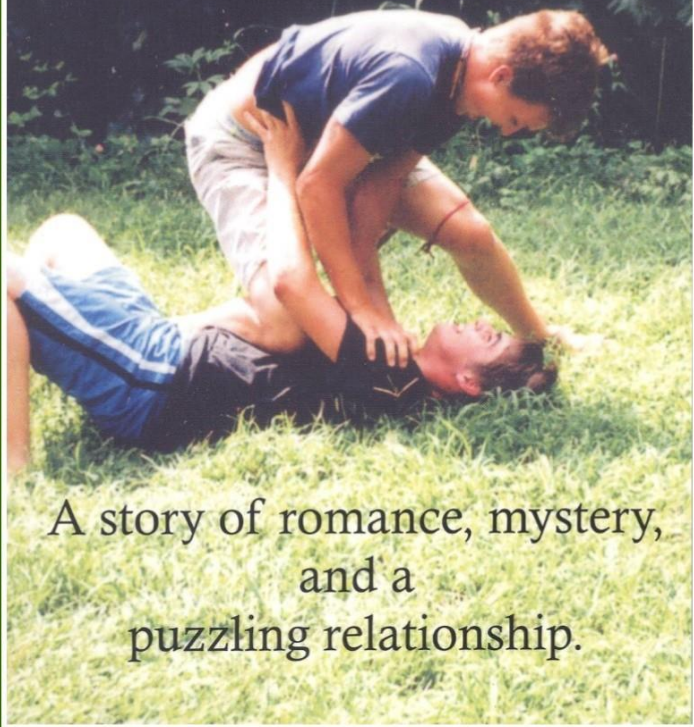


Teens *TM*

THE BEWILDERING BOND

John Hammond



A story of romance, mystery,
and a
puzzling relationship.

THE BEWILDERING BOND
A Novel for Teenagers

A story of romance, mystery, and a puzzling relationship.

By

John Hammond

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CHAPTER ONE

Will and Matt

To say that Will and Matt hated each other would probably be going a bit too far, but to say they had acted that way since they were little kids would not. As a result, they had a history of matching bloody noses and black eyes that followed them since kindergarten. Nobody there in the small town of Woodsville had actually kept count, but, if it had all been added up, those who knew the two generally agreed their battles had resulted in the loss of gallons of blood and months with eyes, painfully swollen shut.

The blows of a five-year-old, or even a seven or a nine or an eleven-year-old were hardly lethal. Not so, now that the boys were seventeen! Neither boy, however, seemed to realize that.

Will and Matt had good relationships with most everyone else in their lives. They were respected, well liked, school leaders, and popular. They were the school's best athletes and did well in their studies. Girls found them both attractive and fun to be around. They seldom raised their voices at others and were always ready with a joke to smooth over tensions between their friends.

So, it was fully unexplainable to most, why, at that moment, at the end of a hot, exhausting, three hour, August, two-a-day, football practice the two of them were rolling around in the grass, beating the beejeebies out of each other. It was such a common occurrence that folks seldom even stopped to watch anymore.

“What’s that cloud of dust about?” one would ask.

“It’s just Matt and Will,” the other would answer.

“Oh.”

And the conversation would be over.

Coach Thunder, who wouldn’t have put up with it for a second from any of his other athletes, looked the other way – it was just how it was between them.

Some things were understood to be facts of life in Woodsville. Certain kids were sarcastic toward each other. Others put each other down. Some even occasionally stood nose to nose yelling angrily at each other. Will and Matt regularly beat each other to a pulp! That’s how it was in Woodsville.

During games the two boys played exceptionally well together. Will was quarterback and Matt the workhorse running back. On the field, they worked together like a well-oiled machine; they anticipated each other’s moves and one was always where he needed to be to assist the other. Coaches and players from all over the Conference had commented on it.

“It’s like they share the same brain when they’re out there on the field,” the coach of their arch rival, the Prescott Cougars, had been heard to say.

Amanda - Will’s girlfriend - and Becky - no one could figure for sure if she and Matt were really more than just best friends - were fed up with the boys’ problem, but had not yet decided what they could do about it. The girls lived next door to each other and had been close all their lives. There was nothing they couldn’t (and didn’t) talk about. It was a comfortable, dependable, relationship, and although they had occasional differences of opinions they always soon found ways to fix things.

Amanda was a cheerleader and Becky was editor of the school newspaper. They played together on the volleyball team and outside of school were inseparable.

Will, Amanda and Becky enjoyed doing things together. Matt, Amanda and Becky enjoyed doing things together. But, put the four of them in the same yard and World War III broke out. Something needed to be done and it needed to be done immediately.

On that particular day, after a half hour of grunting and

growling, gouging and thumping, they silently agreed to stop throwing punches and went their separate ways. No one ever won. It was how those things always ended although a mere thirty minutes had been a remarkably short skirmish. That undoubtedly had less to do with the bad feelings between them than it did the relentless heat of the afternoon and their state of physical fatigue.

Becky was waiting on Matt's front steps as he came across the lawn. He managed an acceptable smile even though his lower lip was split and bleeding. She got to her feet.

"Practice or Will?" she asked calmly, dabbing at his face with the hanky she pulled from the hip pocket of his jeans.

"Not sure. Will, I suppose."

No more would be mentioned about it.

"Coach said the new helmets are about ready to ship out to us. It'll be so great to have some new equipment for a change. Not sure if the old ones would have survived another paint job."

Becky smiled.

"Sometimes I wish we didn't go to such a poor school, you know? Seems like everything we have from lab equipment to library books was all here back when our parents went to school."

Matt nodded and they sat on the porch, feet on the steps. He looked out across the lawn and up and down the tree lined street.

"I wouldn't want to give up living here though. It's been a great place to be a kid," Matt pointed out.

That time Becky nodded.

"Well, the tax vote tomorrow should fix lots of things for us at school," she said. A few extra bucks a year from everybody in town should go a long way toward getting the school back on track. Remember to get your folks out to vote."

"Got a sign taped to the fridge. Tonight, I plan to outline it in red marker."

A bread truck, repainted red, white and blue, turned onto the street from the south and slowly made its way past

Matt's house. It had a loud speaker mounted on the roof and old Mrs. Kravitz was inside with a microphone.

"Remember to vote 'NO' on the school tax increase August 25th. We all pay too much in taxes as it is. I say cut out the waste in the budget instead of taking food out of our families' mouths."

Matt stood up and cupped his hands to his mouth, delivering a long and loud, "BOOOOOOOO."

He was unexpectedly joined by a similar protest sound from someone across the street, four houses north. It was Will, leaning out his second-floor window.

"Surely the two of you don't actually agree on something," Becky said smiling and poking Matt in his shoulder.

Matt had no response. Matt never had a response when it was a question about his relationship with Will.

"How much damage do you think her campaign will do?" he asked sitting down again.

"Dad says it could be a real problem. She has lots of the older folks on her side. He says she's against the referendum mostly because she owns so much property here in town. That's how schools get their revenue – property taxes."

"I'd like to tax that old witch's . . ."

Becky clapped her hand over his mouth.

"Hey. This is America. She has a right to voice her opinion about things. It just means the rest of us need to work harder for our point of view."

"Pretty late to begin, now, I'd say, and you pinched my lip by the way. I may bleed to death right here on the spot."

"Oops! Sorry."

Matt continued to pretend to be irritated with her. It seemed humorous to Becky and she giggled.

"You know, when we were ten, I would have pinned you against the ground and tickled you 'til you said Uncle for laughing at me that way," he said, struggling to keep a smile from breaking across his face. His struggle failed.

Matt could never be even a little bit mad at Becky. They'd always been best friends. They depended on each other. They talked. They hung out. They went to church

together. Becky had been the only girl ever allowed into his tree house – and at nine that had been a major concession.

Down the street, Will had changed clothes – Matt had ripped his muscle shirt to shreds and broken the elastic that held up his purple and black Timberwolves practice shorts. They were both last summer purchases, but just the same, his mother had comments to make about how hard he was on things. Will understood it was what mothers did, so he nodded – his expression suggesting she was right and that he'd try to be more careful - and went on his way. It was a good arrangement that made for a three way win for Will. His mother felt he had listened to her. There was no argument to leave bad feelings between them (and arguments, of course, never solved anything). And, with no prolonged discussion about such things he saved a lot of precious time.

Two minutes later he was walking past Matt's house – other side of the street – on his way to Amanda's. He waved and Becky waved back. Everyone understood it had not been intended for Matt.

The four of them had always lived within two blocks of each other on Oak Street – an odd name since there were nothing but Maples as far as one could see. Will cut across several back lawns and soon arrived at Amanda's. Her little brother was playing in his blow-up pool and she lay tanning – face down, looking away - on what must have been the largest, yellow, beach towel known to man.

Will put his finger to his lips indicating to young Alex that he should not speak. Will dipped his cupped hands into the pool water and splashed it onto her back.

"You're a dead man, Alex," she said quickly turning over, the frown of all frowns on her battle-ready face.

Will knelt down and planted a quick kiss on her lips. The frown evaporated. Alex stuck his finger in his throat indicating his displeasure with their behavior and returned to bombing the boat in the pool with sizeable stones and creative sound effects.

"So, giving your tan a little tan, are you?" Will teased sitting down on the grass beside her and reaching for the sunscreen.

Amanda smiled and turned back onto her stomach.

Will squeezed a generous portion of lotion into his palms and began applying it to her back.

“Thanks. That feels good,” she said.

“Sure does,” Matt joked – well, it was not entirely a joke, of course.

“Some guys from Prescott were over watching practice this afternoon,” he said. “Coach wouldn’t let us run them off. Said they probably came over to learn how to do jumping jacks. It got a laugh. The janitor said they were hanging around the locker room door. Can’t figure. I’m exhausted. How about you do my back, now?”

“Sure.”

Will shed his shirt and continued to sit, cross-legged. Amanda knelt behind him and rubbed on the lotion as they talked.

“Big vote tomorrow,” he said. “You hear old lady Kravitz and her ‘No-mobile’ a little while ago. I ought to slit its tires or something.”

“Hush up! Not how we do things around here. Make sure your folks vote. That’s the best thing you can do.”

“I thought you said kissing was the best thing I could do,” he said joking. “Glad that’s not taxed, by the way.”

“Why do you think the Prescott guys were really over here?” she asked ignoring his comments.

“Can’t be sure. Can’t be good. Last week some from Paxton showed up. Probably just trying to get to us. Word’s out that this should be our year. Most likely just playing mind games.”

“How long has it been since Woodville took home the conference trophy?”

“My Dad was on the team – that makes it about a hundred years ago, I guess.”

Amanda slapped at him, playfully.

“Probably more like twenty-five, then – still a long time.”

“We’ve always been the smallest school in the conference, but this year we have it all going for us. Matt’s running better than ever. Our line is quick and stubborn – they’re giving Matt that extra second or two he needs out of the backfield. Our wide receivers have fantastic hands. The defense is shaping up, too – a lot quicker and better at reading

the offence. I got a really good feeling about the season if we can just keep everybody healthy. If we have a problem, it's that we're not very deep in any position."

Amanda often didn't understand everything Will said about sports, but she enjoyed listening to him talk – and rubbing his well-muscled back and chest. Will liked to talk about lots of things and it was easy to get him started – except about him and Matt.

He changed positions, lying on his back, knees up.

"Coach says the new helmets have been ready to be shipped for a couple of weeks. I can hardly wait."

"If they're ready why haven't they been sent?"

"Something about waiting for the school board to release the money to the athletic fund. Once the referendum passes tomorrow they should be here within about a week, I guess."

"I can't understand Mrs. Kravitz," Amanda said. "She's a School Board member and she's still against the new tax. You'd think she'd be out leading the campaign."

"Dad said with all the property she owns around here, her taxes could go up as much as five thousand dollars. It's not that she needs it, but that is a lot of money."

"I'll say, but like you said, she's the richest person in town. You'd think she'd be willing to do her share."

Will shrugged and pulled Amanda down to him for a long, wonderful, kiss. The subject had been changed and it was tax-free!"

"There's a five-minute limit on those in August," Becky said, as she walked up to them.

It was one of those absurd things you say sometimes to break the ice. Still, it received an appreciative chuckle. Becky sat down on the towel. Amanda moved beside her. Will turned onto his side and faced them, his head propped in his hand.

"Got a date to the Back to School Dance?" he asked.

"Not yet. Probably just show up and see what guy's come stag."

"Ask Mike! He'd love to go with you. He's just too shy to ask."

"Or, Randy," Amanda suggested. "He's new in town

and really cute. Probably the right thing to do to help out a newcomer, you know.”

“Thanks, but no thanks, guys.”

“Matt got a date?” Amanda asked, directly to Becky. Will rolled over onto his back to exit the conversation.

“Yes. Sherri. I think they could have a thing for each other if they’d just spend more time together,” Becky said, smiling.”

The girls enjoyed talking about Matt when Will was present and Will when Matt was there. It was their way of tormenting both boys – in a friendly way. They were fed up with the nonsense going on between them. It made for awkward social situations and produced unnecessary tension – not to mention the endless blood loss and loose teeth.

The boy’s parents were good friends and long ago decided that if the two of them were ignorant enough to continue pounding on each other, they’d just let them. It may not have been a stellar parenting decision, but that was how it was.

For their parts the boys chose not to disrupt other’s lives with the problem between them so it was rare when they aired their disagreements anywhere but in private – never during school, athletic or school events, church or the like. Well, there was that one time when they got into it while riding on the freshmen homecoming float. The theme had been, ‘Football Flubs’, and the judges – who were from out of town – enjoyed the ‘realistic looking’ tussle so much they awarded it first prize.

The four of them were looking forward to their senior year. In addition to the likelihood that the football team would win the conference championship, there would be Homecoming, the Winter Ball, the Prom, and graduation. Although there were expenses associated with most of those events, Woodsville, a relatively poor community, was pretty sensible about such things. For dances and social events the girls wore ‘dress-up’ dresses – but nothing that would be considered expensive – and the boys, shirts, ties and dress jeans rather than tuxedos or even new suits. They had every bit as much fun – more probably – than the kids did at the other schools where they could easily drop three to four

hundred dollars per event on clothes and dinner alone. Family cars and pickups, rather than limos, provided transportation, and couples doubled and tripled, eating together at one of their homes. The parents enjoyed helping and the young people appreciated it.

There was a comfortable, long history of good feelings among the citizens of Woodsville. The upcoming school tax referendum suddenly had the potential of ripping that apart. It was coming to a head between the young families and the retired senior citizens, and between those with money and property and those with less.

The days of small schools were numbered in Arkansas. The state legislature was demanding consolidation. It was presented as being about improving the quality of education, but the bottom line seemed to be money.

The poorer, smaller districts were being gobbled up by the larger schools. Local loyalties died hard in that area and the idea of giving up their Woodsville Timberwolves and becoming Prescott Cougars – arch rivals for generations - was worse than unpleasant; it was unthinkable!

Regardless of the outcome of the referendum, Woodsville High School would remain open during the kid's senior year and for that they were grateful. Will and Matt would be co-captains of the football team and probably the basketball and baseball teams as well. To think of the two of them as co-anythings brought smiles to most faces in their small town.

Becky's cell phone rang – well, it actually played the 1812 Overture but it got her attention.

“Hi.”

“It's Matt. I was talking with Mom about the tax thing tomorrow and she said maybe we should consider going door to door and remind the families with kids to make sure they vote.”

“Sounds good. I'm here with Amanda and Will. I'm sure they'll help. How shall we divide up the town?”

“You and I can start at the south end and work up toward Main Street. Amanda and you know who can start at the north and work back toward us.”

“Sounds good. If I can pry their lips apart long enough

to get their attention, I'm sure they'll help out."

"Meet me at my place in five minutes. Daylight's burning."

"Okay. Bye."

She hung up and passed on the message. They agreed. Amanda went inside to dress and Will pulled on his T-shirt while Becky outlined the plan to him.

"Just the homes where there are kids in school, remember. No need to get the opposition all riled up."

Will nodded. Within five minutes they were on their way.

CHAPTER TWO

To Tax or Not to Tax

Among the four of them, every door of every house with a child had been approached and the parents had been reminded to vote. On Tuesday, the polls closed at seven. In the end, 813 had voted. That was a big turnout for little Woodsville that could only boast a population of 1987. That meant there had to be at least 407 yes votes for the referendum to pass.

Counting began at seven fifteen at the fire station where the voting had taken place – it always took place there. Amanda and Becky, along with many other young people sat on blankets on the lawn in front of the station awaiting the results. It was a town tradition to wait there for such announcements.

Will and Matt - restless by nature and always many yards apart - roamed about the area, speaking with friends and stopping from time to time to talk to Becky and Amanda - never at the same time, of course. Matt spent time talking with Sherri. They liked each other and had gone to several school dances together. It was more a comfortable relationship than anything serious and they never really hung out except on such occasions.

At five minutes after eight Miss Primm came out the door, a clipboard in her hand. Miss Primm had been in charge of ballot counting in Woodsville for as long as most anyone could remember. She was one of those people whose very appearance made folks chuckle - the gold-rimmed half glasses; her hair drawn into a tight bun on the back of her

head; her long-sleeved, white, frilly blouses with tight cuffs and collars; and her ankle length, pleated, plaid skirts, which only occasionally allowed a glimpse of her patton leather, lace up, black, boots. It meant she was always greeted with smiles, which she assumed were prompted by the status her position on the Election Board gave her within the community. Her announcements were always delivered with dramatic flair.

“In the referendum, which asked the question, ‘Should the Board of Education of the Woodsville Independent School District be authorized by the voting citizens of said district to increase the property tax levy by two mils,’ the vote was as follows. Yes 401. No 410. There were two spoiled ballots. The measure fails. Thanks to each and every citizen who cast his or her ballot and God bless America.”

She turned and went back inside. The girls cried. The boys pounded their fists into their palms. The lawn became quiet and soon empty as everyone left.

Mrs. Kravitz, sitting proud as a peacock in her truck, was parked out on the street. A half dozen boys rocked it back and forth jostling her from side to side in her seat. They would not attempt to overturn the vehicle - just do what they could to express their disgust to her. It was an inappropriate way to behave, but then teenage boys often behave in ways that the rest of the world thinks are inappropriate.

Kravitz seemed surprised - more puzzled than frightened - and sat there frowning long after the area had cleared.

With Amanda and Becky in the center, and Matt and Will on the outside, the four of them walked up the center of the street toward home. Nothing was said. They reached Becky’s house first and she said goodnight and left the group. Amanda accepted a brief peck to the lips from Will and she, too, went up the walk to her house. After an uneasy moment, standing there, side by side, Matt crossed the street and Will broke into a trot heading for his place.

Life wasn’t always fair, but then, that usually depended on ones point of view. Those who had been against paying more taxes felt the outcome had been completely fair. The young people felt it was totally unfair. Opposing viewpoints could seldom agree about what was and wasn’t fair, whether it

was referendum voters, rival football teams, or teens and their parents.

None of the four had what would be considered a good night's sleep. While the girls slept in, comfortable in their nice, soft, beds, the boys rolled out at a quarter to five. The first of the football two-a-days began at five. It gave them just enough time to cram a few Pop Tarts into their pockets and race to school. And it always was a race! Will would wait on his front steps for Matt to come trotting up the street. From there to the locker room it was always a mad dash.

That was how they had gone to school every morning since their problem began. Occasionally it was one or the other winning by a step, but usually it was neck and neck, full speed, right to the gym door. Since neither one would slow so much as a millisecond until they had touched the door frame, the guys who arrived earlier always left that door open to prevent their two star players from bashing their brains out on it.

All the players felt down. The question on everybody's mind had to do with the new helmets. Coach Thunder hadn't heard from the Superintendent yet. The rumor had been that if the referendum failed, what money the board had left over would go for teacher salaries rather than to the athletic department. In Woodsville rumors were seldom far from wrong. It wasn't that the players didn't want the teachers to get a raise; they just really wanted those new helmets!

"So, what do the helmets cost?" Matt asked.

"4,800.00," Coach answered solemnly.

A murmur made its way around the room.

"That's a bunch!" Will said.

"Right at a hundred dollars a helmet," Coach explained, trying to put it into perspective.

"I sure don't have that kind of money to shell out for one," Matt said thinking out loud about the hundred dollars.

The others nodded in agreement.

"Well, we haven't been told no yet, so let's concentrate on what we do best," Coach said. "What is it we do best?"

"Play football!" the boys mumbled.

"Sorry, I didn't hear you," Coach said putting a hand to his ear.

“Play football!” the boys roared back.

“That’s more like it. Now get out there, work hard, and bust your butts!!”

While they were stretching and finishing calisthenics, the Superintendent walked onto the field, motioning to Coach Thunder. Their conversation was brief. Coach knew better than to try and keep it from his players. He walked to the center of the circle where Matt was leading the warm ups. He blew his whistle and the activity stopped. The boys became silent. He motioned them in closer.

“I suppose if our winning or losing really depended on whether or not we had shiny new helmets my news would be bad. Since it doesn’t, then it’s just news - not bad news. The Superintendent just informed me that there will be no extra money for us this year and that he will be canceling the helmet order early next week. He told me to tell you all how very sorry he is, but reminded us that the helmet doesn’t make the player.”

Practice went on. Although he understood why the players were off their game, he still kept after them. He expected them to give one hundred percent and he continued to make that plain throughout practice.

Everybody could see it in their faces - even in the way they walked. Matt and Will were down and they never got down. They walked down Oak Street toward their homes, not side by side, but close enough that a car would have had difficulty driving between them. That in itself would have usually made history except that day the helmet story was the talk of the town.

Without a word, Will turned up the walk to his house and Matt continued on to his. Again, Becky was waiting on the porch.

“Up pretty early, aren’t you?” Matt said, kidding her, pointing to his watch, and trying to put on a cheery face.

Becky ignored it. She had something else on her mind.

“I’d have sworn I just saw you and somebody who looked a lot like Will, walking down Oak Street together –that was walking, not racing, not fighting, just walking?”

“Think the sky will fall?”

He managed a weak grin.

"I heard about the money getting cut for sports," she said. "I'm really sorry."

"It just means we go to Plan B," he said, taking a seat beside her.

"What's Plan B?"

"I haven't the foggiest idea, but we have to find it. I thought about robbing a bank and framing Will, but neither of those things fit real well with my religion or my plans for the future so it's back to square one."

He attempted another grin. It didn't really work.

Coach says we need \$4,800 to pay for the helmets and the Superintendent is going to cancel the order next week. We don't have much time."

"Well, let's see," she said, beginning to try out some ideas. "That's about a hundred dollars a player, or fifty dollars per parent or seventeen dollars per parent and grandparent combined."

"I don't think it's right to ask our relatives for the money. They do enough for us as it is - orthodontists, camp - you know."

"Okay, how about Plan B-1 then. We kids find some way to earn it?"

"In less than a week?" Matt asked plainly skeptical about the possibility.

"We can ask the superintendent to extend the time limit just as long as he can and explain to him how we plan to earn the money."

"So far so good, but just how are we going to earn forty-eight hundred dollars."

"Two heads are better than one - and between us we do have two heads - but four heads would certainly be even better."

"What are you saying?"

"That the four brightest, most creative minds in Woodsville High School get together and figure this all out."

"You, Amanda, me . . . and Will?"

"Sometimes things come down to a choice between what's really most important - some stupid, never-ending, quarrel between two thick headed morons or new helmets for the entire team. Surely the two of you can stay away from

each other's throats for an hour, can't you?"

Matt nodded. Her characterization really left him no alternative.

"You do have a way with words."

"And logic."

"Yes, and logic; I'll have to admit that," he said.

Becky stood.

"You be at Amanda's at ten and leave that chip at home."

"Chip?"

"The one on your shoulder about Will - or whatever the heck it is. Amanda and I'll go talk Will into it. Best behavior, now! I mean it!!"

"Yes, mother."

He put his hands up to protect his head. He knew there would be incoming - and there was. They parted with smiles. Matt went inside to catch a nap. Two-a-days were tough even on someone in great shape like he was.

At five minutes before ten Matt walked down his front sidewalk to the street. Will was passing and Matt fell in beside him - some yards away, of course.

"Truce?" Matt asked.

"For the girls. 'Til eleven. No longer."

"Right. 'Til eleven. No longer."

The girls were relieved to see the two guys walking across the back lawn together - and, apparently, neither one bleeding.

"They are a handsome pair, aren't they?" Becky said nudging Amanda.

"Oh yes! Are you sure Matt doesn't register anywhere on your romance meter?"

"Just friends. That doesn't mean I can't think he's gorgeous, though."

Amanda often tried to push the two of them together, but nothing ever came of it.

"So. Let's get on with it," Will said then leaned down and planted a quick kiss on Amanda's lips. The two boys sat on the grass facing the girls.

"Becky and I have started a list of things we thought we could do to raise money. It'll mean all the kids will need to

pitch in. They all respect you two so your first job will be to recruit as many of them as you can.”

The boys glanced at each other - VERY briefly - and nodded back at the girls.

Amanda took out a yellow pad on which they had made their list.

“We figure we should concentrate on just a few big fund raisers rather than a lot of little ones. Here’s what we have so far. A bake sale at the fire station on Friday and Saturday. At the same time, we can have a car wash there. We figure a fire station should have plenty of water. On Sunday after church we thought we could do a used book sale at all three churches - have folks bring books to donate on the way into services and then buy on the way out.”

“I was thinking that the guys who mow lawns could maybe donate one Saturday’s earnings - I’ll start,” Matt said.

“I’ll do that, too,” Will said, then continued. “Between the two of us we can probably get two dozen guys to do the same.”

Will nodded though he didn’t look at Matt during the process.

“I’ll organize the bake sale,” Amanda said. “Mom’s vice president of the PTO and she offered to make calls to members to get stuff for us to sell.”

“And I’ll do the book sale. Will, how about if you take care of the lawn mowing and Matt, you take charge of the car wash?”

The boys nodded.

“How do we advertise?” Matt asked.

“How about flyers?” Will suggested.

“That would cost us money we don’t have,” Amanda pointed out.

“We could go door to door like we did the other night,” Becky said.

The others nodded. To speed up the process they divided the town into four quarters. They’d each take one.

“We’ll be doing two things, here,” Matt pointed out. “First to let folks know all the stuff we’re going to be doing and why. Second, to get the kids to volunteer to help.”

“While we’re making all those contacts maybe we

should ask for contributions of baked goods,” Becky suggested.

“And see if any would be willing to have their lawns mowed - the ones that usually do their own,” Will said. “I’m sure my dad will give us free gas from his station for the mowers”

“We ought to get the word out to Granville and Davis. You know some of them would come and buy stuff - get their cars washed,” Matt said.

“My grandma lives in Grnville,” Will said. “I’ll call her. She knows everybody in town.”

Matt gave him a look. “Granville only has four hundred people in it. Everybody there knows everybody in town.”

That’s all it took. The boys were ready to get it on right there and then. Becky moved and sat between them.

“Remember, you two. You agreed this would be a testosterone-free zone this morning.”

Each boy sighed as he glared at the other one. Becky continued.

“You do that Will. Mom’s best friend lives in Davis so I’ll have her make a call, too. Neither of those little burgs has anything exciting going on this month. We may be surprised at how much traffic we get.”

“Heres an idea,” Matt said. “The Young People’s Fellowship at my church could invite the youth groups from those two churches to come and be with us for Sunday services. Lots of their parents would come, too, I’ll bet.”

Amanda frowned.

“I’m not sure we should use God to trick folks into coming just so they can buy books and pies.”

“I’ll be upfront with them about it all. A good sermon is a good sermon regardless of what may be waiting in the lawn outside.”

Amanda nodded. His addition seemed to handle her question.

“So, it’s settled then. A bake sale at the Fire Station during the car wash. How early shall we get started?”

“I’d say no later than seven,” Matt suggested. “Folks get up and around early on the weekends - swimming, boats to the lake, stuff like that you know.”

The others nodded, agreeing that what he said made sense.

“Seven o’clock it is, then,” Becky said making a note at the top of the carwash page.

“When we find folks who will let us mow their lawns, we need to let Will know, then,” she added.

“Write it down on something,” he suggested. “I’m more a note kind a guy than a remember kind. That way I can just pass on the note to the kid who’ll be doing the lawn.”

Matt wanted to say - but didn’t - that a few slaps to his head might improve his memory. Amanda wanted to say his poor memory was probably due to the pummeling it had taken at Matt’s hands all these years. Becky was just pleased that everybody had kept their mouths shut.

“Agreed then? Plan B-1?” Amanda asked looking from one to the other.

“Agreed,” they said in one voice.

“Afternoon practice begins at five. Me and him (Matt indicated Will with a flick of his head) will have to get our sections contacted before that.”

“Let’s get right at it then,” Becky said enthusiastically as she bounced to her feet.

Will looked at Matt. Whatever friendliness there had been during that past twenty minutes was gone. “Got something to take care of first then I’ll be on it,” Matt said

The other three stood and the girls went inside.

“The park. Behind the pavilion. Five minutes,” Will said.

“In five!” Matt said glaring back into his face.

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CHAPTER THREE

Books and Baked Goods

They arrived behind the pavilion at virtually the same time - both barefoot and wearing cutoffs. It was a private place with nobody around. There was never any waiting around for the other one to make the first move. They arrived, pulled off their shirts, walked up to each other and the punches started flying.

They seldom said so much as a single word during their fights though as time wore on the amount of grunting and groaning clearly increased. It was hard not to react that way when you were being beaten silly.

An observer would have eventually noticed that there seemed to be several unspoken rules. They didn't bite or kick each other, though kneeing anywhere a knee would fit was clearly allowed. They also didn't stick thumbs or fingers into each other's eyes, though fists to any part of the face seemed to be the preferred goal of the activity.

They also refrained from tearing at each other's flesh with their fingernails, although it frequently occurred by accident. Neither flinched at the sight of blood, either the others or his own.

Other than those few taboos, anything else seemed to go. They shoved and tripped and punched and choked and squeezed anything that might be damaged by squeezing (ears, noses, cheeks). They bent fingers back into excruciatingly painful positions and twisted arms in ways that arms had never been intended to be twisted. Pounding heads against the ground and rubbing faces into the dirt

seemed to rate high with both of them.

There was nothing remotely hesitant about the activity. If a fist were free it got thrown. If a knee were available, it got propelled at the first available spot. It was a fully serious endeavor and exhaustion always set in well before it gradually wore to a stop. Once over, neither looked at the other. They got to their feet – working hard to disguise what a struggle it was to do that – and went their separate ways.

That morning the battle had all the usual elements and went on for over an hour. It had been unusually vicious; who knew why?

In the end, each sported a fresh black eye already swollen shut before they exited the park. Their torsos were bruised and bleeding from scratches. Matt limped - he had sprained his right knee - not a good thing for a running back. Will's scalp was split, and no part of a body bleeds as profusely as the scalp.

He knew he didn't dare let his mother see all the blood. After all, it wasn't about making her feel bad. He went directly to the creek and submerged himself in the cool water, washing away the dust and dirt and blood. It felt wonderful - but then after what he'd just endured, being hit by a semi probably would have been a welcome relief.

Rinsed clean and bleeding stopped, he made his way home. He changed clothes and grabbed a bite to eat - two peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, a quart of milk, and four ice cream sandwiches. On his way out, he stuck an apple in his pocket in case he got the munchies before he had visited all the homes in his quarter of the town.

By one o'clock Will was working the Northwest part of town, Matt the Southeast, and the girls, who had started earlier were nearly finished with the other two sections.

"Nasty eye, there," Mrs. Baker said as she answered Matt's knock. "Why you young men play football is beyond me."

Matt let it go without correcting her. He explained Plan B-1 and she offered to call her friends and promised both books and pies. She offered him a homemade cinnamon roll which he graciously accepted, offering a quick peck to her old cheek as payment. She blushed, but was clearly pleased.

Will met with similar comments about the condition of his face. He shrugged them off and got right to the business at hand. There was lemonade for him at one house and a slice of apple pie at another. It was a nice community where people really cared about each other. Both Matt and Will were especially loved by the older folks.

Mrs. Kravitz home was in his area. He rang her bell, not about to pass her by.

"Mrs. Kravitz. Good afternoon. I just wanted to let you know that the kids of Woodsville are holding several events to raise the money needed to pay for the new football helmets that the school can't afford now. There will be a car wash and bake sale at the fire station Friday and Saturday, and a used book sale after church on Sunday. I hope you'll be able to help us out. Not getting the new equipment is really a big disappointment to us. We hate to have to show up for games with such awful looking helmets. It makes it seem like our school really doesn't care about us, you know."

"Well, my car could probably use a good washing, but you better not scratch it."

"Friday or Saturday then. That will sure help us out. Have to raise forty-eight hundred dollars, you know."

"So, you kids are doing all this?" she asked skeptically.

"That's right. We feel like our parents do so much for us already that we shouldn't ask them for anything else. Money's really tight for most of us, you know."

"I see."

"Well, thanks for listening. Books will be collected at the churches before Sunday morning services if you have any."

He turned and left very proud of the way he had handled himself. Yell at her and they'd been out at least one car wash. Lay it on the line calmly and at least get something.

By three o'clock all four had finished making their rounds. They had received a good response and felt good about the plan's chances.

Matt's mother took one look at her son and fixed two icepacks.

Will's mother took one look at her son and fixed two icepacks.

Both shook their heads. Both had taken just about all of the boy's nonsense that they were willing to take, but neither said a word.

By three fifteen both boys were flat on their backs on their beds, ice bags in place, and fast asleep.

That afternoon it wasn't a race to the locker room although they did arrive side-by-side at the open door. They dressed out and went through the warm ups - it was Will's turn to lead them. Every movement hurt, but he'd never let on.

Matt's knee wasn't nearly as damaged as it had appeared to be at first. He was able to run plays and even did his share of catching a few on-screen plays. Will was throwing very well, and no one guessed how much it hurt him every time he let a long ball fly - well, no one other than Matt.

The girls showed up to watch the last few minutes of practice and waited around for them to leave the locker room. They hadn't yet seen the boys' faces - they had no way of knowing about the fight.

Will arrived first. The girls winced. His eye was open by then, but the area around it was purple, rapidly heading toward green. He had a still raw, finger nail, cut from his neck to his navel.

He put his arm around Amanda and leaned down to kiss her. She turned away and shivered.

"You look awful. It would send chills up my spine and give me nightmares if I kissed that face."

"Let's go out to Hickory Woods for an hour or so of kissing and heavy breathing, then. It'll be dark in there and you won't have to even look at me."

"Got all the answers, don't you?"

"Usually. What's wrong?"

"You really don't know, do you?"

He shrugged as Matt approached, stopping a good ten yards away. Becky walked over to meet him.

"You, two! Morons! Imbeciles! Crazy maniacs!"

Her voice got louder with each phrase.

"What?" he said reaching his arms out to his sides and glancing at Will who shrugged his shoulders again.

Becky stomped her foot. She often did that when words failed her. She folded her arms and walked back

toward Amanda. The two of them started toward home making it clear they didn't want the guys to accompany them.

"What did we do to them?" Matt said, shaking his head, but not really directing his comment at Will.

"Women!" Matt said, shaking his head, but not really directing it at Will.

Neither boy had a clue as to why girls reacted like that, but then, neither girl had a clue as to why guys reacted like they did, either.

They turned and began walking down Oak Street, again not close but even they would have to claim they were together.

"Coach seemed really angry with us today," Matt said.

Will nodded.

"Maybe we over did it a bit this morning?"

"Maybe. Just so hard not to."

"Hard, alright," Matt said, sounding as if he were agreeing, even though there was nothing pleasant about his tone.

Will glanced at him. Matt continued to look straight ahead.

"Hard to be this close to you," Will went on.

"Oh, yes! Really hard!"

"Better separate before . . ."

"Yeah. Before. . ." Matt said. "For the team."

"Yeah. The team."

Matt moved up onto the sidewalk to his left.

Will took to the other one and was soon in front of his house.

Matt didn't understand why he really, really, wanted to run after Will and start it all over again. He didn't, but he really wanted to.

Boys are seldom bothered much by such unanswerable questions. The same kind bug girls into hour after hour of discussion during which they spin endless possibilities, but, in the end, come to no real conclusion, either. The boy's way seems more efficient - same result - a lot less wasted time. Regardless, that would just never due for the fairer sex. Teenage boys and girls who come to understand those things about each other have acquired one of life's most important

pieces of information.

Matt walked in the door at 7:30. His mother had dinner waiting for him. Matt filled her in on Plan B-1 and she had some suggestions - mothers always have some suggestions. He listened and nodded attentively as she went on and on. Ten minutes later he had no idea what she had said. It was a satisfying arrangement the two of them had worked out over the years. Mom got to sit with her son and talk, and felt her son was listening. Matt didn't have to talk and would never be tested over the material. Talk about your win-win situations!

At eight he walked to Becky's house to see if things were back to normal between them. It was her decision. It was always her decision because Matt didn't get upset. (Well, you know.)

She met him on the front porch.

"You get to all the houses in your quad?" she asked in a cool, business like fashion.

"Yes, Ma'am," he answered with a quick salute and clicked heels, trying to point out that her reserved approach was not appropriate between friends.

"Do you suppose Will went to Kravitz's place?" she asked.

"Don't know." he said. "It would be just like him to do it, though. Didn't hear the cop car siren so maybe he didn't."

It made Becky smile.

"I'm still upset with you, but can't seem to ever stay mad long enough to make my point."

"If your point was that you were upset with us, you made it. If it was about why you were upset with us, you didn't."

"Boys!"

She stomped her foot again, but didn't make it to the arms folding stage. Matt sat down.

"When we going to see the Superintendent? Who's going?" Matt asked.

"Tomorrow morning. Amanda and I made a nine o'clock appointment with him. The secretary, Mrs. Bain, was really nice on the phone when she saved the time for us. I guess with the big money crunch, he and the School Board are really scrambling around."

“We were going to invite one of you guys to come with us but you’ve brutalized each other’s faces to the place we don’t want to be seen in public with either one of you.”

“Is that what all this is about? You don’t like how we look?”

“The tip of the iceberg, Mister! You two can’t go through life like this. There has to be some way to fix whatever it is. I can see it now. Our seventy fifth high school reunion gets disrupted while you two beat each other over the heads with your walkers and oxygen packs.”

It was a very humorous picture Becky had painted and neither could resist laughing. Becky hoped she had made her point. She hadn’t, but Matt wouldn’t let on. It was one of those things where every time the image returned they both broke into cheek wetting, stomach straining, breath-stealing, laughter.

Amanda walked up, laughing with them, but having no idea why. Becky repeated her story and it began all over again.

Eventually things calmed down, but from then on, they’d each find themselves snickering at the sight of old folks with walkers.

“Mrs. Mounts (school librarian) says there are nearly a thousand duplicate books in boxes in the attic we can have to sell. Lots are classics. At a quarter each, that’s \$250.00.”

“At fifty cents, it’s five hundred,” Matt offered. That’s a lot closer to the forty-eight we need.”

“Will has fifteen lawn mowing kids willing to donate a day’s earnings,” Amanda said. “He figures when the home owners hear what it’s all about they’ll add a hefty tip on top of it all.”

“I’ll get car washing volunteers lined up tomorrow. I’m thinking girls in really skimpy bikinis should bring in the men. I’ll be there to supervise their every move, so to speak.”

He smiled at the thought. The girls rolled their eyes.

“Whatever,” Becky said.

“We need a way to get the books out of the attic,” Amanda said.

“I’ll get the freshmen on the team to handle that,” Matt said.

“Does Coach Thunder know about all this?” Amanda asked. “Plan B-1.”

“I guess we haven’t told him but I’m sure he’s heard,” Matt said. “His house is in the territory that Will covered. I suppose we should have thought to tell him in person. I’ll call him when I get home.”

“Have the churches been contacted?” Becky asked. “I guess we sort of made that plan without getting their permission.”

She had directed the comments to Matt.

“I spoke to Reverend Baker’s wife about it and she thought it was great. She volunteered to get it all set up with the other two churches.”

“Looks like we’re really doing this thing then,” Becky said with a sigh.

“Let the money roll!” Matt said rubbing his index fingers against his thumbs.

Will came walking down the center of the street. Amanda sighed.

“Don’t you guys ever use the sidewalks? It’s almost dark. He could get run down out there like that.”

“Let’s see,” Matt began sarcastically. “Street lights, headlights, a 25 mile an hour speed zone and maybe one car an hour out there at this time of night. Ya! Really dangerous.”

The girls knew better than to argue when it was either macho-man defending his point of view. Will stopped beside the tree in the front lawn.

“I need to be going anyway,” Matt said standing. “We’re counting on you two to keep us organized and on the ball, you know.”

“Let’s meet here right after your morning practice, then,” Becky suggested. “This evening Amanda and I will get lists made of all the details.”

“Will probably won’t like that,” Matt said. “It sounded like he was counting on a trip to the woods tonight.”

“The woods will be there next week,” Amanda said, dismissing the comment.

Matt trotted down the walk to the street, ignoring Will’s presence. Will moved all the way around the tree so they wouldn’t come within yards of each other. He then joined the

girls and took a seat on the steps.

“So. How’s it going?”

“Looking good, actually,” Amanda said. “Things all seem to be falling into place.”

“Matt said that he’d arrange for the freshmen guys to pick up some books the librarian is donating.”

“The book sale is Becky’s deal. Why’s that low life sticking his nose into it?”

“Mainly because he was trying to be helpful and you weren’t here when we needed to make a decision about it. He also got Mrs. Baker to set up the book sales with the three churches - because she was in his quadrant to contact,” Amanda explained before he could get worked up over that as well.

“Guess I’m not really needed since Wonder Boy Matt flew in and took over.”

“You’re just being Stupid about it,” Becky said. “We’ll need volunteers to set the books out as they come in Sunday morning. I’ll talk with Mrs. Baker and see what needs to be done about tables. The churches all have them but we’ll probably need to get some guys to carry them outside and set them up. I’d appreciate your help with that. I’ll get kids to arrange them during services and sell them afterwards. There’s plenty left for you to do. Matt still needs volunteers for the car wash so maybe you can round some up.”

“I’ll go with girls in skimpy bikinis, I think.”

“You boys! Are girls’ bodies all you ever think about?”

“Yes, actually. That’s pretty much it. Somehow, we manage to weave a life in and around it but, yes, it’s pretty much just girls that we think about.”

Becky and Amanda looked at each other and shared an expression of disgust.

“What?” Will said. “You telling me that you two don’t spend time - lots of time - thinking about boys?”

It was met with raised eyebrows and shrugs, but no words. They’d been found out. That being obvious, Will was willing to let it drop. Becky wasn’t.

“Only seems fair, that if there are girls in bikinis, there should also be some guys in those tight little tank suits the swim team wears.”

“You get the guys. I’ll get the girls,” he said smiling. He turned to Amanda.

“All this bikini talk has me ready for some kissin’ in the woods.”

She smiled and patted his hands.

“And that’s just the reason we won’t be going. Besides, Becky and I have lots of things to do this evening. You go run ten miles and kiss the wind or go to the woods and hug a tree. We have to get to work.”

He stood, kissed Amanda on the lips - longer than a quick good-bye but completely unsatisfactory as far as he and his current hormone level were concerned. He made his way up the street.

He noticed Matt through his window lifting weights. The very sight of the boy - off the playing field, at least - made the anger well up inside him.

He wanted to spend time with his girl and talk and kiss and just be close. He couldn’t. He wanted to pound on that other boy, but he couldn’t. His excess adrenalin could have fueled a cross county flight of a 747 that night. He took Amanda’s advice and went for a run.

CHAPTER FOUR

Plan B-1 to the Rescue!

“Thanks for seeing us,” Amanda said as she and Becky took seats in front of the Superintendent’s big, cluttered, desk.

“I understand you’ve hatched a plan to save the helmets,” he said, smiling across his folded hands, apparently already knowing the purpose of their visit.

“That’s right.”

“It’s a lot of money,” he said.

“We’re aware of that. We are just hoping that you will hold off canceling the order until late next week to give us time to try and raise it.”

“I can put it off until Friday. After that our contract says we have to pay for them. Wish it could be longer but that’s the best I can do.”

“Friday should be fine. If we haven’t accomplished it by then it won’t get done, I’m afraid,” Becky said.

“I wish you luck. If you need to use the school for anything just arrange it with my secretary. By the way, my wife said to tell you she’d bring a couple of pies to the bake sale. One of them will be pecan. I’ll buy it.”

He reached for his wallet and handed Becky a five dollar bill.

“Thank you. We’ll see that it gets saved for you. We really appreciate all your help,” Amanda said.

The ‘big’ meeting was over in two minutes and they had their first contribution. Now, if raising the rest of the money went that well, things would be looking pretty good.

The girls were on the sidewalk approaching Will’s

house when the boys caught up with them, racing home from morning practice.

"Told coach what we were up to. He wished us luck," Will said.

"He told us to hit his wife up for baked goods and a box of books they have stored in the attic."

"Can you take care of that?" Becky asked him. "That way we won't need to put it on one of our lists. Time is getting pretty short and the lists are getting pretty long."

"Sure. I'll go take care of it now. I'll borrow Dad's pickup for the books. Where shall we store them?"

Reverend Baker said we could take them right to the church basement. The back door is always open.

Will nodded and kissed Amanda good-bye.

"Later then," he said turning up his walk.

"Later," the girls called. Matt remained silent.

The rest of the day the girls stayed busy finding volunteers to handle the book and bake sales. Matt arranged for a dozen girls and a dozen guys to take care of the car wash. Jake at Jake's Used Car Lot donated soap and rags. Garden hoses were rounded up and the washing stations set up on the wide driveway in front of the Fire Station. The trucks would be moved to the street early in the morning so they wouldn't be hampered by the congestion in case they were needed.

Matt had it well organized. The cars would come down Elm Street from the north and wait their turns near the curb in front of the station. Then, they'd turn up the driveway and follow a U-shaped path. The first station would hose the car down and clean the tires and hubcaps. The next station would spray the car with soapy water from two back pack pressure pumps the park department used to spray insecticide. The third station would do the actual washing with rags - two kids on each side, and one front and back should make short work of the grime. Then came the power rinse and finally - with the car back, ready to turn south onto Elm Street - the towel drying.

Allowing some time for horseplay and conversation, Matt figured it would take five minutes for each car to make the loop. That would be a dozen an hour, 120 in a ten-hour

day and nearly 250 in the two-day period. If the donations averaged five dollars each that would be over \$1,200. Of course, finding 250 cars might be a problem - it would be nearly half the vehicles in town.

Will had an even dozen lawn mowing volunteers lined up. Once the word got out the requests poured in. Will's mother became the appointment secretary - not because she volunteered or was asked - just because everyone knew it was Will's part of the operation so they called his house. She was happy to help, of course.

By sundown Thursday there were forty-two lawns on the list. At twenty dollars each, that would bring in between \$1,500 and \$1,750.

They were disappointed when they learned used books rarely brought more than a quarter each, but if they could move two-thousand of them, it would contribute another \$500.

It soon became apparent that it was the bake sale that would make or break Plan B-1.

"You girls look as worn out as we do," Matt said as the four of them gathered on Amanda's porch at eight-thirty to compare notes and prepare for the long weekend.

Before she stopped to think, Becky said, "We may be tired, but at least our faces aren't green and purple."

The boys looked at each other - no, they glared at each other. She knew immediately that it had been exactly the wrong thing to have said.

They talked about the plans for the next half hour. Everything seemed to be in order.

"Guess that's it, then," Becky said.

Amanda scooted close to Will, putting her arm around his waist and playfully nibbling at his ear.

"Looks like there's still time for a walk in the woods this evening."

He looked into Matt's face. It was set and serious as it glowered back at him.

"Got something to take care of first."

Matt held up two fingers quickly followed by five. The boys thought it was their secret code but the girls had known about it since fifth grade. There were four places they usually fought. One finger signaled the field behind Jake's car lot.

Two, was at the sandy beach at the bend in the creek. Three, was behind the pavilion in the park. Four was on the football field. The first set of two fingers singled the creek. The second five indicated when; five minutes - just about the time it would take them to get there.

“Please don’t!” Amanda said, knowing full well they probably didn’t even hear her. Even if they had it wouldn’t have changed a thing.

She was ready to take drastic measures.

“If you don’t come with me now, don’t come at all.”

She had made it a clear choice between some private time with lots of kissing, or fighting with Matt.

“Tomorrow, then,” Will said, removing his shirt and handing it to her. He got up and left.

Matt nodded then turned to the girls.

“Tomorrow, morning, Fire Station at six thirty. Coach gave us the day off. Swim suits and bring lots of old towels.”

He waited for Will to trot out of sight and then headed off after him.

“I don’t get it. I never have got it. I guess I never will get it!” Amanda said plainly disgusted. “What other seventeen-year-old boy in the whole county would give up an evening of promised hugging and kissing for a fight that he knows is going to cause him terrible pain and blood loss?”

“Only two that I know of. Probably the only two in the whole state of Arkansas.”

At the beach, they only paused long enough to get barefoot and let Matt shed his shirt. If it had been known, the sandy spot had been selected because it hurt less when they fell on it and when their heads were being bashed into it. They were both already hurting and by agreeing to that site, they had admitted as much to each other.

It always began the same way - they walked straight toward each other, never hesitating, looking daggers straight into each other’s eyes. Their bodies would collide and the brawl was on. That night, every punch produced a groan right from the start; there were no parts of their bodies that weren’t already in pain.

At one point Matt’s right fist to Will’s jaw knocked him onto the sand and he lay there dazed, semiconscious. Matt

sank to his knees and sat back on his legs resting, waiting for him to come around. Neither boy ever took advantage of such a thing - and it happened often. Nothing less than a fair fight wouldn't prove anything. Of course, just what they were trying to prove was unknown to anybody but them. It appeared that inflicting terrible pain on the other - not producing permanent damage - was their goal.

Will roused and splashed his face with water from the creek and they were right back at it. A half hour later it was Matt who was laid out. He didn't come to for several minutes. Eventually, Will carried a handful of water and splashed Matt's face, almost as if he were concerned about him. When Matt finally sat up, and began shaking this head to clear the cobwebs away, he saw Will was putting on his shoes making ready to leave. Seeing that Matt was okay, Will left. It wasn't that Will was indicating he had won. Wining wasn't part of it. He was just saying it was best if they called it a night. It was an out with which Matt wouldn't argue.

Six thirty came early for the boys and they found the girls already at the Station when they arrived. Since they really couldn't look any worse than they had the day before, the effects of the latest mutual beating were not immediately evident.

The main events of the day were all there at the Fire Station. By seven o'clock cars were lined up waiting to be washed. Eighteen, swimsuit clad, teenagers were ready to work. Matt assigned them to stations and the first cars began winding their way through the loop.

People were also arriving to look over the baked goods and more goodies were being dropped off every minute. The Superintendent's offer to buy one of his wife's pies had given Amanda an idea. As husbands delivered things, the girls would always ask if they wanted to buy back part of the donation.

"Think how good that'll make your wife feel to know you wanted something she made."

It almost always worked.

Things had got off to a good start and by ten the workers were all appreciative of the coolers filled with lemonade Matt's dad brought to them. It was going to be

scorching hot, already topping 85. The bake sale tables had been arranged so they would remain in the shade most of the day.

“We should have thought to sell cold drinks,” Amanda said at one point.

Even without that, however, the money box seemed to be getting piled high. By noon, Matt and the girls were feeling very good about things. In his tank suit, Matt’s bruises were more obvious than usual. He ignored them. The others didn’t mention them, though many a head shook in continued bewilderment that day.

Mrs. Kravitz dropped by. As promised, she ran her car through the wash and seemed embarrassed at seeing the scantily clad kids working there. When she thought no one was looking, she slid four, fresh baked, loaves of bread from her bag onto one of the bake sale tables.

Amanda saw what she had done, but didn’t comment on it to her or the others. Maybe the old lady wasn’t completely heartless after all. Or, there may have been some other motive.

At noon, the shifts of volunteers were supposed to change but most of the first set continued to hang around and help. The entire community seemed to be caught up in the event.

Not as many strange faces showed up from the other towns as the kids had hoped for, but it was Friday and many had jobs to go to. Maybe the cool of evening and the weekend would bring them in.

At two, Will drove up and parked off the street on the lawn. Amanda went to greet him. She allowed a short kiss, but was still miffed at him and tried to make it obvious.

“Got mowers going all over town. Sounds like a line of Patton’s tanks coming down the road.”

“We’ve been hearing them. That’s going okay, then?”

“Great. Be better once the fumes clear out of town. Mickey got so excited he mowed the wrong lawn first off, this morning, but the Wilson’s paid him anyway. They’re really nice folks. He’ll never live it down though! Should have more than half of them finished by dark this evening. That would make me available for a trip to the woods if anybody’s

interested.”

“We’ll have to wait and see. I’m really fed up with this thing between the two of you. It’s like you’re both still in kindergarten.”

“Guys will be guys,” he said, not helping his cause by pleading male pattern stupidity.

“I guess all the other guys in town just aren’t really guys then. None of them seem to have to beat on each other to prove anything.”

Will shrugged. When all else failed, he, like most guys, just shrugged. It never got them completely off the hook, but it seemed the best they had to offer and generally stopped female harassment for at least a little while. Will hated to talk about what went on between him and Will and since it always got Amanda upset they both tried to avoid the topic.

“Truce?” he asked, both hands raised at his sides, palms forward.

“For now, I guess.”

“Then how about a five-minute lip on lip break behind the station?”

“It’s already occupied.”

“Who?”

“Sherri and you know who!”

“Oh. No room for us then.”

They settled for a long good-bye kiss and he left.

“Trouble in Paradise?” Becky asked.

“No. Maybe. I don’t know. Sometimes he just makes me so . . .”

“Ever know a guy who didn’t sometimes just make you so . . . ?”

“Guess not. You talk to Randy about the dance yet?”

“I don’t need a matchmaker, Amanda!”

“Probably not. I see he’s on his way over. I gotta go . . . to get some . . . lemonade . . . yes, lemonade.”

She left as Randy arrived. He and his family had moved to town just before school got out that past spring. He was out for football, but would have to settle for third string. That was alright with him. He just enjoyed the game and thought being on the team would help him make some friends before school started. It had. The other guys liked him.

Apparently, he thought it was time to find a girl that would also like him - really, like him, that is!"

"Hey," he said.

Not sparkling conversation, but Becky did find him really cute so could overlook that. She had heard he was a nice kid.

"Hey," she returned. "In the market for some of my goodies?"

She would have given anything if she hadn't said that. He smiled and pointed to a Danish. Becky took the dollar he offered and placed it in the cigar box. She handed him the 'goodie' and he took a bite.

"Great. Yours?"

"No. I think that's Mrs. Miller's. She's one of the cooks at school."

"Oh. Yeah. Grey hair and stuff."

Becky nodded not entirely understanding his meaning. Maybe it had been a generic school cook thing that he had been implying.

"You and Matt dating?" he asked getting to, or at least sneaking up on, the point of his presence there.

"No. Just good friends. Have been since way before hormones entered the picture."

"Got a date for the dance?"

"No. Guess I thought I'd just show up and see what happened."

"I'd really like you to go with me," he said, then stuffed the last of the pastry into his mouth. All and all it hadn't been a sweep the girl off her feet with suave sophistication sort of invitation. But then he was so cute.

She was more than a little surprised when she heard herself say, "Sure. That would be great. I think I'd really like that. Give us a chance to get to know each other."

He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Seal it with a kiss?" he asked.

Becky had not expected that from shy, little, Randy. Before she realized what had happened his lips were against hers. It was short and nice. Like a gentleman, she thought.

"We'll make plans later - tomorrow maybe, Okay?" he said.

“Sure. Great. Thanks. His take charge style surprised her. Time would tell if she liked it.”

He walked back to be with some of his friends.

Amanda and Matt arrived at the same moment.

“Already kissin’ on the new guy, huh?” Matt teased.

“Guess we don’t have to wonder anymore about whether or not he’s ever kissed a girl,” Amanda said, giggling.

“You two really talk about stuff like that?” Matt asked making a disgusted face.

“Like you and your friends don’t talk, too,” Becky said more defensively than seemed necessary.

Matt shrugged. It was his admission without coming right out and saying anything. He’d keep the actual full range of guy topics to himself. He went back to help with the carwash.

* * *

That evening the four again met on Amanda’s porch.

“We got real money to count here,” Becky said, shaking the cigar box from the bake sale.

“And from the carwash,” Matt said tossing a roll of bills onto the porch.

Will put an envelope beside the bills.

“What we’ve collected so far from the lawns.”

They began counting. \$631.00 from the bake sale. \$580.00 from the car wash. \$440.00 from the lawns.

“Looks like a grand total of \$1,851.00,” Becky said.

Will did some calculating out loud. If we do that well again tomorrow that’ll be about \$3500.00 which will mean the book sale on Sunday will have to bring in the rest. What would that be?”

Amanda arrived at the grim answer first.

“Almost \$1,300.00”

“At a quarter, apiece that’s five thousand two hundred books. Do you think fifteen hundred church goers will buy that many?” Matt asked.

“Is that three and a half or thirty-five apiece?” Will asked. “Decimals always drive me crazy.”

“Three and a half. The bigger problem is whether or not we’ll really get that many books donated to begin with. We’re depending on the church goers to get the word that

they're each supposed to bring some.

Although they weren't depressed about it, they were more downhearted than they had expected to be. It was a bad news - good news thing. The bad news was they hadn't brought in as much as they figured they needed to. The good news was that Matt and Will were too down about it to do battle that night.

CHAPTER FIVE

Ka-Ching!!!

Saturday turned out to be an overcast day with a few sprinkles early in the morning. By the time the four of them gathered on Amanda's porch that evening, they were concerned about how slow they thought things had been.

They counted the money. \$734.00 from the bake sale - up over a hundred dollars from the day before. That produced some faint smiles. \$460.00 from the lawns, up a few dollars from Friday. It was worth a few positive nods. The car wash did some better as well, \$620.00. Their spirits rose at the results. However, that only totaled \$1,874.00 which still left them over a thousand dollars short. Their spirits dropped again. It looked like the success or failure of Plan B-1 rested with the book sale.

Sunday morning was sunny and a bit cooler than it had been the past week. Matt couldn't decide if that would help or hinder the book sale. Those folks who attended church in summer mainly to enjoy an hour or so of air conditioning probably wouldn't attend. Those who often stayed away because it was just too hot to get up and around probably would go.

By ten o'clock all the books they had collected prior to Sunday had been divided up and were displayed on tables in front of the three churches. They had decided to just ask for a donation rather than charging a set amount. Will's mother figured that after church folks would be in a generous frame of mind and might shell out a bit more if it were done that way.

Only about a quarter of those who showed up for

church brought books. That was a major disappointment. Services were over at noon and by 12:30 all the books that were going to be sold, had been sold.

They sat together on the steps of the Baptist Church to count the take. Each church had produced nearly an equal amount of money. In the end, it only totaled \$224.00. They were \$851.00 short. The four of them couldn't make up the difference - it would have been nearly two hundred and fifteen dollars each.

Matt's parents dropped by to hear the results. Their son delivered the bad news. The two adults smiled. The four youngsters frowned and looked at each other, not understanding the grown-ups' reaction. Matt's Father explained.

"I understand you've been calling this operation Plan B-1. Well, some of us parents put together Plan B-1½ just in case a backup was needed."

Matt stood up, eager to hear more.

"What do you have in mind? I already gave up on robbing a bank."

It had been an attempt to lighten the situation, but his tone clearly suggested his doubts about their ability to raise that much money.

"A water volley ball tournament. Mothers against daughters. Fathers against sons. Winners play each other for the water volley ball bragging rights of Woodsville, Arkansas, U S of A."

"Sounds like fun, but how can it raise any money," Matt asked.

"Donations at the gate. Who in town won't pay a buck or so to see us parents humiliate ourselves at the hands of our kids?"

Faces brightened. Matt stood up.

"When? Where? At the pool?"

"Duh-h-h-h," came a chorus from the other three kids.

Matt smiled and tried to ignore it.

"Monday afternoon starting about four. Mothers and daughters first. By the time they're finished, the men will be out of work and we can start our games with the boys. Everybody can bring picnic suppers and after gorging

ourselves on fried chicken and cherry pie the championship games will be played. We were thinking best of three games for all the contests and each game to fifteen points – unconventional, but it's such a nice number.”

“I say go for it,” Will said.

“Yeah. Nothing to lose and maybe everything to gain,” Matt agreed.

“It'll be lots of fun no matter how it turns out,” was Becky's somewhat forced, optimistic take on it.

“House to house again this afternoon, I guess, guys,” Amanda said referring to the need to get the word out.

It was agreed.

“All that talk about picnics has left me famished,” Matt said patting his stomach.

“Your mother just happened to pack a basket for you guys,” His father said. Must weigh fifteen pounds. I'd say it should keep you full at least 'til mid-afternoon.”

“Thanks, Mom. This is great. He kissed his mother.

“Yeah. Thanks,” the others added.

“How about swimsuits at the creek in fifteen minutes,” Amanda suggested.

The others agreed.

By 1:15 the blankets were spread on the sand and the eating began. Will and Amanda fed each other potato chips, which, for some unannounced reason, required a kiss between each chip. Matt and Becky rubbed sun screen onto each other and were the first into the water.

When Will and Amanda waded in, the four became suddenly quiet. No one would say it out loud, but it was the first time the four of them had ever been there together. The girls silently hoped the guys behaved themselves. The guys realized they had to put things aside for the time being.

They had a great time. The boys, of course, splashed the girls relentlessly and soaked their hair – the one thing they had made the guys promise not to do! So much for creek-side honesty! There was playful dunking all around.

With the girls on the boys' shoulders they played what was called horsy war in those parts. The riders attempted to knock or pull each other off the other guy's shoulders. Matt and Will showed great restraint in not elbowing or tripping -

which was usually an all quite legal part of the process, but which they realized might lead to something more serious between them.

Later on, they swam, and splashed and dunked each other. There were lots of jokes and much laughter. After an hour of fun in the water they took to the blankets and let the bright sun work its tanning magic on their skin. Will and Amanda mostly just lay close and kissed.

“Sorry I’m not Randy for you,” Matt said.

“Sorry I’m not Sherri for you,” Becky replied.

They both shrugged. It wasn’t that they didn’t appreciate how great the other looked in a bathing suit. And, it wasn’t that the idea of kissing each other hadn’t crossed their minds before. It just didn’t fit into the relationship. So, as the other two giggled together a few yards away, Matt and Becky talked and watched the puffy white clouds drift out of sight over the hilltop to the north.

“Hey, loving couple,” Matt said at last. “It’s after three thirty. If we’re going to knock on doors we better get at it. Just hope your lips aren’t so worn out or damaged that you won’t be able to talk to folks.”

It was Matt and Becky’s turn to giggle. They put things back into the basket and folded up the blankets.

They were mostly silent as they walked back to town. Each one was thinking what a pleasant time it had been, being there together like that, but no one was brave enough (or, perhaps, foolish enough) to voice it.

“We’ll have to do this again,” Amanda said as they headed up Oak Street. “Next time maybe you two can bring Sherri and Randy or somebody. It’s a shame to waste a blanket on a beach the way you two did.”

Matt’s eyes twinkled. “Yeah. I’ve really been wanting to bring Randy and a blanket out here, you know.”

Becky pounded his shoulder and Amanda rolled her eyes and shook her head.

“Imbicilious! That’s what you are,” Amanda said.

“What? Imbicilious?”

“I just made it up for the occasion. Part imbecile and part very silly.”

“It works for me,” Becky said.

It would have been a time most guys would have teamed up and directed a barrage of comebacks at the girls. Will and Matt didn't team up that way so the fun stopped there.

By six o'clock all the houses in town had been contacted about the volleyball tournament. Matt and Becky went to Sunday evening church services. Will and Amanda had their own service in the woods. (It's amazing how much punishment two sets of lips can actually take in a twenty-four-hour period!)

Coach Thunder wouldn't reduce the two-a-days to one on Monday, but he agreed to change the late afternoon practice to eleven a.m. A three-hour practice in the noon day sun was grueling, but the players kept telling themselves it was for a good cause and managed to survive it.

The crowd began gathering in the park about three thirty. Apparently, there was more interest than Matt figured there would be. Most donated a dollar. The bleachers only held about two hundred but the others managed to find places for their lawn chairs and blankets.

The agreement was that no matter which team won how many games, they would play all three in each match-up.

Matt's mother had recruited a dozen mothers - either brave or foolhardy depending on your point of view. They arrived early, thinking they should probably learn how to play before the first game began. Their game would take place in the shallow end thereby hoping to minimize the number of drowned moms by game's end. Mr. Steckel, the undertaker, brought an old hearse with a sign on it: "Mother's Express". It got a good laugh.

The guys would do battle in the deep end requiring leg strength to keep afloat. The owner of the local Pool and Spa store provided blow-up ducky life preserves for the fathers. It made for numerous humorous moments.

The Mothers surprised the girls who hadn't taken them seriously. First game went to the Moms by two points. The girls huddled in a strategy meeting before the second. They took that one by 6. The series was tied one and one. In the third, even by cheating in the worst ways, the exhausted moms went down by eleven. The young folks cheered loud and long that they had won. The adults cheered that all

twelve moms who got into the pool could actually get out under their own power. It had been an enjoyable time for participants and on-lookers alike. The moms collapsed on the sidelines while the girls moved toward the deep end to cheer on the boys.

The fathers figured that since their sons would have gone through six hours of football practice during the past eight, it just might give the old guys some edge. They began with a parade of sorts modeling a wide variety of swimwear - at least that's what they said it was - and, of course, the spiffy, yellow, duckies around their waists. They ended with a high kicking chorus line that brought the house down.

Once they figured their sons had been adequately embarrassed and humiliated, they took to the water in a giant, group cannonball. Although that lowered the water some, it was not enough to allow them to touch the bottom as they had hoped.

"You guys done degrading yourselves, now?" Matt called across the pool to them as he and his teammates stood on the deck all quite purposefully allowing the girls one last look before they entered the water.

Matt's father answered.

"Bring it on! Right guys?"

The other fathers nodded and shook fists in the air humorously demonstrating their fighting spirit.

"And just one more thing, Matt, remember I loved you, Son," his father said as he sunk beneath the surface.

The crowd roared and the boys slipped into the water.

The fathers didn't fair quite as well as the mothers had. In the first game, they lost by ten. At that point three of them had legs give out so they gave up and sat on the side. To be fair - as if any of this were really fair - three of the boys removed themselves as well, using an odd man out hand game they had played as kids.

In the second game, Matt's father, by then wearing two duckies - one front and one back - actually spiked one past his son. He got out and took a victory lap around the pool before the game could continue. The onlookers got to their feet and applauded and whistled as the man pranced by, every bit as graceful as a bull elephant. Everybody liked Matt's dad. He

was always ready with a good word and was upbeat about life in general.

Still, the sons won by thirteen. In game three it was down to four on four. The fathers failed to score a single point, but they seemed as pleased as if they had just won the Olympics.

Apparently collapsing the two-a-days had done little to affect the boys - of course, one did have to consider the quality of their opponents.

Everyone seemed to enjoy the picnic that followed. Family time was important to the folks of Woodsville.

For the championship game the net was placed side to side across the pool at the point where the shallow end became the deep end. The boys would be on the deep side and the girls in the shallow. The boys protested. The girls made fun of them. Eventually, the first game got underway.

The girls played the boys close losing by only two. The boys huddled before the second deciding to let the girls win. The girls would serve and the boys would all sink beneath the surface. It was a blow out.

By game three, the boys were back to being serious and the girls resorted to their own devious plan. A dozen girls - not players - clad in bikinis that were barely legal paraded around the deep end teasing the boys in all the right ways to fully distract them.

In the end the boys managed a one point victory which they celebrated by throwing those seductive young ladies into the pool (and then saving them, of course, whether they wanted to be saved or not!). Will enjoyed dunking and then rescuing Amanda. Matt and Sherri also had a good time.

The presentation of the trophy was made by the Mayor.

"It gives me great pleasure to award this one of a kind trophy - a watermelon wearing a fancy paper crown - to the winners of the first annual Woodsville . . . What sport was it," he asked?

"Water volleyball," came a chorus of voices from the audience.

"Yes. Water volleyball contest."

Everyone laughed. The boys threw him into the pool before he handed over the trophy. The melon floated. The

mayor sunk. Matt pulled him out. It would be an event to remember.

It was again almost eight o'clock as the four, still clad in bathing suits, met at the porch to count the donations. They needed \$851.00. Becky counted the last few bills out loud: "Eight hundred forty nine, eight hundred fifty, eight hundred fifty one, eight hundred fifty two. A howl went up from the four of them that was heard up and down every street in town. They hugged all around. The girls couldn't believe it when Matt and Will actually hugged. It had been an accident born out of the excitement, but they let it go and shrugged.

Tuesday morning the four would go together and deliver the money to the Superintendent. They sat talking about their accomplishment well into the night. They laughed again about Mickey mowing the wrong lawn and Matt's father dancing his way around the pool. They felt good. They felt close. They silently wondered if at last, there was a new bond among the four of them. None would hold their breath about that, however.

They remained excited even after they reached their own homes; even after they replayed it all with their parents; even after they were in bed.

Once again, five fifteen again came way too soon for the boys, but they wouldn't be late. That would let down the team. It would let down themselves. It also involved an extra five laps around the track and a dozen ten-yard bear crawls.

At nine o'clock sharp they entered the school office. The girls had recounted the money and itemized it on a sheet of paper for the superintendent. Much to the youngster's surprise two board members were also there - John Cramer and Mrs. Kravitz.

The Superintendent and Mr. Cramer stood as the four entered, shaking hands with them. Kravitz sat stiff as a poker saying nothing.

"Here's the money, every last dollar of the forty-eight hundred the helmets cost."

The superintendent paged through a file folder and took out the invoice for the equipment. He frowned.

"There seems to be a problem. The helmets cost \$4,800.00 alright but there is \$384.00 in sales tax, \$120.00 in

shipping and handling and a \$48.00 late payment fee. That all comes to an additional \$552.00. You just don't have enough. I'm sorry about the misunderstanding. It's probably my fault."

The youngsters stood looking at each other dumbfounded. No one could think of anything to say. Eventually the Superintendent scratched out a receipt for the money they had turned in.

"I'll keep the money here for you in the safe. If you can raise the rest, we'll put it together and I'll pay the invoice. If not, you'll have to decide what to do with the forty-eight hundred. Again, I'm so sorry."

Will picked up the receipt and they left without saying another word. Jubilation had quickly turned to the deepest sort of unhappiness.

The people of the community had been so generous they couldn't go back to them. Will offered the hundred and ten dollars he had in his savings account. The others were broke.

"Let's not panic . . . yet," Matt said. "Who was it that said this crew has the smartest and most creative brains in town?"

Becky raised her hand, halfway, sheepishly.

"Okay, then. We still have a little intelligent, creative thinking to do."

They stopped at Matt's porch and sat in silence for some time. One would start to speak and then shake his head and sit back. Then another would do the same. Nothing worthwhile came to mind.

"Let's take a breather," Amanda said. "Sometimes you can think too hard and nothing happens. My porch at three, okay. By then maybe one of us will have come up with Plan B-1 $\frac{3}{4}$."

Her attempt at humor had not worked. They got up and left. It was a sad day in Woodsville.

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CHAPTER SIX

Good News

At two-fifty-five, Amanda's phone rang. It was the secretary at the high school.

"The Superintendent wants to speak with you," she said. "Hold on just a second. . . ."

"Amanda?" came his strong, pleasant voice.

"Yes."

"I think I have some good news for you," he said.

"Good news would really be good, Sir."

It had sounded dumb, but she was so down she didn't even care.

"The missing money," he said. "I've just received an anonymous donation that covers it exactly."

Amanda perked up.

"Donation? I don't understand."

"Neither do I, believe me, but it arrived in a brown envelope a few minutes ago marked 'Helmet fund' and signed 'A Friend'."

"I can't believe it. This is wonderful. Thank you so very much. Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!"

"I'll deposit your money into the general school fund this afternoon and get a check in the mail to the helmet company before I leave today. They should be here by this time next week. The community owes you kids big time."

He hung up. Amanda jumped up and down repeatedly. Her mother watched wondering what had possessed her. Once she heard the news, there were two women jumping up and down there in the front hall.

“What’s going on in there?” Will said, peaking in through the screen door.

“You’ll never guess in a billion, billion, billion years.”

“Your Dad said we could get married and live in the apartment over the garage?”

“No, silly.”

“I give up then.”

“The Superintendent called. Some anonymous donor made up the difference in the money and he’s ordering the helmets this afternoon!”

“No kidding?”

He opened the door and entered, picking up her mother at the waist and swinging her around and around.

“You hear that. We got the helmets! We got the helmets!”

“Yes, I know, and as exciting as it is to be this close to a handsome young man, you are squeezing the breath right out of me.”

“Sorry. I’ll make a trade for your daughter.”

He repeated it with Amanda; there was one addition. Their lips locked and remained that way for a good two dozen twirls around the hall.

“What’s all the commotion in there?” came Matt’s voice through the open door.

“Yeah. We heard you clear up the block,” Becky added.

Beaming, Will and Amanda went out onto the porch and Amanda delivered the good news.

It was Matt’s turn to swing Becky. In the excitement of the moment he planted a big kiss on her lips. It had been one of those things a guy just does at a time like that. He immediately felt embarrassed – and a bit confused; it really hadn’t been half bad.

Although it had surprised everyone, the incident wasn’t mentioned. They took their usual seats on the porch and steps. Becky moved on quickly and voiced the question that was on all of their minds.

“Who in this town would have donated the money?”

There were several possibilities offered.

“Maybe Jake at the car lot. He was an all-state running

back the year we started first grade.

“Or maybe the three ministers got together and chipped in from Sunday’s collection,” Matt said. “We did bring a lot of business their way, you know.”

“How about the teachers?” Will asked. “Maybe they feel guilty about taking the money in salaries that was supposed to pay for the helmets.”

“Or Doc Adams. He loves kids and could easily afford it,” Amanda added.

The fact was, they didn’t know and probably would never know. Anonymous meant anonymous and that was how it should stay.

“I suppose we should just be happy,” Matt said. “If he doesn’t want his name known then we shouldn’t even speculate.”

“We need to call coach Thunder,” Will said.

Amanda handed him her cell phone and he placed the call. They could all hear his happy reaction from across the porch. The ground there in Woodsville may have even shaken just slightly. You see, if Thunder hadn’t been his real name, it most certainly would have been his nickname!! He had a deep, booming voice.

Finally, things were looking up. They each wondered if anything else could go wrong, but none of them mentioned it aloud.

They sat and talked – well, mostly the girls talked and the boys listened – well, mostly the girls talked and the boys just sat there in their own little worlds, smiling and nodding the way guys do when girls go on and on about things.

From time to time Matt and Will sneaked peeks at each other, careful to never let their eyes meet. Each of them was torn between the old, familiar, anger, and new feeling of appreciation for the other’s help. They each hoped the new – terribly uncomfortable – sense of appreciation would soon pass because they were itching to get at each other.

“Well, I guess now there isn’t any reason for this meeting, is there?” Amanda said.

“Suppose not,” Becky agreed.

“Want to go to the pool, guys?” Amanda asked.

“I’m going home to get some sleep before practice,”

Matt said.

Will nodded, not wanting to agree out loud that it seemed like a good idea. Will kissed Amanda and started toward home. It reminded Matt of the earlier kiss and he glanced at Becky's lips, then turned and made his way across the street and up the block to his place. Kissing his best friend – not actually as weird as it sounds out of context – had not been a part of his plans. Having liked it was not even remotely a part of his plans. He managed a good hour's sleep anyway.

That afternoon the race to the locker room door ended in a dead heat. At practice, Coach Thunder reminded them that school started the following Wednesday and the first game with Paxton was on Friday. The early morning practices would stop, but it would be full pad afternoon practices from then on.

"If you work half as hard once you get those new helmets on your heads as you did earning the money to buy them, we're bound to be unstoppable this season."

It was cause for the kind of yelling and whooping and carrying on that only boys that age can produce. Fortunately, no one was permanently damaged through it all and practice went well. Will's arm was much stronger than it had been the year before and Matt punished every would-be tackler that made contact with him.

During that week things came together for the team. A reporter visiting from the local paper described the offensive line as a wall of stone and the defensive line as a division of tanks rolling over anything that got in its way.

On Wednesday, Coach Thunder had a surprise waiting for each player in his locker – the new helmets had arrived. They received a noisy reception and were soon on every head. Coach walked through the dressing room and stood watching the celebration with his hands on his hips.

"You might want to consider wearing something besides the helmets out to practice today, men."

It received a good laugh as they hustled into pads, jerseys and pants and roared out onto the practice field exhibiting an extra measure of energy and determination. Matt and Will were the last to leave for the field. They were

carrying their helmets and paused just inside the door. Matt held his up and Will tapped it with his own. It was a toast to a job well done. Words had not been necessary. They strapped them in place and raced to the fifty-yard line.

* * *

Wednesday night was the dance. Will and Amanda walked to the gym. Sherri lived at the south edge of town so Matt picked her up in the family car. Randy drove to Becky's house and parked the car. It was a beautiful night so they walked the three blocks to the school.

The moon was full and the cloudless sky allowed each star to shine its brightest. A gentle breeze had come up from the north. The boys welcomed it and wondered where it had been all summer during those blistering afternoon practices. The girls mostly worried it would mess up their hair.

The gym was decked out in a Summer's Eve theme with hanging moons in various phases and shimmering stars of every imaginable color and size. That way the lighting could legitimately be dim allowing the privacy teenagers wanted. The music wasn't live, but in reality, that was better. The local bands just weren't all that good and they couldn't afford quality from out of the area. Randy and Matt liked the fast dancing best. Will enjoyed slow dancing with his special girl held close, her head nestled against his shoulder and his face buried in her long, sweet smelling, brown hair.

There was no famous Lovers' Lane in or around Woodsville so after the dance the couples made their ways to private spots they found comfortable. Many returned to the girl's homes where the families understood about giving them their privacy in the living room. There was lots of kissing in Woodsville that evening, but there was lots of quiet conversation as well. They wondered together about how the school year would go; the football team's prospects; how the financial problems that the school faced would affect things; where they would go on their senior trip; and how proud they were of themselves for having come through as a town to purchase the helmets.

By midnight the talking was over and the last kisses had been kissed. The boys made their ways home. Matt pulled into his driveway and walked toward the front door,

removing his tie and jacket as he crossed the lawn. He saw Will and Amanda kissing goodnight on her porch. It sent a strange, confusing, feeling through him. He loved Amanda as a friend and it was fine for her to have Will as a boyfriend. But, did he also feel it was okay for Will to have her as his girlfriend? He wanted Amanda to be happy and she always seemed to be when she was around Will. Did he want Will to be happy? Did he want Will to have someone special, someone to talk to and to hold close and kiss?

It was disturbing to Matt that he could dislike someone so thoroughly and still be able to wonder those kinds of things. The answers should have been a plain and simple, 'No'. He didn't want the lowlife to have anything that was good or pleasant or romantic. It made him angry – really angry – but it wasn't directed at Will like his anger usually was. It was just anger, unattached to anything he could hit or kick or tell off. It was as distressing a feeling as he had ever had. What did he do with anger when there wasn't any clear target? He hit the post on the porch and then went inside and iced down his bleeding, throbbing, knuckles.

* * *

Even though they had been told that a new helmet didn't make the player, some were not fully convinced of that. It seemed like once they arrived things came together in a hurry.

"So, ready for the first big game tonight?" Becky asked Matt as they walked up Oak Street on the way school Friday morning.

"Ready, hyped, and needin' to hurt somebody," he replied demonstrating some boxer's punch-and-prance moves.

"You guys. I don't get it. Why do you enjoy hurting other guys so much?"

"Mostly just because we can, I guess."

"It's a deadly mixture, I'll tell you that," She said.

"What's a deadly mixture?"

"Adrenalin and testosterone."

Matt smiled. Guys enjoyed the effects of both, of course. He tried an explanation.

"The human species wouldn't have survived its early

years without that combo. The men against the savage beasts, protecting their women and children and slaughtering the evening meal. Don't knock it. Without it you and I'd just be specks of dust floating somewhere in space."

Becky wouldn't admit to his logic and wasn't finished commenting.

"Maybe, but you'd think Mother Nature would have installed some kind of shut off valve on you guys that would kick in once we became civilized."

"Maybe Mother Nature doesn't think we're there yet."

"Not if she's basing her judgment on you and Will, that's for sure. Where is Will anyway? You two are usually heck-bent for the locker room door at this time of morning."

"He had a doctor's appointment or something. I'm not his appointment secretary. Why you asking me?"

He sounded put out. It wasn't so much because Becky had asked him. It was more because he actually knew enough about Will's life that he had the answer. That would have to stop!"

School was school. Third hour was Matt and Will's first test in Trig. Again, Matt was irritated with himself for wondering if Will would get to school in time to take it.

'What is this thinking about that low-life all the time?' he said to himself in the quiet of his mind. It was unfamiliar and upsetting.

He was there on time. The boys' eyes met as they went to their seats without comment. There were no nods or other recognition of each other's presence. It resembled two wild animals just wanting to make sure they knew the location of the other.

After school the team met in street clothes on the field for a strategy session. Coach had a new running-back option pass he had them walk through. The left side of the line was flooded with receivers. Will would take the snap and fade back three steps handing off to Tommy behind his back. Then Will would take off down field thirty yards and turn to the right sideline. Tommy would flip it to Matt and Matt would pass to Will. It even fooled their own defense the first time they walked through it. It was one of those plays that would only be used if things got desperate. It depended on the surprise

effect so was not something you wanted to show until then.

In many ways Matt and Will were interchangeable in the backfield. Matt could throw and Will could run. They each felt more comfortable in the positions they played, however.

The game was at Paxton. It was only a half hour ride, but Coach Thunder liked to get places early. Bone jolting school bus rides did nothing for the wellbeing of young men's bodies so they did some stretching exercises as soon as they arrived and then had time to relax before dressing out.

The wild roar they sent up as they took the field was a good indication of things to come. During the opening play from scrimmage Matt ran sixty-six yards for the first score. By the end of the first quarter it was: Woodsville Timberwolves 21. Paxton Pythons 6.

The second quarter was a defensive battle. The T-Wolves managed one field goal. 24 to 6. At half-time they made some adjustments. They weren't doing well running up the middle against a set of super-sized guards. They would fake straight ahead with Tommy, and Matt would run right or left.

The strategy worked. Two more TD's in the third. The defense set Paxton to a negative twelve yards.

By the fourth quarter their opponents had figured out the fake over center and had moved their attention to the outside. Will changed the signal in the huddle. Instead of faking to Tommy he handed off to him. Tommy ran forty yards straight down the middle for a touchdown - the longest of his career. He knew he was in there to block for Matt and that was fine - nobody enjoyed hitting defensive players more than Tommy - but to get a chance like that made it a game to remember.

The game ended in a 31 to 6 blowout. One side of the field was overjoyed. The other was miserable. It was how it had to be in competition. Somebody always (well, almost always) had to lose and when they took it too seriously it made them sad. Football is just a game. The fate of the World didn't depend on it.

At any rate, it was one happy bunch of boys that pushed and shoved their way off the bus when it arrived back in Woodsville that night. The cheerleaders had made the trip

in cars so Amanda and the rest were there to meet them. It involved lots of hugging, some kissing, and a chorus of happy voices. Becky arrived on the student's bus.

The four walked down Oak Street together in their usual formation - girls center and guys well to the outside. Matt and Will replayed the game, addressing the girls – not each other.

“Did you see such and such?”

“What about that such and such?”

“I could hardly believe when old Tommy did such and such.”

It went on and on. The girls listened, thinking it was really great to have the two guys relating so well with each other.

Will walked Amanda home and spent some private time with her on the porch. Matt left the group at his sidewalk and Becky went on to her place. Matt sat on the steps waiting for Will to leave.

Individually, the boys circled around to the field behind Jake's Car Lot and went at it in a particularly vicious way for over an hour. They were bloody and bruised and so completely exhausted – between the game and the fight – that in the end, they just lay there, side by side and fell asleep.

They awoke as dawn was breaking. Several vultures began picking at them thinking they had gone to the great beyond. They certainly looked the part. As they sat up, their stirring scattered the big, ugly, birds.

“You look terrible,” Matt said feeling his own swollen eye.

“Can't look as bad as you do!” was Will's assessment of what he saw.

“Better hit the creek before we go home,” Matt said.

“Wash or fight?” Will asked.

“Just wash be okay, considering the apparent amount of blood we've both lost?”

“Okay. This time.”

They walked together silently – not close but together. It was only a quarter of a mile. The cool, running, water felt wonderful and they lay with their bodies submerged in the shallows without moving for nearly fifteen minutes. Will was

the first to get to his feet. He picked up his shoes and shirt from the bank and without a word headed toward home. Matt followed a few minutes later. Both climbed trees beside their houses and entered their rooms through windows. It was a first for them both – the falling asleep part, not the use of the trees to secretly enter their rooms.

It didn't seem to register with either boy that they could damage each other so badly they would be unable to play ball. Football was football and the thing between them was the thing between them - two sets of beings, the players and the fighters.

It was a totally irrational activity and apparently, no one - other than the boys, themselves - understood how it began and why it continued.

They never spoke of it.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Trouble!

The second game was at home against the Boone City, Bobcats. It was non-conference, but they usually had a good team. It was their passing game that concerned Coach Thunder so he spent the majority of his time that week with the defensive backs. It gave Matt and Will time to work on taking snaps and handing off. One of their bread and butter plays was Will's quick, blind, handoff to Matt behind his back. He would then lead the way blocking between left guard and tackle with Matt on his heels - the only quarterback in the conference (maybe the state) known as a blocking threat. The play was usually good for at least four yards.

All the work paid big dividends during the game. Boone City's passing game was shut down and Matt's short yardage running game was sharper than ever. Time after time he and Will shoved ahead for three, four, five yards at a time.

The two of them had never been so tired after a game, but they figured a 35 to 7 win was worth it. They both slept in Saturday morning.

The next half dozen games, also, went their way with no game closer than ten points. Games eight and nine were against the toughest teams in their conference. They squeaked by the first of those 7 to 6.

In the second, it was down to the final thirty seconds of the first overtime. Their arch rivals, the Cougars, had the ball on the T-Wolves thirty-two. It was a goal line pass. Randy intercepted it and ran it back to the T-Wolves 45. There were eleven seconds left on the clock when the offence took the

field.

“I think this qualifies as a moment of desperation,” Will said looking around in the huddle. They all knew the play - the half-back option pass from Matt to Will. They were up for it. They had practiced it dozens of times. The line had to hold. Matt needed six seconds in the backfield to give Will time to get downfield. They had just one shot.

Matt lined up to the right. It confused the opponent's linebackers and they were still shouting instructions to each other at the quick snap. Will hid the ball behind his back. Tommy grabbed it and faked a run to the left. The three receivers were strung out down the left sideline. All the defensive backs faded toward them. The right half of the field was free. Will was at the five-yard line well before anyone recognized what was happening.

The ball was handed off to Matt. He pumped once and let fly. It was a high arch. It passed the fifty the forty the thirty the twenty the ten. It had plenty of distance; in fact, it appeared to be coming in high, just over Will's head. He leaped as high as he'd ever leaped. His right hand was behind it. He pulled it down and slapped it into his chest, then drew it in tight against his body. He fell across the goal line as time ran out.

His team mates collapsed on top of him - well, all except Matt. He hadn't run down the field. He had done his job and could be satisfied with that without additional celebration. Will was getting the credit, but it had been a team effort so that was okay. It had been a tad high and without Will's thirty-inch leap Matt realized it wouldn't have worked.

That win gave them a perfect season. It clinched a Woodsville home field advantage throughout the playoffs. Life looked good. The celebration went on around town well into the night. At midnight, the four ended up back on Amanda's porch.

The girls chattered on excitedly. The boys listened and grinned, more at their enthusiasm than at what they had to say. They were tired. It had been a grueling game. Ending up at the bottom of a two-ton pile of celebrating teammates hadn't done wonders for Will's body. There would be no encounter between them that night.

Amanda's mouth wouldn't stop talking long enough to mount a satisfactory kiss, so Will said goodnight and started down the walk. Matt followed, and hurried to catch up with him. It was the first time they had been alone together since the game.

"Great catch," Matt said not looking at him.

"Super pass."

"A little high."

"Close enough."

They nodded, neither one remembering giving nor receiving a complement between them before. It was nice, but it was bizarre and out of place. It was not comfortable.

Will headed up the sidewalk and Matt crossed the street. Will sneaked a peek over his shoulder. Matt was watching him at the moment and their eyes met. They held the look for several seconds. It was an important moment for both, but would never be spoken of between them.

Even though they were about as tired as either could remember ever being, neither boy fell asleep easily. There were so many things to think about - the game, the upcoming playoffs, and that glance. It wouldn't have been so bad if their eyes had just met and then moved on but they both held it as if there should be something more - something friendly, perhaps. It was like a question had been asked, but neither understood what it was.

The next morning, they each woke up so figured they must have been asleep. They had the usual morning-after-a-game aches and pains, bruises and scratches. The shower felt great and they each lingered longer than usual.

They were ready for a relaxing weekend to recuperate for the upcoming playoffs.

* * *

Matt and Will had physics together first period. On Friday morning, an office assistant brought a note to their teacher. Coach Thunder wanted to see them immediately. The same thing ran through both of their minds - he's going to give us the 'Stop fighting for the sake of the team' speech. They had heard it many times before. They had always listened, politely. The lecture had never changed things between them.

Their assumption had been way off base.

“Got bad news, fellas,” coach began. “The helmets are gone.”

“Gone?” they said together.

“Stolen, I guess. Sometime last night. I was working here ‘til ten so it had to have taken place after that.

The boys sat down, the energy drained from their bodies. They looked at each other in disbelief.

“I wanted to tell you two in person – you being the team captains – before word got around. I feel terrible, but like I said earlier, it’s not the helmet that makes the player.”

The two sighed in unison.

Matt asked, “Any ideas who or how?”

“The back door was jimmed open, probably with a pry bar.”

“May we look around before we go back to class?” Will asked.

“Sure. I sprung you for the whole period.”

The three examined the door. It was metal, freshly painted purple. The paint had been stripped away where the bar had been inserted. The boys went outside to look around.

“Tire tracks in the mud,” Matt said squatting down to examine them. They soon determined from following the tracks that a vehicle – probably a small truck from the width of the distance between wheels – had pulled in, and backed up to the door. It had left the same way it had entered the area.

Matt spotted something else.

“Look here. The front right tire has a defect – a gouge out of the tread – see!”

They agreed it looked to be a distinctive mark.

“Let’s make a plaster cast of it like we did of the animal tracks for the biology project when we were sophomores,” Will suggested.

Coach wrote a hall pass for Will and he was off to the science lab for the material. While he was gone, Matt continued to look around. There was a short section of fence that ran up to the backdoor separating the driveway from the area in which the lawn mowers and field-stripping equipment were kept.

It might or might not have been significant, but there

was blue paint on some of the wire, as if something had scraped against it. If it had been the truck it would be a good clue. Matt got an envelope from Coach and scraped a sample of the paint into it. Coach watched – a witness, Matt thought, in case a witness might ever be needed.

Will returned with plaster and a roll of steel wire. They had soon mixed the plaster and bent the wire into a handle that would be inserted into it to help remove the cast after it dried. They cleaned the loose dirt and debris from the area they were casting by blowing on it. Seeing both boys on their hands and knees, blowing into the mud until they hyperventilated, made coach chuckle. They bumped heads and were not sure whether to glare at each other or laugh with coach. They compromised by doing neither.

The cast was made, dried, and removed.

“Perfect!” Will pronounced as he examined it. Let it dry ‘til after school and we’ll brush off the dirt that stuck to and we’ll have a perfect Exhibit A.

Matt then showed him the paint scrapings and the place on the fence where some remained.

“Exhibit B, I suppose,” he said.

Will nodded.

“And maybe Exhibit C,” coach said as he leaned down next to the fence and picked something up.

“What?” Matt asked as the boys walked to meet him.

“A head band.”

Will took it.

“And not just any headband. Look. School initials – PHS.”

“Prescott High School,” they said together.

The coach raised his eyebrows.

“Or Pine Hill High School, or Paxton High School.”

The boys frowned. Matt shrugged. Will spoke.

“Well, at least it narrows the field a bit.”

“If it’s really even connected with the theft,” Matt said. “We have no proof that it is. Guys from the other teams have been hanging around here all summer scouting us, remember.”

Coach had a question for them.

“Why do you wet your headbands before practice?”

“So, they’ll stay wet a long time and keep us cool,” Will said, answering.

“Why do they stay wet so long, do you suppose?”

“The way they are made – double, think, stretchy, absorbent, material,” Matt said.

“Do they dry out in your lockers from practice to practice?”

“Not during two-a-days, for sure,” Will said.

“So, what does all that tell you about this one?”

The boys held it between them examining it. Matt’s face lit up.

“It’s bone dry. It rained during practice yesterday. If this had been here then, it would still be wet. It isn’t.”

“So,” Will continued, “It had to have been left here after the rain – seven thirty or so.”

“And probably later than that after the grass there had time to dry out in the heat of the evening,” Coach added.

“It couldn’t have been dropped earlier in the summer, then,” Matt said. “You’re some detective, Coach.”

“I read a lot of Raymond Masters Detective Novels.”

“Me, too!” Matt said. “Wish we had the Clairvoyant Kid here to help us with this one.”*

The two chuckled.

“Can you two hold your meeting of the Literary Society some other time? We got a big problem here.”

“Several, in fact,” coach said. “First, is that we have to get the old helmets cleaned up for the game tonight. Second, we have to keep the team from getting bummed out over it.”

“Bummed out? Don’t use terms like that with the guys or your old-fashioned expressions will bum them out,” Matt said.

It drew an actual chuckle from Will. Matt and Coach were too surprised to react.

“I have an idea,” Matt said. “Who knows about this?”

“Just the superintendent and the three of us.”

“What if we don’t tell anybody including the players?” Matt went on. “Coach, you could give your speech about the helmet not making the player and say you want us to go out there and prove that to ourselves tonight. Something about how the new helmets were collected earlier and the old ones

returned to the lockers. That really wouldn't be a lie, you know. They were collected – by somebody.”

“Not bad! That would give us a week to try and get them back,” Will said, agreeing to Matt’s plan and encouraging Coach to go along with it.

The boys looked at each other, startled at the turn things seemed to be taking between them.

Coach thought it over and eventually nodded.

“But if the helmets aren't found by next Friday, we'll have to tell the team.”

School dragged for the boys. They spoke briefly at noon, discussing whether or not to tell Amanda and Becky. They decided they'd undoubtedly sense something was wrong and bug them until they spilled the news. The boys agreed to tell them, besides the girls were pretty sharp. They'd be good help.

With no practice that afternoon and the game at seven, the boys had from three-thirty until six-thirty to think things through. They were each, privately, surprised at how easy it was for them talk together – of course they had been doing it on ball fields since peewee league, but somehow none of that seemed to count.

They raced to Will's like they always did from school. There was an awkward moment when they stopped. It was as if neither knew how to proceed. Usually, Will turned and went up his walk, and Matt continued on down the street to his house.

“So, how we gonna do this?” Will asked.

Matt laughed nervously.

“Haven't a clue.”

“I guess we could go up to my room. It's air conditioned.”

“Really? Sounds okay, I guess.”

They turned and went up his walk. The girls who were just catching up watched from a distance, dumbfounded.

“You ever been in my house?”

“A few times to tattle to your mom when we were kids.”

Matt followed Will inside.

“Home, Ma,” Will called.

She entered the hall drying her hands on her apron and

was soon speechless.

“Hi, Mrs. Brown,” Matt said, sensing her reaction. “We promise not to destroy so much as one room this afternoon.”

He followed Will into the kitchen. A few minutes later, with sandwiches, a quart of milk and pockets full of fruit, they made their way up to Wills room.

“This really doesn’t feel right, you know,” Matt said.

“Doesn’t change a thing – long term,” Will said. “Just for the time being.”

Matt nodded, suppressing his urge to make a fist as they both shed their shirts. Air conditioning or not, they had brought warm bodies in from a day in the 90 plus heat.

It was a great room for a boy – much like Matt’s actually. Two side-by-side single beds with a night stand and lamp between them at the wall, a dresser, a study table, computer, model planes hanging from the ceiling, several posters on the walls, and other trappings of a teenage boy. They each claimed a bed and sat up against the headboard, working on the snack as they talked.

“Tell the girls after the game?” Will asked.

“Okay. Sounds good.”

“Had to be a truck to hold all those helmets,” Will said.

“Probably not a pickup. The helmets would have been in view. Some kind of a covered truck.”

“A small covered truck,” Will said clarifying.

“That narrows it, but where does it leave us?” Matt asked.

“Maybe if we talked with Jake at the car lot he’d have an idea for us. The more I think about it the more it seems to me those wheels were set awfully close together for a truck. Couldn’t have been as much as five feet, could it?”

“About that I suppose,” Matt said, taking a swig from the milk carton and then passing it back to Will.

“There was a manufacturers tag on the inside of the headband. That might help,” Will said.

“Sounds like the girls’ department.”

Will nodded as he finished the milk.

“So, summing up,” Matt began, “We need to find an odd sized, covered truck, with a unique front right tire, maybe painted blue . . .”

“The tire?”

“No, idiot! The truck.”

Matt slung a pillow at Will who batted it to the floor before it hit him.

“No destruction, remember. We promised!”

“A blue truck, with a scratch!”

“And a school starting with ‘P’ that gets its headbands from the Yumasaki Company.”

“What’s old lady Kravits’s first name?” Matt asked.

“Beelzebub?” Will said, trying to make a joke.

“Seriously!”

“I don’t know. May be in the phone book,” Will said, reaching across to get it from his study table.

“Only Kravitz in the book – Pricilla.”

“Pricilla with a ‘P’,” Matt said.

“What you getting at?”

“Her little bread truck and a headband with a ‘P’.”

“Since when did Pricilla Kravitz go by the initials PHS?” Will asked.

Matt shrugged.

“I’m going to check out her front right tire, just the same.”

“She has a nephew that visits sometimes. Where’s he from?”

“Don’t know. Another thing for the girls’ list.”

“You making a list for them?” Will asked.

“No. Aren’t you?”

“I guess that list making is the girls’ department as well.”

“I better get going,” Matt said reaching for his shirt and pulling it up and under his belt for safe keeping.

Will nodded but made no move to see him out.

“Thanks for the snack.”

“Yeah. Sure.”

*The Clairvoyant Kid: A Raymond Masters Mystery, Garrison Flint, Family Press, Kindle, Nook, Kobo

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CHAPTER EIGHT

A Pillow Fight?

Coach Thunder pulled off the deception about the helmets without a hitch. If anything, the players were more psyched up than if they had been wearing the new ones. They had something to prove and they did. It was twelve to three, Timberwolves at the end of the first quarter.

The second opened with a sixty-yard pass play from Will to Matt. The defense forced a fumble on the Tigers, first play from scrimmage and on the next play Matt ran sixty-eight yards for a touchdown.

“These T-wolves just can’t do anything wrong tonight, folks,” the announcer said. “If they’re doing this well in the old helmets, the Tigers better be happy they aren’t wearing the new ones.”

At the half, it was Tigers three, Timberwolves twenty-eight. It was a joyful locker room that required no motivational words from Coach Thunder. As he prepared to send them back onto the field he managed, “Go out there and just have fun.”

Matt raised his hand, pretending grade school.

“Maybe you hadn’t noticed, Sir, but we have been having fun.”

It drew a huge roar of approval from the other players and Coach motioned them outside with a long sweep of his arm. He noticed that Matt and Will had kept their distance from each other during the halftime break – back to their old ways. It bothered him.

The second half was a repeat of the first. In the end

the Timberwolves won by a score of fifty-six to nine. The girls were waiting for the boys as they left the locker room after the game. On the way down Oak Street, the guys filled them in on the problem and told them how they could help. Will left the group at his place and Matt at his. The girls went on together unhappy about the stolen helmets, but pleased with how well the boys seemed to be getting along.

Matt was still asleep at ten o'clock Saturday morning when he was awakened by a pillow slamming against his head. He opened his eyes and squinted into the brightness of day. It was Will standing there, pillow in hand pummeling him with it over and over – first to one side and then the other. For an instant Matt wondered if it were a dream. The next collision between his head and the pillow convinced him it wasn't. Seeing Matt's eyes open at last, Will tossed the pillow onto the other bed, and sat on it facing Matt. Matt scooted back to sit up against the headboard.

Still not understanding Will's presence, Matt spoke through a frown.

"You've never been in my room before. My mom know you're in the house?"

"Nope. Used the tree. I've seen you climb it a million times."

"You sit at your window watching me come and go through my window?"

"Not really. Didn't mean that."

"Why you here?"

"The helmets. Finding the bad guys. Getting them back."

Matt was not sure what Will's last phrase meant.

"Getting back at the bad guys, or getting the helmets back from the bad guys?"

"Helmets, though, the two of us could probably lay on plenty of hurt before they ganged up and sent us both to La La Land."

It caused the first smile between them either could remember ever having. It wasn't mentioned and vanished the moment they realized what had happened.

"Got a plan?" Matt asked slipping into clean cutoffs."

"Figure we need to check with Amanda and Becky to

see if they've figured out the headband thing. Then we need to get a look at the Kravitz truck."

"Breakfast?" Matt asked, nodding his approval of the suggestions.

"Can always eat, I guess," Will said clearly surprised at the offer.

"This will blow my family away, you know," Matt said, "Me and you coming down stairs together."

"Should make for juicy gossip if your little sister tells it around."

Smile two. They quickly disengaged their eyes and Will followed Matt down stairs.

Matt kissed his mother and twirled his sister around several times. It was a loving family that enjoyed showing affection to one another.

"Got food for two starved Timberwolves?"

"Sure. Eggs, pancakes, bacon - that be all right?"

Her words were okay, but the way her usually rosy complexion drained to grey was not.

"So long as it's food," Matt said as he poured two large glasses of orange juice. The boys sat at the table. Little sister was off to spread the word. She figured it had to be the best piece of gossip to come along in her entire lifetime! Will was clearly uncomfortable. Matt's mother would not ask what was going on, but she was a mother so she'd come as close as she dared.

"You two have plans for today?"

The question caught Matt off guard. Will came through.

"Got some tire trouble. Team stuff. Matt and I are going to take care of it."

Matt nodded hiding his grin in his glass while looking at Will out of the corners of his eyes.

The boys got right down to eating and had nothing to say to each other although Matt's mother kept them each engaged in conversation with her. She sensed the strain and did what she could to minimize it, though, truth be known, she had no idea what was really going on. She doubted it had anything to do with team tires, however.

The boys stood, wiping their mouths on napkins. Will pushed his chair back under the table, prompting Matt to,

uncharacteristically, do the same.

“We’ll be glad to do the dishes, Mrs. Green,” he offered, much to Matt’s surprise.

His mother smiled, impressed with the boy’s manners.

“Thank you, but that’s okay. I’ll just set them in the dishwasher and run them after lunch.”

“If you’re sure. Thanks for breakfast. It was really great.”

Matt had, of course, never seen Will in that kind of a setting, so didn’t know what to expect. The visitor had certainly put his own manners to shame. Matt kissed his mother good-bye.

“Love ya. Don’t know when I’ll be back. For supper for sure.”

The two left through the kitchen door and headed around the house on their way to Amanda’s. Noticing they were walking too close together they separated as they approached the street.

Matt seemed to find it more difficult to keep his anger out of mind and that fact only made him *more* angry. And the manners thing – how dare Will waltz into his kitchen and make him look bad? Before he could boil over Amanda called to them from her back yard.

“Back here guys.”

She and Becky were tanning. The boys were met with up-stretched hands offering squeeze bottles of sun screen. The girls turned over onto their stomachs. Will began smoothing lotion onto Amanda – gently and slowly, clearly enjoying the process.

“Seems you only think we’re good for one thing,” Will said, joking with Amanda.

“Well, maybe two,” she said smiling, recalling the night before.

“So. The headband. Any ideas?” Matt said as he knelt beside Becky and began doing his part to protect her back in the never-ending battle against UV rays.

Applying the lotion to Becky had always been a routine thing before – just person to person. That morning it seemed different – more pleasant in some way. He noticed how soft her skin was and realized she was a girl not just a friend.

“We went on the internet last night and found some companies that handle that brand. One is up in Lowell. Does specialty imprinting – called, Attention to Detail. Don’t know for sure how that will help.”

“Got a phone number?” Will asked.

“Yeah And fax and email,” Becky answered.

“We can take turns calling, pretending to be somebody from one of the ‘P’ schools checking on an order. We can probably at least find out if any of the schools has ever placed an order with them.”

“You’re an evil genius,” Becky said.

Matt wasn’t sure it was an honest thing to do, but didn’t voice any opposition. There were just three schools and there were three other kids there. He’d find a way to opt out and let them handle the shady operation.

It was the boys’ turn for lotion. They pulled off their shirts and sat cross legged while the girls knelt behind them and took their turns. Again, it felt different to Matt – nice, great, but still, different.

Becky did his back and arms and started on his chest. He took the lotion from her and said:

“Don’t want to overwork you. I can do the rest. Thanks.”

She thought it was a bit strange, but soon put it out of her mind as he finished his front and legs. Having her touch him, was giving him feelings a best friend shouldn’t be getting from a best friend. Suddenly, Matt’s life seemed filled with confusing feelings. He didn’t like it. He was seventeen. He thought life was supposed to start getting easier. (What fairytale had he been reading?)

Fifteen minutes later the boys were on their way across town to the garage where Mrs. Kravitz kept her vehicles. It wasn’t locked. They entered. Her Chrysler was on the right and the old, brightly painted truck was on the left. They went immediately to examine its front right tire. It was flat. It was also hard to examine it in the darkness of garage. They hadn’t thought to bring flashlights.

Matt searched the place and located a mechanic’s light on a long cord. Will found an outlet and they returned to the tire. It still wasn’t easy to get a good view up under the body

of the truck.

“Bingo,” Will said at last. He removed his head from the wheel well and allowed Matt to take a look.

“Plain as day,” he said, agreeing. “Now what?”

“Not sure. Probably should make a cast of it to show that it matches.”

“Good idea,” Will agreed. “It means we’ll have to come back later.”

“This truck won’t go anywhere with a flat,” Matt pointed out. “I can’t believe old lady Kravitz actually stole the helmets. She’s just bound and determined to spoil things for the Athletic Department.”

“She worked so hard to defeat the referendum that maybe she’s angry we found a way around it,”

As they stood up preparing to leave, Matt pointed at a jack firmly positioned on the right side of the front bumper.

“Strange,” he said. “Maybe somebody started to change the tire and got interrupted or something.”

“Probably,” Will agreed.

They left, being careful so no one would see them. They had not been careful enough.

“What was you guys doin’ in there?” came a high-pitched voice from behind them.

They turned around to see what they were facing. The good news was it was not Mrs. Kravitz. The bad news was it turned out to be Butchy, the biggest trouble making, foulest mouthed, nine-year-old the town had ever known. The word on the street was that his mother would give him five dollars in the morning and tell him not to come home ‘til after dark unless he was bleeding.

“Something about that wheel, I know,” he said. “Cost ya five bucks fer me ta keep my mouth shut about you two bein’ in there. Me and Kravitz is pretty thick, ya know.”

The boys looked at each other. They really wanted to pound him into a pulp – no, into red slime - but gave that up in favor of sorting through their wallets until they managed to come up with five dollars.

Will held it out and Butchy reached for it. Will raised it well above the little boy’s head.

“For five bucks, you’ll have to tell us what you know.

Otherwise it might not be worth it to us. If you don't really know anything we aren't going to pay."

Matt thought it had been a surprisingly good move on Will's part. Perhaps he had dealt with blackmailers before. That raised a pile of questions he would rather not consider at the moment. Butchy spoke.

"Three guys. About your age. Every other word was a cuss word. I know'd what they meant a course. It was Thursday night. Late. Drove up in a little blue van like thing. Weird looking. Never seen it before. Front right tire was low. They took off the wheel and took it into the garage. Pretty soon they come out with a different one and put it on their truck. It wasn't flat. They backed out and left."

"Did you know them?"

"Could have been you two and one more; it was dark."

That was getting them nowhere. Matt had an idea.

"How did you know the wheel they brought out wasn't the same one they took inside? Maybe they patched the tire and blew it back up."

"Wrong wheel."

"Wrong, how?"

"Plain old hubcaps on the one they brought out. The truck had fancy ones – like on a bike, sort of."

"Spoke wheels," Matt said. "I don't suppose you got a license plate number, did you?"

"Fer five bucks you want a number?"

Matt walked toward him in a threatening way.

"Okay! No number, but it was a Arkansas plate, I know that much. Had a sticker on it with next year's date."

"Did they say anything?" Will asked.

"You're wantin' a awful lot for a measly five bucks."

Matt took two more steps in his direction, removing his T-shirt and rolling it long-ways, snapping it between his hands. The youngster put his hands to his throat and nodded.

"Okay. Okay. Back off. One a them said something like, 'Auntie's in bed by nine every night. She'll never even know we was here'. One more thing, just before they left, the one doin' most a the talkin' come back out a the garage carrying another wheel - like maybe a spare. I don't know."

"A spare from the truck?" Will asked.

Butchy nodded and shrugged indicating it could have been.

“What were you doing here so late that night?” Will asked, more concerned than inquisitive as he handed over the five dollars.

Butchy responded with a smug look and crossed arms.

“Probably none a your business, but I was waitin’ on my girl to do some heavy kissin’ an stuff.”

“You’re nine years old, for gosh sakes,” Will said. “You’re supposed to be chasing girls with frogs and woolly worms, not kissing on them – let alone whatever stuff you had in mind. Act your age. You only get to be nine once. Enjoy it, my man!”

Matt was surprised by the emotion with which Will delivered his little, pre-facts of life talk to the boy. It was something else to wonder about.

Although neither of them had any way of knowing, it was the first time anybody had really showed Butchy they cared about his welfare. It was a very important moment in the little boy’s life.

CHAPTER NINE

A Mysterious Blanket

Since it had been established that Aunt Pricilla was in bed by nine, the boys waited until ten to return to make the cast. They found everything just like they had left it.

“We need to rotate the tire about 90 degrees so we can get at it to plaster it up,” Matt said.

“I’ll jack it up,” Will suggested, “And you tell me when it’s turned enough.”

“Good plan.”

It was soon accomplished and Will let it back down just enough to steady the wheel. The plaster was mixed and applied and thirty minutes later had been carefully removed.

“Should we wipe the tire clean of the white stuff?” Will asked.

“Does it really matter?”

“If she finds out we made the cast she could have the tire destroyed and then we’d have no evidence against her,” Will pointed out.

“Rags?” Matt asked. “Where will we find some rags?”

“In the back of the truck,” came Butchy’s voice out of the darkness.

“Butchy? You should be home in bed, young man,” Will said in his most fatherly tone.

Matt grinned about it back in the shadows.

“Can’t. Mom’s got company ‘til midnight.”

The boys knew about her ‘company’ – her hundred-dollar a night company. Time was, when Will had considered being one of her ‘guests’. He came to his senses and didn’t

follow through.

“How do you know about the rags?” Will asked as he followed the little boy around to the back door of the truck.

“I stay in there sometimes. Rags make a good pillow.”

Will opened the door and lifted Butchy up so he could reach what they needed.

“Got Ho Ho’s and chips in here if you’re hungry,” he said all quite seriously. “And a kerosene lamp fer light.”

“Just the rags, thank you, and better be careful with that lantern. You could burn yourself up.”

The tire was soon clean and they were ready to leave. At the door Butchy pointed to the ground.

“Looks like ya dropped somethin’ there, Willy.”

Will looked, privately amused at being called Willy. What he saw was a five-dollar bill. It raised questions. He had brought no money with him and Matt was lucky to ever have more than one on him at a time. It became clear what was happening – Butchy was returning the blackmail money. It was not clear, why.

Will played along, looking at Matt with his finger to his lips indicating silence.

“Looks like somebody lost something for sure.”

He bent down and picked it up.

“It’s yours alright,” Butchy said. “Saw it fall out a your pocket when ya first come in tonight.”

It had been a bare faced lie, of course, but for some reason the boy wanted Will to take it back.

“Thanks, I suppose, Butch. I’d sure have never seen it if you hadn’t pointed it out.”

“That’s okay. It’s what friends do, ya know.”

He smiled up into Will’s face, content to ignore Matt entirely.

Suddenly they were friends, Will told himself. That was nice. That was confusing. Will didn’t have time for a new little brother. He was the youngest in his family and had no idea what you did with a nine year old, smudge-nosed, ragamuffin who swore like a sailor and made out with the girls.

“You be okay ‘til midnight?” Will asked.

“Sure. Like I said, got a stash of goodies and a Gameboy. I’ll do fine. Trish won’t be by tonight so you don’t

need to worry about that kind of stuff.”

Matt and Will left, both bothered about the little squirt but content knowing that he probably knew more about surviving on his own than the two of them put together. And it was Woodsville, for goodness sake, where the crime of the century had occurred when some teenagers painted “T-Wolves Rule” on the water tower back in 1989.

It was after eleven – too late to check in with the girls. They walked down the alley behind the stores on Main Street both understanding why they had taken that route. They stopped behind the café. Matt, who was carrying the plaster cast in a brown bag, placed it on top of the dumpster. Will was immediately out of his shirt.

“Five undefended punches?” Matt asked

Will nodded. They did the odd man out thing with their fingers and Will got to throw the first blow.

It was thrown hard and fast to Matt’s mid-section, bending him over for a long moment. He straightened up and threw his best right into Will’s left cheek. Will spit blood. He returned the blow to Matt. More blood. Then it was a punishing right into Will’s stomach. He dropped to his knees, losing his breath, finally struggling back onto his feet. From there on the blows had lost most of their power. A few more to jaws and heads and they were done – actually they were lucky either one could still count to five.

Matt picked up the sack and left on a slow, weaving, trot. Will had taken the worst of it and he staggered toward the street light at the end of the ally, two blocks away. By the time he reached home, he didn’t have the strength to climb the tree so he stretched out in the grass below it and was soon asleep.

* * *

Will awakened the next morning to a rooster announcing the dawn. He found himself under a blanket. His shoes had been removed and his shirt – carefully rolled up - cradled his head. He sat up. My how it hurt to sit up. His ribs hurt. His face hurt. His fists hurt.

“Hey,” came an overly cheery young voice. Butchy plopped down on the ground beside him.

“Gottcha a bottle a water. Figured soda’d just burn the

inside a your mouth.

Will accepted the water without comment surprised by the logic the little squirt displayed.

“You cover me up?” Will asked.

“Nope. Found ya like that ‘bout one this morning.

“What were you doing here at that time? I thought we agreed you’d go home at midnight.”

“I don’t remember no agreement about it. I figured you two would have it out. Nobody can figure you twos hanging out together all of a sudden. I knowed it was too good ta be true.”

“So?”

“So, I come lookin’ for ya. Made the rounds – creek, Jake’s, football field, park. You wasn’t at any a them places so I figured you’d be here. Planned to climb up and take a look through your window to make sure, but found you down here all cozied up under the blanket.”

“And you stayed here with me all night?”

“Mostly – sort a. Went off the get the water about four thirty. Figured you’d be up with the first light.”

“Didn’t you freeze? It must only be sixty now.”

“I said I stayed with ya sorta. Mostly, I slept up in your bed. Pretty nice. Not really very soft, though.”

Will started chuckling. It hurt so much, but before it was over, the chuckle became a full blown, bend in the middle, laugh.

“You are a piece of work, Squirt.”

He reached over and tousled his hair. It was obvious that Butchy – suddenly Squirt – liked that. He leaned himself into it and remained motionless. He clearly wasn’t used to be touched with gentleness and affection.

“Now, little buddy, I somehow have to get up that tree so I can get cleaned up and changed before my parents see me this way.”

“You’ll never make it.”

“I won’t?”

“Nope. Ya groaned all night so I figured you’d not be up to climbin’. I brought you down new jeans and a tank top, and a wet wash cloth and deodorant. It’s all around back. Figured you wouldn’t want to be changing out here on your

front lawn.”

“You’re a good – and unpredictable – little friend, Squirt. Thank you. Now, I want you to get yourself back home. Your mom will be worried about you.”

“Yedah. Sure. Okay. See you later. Goin’ to church?”

“Oh, yes. My Dad wouldn’t let a little thing like a couple of my bruised ribs keep me away from church.”

“Oh, and here’s a comb. Your hair looks awful.”

“Looks like my comb from Branson.”

“It is. Right dresser drawer. Don’t worry. I didn’t steal nothin’. Ya don’t steal from your best friend, ya know.”

So now it was best friends. Some relationships moved way to fast.

Squirt was on his way. Will was soon changed and presentable with face washed, fresh clothes, hair combed, and smelling like Old Spice under his arms. He entered the kitchen. His mother was there.

“You didn’t come home last night. I was worried.”

“Oh. I slept out in the lawn. Should have told you. Sorry. Better get upstairs and shower. He gritted his teeth and moved past her as if each step were really not sending waves of unbearable pain throughout his body.

Across the street and down the block Matt wasn’t fairing much better. He was puzzled by how just five punches could have torn him up worse than the usual hours’ worth of brawling. Apparently, he protected himself better in an actual fight than he realized. Free punch sessions would have to be avoided or, at least, cut back to three.

He was pleased at how, with one blow he had sent Will to his knees. He immediately felt uneasy being that pleased about hurting someone else – it was Sunday morning and it seemed un-Christian to delight in such things. It had been a problem for him before, but apparently not enough of one to stop trying to punish Will. Sometimes he wondered if there had ever before been such a relationship – one based solely on the mutual desire to inflict extreme pain on each other and both agreeing to participate, over and over again, in the contests necessary to carry it out.

Becky had once likened it to the way city gangs and certain countries maintained bloody, hate-based, conflicts

between them for reasons no one else could possibly understand. He supposed she was right. He had convinced himself he didn't actually hate Will – that certainly would have gone against his beliefs. It was more like a parent punishing a child for its own good. Of course, he didn't believe in spanking kids, so that was bogus, too, but he chose not to make the connection.

Both boys' families went to early church services. They attended different churches – something the ministers and congregations were undoubtedly pleased about. They could just see a fist fight breaking out during the collection. Becky went to Matt's church and Amanda attended the third. Religiously, the four of them had all bases covered there in Woodsville.

As the service began in Will's church, Butchy squirmed in beside him along the aisle, smiling up with dirty face but clean shirt. He had attempted to tie a tie he acquired from who knows where. Green and red diagonal stripes on a blue and yellow poke-a-dotted dress shirt. Some in the room smiled and others seemed embarrassed. Will was not. 'The kid had decided to come to church for gosh sakes, he thought. Grow up and practice what you preach, people.'

Will turned toward the boy and first retied the tie and fitted the collar in place over it. Then he took out his hanky and gave the boy's face a quick spit bath – something he had hated in the worst way as a kid. 'I've become the boy's mother,' he thought to himself.

No one sat prouder than Squirt that Sunday. No one sang louder or more off key than Squirt that Sunday. When the minister recognized visitors and new comers, Butchy stood up and in his loud, raspy voice, announced his name.

"I'm Butchy Langhorn. Will, here, is my best friend and he calls me Squirt. It's the second time I've been to services. The first time was when Ma brought me to be baptized. I guess I was just a little kid 'cause I don't remember about it."

There were a few chuckles and a definite mummer up and down the pews of smiling church goers.

"Well, Butchy Squirt Langhorn, we are all happy to have you with us here today," the minister said.

Butchy wasn't through.

“I got a buck for the collection. I’m no freeloader.”

Will pulled him back down into a sitting position and placed his arm across the back of the pew behind him. In case the lad decided to pop up and offer more information he’d be in a good position to restrain him.

Aside from swinging his legs so they often hit Will’s sore muscles and a few outbursts of whistling, Squirt conducted himself rather well.

The look Will got from his mother at the conclusion of the service, was one just filled with questions. Will shrugged and motioned with his hands that he wasn’t sure how it had come about. Squirt was going to be hard to explain without references to the stolen helmets – which was not for anybody to know – and his last fight with Matt – which his parents had long ago determined was not a topic for discussing with them.

So, he chose not to offer any explanation. Outside he patted Squirt on the head and said:

“You look good this morning. Interesting outfit. Pick it out yourself.”

“Sure did!”

He grinned the grin of all grins. If Will’s hip pocket had been large enough, one got the idea Squirt would have taken up permanent residence there. It was one of those things that was both funny and sad. Will wasn’t sure how he was going to handle it. Until he figured that out he’d just be content with a new little buddy. There would have to be some ground rules, number one being not to be around during his private time with Amanda.

Speaking of Amanda, there she was waiting patiently for him to get out of church.

“I’ll see you later, okay,” Will said. “I sort of need to be with Amanda for a while now. Teenager stuff you understand.”

“Kissy, kissy, kissy?”

It had been a serious question.

“Probably really none of your business but some of that, I suppose.”

He was surprised by the boy’s response. It began with a series of studied nods.

“I’ve heard that if a guy your age don’t get enough

kissin' he gets spots on his face so I'm glad you got her."

He turned and left. Will had apparently just received Squirt's permission to do lots of kissing. He suddenly really liked the little . . . squirt.

He went right to work according to his new directive and kissed her – gently and quickly – in a manner that was fully acceptable in public there in his home town. They walked home together.

"Lose a blanket last night," he asked her.

"What?"

The look in her face confirmed it had not been her. From his mother's earlier reaction, it had not been her. His dad would have awakened him with his foot and taken him inside by the ear. Little sister would have run to tattletale. That just left one very unlikely benefactor.

Amanda continued:

"Becky and I think we need to get together and concoct some better plan to catch the dirty, low down, slimy, scum that stole the helmets."

"I can tell the sermon did you world's of good," Will joked.

She backhanded him in his stomach – right where he should not have been backhanded. It was still super-sensitive from Matt's pounding the night before. He winced. Showing no compassion, she stomped her foot.

"You and Will last night? I thought that was over with!"

"Whatever gave you that idea?" Will said, honestly puzzled.

She folded her arms and looked away, too upset to answer. They walked on in silence. They passed his house and went on to hers.

"I'm going to change clothes, she said. "You go home and do the same. Becky and Matt will be here in ten minutes. You can come if you want to."

Will had never seen Amanda that upset with him. They hadn't parted without a kiss in years, but he made no move toward her and she turned and went inside. He walked home, noticing that he was moving better and the pains were somewhat less. In ten minutes, he was back. The others were already there on the porch. Becky was sitting – arms

folded – with her back to Matt. Apparently, Amanda had spilled the beans about the night before.

Both boys were having the same thoughts. Why couldn't the girls just stay out their business? It was like everybody in town thought they should get some say about it – teachers, ministers, even then mayor had lectured them. It made them angry and being angry only ever led to one thing and they really weren't up to it that morning.

The boys caught each other's eye and nodded.

"Girls in a snit, I take it," Will said/asked.

"Major snit, I'd say," Matt said back.

Will saw the chance to tease the girls and maybe break the deadlock.

"Well, Matt, if they aren't going to speak to us, maybe it would be a good time for us to down to the creek for an hour or so."

Matt understood.

"I'm ready. I've been ready ever since I woke up hurting this morning."

Actually, that had not been a lie.

They drew their faces tight and serious and together made a move as if to leave.

"Okay. Okay." Amanda said. Becky turned around.

"We have more important things – no, we have a different set of important things to work on right now."

The boys sat on the steps, probably prouder of the scam they had just pulled off than they should have been. Will related what they had learned at the Kravitz garage the night before and they talked about what it might mean.

"The tire tread is a perfect match and the distance between the wheels is also right. The thing is, Butchy has information that seems to clear her."

He went on to outline what they had heard.

"So, either of you know who that nephew guy might be," Matt asked the girls.

"It's not a big help, I'm afraid. Mrs. K has two brothers and a sister and they each have a teenager."

"But where do they live?" Will asked hoping to narrow it down a bit.

The girls looked at each other. They didn't know.

“Put it on your list, then . . . if you will please,” Will said deciding he needed to tread lightly.

“We can take care of that. Have the answer before sunset.”

“You think you can trust what Butchy said? I mean, he’s not the most reputable being in town.”

“Well, with the jack and all the way we found it inside, it tends to support what he said. Plus, we paid him five dollars for the information and Matt threatened to strangle him if we found out it wasn’t the truth.”

“No I didn’t,” Matt began. “Oh, yes, I guess I did. How unlike me.”

The boys snorted, looking away from each other.

“You paid the little snitch?”

“But it all turned out alright. He gave us back the money.”

“He what?”

“That reminds me,” Matt said, “Two dollars of that is mine!”

Will opened his wallet and tossed two bills in Matt’s direction. Matt picked them up and nodded. Will nodded back.

Becky tried to redirect the conversation to the matter at hand.

“Once we find out where her nephews live we can take some fieldtrips and see if we can find that little blue truck.”

“Little blue truck with the scratch on it,” Matt added.

“Little blue truck with the wrong front right wheel on it,” Will added to the addition.

“What if he didn’t mean what it sounded like he meant?” Amanda asked.

“You’ve lost me,” Will said.

“What Butchy said. About not waking his aunt. Maybe he was just being thoughtful and really wasn’t trying to keep their presence there a secret from her.”

“So,” Will said continuing his questions. “That would mean what?”

“So, if he wasn’t concerned about her knowing they were there then maybe she was in on it. Maybe she paid them to steal the helmets.”

“Your mind works in strange ways – but I like it,” Matt said.

Will looked at his watch.

“Gotta run. Early Sunday dinner at my house today.”

“Me, too,” Matt said.

They stood and left down the sidewalk together, stopping for a moment before parting at the street.

“I returned your blanket – back steps,” Will said.

“I found it,” Matt said.

Will nodded, looking Matt in the face.

Matt nodded back. The conversation was over.

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CHAPTER TEN

The Road Trip

On Monday morning, the Superintendent called Coach Thunder, Matt, and Will to his office during first period. The county sheriff was there as well.

“I couldn’t postpone calling in the authorities. You will need to inform the team about the theft, I suppose. Sheriff Watson will appreciate hearing anything you may know.”

Withholding evidence from the police was not a good thing. The Boys looked at coach to see how they should proceed.

“I’ll be glad to show you where it all took place, Sheriff,” Coach began. “The back door was jimmied open – that much I’m sure of. The players’ lockers are never locked - we just don’t have any problem with theft around this little school.”

The boys got the message: Coach was protecting their investigation, for the time being at least. If the Sheriff found what they had found, then he could follow up on it. If not, and if their own investigation didn’t pan out, then they would give what they had to the investigators.

The Sheriff addressed the boys.

“Any ideas, suspicions?”

Will spoke, knowing Matt wasn’t into shading the truth.

“Well, there’s Mrs. Kravitz of course. She obviously didn’t want us to have the helmets.”

The Superintendent and Coach Thunder squirmed uneasily at his comment. He continued.

“The most likely candidates, I suppose, would seem to be our rival school – Prescott.”

The sheriff looked at Matt who just nodded and shrugged. He was a terrible liar even when he didn't say anything. The sheriff suspected there was more but didn't press.

The meeting was over and the boys returned to class after a short, whispered, conference in the hall with Coach. They filled him in on the Kravitz connection with a nephew whose whereabouts was still unknown, but indicated the girls were hot on his trail.

At noon, Will and the two girls placed calls to the headband company inquiring about orders from the Prescott, Paxton and Pineville High Schools. Both Paxton and Prescott had purchased in time for homecoming deliveries - well over a month before. They had no record of a Pineville order.

They were quite proud of themselves. Even Matt was impressed that it had been pulled off with a minimum of outright lying. Becky had made the first call and set the pattern for the others.

"Hi. I'm calling to check on a headband order for Prescott High School. I just need to know when it was shipped so we can plan ahead for next time."

"Looks like it shipped on September fifteenth. Order was placed on August twenty first."

"That about the usual delivery time?"

"Three to four weeks. Yes."

"Thanks for your help. Really appreciate it."

Matt had to wonder why the person at the other end of the phone didn't get suspicious after receiving three such similar calls all within a half hour. Perhaps each one had been taken by a different person. That made sense.

After school Amanda had some more important information. A friend of a friend of a friend of Mrs. Kravitz knew one of the nephews. His name was Brian Kravitz, he was sixteen, and he went to Prescott.

The boys went to the locker room to check the Prescott team roster with Coach. No Kravitz. That posed a problem.

"Could be he's the equipment manager or something," Matt said thinking out loud.

"Or just a kid trying to get in good with the team," Will suggested.

The boys met the girls and decided that it was worth a trip to Prescott. Amanda had an idea. She called Directory Assistance for Prescott.

"I need the number and address for Brian Kravitz - I'm not sure if that's the correct first name."

"I have a William Kravitz in Prescott. Only Kravitz in the book."

"William! That's right thanks."

"One moment please."

The recorded message was delivered and then repeated. They had what seemed to be the boy's address and phone number.

"Good going Manda," Matt said clearly impressed.

"How about just repeating that with Directory Assistance in Paxton," Will suggested.

She tried again. There were five Kravitz families.

"No help, I'm afraid."

"Not necessarily," Matt said. "We get the addresses and check them out for the truck. Only five. That's a whole lot easier than driving up and down every street in town looking for it."

The others brightened at his idea. An all-day Saturday adventure was planned. Will was sure he could get the car - the pickup would be too crowded and it had Timberwolves stickers all over it, which would make them stand out immediately as unwelcome visitors. The girls offered to pack a lunch. Will would bring a camera.

"Take swimsuits and we can stop off at the Lake of the Woods on the way back," Amanda said.

Suddenly their day of sleuthing was turning into a pretty nice outing.

The first playoff game was Friday night against the Marshaltown Mavericks, the eighth seed in the conference. The T-Wolves equipment managers had repainted the old helmets and they looked pretty good. From the stands, it would be hard to see the dents and dings.

The first string had taken a 30 to 0 lead at the end of the first half so coach put in the second team to start the third quarter. Coach Thunder was a cautious man and didn't want to risk injury to the players he knew he'd be needing during

the rest of the playoffs.

As the offense would come off the field, Matt would huddle with the running backs and Will with the quarterbacks to offer suggestions and encouragement. Neither of them was one to just sit and watch during a game. In the end, the T-Wolves won 40 to 9. The second team had played well against the best that the Mavericks had to offer. Best of all, the ambulance at the South end of the field went home empty!

* * *

Prescott was twenty minutes South of Woodsville. From there to Paxton was another thirty to the west. The lake was about half way between Paxton and home. They were on the road by eight the next morning. The boys repeatedly got their hands slapped for trying to get into the box that held lunch.

Amanda sat in front with Will and the others in back. Back seats were traditionally the kissing seats, but there would be none of that, that day. After the boys finished replaying the game - play by play - it was the girls who did most of the talking. There were lots of unanswered questions.

“What would they do if they found the truck?”

“Would they try to get close enough to find the scratch?”

“Would they take mud scrapings from the other tires to see if they could match it to that behind the school?”

“What kind of pictures should they take? The odd hubcap on the front right wheel, of course. The scratch if they found it.”

Will suggested rubbing a pencil-on-paper impression of the vehicle’s ID number, probably on the dashboard somewhere. They’d need the license plate number and city tag number. The list of questions had suddenly become long.

The home of Brain Kravitz had no garage. There was a new Chrysler in the driveway. Apparently, Chrysler’s were the choice of the family. Will drove around the block and returned, stopping alongside the street a few houses away.

“What are you doing?” Amanda asked.

“Squirrel hunting,” Will said, smiling, turning to glance at Matt who nodded.

“You’re making no sense,” Amanda said.

Will zipped his lips. Matt explained.

“When you’re out after squirrels and you see them scamper up a tree, they’ll always go around to the other side so they’re out of sight. But, if you just stand still and wait, pretty soon they’re peeking at you from around the trunk. Inquisitive creatures.”

His explanation didn’t dispatch the girls’ confusion. Will continued the explanation.

“Little kids are like squirrels. They’re out there right now and in a few minutes, they’ll show themselves. A few more minutes and they’ll be here asking us what we’re doing.”

“And?” Amanda said, growing impatient with the run around.

“And, when they come up we’ll ask them about Brian and if he has a truck.”

“Oh. I see. That’s actually pretty clever - for a guy.”

Will pulled her close and put her in a friendly head lock. It was worth a kiss or two. They were good about saving their prolonged shows of affection for private times - not wanting to make Matt and Becky uncomfortable.

Sure enough. Sooner than either guy expected there was a knock on Will’s side window. He rolled it down.

“Hey, little man, what’s going on?” he began turning in the seat so he could talk easily with him.

“Saw ya here.”

“I suppose you did. You live around here, do you?”

The boy - maybe six years old - pointed with a piece of toast to the house across the street.

“Good place to live is it?” Will asked.

“Good enough. Not many girls. That helps!”

“I suppose you know everybody up and down the street don’t you?”

“Everybody!”

“Brian?”

“Yup.”

He took a bite and chewed.

“Good kid?”

“Okay. Not much time for little kids. Always with his girlfriend.”

“I forget what he drives?”

“Nothin’. Got his license took away when he had the accident last summer.”

“Was that in his truck?”

“Brian ain’t never had no truck. Nobody has no truck at his place.”

Will turned to the others looking as smug as Pooh Bear after locating a new honey tree.

“Well, have a good day. Nice talking with you,” he said, concluding the conversation with the little boy.

They were waved on their way as the car moved onto the street and turned back toward the highway.

“So, one down, I guess,” Amanda stated.

“Paxton, next stop, I guess,” Will said.

“If you see a pop machine, stop. We’re thirsty back here,” Matt requested.

Will nodded. A machine was located and by the time they hit the outskirts of Paxton, the four thirsts had been quenched.

Paxton was a larger community. They had five street addresses and Will had no idea how to find them.

“A little help here, guys,” he said.

“Like a map of the town copied from the phone book in the school library,” Becky asked, her tone and manner rating even higher on the “Smug Scale” than Will’s had earlier.

“Like that, I suppose,” he said. For some reason, it required that he lean over and kiss her - twice.

She had the approximate locations of the houses circled in red. Matt noted their present location from street signs and they were soon turning right on Block Place toward the first address. It turned out to be the home of a widow who had just come out to get her mail. Amanda rolled down the car window and engaged her in conversation. She was every bit as chatty as the kids. Come to find out, she was no relation to the other Kravitz families in town. She did, however, point them in the direction of the only two with teenagers.

Will repeated his “squirrel hunting” strategy at both places. The kids soon gathered and were talkative, but their information only provided dead ends. No truck. One was a girl and the other, a boy. He had been sent off to military

school because of trouble with the law over the summer.

They were disappointed, but wouldn't give up.

"I guess we just need a new strategy," Matt said, trying to put a positive spin on it. Myself, I can't think very well while my stomach's growling. Let's head for the lake and eat. Maybe that and the cool water will give us some inspiration."

The guys would have been happy to eat in the car, but the girls insisted on a blanket spread out under a big shade tree. They found a nice spot - in among a grove of trees - where the shade would stay with them all afternoon.

Once again, Will and Amanda seemed unable to feed potato chips to themselves so they helped each other. It was a nice thing to do, actually. They could look into each other's faces and feel close - special to each other.

Becky tossed olives in the air and Matt caught them in his mouth. He hated olives but enjoyed showing off. They talked together while the other two - well. Matt and Becky had always been able to talk. It was actually about the only thing they had in common. They wondered together about life's mysteries and gossiped just a bit - Matt wasn't really into that, but he understood his friend needed her daily dose. They talked about religion, the future, and what it would take to keep mankind on the right path.

Matt found himself finding excuses to touch her - pretending to read her palm, picking leaves out of her hair, awkwardly falling against her. It was a strange compulsion he felt that afternoon.

By 2:00 they were ready to swim. The dressing rooms were ancient wood and rock structures with a shower in each corner. The guys were changed and outside well before the girls. They were immediately in the water paying little attention to each other as Will began swimming laps across the large roped off bathing area. Matt spent his time under water searching for treasures - a white rock, a small mud turtle, an old sneaker.

The boys raced out of the water to meet the girls as they were spreading towels on the sandy beach. They bawled out the boys for not putting on sunscreen first, then applied a heavier layer than usual, as if that might make up for it. It wouldn't of course, but the guys said nothing, enjoying all the

extra attention. Eventually the girls pronounced everyone ready for the afternoon in the sun. It was late in the swimming season, still, there were surprisingly few people there - mostly young families with kids who stayed in close to shore.

Amanda and Will went out to a far corner of the deep area, content to just be close. Becky and Matt swam and splashed and enjoyed being there as friends. She had brought a blow-up beach ball which Matt inflated. They batted it back as forth as they talked. He wanted to bring up that kiss that he hadn't been able to get out his mind, but was afraid she wouldn't even remember. He enjoyed the fantasy of thinking it had been special for her as well and didn't want to learn otherwise.

From time to time they would all lay out in the sun. The girls had saved back a second box of goodies and brought it out about four. Pie, cake, raspberry tarts. Where the boys put it all the girls couldn't imagine and more amazing yet, neither of them seemed to have an ounce of fat anywhere on their bodies. It was disgusting! (In a r e a l l y hot sort of way!)

By five they were ready to call it a day. The guys showered off the lake water and changed back into their clothes. The girls decided to remain in their suits. It was nearly six when they pulled into Will's driveway.

Will and Matt hadn't said a dozen words to each other but they had each felt - how can it be described - uncomfortably comfortable there together. They had a good time, but felt they shouldn't have. It was how things were between them. Who but those two could get boiling mad at each other because they had a comfortable time together?

The day had produced no helpful clues.

"Maybe it's best if we just hand it all over to the Sheriff," Will said as they sat on Amanda's front steps thinking back on the day.

"That truck has to be out there some place. You know it does," Matt said not ready to give up.

"Here's a thought," Becky said. "Mrs. Kravitz has a sister. Her married name wouldn't be Kravitz. We need to find out what it is and track her down. The nephew could have a different last name."

The idea perked up their spirits a bit.

"We just need some time to ask around," Amanda said.
"We should have all we need by after Church tomorrow."

It was late. Matt walked Becky next door to her house and they sat a few minutes in her porch swing. Conversation didn't flow as smoothly as usual. Something seemed awkward between them. Things always got that way when they weren't being completely open with each other.

"Well, I better go. I'm going to early service tomorrow. You?"

"Not sure. Probably. Seems like there's a lot more day left than when I go to the 11:00 service."

"Yeah."

Things became quiet.

Matt stood up.

"See you then, maybe."

"Probably."

It suddenly came to him as he was crossing the street. He needed a steady girl. He wanted somebody to kiss whenever he wanted to kiss. It didn't have to be Becky. It didn't have to be Sherri - although she was a good kisser. He'd start some serious looking so night after night he didn't find himself just going home without any romantic moments to enjoy and remember.

He did wonder if it could be Becky. On the plus side, they got along really well - almost never had a difference of opinion. On the negative side, they had no secrets. They had shared every dark moment of their lives - every skeleton in their closets. He wondered if that might not dampen the romantic side of things. He fell asleep playing the possibilities over in his mind.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Playoffs: Game Two

Mrs. Kravitz's sister turned out to be Lucille Keating and lived in Prescott. She had a college age son who attended the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville, thirty miles to the northwest. She also had a daughter who was a senior at Prescott High School. She was a cheerleader and from her description, no one - not even Squirt - would have been able to mistake her for a boy. She had long blond hair and all the feminine attributes cheerleaders usually had.

"So, where does that leave us?" Will asked as the four of them sat, relaxing together on the deck of the town pool early Sunday afternoon.

No one had an immediate answer.

"I think it might be fun to check out that cheerleader," Matt said, hands up, preparing to defend himself against whatever the girls decided to throw at him. That time it was just looks. Will smiled. It hadn't been often he had smiled at something Matt said.

Will became thoughtful. I looked at the blue paint we scraped off the fence. It's a really strange shade - dark with a . . . I don't know . . . maybe a purplish look to it."

"You guys wouldn't know fuchsia from puce," Amanda said. "Let us women look at it."

Will opened his fanny pack and took out the envelope. He handed it to Amanda. She spread it open wide and the girls examined it. Finally, Becky spoke.

"Well, you're right; it is a very strange shade of blue."

Amanda nodded her agreement. "Like no eyeliner or

nail polish I've ever seen."

"That could mean it's a foreign made truck. Where do they have odd shades of color?"

"Italy, Mexico, Japan?" I guess, Amanda said as much a question as a suggestion.

"Who'd know?"

"Carlos might. He moved here from Mexico a few years ago," Matt said.

"Which one is Carlos?" Amanda asked.

Becky had the precise answer that another girl would understand.

Shoulder length jet black hair, high cheek bones, shiny brown eyes, a wonderful smile and a skimpy bathing suit."

"Oh. Sure. He's here this afternoon I think."

They scanned the pool looking for him.

"There, on the ladder to the three-meter board," Amanda said, pointing.

The boys looked. It was Carlos alright although with his hair pulled back in a ponytail they probably wouldn't have recognized him from the rear. Apparently, the girls were more practiced identifying guys from that angle.

A few moments later he pulled himself up out of the water a few feet away. Matt motioned him over. He sank to his knees and sat back on his legs as he smoothed the water out of his hair with his hands.

"Need your expertise," Matt began. "We have a sample of a color here that's not really popular in the states. I was wondering if maybe it was more popular in Mexico. There are so many great, bright colors in Mexican blankets and vests and things."

Carlos was clearly pleased at the compliment Matt had given his native country.

"Sure. Let me see."

Amanda opened the envelope so he could take a look. His face brightened and he nodded then stopped to think.

"Let me see how it would be called in English - azure agate blue. Like the water off Acapulco. You're right I never see it up here. Too bad. Very pretty."

"Is it a color that might be used on cars or trucks?" Matt asked.

Carlos nodded.

“Si, I mean, yes. Sorry. That’s the one word I still slip up on a lot.”

“You don’t have to apologize one bit for your English. The three of us would probably starve in Mexico if we had to survive on our two years of high school Spanish.”

Again, Carlos was pleased with Matt’s kind words. It was the sort of person Matt had always been - trying to make others feel good about themselves. Never putting them down for how they were or what they thought.

Carlos continued.

“Popular for delivery trucks - little trucks, you know.”

“Seen any around here?” Becky asked.

Carlos suddenly smelled something more than a discussion of inter-cultural color preferences, but he didn’t ask.

“No. Sorry. I haven’t. My Uncle can get you some paint if you need it. He works at Ace and often makes special orders.”

“If we get to that point we’ll let you know,” Matt said. Thanks for your information. Or should I say Gracious por bien informacione?”

“Well, no, that really isn’t what you should say -unless your information had been sick - but I appreciate that you tried.”

It was worth a good laugh among the five of them. The girls were right. Carlos had a wonderful smile. He stood and left to join his friends. For some reason the girls seemed to need to watch him walk away. (Probably just concerned that he reached his destination safely!)

“I’d say that has to be progress,” Will said.

“But where does it get us?” Amanda asked.

“Well, maybe we know that we might possibly be looking for a little Mexican made truck of some kind,” Matt said.

“Your certainty overwhelms me,” Becky said. “maybe ... might ... possibly ... of some kind?”

Matt shrugged and they chuckled. Will shoved him at the shoulder the way guys do when they’re teasing.

Matt’s immediate, automatic, reaction was to get to his feet, fists clinched. His heart began to pump fast and

adrenalin gushed into his system. Will remained seated the palms of his hands raised in Matt's direction.

"Just a little fun, Matt. Sorry. Shouldn't have touched you. I wasn't thinking. Really, I'm sorry."

Matt was confused so he ran to the edge of the pool and dove in remaining underwater the length of the pool. He came up and sat in the shallow end with his back against the side. Will had tried to be playful. They had never been playful with each other. He said he was sorry - not once but twice. They had never said they were sorry - because they never were.

Matt was angry - mostly at himself though he wasn't even completely sure why. He'd reacted like an animal that felt threatened. It was all automatic. There had been no thinking involved. If Becky or Amanda or even Carlos had done the same thing to him he'd have smiled and laughed, maybe even pushed back - gently.

Something about his relationship with Will seemed to be coming to a head inside him. It was suddenly very uncomfortable to continue down the path they'd always walked and yet to find an alternative was downright scary. He wanted to scream. He sank to the bottom and screamed the scream of all screams. He felt a little better and swam back to where it had all begun. He pulled himself up onto the side.

Before words were necessary, Will dove in, and swam away. Amanda joined him. It was Becky and Matt alone on the towels.

"I was such a jerk!"

He pounded himself on the forehead."

"Jerk! Jerk! Jerk!"

"What's the sport's saying? No harm no foul?" she said, still uncertain how she could help her best friend.

Matt raised his eyebrows.

"I suppose it was nothing less than he expected from me," Matt said at last.

"I suppose. He did apologize."

"And that makes me feel like pond scum."

"I don't pretend to understand the thing between you two, so I don't have any idea how to help you."

He lay down on his side, his head propped up in his

hand.

“It seems like Will and I don’t understand it anymore, either. I just need to lay here and think a while. You go on and have fun.”

He turned over onto his stomach and cradled his head in his crossed arms.

“Sure,” she said. She hurt for him - she hurt for them both, but that certainly wasn’t a new feeling. She was sure the two boys really thought the problem was just between the two of them - that it only affected the two of them. They were wrong, of course. When you love somebody, it tears you apart to see such bitterness and uncontrolled anger boiling inside them.

Becky was soon in the water. Carlos came to talk with her. They swam together for a while then went their separate ways.

Matt fell asleep. Becky stayed with him and read.* Amanda and Will left. They would all get together at Amanda’s at seven and fine tune their strategy.

* * *

Matt was late. He felt embarrassed to even show up. He had practiced a dozen different things he could say to Will, but none seemed right. So, he just showed up - late.

There was to be no problem. The girls sat facing each other, their backs against posts on the porch above the steps. Will sat on the top step. When Matt arrived, Will raised his right hand. It became a gentle high five and the problem was over.

Neither could remember having done that together before. On the playing field, it was all business between them - no time for such things - especially things that might be misunderstood to be friendly gestures.

Amanda had the news. Her mother had a friend in Prescott who knew the Keating family - Mrs. Kravitz’s sister. They had a pick-up and a car, but neither one was blue - light, dark or in between.

The college age brother had a ‘56 Chevy he had rebuilt himself in high school automotive class. It was medium blue, but he seldom drove it home from school. It appeared to be another dead end.

Matt had a paper due in English so he left early. The others talked for a while but were soon on their ways, also

* * *

The next playoff game was Wednesday against Paxton at home. Excitement was running high at school that day. Last period there was a pep rally in the gym. The team members sat together. Amanda, of course, was with the cheerleaders. Becky sat with some of her other friends.

The co-captains always had to say a few words. Will went first.

“We know we have the skill to beat them. We’ve already done it once this season. It’s just a matter of concentration - execution. You can depend on us to get the job done.”

Matt stepped up to the mike.

“Will said it all. We will deliver you a victory this evening.”

The students screamed and stomped and showed their approval. One got the idea the two of them could have just read from the phone book and the students would have still gone crazy. They loved their Timberwolves at WHS.

It had been big talk from the two of them, but that’s what co-captains were expected to say. They both believed it, however, and what they believed, their teammates believed.

Afterwards, Will, Amanda and Becky walked home together. Matt went for a walk by himself.

* * *

Paxton was larger than Woodsville and they transported kids into the school from thirty miles in every direction so the high school was considerably larger. Those farm boys were strong and made excellent football players. Coach Thunder never took them lightly.

The practices on Monday and Tuesday had been back to the fundamentals - blocking, handoffs, running routes, and defending against the pass. It was looking good, but Paxton wouldn’t be a pushover like their last opponent had been. They had now entered the serious phase of the playoffs and that meant win or go home.

The Pythons arrived in Woodsville in mid-afternoon so they could eat at the local cafe and take their equipment to the

locker rooms. Both coaches had warned their players against mixing with the other team - it was not the time for emotions to explode before the game began.

The few that Will ran across had remarks to make about the sad looking helmets the T-Wolves had to wear. Will kept his mouth closed. Matt showed up just in time to dress and get out onto the field.

They warmed up and stretched and ran a few generic plays - nothing that would give their secrets away. The Pythons did the same. The chess match had begun.

Woodsville won the toss and deferred, choosing to receive in the second half. It was a high, deep kickoff, taken on the four and returned to the Pythons five where the runner was rudely planted like a one-eyed potato.

On the first play from scrimmage the quarterback was buried in the end zone for a safety. After twelve seconds, it was the T-Wolves 2, the Pythons 0.

On their first offensive drive Woodsville went three and out. The backfield tested the Python's line on both sides and straight ahead over center. They seemed solid.

It was a back and forth series of plays in the center of the field, neither team gaining any real advantage. The first quarter ended as it had begun, 2 - 0

The second quarter began with the T-wolves on their own forty. Matt lined up far right. It confused the opposition long enough that on a quick count, Matt got thirty-yards down field without a Python in sight. Will's pass was perfect and at twelve seconds into that quarter it was 9-0, Timberwolves.

On the side line Matt joked to the coach.

"We got a killer first twelve second game, coach. Think we're going to need anything more?"

He got coach's smile and his butt swatted hard enough to sting. Apparently, coach wanted something more.

The Pythons scored on an end around and made the extra point. At the half, the score stood at 9 - 7. It wasn't a comfortable lead but the Timberwolves were still confident.

"We're going to pass the heck out of them next quarter," Coach announced. We'll rotate receivers in and out on every play and before they realize we've run the defender's legs off we'll have marched right down the field.

The plan worked beautifully. It was always fresh receivers against steadily tiring D-backs and safeties.

"Touchdown," the announcer said excitedly as Will completed a nine-yard pass over the center. "Looks like a new strategy from Coach Thunder - and it's working. 16 to 7 the home team."

Three and out for the Pythons. A great punt set the T-Wolves back at their own twenty-three.

Will called the play - it wasn't in the playbook, but Matt had just pointed out to him that he was being left unblocked while the other team concentrated on the receivers. It was a simple plan - receivers on the left ran post patterns at full speed. Those on the right drifted to the left, luring all the defensive backs with them. Matt went in motion to the right and made a bee line for the goal line. Will lofted one that came within reach at the twenty. Matt caught it over his left shoulder and all but walked in for the score.

It was soon 22 - 7. There was no more scoring in the third. Coach's strategy had worked well and the improvisation by Will and Matt had taken advantage of it.

In the fourth quarter, all they had to do was play them even and the game was theirs. Out of necessity the Pythons came out throwing. The Woodsville defenders gave them the short game, but aggressively defended against long yardage plays.

With just under two minutes to go the Pythons had the ball on the T-Wolves ten and passed a quick one for six, soon seven. It was 23 - 14. The ball slipped between the hands of the kickoff returner and it was recovered by a Python on Woodville's sixteen-yard line.

Again, the announcer: "The Pythons are suddenly within easy field goal range. Will they kick to get the automatic score and hope they get another chance to score six? No. The kicker remains on the bench."

The strategy of course was to try three times for the touchdown and if that failed bring on the kicker. Time was getting precious, however. It was three quick pass plays. Number one batted down. Number two off the receiver's hands. Number three was thrown left as the quarterback ran right - a difficult pass for the best right handers.

The receiver tipped the ball that came in too far right. It fell into the waiting hands of a Timberwolves defender. He fell to the ground and made sure it didn't get away.

The Woodsville sideline erupted in celebration. There was still a full minute on the clock. The sensible thing to have done would be to take a knee and run the clock out. That was coach's specific instruction to Will.

"Take a knee."

Will, with Matt at his elbow, repeated the instruction.

"Take a knee."

"Hut, hut, hut!"

The ball was snapped and Will knelt. The other team stopped the clock with forty-eight seconds. Matt knew what was in Will's mind. Coach had said to take a knee. "A" meant one in their minds. There was time for one more play. The Pythons lined up, but had lost their starch. They were content to just go through the motions of the last, knee to the turf, play.

The ball was snapped. Will started to his knee then stood up and dropped back three steps. Matt took off on the fly, caught the pass at his own forty and was home free.

"Unbelievable!" the announcer said. "He raced down that field like there was actually somebody chasing him. Believe me, folks, there wasn't! The T-Wolves pull off a major victory here this evening defeating a fine Paxton team 28 to 14. It puts them up against their longtime rival Prescott Cougars, right here, Friday evening. Tickets will be on sale at the ticket office in ten minutes."

That time it was Matt's turn to get piled onto and take the glory. Will walked to the sideline ready to take his well-deserved tongue lashing from Coach. Thunder's line was short and to the point.

"Next time I give you a direct order, young man . . . I'll have to be sure I make my intention more precise."

He patted Will on the back and trotted off to meet Matt and congratulate him. Will watched for a few moments from the bench and then made his way into the locker room. He was showered and dressed and out front long before most of the players even got inside.

It wasn't that he wasn't delighted with the win. He was. He just had bigger things on his mind that evening - the

helmets and the Matt! It was his turn for a long walk by himself.

* Becky was reading: Lucky in Life: a story of teenage adventure and romance, by John Hammond, The Family of Man Press

CHAPTER TWELVE

Squirt's Missing!

Thursday and Friday were parent teacher conference days so the students had a mini-vacation. Football practice was held from six to eight a.m. on those days. Will could have cared less one way or the other. Matt liked the arrangement since it freed the rest of the day.

Although they had beaten Prescott earlier in the season the players were still serious in their preparations. The boys were both tired after the Thursday practice when they met the girls at Amanda's.

"We think it's time to review everything we know about the helmets," Becky said, a yellow pad in her lap. "Let's put it all down in one place."

Matt began.

"Well, it happened Thursday night sometime after Coach left his office in the locker room at ten."

"And before Squirt saw the guys at the Kravitz garage," Will added. "When was that?"

"A little after eleven," Matt said.

Will continued.

"The tire tread left in the mud at the locker room door matches the tire on the Kravitz bread truck."

"But," Will broke in, "The hubcap on that wheel is different - fancier - than the other four on her truck."

"And that means what?" Amanda asked.

Becky tried to put it all together.

"That Butchy - Squirt - was probably telling the truth about seeing a truck with a low tire, and that the guys driving it

traded it for one on the bread truck.”

“The way the bumper jack was in place on Kravitz’s truck also supports that,” Will said.

“And was Squirt sure the truck was blue?” Amanda asked.

“That’s what he said - and without any prompting from either of us,” Matt said.

“So,” Becky tried summing up, “The truck at the locker room was the same truck that later appeared at Kravitz’s garage and changed wheels.”

“Right.” All three gave their agreement.

“What else,” Becky asked?

“Got the blue paint from the fence,” Will said. “We really can’t pinpoint when it was left there, though.”

“But,” Matt said, “If the truck with Kravitz’s wheel also has a scratch on the rear right side of the back, it will add support to the other evidence.”

“Now the headband,” Amanda said. “Its initials or monogram or whatever is PHS so it could be Paxton, Pine Hill, or Prescott.”

“Or Pontiac or Pinkerton, or Phuddsville for all we really know,” Becky said.

“Okay, so it’s circumstantial evidence,” Will said. “It may be more important in helping us find the truck than in convicting the bad guys. It probably does narrow the field to the ‘P’ schools.”

They all nodded.

“Anything else,” Becky asked.

Will had a thought.

“Squirt said one of the guys referred to Mrs. K. as his aunt.”

“I’m not sure that’s exactly what Squirt said,” Matt added. “I think he actually related that the boy said something like, ‘Auntie, or Aunt Pricilla’ not ‘my Aunt Pricilla’.”

“I don’t see the difference,” Amanda said, frowning.

“All I’m saying is that if he had said ‘My Aunt’ we would know for sure he was related, but since he just said ‘Aunt’ we can’t be so sure.”

“I think you’re playing with words,” Amanda said.

“Maybe I am. I just think it’s well to keep it in mind,

that's all."

Matt, who had been lying on the grass, sat up.

"Here's a scary thought, guys. What if the guys already came back and traded wheels again? That could account for why they left the jack in place – so they could return right away and trade back the wheels. What if instead of fixing the flat that we have a cast of, they just tossed it out and got a new one?"

"Ouch!" Will said. "If they're as poor as we are that probably won't happen, but then if he owns a fancy foreign truck he may have all the money he needs."

"I think you guys need to go check out the garage and see if the odd wheel is still there," Becky said. "Surely he wouldn't put a new tire on the wheel that has the hub cap to the bread truck."

"As soon as we're finished here, then," Will said.

Matt nodded his agreement, still not looking directly at Will.

"Do we know anything else?" It was Becky searching her yellow pad trying to make sure nothing had been missed.

Amanda was thinking about the kids they had checked out. "It doesn't seem likely that it's either of Mrs. K's nephews, right?"

"Right." Again, it was all three agreeing.

"And it doesn't seem reasonable it would be the college kid."

"Right"

"And we're pretty sure the person Squirt saw was not a girl - specifically the niece?"

"Right."

"Right."

It was Will and Matt agreeing.

"Well, I guess that's it, then," Becky said setting the pad aside.

"Guess that's our cue to go check out the garage," Will said, addressing Matt but not looking at him.

The boys got up and began the trek across town. Not a word was said until the familiar voice piped up behind them.

"Where we going?" Squirt asked.

"We?" Will said making it a dramatic question.

"I think it's the Kravitz place," Squirt said, ignoring Will's remark.

Matt snickered, managing, "Well, Papa?"

He snickered again getting some perverse pleasure out of Will's odd new relationship that wouldn't go away.

"Yes. You been there the past few days?"

"Just every night."

Will frowned, saddened to hear the truth about the little guy's life.

"Any activity there."

"Girls, ya mean?"

Plainly Squirt didn't understand. Again, Matt smiled.

"No. There better not be any girls, Will said, sternly. "We talked about that, remember."

"Yeah. Toads and night crawlers. I remember."

"It was frogs and wooly worms, but that's close enough I suppose. I meant did the guys ever come back for the tire - the wheel - they traded for off the bread truck?"

"Nope. Still there just like when you two was there last. I knowed we was goin' to the garage."

He grinned up at Will and took his hand. Suddenly Matt didn't see it as funny. It was sad and it was wonderful. Will took the little hand in his as if he'd been used to doing it all his life.

"Mrs. K's gone to visit her sister today. Stayin' overnight. Does it every three or four weeks. They's pretty close, I'd say."

"How do you know so much?"

"Got nothin' to do but be nosey. Ya learns lots bein' nosey."

Will smiled down at Squirt.

"Like what kind of things?"

"Well, like the girls likes the boys in those tiny little swim suits. I can't see it myself, I'll tell you that. And like you and Amanda kiss short when other people are around and long when they ain't. And like you and Matt has a awful problem, but I don't know what to do about it."

He looked up at Will, his lower lip trembling. Will glanced over at Matt and held his eye while he attempted an answer.

“What’s between Matt and me is not for you to fix. That’s not your job. That’s not your concern.”

“I is too my concern. Sometimes I go to sleep cryin’ about it.”

“Wow!” Matt said, not realizing it was being said out loud.

Squirt looked up, back and forth between them. Tears flooded his cheeks.

He looked at Matt. “I don’t like it when you hurt Will.”

He looked at Will. “An I hate when I see you gittin’ so mad. It’s like I’m afraid you is gonna kill him.”

“I guess I didn’t know you’d been watching us.”

“Fer a long time.”

He nodded. Will handed him his hanky and put his arm around his shoulders, pulling him close as they continued to walk.

“I can’t promise anything. I’d like you to promise me you’ll stay out of it. Stay away. Can I have your word on that?”

“Not fair.”

“What?”

“You make me promise, but you won’t. Okay, I promise.”

He pulled away and ran off down the street.

There were no words to say between Will and Matt at that moment. They both took big breaths and walked on toward the garage.

It was just like Squirt had said. The wheel had not been retrieved. The jack was still in place and there were no girls in the back of the truck.

“We’re really up against a brick wall, here, you know,” Matt said. “Without that truck, we got nothing.”

They left the garage, planning to head back toward Oak Street.

“What were you two doing in there?” came a voice from behind them. It wasn’t Squirt. It was Mrs. Kravitz!

The boys turned to face her. Anything short of the truth wouldn’t work. Will thought about saying he had come to check on Butchy, but she didn’t know about how he used her truck for his safe haven. He didn’t want to get the little Squirt

in trouble. It was Matt who started laying it on the line to her.

"Here's the deal," he began with a sigh. "You know the new football helmets were stolen."

She nodded, clearly wondering how that was connected with the boys' presence in her garage.

"There is evidence that the little truck used during the robbery had the same front right tire on it as your bread truck does now. We have further evidence that a small, probably foreign truck came here to this garage soon after the robbery and exchanged front right tires with your truck. If you will look at the wheels you will see the one on your truck is not the one that should be there. Somehow, somebody knew it would fit the other truck.

"We've been trying to find some connection that will help us find those boys and their truck."

"I see. Well, I certainly don't know anything about that. Boys, you say. How old?"

"About our age - high school age," Will answered.

"From here in town you think?"

"No, ma'am," Matt said emphatically. "We suspect it's kids from one of the towns we play in football. Like a prank, I suppose you could say."

Will thought Matt's use of the word 'prank' was a stroke of genius. If she did know something, prank made it seem less serious than referring to it as robbery.

"We probably should have asked your permission to snoop. Sorry about that. Just didn't want to say anything until we had some hard facts to go on."

"Yes. I suppose I understand. I also understand you must have suspected me as the thief. I suppose I can understand that, too. Well, if I think of any connection I'll get back to you."

"Thank you. You've been very understanding."

The boys turned to leave. She had one more question.

"You see that little Langhorn boy in there today?"

"Langhorn?" Will said, not sure what her interest was.

"They call him Butch I think. He uses the back of my truck as a bedroom sometimes, I guess you'd say."

"So, you know about that?" Will said.

"Poor little tyke," she said shaking her head. "I just

haven't seen him today and I was worried."

"We saw him down the street, there, earlier," Will said, pointing. "He seemed fine to us,"

He looked at Matt who nodded, supporting his observation.

"Good. Sometimes I hear him crying in there at night. The little children in this town seem to be afraid of me and I've never tried to change that, I guess. I always hesitate to approach him for fear he'll run away and then won't have any place at all."

"Would you like us to tell him you know and that it seems to be okay with you?" Will asked.

"Would you do that? It would take a load off my mind. You're good boys."

She turned and went inside her house, sniffing into her apron.

"Well. That blows my life-long opinion of Mrs. K. I'll tell you that," Matt said.

"Yeah. Wow! We probably owe it to him to tell him so he won't have to be afraid of her," Will said. "I guess I need to find him and have a talk anyway. I didn't ask to have him in my life, you know. I'm not sure why he all of a sudden became my responsibility."

He acted upset, but Matt sensed it was more because he wasn't sure what to do than that he didn't want to help the kid. They walked toward home realizing Squirt probably wasn't ever really very far away.

"You go on, Matt," Will said as they cut across an empty corner lot. "I'll sit over there under the trees and wait for Squirt to show up. I'd rather the talk would be private."

"Sure. No problem. Later at Amanda's - say two?"

"Two. Maybe go swimming?"

"Sure. Maybe. See what the girls say."

It had been the first-time Matt could remember the two of them making social plans and first time Will had ever called him by his first name. On the football field, it was, 'Hey Green' if anything at all."

Of course, he had never called Will by his first name, either. 'Lowlife', 'Pond Scum', 'Jackass', but never Will. He had a humorous thought. It the two of them ever became

friends - a most unlikely happening, he told himself - they would be quite a colorful pair - Green and Brown. It planted a smile on his face that was still there when he met Becky waiting for him on his front steps.

“What you smiling about?”

“Nothing. You’d never believe it anyway.”

She could have been bothered that he refused to share something with her. They never kept secrets, but she shrugged it off.

“Will and I talked with Mrs. Kravitz. We told her about the wheel and the truck. She didn’t help us much, but said she’d think about it. She’s really not such a bad person and I can’t believe I’m saying that. Every boy who’s grown up in this town knows two things. There are ghosts in the cemetery every full moon and Mrs. Kravitz makes stew out of little boys who bother her.”

“Can’t imagine that you’ve never bothered her, but then you certainly aren’t stew so I guess you haven’t.”

“I’m not stew, huh? I wonder what I am, then?”

Becky wasn’t sure what he meant, but she tried an answer.

“A kind, helpful, loveable guy, maybe?”

“Hardly. Don’t want to talk about it. Want to go swimming later?”

“Sure. Pools closed so it will have to be the creek?”

“Creek sounds good. Will’s idea. You’ll ask Amanda?”

“Sure. Since when have you and Will started sharing ideas? Thought you just helped each other redecorate your faces.”

“Like I said. I don’t want to talk about it. I got homework due Monday. Better go get on it. No telling what may be coming up this weekend.”

Becky looked confused.

“The helmets. We may get a break and have to go chasing down clues or bad guys. Don’t want to be caught without the work finished.”

“Did anybody ever tell you that you plan ahead way too much?”

“Just somebody named Rebecca Susan who’s told me about a zillion times.”

Will came running down the street.

"I can't find Squirt anywhere. I'm worried. I went by his place and his mother hasn't seen him since yesterday morning. I really wanted to hit her. How could any parent be that unconcerned about their own kid?"

"He's probably okay. Just mad enough to hide out from you for a while," Matt said.

"You made him mad at you?" Becky said.

"You had to be there," Matt tried to explain as if in Will's defense.

"I suppose you're right. He's survived on his own for most of nine years. I imagine he's okay, Will added with an almost friendly nod in Matt's direction."

"Yeah. He'll surface when he's ready to. Kids don't stay mad."

"Look who's talking about kids not staying mad," Becky said raising her eyebrows. She looked from one of them to the other.

They each looked away - from her and each other.

"Becky suggested the creek," Matt said, then quickly added, "For a swim - the four us, this afternoon."

"Sure. One? Two?"

"One sounds good," Matt said. "That Okay, Becks?"

He was trying to smooth over whatever was in her craw. She nodded. Matt went inside to study. Will walked Becky as far as Amanda's. It had been an unseasonably hot fall. They were seldom able to continue swimming that late in the year, even in the mild climate of northwest Arkansas, so they took advantage of every opportunity they could.

During lunch, Matt got an unexpected call. His mother took it.

"Matt. It's Pricilla Kravitz - for you?"

"Matt jumped up from the table as if he had been expecting it. In a way, he had, or at least hoping for it.

"This is Matt."

"I may have some information for you about the truck. I've been making some discrete inquiries - have to be discrete when it's relatives involved. Can you come right over?"

"Sure. With Will?"

"Yes."

He hung up needing to call Will.

“Anybody know Will’s number.”

“You – Matt Green – are calling Will – Will Brown?” his little sister asked. “Did you just find out the end of the World is coming?”

She was out the door to spread the gossip.

He looked it up in the phone book.

“Is Will there, please?”

“Just a minute. May I tell him who’s calling?”

“Matt, Matt Green.”

There was silence at the other end of the line, then Will’s voice.

“Ya?”

“Kravitz called. Wants to see us, now!”

“Meet ya out front.”

“Okay.”

It felt comfortable to be racing with each other again. Neither let up for a second until they hit her back porch and collapsed on the steps in smiles. She heard them arrive and asked them into her sitting room. They sat together on a sofa. It was the closest they’d been in years without bleeding.

“I don’t know if this is significant, but it’s all I have been able to find out. My niece, who lives just outside of Prescott, dates a boy who is on the football team. His name is Jerry something - maybe Rodriguez - yes I think that’s right, Jerry Rodriguez.”

“He’s captain of the Prescott football team,” Matt said.

“Oh, you know that. And here I thought I had a scoop for you.”

“Believe me, it is.”

“There is one thing more; his father has a laundry service—Jose’s Linens - and their trucks are small, covered trucks, painted deep blue.”

“Have you met the kid?” Will asked.

“Yes. Several times.”

“What does he call you?”

“Well, let’s see. Cillia - that’s short for Pricilla - they named her after me - probably hoping to be remembered in my will - calls me Aunt Pricilla and I do believe he calls me just Aunt or Auntie.”

“I could kiss you,” Mrs. K, Matt said. “In fact, I will.” He stood up and planted a wet one on her cheek.

She didn't have time to act embarrassed before Will followed Matt's lead. The boys thanked her and were off on the run toward Oak Street. There would be no dip in the creek that afternoon.

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Final Clues

They decided that it would just be Will and Matt who should go snoop around Prescott that afternoon. They would take Will's pickup in case they found the helmets, and four of them in the cab would be too crowded, not to mention illegal. Also, four kids from Woodsville might look suspicious.

Matt was sitting on his front porch enjoying the last of a pile of sandwiches he had fixed himself for lunch - salami and Mexican cheese, sprinkled with red pepper - when he spotted Will coming up the street in the pickup. He met him at the street and without a word they were on their way. Well, there were two words. Will said, "Seat belt!" and Matt buckled in.

Ten minutes into the thirty-minute drive Will pointed at the glove compartment and Matt opened it. There was box of chocolate bars. Matt ripped the plastic covering open with his teeth and removed two, pulling the wrapper half way down on one and handing it to Will, who nodded. He enjoyed one himself.

"So, we probably need a plan," Matt said.

"Probably. Think we should start at the laundry and see if we can find the truck?"

"Sounds good. Locate the little blue trucks then look them over to find the odd wheel."

The laundry was on the highway about a mile outside of Prescott. There were a dozen employee's cars parked out front. Will found a spot at the far end near the fence where he thought it wouldn't be noticed. All the T-Wolf stickers would be a dead giveaway.

They got out and walked around to the back of the large, metal, building. There were the trucks, lined up like toy cars on a little boy's shelf.

"Why aren't they on the road, I wonder?" Will asked.

"I think linen deliveries are usually made early in the morning before restaurants and business get going for the day."

"Makes sense."

They looked the area over to make sure they were alone back there. Deciding they were, they hurried across the open lot to a spot behind the trucks, out of sight of anyone who would come out the back door.

"An even dozen trucks," Will said pointing as he counted. "I'll start here. How about you start at the other end and we'll meet in the middle."

Matt nodded and made his way to the far end. As he began examining the second truck Will showed up motioning him to follow. It was the one the outside at the other end. There it sat with Kravitz's wheel on the front right and four, great big, beautiful scratches at fence height on the right-side, rear.

They were overjoyed, but their excitement had to be quiet. A swift slap to each other's hind quarters was all they dared. As common as that was on the playing field, it had seldom taken place between them - on or off the field.

"Get a picture with the building in the background for proof about where we found it," Matt said.

Will got to his knees and framed the wheel just as Matt had suggested. He took a second for good measure and then snapped some of the scratches.

While Will took the pictures, Matt opened the rear door of the truck.

"Nothing?" Matt reported before Will had a chance to look inside. "I guess we need to find the Rodriguez house. If it was Jerry, he might have stashed the helmets there."

They closed the door and started back across the lot to the corner of the building. The rear door opened and a man came out.

"What you two doin' back here?" he asked.

Will responded, moving directly toward the man so as

to not appear suspicious. Matt's inclination was to run like the wind, but he matched his companion step for step.

"Looking for Jerry. Football stuff."

"He worked this morning - drove a route. I think he's home. You'll probably find him there. If he's not there he's probably kissin' up a storm with Cillia out in the shack. That boy got an extra dose of hormones if you ask me."

"Thanks. Appreciate your help. Have a good one."

The man nodded and waved as the boys rounded the corner and hurried to the truck. None of what Will had said was not true. Matt was intrigued at how he could so easily skirt the truth and still not lie. It hadn't been a skill he had ever needed to develop, since being truthful had always been so important in his home.

They were soon back on the highway.

"The girls wrote down the address for us. It's on a sheet of Becky's yellow paper in the glove compartment," Will said.

Matt found it under the candy box. Before he closed the door he lifted two more bars and slipped one into the pocket on Will's shirt and the other into his own. Most of the T-shirts they owned had Timberwolf or Woodsville logos on them and neither one had been able to quickly find a clean, plain one that noon. So, they both arrived in short sleeve dress shirts.

"2246 West Street," Matt read out loud.

"I imagine that just might be on the west side of town," Will said.

It produced a smile between them. He turned west and soon found the street. He paused not knowing which direction to go. They scanned house numbers and determined they increased to the right. They were in the 200 block so had some way to travel.

It was a two-story yellow house with a double garage to the south in the rear. There were no vehicles in the driveway. Windows in the foundation suggested a basement. The lot was encircled on three sides by woods. The mailbox carried the Rodriguez name. Will pulled past the house and parked a block away off the street in an old driveway that seemed to lead to nowhere.

They cut through the woods and stopped at the point where the house first came into view.

“What do you think,” Will said, “Basement or garage?”

“Garage is probably easier. Let’s start there.”

They circled to the back of the lot through the edge of the woods and entered the clearing behind the building. There were two windows and a door. They each approached a different window and peered inside.

“Nothing I can see here except one shiny, new, Lincoln Town Car,” Matt announced in a loud whisper.

“Same here. Better see if we can get inside.”

The door was open and they were soon looking around. There were no helmets to be seen. Matt pointed up and toward the front of the building. There was a half attic area – a loft of sorts – probably used for storage. A ladder along the north wall provided access. Matt went first with Will at his heels. The ceiling slanted from the peak down to the sides of the building. They could stand up straight in the center. There were lots of boxes but after a five-minute search they came upon no helmets.

They were moving toward the ladder, ready to leave the attic when the garage door opened. They got to their knees and looked down through the cracks in the floor. It was Jerry. He walked toward the ladder. The boys were quickly prone on their stomachs behind a row of boxes stacked three high. They hardly breathed as the Jerry climbed the ladder and entered the attic.

He whistled as he sorted through the boxes closest to the ladder.

“There you are,” he said at last, picking up a little one and making his way back down stairs. He opened the car door, shoved the box across the seat, got in, and backed out. They waited for the door to close before they started breathing again.

A minute later they were back outside behind the garage.

“Well, we know he’s gone. Shall we risk looking into the basement?”

“Have to, I guess,” Matt answered.

“Maybe just one of us. Be harder to see than two,” Will

suggested.

Before it could be agreed which one would go, Matt was on his way. He knelt beside a window and looked inside through cupped hands to mask the glare. He was soon back at Will's side.

"One big recreation room - pool table, big screen TV, card table, and a hot tub in the front corner. No room for helmets. Great place for a party, though!"

Will sat down in the grass, his back against the garage. Matt joined him.

"Another dead end, you think?" Will asked.

"What did that guy at the laundry say - something about a shack where Jerry took his girls?"

"Right. Didn't he say 'out back' or something like that?"

"Yeah. In the woods, maybe?"

They got up and entered the woods. Fifty feet inside, they came upon a small clearing and in the center stood a small, one room building in bad repair."

"It certainly qualifies as a shack, I'd say," Will said.

They stood just inside the woods scanning the area. The single window beside the front door was dark, suggesting probably no other windows and no light on inside, even though there was electrical service running into it from a pole in the rear.

"Too small you think?" Will asked.

"Maybe. But we are here and apparently alone."

"Let's take a look, then."

They moved toward it, slowly and cautiously. They looked from side to side not wanting to be surprised by anyone.

The surprise was not to be a person. It was a large, barking, drooling, tooth bearing, dog charging toward them from around the corner of the shack. The boys backed up. Matt quickly unwrapped the candy bar from his shirt pocket. He squatted down and held it out. The dog slowed and sniffed. Matt tossed it in his direction. It took the bar in its mouth and retreated back into the woods.

"Chocolate's not really good for dogs, you know," Will said.

"A set of sharp teeth tearing at my calf isn't really very

good for me, you know.”

Will realized his comment had been dumb and he shrugged. They continued to the shack.

Will looked inside through the widow and shrugged. Matt tried the door. It was not locked. He pushed it open far enough to allow his head inside for a look around. It seemed safe to proceed.

He pushed the door wide open and pointed with a sweep of his arm. “Bingo! My friend. Bing - go!!!

Will moved to his side not sure he was more surprised to see the helmets rowed up there on the floor or that Matt had just called him friend. He would let the second pass and concentrate for the time being on the first.

“Steel ‘em back?” Will said, not really asking.

Matt nodded.

“It’ll be lots of trips from here to the truck,” Will pointed out.

“There was a box of big, white, laundry bags in the garage.” Matt said. “I’ll go get it.”

Will followed, thinking it would be awkward for one person to carry. He was right. They put it down on the slab step of the shack.

“Stinkin’ hot,” Will said, beginning to unbutton his shirt.

Matt nodded and did the same. With the three top buttons undone, they pulled the shirts off over their heads and tossed them to the ground.

That had always been the signal between them to begin throwing punches. They realized it at the same moment and a look flashed between them. All quite automatically the adrenalin rushed in, to prepare them for battle.

“Whoa? What a rush I just got?” Will said.

“The rush of all rushes,” Matt said nodding.

Both boys stood there, fists clinched, one foot in front of the other, filled again with the old feelings. Matt was the first to lower his arms and shake his fists away. Will followed. They sighed and paced about in different directions for a few moments.

They became silent and remained that way for the rest of the afternoon. They bagged the helmets and carried them to the truck - it took twelve bags and a half dozen trips.

They went right to the rear door of the locker room. Will had called Coach with the news and he was waiting with the door unlocked.

A quick examination suggested that no damage had been done. The fact that they had been kept and not thrown away at the bottom of the lake or into a landfill, made coach think it had only been intended as a short-term prank. They placed the helmets back in the lockers. The players would be happily surprised when they arrived for practice Friday morning.

“Did you get the details to the Sheriff’s office,” Coach asked.

“Got them back. Didn’t see any need to make more bad blood between the teams just before the big game,” Matt said.

“I see. Okay. I can buy that. Going to give me the name or names involved?”

“Not unless there will be extra bear crawls involved if we don’t,” Will said smiling, looking at Matt for his approval.

Matt nodded and returned the smile.

“You boys have done a good thing here. I knew you could work as a team on the field, but I’ll tell you, I had major reservations about the two of you taking on this thing together. Thank you.”

“It was all a part of being on the team,” Will said.

“Yeah. Don’t go reading anything else into it,” Matt added immediately.

Coach was afraid those comments combined to say the truce between them was over. He didn’t ask. He didn’t want to know.

Had he asked, neither boy would have had an answer for him. Their best bet would have been ‘no’ but things had become very confusing between them.

“Ride?” Will offered as they left the locker room.

“No, thanks.”

Will drove away and Matt went for a walk.

The Cougars couldn’t just get off Scott free, of course. The next move had to be carefully planned. At the moment, there were other things on Matt’s mind. He went to the woods to think.

"Thought this was Will's place," came Squirt's voice from behind the tree against which Matt was sitting."

"Hey, Butchy. We were worried when we couldn't find you earlier. Will said he knew you were alright - said he knew you could take care of yourself."

"Where is he?"

"Not sure. We just got back from Prescott. I imagine he's taking the pickup back to his Dad's station."

"You waitin' here to fight him?"

"No. I just needed a quiet place to think."

"You look funny."

"Funny, how?" Matt asked intrigued by the comment.

"No black eye. No puffy cheek. No split lip. Hardly recognize ya."

"I guess I can understand that."

"You two done wailin' on each other."

"I'm not sure. That's the most honest answer I can give you. I wouldn't bet my last dollar on it, though."

"I got lots a dollars."

"You do? Blackmailing other people besides Will and me?"

"Nope. Found me a money makin' box."

"A what?"

"A money makin' box. It's in the back of Kravitz's truck. About so big. Tin. Fancy. Smells like soap inside it. Every so often I'll find some dollar bills in it. I take 'em out and then the next day or so it grows some more."

Matt understood. He wouldn't snitch on Mrs. K, however.

"I better go find Will," Butchy said. "I wasn't very nice to him the last time we talked."

"My grandma would just say you were being his Dutch Uncle."

"What?"

"A Dutch Uncle is somebody who tells you straight out something you need to hear, but don't want to. It usually helps in the long run. A Dutch Uncle is like the best friend you never wanted to have."

"Not like'n to hear what ya need ta hear, you mean."

Matt was impressed the lad understood.

“Exactly. Go on and find him. He’s really worried about you.”

It brought a quick, strange smile to the little boy’s face. He took off on a trot toward town. Matt sighed and closed his eyes hoping that would clear his head. He smiled thinking back to what Squirt had said. It was hard to remember a time when he had so few aches and pains and when his face actually looked like the Matt Green it had always been underneath the bruises and scabs.

In about twenty-four hours the biggest game of Matt’s life would begin. He really wasn’t nervous. He knew what he needed to do and he was confident he could do it. It was a matter of Woodsville doing its best and Prescott doing its best. If that happened, the better team would win. That was how it should be. He hoped the Cougars were healthy. He’d hate to beat a team just because they were hurting – that wouldn’t prove a thing.

Not everybody on the team shared Matt’s philosophy. Many hoped the other team would take the field limping on crutches to make their own job easier. That, Matt believed, proved nothing and Matt was more about proving things to himself than he was taking advantage of another’s misfortune.

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Sometimes it's hard to define a win

Friday morning practice was mainly an easy walk through of plays and a strategy session. It was over by seven. Will had shared the good news about the helmets with the girls on Thursday afternoon as soon as he left Coach and Matt at the locker room. Matt hadn't showed up that evening. Becky called his house to make sure he was alright. He was - just needed quiet time to himself.

Butchy found Will and they had a long talk in the park. They talked about love for some time and how some people - like his mother - just weren't able to follow through and be good parents even though they really did love their children.

"Like, I love her, too, but I can't help her."

"It's different. The kid's not supposed to have to take care of the parent - not at your age. You're just stronger than she is. You'd do anything you could to help her. She'd like to do the same for you, but she's too weak - too mixed up, maybe - to follow through."

Butchy seemed to get the idea. He grew very serious.

"I love you, too, Will, but I can't fix you up either."

"I understand what you're saying. You made that pretty clear yesterday. But you tried. You let me hear your feelings and I thank you for that."

"Really? I figured you'd just be mad, but it needed to be said so I told myself it would be worth it even if you never spoke to me again. I was bein' like your German Grandma."

Will passed over the confusing reference, assuming he

meant Dutch Uncle.

"That's about the strongest form that love can take, I suppose, Squirt - trying to help your loved ones without letting your own needs get in the way."

Butchy beamed and scooted closer. They were sitting on the ground under a huge Oak tree.

"I was really worried about you when we couldn't find you yesterday," Will said.

"I was waitin' fer you in the Woods. If you showed up I was going to apologize."

Will put his strong arm around the boy and pulled him close.

"You know. I've been thinking. I've never had a little brother and I think it would be pretty nice if we'd start doing things like brothers."

"Really? Great! What do brothers do?"

Will chuckled.

"Well, they build stuff and go for hikes and play catch and toss a football around . . ."

"And get help with homework, and fix bikes and sit and talk like this, and get ice cream cones sometimes, maybe?"

It came off like a question.

"Yes. Things just like that."

"Do I have to give up Tricia?"

"Tricia?"

"My lady. My babe. My main squeeze."

"Where did you learn to talk like that?"

"Late night movies on TV, I guess."

"Right out of the 1940's I'd say. And, no, you should have friends your own age, but you should be doing things with them that nine year olds do, not what seventeen year olds do. You'll have plenty time for kissing and stuff later on. Just have fun playing tag and riding bikes and watching TV together."

"And coloring is good, too," he said nodding.

Will returned the nod with a smile.

"I ain't gonna play with dolls, though. And I ain't gonna play dress up or put on lipstick. And I ain't gonna . . ."

"I get the point. You're going to be a normal nine-year-old boy and that's really great."

“Can I keep goin’ to church with you?”

“Sure.”

“There is one thing - well, two things, I want to ask of you as my friend. First, it’s probably not a good idea for you sit outside my bedroom window and watch me when I don’t know you’re there. Second, when Amanda and I are having our private time together, I’d rather you wouldn’t be there. That’s just our time together. She isn’t going to follow you and me around when we’re doing our things. You understand?”

“Okay but how am I ever going to learn how to kiss the girls if I don’t have somebody to watch?”

“Funny thing about that, Squirt. Somehow, for thousands and thousands of years, boys have just been able to figure that out all by themselves. I’m sure you will, too, when the time comes.”

They sat in silence for some time, then Butch said:

“Got a big problem.”

“Can I help?”

“There’s somethin’ you should know, but I promised I wouldn’t tell.”

“Will it hurt anyone if you don’t tell?”

“No. I guess not.”

“Will it hurt anyone if you do tell?”

“No.”

Will wondered how to put it. Not knowing, he just began.

“Sometimes circumstances change after a guy’s given his word. Things come up he never could have dreamed of at the time he made the promise. When things have changed enough, I’ve always thought it was probably okay to change my mind on things like that.”

Butchy nodded.

“Things has changed, alright. Me and you becomin’ brothers and stuff.”

They both remained silent. Will let his little friend think it through.

“The money for the helmets – the extra ya had to have right at the end – I know who give it.”

“I see. Well, it would be nice to know, of course, but I suppose it isn’t really necessary for me to know.”

“Maybe it is. Maybe if you knowed, then you’d think different about somebody – better about ‘em.”

“I can see how that’s a really tight spot you’re in,” Will said, not trying to sway him one way or the other. He figured that may have been the first time in the little guy’s life that he had ever struggled with the concepts of right and wrong. Eventually the boy spoke, nodding.

“I think it’s better to fix things up between folks than it is to just let bad feelings stay around.”

Will nodded, impressed again, but didn’t say anything. He waited. Butchy looked off across the park as he continued.

“Mrs. K. She put some money in a envelope and sealed it up and give it to me to deliver to the school office – at the high school building. That janitor hates my guts so I had to be real careful so’s I’d get that far.”

“Thank you for telling me. That does help me get rid of some bad feelings.”

“And give ya some good ones?” Butchy asked as if that were the more important part of it all.

“Yes! Definitely, lots and lots of good feelings?”

Butchy stood up. He sighed and smiled.

“Race ya to the pavilion and don’t ya dare just let me win. Someday I’m really gonna beat ya, you know, and if ya don’t do your best I’ll never know when that time really comes.”

It seemed the relationship had been cemented and projected well into the future.

They raced. Will won. Squirt smiled and hugged his friend around the waste. He knew in his heart that someday he’d be the quarterback and he’d win the big game.

* * *

By the time the teams took the field for warm-ups word had spread that the new helmets were back. When the Timberwolves burst out of the locker room door and ran down the ramp toward the waiting fans, those fans went wild for their home team. The players held their helmets high in the air and it started all over again.

When the co-captains of the two teams met in the center of the field for the coin toss, Matt and Will kept their eyes on Rodriguez. Understanding what had taken place - that

he had been found out - Jerry was clearly uneasy. As they broke to return to the sidelines, Matt offered him his hand, saying "Football now, other things later."

Will was surprised. It was as close to a threat as he had ever heard Matt utter.

Prescott would have the ball first.

The Cougar's offence seemed flustered. It was three very unsuccessful plays and out. The T-Wolves received the punt on the thirty-eight and ran it back to the Prescott twenty-two. Eventually they had to settle for a field goal. Woodsville 3. Prescott 0.

The next series went much better for the Cougars. They were finally stopped on the Woodsville eighteen. It was a field goal trade. 3 to 3.

The Prescott defense was tough - both to the run and the pass. Will mixed it up: run right, run left, pass short, run left, pass long. They were stopped on the Cougars thirty-three and brought in the kicker. Woodsville 6. Prescott 3.

Prescott did a little better, managing to get down to the twenty-nine. The field goal attempt hit the upright and bounced back onto the field. The score remained 6-3 at the end of the first quarter.

It was Woodsville's ball to open the second. Matt carried on five successive plays gaining forty-two yards in all. The ball sat at the Cougars thirty-seven.

Will passed three plays in a row. Matt's fake up the center fooled the line, but not the D-backs who defended the plays well. The ball was never put where it could be intercepted, but they were doing nothing through the air.

"Third down and ten," the announcer said. "T-wolves still on the Cougar's thirty-seven - right where it's been for the past several plays."

Will faked to Matt who continued downfield twelve yards, and turned. The ball was there, as if waiting for him. He tucked it away and was immediately stuffed.

"New life for the Timberwolves," the announcer said. "First and ten on the Cougar's twenty-one. That was Matt Green over left tackle for three. The boy is playing a suburb game tonight."

In the huddle, Will's instructions were clear.

“Tommy, get your butt into the end zone as fast as those scrawny legs will get you there. It’s a fake to Matt up center. Short count. Break.”

“Hut!”

The ball was snapped. Tommy flew down the field. Tommy never flew down the field. The Cougar safeties were caught off guard. Matt executed an excellent fake plunging straight ahead. Will held the ball out of sight against his right thigh, turned away from the line. He dropped back one step, two steps, three steps, cocked his arm and let fly. Tommy was all alone in the left corner of the end zone. Squirt could have caught that pass.

“Touchdown, Tommy Davis!” the announcer said excitedly. Woodsville 12. Prescott 3. Make that thirteen Woodsville as the quick extra point is good.”

Just as the T-Wolves seemed to be getting the game under control, the Cougar’s ran the kick off back for a touchdown. 12 - 9 and soon 12 - 10.

That was how the first half ended. The Prescott locker room was upbeat. They had the momentum. The Woodsville locker room was at least positive - they were ahead by two. Matt and Will realized that was like no lead at all. Any score would take it away.

Coach made some subtle changes in the passing game. They would flood receivers to the same side giving Will more options within the same field of vision. Matt and Tommy would go out of the backfield as fourth and fifth option receivers.

The deception worked during the third quarter and on the third play of the first series Will passed for a touchdown. 19 to 10 felt safer to Will but he wouldn’t let up.

The Cougars matched the touchdown with a thirty-yard run. 19 - 17. It was back to a two-point game.

“The fans are getting their money’s worth in this championship game. Woodsville is back, but clutching to a mere two-point lead.”

That remained the score as the fourth quarter began. Prescott had the ball on Woodsville’s forty-two. Three plays later they ran for a touchdown. 23 - 19. The T-Wolves trailed for the first time. The four-point deficit meant a field goal

would do them no good.

The coach faced a difficult call. His team was on the thirty-one and had just lost fifteen yards on a sack. It was fourth and twenty-five. Fail to make it and the Cougars had good field position. A field goal would have to be kicked from the forty-six. His kicker had the leg in practice, but his longest all season in a game had only been thirty-six.

Coach opted for the field goal.

“A solid kick,” the announcer said. “It’s got the height, but will it have the distance?”

The players held their breath. The fans got to their feet. The little kids stopped playing chase and watched the ball loop high and get lost in the floodlights. It began its descent. It would be close.

“Yes!” the announcer shouted. “Yes! Made it by the width of the kicker’s shoe lace. That brings the T-Wolves back to within one point. 23 - 22. Still lots of time left.”

It was a deep, adrenalin driven kickoff, well out the back of the end zone. It would be brought out to the twenty. On the next series, it was three and out for the Cougars. They managed a good punt and the Timbewolves took possession at their own twenty-four. They had been marching steadily down the field but then found themselves with a third down on the Cougars nineteen.

Matt was buried at the line of scrimmage. In came the kicker. The fans quieted. The snap was high. The placement was poor. The kick missed to the right. The fans groaned.

“It’s okay guys,” Will said. “We still have them backed way up in their own territory.”

He offered encouragement to the defense as it took the field and the announcer described the drama.

“Four minutes to go in this hair-raising battle of the two best teams we’ve seen in this conference during the past fifteen years.”

The Cougars went to the short passing game - three to five yards at a time. They mixed in an occasional run. They were eating up the clock.

With two minutes left it was fourth down on Woodsville’s fifteen. It was an easy three points for the kicker. Woodsville was down 26-22. Only a touchdown could win the

game. They received the kickoff at the fifteen and ran it back to the forty-five. One minute fifty seconds left.

"Matt Green over left tackle for ten," the announcer said.

"Matt Green up the middle for ten more," he said.

"Matt Green around left end for twenty-two. What a show this young man is putting on here this evening. That puts Woodsville on the Cougars twenty-five-yard line with eight seconds showing on the clock."

In the huddle the play was clear - Matt's option pass to Will. They had run it a hundred times in practice - more likely five hundred times. It was the do or die play of the season.

Will took his team up to the line. They dug in knowing they had to buy time for Matt. The ball was snapped, the hand off to Tommy was perfect. Matt's fake into the line seemed to fool the linebackers. He stopped and took a five step drop. Tommy handed off as he ran left across the backfield. The pass was in the air. Matt knew from the moment of release that he had never thrown it more perfectly. Will was exactly where he needed to be. He went up into the air after it. So did the defender. They left the ground at the same instant. Will's hand was higher, and met the ball perfectly. On the way down the defender's hand slipped behind the ball and it dropped to the ground. Incomplete. The gun sounded. The play, the game, and the dream of a championship were over.

The defender reached down and offered Will a hand up. It was Jerry Rodriguez.

"Sorry about the helmets, man. I really am. It was a dumb prank. Sorry you had to lose but it's how football goes."

"You beat me plain and fair, man. You were exactly where you had to be. Congratulations."

They went their separate ways - Jerry to his happy, cheering bench and Will to the quiet, heavy-hearted side of the field."

"He's okay, you know," Will said to Matt," indicating the other side of the field with his head.

"Rodriguez?"

Will nodded.

"If we'd grown up in the same town I think we could have been friends. That was the greatest pass you've ever

thrown, by the way old man.”

Matt managed a faint, short lived smile as they headed for the locker room.

The locker room was quiet. Guys don't like to lose, even when they know they've done their best, but their best just wasn't quite good enough. It hurts, and there were four dozen hurting young men who headed for their homes that night.

Will went his way and Matt his.

Will was still awake, tossing and turning, at midnight. He slipped into some jeans and went for a walk. It led him to the football field lit only by the full moon.

Even before he could make out the boy's face, Will knew who it was sitting there in the center of the field on the fifty yard line. He walked to where he was and sat down, cross-legged, not really facing him and saying nothing. Matt turned his head and nodded. Will nodded back and picked at the grass.

After a while, Matt changed positions, lying on his side, looking up at Will.

“You do remember how our problem started, don't you,” Matt asked?

“Of course. How could I ever forget that?”

Silence.

Matt looked up at Will again, shaking his head.

“You don't have a clue, either, do you,” Matt said, a smile slowly spreading across his face.

“Not even a clue to a clue. Had to have been something really big, though.”

“Like?” Matt asked.

“Like you shoving in line ahead of me at the slide.”

“I did that a lot, didn't I. But since I'm sure it had to be you who started it all, it was probably one time when you tattled to Miss Smith about something I did on the playground during recess.”

“I did my share of tattling, I suppose?”

More silence.

Will broke it.

“How long has it been since we beat the stuffing out of each other?”

"Maybe a week, I guess."

"Must be a record."

"Must be. Miss it?"

"Sort of, I guess. I mean it seems strange we're not doing it, but it's okay, you know?"

"Yeah. Me too. The girls are sure happy about it," Will said. "And Squirt."

"Notice how the girls won't mention it, though?"

"Yeah. Probably afraid if they do we'll remember and go back to breaking bones."

Matt became philosophical.

"Suppose Woodsville would ever be able to survive if they suddenly didn't have our fights to worry about?"

"It survived the Civil War - of course that was small potatoes compared to how we've been going at it these past . . . how long has it been?"

"Since kindergarten. Guess that's better than twelve years," Matt figured.

"And we went at it how often would you say?"

"Probably averaged at least once a day, so say make that 360 days a year - taking time off for camp in the summer."

"And 360 times twelve years would be . . ."

"Let me figure it on my phone . . . four thousand three hundred and twenty."

"I imagine that's close to a record," Will said.

"I suppose - especially since we're not brothers."

It was worth a chuckle and a long smile directly into each other's faces. The idea of being like brothers warmed their hearts though neither mentioned it.

Will lay on his back, hands behind his head, looking up at the moon.

"We've been through a lot together."

"Sure have."

"Especially the past few weeks."

"Especially," Matt repeated nodding slowly and thoughtfully.

"It's strange."

"What?" Matt asked.

"How unimportant losing the championship seems right now."

“You too? I been thinking the same thing.”

“Us?”

“Yeah. Us,” Matt confirmed with a nod.

“Seems like we’ve really been best friends all our lives but were too dumb to realize it.”

“Seems that way. Wasted lots of years, ya know.”

Will turned onto his side and faced Matt, the grin of an Imp spreading across his face.

“I suppose that even though now we finally know we’re really best friends - almost brothers, even - that shouldn’t keep me from . . . attacking you, should it?”

Without waiting for an answer, he was quickly on top of his surprised friend and the rolling and squirming and muscle against muscle began all over again.

Although it was a fully serious contest, the grunts and growls had been replaced with giggles and laughter.

There would be no bloody noses. There would be no painful black eyes. There wouldn’t even be bruises except by accident. They were just two guys, doing what guys often do when they want to prove to each other that they share that most precious bond of all - the bond of friendship forever.

THE END

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