by half-time. Nothing they threw up went in.

We quintupled our score, going from 7 to 34.

The crowd was going wild.

We closed to 59 to 50 by the middle of the fourth quarter. I hadn't done any of my half-court lobs. We were a team. We were working the ball in toward the basket like you're supposed to.

Molly got fouled, and she made her two shots. Libby snatched the ball from a forward, turned and sank a three-pointer from where she was standing.

Quick-Hands Kyra stole another one from a guard, slipped it to Libby in the corner who sank another three.

We were 59-58 with a minute to go.

The guys in the stands were on their feet, yelling and cheering as if their life depended on the outcome of this game.

The alumni went into a stall, trying to hold on to their victory.

Kyra tried to tap the ball away, but just hit air. That was good. She could have drawn a foul.

We tried everything to get that ball loose.

Molly got her hands on it and hung on for dear life. She got a jump ball out of it, but she was too heavy to reach as high as the stringbean center the alumni had. They got the ball. A lot of good it did them.

We didn't want to foul them because there wasn't enough time. Coach didn't call time out. She just let us go.

Then the crowd started the countdown.

"Twelve!"

“Eleven!”

“Ten!”

We were down in their end of the court. Kyra made a pass at the ball. Their center turned to avoid it and I snagged the ball, lost it, scrambled for it and got it near the mid court line.

“Three!”

“Two!”

What could I do but lob the ball. At least I could try. So it would go over the backboard and into the stands. At least I’d tried.

But it didn’t.

It went through the hoop.

You wouldn’t believe it. The entire student body poured out of the stands and mobbed all five of us—especially me.

Everybody slapped my head and lifted their hands for high-fives. Dads pounded me on the back and shook my hand.

And all these cute guys tried to kiss us! Hundreds!

No one’s gonna kiss me.

But, man, this is the life.

If Coach’ll let me, I’m staying on this team.

2

Big Surprise

They had to clear the floor for the boys' varsity game so we left the court and jogged into the locker room. We were still flying high. We couldn't get over what we'd done.

We were chanting, "We beat the alumni. We beat the alumni!" We kept it up while we were showering and dressing.

"Where's Coach?" I asked anybody. "What's keeping her?"

"Oh, she's probably in her office drawing up your contract," Lorrie said.

We all laughed.

"She's probably wondering if she can get you for one million or if she'll have to offer you two—or six or ten!" Kyra gave my pigtail a pull when she said that.

"Hey, Becky," Molly said as she leaned over and tied her shoe. "You just tell her, 'Look, Coach. You don't have to offer me any money. I'll just play for the fun of it. Just make sure those cute guys keep kiss—'"

Coach walked in as we were screaming with laughter.

“Okay, you guys, listen up.”

We stopped our chatter, but we finished dressing while she talked.

“That was some performance you guys put on.”

We yelled and hollered and then we started our chant, “We beat the alumni. We beat—”

“Hey! Enough!”

We shut up.

“This isn’t junior high, you guys. Sure, you beat the alumni and you had a lot of fun. But I wouldn’t call that high school basketball. You had a good scrimmage. You knocked them off their game. You even won. But that’s not the way we play ball at this school. Basketball’s a ladies’ sport. You never saw a game on TV where the players did what you guys did. Did you?”

We didn’t know what to say. We thought we’d done a great job. David had killed Goliath.

“Well, did you?”

We mumbled, “No.”

“We haven’t been practicing all these weeks to throw our game plan out the window like you guys did tonight. It’s back to basics on Monday, I tell you. I’m not going to have those shenanigans from any team I coach. You guys embarrassed me tonight. That’s why I didn’t call any time outs. I let you play to the buzzer to get the game over as quick as possible. I apologized to the alumni. They were furious. That’s why I was late getting in here.”

I couldn’t believe her. The other girls were stunned, too.

“You’re not glad we won?” Meagan said.

“Oh, I’m glad you won. That was a fun game. But that’s all it was.”

“What about Becky?”

“What about her?”

“Is she coming on the team?”

“Has she been on the team? Did she come out for practice the first day of school like the rest of you did? Has she been scrimmaging with you ever since then?”

“No. But she didn’t know she could do what she does back then.”

“I can’t help that. She’s got some good moves—some great moves. But she’ll have to wait until next year and do it right.”

“You mean I can’t stay on the team?” I asked.

“Come back next year and we’ll build our game plan around you. But not now. Thanks for the great game tonight. But we’ll see you next year, okay, Becky?”

“But she can score from mid court, Coach,” Lorrie said.

“That was just a fluke. And, besides, she’s the one who eggs you on so you act like apes on the floor. I won’t have it.”

“So she doesn’t get to play.”

“Not this year.”

The girls felt as bad as I did. Here I thought we’d have a ball. We’d win all our games and go to the state championships like football and soccer did—and girls’ volleyball.

“Well, I’ll see you guys around,” I said, giving them high fives as I walked past them to the door.

“See ya, Becky.”

“Nice goin’, Becky,” Ruby was holding the door open for me. Under her breath she said, “Wait for me.”

“Let me know if I can ever help,” I called back as I went out the door.

But on my inside, I was asking, “*Father God, why won’t Coach let me on the team? What’s the real reason?*”

3

What a Let-Down

I saw Bean near the outside door, but some girls from my homeroom were also waiting for me.

“Did she sign you up? You playing varsity?” They swarmed around me.

“Nope.” I shook my head. “She said I have to wait till next year.”

“Next year! Next year!”

Everybody was groaning.

“But you were a sensation, girl!”

“Those guys came alive with you on the team.”

Everybody was talking and moaning.

“Next year,” I said.

“Well, we’ll see about that,” one of my friends said.

“We’ll tell everybody!” someone else said.

“We’ll go to the principal!”

“The superintendent.”

“The governor!”

“The president!”

“The Supreme Court!”

They were all trying to top each other, and we all

ended up laughing.

“What did coach say, Becky?” somebody asked.

“Yeah. Tell us. What did she say?”

“She said—and I know she’s right—she said that since I didn’t come out for practice at the beginning of the year and work into her program from the start that I can’t expect to come in now at the beginning of the season.”

“That’s no fair!”

“You were good, man!”

“Yeah, real good.”

Everybody was talking again.

“Well, we’ll see about this. Come on, guys. Let’s go make some trouble,” someone said.

“The game’s starting!” We heard a call from the gym door.

With a rush, everybody ran in to get seats.

Bean came toward me. “Your folks said to tell you they were taking Anna home. You can call when you want them to come get you. You gonna watch the game with me?”

“I’m waiting for Ruby.”

“Everybody liked what they saw tonight,” he said. “They’ll demand she puts you on the team.”

“No. I don’t want that. I like Coach. If she wants it this way, that’s okay with me. So don’t make a fuss, you hear?”

“Well, if I don’t make that fuss, at least I’ve got another one to make,” he said.

““What do you mean?””

“Start at the beginning. How did you get that first basketball that you threw over your head?”

“Someone threw it and it hit Anna on the back,” I

said. "She was bending over pulling up her socks."

"And what would have happened if she hadn't bent over?"

"She would have seen it coming at her."

"And what would she have done about it?"

"She would have put her hands up to protect herself." I knew that.

"You know how important her hands are? How important a violinist's hands are?" he asked me. "Break a finger on your left hand and you're done."

"So one ball comes at her out of nowhere."

"Somebody tripped her on the way out," he said. "She was falling with her hands out in front of her when Danny caught her."

"Were they walking out with a crowd of people around them?"

"Yeah."

"That could happen to anyone," I said. "You're paranoid, Bean. No one would trip Anna just because she's a concert violinist."

"Danny and I think someone's out to get her."

"Who would want to beat up on an eight-year-old girl?" It didn't make sense to me.

"Maybe someone's jealous," he said.

"Like who, Bean. Come on!—No! Hey! You might be right at that."

"But why would they want to hurt—her?"

"They're not jealous of her," I told him.

"They're not?"

"No. They're jealous of you. That ball was intended for you."

"Why me?" He couldn't figure it out.

"It's those stupid jokes you tell."

“Stupid! They’re not stupid,” he said. “Any normal person thinks they’re funny. Which reminds me. Have you heard the one about the man whose car broke down outside a mental asylum?”

“It’s too late, Bean. Here comes Ruby. What time is it?”

He looked at his watch. “Eight thirty.”

“Eight thirty? Wow, time flies when you’re having fun.”

“That’s like what the frog said on the lily pad.” Bean stopped me.

“What’s like what the frog said on the lily pad?”

“Time’s fun when you’re having flies.”

“Ugh! You’re just like Joseph. He has a dumb joke for everything.”

“Where do you think I get them?”

“Get OUT of here!” I laughed and turned as Ruby came out the locker room door. I guess Bean went in to watch the game.

Ruby hugged me. “You were so good,” she said. “We would never have won that game without you.”

“We beat the alumni! We beat the alumni!” I got her jumping up and down with me. “We beat the alumni! We beat—”

“Hey,” Ruby stopped. “Do you realize the alumni were all lettermen? They were good when they were here. And some of them are now in college playing ball.”

“And we’re a team of sophomores.”

“Except for me.”

“And Molly.”

“With a coach that doesn’t want our star player on the team,” Ruby said.

“What’s the real reason?” I asked her.

“None of us knows. That’s never been a rule before. They let Andrea Rogers play on the team three years ago when she moved to town after the season started.”

“Well, maybe Coach knows I write for our school paper sometimes.” We were walking toward the gym door to go in and see the game.

“Why do you think that’s the reason?”

“Well—maybe she hiding something she doesn’t want anyone to know.”

4

Second Try

My friends made noise the next day; but Mr. Scruggs, our principal, was out of town and the cheerleader guys had no one with as much authority to talk to. The school board wasn't going to meet again until next month, so they couldn't go there.

I suppose the kids could get their parents to call the school board on the phone, but I didn't count on it. Folks are too busy to complain about a decision a teacher makes.

The kids in my classes kept telling me that I got a raw deal, but that was about all.

Danny had a good idea.

“Why don't you go over and volunteer to be team manager, Beck? That way you'll be there if she should ever need you. Make yourself useful. Show her you're a Christian—that you don't carry a grudge.”

“Yeah. Do it, Becky!” Joseph pounded me on the back. My brothers are always pounding me on the back!

“But they've already got a manager,” I said.

“Well, volunteer to be her assistant. There’s a lot to do on a team, and they can always use more help,” Danny said.

“I’ll meet you at lunch,” Joseph said. “I’ll go over with you when you talk to Coach.”

I gave him a nod with my head. “You got it,” I said. “I’ll meet you at the gym door.”

I thought about that all through Spanish I, geometry and sophomore English. I even thought about it through Girls Glee Club. We always have a ball in there. Once we learn a song, we each have to get up and sing it as a solo.

We were doing “They’re Hanging Danny Deever in the Morning.” It was an old Irish ballad about some poor guy who got in trouble with the law. His relatives and friends were having a cow because they didn’t want him executed.

A lot of girls in the class took themselves and “Danny Deever” very seriously. They dreaded getting up and singing a solo, and they were pretty sad about poor Danny. They’d stand up straight and tall and start singing after the pianist, a lady named Elsie, played the introduction. A lot of them sang from behind their front teeth instead of using their diaphragm. The sound that came out was often pretty bad.

And then it came my turn.

I don’t know why I do what I do. I guess I’m just pure ham. But I thought it was a lot of fun. I sang it in Irish dialect and started taking off my blouse as I sang it. The teacher—we called her “Miss Butter-sack”—didn’t know what to think. She took her music seriously, but she had a sense of humor.

I wasn’t going to take all my clothes off. I just wanted

to have something in my hands. I wanted to dramatize what poor Danny Deever was going through as they were preparing him for the noose.

Well, the girls watching couldn't hold it. They roared. Even Miss Buttersack had her hand over her mouth, and tears were running down her face she was laughing so hard.

When I hit the final wail, "They're Hanging Danny Deever in the Marrrrrning!" I was wringing my blouse and dabbing my eyes as I howled.

I got a standing ovation.

It was so much fun!

Like I said, I almost forgot about going to see Coach at noon.

But Joseph was at the gym door, like he said. We went in and knocked on the door of Coach's office.

"Come!" her voice answered.

We went in.

"Hi, Becky P. What's up?"

I noticed she ignored Joseph.

"We wondered if you could use a manager's assistant," I said. "I liked being around the girls last night, and I thought maybe I could help the team that way even if I couldn't play."

Coach scratched her head.

"I thought I told you to wait till next year, Becky. Don't you hear? Don't you think?"

"But—"

"I see what you're trying to do. You want to get in here under my nose and upset my girls so that they force me to let you on the team. I'm sorry. It won't work."

"But Becky's not that kind of girl, Coach." Joseph

stood up for me.

“Oh, she’s not, ah? But you are, Pruitt? You are? Get out. Both of you. I don’t want to see either of you over here again. This is my team and you keep out. Both of you. Y’hear?”

We were out the door and that was that.

“What’s she got against me, Joseph?” I said as we walked down the hall to the front door. “What did I ever do to her?”

“But what has she got against—me? What did—I—ever do to her?”

“Beats me,” I said.

“I can understand why she doesn’t want you around.” Joseph pointed his finger at me.

“Yeah? Why?”

“You showed her up.”

“How did I do that?”

“You showed that all the training she’s been giving her team isn’t working and that you coming out of the bleachers were as ready to play as the team she’s been training all fall.”

“But I didn’t do it on purpose.”

“No, but you did it. She can’t have you around and keep her job.”

“Well, I’m disappointed she took it that way.”

“At least you tried, Becky.” We went out the door. “At least you tried. But me? What did I ever do?”

He went one way, talking to himself and shaking his head.

And I went another.

I sure would have liked that job. Those guys were fun to be around. But Coach was something else.

I got a call that night.

It was Mr. Scruggs.

“I hear we’ve got a basketball star, Becky P. Is there anything you can’t do?”

“Naw,” I said. “I’m just lucky.”

“Well, that’s not what I’ve heard from some people that saw the whole thing.”

“They’re just being nice,” I said.

“Well, I don’t know if there’s anything I can do about getting you on the team. We pretty much let our teachers do what they want.”

“Yes, sir,” I said.

“Of course, if they don’t win any games—”

He let his voice hang in the air. He didn’t finish his sentence.

“Well, I’ll be talking to you, Becky P. See you Friday night at the Cleveland game?”

“I’ll be there,” I said.

“Good. Good night.”

“Good night, Mr. Scruggs.”

“Oh, and say, Becky P.? Before you hang up, I’d like to ask you to do a little something for me.”

“Sure, Mr. Scruggs. What would you like?”

“Well, I’m not too happy with what’s happening with our basketball team, but I don’t want to interfere with what Coach Demmery is doing.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Now I certainly don’t want her to think I’ve planted a hawkeye over there to spy on her. But I do need to know what she’s doing on my time.”

“Yes, sir,” I said.

“Well, you know all about the gym since you were on our championship volleyball team. I feel funny asking a volleyball star to do something so menial, but I’d like

you to help the custodian in the gym with his cleaning—you know, scouring the showers, sorting towels, mopping floors. We'll pay you. But you just keep your eyes open and let me know what you see, okay?"

"I guess so. But what if Coach sees me around?"

"You're not working for her. You're working for the custodian. Blend into the woodwork so, if she sees you, she doesn't notice you. Know what I mean?"

"You don't want her to know I have my eye on her."

"Right, Becky. Report to the custodial office in the gym tomorrow after school. I'll make all the arrangements."

"I'll do what I can, Mr. Scruggs," I said.

We hung up.

I had a job now. Two jobs. I was gonna be a copper and a mopper. I had no idea what I might find out.

Looking back now, if I'd been thinking, I might not have told Mr. Scruggs I'd do it.

5

What to Do

It turned out that I didn't even get to go to the Cleveland game. Coach called me at home and dropped her bomb.

"Look, Becky. I want you to do me a favor."

"Sure, Coach. Anything."

"I want you to stay home Friday night."

"Stay home?"

"Yeah. Stay home."

"Why's that, Coach?"

"Just your being there gets the fans all keyed up. If we fall behind, they'll be shouting for me to put you in. My girls will get distracted, and we might lose. So just don't come, okay?"

"But I thought I could cheer them on to victory," I said.

"It wouldn't work that way, Becky."

"You really don't want me to come?"

"Thanks, Becky. I knew I could count on you."

I hung up the phone. I didn't know what to think. I confess I'd been looking forward to Friday night. I knew the team would fall behind in the score. I could hear

the fans chanting, “We want Beck-y. We want Beck-y.” I saw myself changing into a uniform and going out there to win the game again.

I could see Coach’s point. She knew that would happen. She knew her game plan would go out the window if I was there and the fans demanded that I play.

So what would I do Friday night?

“Joseph!” I shouted up the stairs. He was in his bedroom. Each of us has our own bedroom thanks to our Dad. He built our house.

“Jo-seph!” I knew he heard me the first time.

“What?” he opened his door and called down.

“Come on down here. I’ve got a problem.”

“You’ve got a problem and you want help? From me? I don’t believe it.” He came running down the stairs, yelling, “Hey, everybody, she wants help from me! I don’t believe it.”

“You clown!” I said.

“What’s up?”

I told him what Coach had said.

He couldn’t believe that either.

“All week long,” he said, “the cheer leaders have been telling everyone to chant that they want you in the game. They figure they can force Coach to put you in. She must have gotten wind of that.”

“Yeah. She can’t put me in if I’m not there.”

“Pretty clever.”

“So what do I do Friday night? Stay home and knit socks?”

“You could do your homework for Monday.”

“I do that on Saturdays. What would I do on Saturday if I did my homework Friday night?”

“Well, when you ask an expert like me, you get an

answer like this—go with Mom and Anna.”

“But I want to go to the game. I don’t want to go to a concert!”

“Your own sister’s in a concert big-time and you don’t want to go? They could use someone to carry her violin.”

“Why don’t you go then or are you going to the game?” I sort of sneered when I said that. I’m not always very nice.

“Don’t you listen when we talk? Dad’s taking Danny and me ice fishing up at the lake. We’ve been talking about this for months.”

“What’s the fun of building a tent and sleeping out on the ice? I just tuned you guys out every time I heard you talk about it.”

“We’re not sleeping on any ice. You know that.”

I did know that. My great-grandfather rents some cabins up there. He built them himself back in the 1920s and 30s. They’re neat. They’ve got a lot of old furniture and pictures from back then. He hasn’t changed a thing.

“Take me with you guys. I like fishing,” I said.

“No can do. There’s no room.”

“Mom!” I shouted, “why can’t I go fishing?”

“Because you’re not a man,” Joseph shouted back at me. “It’s only the men at church—the men and boys. Don’t you ever listen?”

“But I don’t want to go to a concert!” I know how to whine.

My Mom came out of the kitchen.

“They’ll take you up to the lake some other time, Becky,” she said. “But it’d be a real help to us if you’d go with Anna and me. We have a lot to carry.”

“Do I have to dress up?”

“Yeah, it’s formal. You have to wear a suit and tie,” Joseph said.

He wasn’t funny.

“It is dress-up,” Mom said. “But you don’t mind that.”

Word got around at school that I wasn’t going to the game, and the kids didn’t understand. I didn’t tell anyone Coach asked me to stay away.

“You lettin’ the team down, Becky P.?” someone asked me.

“Some Hilltopper you are if you don’t go to the game, Becky P.,” someone else said.

“My sister’s playing a solo with a symphony orchestra, and you don’t want me to go?”

They shut up after that.

I reported to the gym after school. The custodian was expecting me. He gave me a mop, a bucket of sudsy water and another bucket of clean. I had to mop the showers. The team had already dressed and gone out on the court. So I got right to work and slopped the suds around and mopped them up.

I heard a door click and looked out into the locker room. Coach had come off the floor and gone into her office.

I still had another corner to do and was doing it when I heard her office door open. I watched her come out, dressed to go home. She had a violin case in her hand. She looked at her watch as she went out the side door to the parking lot.

I dropped my mop and ran after her. I edged the door open and watched her as she drove away.

I went back to my mop and finished my work. I poured both buckets down the drain in the shower

room floor, rinsed them out, poured them out, gave my mop a good wring and set off for the custodian's office.

The guys were coming in off the floor when I crossed the locker room.

"You done already?" I asked Meagan.

"We can stay as long as we want," she said. "I've got a lot of homework tonight, so I'm cuttin' out."

"What does Coach think of that?"

"I don't know. She's gone home. She doesn't usually stay more than half an hour after school—if that."

"You're kidding!" I said. "How can she expect you to compete against the other schools unless she gives you lots of drills and practice?"

"She says we're good enough already. We beat the alumni."

"Yeah. But just barely. Two points is all."

"Well, we beat 'em."

"Does she go home this early every day?" I asked her.

"She has so far."

"Do you usually stay later than this?"

"Yeah, but not all of us. Some of us leave early, some late."

"Doesn't it bother you?" I asked her.

"Yeah, but she says we're ready for Cleveland, and she should know. What are you doing in here with that mop?"

"Oh, I've got a part-time job after school working for the custodian," I said. "I just cleaned out the showers."

"Well, I've got to dress. See ya, Becky P." She sat down on a bench to untie her shoes.

I went out on the gym floor and talked to the other girls. They were standing around, practicing three-point shots. They told me what Meagan had told me.

I went into the custodian's office and called Mr.

Scruggs. I told him what I'd seen and heard. He thanked me. I told him about Coach's call and about her asking me not to come to the games. He thanked me for telling him that, too.

We hung up.

That was Tuesday. I went back Wednesday, early Wednesday. I wanted to be in the gym, sweeping and dusting, when Coach was in there before she left.

I was down at the far end of the gym. The custodian had pulled a section of the bleachers out from their nest in the wall. He told me to work there, dusting off the bleachers and mopping the floor underneath them.

I did it, keeping my head down and my ears open.

Coach came in with a clipboard in her hand and a whistle around her neck. As the girls came in, she got them to line up. They didn't do sprints or exercises. They just lined up. She told them to practice shooting three-pointers from the corners and from outside the circle. She said she couldn't make the baskets for them. They'd have to practice. She said a three-pointer always lifts the score and they should do that a lot in games.

"I've got to leave for my appointment," she said. And she left. She didn't tell them how long they should stay. She didn't tell them anything more than that a three-pointer always lifts the score—which they already knew—and that they should do it a lot in games—which was the last thing they should do. They needed to practice working the ball in to the basket. A three-pointer is a last resort. You do it only if you're hot or if your opponent is crowding the lane and you can't get through to your teammate or the basket.

On Thursday, Coach looked at me—twice.

She grabbed me by the arm.

“What are you doing here? I told you I don’t want you anywhere near this gym.”

“I have a job after school, helping the custodian clean the gym. I clean the showers and mop the—”

“I don’t care what you do. I told you I don’t want you here and I mean it. So pick up that mop and get out. Now!”

I picked it up and got out.

When she left, I called Mr. Scruggs and told him. And I told him the girls were convinced they were ready for Cleveland.

He thanked me for telling him.

I asked him, “Do you want me to keep on working here?”

“No,” he said. “You’ve found out all I need. I’ll call the custodian and tell him not to expect you any more.”

I asked him, “Where did you get this lady? She doesn’t know basketball.”

“Oh, she came from the State university. She majored in music and math and played on a basketball team in the NCAA. I think her team did well in the nationals. Her resume was excellent, and we needed both a math teacher and a coach.”

“Well, I don’t think she knows anything about coaching,” I said.

“I appreciate that, Becky. You just leave that to me.”

And then he hung up.

I put my mop and buckets in the closet where they were kept and left, shaking my head. The girls were convinced they were ready for Cleveland.

I knew what they were ready for.

They were ready for bed.

When they woke up, they’d know what life was really all about. They’d know it takes work to beat a big

school like Cleveland.

6

Here Comes Anna Pruitt

Pick it up yourself, Anna,” I yelled at my sister. “Just because you play that ‘Hansel and Gretel’ stuff doesn’t mean you can drop everything you touch and expect some bird to come pick it up.”

“Mom! Mom! Becky’s yelling at me.”

We were upstairs trying to get Anna to get herself dressed so we could leave the house on time. You couldn’t walk through her room. Any clothing she put on, didn’t like and took off, she just dropped on the floor.

Mom came in the door.

“Aren’t you ready yet, Anna? We’ll be late.”

“Well, Becky’s yelling at me.”

“She’s Gretel, Mom. She leaves a trail of clothes.”

“You’ll have to finish dressing in the car, Anna. We’re leaving. Becky, you’re in charge of her violin.”

“Make Gretel carry it herself. It’s not that heavy.” I was still mad at her.

“It’s her long dress, Becky,” Mom said as she opened the front door. “She needs two hands to hold it up

when she climbs stairs. I carry the music and our picnic supper. You carry the violin. That'll be a really big help to us. We really appreciate your coming. Help your sister. Make sure her dress doesn't get caught in the car door."

"Oh, I'm glad to come," I said as I closed Anna's door and got in the front.

"Well, it's good for you to come."

"Why's that?" I said as we drove out of the driveway and headed for the highway.

"It's cultural. Kids these days don't know much about culture."

"So? Why should we?"

"Because there's a lot more to life than hamburgers and TV."

"Impossible," I said.

"A lot of people have fine manners—people who love music and the people who perform. They like to see boys and girls behave like ladies and gentlemen—opening doors for others, thanking people for the nice things they do for you, standing up when an older person comes to meet you. Tonight, we'll need your help getting directions."

"You need directions? You've been there before."

"No. We've been to symphony hall, but this competition is being held at the civic opera house."

"Competition?"

"Becky, where have you been? We've been talking about it for weeks. It's the Young Artist competition," Anna said at the top of her lungs.

"Well, you don't have to yell!" I said. "Make Gretel stop yelling at me."

"I'm not yelling," she yelled. "And my name isn't Gre-

tel.”

“It’s Gretel,” I said.

“If I’m Gretel, you’re—you’re Humperdink.”

“Who’s Humperdink, Mom?”

“He’s the one who wrote the music she’s playing to-night. He wrote the Hansel and Gretel opera.” She put her hand on my knee and spoke softly. “Don’t get her excited, Beck. She has enough to think about.”

“Like what?”

“It’s a competition she’s been practicing for for a long time,” she said. “The winner tours with the symphony and may get to go to Europe with them.”

“Neat.”

“These are the semi-finals.”

I know I should have known all this. But when you leave for school early and don’t get home till supper, you miss out on a lot of details—especially when your Mom and little sister are gone a lot on concert tours.

Well, it took about an hour to get to the city. Anna snoozed. Mom and I chatted about school and about Danny and Joseph. About where we used to live in Blacksburg, Virginia, and why we moved to Sunny Hills in this state—so Dad could teach building construction at the University.

We talked about Coach and about what I should do. She said I should just wait and let the Lord work it out.

“The minute you try to work a problem out by yourself without His help the trouble starts. If we only wait and pray and wait some more,” she said, “things will come out right.”

She prayed for me with her eyes open while she drove.

It was dark when we got downtown. I followed the

map and gave Mom directions. She had a parking pass for the garage in the basement. We were amazed at what a big building the civic opera house was.

Well, we drove down the ramp and parked. The underground garage was fairly well lit. As we got our stuff out of the van, I looked for the elevator. I saw a girl in an usher's uniform taping a piece of paper to the elevator door. I thought she looked familiar, but from that distance I couldn't really tell. The elevator door opened. She gave us a quick look over her shoulder as she got in and the door closed.

We got all our stuff together and walked to the elevator. The paper on the door gave directions about where we should go.

"We go up to the fourth floor and take a right when we get off the elevator," Mom said.

"Take a right." I made a mental note of that.

"We go down a long hall and take another right and then a left. That takes us to the stage door.

"The stage door is four floors up?" I couldn't believe it.

A man came up behind us as we got on the elevator.

"Is the stage door on the fourth floor?" I asked him. "That sign on the door said we should go up to the fourth floor, take two rights and then a left."

"That must be right if that's what's posted," he said with a big smile.

"Don't I know you? You look awfully familiar," I said.

"No. I've never seen you before," he said. He had no time for me.

"Do you work here?" I asked him.

The elevator stopped. "This is my floor," he said. He got off, still smiling at us.

“He was nice and helpful,” I said as we soared up to the fourth floor. We got that tickle in your stomach you get when the elevator shoots up and sinks to a stop. Mom and Anna laughed.

We got out.

“We take a right,” I said.

We walked down a long hall and turned the knobs of all the doors we passed, but they were all locked. We came to the end of the hall where it teed.

“We take another right and then a left, don’t we?” Anna said.

“That’s what the sign said.”

We turned right and went down another long hall. It teed into a short hall. We turned left and came to a flight of stairs going up.

“The sign didn’t mention stairs, did it?” Anna said.

“I wouldn’t think a stage door would be up another floor,” Mom said. “Usually they’re down below the stage.”

“Why don’t we go back to the elevator and go down where we came in and start all over again,” I said. “Or should I go up and check?” I pointed to the stairs.

“No, let’s stay together,” she said. “I like the idea of going back downstairs. It’s getting close to the time Anna’s supposed to play.”

We turned and retraced our steps.

“He said two rights and a left,” I said. “So we take one right and two lefts going back. Right?”

We started back and somewhere we missed a turn. Nothing looked the same. We came to the end of a hall that didn’t T. It had a door we opened. Beyond it was a flight of stairs.

“At least we can go down, Mama,” Anna said.

“Well, since we don’t seem to be able to find the elevator, we’ll be going in the right direction,” she said.

We went down the stairs and down the hall at the bottom. We tried the doors on both sides of the hall, but they were all locked. We came to a T and stopped.

“Do we turn left or right?” I said.

Mom looked back the way we’d come.

“Mama, it’s getting late!” Tears began to form in Anna’s eyes.

“Why don’t you turn left, Becky, and I’ll turn right. Anna, you stay right here. We’ll be back in a minute.”

“No, Mama, no! Don’t leave me.” She was getting upset.

“Becky, you go left and look what’s down that hall. Come back and tell me, and then go down this other hall.”

“And you’ll stay right here?”

“Right here,” she said.

“Where are we?” I said. “What room number is on that door in case I don’t get back?”

“I’ll look.” Anna lifted her dress up a little and ran to look at the nearest door we’d passed. “Four-seven-seven,” she read.

“I’m off,” I said. “I’ll hurry.”

“I’m hungry, Mama.” I heard Anna say. I looked back and saw Mom open the picnic box and dig for a sandwich.

I ran down the hall. At the end was a flight of stairs going down. I ran down. There was a lobby there with other stairs going up to the floor I’d just left. I figured each one was going up to a different wing of the building.

I ran to the middle of the lobby. “Hey, is anybody

here?” I called in a loud voice. There wasn’t a sound. The place was deserted.

I went to the foot of each set of stairs and called.

There was no answer.

I turned to go back up to Mom and Anna and realized I’d lost track of which set of stairs I’d come down. I began to panic. Anna had to get to the stage door right away!

I called, “Mom! Mom!” at the foot of each set of stairs. I listened, but there was no answer.

I had to find them! This was too big an opportunity for Anna to let go by. They were depending on me.

I ran up a flight of stairs, calling out as I ran. I ran down the hall at the top, still calling. I made sure of where I was turning so I could get back to the lobby if I didn’t find them.

And I didn’t find them.

I ran back to the lobby so I could go up another flight of stairs. I took off my left shoe and stuck it in the corner of the second stair up. This way I would know what stairs I’d gone up in case I got turned around again.

I ran up, shouting, again. I ran down the hall, shouting. No Mom. No Anna. I ran back to the stairs and down to the lobby. I was out of breath.

I took off my other shoe and stuck it on the second stair up of that flight.

As I ran to the next flight, I happened to look back at my first shoe. It was toe in on a bottom step where I hadn’t put it.

I stopped. I knew I had put it toe out. Someone was there—someone who had moved my shoe to another stairwell—someone who didn’t want me to find Mom

and Anna. Why? Who?

I stood there in the middle of the lobby, thinking. And then it all came together. Who would want Anna not to get to the stage door? Someone who didn't want her to compete. Some sister or some father of a kid who was in the competition. Someone who knew Anna and didn't want her around. Was it that girl by the elevator door or was it the man we talked to on the elevator. He saw Anna all dressed up. He saw her violin. He knew we were coming to compete. He said, "This is my floor" when he got off. He must have known his way around. He could have told us. He knew the stage door wasn't on the fourth floor.

I kicked the air. What a dunce I am, I said to myself. That was why he was smiling. He knew he was putting something over on us.

So how would I get us out of this mess.

Lord, I prayed, we need Your help fast. Help me think what to do. We have no one else to turn to for help.

Whoever moved my shoe was watching everything I was doing. I got my shoes and put them back on. I might have to fight someone and with my shoes I could kick him in the shins. I kept looking out of the corner of my eye to see where he might be hiding.

It was while I was doing that that my eye landed on something on the far wall. A telephone!

I could call for help. I ran over to it and sure enough, it was alive. I got a dial tone and dialed "Operator."

"Ticket office," a voice said.

"Oh, lady, I need help. We're lost, and we've got to get Anna Pruitt to the stage door. She's probably up next." I made my voice sound as desperate as I really was.

"Where are you?"

“Where I am doesn’t matter. Anna Pruitt is outside room 477 wherever that is.”

“We’ll send someone right up to get her. And, yes, she’s up next. And where are you, young lady?”

“I’m in some lobby on the second floor, I think.”

“What color is the carpet?”

“Blue.”

“We’ll take care of Anna first, and then we’ll come and get you. Stay there.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I said. I was so relieved I just sat on the floor under the phone and sagged.

It didn’t occur to me until later that I was out of sight of anyone keeping his eye on that lobby. I saw someone stick her head out of a door and look around. When she didn’t see anybody, she turned back and shut the door.

I didn’t recognize her from clear across that big room, but she did look familiar.

Who could it be?

I heard a noise and stood up.

A panel in the wall slid open and a woman stepped out. She saw me.

“Are you the one who called?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Come. Follow me.”

She stood beside the opening and waited until I stepped inside. She pressed a button and we started down.

“This is an elevator?” I was surprised.

“I believe that’s what they call it. How did you get way over here?”

“A sign on the elevator door in the parking lot told us the stage door was up here. We were just following di-

reactions. Did you get Anna?”

“Yes. She got there just as they were calling her name.”

“Poor kid. She was really upset.”

“Well, she’ll have to put that behind her if she’s going to do well in this competition. Are you her sister?”

“Yes, ma’am. I’m here with my mother. I came so I could carry her violin and help her find the stage door. A lot of help I’ve been!”

“Well, everything’s fine now.”

“I wonder who that man was.”

“What man, dear?”

“A man came up behind us and got on the elevator with us. I asked him if the stage door was really on the fourth floor and he said if it was on a sign then it must be.”

“I’ve no idea who it could be,” she said.

The elevator stopped and we got out.

“Thank you for coming to get us,” I told her.

“Follow me,” the lady said.

We walked quickly down another hall. She opened a door, went down four steps and across another hall and up six steps. She opened a door and we were back-stage. I heard the sound of music and a solo violin rising above it all.

Mom was standing near the back curtain, watching.

“Oh, Becky!” She hugged me. “They said you called.”

“They got her here in time?”

“Poor Anna. You didn’t come back and didn’t come back. She was desperate. But we prayed about it and she calmed right down. She knew if the Lord wanted her here, He’d get her here in time. So we sat there and ate our supper and had a good time together. And then a

lady came out of nowhere and brought us down here.”

“How’s Anna doing?”

“Listen for yourself.”

I peeked around the curtain. She was standing out near the footlights. A huge symphony orchestra was circled behind her. The conductor was waving his baton and a good-sized audience was out front.

I watched Anna play. Her fingers danced up and down the strings like butterflies at a picnic. And then the orchestra quieted down and she played a slow, sad song against a very light accompaniment.

“That’s the Sandman’s lullaby,” Mom whispered in my ear. “I told Anna to use that section to do her crying in.”

It was amazing. She was playing from deep in her soul—like a grown woman whose children had drowned and who’d known nothing but tragedy all her life long. And then the orchestra picked up again and swept to a loud banging climax.

“How does she remember all that?” I said.

“It’s called hard work,” Mom said. “You know how long she practices.”

“Not when you’re out for sports like I’ve been. I’m never home.”

The orchestra went into its final great heaves as Anna’s fingers flew up those strings.

And then it was all over.

The audience roared and gave her a standing ovation. You should have heard them shout and applaud. They loved her.

And Anna stood there quietly. She bowed slowly and straightened up again. Then she turned and held her hand out to the conductor. He shook it and gave her a kiss on each cheek. She grinned and kissed him on the cheek. The

audience loved that, too, and let her know all about it.

Then the conductor took her by the hand and led her off the stage.

He shook Mom's hand.

"Unbelievable!" he said. "Simply unbelievable! We haven't gotten music like that from many professional violinists. And she's only eight! I can't believe it." He was an old, white-haired foreign man who held onto his s's when he talked.

The audience was still cheering and clapping.

The conductor took Anna's hand and led her back onstage. What a roar they got all over again.

The conductor held up his hands and quieted everyone.

"Miss Pruitt was the final contestant of the evening. May we have the verdict of the judges at this time."

A woman stood up down at the front row and walked to the end of her aisle. She couldn't come right to the stage because the orchestra pit was there, and she wouldn't have been able to reach high enough to give the conductor her paper. She brought it up the stairs on the side of the stage and walked it across to him.

He took the envelope and opened it.

There wasn't a sound.

"In third place is Reginalt Earles."

There was a good round of applause as Reginald stood up. The conductor motioned him to come to center stage and stand next to him.

"In second place is Trudie Marie."

There was a lot of applause, especially from one section of the audience where her family must have been sitting. But no girl stood up to come forward.

"Trudie Marie?" he announced again.

Still no Trudie. No one came on stage to acknowledge

the applause.

“I guess she’s no longer here,” the conductor told everyone.

Then he paused.

“In first place—” He stepped back and bowed to Anna. “Miss Anna Elise Pruitt!”

If they’d roared before, they howled now. Even the orchestra rose and clapped and shouted. They all knew they’d had a great performance—from MY little sister. I knew she was good, but I’d never realized she was this good.

She stood there like a princess and bowed her head in humble acknowledgement. Man, it was great.

It was great! I was so proud of her. She can drop her clothes all over the house, for all that matters. A girl who can play like that! I’d let her roll in mud!

Well, people came from all over the place and congratulated her—and Mom. They especially liked the way Anna played the sad part. Some man said it was “deeply lugubrious.”

Loo-goo-bree-us. What a word. Some day I’ll look it up in the dictionary.

Well, as everybody shook everybody else’s hand, we looked for Trudie Marie and her family.

They were not in sight. Evidently, they’d gotten ticked off because they knew she wouldn’t win and they’d gone home.

Mom turned to congratulate the Earles family and then the conductor once again.

And then we left.

We stopped for hamburgers and fries and ice cream to celebrate on the way home.

“I thought you said Anna had her supper,” I said. “How come she gets burgers and fries?”

“Okay, Becky,” Mom said. “You try doing what she did tonight. You could eat a horse.”

We laughed and we talked all the way home. We couldn’t get over the mean thing that girl with the sign and that man had done to us. He knew the stage door wasn’t on the fourth floor.

We were all beat by the time we got home.

I walked into our house shaking my head.

Trudie Marie, I said to myself.

Trudie Marie.

What should I know about her?

There was something about that name that I should know.

7

And the Winner—

The winner wasn't Sunny Hills. The final score was 92 to 34. The city newspaper wasn't very flattering to our team. It said the girls were not prepared to play. The score was 52-12 at the end of the first half. That's when everybody except the diehards left their seats and went to the lobby to wait for the boys' game. The diehards thought our team would pull it out at the end like before.

The paper quoted Coach as saying some of the girls were suffering from food poisoning and that had taken the edge off their game.

That sounded like soapsuds to me. Food poisoning, hah! Those guys needed me.

I called Meagan.

"What's this about food poisoning?" I said. "It sounds fake to me."

"No, man. It's true. We all had stomach cramps something awful. We don't know if someone spiked the lemonade or spoiled the potato salad. We could hardly make it up and down the court."

“Come on. Are you giving me a line? Eddy’s not around any more.” Eddy spiked the punch last semester in Bean’s Canteen when some of us volleyball girls got really sick.

“Honest, Becky P. Call Lorrie. Call Molly.”

“That was a pretty lopsided score,” I said.

“I’m just glad we scored at all.”

“Well, I got to go,” I said. “Tell everybody on the team hi for me.”

“Will do,” she said. “And, Becky?”

“Yeah?”

“Tell it to Murphy. But don’t tell anyone I said so.”

She hung up.

Ah! The truth.

Coach had made them promise to tell people that business about food poisoning. But when you tell something to “Murphy,” it means the opposite is true.

Those poor guys. She was making them lie about losing the game.

I couldn’t tell Joseph—or Bean. Meagan made me promise not to tell anyone. I wondered who else would figure it out. Would Mr. Scruggs?

The city newspaper printed a picture of Anna with a crowd of us. I was even in it in the background.

That was Saturday.

Saturday I did my homework and my chores. Dad and Danny and Joseph got home late. Mom made Anna go to bed, but she let me stay up to help her tell them about Trudie Marie.

“Man! That was evil!” Joseph said.

“It really was,” Mom said. “It seems you can’t trust anybody any more when it comes to a competition.”

“That man was so nice when he was telling us the di-

rections had to be correct if they were posted,” I said. “He smiled and looked like he really cared that we got to the right place at the right time.”

“Becky thought she’d seen the man before,” Mom said.

“It was funny,” I said. “I know I’ve seen him before, but I just can’t remember where.”

“If Anna hadn’t gotten there in time, she would have been eliminated,” Mom said.

“And guess who would have won,” I said.

We both said it at the same time. “Trudie Marie!”

“Do you think there’s a tie between Trudie Marie Whoever-she-is and the basketball that came crashing in on Anna?” I asked everybody.

Danny scratched his head. “Well, it certainly looked like someone did it on purpose.”

“You kids keep your eyes and ears open,” Dad said. “Maybe you can pick up something in school from the kids.”

“Hey, we can be like our old friend, J. Edgar Beanpole.”

“Football detective!” Danny said.

“Soccer sleuth!” Joseph said.

“Volleyball spy!” I said.

“Night watcher!” we said all together in a spooky tone of voice.

We all laughed. Bean had written books about us.

Sunday, I went to Sunday School and church. I saw a lot of kids from my school. They all believed that business about food poisoning. They said the game was terrible. The girls were running up and down the court holding their stomachs and looking like they really were in pain. Some people had started to chant for me,

but quit when they saw I wasn't there.

I went back to church Sunday night for the evening service.

Monday, my world fell apart.

Meagan was standing by the door of my first period class.

"You squealed."

"Waddya mean?"

"It's all over school. Everyone is saying that you told them Coach is lying—that we didn't have cramps—that we lost because we don't know how to play."

"I never said that!"

"I thought you were my friend. I thought I could trust you. But you had to go and tell the world. Coach is gonna kill us."

"I never said a word. Who told you I did?"

"We all wanted you on the team, but not any more."

"Not any more?"

"We don't want a girl we can't trust."

She turned and got swallowed right up in the crowd.

"But it's not true, Meagan!" I yelled after her. But she didn't come back. I felt someone poke me on my shoulder.

"No yelling in the hall." Some teacher walking by just then made me shut up.

The bell was gonna ring. I had to get into my seat. I was shaking my head and telling myself, "I never said a word—to anybody!" when a girl came up and pushed me.

"Who do you think you are, Becky Pruitt? Calling Coach a liar. Those guys were trying hard. I was there. I saw them."

The bell rang.

She didn't stop. "Where were you? I didn't see you there!"

"I was out of town, Amanda," I said in a low voice, pointing with the side of my head to tell her that the teacher was looking.

"She was out of town, Miss Knurr," she told the teacher. "She wasn't even there, and she goes around telling everyone that the girls didn't have food poisoning and that Coach is a liar."

"I never said any such thing," I protested.

"Since you want to talk out and tell everybody everything you know, Amanda, you begin by telling us what iambic pentameter is and what poet used a lot of it."

"Becky wasn't even there and she goes around—"

"Iambic pentameter, Amanda?"

Miss Knurr has eyes that bore right through you.

Amanda felt the heat. "I don't know," she said.

"That's all right. I'll just make a little mark in my grade book that you are not prepared today."

"Becky P.?"

"Yes, ma'am?"

"Iambic pentameter?"

"That's a line of poetry that has ten syllables in it, two to a foot. It doesn't rhyme usually. And Alfred Lord Tennyson used it in his long narrative poem called 'Idylls of the King'."

"Good girl! Grade A for the day. And, if she was out of town, Amanda, at least she did her homework."

"Dork!" Amanda said under her breath, just loud enough for me to hear.

"I heard that remark, Miss Brown," Miss Knurr said. "I am making an appointment for you this afternoon in detention. Be there."

“But—“

“You were the one who said ‘Dork,’ Miss Brown. Be there, and I’ll check to make sure you show up.”

Amanda didn’t look at me or say another word the rest of the hour.

As we went out the door after class, she gave me a mean look in the eye and said, “I’ll get even with you.”

I blocked her. “Who told you I blabbed.”

“Good authority,” she said.

“Who?”

“Hey, let us out!” The guys behind us had to get by.

“Find out for yourself,” she said.

“That’s what I’m doing right now. Who?”

“I’ve got to get to class.” She turned and walked away and was gone before I could catch her.

I went on to my classes the rest of the morning. It was strange. Last week, I was the campus heroine. This week, I was Public Enemy Number One. All morning, guys made remarks about what a traitor I was and who was I to say the girls weren’t sick.

But no one would tell me where they heard that rumor or who started it. It was something negative, and so they believed it. They didn’t even try to find out the truth.

I saw Bean at noon.

“They’re blaming me for telling, and I didn’t even tell Joseph,” I told him. “Who’s at the bottom of all this? Why would they blame it all on me?”

“Beats me,” he said. “Everybody’s talking about it. They think you’re getting even because Coach won’t let you on the team.”

“But I’m not like that,” I complained.

“You’d think after all you’ve done for Sunny Hills

High people would know you're not like that."

"Yeah. I just don't understand it."

"Well, maybe it's time to think things through."

"Spoken just like J. Edgar Beanpole," I laughed.

"What's given?" he said.

"We know the team can't win," I said. "But we won when I got on the team. Somehow we just seemed to jell. But Coach doesn't want me to show my face. She threw me out of her office and out of the gym. She called me and told me not to come to the games. Now I'm getting blamed for something I didn't do."

"Man, that's not fair," he said.

"So who is winning, Bean?" I said. "Who's the one who will benefit from all the kids hating me and from the team's not wanting me around?"

"Well, there's only one person I can think of."

"But coaches don't do things like that," I said. "They want a winning season."

"Then why didn't she put you on the team?"

"Maybe she wants to lose all the games."

"Why would she want to do a thing like that, Becky?"

"Well, she doesn't seem to care that some kid might hang around who can sink every basket she throws from halfway down the court. She doesn't want to hear a thousand people chanting for her to put her on the team. She doesn't—"

"Let's figure out why Coach Demmery would start a rumor like this?"

"She doesn't like me. She doesn't like Joseph. She doesn't want me around to see that she leaves early. I don't think she cares whether the team wins or loses. She has something else she cares about more. That's why she leaves practice early every day. She just takes

the roll and gets the girls shooting baskets. And then she leaves, carrying a violin case.”

“A violin case? You sure it’s not a machine gun? Thugs carry machine guns in violin cases.”

“She’s not a thug,” I said.

“We’ve got to find out where she goes,” Bean said slowly. He was thinking. “She puts on her good clothes and takes her violin. She must be doing something professional, don’t you think?”

“Maybe she’s giving lessons. Mr. Scruggs told me she majored in music and math in college. But I don’t know. I’ve just seen her leave her office in her suit and go out the door.”

“What’s our next game? Newton? What do you think she’ll do then?”

“We’ll have to wait till Friday to see, I guess,” I said. “But what do we do in the meantime? Come on, Bean. Tell me. What do I do today?”

“Like I always say—we keep our eyes and ears open.”
The fifth period bell rang.

“Only one thing bothers me,” I said.

“What’s that?”

“What if she’s a Christian? She wouldn’t do something like that.”

“With all this evidence, how could she be?”

“Maybe someone’s trying to frame her,” I said.

“Look, I gotta get to class. You figure it out.”

He left. And I ran for class.

Lord, what’ll I do? I prayed as I ran. *This whole thing is a mess. Please straighten it out for me.*

I had to run fast.

My fifth period teacher was a bear.

My fifth period teacher was Coach Demmery.

8

Fire and Ice

I was in the classroom but two steps away from sitting down.

The tardy bell rang.

“You’re late. Go to the office for a tardy slip,” my teacher said.

“But I was in the room on time,” I said.

“You’re supposed to be IN your seat when the bell rings. Go!”

“Yes, Mrs. Demmery,” I said. “But I’ve never had a tardy in high school before.” I had a pleading tone in my voice.

“Go!”

“Yes, ma’am.”

I went.

The folks in the attendance office couldn’t believe she’d called me tardy since I’d been in the room and my desk was in the farthest row away from the door.

Rose, Mr. Scruggs’s secretary, was so upset she called Coach on the in-house phone to double check that I was really tardy. She said she hated to give me a

tardy since this was the first one I ever had, and I really had been in the room.

She said, "Write her up."

So Rose did.

I took it back to the room. I wished later I'd just gone to the bathroom and waited out the class.

She called on me for an answer to every question. I had to do equations on the board in front of everybody. She leaped on any mistake and made me feel like a dork. Fortunately, I'd really studied over the weekend; and I answered all her questions. I made some dumb mistakes, and that's when she caught me.

But the whole time I was doing a slow burn. I knew she was getting even for what she'd heard about me. One part of me wanted to give up and just leave when class was over. The other part said I had to talk to her.

I stayed behind when everybody left.

"Yes?" she said.

"I have to talk to you."

"Oh? What about?"

She was cold as ice.

"Kids are saying things about me that aren't true."

"And what am I supposed to do about that?"

"I want you to believe me that I didn't start any rumors."

"Why is that important to you?"

She was turning me inside out.

"Because I believe you," I said.

"Well, that's nice. So you believe me."

"Don't you know what I'm talking about?" I was frustrated.

"Well, no, frankly. I haven't the slightest idea."

"Then why did you pick on me today?"

“I didn’t pick on you. You know the policy in my class. It’s been ‘in your seat when the bell rings’ all semester. You weren’t in your seat. You had to march.”

“And then you called on me for every question.”

“Of course. You were the only one who was prepared. Except for a couple of dumb mistakes because you got rattled, you did an excellent job. I’m giving you a grade of A for the day.”

I didn’t believe her.

“But I thought you were mad at me and that you were getting even.”

“Why should I be mad at you?”

“You haven’t heard the rumors the kids are spreading about me?”

“No, I haven’t. And I really must get ready for my next class over in the gym.”

She gathered her papers and picked up her books.

I was sure she was lying. She had something she had to protect, something she had to hide. That was why she wasn’t admitting she’d heard the rumors. She didn’t want to touch that or me with a ten-foot pole.

As she went to the door, it opened. Mr. Scruggs stormed in, his face red as a beet.

“So here you are, Becky,” he yelled at me. “You’re not content to spread malicious lies about the Coach here and her team, but you’ve come to her classroom to torment her some more. I won’t have this outrageous gossip you’re spreading about Coach behind her back. The idea! Calling her a liar and saying the food poisoning was just an excuse to cover weak preparation. I won’t have it. You hear?”

He turned his back on me as he was talking, and I saw that he had his fingers crossed behind his back.

He wanted me to see he was putting on an act. I played along with him.

“But, honest, Mr. Scruggs, I didn’t—”

“Did you slip a disc in that brain of yours, Becky P.? You’ve always been loyal to Sunny Hills High School. But this time, you’ve gone too far. I was at that game with Cleveland. I saw how our team was playing in pain. And where were you? Why weren’t you there?”

I looked at Coach for the answer.

“Well, Mr. Scruggs,” she said, “I called Becky and asked her not to come to the game.”

“You what?” He uncrossed his fingers. “I can’t believe you. The one girl who can help your team win and you tell her not to come? Why in tarnation did you do a fool thing like that?”

“I’ve been training my team all fall, Mr. Scruggs. Becky came too late. She doesn’t know our strategies and our plays. She doesn’t know how I want things done.”

“But she knows how to win! I heard your team was behind the alumni 36-7 when Becky started to play. That’s 29 points in my book. With her in, your girls won that game. And the alumni won the city championship last year when they were seniors. Why didn’t you want her to come to the game?”

“I knew the fans would demand she be put in the game if we got behind. I wanted to stay in control of the game myself. I didn’t want my team unnerved by that pressure.”

“And so you lost.”

“We got food poisoning.”

“And how did the whole team get food poisoning?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know? You don’t know? You’re supposed to know everything your team does and eats before an important game. I can’t imagine that you wouldn’t know.”

“I’m not with them 24 hours a day!” Mrs. Demmery was beginning to get red now.

“Well, you are before the game. What did they eat for supper?”

“I don’t know. They eat at home before they come.”

“Then how did they all get food poisoning? What one food did they all eat? What one drink did they all drink?”

“I tell you I don’t know.”

“What time did you get there Friday night? The game began at eight.”

“I got there in time to do everything I had to do. The girls know my routine. I don’t have to dress them.”

“What exact time did you get there?”

“Seven forty-five.”

“Only 15 minutes before the game? That’s irresponsible! If that’s the way you operate, maybe Becky is right. I wouldn’t be surprised if you told your team to pretend they were sick so you’d have an excuse for not winning the game.”

“That’s why you need me as a team manager over there,” I said. “I can keep my eye on what goes on that you wouldn’t ever see, Coach. You need me.”

“I told you before,” Coach glared at me, “I don’t want you anywhere near my team.”

“What do you mean you told her before?” Mr. Scruggs said.

“She came to me the Monday after we beat the alumni and offered to manage the team, hand out tow-

els, fold uniforms—you know—manage,” Coach said.

“And you turned her down? You turned Becky Pruitt down? She’s the girl who helped bring Sunny Hills High School the girls volleyball state championship.”

“I know all that.”

“And you turned her down?”

“Well, I felt it wasn’t good for the team. They turn into a bunch of hoods when they play with Becky. Basketball is a disciplined game, a game for disciplined young women,” Coach said.

“I’m going back to my office. How I ever got a loser like you for a coach, I’ll never know. I’ve seen more jabbing with elbows and meanness on your basketball court than in any other sport. Disciplined young women, are they? Disciplined enough to lie about being sick from food poisoning so they can excuse themselves for losing a game.”

Mr. Scruggs headed for the door, but I stood in his way. The girls needed a coach. It sounded like he was going to go fire her.

“She’s not a loser, Mr. Scruggs. Maybe someone’s out to get her because she has a good team.”

“You think so, do you?”

“Well, maybe, Mr. Scruggs.”

“And do you think you can find out who it is?”

“I can try, sir.”

“Well, I say let her try. What do you say, Demmery?”

“She’s like a bomb just waiting to go off. I still don’t want her around.”

“But Becky says she can find out who it is.”

“That has nothing to do with this. I will not be pressured into putting her in the game as a player or on the floor as a manager.”

“You have a contract with this school district, Demmery?” Mr. Scruggs asked her.

“I have a contract.”

“And you do whatever you are assigned?”

“I am assigned to teach math and coach basketball.”

“And you are answerable to me?”

“Yes.” She really didn’t like being reminded of that.

“I say you will take Becky as manager of the team, like it or not.”

“I say I won’t.”

“Maybe you don’t want her around listening to what you tell the team. Is that it? What’ll it be next time? Headaches? Upset stomachs? Diarrhea?”

“Are you accusing—?”

“I wouldn’t be surprised if you started those rumors as an attempt to discredit Becky and turn the students against her.”

“Preposterous!”

“And then they wouldn’t chant ‘We want Becky P.’ anymore. They’d be mad at her, and you would be rid of the pressure she creates. You’re clever, Demmery.”

Coach got red. But she didn’t deny it.

“I’m astonished you would talk to me like this in front of a student,” Coach said.

“But Becky is the issue, Demmery. She’s what we’re talking about! And I won’t have you changing the subject.”

Coach didn’t say a word.

I remembered Amanda Brown said she had it on “good authority” that I was spreading rumors. Now I was sure that that “good authority” really was Coach herself.

“Well, the students and I want a winning team,

Demmery,” Mr. Scruggs said. “Maybe you should stick to math for the rest of the year, and I’ll let Becky coach the team. She showed she’s a smart girl when she was starring on our girls volleyball squad. I wouldn’t be surprised if she could be just as smart for basketball.”

“So you want this—this sophomore in as basketball coach and you want me out, do you? Well, you got it, Scruggs. I’m out of here!”

Mrs. Demmery swore, picked up her books and stormed out the door.

“I thought you said she’s not a loser, Becky P. She acts more like a loser than any loser I ever saw.”

“I don’t think she’s a loser,” I said. “I think she’s a good woman.”

“No. You’re too young to judge character, Becky. I’ve been wondering about her for some time. I’ve watched her closely all year. She leaves school early and comes late. I know she hasn’t spent much time with those girls.”

“Well, maybe she just has something she thinks is more important than this job.”

“Nothing is more important than this job!” Mr. Scruggs said.

“But what will you do without a real coach. You need a real coach if we’re going to go to State.”

“Well, I just have a hunch that you can pull it off, Becky P., until I can get some adult who’ll be permanent. The team is all sophomores with one junior and one senior. They won’t object if a clever sophomore tells them what to do. And, besides, you think like Bean thinks; and I really like to put responsibility in the hands of students who think. Let’s see what you can do. Win the next game and I’ll be the one to do some

serious thinking.”

“I don’t need any promises, Mr. Scruggs,” I said. “And I don’t need any rewards.”

“Good girl. I’ll meet you at the gym after school to explain to the team what I’ve done.”

“What about the sports guys on the city newspaper? They’ll fry you for this.”

“I’ll take care of them. You just give me a winning team.”

He left.

As I picked up my books, I prayed with my inside voice, *Dear God, I don’t ask for a winning team. You know I’d like one, and I need Your help. But help me to witness through this, and help me to bring credit and glory to You.*

Well, Mr. Scruggs met me after school and took me into the gym with him. The girls were taking shots from wherever they were standing. Mr. Scruggs whistled with his hand in his teeth and motioned everyone to gather round.

“Girls,” he said, “tell me about Friday night. Were you really sick?”

Nobody said anything.

Then Meagan said, “Where’s Coach?”

“You’re not answering my question.”

“You squealed, Becky P. Some friend you are.”

“Becky didn’t squeal, Meagan. Someone higher up started some rumors to get the students mad. Becky’s a Christian. She doesn’t do things like that. She stands by her word.”

I didn’t say anything.

“I want the truth,” Mr. Scruggs said. “Do any of you have the moral character to tell me the truth?”

Everybody started to talk at once.

“Meagan?”

“I won’t get into trouble? You guarantee my immunity like they say on TV?”

“Guaranteed.”

“Well, Coach was afraid we’d lose the game and so she told us to hold our hands across our stomachs and look like we were in pain. She said she’d tell the papers we had food poisoning.”

Mr. Scruggs looked at everybody. “Is that the truth?”

They all nodded and said yes.

“I figured as much. And I’ve already relieved Mrs. Demmery of her job as coach of this team.”

You should have heard them cheer. They went around giving one another high fives.

When they calmed down, Libby said, “So what are we going to do about a coach, Mr. Scruggs?”

“Well, I have a coach in mind who has already shown she has remarkable skills when it comes to basketball. She inspired you to win your first game of the year against the alumni when you were behind by nearly 30 points. I think she has the credentials to inspire your team again if you promise to work with her.”

“Becky P.?” they all asked at once.

“Becky P.”

They laughed and cheered and picked me up and paraded me around just like my homeroom gals had done when I scored that basket from mid-court.

When they settled down again, Mr. Scruggs said, “Becky is young. But she’s bright. She thinks. She plans strategy that works. I think, if you all work together and let her coach the way I know she’s able, you’ll have an exciting season. Waddy say?”

They picked me up again and marched me around while they chanted, “Becky P.! Becky P.! Becky P.!”

When they put me down, I said, “Okay, men! Sprints!”

They peeled into single file and began running around the outside perimeter of the court.

“No cutting corners,” I called out.

“I think you know what you’re doing, Becky.” Mr. Scruggs patted me on the shoulder. “Let me know if you need my support in any way, okay?”

“Will do, sir. This is going to be great.”

Well, since they had to do everything I said, I made them work. We ran six laps. I ran with them. We had races and relays like we did in fourth grade. We did exercises. We did short sharp passes to each other with force. We did long passes with girls standing behind the line under our basket and passing to a girl running down court toward the opponent’s basket. We dribbled in and out around chairs that I set up in a row. I kept yelling, “Faster! Faster!”

We would have gone through the plays Coach Demery had told them if she had told them any. We practiced plays they remembered from last year when we’d had another coach. We practiced them again and again. Then we had a scrimmage, shirts against skins—well, not really skins.

We were exhausted when it was time to go. We showered and dressed. The girls were excited we’d get to play all season like we played against the alumni.

And when word got around school, those rumors about me were forgotten. Everybody got all excited. They promised to get behind the team and rock Sunny Hills.

Mrs. Demmery quit her teaching job and left town. Out of sight, out of mind. We had more important things to do than feel sorry for her. We had a game with Madison Friday night, and those girls were big and tough.

9

The New Us

Well, you can bet things were going to be different with me in charge. The first thing, I made it a rule that every player had to have a basketball in her hands from the minute she stepped on court till we were through.

I had the art department letter the name of an opponent on each ball we used in practice. Whenever a player shot a basket she would call out the name of that school. I had the announcement made that the gym was open and anyone could come in at any time. The more noise and distraction all the time the better.

I asked the audio department to make a tape of the crowd noise at our next game so we could play it at every practice.

I wanted the team to get used to screaming and shouting so they would be totally calm no matter what the noise or distraction in the gym—and no matter how loud it was. I wanted them to tune it out. Then they would be calmer during a game.

I asked the art department to make us a ladder chart

to show each player's percentage of foul shots made in practice. I landed hard on practicing foul shots. The way I see it, people won't want to foul you if you make all your free throws. That leaves you freer to score on open jump shots.

I told the girls we would do 50 free throws after each practice, and I got some girls from my homeroom to come and help us keep the score.

"The No. 1-ranked shooter goes against No. 2, and No. 3 faces No. 4, and so on. When No. 4 outshoots No. 3, she moves up a spot," I told the team. This way I knew they would concentrate on free throws, and we'd have an advantage in our games.

I also got one of the cheerleaders to keep a list of the basketball games coming up on TV so the girls could watch the college kids and pros and pick up strategy and tricks from them.

I got Mr. Scruggs's permission for us to meet in our own homeroom so we could talk strategy and plan our plays and not take time away from our practice sessions.

I called the city newspaper to see if the guys on the sports desk knew of any retired pro basketball player who lived in our town or nearby. I figured we might get him to come talk to us in homeroom and give us some pointers.

I told the team to drink at least eight gulps of liquid every hour. On game days, they were to eat small meals through the afternoon with the last one an hour before the game began so the food would get out of their stomach and into the small intestine by game time. I picked all this up from my mom. She said we would have stamina all game long.

I made practice fun.

We drilled on playing keep-away, first by tossing the ball to one another with one girl in the middle to try and snatch it away. Then we did it with two, then three girls in the middle to intercept the ball. Then we did it with bounce passes. Then we mixed bounce passes with tosses.

On everything we did we always had at least one player trying to snatch the ball away.

We drilled on in-bounding the ball with 12 seconds to go. I had another cheerleader count the seconds down out loud. Sometimes the kids watching in the stands would call the numbers out, too.

We'd string out down the court and toss the ball fast to one another with the last guy shooting the final basket. We rotated so everyone had a chance to shoot the final basket.

We practiced shooting from far out left, middle and right. We worked on our free throws and asked the kids watching to scream and yell and try to break our concentration.

We practiced freezing the ball, going into delaying tactics in case we'd be trying to run out the clock and trying to keep our opponent from snatching the ball and scoring.

We practiced working the ball in toward the basket. We worked on developing a sense of where each player was all the time so that, if our player was right behind us, we could swing the ball behind our back and have it land in her hands.

All the time we practiced, we chattered at each other and did our chimpanzee act. We decided we'd do that in games and stop only if the referees gave us a warn-

ing.

In fact, I called up a guy who'd been a referee and asked him about it. He said it was up to the individual referee. Some wanted as little talking as possible and some didn't mind a lot of noise. They were more concerned about body contact than they were about noise.

I asked if it was taunting to wiggle your fingers in the face of the guy with the ball, and he said some referees do but he hadn't seen it done much. He said sometimes having a hand in an opponent's face is good defense. But, he said, sometimes having a hand in his face opened up a hole for the player with the ball to toss it to someone else. Keeping your arms outstretched to the side would help you deflect the pass better.

He suggested I check a basketball rule book out of the public library. I did that and it helped.

I asked Mr. Scruggs to ask the faculty men who knew basketball to volunteer to go to our opponents' games and chart their favorite plays and make notes on their good players. That gave us a spy in every court in town. Then when we were going to play a certain opponent on the next Friday, we would have the faculty member who'd been to all that team's games come and talk to us in homeroom. That way we knew what to expect.

Talk about strategy and hard work. We had so much to make up for right away that I wanted to call for extra sessions from 8 to 10 at night. But I decided not to. The girls were working hard enough. I did get Mr. Scruggs to ask our teachers for patience just this week. We'd make up our homework after we beat Madison.

We kept the gym open every afternoon and encour-

aged students and anybody else—like parents—to come. Some players brought their families. I wanted them to be conscious that their parents were there and then to forget it. And I gave them a talk about always keeping their temper. We didn't want to lose points after all our work by having one of us punch an opponent or shoot off her mouth at a referee.

I knew we couldn't get it all done in one week. I simply had to set up a pattern that we would follow. I held a clipboard in my hands and wore a whistle around my neck. I kept the girls going at a fast pace. And I remembered to call time out for drinking water and for bathroom breaks.

The girls were all fired up for the Madison game and the student body caught their spirit. The cheerleaders held a big rally on Thursday night. I wanted the girls to get lots of sleep, but they needed to be at that rally to get introduced one by one and to be told to "Beat Madison! Beat Madison!"

I made the girls promise they'd go home and go to bed. I knew some of them would go party somewhere, but I hoped they wouldn't. I'd have a hard time kicking them off the team since these girls were all the team we had.

I wanted to give them my testimony about trusting the Lord Jesus, but it wasn't the time or place. I knew the time would come. The Lord would open the door.

And I knew I had to practice what I preached. So I went home and went to bed like a good little girl.

10

Madison

It was my turn to sing again in girls choir on Friday. We were doing mournful love songs. Miss Buttersack thought she might have a crooner in our class, and so we were going through the “Kashmiri” songs—songs out of old India.

The prima donnas in the class could just see themselves with a mike in their hands and close to their mouth, moaning love songs to adoring males. It was more than I could take.

I know I’m a clown. I know I should behave and do what my teachers expect me to do. But this was old agony itself.

When I got up and waited through the introduction, I sang through my nose with a tremble in my voice.

“Pale hands I love
Beyond the Shalimaree,
Where are you now, I ask,
Where are you now?”

Then I added in a falsetto voice without moving my lips, "I'm taking a bath."

The class didn't know where that came from or whether to laugh or not.

I repeated that first stanza like I was supposed to and added, again in my falsetto voice, "I told you I'm-in-the-tub."

It brought the house down. Oh, how they laughed. And I just loved Miss Buttersack. She laughed, too. She could have skinned me alive for making fun of her love songs, but she didn't. She told me I bring a lot of life to girls choir and that it's her favorite class all day.

Bean kept rattling dumb jokes at me all through lunch in an effort to get my mind off the game.

"Did you hear the one about the guy who took a ride on an airplane?"

"No."

"Well, unfortunately, it caught fire. But, fortunately, he had a parachute. But, unfortunately, it didn't open. But, fortunately, there was a haystack down below him. But, unfortunately, there was a pitchfork with its teeth pointed up buried in the haystack. But, fortunately, he missed the pitchfork. But, unfortunately, he missed the haystack."

"Bean!" Talk about cornballs!

"A couple of guys were sitting on an airplane," he said. "And the one by the window was looking out.

"Wow!' he said. 'Those people down there look like ants.'

"The other one said, 'They are ants, you idiot. We haven't taken off yet.'"

I didn't laugh.

"Did you hear the one about the guy, named Valter,

from Minnesota?”

“No.”

“Well, his wife had a birdhouse on a wooden pole outside her kitchen window and a robin laid some nice little blue eggs in it that hatched. She loved watching the mama feed the little birdies.

“But, one day, a cat climbed the pole and ate the birdies. So, Valter’s Mrs. told him to go get an aluminum pole the cat couldn’t climb. Which he did.

“But, when he got on the bus with the pole, he couldn’t hold it in his lap. So he put it under the seats and climbed on.

“A little old lady climbed on after him and sat in the seat behind him. She tapped him on the shoulder and asked, ‘Are you a pole-vaulter?’

“He was surprised. ‘No, I’m not a Pole. I’m a Swede. And how did you know my name was Valter?’”

I shook my head at him. “And you expect me to laugh at that? You dumb nut.”

“Are you worried about Madison?” he asked me as he bit a big hunk out of his sandwich.

“No. I think we can pull it off if the girls keep their concentration. Madison’s full of tricks.”

“Like what?”

“They gang the girl with the ball and then quickly fall back if they haven’t snatched it out of her hands. They dart in and out at you, and they’re deadly with free throws.”

“So what are you gonna do about it?”

“Try to be quicker. Catch them flat-footed—both feet on the floor. You coming?”

“No. I don’t want to watch you guys get creamed.”

“What do you mean creamed? We’re gonna win!”

“With one week of practice? And you who’ve never coached a team in your life? What can you do against Madison? They’ve had a good coach all season.”

“Boy, talk about loyal friends!”

He put his finger under my chin and made me look up. “Hey, you know I’m teasing, Beck. I wouldn’t miss that game for a thousand dollars.”

I changed the subject. I’m too young for tenderness.

“You coming to the finals for Anna’s contest?”

“When is it? Is she gonna win?”

“Sunday afternoon? I think Trudie Marie’s folks will try to slip us another fast one.”

“They better not try,” he said.

“What if they do?”

“Well, you’ll have an opportunity to witness for the Lord.”

“Fat chance!”

“Becky! What a way to talk!”

“Well, who’s gonna listen to the gospel at a concert?”

“You never know.”

“If some parents beat up on Anna because they want their kid to win, are we going to give them John 3:16?”

“Well, we want what God wants for Anna.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“We’re not going to fight or beat anybody up, but we’re gonna keep our eyes and ears open so nothing happens to your sister.”

I didn’t mean to give him a hard time. The game with Madison had me all keyed up.

“Thanks, Bean. That means a lot!”

“So, are you gonna win the game tonight?”

“Mr. Scruggs says if we win tonight he might let me coach another game. At least he said he’d think about it.”

“You gonna play and shoot those wild baskets?”

“Only if I have to. I’ve got to watch what’s going on so I can plan our strategy.”

“Well, if you guys win, you’ll be just like the Chinaman.”

“What Chinaman?” As if I didn’t know what was coming.

“Well, an Englishman bought a gold mine in Australia and left it in the hands of an Australian, a Swede and a Chinaman while he went back to England on business. He told the Australian, ‘You’re in charge of getting the ore.’ He told the Swede, ‘You’re in charge of smelting it,’ you know, boiling it down. He told the Chinaman, ‘You’re in charge of supplies.’

“He went to England and, when he came back and saw how well the Australian and the Swede had done, he praised them for their fine work. He asked, ‘And where is the Chinaman.’

“They said, ‘He’s down in the mine.’

“He said, ‘Well, let’s go see how he’s done.’

“They went down in the mine and the Chinaman jumped out of the shadows, yelling, ‘Supplies!’”

I shook my head. “It’s not going to be a surprise if we win. We’ve worked hard. Besides, you’re supposed to tell me jokes that make me laugh.”

“Well, normal people think they’re funny.”

“Thanks a lot.”

I left him. I had to get to class and then go to the gym to finish preparing for tonight’s game.

Just when you need a little moral support—you get Bean!

Turns out, Madison was nothing. We would have won blindfolded. By half-time, they’d only scored 12 points. We won by 40.

11

Anna's Banana

The trip to the capitol was fun. We asked Bean and his mom to go with us. She and Anna sat in the middle seat with me. The guys took the back bench. Daddy drove and Mom sat up in front with him.

Joseph was in fine form.

“Dad? Dad?” He tried to interrupt our parents who were talking to Bean’s mother.

“What is it, Joseph?” Dad asked, knowing what was coming.

“You wanna hear my Sunday joke?”

“Yes, Joseph.”

He told Bean’s mom that you have to say yes to Joseph to get it over with or he’ll be pestering you to listen to his jokes all day.

“Well—don’t laugh, Bean.” He jabbed him in the ribs.

I was laughing too because I knew another dumb joke was about to make its appearance in the world.

“Well, a man had a bullet that he carried everywhere in the pocket of his shirt over his heart. Everywhere he went, he kept that bullet in his pocket. Then, one day,

someone threw a Bible out of a ten-story window and it hit him in the chest. The bullet saved his life.”

Silence.

“Don’t you get it?” he asked us. “A lot of people will carry a Bible in their pocket and, when the bullet comes—”

“We get it, Joseph,” Daddy said.

“I guess everybody in here isn’t normal,” I said. “Joseph tells me that normal people laugh at his jokes.”

“It’s Joseph who’s not normal,” Anna said.

“Hear that, Bean?” I said. I turned to his mother. “He’s always telling me those same dumb jokes. I know he gets them from Joseph.”

We laughed and chattered all the way to the city. Danny, Joseph and Bean talked about the boys basketball team and its prospects of winning the city championship. They never even mentioned the girls’ team.

What none of us talked about was the competition Anna was facing. The best young violinists in the western states were competing for this honor. We didn’t want her to get nervous.

At one point, Anna leaned forward and prodded Mom’s shoulder.

“Mama, what if I get hungry. What can I eat?”

“I thought you might need something,” Mom said. “I brought some bananas. Why don’t you tuck one in the sash around your dress. That way, it’s there when you need it and you won’t have to carry it around in your hand.”

She handed Anna the banana, and Bean’s mom helped her tuck it in her sash.

We didn’t have any trouble finding the opera house;

and, like before, we pulled into the underground parking place. This time we didn't meet any man to tell us the wrong directions. Besides, we knew where to go. We got off on the first floor. Dad was carrying Anna's violin.

The orchestra was making a real celebration of this event. The house was packed. Families had come with their prodigies and had brought all their relatives, I guess. Balloons and streamers decorated the place. There was free ice cream for everybody and circus rides for the little kids.

Those who would be competing went with their parents back stage. Everybody else had to go out front and sit down. Danny said we should get aisle seats in case someone started some funny business and we would need to get out fast.

Bean's mom sat with Bean and Danny on the aisle down near the front middle. Joseph took an aisle seat on the left. I took one on the right. After what happened last time, we wanted to make sure nothing happened again.

I didn't have a program, so I went looking for an usher. I didn't see one by the lobby doors, so I went upstairs to the first balcony to see if an usher was up there.

I was out of the auditorium when the concert began. I was climbing stairs. I heard a burst of applause and then an announcement that the symphony would play first and all the contestants would stand beside a musician and turn his pages. That way, everybody would see all the contestants at once. The orchestra was going to play "The Carnival of the Animals" to celebrate the competition.

When I got to the top of the stairs and turned down the aisle to get a seat, I got the surprise of my life. A lady clown was leading the orchestra, not the old white-haired gentleman from before. The kids in the audience were squealing with delight.

At one point, the clown stood on her head and conducted with her feet. She got a ton of applause for that one.

I looked for Anna in the string section, but she wasn't there. I looked around. Where could she be?

Then I saw—they'd stuck her back with the kettle drums. Poor kid. All that noise would knock a normal person silly—especially a little girl who would soon be concentrating on playing a concerto she'd memorized.

I wondered whether that was someone's big idea—to rattle Anna before she could perform her number.

It was fun to sit in the balcony and look down on everybody the way God must do. I looked back in the string section and locked on a face I'd seen before. It was the man who had given us the wrong directions the first night we'd brought Anna.

From where I was sitting, I could stare at him and he wouldn't know it. He looked so familiar. I knew I'd seen him before. But where?

And slowly it came to me. He'd been at school when Mr. Scruggs had a reception for new teachers at the beginning of the fall term. He had been some teacher's husband. But who?

The orchestra members got a lot of fun out of the number they were playing, and so did the contestants who were standing in among them.

When it was all over, the thunder of applause subsided and the orchestra sat back down. Then the clown

conductor beckoned all the contestants to follow her out into the wings.

My red light flashed on.

The clown was going to lead them around behind the back curtains to the room where their parents were waiting. She was going to be alone with all the kids and that included Anna. If someone was going to get to her, he could do it behind that curtain.

I took off, down the stairs to get backstage to check what was going on. I didn't take the time to see whether Danny, Bean or Joseph had left to follow the clown. I ran.

I took the stairs two at a time. At the bottom, I took the hall down the right hand side of the auditorium. I went in the last door that opened down near the front. I ran to the stage stairs and up behind the curtain. I figured if the guys hadn't already left, they'd see me and follow.

There was a file of kids disappearing around the back stage curtains when I arrived in the wings. I followed them, simply to make sure that Anna got to our folks.

I didn't see the clown, and I didn't see Anna.

When I got to Dad, I said, "Did Anna get back to you okay?"

"No. Aren't there more kids coming?"

"I was behind the last one," I said.

Dad's eyes opened wide. Danny, Bean and Joseph came running from behind the backstage curtain.

"What's up?" Bean said.

"Anna's missing," I said.

"All the kids followed the clown," Joseph said.

"She didn't pass by here or I'd have seen her," Dad said.

“Where’s Mom?” I asked him.

“She went to stand in the wing by the kettle drums so she could bring Anna out herself.”

“Dan, you go that way.” He pointed where Mom had gone.

“Is there a back door out of here?” Bean asked me.

I pointed. “Back wall behind that curtain.”

He and Joseph were out that door in a flash.

Then Mom and Danny came back.

“Do you have Anna?” Dad’s voice was urgent.

“No. I let her follow the clown. Everyone was having so much fun she didn’t want to miss anything. Something wrong?”

“Well, she never got back here,” Dad said. “Everybody else did, but not Anna.”

“Then where is she? Mark! Find her!”

We all went out the back door.

Bean and Joseph were running toward us from down the hall. “Did you find her?”

“She wasn’t down the halls back there.” Bean pointed back over his shoulder with his thumb.

“Mark! Do something!” Mom was upset.

“The only trouble is that this place is a maze of long halls, flights of stairs and locked doors,” I said. “It’s easy to get lost like we did the last time.”

“We’ve got a little time,” Dad said. “She’s last on the program.”

Mom grabbed his sleeve. “You’re sure the clown didn’t go through the room you were in?”

“I didn’t see her at all,” he said. “I just saw the children skipping out from behind the curtain.”

“We’ve got to scatter,” I said. “If you guys hit one of the lobbies, it’ll have a blue carpet or some other color.”

There will be a telephone on the wall. Use it to call the switchboard.”

“Roger,” Danny said. “I’ll go this way. Bean, you go that way. Joseph, stay by this door in case the clown comes back with or without Anna. Hang on to her and make a big fuss if she does.”

We ran. I came to a flight of stairs. I went up.

I went down the long halls, trying every door knob and thinking, thinking. What would some crazy lady do who was wanting to get rid of a little girl. Where would she take her?

It would depend on whether she would want to kill her or just hide her away until the competition was over.

I couldn’t believe that a lady clown who could lead a symphony orchestra standing on her head would be psycho enough to want to kill a young girl.

And wouldn’t you know—I got lost. I’d forgotten to blaze a trail so I could make my way back. I didn’t come to a lobby with a blue carpet. I just came to halls going every which way. Sometimes I felt I was going in circles because I kept coming back to doors I thought I’d seen before.

I was getting frustrated. I went up stairs and down.

Lord, help, I prayed. I need You. Anna needs You. Help her to keep calm. Help her to think of a way to get free.

I don’t know how I did it, but I turned a corner and there was Joseph.

“Hey, man! Am I ever glad to see you! I thought I was lost and would never make it back to civilization.”

“What did you find?” he asked me.

“Not a thing. What about Danny?”

“He’s still out,” he said. “So’s Bean.”

“Well, why don’t you go in and tell someone what you know. I’ll man this door.”

He opened the door and went to look for someone to tell.

I leaned against the door and closed my eyes.

Father, I prayed, I’m still waiting.

I opened my eyes on a small piece of banana peel on the carpet near my foot. A banana peel on an opera house carpet? How would a banana peel get there?

I looked up and down the hall. Nothing. So I walked up and down the hall, looking. Nothing. And then I saw another piece. I followed it four or five steps to another piece.

Gretel!

A little girl I’d called Gretel and she called me Humperdink knew how to think. She’d taken out her banana and bitten off pieces of the peel and left them as a trail behind her.

Father, have we got something here?

I took off on a run. I came to a T in the hall. I looked closely both ways and saw which way she’d gone. There was another piece of peel to show me.

The trail went up two flights of stairs and down a long hall.

I wondered how the clown was getting Anna to go along with her. I knew she wasn’t carrying her because Anna was able to put the banana in her mouth and bite off a piece of peel and drop it. She couldn’t do that if she was being carried and held against her will.

But what I couldn’t figure out was why the lady clown would want to kidnap my sister. I couldn’t believe that everybody was against her.

I knew Anna loved ice cream. Maybe she was telling her about an ice cream heaven she was taking her to see. Or maybe she had something Anna wanted.

Maybe she told her she was taking her to Mom. But, why? Why up here?

But then I noticed that every piece of banana, sitting on the carpet, had the bright yellow side up. If Anna had dropped it as she walked, some pieces would have fallen with the yellow side of the peel down.

So what was this about?

Did someone want me to follow this trail—to take me out of range of what was really going on with Anna?

I stood there thinking.

The people who planned this kidnap thing would have picked up on the “Hansel and Gretel” theme. They knew Anna would have played her piece over and over at home. She would have talked about the story until everyone at home would know it by heart and would remember the breadcrumb trail and would follow it.

I turned and ran back the way I’d come.

My mind was working like a ten-speed bike.

If the clown conductor wanted Anna out of the way, she’d hide her as close to the auditorium as she could get her. She’d open a closet and stuff her in and go her way in a second as if nothing had ever happened. Better yet, it would be an elevator. She’d open the door, stick her in and send her up or down. That would get her out of yelling distance of the auditorium—fast.

But why would she want Anna out of the way?

I followed the banana peels back the way I’d come. I looked for elevators along the wall. I remembered the lady who rescued me in the lobby with the blue carpet came right out of the wall. The elevator was behind a

panel. I saw a lot of panels. I didn't see one elevator.

No one was outside the auditorium door. I pulled it open and ran into the arms of Amanda Brown.

"What are you doing here?" I was shocked. She was the girl from my English class back home.

"I work here. I'm an usherette."

"Did you see Anna Pruitt? We can't find her. She's missing."

"Was she the girl who had her picture in the paper? The one with you in the background?"

"Yes. Have you seen her?"

"Wasn't she on the stage when the clown conducted the symphony?"

"Yes. Have you seen her?"

"All the kids went back to the dressing room where their parents were waiting."

"But not Anna," I said. "She never got back there."

"Her mother took her to the bathroom."

"How do you know her mother was anywhere near her? You just said the parents were waiting in a dressing room. You know more than you're telling me, Amanda Brown."

"Dry up, dork. You think you're so good—such a good student and such a good basketball player. You're as dumb as they come."

"You said you'd get even with me," I said. "You knew I'd be here with my sister. Is this how you get even? Did you kidnap Anna?"

"What a laugh." She pushed me. "Why would I kidnap Anna? What would I gain by kidnapping Anna?"

"You'd get even with me for one thing. And—and—"

Father, there's another reason, I prayed.

And then it came. "And you'd give some other kid a

chance to beat Anna. I know who you're working for, Amanda Brown?"

A man poked his head around the curtain.

"What's all this noise? Will you kids please shut up! There's serious business going on in here."

I grabbed Amanda's hand and pulled her out the door.

"You weren't at the Cleveland game like you told Miss Knurr. You were here! You were the usherette in the parking garage with that man. You told him who we were before you went up in the elevator. You were the girl who opened the door in the lobby with the blue carpet. You turned my shoes on the stairs. You guys wanted to keep Anna from getting to play. Is this how you get even?"

She twisted her arm out of my grip and gave me a shove that sent me sprawling.

"Dork!" she said as she opened the door again and disappeared.

I knew I could have gone after her, but she was an usherette. She knew this building better than I did. She'd be out in the auditorium before I even got up.

I lay back on the floor and prayed. *Father God, please help me to think. Help me to figure this out.*

I kept thinking of the room with the blue carpet. I'd called the switchboard and that lady had sent another lady up in an elevator to get me.

Of course! A phone! I had to get to a phone.

I looked around me but there wasn't a phone on the walls either up or down the hall. But there would be a phone back stage.

I opened the auditorium door and went in. I ducked around the curtains. Mom and Dad and the boys were

standing there, talking in low tones and looking desperate. That meant Anna was still out somewhere—alone.

“Becky!” Mom said. “What did you find out?”

“I need a telephone fast. I can’t stop to explain.”

She pointed me to one on the wall nearby.

I ran to it and dialed zero.

“Operator,” a voice said.

“Lady, this is an emergency. Anna Pruitt, one of the contestants, has been kidnapped. We think someone stuffed her in an elevator near the back door of the auditorium. It’s somewhere behind the panels and I can’t find it. Can you send someone to help?”

“We have an elevator near there, but our panelboard shows it’s inoperative.”

“Where is the elevator?”

“It’s sitting on the floor in the basement.”

“Can you get someone there right away? I believe someone stuck Anna in it and cut the electricity. Hurry!”

I hung up.

“Becky! Tell us!” Mom was imploring me.

“Quick! Out in the hall.”

We quickly filed out the back door and closed it as I told them what I’d figured out.

“They’re sending someone to open the elevator to see if Anna’s inside.”

“Mark, she could have suffocated,” Mom said, alarm in her voice.

I didn’t know what to say.

It was true. They might find her dead.

Dad prayed out loud while we were waiting, *Father God, we’re trusting You. Keep our Anna safe. We’re not*

concerned that she win this competition. We want to get her back, and we want You to get the glory out of all that is happening here. We pray in the Name of the Lord Jesus. We all said "Amen."

There was nothing we could do. We just stood there and waited.

And waited.

And then a panel near us slid back. A woman appeared leading Anna by the hand.

Boy, did we crawl all over her—Anna, that is—not the lady. Oh, how we laughed and I even cried.

"What happened?" Danny asked Anna.

"I was eating my banana as we followed the clown off the stage. Then one of the girl ushers asked me if I needed to go to the bathroom, and I said I did. She said she'd take me to the lady's restroom, but the lady clown said she'd show me. I just followed her into this elevator. We went down and—"

And then she started to cry.

Mom waited for her to calm down.

"But you didn't know who she was, Anna," she said. "Why did you follow her?"

"She was a clown. I love clowns."

"What happened then, honey?" Mom said. She was kneeling down beside her. She gave my father a long look.

"When we stopped, she grabbed my banana." That made Anna cry again.

We waited for her to calm down.

"And then?" Mom said.

"And then she pulled out a plug high up where I couldn't reach it and turned out the lights. Then she did something that opened the door. She went right

out and shut the door on me.” She sobbed again. “I was so afraid.”

She buried her face in Mom’s shoulder and bawled.

“Then what did you do, dear?” Mom said, patting her back.

Between gasps, Anna said, “I asked the Lord Jesus to keep me safe, and then—I just lay down. I guess I went to sleep.”

“The cool air near the floor kept her from suffocating,” Danny said.

“Mark, she’s in no condition to compete out there. We’ve got to get her out of here.”

“Well, I’m afraid you’re already too late, Mrs. Pruitt,” the lady who rescued Anna said. “They were announcing the winner when I left the office to find your little girl.”

“I’m too late?” Anna began to sob again.

“Who won?” Daddy asked the lady.

“Well, what Anna said is going to complicate that.”

“How’s that?”

“The winner was the daughter of our lady clown.”

“What was her name?” I said.

“Gertrude Demmery. Only she goes by the name of Tru.”

12

Newton

Trudie Marie. Why did we think her name was Trudie Marie? It was Tru Demmery. We'd heard it wrong. Everything came together when we realized the French conductor had mispronounced her name when he gave her second prize.

She was Gertrude Demmery, Coach Demmery's daughter. And Coach was the conductor-clown! And it was her husband, also a violinist—the one I recognized when I was sitting in the balcony—who had given us the wrong directions that first time.

Now we knew why Coach ducked out of practice early every day. She had to get to the Big City in time for rehearsal—her other job. This was that hidden thing she had had on her mind—that something she felt was more important than basketball. She wanted her daughter to win this prize.

Now we knew why she didn't want me on the team and why she kicked Joseph out of her office. She knew Anna was a better violinist than Gertrude. She knew Anna was a Pruitt. She hated Anna so much that she

hated all of us Pruitts.

Well, the executive committee of the symphony decided they couldn't take away Gertrude's prize just because of something dishonest her mother had done. But they did cancel Mrs. Demmery's contract as assistant conductor of the symphony, and they filed charges of kidnapping against her.

And they signed a contract with Anna for her to appear as "guest artist" on a number of their programs. They wanted to keep her with them. They loved her playing, and they loved her.

Mom said on the way home that she was just as glad Anna hadn't won. She said she needs to have a normal childhood—while keeping up on her violin, of course.

Bean's mom said she was worried when she saw the three boys follow me up the side stairs of the stage. But she knew there was nothing she could do but sit there and pray.

The Lord sure had answered those prayers, I tell you.

We later learned that Amanda Brown was Coach's niece. That explains how she had on such "good authority" the charges she said I was making about the team. Coach was feeding her lies to spread because she didn't want me snooping around as manager and reporting what I found.

The city newspapers made a big fuss over Anna and Coach Demmery and Trudie Marie, but I had too much to think about to give it much time.

In fact, next day, I forgot all about Anna's problems. I had a string of high-spirited horses and a game with Newton High on Friday night that was taking all my time.

I kept them under control by running them to death.

We drilled, drilled, drilled. We knew this paid off because we'd stopped the Madison girls in their tracks.

And I kept rotating everybody. We couldn't rely on one star. We all had to be able to do everything. And I rotated myself in and out the whole time so I'd be in condition if I might be needed.

Game time Friday night, we all decided I better play to keep my half-court lobs sharp. Newton didn't have much of a record in the league, so this would be a good game for me to get in.

I got an ovation when I joined the team on the floor. We gave each other high fives and got ready for the tip-off.

I got the ball at mid-court and thought I'd set the tone right from the start with a basket shot from there. I set my feet and gave it a heave. Everybody screamed with anticipation. Hah!

It went over the backboard and into the crowd.

The groan I got really got to me. I couldn't do a thing after that. They'd feed me the ball at the top of the key after working it around. I'd shoot and miss.

I can't explain it. I was 0 for 12 at halftime.

We talked in the locker room.

"I don't know what's wrong," I said as we were lying on our mats with our feet up. "It's the same basket. These are the same hands as before, but I just can't get it in. Think I should just back off and stick with coaching?"

Nobody said anything.

Then Lorrie said, "We're not all that far behind. We've forced them into so many turnovers they haven't scored all that much."

"The score's only 31-27," Kyra said. "We're keeping it

close.”

“We’ve all missed some pretty easy shots,” Ruby Ruberg, my old volleyball teammate, said.

“I’d say you should stay in,” Pam said. “Who knows? You might get hot, and we’ll be off to the races.”

“What do the rest of you guys think?” I asked.

“Stay in.”

“Yeah. Keep tryin’.”

“Beat Newton! Beat Newton!”

I put my whistle in my mouth and gave it a peep. “Up and at ‘em,” I chirped.

We ran for the door, shouting, “Beat Newton! Beat Newton!”

The crowd picked it up and we thundered in that gym. But second half was a replay of the first. Nothing I shot went in. I missed easy shots, and I was rushing shots. I was pressing myself to find a rhythm. I was fighting myself.

I took myself out of the game and went back to the starting five we’d used against Madison, but that didn’t work. All of us were dead.

Ruby motioned me to come back in, so I did. By then I was 0-22, and we were going into the last ten minutes. We were behind 45-38.

I got a momentary lift when my first shot went in, but my next shot was an air ball. I could either give up and sag back on the bench or I could fight. My mother would want me to fight. The guys on the team would want me to fight. The Lord would want me to fight.

Lord, I haven’t anyone but You to help me, I prayed as I took the ball from Kyra.

Now, I don’t use the Lord like a rabbit’s foot. He’s not my good luck charm. It’s just that He’s part of my

life. Sometimes He gets me out of pickles and sometimes He lets me suffer. But I try to bring Him into everything I do.

And I'm not saying that the Lord answers all my prayers immediately. Maybe I just relaxed because I knew He was going to take care of everything.

We were working the ball in. I faked a defender off-balance and rose up to make a mid-range jumper.

And it went in. And from then on, everything went in. The guys began feeding me the ball and I lobbed in shots from everywhere, and they all went in. We couldn't get over it and, of course, the crowd loved it. They had put up with my cold hand for three quarters, but this got them going. We went ahead and won by 20 points.

Sunny Hills was rocking!

13

Mr. Dinkle

You wouldn't believe what we did with the substitute we had in geometry. Mrs. Demmery's leaving school opened up a hole in the math department.

Of course, no one stayed in his seat—except me. I had a knot in my shoe that wouldn't give up. I stayed at my desk and bent over my foot so I could undo the tangle.

The rest of the guys got up and walked around and talked to each other.

The man kept banging the desk with a ruler, but nobody listened.

One of the girls went up to him and tossed his hair.

"What's your name, Mr.—?" she asked him.

"Dinkle," he said.

"Dinkle?" she said with a loud laugh as she turned to the rest of us. "He says his name is—Dinkle."

Everybody shrieked. We all thought that was the funniest name we'd ever heard.

One of the guys took the glasses off Mr. Dinkle's nose and put them on himself.

Everyone tried to talk to him at once so he got all flustered.

Two of the guys tried to take his suit coat off his shoulders while he tried to get us to sit down.

He asked for our names.

We were to sit down and write our names on a sheet of paper.

The last thing we wanted was for him to know our real names. I put Aleecia McFiggin on my paper. And then I helped collect them.

When he'd gotten them all in his hands—he was an old man. I'm sure he was about 70—he began reading them. Everybody else had done what I did.

“McGruder McBooter. Please raise your hand.”

Tom Fenton raised his hand.

Did we ever laugh.

“Loretta Gogolooski. Raise your hand.”

Mary Jones raised hers.

“Aleecia McFiggin?”

I raised mine.

He put the papers on his desk and looked down at us. He looked six feet tall.

“You people realize that when promotion time comes, Aleecia McFiggin will be promoted to the junior class. If your name is something else, I have this document” (he pointed to my paper) “to prove you were never in this class.”

Everybody laughed.

But I sat up in my chair.

That would make me ineligible! It would mean the same as my flunking the class. You can't flunk geometry and still go out for sports—not an important class like geometry.

“But we could have an alias,” Tom called out.

“And we could sue you,” Mary said.

“And what did you say your name was?” he asked Mary.

She got all flustered. She’d forgotten she’d written Loretta Gogolooski.

“Butterfly,” she said. “Butterfly McDaniel.”

Everybody laughed.

“Not Loretta?”

This guy was smart. I was beginning to get anxious.

Tom got up and went over to take Mr. Dinkle’s glasses off again.

“Thank you for volunteering, Mr. McBooter. Will you take the chalk please and go to the board.”

Tom was caught flat-footed.

“And Miss McFiggin, let’s have another Scotsman at the board. McBooter. McFiggin. Write your names up high at the top of the board. Now write down this problem.”

And then he gave us a whopper.

Tom and I were supposed to stand there and each figure it out.

Mr. Dinkle turned to the class while we worked—or tried to work. “You people talk about suing. I have grounds this morning for filing a class action suit against all of you for harassment.”

“Why? What did we do that was harassment?” Mary said.

“I’m astonished that a class of sophomores would act like third graders. What are you? Fifteen? Sixteen? You’re halfway to 30 and you’re acting like infants.” He shook his head.

“You can’t sue us if you don’t know our names,”

Mary said. She had a sneer in her voice.

“I’ve got Mrs. Demmery’s grade book.”

That’s all he said. That’s all he needed to say.

For some reason that short sentence cleared the cobwebs out of everyone’s mind.

For some reason nobody said another word.

I erased “McFiggin” and wrote “Pruitt” on the board over my problem.

Tom shook his fist at me.

I didn’t care. I had work to do and eligibility to protect.

“I saw you erase your name, McFiggin. Put it back on the board.”

“But that’s not my real—“

“You told me your name was McFiggin. It’s McFiggin. And I told you to write it on the board.”

I wrote it.

Tom held his hand up to his mouth and laughed so I could see it.

“Do the problem, McBooter!” Mr. Dinkle had eyes in the back of his head.

The problem was complicated. I had to decide what was given and what was wanted. I was glad I’d memorized all the theorems in the book. At least I had that advantage.

“While these young people are working at the board, I want you in your seats to take out paper and work the same problem,” Mr. Dinkle said. “When you’re done, I want you to challenge the work on the board.”

Tom didn’t even know where to begin. He looked over at me and tried to see how I’d started.

“No cheating, Mr. McBooter. Keep your eyes on your own work. The same thing goes for you, Miss Butter-

fly.” Mary had evidently looked up from her paper.

Some guys in the class laughed.

When we were done, Tom had more challengers than he expected. Everybody saw the mistakes he’d made, but they couldn’t break down what I’d done. I’d figured it out right.

“All right, Miss Butterfly, you get up here and challenge Miss. Mc—Pruitt with the next problem.”

“But I’ve already had my turn, Mr. Dinkle, sir,” I said as politely as I knew how. The class laughed. But I didn’t like being on the hot seat like this.

And wouldn’t you know, he kept me at the board the whole period.

Ten minutes before the bell, he went to the phone and called the office.

“Mr. Scruggs, please.”

He waited.

“Mr. Scruggs? Dinkle. I have a hoodlum here in geometry who has been giving me trouble. I think you should—you’ll be right up? Thank you, sir.”

He hung up.

He turned to the class. “Hurry up. Finish that problem. Mr. Scruggs will be here in a minute. McBooter, erase the board and sit down.”

I started to erase my work, too.

“I said McBooter sit down, not McFiggin. I want Mr. Scruggs to see just what you’ve been doing.”

I began to wonder why he was doing this. Why was he making a mountain out of something that was just a prank, something that all kids do when they get a substitute. And why had he kept me at the board the whole hour?

Something was smoking in the back of my brain.

The door opened and Mr. Scruggs came in.

“Thank you for coming, Principal Scruggs. I have never been treated in a more insulting manner than I have in this class.”

“Why? What happened?” Mr. Scruggs frowned.

“This young woman at the board gave me her name as Aleecia McFiggin after she messed my hair, took my glasses off my nose and put them on herself. She tried to take my coat off so she could wear it herself and she got the class to laugh at my name.”

“I can’t believe it of you, Becky.” He turned to the class. “Is this true?”

“Every word,” Mary said. “You should have heard her, Mr. Scruggs. She insulted poor Mr. Dinkle all period.”

“I had to keep her there at the board all period so that she would not be able to pull some prank behind my back while I was working with other students. See? She wrote her name—McFiggin—over her head on the board.”

Why was Mr. Dinkle doing this to me? Why would he want to humiliate me like this? What did he have against me?

The bell rang.

“Class dismissed,” Mr. Dinkle said.

“Becky, you wait here,” Mr. Scruggs said.

Mr. Dinkle gathered up his papers and his books and excused himself to Mr. Scruggs and walked toward the door.

“Just a moment, Mr. Dinkle,” Mr. Scruggs said.

“Yes?”

“You need to be here for this conversation, if you don’t mind.”

“I do have a class next period.”

“This will just take a few moments. Now what was this all about, Becky? This doesn’t sound like you.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I did give him McFigggin as my name at the beginning of class. Everybody was giving him other names like we do with a lot of substitutes. I told him it wasn’t my real name, but he wouldn’t listen. He kept me at the board all period.”

“You didn’t listen, Mr. Dinkle?”

“How was I to know what her real name was? She was the one who gave me her name to begin with.”

“You’re perfectly correct. You had no way of knowing. And, Becky, did you do all those things he was telling me you did?”

“No, sir.”

“Mr. Dinkle?”

“I really must leave for my next class. I’m sorry, Mr. Scruggs. Substitutes must be in the room when the students first come in in order to get control.”

There was a pleading sound in his voice.

“I understand. Thank you for staying this long, Mr. Dinkle.”

When he’d left, Mr. Scruggs turned back to me. “You say you didn’t do the things he accused you of doing?”

“That’s right, sir.”

“The other students did them?”

“Yes, sir.”

“You did none of those things?”

“Well, I did laugh at his name when all the other kids were laughing. ‘Dinkle’ is an unusual name. But I know we shouldn’t have laughed.”

“You didn’t muss his hair or take off his glasses?”

“No, sir.”

“And just what were you doing?”

“I was trying to get a knot out of my shoe. See? It’s still there.” I pointed to my shoe. “It was so tight I couldn’t get it loose unless I took my shoe off. But I didn’t have a chance. He told me to go to the board and he kept me there all period.”

“What do you think is the reason why he did this to you?”

“I don’t know—unless he talked to Mrs. Demmery. Do you think he did?”

“Well, I gave him Mrs. Demmery’s phone number. I’m sure he called her up to find out where she was in the textbook and what she’d taught the class.”

“Do you think Mrs. Demmery told him to watch out for me? Was she trying to pin something bad on me so I’d get in trouble?”

“Why would she do that?”

“Mr. Dinkle was building a case so he could flunk me. An F in geometry would take me off the honor roll. An F in geometry could put a stop to my coaching the basketball team. An F in geometry would let Mrs. Demmery get even with me. She’d have the last laugh.”

Mr. Scruggs laughed. “No, I’m afraid you’re running down a dead-end road on that one. Mrs. Demmery’s not like that. She may have a short temper. But she’s not one to get even.”

“She’s not?”

“No, and it’s very serious when a faculty member like Mr. Dinkle—even though he is a substitute—accuses a student of harassment. This really could take you off the basketball team, Becky. I’m going to have to do something. I just can’t let it go because you’re coaching the team and winning all your games. Do you under-

stand that?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I hate to see you get into trouble like this. You’re a leader on campus, and you have to set an example of good behavior.”

“I know, sir. That’s what I tell the team.”

“Well, you get on to class. Here’s a permit slip with my signature—“

He bent over a desk and wrote his last name on the slip that would get me into my next class without penalty.

“Take this.”

“Thank—“

“I’ll have to let you know my final decision. Keep coaching until I call you into my office. I’m still looking for a full-time coach, but I haven’t found one yet. All the coaches I’ve found already have jobs.”

“Yes, sir.”

“But, know this, Becky—I will not put up with this kind of behavior. You’re skating on thin ice.”

I took the slip and picked up my books.

“Thank you, Mr. Scruggs,” I said as I went out the door.

He’d given me another one of his old-time expressions with this “skating-on-thin-ice” thing. He could have said it better in one word.

I was in—trouble.

14

The Bomb

On Monday, the bomb fell. We wouldn't be going to State. The State Interscholastic Activities Commission disqualified us from tournaments and further competition.

Rumors said it was because we had a student coach—and a sophomore at that—not a real coach who was a recognized member of the faculty.

That meant we would have to forfeit our entire season.

At first, the student body was shocked silent.

Then another bomb burst.

Their anger.

They stormed Mr. Scruggs's office. He sent them back to class, saying he would call a special assembly after lunch. He needed time to get an explanation from the State Commission.

Everyone saw the reasonableness of that, and so they went back to class. Everywhere I went, kids were saying we'd gotten a bum deal. They said, since we'd beaten all our opposition fairly, we should be allowed to

go to State.

That afternoon in assembly, Mr. Scruggs got up to speak. Everyone quieted right down.

“I’ve talked at length with the officials of the State Interscholastic Activities Commission. They say we have violated the rules of high school state competition.”

A great cry of “Boo” showed him how the student body felt.

“Now, wait until I’m through,” he said. “I appreciate all this emotion, but you need to wait until you’ve heard the whole story. And, by the way, you should make that a rule of life. Don’t react until you know all the facts.”

He got some applause for that—especially from the teachers.

“They said they had closed their eyes when our girls volleyball team went into the State finals—which we eventually won, by the way.”

He got a wave of applause and shouting and whistling for that one. We members of that volleyball team stood wherever we were with our hands over our heads in a hand clasp of victory. Everybody roared for us.

“We love you girls,” Mr. Scruggs said.

He got another wave of shouting and applause.

When that subsided, he said, “The Commission says it cannot wink at this new violation. It—”

He got another wave of “Boo.”

“I told you guys to wait till I’m through before you react!” He sounded like he was getting upset.

We quieted down.

“The Commission salutes our achievement in winning all our games so far but one.”

He got a roar of applause in response to that.

“The Commission recognizes that we rose despite the odds to the rank of greatness as a team and as a school.”

He got another wave of applause.

“The Commission will strike a medal to recognize the achievement of Sunny Hills High School in winning our All-City championship—if we win the game against Grant Friday night.”

Applause and cheers. “Beat Grant! Beat Grant! Beat Grant! Beat Grant!”

Mr. Scruggs waved for silence and then continued, “The Commission at its annual basketball athletic awards banquet will give Becky Pruitt special recognition as the State Student Coach of the Year—if we win Friday night.”

More roars and applause.

And then everyone started to chant, “Becky P! Becky P! Becky P!” and members of our team came and got me and hoisted me on their shoulders. I tried to get down and couldn’t. So I played the ham again and punched the air with my fists.

They all marched me up to the stage and set me down beside Mr. Scruggs.

The kids were still yelling, “Becky P! Becky P!” and applauding. The team was applauding, too.

It was great.

Mr. Scruggs shook my hand.

When the applause died down, he said, “Becky, you’ve done an excellent job and Sunny Hills High School is proud of you.”

Another wave of applause and shouting of “Beck-y! Beck-y!”

“I thought for a while that this forfeiture was my

fault,” Mr. Scruggs went on.

Boos from the audience.

“No, listen to me. When it became necessary to replace Coach Demmery, Becky urged me to find another coach who could lead us to the State finals. But I said no. We had had a coach in another sport who had had to resign, and we had a perfectly good volleyball coach in the student body who took her place.”

Shouts of “Bean! Bean!” began rolling through the auditorium.

Mr. Scruggs held up his hand for quiet.

“I had already given Bean another assignment so I didn’t ask him to take on the girls basketball team. I knew I didn’t need to. When you have a girl in the student body who can score baskets with over-the-head lobs from mid-court—”

He didn’t get a chance to finish. There was another roar and everybody stood up and applauded.

I raised my hand to acknowledge their tribute and then shook hands again with Mr. Scruggs.

I was turning to leave, when he took me by the arm and turned me around.

“I’m not finished. I was saying that I appointed Becky to be the acting coach. I have talked to the commission, fearing now that it might have been illegal for me to appoint a student coach. The commission has assured me that I may appoint whomever I wish. She does not have to be a faculty member.”

More applause.

“We’re waiting now to hear the specifics of the charges. I have a suspicion—and I may be wrong—that they are remembering that Coach Demmery, on her own, started practice the first day of the semester in-

stead of waiting for the official day for all schools to begin. In her eagerness to get started on her program, she jumped the gun.”

No one said anything.

“Again, perhaps I am at fault for not warning her, a teacher new to our school and to our system. I have many things to think about at the beginning of school, and I hold myself accountable to you for not making sure of that fact.”

Again, no one said anything.

“I am notifying the Commission that we will appeal this ruling.”

A blast of applause and cheers.

“We will not take this sitting down.”

More applause and cheers. And the kids began chanting “Sun-ny Hills! Sun-ny Hills!”

Mr. Scruggs let it go on for a little and then he held up his hand.

“The Commission has given permission for you to play Grant for the title.”

Another roar and applause. “Sun-ny Hills! Sun-ny Hills!”

“If Grant wins, it takes its title into the State finals. If we win—”

They didn’t let him finish. They roared and stamped and shouted “Sun-ny Hills! Sun-ny Hills!”

Mr. Scruggs held up his hand, and they finally quieted down.

“If we win, we will only be able to go to State if they clear our record. They have more investigating to do and more analysis of their own rules. They notified us of all of this to put us on notice.”

He spoke again, but he kind of choked up.

“Girls, we wish you well. We know you will wear our colors proudly. We know you will win!!”

That brought the house down.

The assembly was over and the students filed out, but they filed out cheering and now singing our Sunny Hills fight song.

The team? We were emotional wrecks.

Me? I knew it would work out all right. The Lord was on my side. Like those verses in Proverbs 3 say, “Trust in the Lord with all your heart; and lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will direct your paths.”

I saw Joseph after the assembly.

“Mom went to the hearing for Coach Demmery.”

“And what happened?”

“Mom got the judge to drop the charges. She said that losing the prize hadn’t hurt Anna. She and all of us are happy she didn’t win it. We get to be together more as a family.”

“And the judge said?”

“He said he had never heard of anything as cruel as what Mrs. Demmery did to Anna. He said the opera people had to consent before any charges could be dropped.”

“And they said?”

“They said they had filed charges largely in behalf of us Pruitts because they felt we had every right to be grieved. They felt they had disciplined Mrs. Demmery by canceling her contract.”

“And what did Coach say?”

“She was so relieved that she shook Mom’s hand. Mom thought she might be willing to talk about her sins and salvation. So she took her into a private room

and tried to lead her to the Lord since Coach had just had a good example of forgiveness. Mom felt she would be ready to learn how God can drop the charges against her because Christ died for her.”

“Right. So what happened?”

“Remember when we were waiting for Anna to come up on the elevator and Dad prayed? He prayed that the Lord might get some glory out of all that was happening. We weren’t so concerned that she win the competition. We just wanted her safe. Well, this is how the Lord worked. Isn’t it cool?”

“It’s cool,” I said.

“The only trouble is,” Joseph continued, “Mrs. Demery said she wasn’t interested.”

“Wasn’t interested?”

“She said she’d seen too many hypocrites in church. She had too much to do to get involved with hypocrites.”

“So what did Mom say?”

“She told her God is her Judge. She has to face God at the end of her life, not the hypocrites. She told her this might be Coach’s only chance to repent and receive the Savior as her own.”

“What did she say?”

“Not interested.”

15

Grant

Well, the after-school rally before the Grant High School game brought out every student in our school. We had songs and cheers and pep band and introductions. People stood around the raised platform they'd put by the entrance of our school.

The head cheerleader interviewed me, but I'm not going to get into that. She seemed to think that I deserved some credit for what the gals were doing. I told her I just blew the whistle. Our team did the work. She and the students were nice to me. I got a big round of cheers, applause and whistles.

While I was being interviewed, I saw Amanda Brown. She was standing near our raised platform with some women in jeans who were staring intently at me. They watched everything I did—so much so that I began to feel uneasy. I didn't recognize them. They looked as if they had something on their mind. They didn't clap for me when the other students did.

I've seen enough cops and robbers on TV to recognize the sort of people who trap and beat up the ones they

don't like.

I stood next to Molly, big Abby Moldonado, while the other girls were being interviewed. I nudged her and spoke to her while I looked the opposite way.

"Do you know a girl named Amanda Brown?"

"No."

"I want you to glance at some ladies down there in the front watching me. Glance and look away so they don't think you're looking at them. I think they want to start something."

"Why would they want to fight us?" she said, looking down and then looking away. "You mean those gals with their hands in their pockets?"

"Yeah."

"Want me to take care of them?"

"Naw. Let's just stick together when we go back to the gym."

"Who's Amanda Brown?" Molly said.

"She's Coach Demmery's niece. She has it in for me."

"So what can she do?"

"She can get her friends to take me apart."

"Let 'em try."

Well, I walked with our girls back to the gym. They went on home to rest and eat a bite before coming back at 6:30. I decided to stay in the locker room, do my homework and just not be available to anyone outside who might be waiting for me to slip out a side door to go home.

I was munching a sandwich over some tough geometry problems when I heard footsteps coming quietly down the hall outside the locker room.

I thought the door was locked. But I didn't have time to check. I kept working and didn't even look up when

they came in the door.

Sure enough, it was Amanda and her friends, looking for me. I had to think fast.

Father God, help me know what to do, I prayed.

I decided to ham it up—make them laugh.

“Hi, ladies. Amanda. You coming to the game? I haven’t seen you, Amanda, since that day at the opera. Did you move to the Big City?”

One of the ladies came up to me and grabbed me by my shirt front.

“Listen, you. You been mean to Mandy.”

We were nose to nose. And I started laughing.

“You can’t fool me,” I said. “Real hoodlums don’t wear makeup under their ear.”

She let go of my shirt and wiped her neck. She looked at the grease paint on her finger.

“And look at your hands,” I said. “Hoodlums have calluses on their hands and dirt under their fingernails. You ladies don’t scare me. So, Amanda Brown, who are your friends? Some more of the Demmery family? Or are these ladies from the chorus of your opera house?”

Then I had an inspiration. “Did you come to hear me sing?” Without waiting for a yes or no, I went into my “They’re Hanging Danny Deever in the Morning” routine.

Well, it stopped them in their tracks. I got them laughing. They applauded when I went into that final wail and stood there with my limp blouse in one hand and clutching my heart with the other.

I didn’t give them time to do any mischief. I went right into “Pale Hands I Love Beyond the Shalimarree” and included the bathtub part. They were hysterical by

the time I finished; and, while they were laughing, the door opened and Molly and the rest of our team walked in. They'd expected to find a fight going on and were surprised to see a party.

They didn't know what to think—and neither did Amanda. She stood there with a frown on her face. She knew she wouldn't be able to get even with me now. She tried to get her friends to leave, but I wouldn't let them. It turned out that they were part of the opera troupe, pretending to be hoods to scare some nerd for their friend Amanda.

"Come on, you guys," I said. "Give us a song before you go."

They gave us a song, but they didn't give us an aria from an opera. They gave us Barbershop. And were they good! It was just what my girls needed before facing Grant. We laughed and relaxed and had a wonderful time.

The ladies left so we could dress, but they said they'd stay for the game and root for us.

"How do you do that, Becky?" Molly asked me. "They came in here to beat you up, and you turn it into a song-and-dance."

"Well," I said, "I'd rather have ham any day than a knuckle sandwich, for one thing. And, for another, I asked the Lord to help me know what to do. I prayed a quick prayer as they were turning the door knob. I know He heard me because I'm His kid. Then I just did what I do best. I gave them ham."

"How do you know you're His kid?"

"Hey, girl, when I realized what a wicked sinner I am—deserving the death sentence like Danny Deever because of my sins—and when I realized that Christ,

Who is God Himself, died the death I deserved—I thanked Him for dying in my place. I told Him I was sorry for my sins and I asked Him to come into my life and let me start all over again new. He did that, and He made me His kid.”

“Is that all?”

“That’s all—repenting and trusting.”

Someone stuck his head in the door.

“You guys ready?”

“One second,” I called back.

“You wanna pray, Molly?” I said.

She bowed her head. “God, Becky says You died for us—for me. Hey! Well! Thanks! Uh. We’re sorry for our sins—at least I am. And—help us to beat Grant tonight. Amen.”

The gals shouted “Amen” together and ran for the door.

I’d asked God to give me a chance to witness. Wow! What an answer! But I had an idea Molly did it for good luck. She wanted God on her side. Maybe what she did was for real. I didn’t know. But God did.

We went out the door to face the championship game of our high school league. We knew it would be fang and claw the whole way. How right can a girl get!

We hadn’t met players this big and this fast all season. They had such long arms and such big bottoms that they could hold the ball out in front of them so far out of reach we could never bat it away.

And talk about dead-eye. It was swish! swish! swish! all night.

When I called timeout, Libby groaned, “This is embarrassing!” The score was 24 to 12, and we’d just been playing seven minutes.

I set up a rotation so we always had a starter resting on the bench. That meant one of us would always be fresh.

“Remember the fundamentals, guys. Don’t let them force us out of our game. We set the pace, not them. Be patient.”

We gripped our hands and shouted, “LET’S GO!”

By third quarter, they had built a 21-point lead.

Father, I reminded Him with my inside voice, let these guys know that You do hear us and that you answer those who call on You.

He didn’t owe us anything, and He didn’t need to do anything for us. But I wanted the girls to know He cares.

At the next timeout, I said, “Okay, hot shots, it’s time to call out our three-point bombers. When we inbound the ball, let’s dribble in the low post and then pass out to a three-point shooter. It’s time to get hot!”

Grant scored again. It was 51 to 28. We inbounded with Libby passing to Lorrie. She dribbled up court and shot the ball to Molly who was wide open.

Three points!

Grant inbounded and Kyra intercepted a pass, dribbled, shot it to Molly again.

Three points!

Grant inbounded and their center bounced the ball on her toe. It flew at an angle into Molly’s hands. She was wide open.

Three points!

People who had started for the exit turned and came back. It was 51 to 37 in ten seconds.

Grant went into a freeze, but it was too early to put on a freeze. We were still in the third quarter.

We let them play down the clock and then try a bas-

ket, but they were off. Our quick nine points had rattled them. Their shot hit the rim and Lorrie took the rebound. She dribbled up court, found Molly—dribble, lob and thunk.

Three points!

Unbelievable. Four three-pointers in a row. 51 to 40.

Our crowd was going nuts.

Grant's coach called time.

"Just get your breath, guys. You're doing great. We'll catch 'em yet."

"You've got to come in before this is over, Becky P.," Libby said. "We want you in here."

"Yeah," the other girls said.

"I'll come in when you tie the score," I said. "There's no way I'm gonna interrupt the great work you guys are doing. Go get 'em."

We gripped our hands and yelled, "LET'S GO!!"

We went into a full-court press. The Grant guard was running full-tilt with the ball against Lorrie who was running backwards in front of her, hands outstretched. The guard's shoe hit a scrap of paper ribbon. She slipped and lost the ball. Lorrie picked it up, tossed it to Libby to Molly to Kyra to Molly.

Three points!

How-dee-do-dee! 51 to 43. Only eight points behind.

Now Grant put a full-court press on us. But we kept to our game. It was pass, pass, pass. It was move around, rotate, shuffle. Then pop. Kyra, open, got to the basket for two.

We had 17 unanswered points.

Then Grant started to foul us. But we hadn't spent hours at the foul line practicing for nothing. We were used to all the noise and the waving signs.

Thunk.

Thunk.

Then it was another thunk-thunk.

And it was 21 unanswered points. Imagine. 51 to 49!

I thought the building was going to collapse. This was the title game, remember.

Grant called timeout again.

“You getting’ ready to come in, Becky?” Libby asked me.

“You’re almost there,” I said. “Two more points.”

“We’ll get ‘em. Come on, guys.”

We gripped and yelled “LET’S GO!” again. I knew the Lord was laughing and enjoying all this. We were doing what we knew how to do best. We knew He was helping us along.

I looked at the clock.

We were down to one minute and 12 seconds. Like Joseph said, “Time’s fun when you’re having flies.” Our flies were going in three points at a time, then two points, then four ones. We loved it!

The Grant crowd was imploring their team to score, score, score. It was like those players were paralyzed. They couldn’t believe what we’d done any more than we could.

Grant had the ball. They needed two points to put the game out of the reach of a three-pointer. They worked it up the court and around in their pattern. They bounce passed it to their center who turned, twisted and swish!

Three!

We hadn’t practiced our full-length court passes for nothing. Lorrie took the ball out and lobbed it in to Molly who lobbed it down to Kyra who found Meagan for three. 54 to 52.

Lorrie intercepted the inbounds pass and swoosh! 54 to 54.

Talk about the rocket's red glare. Our fans were bombs bursting in air.

Grant called time.

"You gotta come in now, Becky," Meagan said with a grin. "We tied the score."

"I'll break the pace," I protested.

"Don't worry. We got 'em on the ropes. Come on in."

"You gotta come in, Becky," Libby said, clutching her calf. "I've got a charley horse. I gotta work it out."

As I slipped out of my sweatshirt, I wondered which one of us Grant would double-team. We could all hit three-pointers.

Grant had the ball. Their strategy had two parts, I was sure. They would want to work the ball to their center for the last shot, and they didn't want to leave Sunny Hills time for a rebound, a timeout and a chance to win at the other end.

Their center had missed a four-foot hook and had lost the ball during two possessions in the previous minute and a half before this timeout.

Time in. They sent the ball to their center like I thought. She missed an open 17-footer off a pick and roll. But they got the rebound. Then one of their guards missed a tip-in. They got the rebound again. Nothing of theirs was going in, but we seemed powerless at getting the ball. Then their forward was long on a three-pointer, and Kyra got the rebound.

The fans were counting down the seconds.

She shoveled the ball to me. I heard the fans screaming, "Sink it, sink it, Becky P."

I planted my feet, eyed the basket—and missed.

Molly got the rebound and shoveled it to Meagan.

With seven seconds to go, Meagan escaped a trap and shoveled the ball to Lorrie who swung a lateral pass to me.

I saw Grant players trying to streak across the key to block my shot. Their center tried to run at me from under the basket.

I barely had time to catch and shoot. I got the shot off when our crowd was shouting, "Four!"

I didn't even have time to pray.

The ball soared like old times.

Up.

Down.

Swish!

Three points!

The buzzer.

London, Paris, Rome, Heaven heard the noise as our Hilltoppers roared their delight. They went wild.

We'd won! We'd won!

We were all mobbed—and kissed—and hugged. I found myself being lifted and carried on the shoulders of my team.

Yes! I punched the air time and again. What a thrill! You wouldn't believe how excited we were.

The guys let me down and we hugged each other some more. I saw Bean.

"Supplies! Supplies!" I shouted at him.

"No supplies! No supplies," he shouted back.

I wanted to tell him fortunately we missed the pitchfork and fortunately we hit the haystack. But I was swirled away from him in the mass of humanity that swarmed up and down the court.

The next time I saw him, he shouted, "Are you a pole-vaulter?"

“No, I’m a Swede,” I yelled. “I’m a Swede.” Oh, we were crazy that night.

What a night! What a thrilling night!

Sure, there was a chance we wouldn’t get to go to State. But we had just won our own national championship. Nothing—absolutely nothing—could beat a game like this.

Thank You, Father God, I prayed. Thank You. Thank You. Thank You.

16

Who?

We didn't hear and we didn't hear. State finals were two days away and we didn't know whether we were in or not.

The sports desk of the city newspaper and the sports editor of our own school newspaper were fit to be tied. They had been reporting every detail. Mr. Scruggs was phoning the Commission every day, trying to get an answer.

People had to know so they could make plans. Half the town would be coming if we were going.

I told the team to relax because if the Lord wanted us there we'd be there. And we worked our tails off. We knew we could beat the big girls. We just had to be sharp.

I was sitting in Miss Knurr's English class working on a composition when an announcement came over the loudspeaker. Mr. Scruggs was addressing the student body.

"I want everyone to know that the State Interscholastic Activities Commission has made its decision."

He paused.

Boy, did we all sit up and listen.

He paused some more. Was he playing with us?

Some kid yelled out, "Tell us."

We laughed.

"I'm wound up in my microphone cord. I'm sorry. But I want you to know their decision."

We all yelled, "Tell us!" Even Miss Knurr.

"The Commission has cleared us—"

That's all we needed to hear. And did we yell and cheer. We could hear other classes cheering up and down the hall. We would have gotten out of our seats and marched, but Miss Knurr nailed us. We didn't dare budge.

We heard other kids in the halls, but we had to wait till class was over. Then we ran yelling out the door.

We yelled and paraded around, but we had sense enough to be in our next class on time. Mr. Scruggs and the teachers let us do a lot of things, but we had to be in our seats and ready to go when the bell rang.

The second the bell finished ringing, an announcement came over the loud speaker in our room. It was Mr. Scruggs again.

"I told you people at the last assembly I called to wait until you heard the whole story. You went crazy last hour after you heard only half of what I had to say."

We sat up straight and listened.

"Yes, the Commission has cleared us on the first of the charges leveled against us. It has cleared our former coach of violating its rules for basketball. It is true she started practice the first day of the semester; but, when I told them that all she did before she left was call the roll and tell the girls to practice three-point

shots, they agreed that she was not coaching at all. She was merely treating it like a physical education teacher might do. However—”

“Uh-oh,” several of us said out loud.

“However, someone they chose not to name has sent them a list of infractions this school has committed.”

We groaned.

We’d yelled too soon.

“They did not indicate,” Mr. Scruggs went on, “whether the allegations came from a rival school or coach. These things are possible when the competition is as tight as it is in this town.”

I sighed a deep sigh while he paused for breath.

“The Commission knows that we and our supporting fans need to know in advance whether Sunny Hills will be allowed to compete.”

“Yes,” I spoke out.

The teacher frowned at me.

“So, at my urging, the Commission has made a special allowance, since we won our city championship, to allow us to attend the State finals.”

We all cheered.

“Now, I know you are happy about that. But wait until I finish. You heard me say that we will be allowed to attend the State finals. The Commission must investigate these other charges before it can clear us to compete. It wants to have us there so that we can go ahead if the laundry comes out white, so to speak. If there is a lingering doubt, then we will not be able to play. I said we would consent to come play because—”

And here he cleared his throat. I knew he was choking up.

“Because I know we have a team—” He paused.

“That will—

“Take us—

“All the way.”

He was so proud of our team.

We didn't need any more excuse than that to bring the house down. We yelled and cheered and applauded. And we could hear the kids in other classes up and down the halls doing the same thing.

Not that we at Sunny Hills go nuts over sports.

We just go nuts over sports!

No other school in the State had gone to as many State Finals in one year as Sunny Hills.

But we couldn't imagine who was making these charges. The coaches of Grant and Jefferson were out of the National Basketball Association. They'd been professionals. They wouldn't do a thing like that.

I thought of Amanda Brown. But why would a State Commission listen to complaints that a sophomore girl might raise just because she had a grudge against me. Whoever did it had to be someone the Commission would trust.

I thought of the guys at the city newspaper. They liked Grant more than they liked us because Grant was “old school” and we were brand new. They had covered all our games, and they knew all about us there was to know. They hadn't liked it that Mr. Scruggs appointed a kid like me to coach the team, but they hadn't been nasty in their coverage of our games.

Bean thought it might be Hudson DeArmon who was giving everybody a lot of flak in our school play. He'd promised to get even with Bean for taking the solving of that mystery out of his hands. But he was just another student. Of course, he could have gotten his father to

write the Commission, but what did his father know about our team?

I didn't know. There were too many possibilities. We just had to stay focused and go to the capitol, ready to play our games. We just had to believe that we would get to play.

I felt a prod on my shoulder. It was my teacher, telling me to get to work and stop my day-dreaming.

Just before the bell rang to dismiss class, the room phone rang. The message said I was to report to the principal's office right now.

I hurried down there.

Mr. Scruggs pointed me to a seat in front of his desk.

"This list is pretty long the Commission faxed me. Well, not so awfully long, but long enough. And it's not all. There's one more charge the Commission is weighing. It will let me know when we get to the City. But for now, we've got some detail work to do here."

"Like what, sir?" I said.

"For one thing, your own academic eligibility. The Commission wants a copy of your grades for first semester. Are you on probation?"

"No, sir. I was on the honor roll."

"Hmmm," he said as he wrote something down. "I see."

"And what games did you play in? Cleveland?"

"No, sir. I was in the City that night."

"Madison?"

"No, sir. I felt the regular team needed to prove itself. I suited up, but I didn't play."

"Newton?"

"Yes, sir. I felt I had to keep my game performance sharp if I was going to help the team much."

“Tell me about your practices.”

The tardy bell rang for the next class.

“Oh-oh, I’m late for class,” I said.

“Sit there and don’t worry about that. I’ll take care of that. Tell me about your practices.”

“Well, we practiced every afternoon after school for two to two-and-a-half hours. We pushed ourselves and—”

“Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday?”

“Yes, and Friday. I always hold a scrimmage on Friday afternoons to keep us sharp.”

“Hmmmmm, good,” Mr. Scruggs said as he wrote some more.

“And what about night practices? Did you scrimmage at night, too?”

“Well, I thought of doing that, Mr. Scruggs. But at the last minute I decided not to. I was already pushing the girls pretty hard. I didn’t want to over-do it.”

“So, you had ten practices before you yourself played in a game.”

“Yes, sir. Two weeks, Monday through Friday.”

“Did you know that was a requirement the Commission puts on every player? He must practice on 10 different days before he plays in a game.”

“Is that right? No, I didn’t know that.”

“Did you know that we would have had to forfeit the entire season if you hadn’t practiced on 10 different days before you played in a game?”

“No, I didn’t know that.”

“Did you know that two practice sessions a day are illegal? The Commission allows only one. Had you scheduled two, you would have automatically forfeited our season.”

“Wow! *Thank you, Lord.*”

“Thank you, Lord?”

“Yes. I have to thank the Lord for things like that. He watches out for me since I belong to Him.”

“Belong to Him, huh? You’ll have to tell me about that sometime.”

“I’ll tell you now if you like.”

“Later. We have this list. That first game when you won it with a half-court basket—who were we playing? Washington?”

“No, sir. The alumni. It was just a scrimmage. They had all returning lettermen and we—”

“You are living a charmed life, Becky P. If that had been a scrimmage against another school, we’d have been in trouble.”

“*Thank you, Lord, again and again.* You sure you don’t want me to tell you about my Savior, Mr. Scruggs?”

“Later, remember? Later.”

“So have we cleared up all the charges?”

“We still have that one that’s coming tonight. I’ll fax the Commission what you’ve given me. Here’s hoping we make it.”

“*Lord? Please?*” I prayed aloud so Mr. Scruggs could hear me.

“If He does, Becky, if He does—we’ll sit down and have a chat together and you can tell me all about your—uh—Savior.”

“I’ll be ready,” I said. “Shouldn’t I go back to class now?”

He wrote out a note and gave it to me to give my teacher.

Once out in the hall, I gave out a big “OOOeee!” and

got a big shush from the hall monitor. But it was worth it. In fact, I ducked into the little girls room and yelled it again.

“OOOeee!”

One more charge to go and we’d be in the Big Time.

“Yahoo!”

* * * * *

The cheerleaders held a big rally in front of the school the day we loaded the bus to take the team and the pom squad and band to the City. A lot of guys were taking their own cars so they could leave when they wanted and return when they wanted. But they were going to caravan, honking their horns, with the bus leading the way so we would let the whole state know that Sunny Hills is on the map.

All sorts of people tried to get to me to tell me what to do to win and what I should get the team to do. But I’d been to State before.

I also knew we had to keep a sharp eye on everybody and stick together once we got there. Not that other people were dishonest and crooked. They just wanted their team to win more than they wanted us to win.

I had an inspiration the day Mr. Scruggs announced that we would be able to go. I called the ladies at the opera house and asked them if they would ride the team bus with us and sing for us on the way. I knew the girls would be tense with anticipation, and I wanted them to relax and have fun. I knew from before that these ladies could help us and that they might just enjoy doing it.

And, sure enough, they said yes.

The cheerleaders had told everybody to wear their pajamas to the rally because we were going put out the lights and send all our competition to bed early with our sensational team doing its stuff.

I told the opera guys about that and so they were there in pajamas from their costume department that were out of this world. They were hilarious.

I had told the cheerleaders they were coming and so, after we had the fight songs and the cheers at the rally and team introductions and more cheers, we had these ladies sing some of their songs.

They were a riot. Everybody loved their silly songs and crazy costumes. And then they got on the bus with us and gave us a program on our way to Big Town.

When we got near to the motel where we were staying, I gave the team some of the same directions Bean had given the volleyball girls—especially about sticking together and getting a good night’s sleep. If anyone wanted to flirt with us or rough us up, we should just ignore it and move on as if we hadn’t heard a word. With all the trouble we were having qualifying to just play, the last thing we wanted was to be disqualified for misbehaving.

I told them some rooters are so desperate for their team to win that they’ll try to get a good competitor eliminated any way they can.

Well, we got settled in our motel, ate dinner and watched the first two games of the elimination between two teams we didn’t know at all.

Our bus took us back to our motel.

As I was getting settled for the night, the phone in my room rang.

“Becky P?”

It was Mr. Scruggs.

“Yes, sir?”

“Bad news. The Commission has turned us down.”

“But why?”

“We have an ineligible player who’s been playing all year. That’s enough to cancel us out. We forfeit every game she played in.”

“Who?”

“It doesn’t matter who. I don’t want you girls to blame one person for ruining the season.”

“You won’t tell me who?”

“No.”

“Is it me?”

“No.”

“But how can we check to see if she’s ineligible? What if she isn’t? Do we have to forfeit our season over a charge that maybe isn’t true?”

“The Commission advised me not to tell who it is.”

“Do you know?”

“Yes.”

“Mr. Scruggs, you gotta tell me. I think Amanda’s trying to get us kicked out. She’s feeding the Commission information that’s not true.”

“Amanda? Amanda who?”

“Amanda Brown. She’s a girl in my English class who knows a lot about basketball. She’s Coach Demmery’s niece. She hates me and wants to get even. Give me a chance to check on this.” I was desperate. “Tell me. Who’s the player? Please.”

“Well—”

“Please.”

“Well, it’s Molly. She’s not living with her parents. She moved into our district so she could play ball at

Sunny Hills. She's living with her grandmother. A player has to be a full-time resident of the district she plays for. She has to be living with her parents."

"Where are you calling from? What's your phone number?" I asked him. "I'll go wake Molly up and ask her."

"Don't wake her up. You can ask her in the morning."

"I'll wake her up. We need to know now. Maybe you could call the Commissioner tonight. We play at nine in the morning."

"All right, Becky." He gave me his number.

He sounded all discouraged.

I raced out of my room and knocked on Molly's door down the hall.

No answer.

I knew if I banged on the door I'd wake everybody up. So I ran back to my room and called her on the phone.

No answer.

Oh, no, I said to myself. *She's out on the town.*

But Molly wouldn't go carousing around in a town she didn't know. She wasn't the carousing kind.

I called the operator and asked him if he'd seen her.

"She's in the swimming pool, relaxing," he said.

I ran down there in nothing flat. She was stretched out on top of the water in the shallow end, floating like a bar of soap.

I yelled at her.

No answer.

I did what any good American girl would do. I jumped in with all my clothes on and gave her a push.

"Hey, Molly. You living with your grandmother?"

"Sure. So what?" She stood up and wiped the water

off her face.

“Where are your folks?”

“My mom lives there, too. My dad’s a traveling salesman. He’s gone two, three weeks at a time.”

“But he comes back there when he’s done?”

“Sure. Why?”

“OOOeee!” I shouted. I flapped my arms down on the top of the water and raised a storm. “OOOeee, Molly. We get to play!”

She held me under the water till I calmed down. So I told her what had happened.

She said her folks had sent her on ahead so she could enroll in school at the beginning of the term. Her grandma has a big house, so they’re living with her and paying her rent.

I clambered out of the pool, dried my face off on Molly’s towel and ran wet through the halls.

I called Mr. Scruggs and told him the truth.

“Thanks, Becky ol’ girl,” he said. I could hear the relief in his voice. “I’ll call the Commissioner back who called me.”

Next morning at nine, we were on the court and ready.

A call from the Commissioner told the officials to go ahead and let us play. But we still didn’t know who was feeding the Commission all this baloney about us.

Who would want to do us dirt?

We found out fast enough at nine—not the person feeding the Commission all those lies about us but the team we had to play. Crescent High was all elbows and knees. They knew how to cut a girl down in ways a referee would never pick up. We’d be scrapping over the ball in a pack, and they’d be whacking around. They

knew the referees would be keeping their eyes on the ball, and they could get away with it.

It knocked us off our game. We were a run-and-shoot team. They were a run-and-trip team. You slam the floor a few times and you feel it. Our girls were limping by half time. We were behind 44 to 40.

I got the trainers to massage legs as we rested in the locker room.

“You gotta play this half,” Lorrie said to me. “My leg’s killing me.”

“Show me,” I said.

I went around and looked at each girl’s legs and arms. All of them had red bruises, and some of those were tinged with purple.

“Leave it to me,” I said. “You gals take naps. I’ll be back before we have to go back on court.”

I went out into the gym and asked a guy at the scorekeeper’s table to point me to the referees’ room.

I knocked on their door and asked to speak to the referees. I asked them to come into my locker room and look at my girls. They said they couldn’t come into the locker room, but they would look at them on the side-lines before the game started second half.

Well, that made all the difference in the world. We played the second half and won by 20 points—most of them on free throws. Four of Crescent’s starting five fouled out. The refs watched them like hawks.

17

Semi-Finals

No one said it would be easy. The closer you get to the gold the fires get hotter. The pressure builds and, if you're not careful, the steam escapes.

It's like frying eggs. If you let the heat get too hot, you have leather—flat leather. You let the spatula knick the yolk, you've got a yellow brick road going every which way.

With girls, high-spirited girls who can focus on winning and actually win, you let the heat get too hot and they go flat. Get them angry and they go all over the place. The secret is to calm them down so they can get their rest, feed them well so they keep their strength, and then focus their attention on a tiny little something that will slowly burn—some little insult that kinda hits home, just a few words that get under their skin. It's like giving a cat a little mouse it can tease and tease. Then something clicks and it's ready to pounce.

That's how to win in the Final Four. It didn't take me long to figure that one out.

So I came into breakfast at the dining room in our

hotel carrying the newspapers I'd gotten up early to read. Nothing like keeping up-to-date on what people are saying about you. I thought I'd give the girls a run-down. But, really, I was releasing a mouse.

"The *Daily Telegraph* likes you guys," I said as I sat down at my place.

"What do they say?"

"Read it."

"Tell us."

"Let me drink my juice," I said, gulping it down.

Kyra reached to grab the paper.

"No ya don't," I said, turning away. "It says, 'The Sunny Hills High School basketball team is cutting through the State finals like a hot knife through butter. With one defeat early in its season, the six girls including their student coach are scaring the bejeebers out of all their opponents.'"

"What are bejeebers?" Molly said.

"The living daylight's."

"The guts."

"The gizzards."

"The grits."

Everybody had an answer.

"The only ones who seem unimpressed," I read on, "are the Netcong Nuggets, two-year State champions from upstate. They are scheduled to play Sunny Hills in tonight's semi-finals."

"Unimpressed?" Molly laughed. "Wait till tonight. We'll press them!"

"Asked why the Nuggets are so confident," I read, "co-captain Anita Seeburger pointed to her team's record.

"We've won every game we've played for three years,'

she said. 'We're the cadillac team, the gold cup team. Sunny Hills is too—too Model T.'

"Model T!" Our dining room exploded. It was good we had a room to ourselves.

"Who do they think they are?"

"Hoity-toity!"

"Cadillacs? Give me a break!"

I read on. "'Just look at the names of the girls on the team,' Seeburger said. 'You have Walsh, Ingram, Moldonado, Pruitt, Isako and Erickson. All you have to do to see what Sunny Hills is like is to put together the first letter of each name.'"

I folded the paper and put it down. No one said anything until I took a bite of toast.

"She thinks we're wimps?" Molly said. "How dumb!"

"Oh, I wouldn't let it bother you," I said. I swallowed some milk. "I think she was pretty clever to put our names together like that. It shows they've been giving us a lot of thought."

I was surprised that they didn't explode at being called "wimps" by Anita Seeburger.

"The *Telegraph* has picked them to 'threepeat' as champions again," I read. And I let the matter drop.

We got talking about strategy. We had an appointment later in the morning with one of our Sunny Hills teachers who had seen the Nuggets play.

I sent one of our cheerleaders to the *Telegraph* office to get clippings of games the Nuggets had played. The paper's librarian could get e-mail copies from the Netcong newspaper for games the *Telegraph* hadn't covered.

We had a long meeting with our teacher. Mr. Scruggs and some other coaches from school came along. We

went over the clippings from the newspaper, had lunch, rested in the afternoon, swam in the hotel warm-water pool and had an early supper.

We got to the gym early and had a good warm-up—enough to get the kinks out, but not too much to tire us out.

But something was different. I couldn't figure it out. Had my little plan at the breakfast table backfired on me? Something was missing from our warm-ups.

Even though our Sunny Hills fans turned out 100 percent and practically caused the walls to cave in with their thunderous welcome when we hit the floor, something was wrong.

It didn't take long to find out. The Cadillac was cruising.

Before we scored a point, it was 24-0 with seconds to go to the half. Our fans couldn't believe it, and neither could we. They had played ball control, slowing the game down, slower and slower and then laughing at us when we tried to score and couldn't. And, when their players scored, they'd laugh and hold their right hand up by their eye and wave at us with the ends of their fingers.

Then Molly connected as the buzzer rang and it was 24 to 2 at the half.

"What's wrong with you guys?" I asked them as we jogged into the locker room.

No one said anything.

Then Kyra said, "Now I know why they've won every game for three years. They're—good! "

"They're the gold cup team," Lorrie said. "What can we hope to do against—them?"

"I hate the way they wave at us when they score,"

Libby said.

“They called us wimps. Maybe we are,” Molly said. “Maybe we ought to just go home.”

My Mom and some of the others had a snack and something to drink for us in the locker room. We got ready for second half and then lay down on our mats and talked strategy.

We had to admit Netcong was good.

“Which one is Seeburger? I wasn’t looking when they introduced them,” Lorrie said.

“She’s the tall blonde with the pony tail,” Molly said. “She’s got sharp elbows.”

“She tripped me a couple of times,” Libby said. She rolled over on her stomach. “Why don’t we call her ‘Hamburger’ and make her mad second half.”

“Because that’s not who we are,” I said. ‘I’d rather make her mad by the way we play than by what we say.’”

“Good point, Pruitt,” Molly said.

“I can’t believe you guys,” I said. “Just because they think they’re good doesn’t make them all that good. Who do you play when you’re from Netcong? Just the little farm schools up north. What’s gotten into you?”

“I guess I’ve just lost my bejeevers—jebeebers—bebeeverers—how do you say that word?” Lorrie Isako asked in a sweet, little innocent voice.

That did it. We lost it. Oh, how we laughed. Our mothers thought we were crazy. We were shrieking. It was SO funny!

Yep, that did it. We got it all back. Old Lorrie had gotten us hot. We danced out on the court, ready to play the second half and paint that Cadillac black and blue, pink and orange, red and green.

It didn't stay 24 to 2 for long. We leaped around like we were running on bed springs. We out-rebounded them like you wouldn't believe.

Moldenado got her range. We fed her the ball and it was three points, three points, three points. The Nuggets weren't just standing around watching. They were working the ball around and doing their best to use up the clock. It seemed like all of them could hold the ball out over the floor with one hand. They would sweep the ball around over their heads, toss it to one another, catch it with one hand and scoot it to the next girl. They were fabulous.

And then I saw the key to how they played.

They were fabulous, and they knew it. They knew it, and they were proud of it. They danced and pranced around the floor, stretched out in all kinds of contortions and eventually worked the ball in to the basket just in time.

We just went Ingram-Erickson-Molly-score.

"We've got to start knocking the ball out of their hands," I said to the girls when I called a time-out. "They're holding it out over the floor, over their heads, out at arm's length. We've got to be quicker and snatch it away."

We'd gotten the score to 37-29. We were definitely in the game, but we were letting them waste too much time with their passing the ball around.

"Look for their weaknesses and let's talk about it next time I call time," I said.

We started stealing the ball and scoring. Lorrie got two. Libby was dead-eye on the free throw line. In fact, she was so good they stopped fouling her. That left her open for jump shots and lay-ins.

We tried to catch up, but they kept us down by four points time and time again.

I called time.

“Figure out anything, guys?” I asked.

“Thompson always goes left when she tries to dribble around me,” Kyra said.

“Cousey’s favorite shot is a hook shot, but she always looks to the right before she sweeps her hand up toward the basket,” Molly said.

“Seeburger gets nervous if I crowd her,” Libby said.

“Take my place, Pruitt,” Lorrie said. “I need to catch my breath.”

“While you’re at it, catch some of those bejeebers, Isako,” Molly said. We laughed.

A referee gave a short chirp on his whistle.

I slipped out of my sweat suit and ran out on the floor.

Kyra Ingram crouched in the circle and tipped the ball to Molly who snapped it to Libby, to Kyra, to me to Libby. Zippo!

And then the fun really began. These girls were really vulnerable to the quick steal. Just because they could hold the ball in one hand didn’t mean they could protect it.

Slap! Lorrie got the first one loose by leaping as Cousey swept her hand up toward the basket.

Lorrie to Molly to me. We scored. 37-33.

Thompson came straight down the floor at Libby. She danced to one side to ace Libby out of the way. But Libby went left when Thompson did and knocked the ball out of her hand. It bounced to Molly who threw to me. I sent it to Lorrie. Bingo! 37-35.

Molly crowded Cousey into a double-dribble and it

was our ball. Kyra-Libby-Molly-Lorrie. Rip city! It was all tied up.

You should have heard the roaring. People couldn't believe our comeback.

We had their number from there on to the end. We slapped and plucked and snatched and batted and turned those girls into putty.

It was 71-47 at the final whistle. It was like we'd walked on water the way the fans were yelling and screaming.

Those poor guys we beat were really broken. They'd coasted through the Final Four so many times they thought they'd just breeze into the championship. They took their school bus home, and we didn't expect to hear from them again.

But the newspapers the next day said they'd been called back. Since the Association was having trouble about our status, the Tournament Committee asked them to suit up so they'd be ready to play in the final if something happened to us.

"Fat chance," Molly said, "We're the ones playing in the Final."

18

The Mega-Ton Bomb

We were on a roll. The newspapers had big pictures of each of us on our team and a big write-up of how we were doing this with a sophomore student coach. They said a lot of nice things about us. They'd never expected us to get into the championship match.

Our girls were as high as kites. This was the life, and we were really living. All our hours of practice and concentration were paying off. The newspapers were calling us the Cinderella team, and people we never knew existed were rooting for us. The coliseum was packed for every game we played.

Back when I first knew we were coming to State, I asked Mr. Scruggs to call the Commission to see if we could supply one of the musicians who play the national anthem before games.

“Who do you have in mind? Miss Buttersack?”

“No. We Pruitts have a little sister named Anna who's just been signed up by the Civic Symphony to solo violin with them in several concerts. She's eight and she's been called another Mozart.”

“She’s that good?”

“She’s marvelous.”

“I’ll make the call,” he said.

So guess what. Here came our big game. And here came Anna Pruitt.

She stood in front of the microphone and put her violin to her chin.

“Ladies and gentlemen. Please rise for our National Anthem,” said a voice on the loud speaker. Everybody stood up.

Then Anna began to play.

It gives me shivers to remember it.

She played it like I’d never heard it before. She put in slides and flourishes I never knew existed. And when she got to that great note, “O’er the land of the freeeee,” she took that note up fourteen stories and held it there. Then she dropped to the basement for “And the home of the—”

She paused for a slight second and then plunged into “brave.”

But she could have left “the brave” off because that place was cheering and applauding like you never heard.

She stood there with her violin and bowed slightly to recognize their appreciation. And then she left the spotlight and returned to Mom.

But the people wouldn’t let her leave. They called her back again and again.

I was thrilled. And I knew our whole family was, too.

The thing I liked—I knew it wouldn’t go to her head. She knew the Lord had given her a gift, and she wanted to use it to please Him.

What a note to start a game on.

We were all set. Our starting five was on the floor ready for the tip-off.

And then a voice began to talk over the loud speaker.

“Ladies and gentlemen, there will be a short delay before this final game begins.”

There was a murmur through the crowd. This had never happened before.

“The State Interscholastic Activities Commission has reversed itself on a ruling it made last week. It has now found that the team from Sunny Hills High School is not eligible to compete in these games.”

Well, that shook the crowd—to say nothing of us!

A massive “Boo!” rolled around that arena.

When it had subsided enough for his voice to be heard, the man continued talking.

“The Commission had dismissed the charge that the Hilltoppers had begun practicing before the time allowed by State rules. On reconsideration—”

Our rooters didn’t give him time to finish his sentence. People booed and booed. Some got to their feet and shook their fists in the air. People were angry!

We stood there in a group—holding hands. We weren’t sissies. We were just trying to hold each other up.

We were shocked.

The officials came out and pointed us to our locker room.

We filed off the floor to an ovation. Everybody stood up and clapped for us.

We waved as we left the floor.

Out of another door, the Netcong Nuggets, the team we’d beaten 71-47 in our last game, came whooping out to warm up. They had big grins on their faces as

they held their hands up palms out by their eyes and waved their fingertips at us to say goodbye.

Talk about taunting!

Mr. Scruggs was in the room, waiting for us. He was as stunned as we were.

An official came in after we did.

“I’m sorry, girls,” he said. “This has never happened before in the history of our State Finals. And it couldn’t have come at a worse time.”

None of us said anything.

“The Commission sends its apologies. And it wants you to know that you will receive the gold cup for the Good Sportsmanship Award. The Commission knows it was not your fault that Coach Demmery started practice the first day of school. And it might have overlooked this if she had not made such an issue of it in the list of grievances she supplied us to look into.”

“Grievances she supplied?” I asked the man. “Grievances—she—supplied?”

“Yes, she felt it was the point of honor to supply a list of violations that she, the coach, felt the Commission should take into consideration. When she read in the newspaper that we had decided to overlook the matter of your early practices, she objected. She reminded us that the Commission needed to be equally fair to all the high schools in its rulings.”

“But don’t you see what she’s doing?” I asked him. “She’s getting even with us. She’s getting her revenge.”

I turned to Mr. Scruggs. “I thought it was Amanda Brown who was telling them about Molly and feeding them all these details. But it was Coach!”

His face was white with anger.

“I hereby file a formal complaint to the Commission,”

he told the official.

“You’ll have to do that in writing,” he said.

“You can be sure I will. And the headlines in the newspapers will supply the writing. This is outrageous. Surely the Commission recognizes the motive for this woman’s actions.”

“The Commission doesn’t have time to look into motives, Mr. Scruggs,” the man said. “It examines violations. Your school violated a rule that is binding on every high school in this state. It would be wrong for us to allow you to compete in the finals when this violation is known.”

“But—”

“Your team did begin practice the first day of classes?”

“Yes,” Mr. Scruggs said.

“I’m sorry. There’s nothing more I can say except that you girls are a sensational team and these final games lost a gutsy and gifted competitor when we lost Sunny Hills High. Good night.”

He turned to leave the room.

“Oh, no you don’t!” Mr. Scruggs called after him. “You can’t come in here and say a nice little speech and leave. You’ve put these girls through the wringer with your on again, off again rulings. You knew your informant had a petty gripe to settle. You also knew these girls had won their conference championship. Look at them. You’ve broken their spirit with your— your infantile, idiotic, picky-picky interpretation of the rules. You knew their coach did nothing more than take the roll that first day. You knew she never coached them all season.

“You’ve not only toyed with and abused these girls,

you've abused our school and our conference. You and your kind have no right to sit on the State Athletic Commission."

He was shaking his fist and yelling at the man.

"I'll see to it that you're driven from office—all of you—if I have to go to the governor himself. Now, get out. You hear me? Get out!!"

The man got out.

Mr. Scruggs turned to us and he had tears in his eyes. "Girls—I'm so sorry. You're a wonderful team." He choked up as he said it. "You are—our State champions!"

I'm sorry, but I was crying too. We all were. We'd come so far in so short a time. All of us were ruined.

Yes, there was a crowd waiting to encourage and salute us when we left the locker room after dressing.

Yes, I got a nice award at the big banquet.

Yes, there was a crowd back at school and a big assembly where they presented our Sportsmanship award to the school.

And, yes, I felt another pain in my heart when Amanda Brown passed me in the hall. She grinned and waved her fingertips at me and said, "Hi, Becky P."

And I still couldn't figure out Mr. Dinkle.

"He would have fried me in oil," I told Mr. Scruggs.

"I asked him about that," he said. "Mrs. Demmery told him you were a real trouble maker and the only way to keep you under control was to make you suffer."

"If he'd given me an F in geometry, Mrs. Demmery would have gotten even with me for taking her job. She'd have the last laugh."

"I knew you were telling me the truth that day," he said. "That's why I told you to go on coaching until I

called you into my office. I never called you in, did I?”

“I always wondered why.”

“Well, some other students came by and corroborated your story. I told Dinkle I’d seen through that little scheme and I told him to lay off.”

I was glad Mr. Scruggs faced up to Mr. Dinkle, and he probably should go after Mrs. Demmery, too. But, hey, the Lord is good. Some things have far more value than winning a trophy for the school. I talked some more to Molly about the Lord. Her heart was wide open, and she asked Him to forgive her sins and be her Savior.

Mr. Scruggs and I had our little chat about the Lord. His heart was open, too. But he said he wanted to talk to an adult. I could see that. I suggested my dad. He knows all about receiving the Lord Jesus as your Savior.

I told Mr. Scruggs that when you’re born again you have all your sins forgiven. It’s like Jitter told Crissy O’Toole in our school play, “You get to start all over new.” It’s like life’s just beginning all over again when the record of your sins is all erased.

“Thanks for all you’ve done for Sunny Hills High School, Becky P.,” Mr. Scruggs told me. “And thanks for all you’ve done—for me.”

And, thank—You, Father God, I said with my inside voice. And I meant it with all my heart.