

## School Tryouts

## Chapter One

Matt bolted down the stairs taking them two at a time, at the bottom he grabbed the handrail and twirled from the hallway into the kitchen. Then he stopped.

His mom was wearing her apron and had a mitt on her hand. This could be a good.

“Hey, slow down. These cookies will be finished in thirty seconds.”

Matt peered around a vase of flowers sitting on the kitchen island and blocking his view.

“Where’d you get these?”

“Your dad got them for me. Aren’t they lovely, a summer bouquet to brighten my day.”

“I’m going to Jeremy’s.”

“Would you like and have a cookie first? They are your favorites – chocolate chip oatmeal.”

The smell of the fresh cookies hit Matt and stopped him dead in his tracks. “Can I take a few for Jeremy?”

“Just slow down. They need to cool for a minute.”

“But I’m in a hurry.”

“If you are riding your bicycle, you must wear your helmet.”

*Whoa. Where did this come from? Matt thought. I hadn’t worn a bike helmet since I was ten.*

“Mom, I’m going into middle school. No one wears a bike helmet.”

“You will wear your helmet. I don’t want you getting hurt. Understand, young man.”

“Can you wrap them in a towel and put them in a bag?”

Two minutes later, Matt was in his backyard picking up his bike off the ground. He looked back at the kitchen window. He couldn’t tell if his mom could see him. He wheeled his bike through the gate to the front of the house and onto the driveway.

Across the cul-de-sac and up two houses were a moving van and crew bringing in boxes. *New neighbors. Maybe a kid my age.*

Holding the bag of cookies in his left hand, Matt climbed on his bike. He wished he would have thought to put them in his backpack. Riding with two hands would be easier. He rode out into the street, looking for any signs of who might be his new neighbor.

As he passed the truck, a car quickly backed out of the driveway.

Matt turned sharply to the right and crashed into the curb, tumbling across the street. The car slammed on its brakes and stalled out.

Matt sat up in the street. He was in pain. His first instinct was to scream for his mom. His knee was scraped and bleeding, as well as the palms of his hands. It hurt. He refused to cry.

The car had stopped in the middle of the street and the driver got out. He was a teenager. Matt was twelve years old; he had to be tough. A woman got out of the passenger side.

“You all right? You need to be careful riding in the street.” The woman bent over to examine Matt’s wounds. In one hand she carried a glass, wrapped in a paper towel.

Matt sniffed. His eyes were filled with tears.

The lady dumped the contents of her glass over Matt’s knee. “That’ll wash it off. Your momma home? You might could use a band-aid.”

“Hi, I’m Nathan. Nathan Wilson. We’re just moving in.”

Matt recognized him, the quarterback of the high school team. He and his dad had gone to all of the games last year. Matt had to be tough in front of the star player. Matt stood up. “I’ll be all right.”

“Weren’t you the back-up for the Chargers last year? You came off the bench and led the comeback at the end.”

“How did you know?”

“I was there. Years ago, I played for the Charges. I go to the games when I can. Coach Jordan’s a good man. You got a shot of making the team?”

“Well, Roger’s the obvious starter. I guess I have a chance at back-up.”

“You need to believe in yourself. Go out there and take the job from him.”

“Common, Nathan. We need to fill up our new house with groceries.”

Matt noticed his mom’s cookies strewn across the road. He couldn’t go in now and admit he’d be in a bike wreck.

When he returned home from Jeremy’s house, his mom was waiting with questions. “You got hit by a car and didn’t tell me?”

“How did you know?”

“The new neighbor stopped by to introduce herself.”

“Was it the teenager or the mom?”

“Were you wearing your helmet?”

Matt paused slightly before answering, “Of course.”

“Do I need to look at your knee?”

“It’s OK.”

“Come up stairs to the bathroom, so I can wash it out and put some salve on it.”

The two went upstairs and Matt’s mom washed and fixed up his knee.

“The new neighbor seemed like a nice young man. I think he was in my English class a couple of years ago.”

“He’s the quarterback on the high school team. He’s good; he’ll probably get a scholarship.”

“Receive.”

“He’ll probably *receive* a scholarship.”

“He stopped by to say he was sorry. That was very mature of him to apologize. He felt he should have been more observant. You should have been on the sidewalk, and you would have been fine. Now, let’s take over a plate of cookies and welcome our new neighbors.”

Downstairs, Matt’s mom wrapped up a plate of cookies and tied it off with a bright bow.

“Can I go by myself to take them over?” Matt was nervous that his helmet would enter into the conversation.

“You may. I’m going to rest a bit.”

Matt rang the bell and Mrs. Wilson answered.

“Hi, my mom made these for you as a welcoming present.”

“How very nice. Nathan remembered your mom as his freshman English teacher.” Mrs. Wilson took the plate and turned around, yelling, “Nathan!”

“Nathan will be down in a second to apologize for almost killing you.”

A minute later, Nathan joined the two at the door. “I’m really sorry about almost hitting you. I wish I could say the truck blocked my view, but I should have been more careful.”

“Nathan,” Mrs. Wilson said, “Apologizing is a sign of maturity. Thank you for doing that.”

Matt shuffled his feet. “I’m sure you have a lot of unpacking to do.”

“It can wait. I want to see you throw the ball.”

## Chapter Two

After a couple of throws in the front yard, Nathan said, “Do you mind if I give you a couple of pointers?”

“Sure.” Matt was in awe. The high school star helping *him*.

“First thing, let’s work on your stance.”

Matt stood still and let Nathan adjust his feet.

“Hold the ball higher. Up by your ear.”

Matt did as instructed.

“Now hold your left arm up like this.”

Matt did.

“Now with one motion swing your left arm across, rotate your hips and bring your throwing arm forward.”

Matt followed the instruction, still holding the ball.

“Swinging the left arm across is called ‘swiping the booger.’ It’s all one motion. Your power comes from hips. Not your arm. Now back up and throw me one.”

Matt placed his legs in a secure base. He held the ball near his ear. He positioned his left arm, so it was up with a bend in the elbow.

“Perfect. Now throw it.”

Matt threw the ball.

“Good. Next time let your right arm come across in the follow through.”

The two continued for another ten minutes. Matt felt he was beginning to get it.

“I should go and help my mom unpack.”

“Thanks so much for your help.”

“Keep working. It takes muscle memory.”

“So, Nathan, has MIZZOU offered you a scholarship?”

Nathan laughed. “Naw. I’m not tall enough.”

“Even if you win state this year?”

“We have a good team and have a good shot at winning conference. But the first playoff bracket pits us against the best team in the state.”

“That’s not fair.”

“It’s just the way it is. The brackets are organized so the state final puts the best teams from the west against the best from the east. It’s usually a Kansas City team versus a Saint Louis team.”

“I know you can do it.”

“You can, too. Get your guys together and work on seven on seven.”

Matt waved goodbye as Nathan turned and went inside. Matt couldn’t wait to show Jeremy his new throwing technique.

The next day Matt met his mom in the driveway to help unload groceries. With his hands full Matt headed toward the house, when he noticed Nathan climbing out of his car and walking over. Matt stayed in the driveway; nervous the bike story may come up.

“Hi, Mrs. Finnish. Wanted to tell you the cookies were great.”

“Thank you, Nathan. I’m glad you enjoyed them.”

Matt’s arms began to tire, but he needed to listen.

“I hear you play on the football team. Have you been keeping up with your summer reading schedule?”

“Yes, Ma’am. Reading *Huck Finn* and *Catcher in the Rye*.”

“Interesting. You know those are both *Bildungsroman* novels.”

“I’m not sure I know that word.”

“Those are stories about young men who mature over the story. They begin with an immature outlook and then grow up and obtain a more mature view of the world.”

*With mom talking about school, I may be safe to go inside.* Matt did not hear the rest as he went inside.

That night at dinner, the three ate in relative silence which was unusual. Matt’s dad normally would entertain with a story or engage Matt with questions. Eventually, Matt’s dad put down his fork and cleared his throat.

“So, Matt, what activities do you plan on doing when school begins? Middle school has a lot of clubs. And there’s music. Did you know it’s a requirement to learn a musical instrument?”

“A music teacher came down and talked to us before school let out. He said my mouth was better for a trombone than a clarinet. I don’t really care; I like sports better.”

“Going to keep up soccer, are you?”

“Maybe for the spring season, but for the fall I’m going to try out for the football team. I really liked it last year.”

“You barely even played,” his mom said. “You were back-up for all but one game, and they never even let you kick field goals.”

“Nathan’s been coaching me. I’m getting better.”

“Your friend Roger will be the starting quarterback. You know that.”

“Dad, Nathan thinks I have a chance to win the position.”

“Matt, you’ve played soccer since second grade. You have always enjoyed it. Should not you stay with what you love?”

Matt sensed his parents were ganging up against him and he didn’t know why. Matt stuffed a big bite into his mouth. This conversation was going in the wrong direction. Matt decided to postpone for another day.

## Chapter Three

Everyday over the next week, Matt rode his bike to the high school and watched the seven-on-seven practice. They played in the stadium. Matt felt like he was trespassing. He was sitting in the stadium without a ticket. No one cared. The players were comfortable as if they owned the place. Usually, Matt was the only one in the stadium seats. Sometimes there would be a father or two sitting up there. Playing hooky from their jobs, Matt thought. He wondered if his dad would skip work every once and while to watch him just practice.

During the practice, no coaches were involved, and Nathan led the session. Since it was just offense versus defense there was no method of keeping score, still everyone out there was giving his best. Each side usually had about a dozen attend each morning. Matt watched and tried to absorb how it worked.

They played like flag football. No pads or helmets. On offense there was a quarterback and a center, though the center just hiked the ball and mostly stood around. Most of the time there was a back who lined up behind Nathan. Then there were four receives usually two on each side. Sometimes they would three on one side. Other times, a tight end would come in and one of the receivers would stay on the sideline.

Nathan would take the snap; the receivers would run their routes, and the running back usually hung back for a count then slide out for the outlet pass. Nathan always made a quick decision on who to throw to. If everyone was covered, he'd dump it off.

It took more time for Matt to grasp how the defense worked. He did notice that they either were in zone or played man-on-man. Matt tried to guess as they lined up, but

he knew he was just guessing. He couldn't read the defense, as he had heard the announcers on TV discuss.

At the end of the Friday practice, Nathan called Matt down to the field.

"Let's see how your form is moving along."

One of the receivers stayed around. Matt through the player some balls as he ran a few stop routes.

"Looking good." Nathan intently watched Matt. He made Matt add a two-step drop back before throwing. "Nope. Let me give you some pointers.

"Take the snap and step back with your right foot. Turn your body toward the sideline. Now cross your left foot over and take one more step back with your right. Now throw."

Nathan helped Matt by placing his feet. After a couple of iterations, Matt was throwing to the receiver.

"Parker, go down five and cut to your right. I want to see Matt throw to a moving target."

Matt's first attempt was high and not very strong. His next throw was better.

"Now just add some zip to the ball. Rotate your body faster."

Matt did and threw a few more. He was in hog's heaven actually throwing balls to the high school receiver. Parker was patient. He ran the routes Nathan asked him to.

"Not bad," Nathan said. "Thanks for your help, Parker."

Parker trotted over to Nathan and Matt.

"This kid's going to be the seventh-grade quarterback for ..."

"River Oak Middle School," Matt finished Nathan's thought.

“Cool,” Parker said. “Nate and I went to Rolling Meadows. It was a fun rivalry, but we always beat River Oak.”

Parker walked away.

“If you show up about fifteen minutes earlier next week, you can help warm up the receivers before we begin practice.”

Matt couldn't wait to tell his dad.

At dinner that night, Matt talked about his day being coached by the high school quarterback and throwing to the receivers. “And he invited to come to practice and help in their warm-ups.”

“You should get your soccer buddies together and kick the ball around.” Matt's mom said.

“The young man is being polite. He doesn't really want you bothering them in practice.” His dad said.

Every day for the next two weeks, Matt showed up fifteen minutes early. The first few days Matt just casually tossed a few balls. By the third day, Matt threw to one line of receivers as Nathan threw to the other half. Matt threw the down-and outs, while Nathan threw the deep balls.

After practice one day, Matt asked, “Where's your back-up?”

“Baseball.”

“And, any other kids on the team playing quarterback?”

“There are. One guy's on vacation. Another one just isn't interested.”

“I guess he doesn't have a shot of taking your spot.”

“He thinks he does. He has a private coach and goes to a lot of camps.”

“But he’s not with the team.”

“He will be when in August when practice officially begins with the coaches.”

“What grade is he?”

“A sophomore. Who knows? Maybe he’ll beat me out.” Matt thought Nathan presented a sense of false modesty. Matt admired his confidence.

“No way.”

“Speaking of camps, are you going to the football day camp?”

“Football camp?”

“I have a flyer in my car I can give you. It’s a thing our new coach just initiated. It’s a skills development camp. Three hours a day for a week. The high school players teach the skills. It’s no contact. Very low key.”

“How much does it cost?”

“Forty bucks.”

Matt knew he couldn’t ask his parents, not after they had been steering him to soccer. He had to Matt thought about his recent birthday money. He didn’t quite have enough. He needed a plan to earn some money.

Matt returned home to find Jeremy waiting for him in the kitchen. Matt’s mom was baking a new batch of Matt’s favorite cookie.

“Hey Jeremy! Hey Mom!”

“You’ve arrived just in time. How do you manage to know exactly when I’m ready to pull out a fresh dozen?”

“Man, where have you been?” Jeremy asked.

“Just out riding my bike.”

“With your helmet on, right?”

“Of course, Mom. Jeremy, want to go outside and toss the ball around?”

“Maybe, later. First things first, and first thing is eating these cookies.”

After each eating a couple and saving their tongues from burning with gulps of cold milk, Jeremy broke the verbal pause. “Have you heard about the football camp at the high school? Are you going?”

“Yeah, I just heard about it.”

Matt’s mom gave Matt a quizzical look.

“I heard about it from Nathan.”

“Who’s Nathan?”

“You mean you have not said a word to Jeremy in two weeks?”

“What? You’re keeping something secret?”

“Nathan Wilson, the high school quarterback, just moved in across the street.”

“No way. He talked to you?”

“Jeremy, tell me about this camp.”

“Mrs. Finnish, it’s an instructional camp where the high school players teach skills to kids from elementary and middle school. It’s three hours for five days. The players work by their position. So, I’ll be with other running backs.”

“Does this mean the campers have to play football?”

“Oh no. It’s just to teach skills.”

“Jeremy, are you going to this camp?”

“Of course, Mrs. Finnish. I told my dad. He said yes before even asking how much. Every kid going out for football is going to be there. All the guys we played

against in rec ball. A hundred kids will show up on the first day of school, but the coaches will know who the real players are based on this camp.”

“Matthew, were you thinking about going?”

“Mom, I think it will be fun. Jeremy is going, and probably all the old guys from the Chargers.”

“I know you. You will then whine and beg to go out for the seventh-grade team.”

Matt inhaled deeply. “But I’m not a whiner,” drawing out the *i* in the word.

Matt’s mom laughed. “Of course not. You would never whine. Will there be kickers at the camp?”

“Of course. All the positions, Mom. It’ll help with soccer.”

Matt ignored Jeremy’s stare. He’d explain later.

“Is there a soccer camp?”

“No.”

“I’ll talk to your dad when he gets home.”

After another couple of cookies each, the two went out back to toss the ball around.

“Don’t you think you should be working out as quarterback at the camp? The coaches will see you there.”

“Let me tell my news. These past two weeks – every morning I’ve been hanging out with the high school team. They’re doing seven-on-seven practice and I’ve been warming up the receivers before they start.”

Jeremy just let the ball drop. “There’s no way. That’s not true.”

“It is. Wilson’s been coaching me on throwing.”

Jeremy walked to Matt and handed him the ball. “You have no idea how lucky you are. This just isn’t real.”

Matt gave Jeremy a playful punch in the arm.

“It’s a done deal. You’re going to camp and working out with the quarterbacks. This is your chance to show the coaches you are better than Roger. You could be the starting quarterback for the team.” Jeremy thumbed Matt in the chest to emphasize his enthusiasm.

“But when school starts, I don’t know if I’m going out for soccer or football.”

“Soccer? Or you nuts? You need to play football.”

“My parents don’t like football so much.”

“What has that have to do with anything?”

“They think I might get hurt.”

“It’s just a camp. You can’t get hurt at camp. No pads. No contact.”

“I know that. It’s just when school starts with the real team.”

“Don’t give me that. You’re playing football and you’re going to beat out Roger.” Jeremy thumbed Matt in the chest.

That night, Matt’s parents must have discussed it, because the next day Matt’s mom informed Matt that he was signed up for camp. “And,” his mom said, “You will work out with the kickers.”

## Chapter Four

When the big week arrived, Matt's dad took the morning off from work to bring Matt to camp. Matt was afraid his was the only parent with him in the in-processing. As it was, there were several dads and as many moms. A year ago, Matt would have been so happy for his dad to be with him. Not so much today.

At the check-in table, a lady took a check and information from his dad. The lady snapped a band around Matt's wrist.

"And what position group are you signing-up for?"

Matt saw the list of his age group for quarterback. There were five, including Roger, the one Matt played behind on the sixth-grade rec team. No one in his age group had signed up for kicker.

"Kicker," his dad said. "Matt's really a soccer player, but his friends are here."

"Great," she said. "You're the first kicker in your age group. We may consolidate you with the rising six graders."

Matt joined the group of six and seventh grade kickers. The leader of the group, Caesar Ramirez, was the high school kicker. The four kickers introduced themselves. "I'm Matt Finnish, a seventh grader and soccer player. I'm here because I may try out for football team." He was the only seventh grader with three six graders

For the next three hours, Matt was mortified. Two of the kickers were horrible. Caesar spent most of his time trying to help the two lousy kickers. Matt's eyes continually wondered over to the quarterback group. Nathan led that group. A coach hovered over the group and seemed to give Roger a lot of attention. Matt wondered if he was the seventh-grade coach.

At the end of the camp, Caesar Ramirez pulled Matt aside.

“Sorry you didn’t get much work this morning. You want to stick around for a half an hour, and I’ll show you my routine?”

“Let me ask my dad.” Matt looked around and leaning against the fence was Matt’s dad. “Can I stick around a bit longer?”

“Matt, not today. I need to be back at work.”

“Come by then this evening at six. I do my routine then.”

“Dad, can I?”

“Not tonight. We have dinner already planned for six.”

“Caesar said, “I can adjust to five for today, if you can make it.”

“That can work. Matt, just ride your bike.”

Just before five, Matt parked his bike next to the track. There were a handful of adults walking laps. Matt at first didn’t see the kicker, when he did Matt ran over to help. The guy was struggling with a large mess bag filled with footballs.

“Good, you’re here. Caesar dropped the bag at the ten-yard line. “This is about the extra point line. We’ll kick from here in the middle and then switch to the hash marks.”

Caesar kicked the first one straight down the middle.

“I saw you watching the quarterbacks today.”

“In sixth grade I played both kicker and quarterback.”

“If you want, I can get you into that group. And we can do kicking in the evening.”

“That’s great. Thanks so much. I just need to ask my dad.”

“Let me know.”

Matt kicked from the same spot and made it. He felt good about his kick.

“No. It’s too low.” Caesar kicked another perfect kick and Matt’s next kick made it through but still just barley over the cross bar. “We have some work to do. The problem is your kick will be blocked. I think your head’s too far forward. Try it again.”

For the next half hour, Matt did all the kicking.

“I appreciate the help, but I feel like you aren’t getting your practice. I’ll chase the balls, so it’ll go faster.”

Matt collected the balls and brought them back, and Caesar finished his routine.

“Did you decide if you are going out for kicker or sticking with soccer?”

“I’m thinking football.”

“Good. If you come out here every night, I think you’ll have a consistent form before school tryouts – at least for the extra points. In seventh grade, the coach won’t go for the field goal that often. If you can hit one from the twenty, the coach will love you. Is anyone else trying out for kicker?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, just assume there is. I’ll help you all summer. But you have to promise me you’ll be committed and try out for football.”

Matt paused. His parents didn’t want him to play football. But all his friends were going to try out for the team. Matt had a great chance of making the team and maybe a chance at beating out Roger. But Matt had one more reservation, that he’d need to work through.

Matt nodded. “I’ll be here tomorrow night.”

At dinner, Matt excitedly told his parents all about camp. “The kicker has really taken me under his wing. He invited me to work out with him in the evenings. He practices every evening at six.”

“I guess that means I need to re-adjust dinner time.”

“It’s six fifteen now. Should we have early dinner or late dinner?”

“Honey, I get tired by the end of the day. Can we do an early dinner?”

“I guess I can come home a bit earlier this week. Probably should get in a little earlier each morning. So Matt, can you manage camp without me?”

“Dad, I don’t think I can.” Matt finished with a big smile.

Matt’s dad rubbed Matt’s head. “You can ride your bike.”

Shortly after dinner, Matt’s parents retired to their room, much earlier than normal. Very strange for being so early. Matt scooped up some ice cream and slowly ate it in the quiet kitchen.

Matt needed to make a decision and commit to it. There were just so many conflicts. Jeremy and Nathan Wilson thought he had a chance to make the team and beat out Roger. But Roger was his friend, and Matt didn’t want to take away what was surely Roger’s reward for all the years he played.

Matt also did not want to go against his parents. They would rather he play soccer. His dad played soccer when he was in high school, but his dad also played football in middle school. *Why does Dad object so much?*

Matt spooned in the last bite of ice cream. He had his own issue which he never discussed with anyone. Deep down he feared getting demolished. Every play, eleven guys on the other team would be out to cream him. Last year on the Chargers, he played

one entire game, when Roger sat out with a twisted ankle. Matt was proud of that game. He survived even though he was terrified. But that fear is still there. Seventh grade was real football, not just a little kid league. Half those kids back then won't make their school's team. The kids that do will be much better – faster, stronger and more aggressive.

If he told Jeremy that he couldn't play, because his parents wouldn't let him, would that be a cop out?

And what about all the help Caesar's is giving him? Matt just had to at least try out for kicker.

Matt rinsed out his bowl and placed it in the dishwasher. His hands shook. He could never live with himself if he didn't try. His parents wouldn't like this decision, but he had to do it. Tomorrow he'd work out with the quarterbacks, and when school started, he'd try out.

Chapter Five

Matt arrived early, locked his bike and watched the other players arrive. He looked at the kickers and Caesar waved at him. Matt saw Nathan who was already busy talking to a couple of early arrivers at quarterback.

“What do you think?”

Matt turned to see who just spoke. Matt recognized one of the quarterbacks who had just arrived.

“It’s a good camp.”

“You’re staring at the quarterbacks. Are you going to join that group?”

“I am.”

“Which middle school are you going to? My name is Roscoe.”

“River Oak.”

“Too bad. Looks like that Roger kid is going to be the starter there.”

“Roger’s a good player. We played on Chargers last year in rec ball.”

“That’s too bad. You’ll never get playing time, and your chances of starting in high school are next to nothing.”

Matt stared at Roscoe, then said. “I’m having fun.”

“At Rolling Meadows, it’s wide open who will be the starter. I got as good a chance as anyone.”

“Good for you.” Matt tried to remember if this guy did well in the drills. He just seemed to blend in with all the others. “About yesterday. What did I miss?”

“Not much. We just did timed tests. Shuttle drill, 40-yard dash, ten-yard quickness test, stuff like that. Too bad you missed it. You might have had a chance to compete against Roger if you had some hard evidence that you are a better athlete.”

“We should probably join the group.”

Matt ran out onto the field where the quarterbacks had circled around Nathan.

“Welcome, Matt. We missed you yesterday,” Nathan said.

The adult coach scowled. “Who are you? Why weren’t you here yesterday?”

Nathan came to Matt’s rescue. “Coach Thompson, this is Matt Finnish. He’s also going out for kicker and was in that group yesterday.”

“Finnish, you need to be with this group every day. I’m looking for dedication from my players.”

That day in camp the players worked on some basic skills such as taking the snap from center, and the steps necessary to hand the ball off for the various places where the running back would be. It seemed a bit simple, but after many iterations, Matt realized how important the consistent foot work was. They finished the day working on making quick pitches. On the first few tries Matt failed miserably. One of the other high school quarterbacks took Matt aside and taught him how to make an underhand spiral. Matt felt like a failure, because he had to be pulled out for special instruction. But soon Matt realized that this camp was low key and focused more on learning than making an assessment. No one yelled and no one seemed critical. Everyone one of the small group of players had struggled in at least one skill.

That is, everyone except Roger. He already excelled at every drill. And whenever they did a new drill, Roger always went first to help demonstrate the correct way.

After the camp session ended Matt wanted to ask Nathan his opinion on how he did, but Nathan quickly left with all the other high school players to a meeting. After seeing this, Matt turned to speak to Roger who was speaking with the seventh-grade coach off to the side. So Matt got on his bike and rode home.

At dinner that night, something felt different. Matt's parents seemed quiet. They'd catch glances at each other and then quickly look down at their plate.

"I guess it's different eating so early."

"Matt, all is fine," his dad said, and then put another bite into his mouth.

"I had fun at camp. I met a new friend. He's going to the other middle school though."

"The boss didn't have an issue with me leaving early. He says he understands."

Matt's mom wiped her mouth with her napkin. "You've told him?"

"Yes."

"I think I need to excuse myself. I need to get ready to go see the kicker." Matt met up with Caesar and went through his kicking routine.

The next morning, Matt rode his bike to the camp. This day in camp, the quarterbacks worked on throwing. They grouped with the receivers and Matt threw well. After his first roll-out pass where Matt floated it up to the receiver, the middle school coach made a nice compliment. Nathan gave Matt a wink. Matt felt things were going his way as for the remainder of the drills he was always second behind Roger.

At the end of the session, the Coach Thompson held Matt back from leaving.

“You have a few extra minutes? I’d like to get some scores down for you.”

The coach timed Matt in the forty, the ten and in the shuttle. Matt had no idea how he compared to the others. The coach just looked at his stopwatch and wrote down the results. The coach measured his standing long jump. “I don’t have the equipment needed to measure your standing high jump, but I think we’re OK without that score. You did really well.”

For the rest of the camp, Roger and Matt were always the first two in every drill. The rest of the group accepted the delineation. Roger and Matt just stood out better than the rest. Roscoe was emerging as the best quarterback for Rolling Meadows.

At the end of the last day, Roscoe said, “Too bad you and Roger go to the same school. If you went to Rolling Meadows, you’d start for sure.”

“I think you’re the shoe-in there. It’s going to be fun when we play each other.” Matt shook Roscoe’s hand. It seemed strange to make a friend at the rival school. Matt’s focus was thinking about all the new kids he’d meet in his middle school. Three elementary schools all coming together. There was going to be a lot of new faces.

## Chapter Six

Matt woke up before his alarm. It was the first day of seventh grade. He had showered the night before and he had laid out the clothes he would wear the first day. He dressed quickly and went to the kitchen. Matt's dad was just finishing his breakfast. Matt's mom was still in her dressing gown.

"Mom, you're running late." Matt sat down to a plate of pancakes.

"No, I'm fine."

"But you normally have left by this time."

"Did I forget to tell you?"

Matt looked up quizzically unable to speak with his mouth stuffed.

"I'm not teaching this semester. I'm taking time off."

Matt swallowed. "I had no idea."

Matt Dad stood ready to leave. "Good luck in soccer today."

"With after school sports, I may not be home 'til five."

With a new school, a new routine, a new locker, a new cafeteria, new classes, and new students, the day was overwhelming. Matt barely had time to think about football. He did note that Jeremy wasn't in any of his classes, though he did notice that he recognized at least someone he knew in every class. In all but one of the classes the teachers let the kids choose their seats. Matt played it safe and sat in the middle. In his science class he was assigned a seat. Two students per lab table, and Matt's partner was a girl. He smiled and gave a wave. The teacher was strict and allowed no conversation.

After dressing in shorts, cleats and t-shirts, about a hundred boys lined up in rows outside. The coaches hollered and blew whistles. No one was able to please any of the

three coaches. The head coach, Coach Thompson explained how the week would go. Anyone wanting to try out for a skill position hustled over to the far side of the practice field. This was about three-quarters of the group. Matt at first didn't know what the coach meant about a skill position, but he saw Roger go that way, so he followed. Looking back at the original group Matt saw that those who stayed on that side of the field were the bigger kids. They were all big, but he would have to worry about that later.

Six quarterbacks lined up to throw to a line of receivers. Matt threw the same route to a group of about ten. He took two steps back, pivot and threw to each twice. Then they ran a different route. `And that was mostly the day's practice.

At the end of practice, the coach explained how the team was going to be organized. This was much different that Matt had envisioned. The team would be made of fifty players. Many would play both on offense and defense. There would be three squads: A, B, and C. In the game the A Squad would play the first quarter. The B would play the second. The C would play the third, and the A would play the fourth. This was much different than Matt thought. Everyone would get a chance to play, and the level of play would be similar for all the schools. To make the team, Matt had to be one of the top three quarterbacks, and he would play at least a quarter every game. The games were to be played Tuesdays after school. The first game was in three weeks. The coaches would make the cuts after Friday's practice. All pads and equipment would be given out after the cuts.

Matt came home exhausted.

“How was your first day?” Matt's mom asked.

“Fine. But also, overwhelming. My head seemed to spin the whole day.”

She laughed.

“Was PE class a welcome relief?”

“Mom, no PE this week. It was tryouts. If you make the team then the sport counts as PE class.”

“Then, how were the soccer tryouts?”

This was the part that Matt hated. He had lied all along to his parents, telling them he was trying out for soccer. Matt had no idea how soccer went, so Matt made it up. “We’ll know by Friday who made the team.”

“I’m sure you’ll be great.”

At dinner that night, Matt’s dad repeated the same question. Matt kept up the story.

“Did you meet any nice girls today?”

“Da-ad.”

“Well?”

“I sit next to a girl in science class.”

“And what’s her name? Did you two go to the same elementary?” His mom asked.

“I don’t think so. We didn’t get a chance to talk.”

“Was Jeremy in any of your classes?”

And the questions continued for the entire dinner.

At the end of practice on Friday, Coach Thompson told who would be on A, B and C squads. All the others were thanked for doing their best and would welcome to

come back next year. Matt was the B Squad quarterback, and also the A Squad kicker. Matt did not have to worry about a defensive position. He was also given the famous “play book”, a binder with all the plays. The quarterbacks were told to know all the formations and the first ten plays by Monday. Just another thing Matt would have to hide from his parents.

Matt was happy for Jeremy who made the A Squad as fullback. Roger of course was the A Squad quarterback. The C quarterback, Billy Jones, was someone who didn’t go to the summer camp. He was tall and lanky and could throw a mile as well as he could really zing the ball. Matt worried about the competition. The coach made it known that not knowing the plays could drop one down to the next lower level.

Like every day that week, his parents bombarded him with questions. Matt thought they must have really liked school. That’s all they thought about: “How was your day at school?”

“So, I assume you made the soccer team?” his mom said.

“Yes.”

“I’m proud of you son. You know I played soccer in high school.”

*I know.*

“I heard everyone who tried out for soccer made the team,” his mom said.

“Yeah. Not that many tried out.”

“Did you make the starting line-up?”

“Of course, Dad.” Matt began to feel queasy. His mom as a high school teacher may have some connections. “I found out the girl’s name who sits next to me in science class. It’s Denny.”

“Her last name’s not McIntyre, is it? There’s a teacher at the high school with a daughter named Denny. I might just know her mom.”

*Great. Great. Great. I already told her I was trying out for the football team.*

“Are you and Mrs. McIntyre close friends?”

“Not particularly. Are you worried that we might force you two together?”

“Mo-om, we’re lab partners.”

Chapter Seven

Sunday afternoon, Jeremy came over for the purpose of studying their playbook. Matt let him in and the two immediately went to the kitchen.

“Baking any cookies today, Mrs. Finnish?”

“No new ones today. We still have some molasses cookies from the other day.”

“With icing?”

“Of course. So, what brings you over today?”

Matt quickly interjected, “We’re going to study English.”

“And what in English will you be studying this afternoon?”

“‘The Killers’ by Ernest Hemingway,” Matt answered. “We need to go on and get busy.”

“One more cookie, Jeremy?”

“Yes, please.”

Up in Matt’s room the two opened their playbooks.

“What’s with the bit about studying English?”

“Jeremy, I didn’t want my mom to know.”

“Why?”

“Just because.”

“You make no sense.”

“Look, I told her I am on the soccer team. She doesn’t know I’m on the football team.”

“That’s stupid. Why did you tell her that? Your dad knows, right?”

“No.”

“They don’t know? What about banquet night at the end of the season? Or the yearbook? Why are you hiding this from them?”

“It’s OK. They just like soccer better. So, can you help me keep the secret?”

“This means your mom is going to grill us on the story she thinks were studying.”

“We’ll figure it out.”

Two hours later, the house was quiet, and the boys snuck out the front door.

Monday afternoon, the players went through the assembly line of receiving their equipment. The school trainer checked the helmet and shoulder pads fit properly. None of the equipment seemed as good as the pads Matt’s parents bought last year for the Chargers. The shoulder pads stunk. The pants were too big, and the pads were meager. The mouthpiece was obviously inferior.

Matt whispered to Roger, “Can we use our own pads?”

As if the coach heard Matt’s question, he proclaimed, “School rules prohibit the use of any equipment not issued by the school. Except of course, shoes. You must purchase your own shoes.”

Matt’s heart stopped. He had outgrown his cleats from last year.

Roger whispered back something about using his own mouthpiece. Matt wasn’t listening. He was thinking about shoes. *I know. I’ll tell my dad I need new cleats for soccer.*

The rest of the week was rough. It was hot and the coaches kept a fast-paced busy schedule of drills. For any player who had never played tackle football they received an abundance of hitting. Matt was tackled many times and never got used to it. Coach Hauser, the offensive coordinator, taught a couple of survival tricks to dodge and duck

oncoming defensive lineman. Matt also got plenty of practice ducking under an approaching tackler after a run. And they even did a drill where the coach taught the quarterbacks how to plow into a tackler when necessary. By the end of the week Matt's feeling of terror of being crushed seemed to have diminished. He gained a lot of confidence. The secret to survival was avoiding the direct collusion.

On Friday, Matt's dad took him to the high school game. His mom said she would stay at home. It would be a bonding event for dad and son. Matt's dad bought hot dogs and iced drinks. It was still hot outside and still daylight. Friday night lights didn't describe the first game as it started while still daylight. Matt was excited to see Nathan Wilson, Caesar and the receivers he met over the summer. The game had a new excitement that he hadn't felt the previous year. Matt *knew* these players.

"Dad, everyone in middle school is talking about football. Rec ball was fun, but this is a big deal." Matt just couldn't hold back his excitement.

Matt's dad felt it, too. "I remembered when I played football in middle school. That was exciting. The school was behind the team. We had pep rallies and cheerleaders. How is it at your school?"

"So why didn't you keep playing through high school?"

"I was a small, skinny guard. The coach didn't need any of my kind."

"You could have been the kicker."

"It wasn't the same. Standing around and just waiting to kick seemed boring. I wanted to be in the action."

The crowd stood up and cheered. Wilson just threw a long pass to Parker, who ran the rest of the way in for a touchdown. “We’re starting to pull away now.” Caesar kicked the extra point, and the team was up by twenty-one.

“Dad, can I go sit with my friends? I’ll be back by halftime.”

“Say ‘hi’ to Jeremy for me.”

Matt walked down the steps and over to the seventh graders who all stood in the front few rows near the ten- and twenty-yard lines. He walked up to his science lab partner, a tall girl with straight silky brown hair and tapped her on the shoulder.

“Oh, Matt. So nice to see you.”

Matt wore a big smile and was lost for words.

“Did you just get here? We’re killing them.”

“I know. I was sitting up there with my dad.”

Matt stood there awkwardly not knowing what to say next. All around the other kids were cheering. “You want to go get some popcorn?”

At the end of the game, the band played the alma mater, and the players ran off to the locker room. “Wow, that was a great game.” Matt didn’t even know the final score.

The two stood toe-to-toe about a foot apart. They were the same height.

“Thanks for the popcorn.”

“I should check on my dad.”

“I need to find my parents.”

## Chapter Eight

The morning of his first game, Matt was excited, but he couldn't share his excitement with his mom. As if on cue, his mom asked, "When do you play your soccer games?"

"Not like the old days when they were on Saturday mornings."

"I would like to go to your games."

"I'll get you a schedule." Matt ran to his room to collect his backpack. When he came back his mom seemed to have forgotten about the schedule.

Before the bell rang for first period, Matt pulled his jersey over the t-shirt he wore. All the players wore their jerseys the day of the game. Now he could be among the proud walking down the hallways. It wasn't new, and he didn't get to choose his number; but he loved that jersey – number sixteen.

At lunch the cafeteria buzzed with excitement. There was a section filled with boys all wearing red jerseys. Matt sat with Jeremy and they both were so nervous they could barely eat. "We need to drink a lot of water. It's going to be a scourger out there." Jeremy said.

In science class, Denny was already at the table. She handed Matt a cookie wrapped in plastic and tied off with a red ribbon. "My mom and I made this last night."

Matt could see the words written in icing, "Go, Fight, Win!"

"Eat it in the locker room. It'll give you energy."

*This is a great day.*

Matt and the rest of the team ran out onto the field. Nothing like the high school, but it did have a set of bleachers which were filled with students. Matt didn't see many

parents. Since first grade his parents had come to every game, sporting event and activity he had ever been in.

River Oak lost the toss which meant Matt was going to kick-off to start the season. He felt proud to be on A Squad, if only for one play. As kicker Matt's role was to be the safety in case the kick returner got past everyone else. Matt made a strong kick with good airtime. His teammates made the tackle easily.

By the end of the first quarter, the visitors were up six to zero. Their kicker had missed the extra point. Now the B Squads took the field. Matt would get to play eight minutes, that is if the defense could give him the ball. The quarter started with the visitors on the home team's twenty-yard-line.

On the first play their fullback ran straight up the middle for a touchdown. The kick was low and blocked. Realistically it should be described as a line drive straight into the kicker's own blockers. Matt smiled at that. He hadn't made such a low kick since the first day he worked with Caesar.

On his first drive everything worked perfectly. Between the two runners, they alternated and picked up five or six yards every time. Matt was happy with that progress and even more so when Coach Thompson called for a pass. The receiver, lined up on the far right, ran a slant and Matt hit him in stride. The receiver ran past the middle linebacker and across the field. He had gained twenty yards before being tackled. Five running plays later, they scored. The B Squad kicker missed the extra point just wide to the left.

The visitors made a couple of first downs before they had to punt. On the second drive, it was the same as the first drive. The methodically marched down the field. A ten-

yard run tied the score. Instead of kicking Coach Thompson called for a two-point try. Matt faked to the fullback up the middle and the sprinted for the flag. He made it before being touched. The home team was up 14-12 and that's how the quarter ended.

The third quarter went without scoring for either C Squad. Many of the players on the C Squads had not played football before and each side made many mistakes. The A Squads took the field for the fourth quarter and the visitors added six. After a three and out, the visitors drove again and this time their A kicker hit a field goal. It was 21-14. As the clock ticked down, Roger led the offense for a touchdown. Coach Thompson did not want to end the game in a tie, and Matt was called back from an attempt. Roger threw a pass for the two-point conversion and River Oak ended up winning 22-21.

It was an exhilarating first game. Roger was the hero and received praise from all. Matt was happy for him, but deep down he wished he would have been the hero. As they walked off the field, Coach Thompson told Matt, "You played a great game today."

At home, Matt wanted to share so badly with his parents all the details of the game, but he bit his tongue all through dinner. Neither asked how his day went, and Matt went to his room early to work on homework.

## Chapter Nine

The next day in school though everyone talked all day about the game – in the halls, in the cafeteria and even in science class. Matt was the only football player in the class and the teacher, Mr. Owens, made Matt stand-up and explain the results of the game. Matt spoke about the defense and of Roger, then sat down. Mr. Owens then asked, “Well Matt, how would you describe your contribution?”

Matt felt his face turn red. Denny spoke up, “Actually Matt did very well. It was the B Squad which scored two touchdowns.” Some of the students clapped and some made jeering remarks. Matt didn’t know how to handle the sudden attention. He felt good, but he wasn’t used to being called out like that. Still, he couldn’t help himself from smiling broadly.

The next two days were similar around the Finnish household. Dinner was quiet and awkward. The high school game was away, and Matt went to the game with Jeremy and his dad. By the time Matt came home, his parents were in bed and Matt had no one to share the exciting finish as Nathan Wilson threw a late fourth quarter pass for a 21-17 win. In bed, Matt watched out his window. He saw Mrs. Wilson’s car come home and half an hour later Nathan’s car pulled into the driveway of a dark house. Matt wondered how the team reacted to late night games. Did they celebrate, or were just so tired they went straight home?

The next week started out as the previous one. Neither his mom nor dad asked about the soccer schedule. Matt was relieved and also perplexed. They seemed pre-occupied. On Tuesday, since it was an away game, the team had to board the bus early

before school was over. Matt missed science class. He wondered if Denny realized the team left early and she had another cookie waiting for him.

The first quarter had Roger throwing on almost every play. River Oak was up 21-0 by the time the second quarter began. For the B Squad Coach Thompson had a completely different game plan. The offense ran on every down. At half-time it was 35-14. The C Squads were matched completely differently. The River Oak squad made tremendous improvement. By the end of the third quarter, it was tied 35 all. In the fourth, River Oak scored two touchdowns and Matt kicked one extra point but missed the last one.

After the kick Matt realized his mistake. He had already made four and lost his concentration. He leaned too far forward and the ball slide under the cross bar. It was a tough bus ride home for Matt. Everyone else was ecstatic. It's a team sport, but the kicker is on an island, alone.

The next day in science class, Matt told Denny about the game and his miss. She touched his arm. "Let it go. I believe in you." That meant so much to Matt.

The next high school game was at home. Matt's dad gave Matt a ride to the game and money for food, but did not stay. Matt arrived well before kickoff. He saw Caesar come out of the locker room early to warm-up. Caesar waved him out of the stands. "I heard about your game. The secret to success in this business is to have no memory. If you think about your last kick you're doomed. Let it go."

"Thanks. I'll take heed."

"I'm serious. You're a good kicker. It's like water on a duck."

Matt felt he was keeping Caesar from his drills. “You need to warm-up. Thanks, and good luck.”

Now back in the seventh-grade section, Matt watched Denny come down the stadium steps.

“Look at you., Mr. Matthew Finish, I didn’t know you were special and could go down there on the field.”

“Ah, Caesar’s a great guy. He took me under his wing this summer and taught me how to kick.”

“Your mom’s not teaching this year? My mom just told me.”

“She just said she was going to take a semester off. She deserves it. She’s reading a lot. She likes that serious literature.”

“Have you started reading *The Red Pony*, yet? That’s a weird book. I’m not sure I get it.”

“I read it this summer. My mom told me we would have to read it. You want to get together this weekend and talk about it?”

“We could meet in the library on Saturday.”

Matt smiled. “Saturday works for me.”

Just after lunch, Matt’s dad dropped Matt off at the library. Denny was waiting just inside the entrance. “Hey. Follow me. I know of a quiet table in the research area. We can talk, because few people go back there.”

They found a table with four chairs, and both sat on the same side. Denny pulled out her copy of the book.

“First of all, let’s examine each story separately and then we can discuss what they mean as a collection.”

Denny pulled out a notebook and pen. “OK, let’s examine these turkeys.”

They discussed the book for a good thirty minutes then suddenly there was a moment when neither talked. They looked at each other and giggled. “Just for the record,” Matt said. “My name’s not Matthew. It’s just Matt.”

In mock seriousness, Denny blinked three times and said, “I never heard of such simplicity.”

“On my birth certificate it spells out M-A-T-T-E. I used to write my name that way, but my kindergarten teacher had a fit and wouldn’t let me. So, I now go by Matt without the E.”

“Well, Matt without an E, my name is Denise, and I go by Denny.”

“Whenever you say your name, I think of breakfast.”

“Hardy har-har. So why the funny spelling?”

“It’s my dad’s idea of a joke and my mom went along with it. When people would get their film developed, they would have to check the block for glossy prints or matte finish.”

“That’s horrible.”

“They tell me if I were a girl, my name would have been Glossy.”

“I can’t believe a mom would let that happen.”

“Just outside there is an ice cream shop. Want to go for some ice cream?”

## Chapter Ten

Late Sunday night, Matt snuck out of his room with his football uniform. The first week he really stressed over when he could sneak in a wash. Both his parents seemed to conk out early on Sunday. It worked the week before, so Matt tried it again. He had just added the soap and closed the lid when suddenly his mother appeared behind him. Matt let out a little involuntary scream.

“Matt, you’re doing laundry?”

“Sure. Just trying to help out.”

“At eleven at night?”

“I thought you were asleep.”

“Am I not being a responsible mother? You’ve never done laundry before. How did you even know how?”

“I figured it out.”

“Oh, sweetie, I’m so sorry.” She wrapped her arms around Matt.

“You’re a great mom.”

She squeezed her son and began to cry. Matt had never seen his mother cry like this. It made no sense.

“Why don’t you go back to your room. I have it all under control.”

Matt worried that she might have seen the knee and thigh pads he had dropped on the floor. When his mom was back in her room, Matt pulled out the next book on his reading list, *Romeo and Juliet*. This one was hard to get used to. It had a cadence to it, which wasn’t natural. Somewhere in the play it was supposed to be a love story. Matt wondered how this would go if he had to study it with Denny.

Tuesday game was another away game at a school called Northside. The coaches explained that this team would be tough. They had a strong defense and a full complement of really, big kids. The middle linebacker was especially huge. His name was Smith-Cline. He seemed big enough to play varsity on a high school team. Coach Thompson's game plan was to run the ball away from the monster.

Before the opening kick-off, Coach Dougherty, the defense and special teams coach, pulled Matt aside.

“Number eighteen is small, but superfast. Kick it away from him.”

Matt saw that 18 was to the left so he kicked it to the right toward number 85. Matt's role was to hang back and be the safety. So far in the season, his team had always made the tackle long before any threat came his way. Number 85 began moving up the right side. Matt slid over some in that direction. Then just as Matt thought the guy was going down, he lateraled to 18 who sped across the field heading to the left. The trick play worked. Number 18 ran past all the River Oak players and was approaching midfield. Matt did what he knew he was supposed to do - move in front and be ready for the tackle. Matt had never tackled anyone in his life.

Matt had to make the tackle. It was going to be right at mid-field, right in front of the bleachers. He couldn't miss. Surely, he could stop this little guy. Matt moved directly in front of his path. The guy was running straight at Matt as if he was going to run through him. *The guy's half my size.* Matt stood in the path and – closed his eyes - and braced for impact.

The little runner hit Matt square in the chest. Pain shot through Matt's body, and he fell over backwards. Matt hit the ground and heard the whistle blow. He looked around, 18 was on the ground. Matt had done it. He made the tackle.

Matt picked himself up and jogged to the sideline. No one gave him a high-five. The River Oak defense ran on the field. It was as if they all expected him to make the tackle. Matt sat on the bench and steadied his breathing. He did it. He conquered one of his fears. Now, all he had to do was play the game and not get creamed.

By the end of the first quarter River Oak was behind 12-0. Jeremy was getting nowhere up the middle. The receivers seemed nervous and dropped almost every ball. When the B Squads took the field, Matt was apprehensive. The offense played scared, just trying not to fumble and not to lose yards on any play. The good news was their offense wasn't any good. With about two minutes before half, Coach Thompson called timeout. He noticed that the opposing B Squad defense was playing everyone right up near the line of scrimmage. He called for the wide receiver to line up way outside on the right. He would sprint up field and look for the ball. Matt was just to float it up there. The play worked like a charm. It went eighty yards for a touchdown.

For the two-point conversion, Coach Thompson called the squad over for a strategy time-out. Matt was to run a quarterback draw up the middle. They had never practiced it, but it went like one of their pass plays. Matt would just drop back, then take off. It looked like it was going to work. Matt had a big hole up the middle, but the linebacker recovered quickly and came up to make the tackle. Matt, with newfound confidence, ran forward and slammed his shoulder into the opposing player.

At the point of impact, Matt felt the worst pain in his shoulder. It all happened so fast. Matt was on the ground. His left arm was intense pain from his shoulder to his fingers. It was all on fire. Matt ran off the field with his left arm dangling down. His whole arm felt pins and needles.

“Coach, coach! I think my shoulder’s broken.”

Coach Thompson looked straight at Matt and felt his hand and under his shoulder pad. “Go sit on the bench. Rest your foreman on your leg. Don’t move.”

Matt did so but couldn’t understand why a doctor wasn’t setting his arm, or wrapping it in a sling, or putting ice on it. Soon a student trainer sat down beside him. He didn’t do anything either except tell Matt to concentrate on the game.

Matt watched the other team offense make a few first downs. Strangely the pin and needle pain diminished. His arm just tingled a bit. After another minute, Matt said to the student trainer, “It doesn’t hurt anymore.”

“Go over to the coach and tell him you’re ready.”

Matt got up, shook his arm around a bit, and went to the coach. “It doesn’t hurt any more. Am I in shock?”

“You had a stinger. You’re better now. Go back in and just hand the ball off a few times and take it to half-time.’

The final score wasn’t near as bad as the game seemed to go. River Oak lost 26-6. Roger took a pounding and got on the bus with ice packs all over his body. Jeremy had one on his neck. It was a quiet bus ride home. Back at school, the trainer called Matt into his training room.

“Finnish, you’re not finished. That’s a good joke. I’m funny, no?” The trainer gave a quick evaluation of Matt’s shoulder. “What you had is called a stinger. You compressed your nerve, and you felt it, right? But these things usually recover right away. It’s amazing how we can bounce back. Take this paper home to your parents. It gives a medical description of what happened. It’s up to them if they want to take you to see a doctor. Come in before school starts and I’ll check it again. You don’t have to go to a doctor, but one of your parents needs to sign this before you can resume any school activities. Got it?”

At home, Matt felt as if the letter was screaming at him. “Show me to your parents. Tell them you deceived them. Admit your guilt!” Matt quietly ate his dinner. He wanted so badly to tell his mom. He wanted her to put him on the couch with an ice pack. She had always done this every time he got hurt or felt ill. His dad would make an appointment to see a specialist of some kind, nerve or bone, whatever. They’d probably let him stay home from school.

But he hadn’t told them he had been playing football for a month against their wishes. If he was going to keep playing football, he would have to do something drastic. He was going to have to forge one of their signatures.

## Chapter Eleven

In his room, Matt practiced for twenty minutes. Then he did it. He forged his dad's signature. *In for a penny; in for a pound.* The saying didn't make sense, but Matt had heard it many times and it came up naturally.

*What if someone from the school calls?*

The next morning the trainer thought Matt was fine. Matt resumed practice that afternoon. The note worked. Matt was having amazing luck.

At lunch the next day, Denny pulled him aside. "Are you all right? I heard got hurt. Nearly broke your shoulder."

"I'm fine. It was just a stinger."

"You didn't even mention it yesterday."

"Who told you?"

"The news filtered out. Your team got crushed and everyone is all beat up."

"You know the high school is away tomorrow. The middle school is hosting a mixer in the cafeteria. Are you going?"

"No. I'm staying home and reading *Romeo and Juliet*."

"Really?"

"I'm kidding. Of course, I'll be there. My mom is going to be a chaperone."

The cafeteria was decorated in streamers and balloons. Along one wall were long tables filled with a large assortment of homemade desserts. In the opposite corner was another table with pitchers of lemonade, and bottles of water. A DJ played the current hit songs. The lighting in the room was dimmed a bit less than for a normal lunch.

Matt surveyed the room. He saw the band kids mingled together, otherwise everyone seemed to be grouped by the elementary school they attended. Matt found a handful of football players, but none were on the A Squad. The cheerleaders, with ribbons in their hair, appeared as if they were hired hostesses. They flew through the groups trying to encourage camaraderie.

Just as he was beginning to feel awkward standing in the entrance, Matt saw old friends from elementary school. He moved toward the group. He stood in that group and ate a plateful of cookies. After a have an hour of not much happening, the DJ took charge and organized group line dancing. The girls came out in force and next the bravest of the boys. Matt saw Denny with some other girls having fun. A couple of boys joined them.

Matt jumped into the fray. He didn't know any of the movements, but with Denny and her friends leading him, he was having a blast. With the dance floor filled, the DJ switched to pop songs. Matt, Denny and her group of friends all danced together as a group. It ended all too quickly.

Denny stayed with her mom and Matt went outside to wait for his dad. Fifteen minutes went by. Most of the kids had been picked up. Soon it was just Matt and off in the distance under some trees eight or so boys lingered. Matt couldn't see who they were, but they soon approached him.

“What are you doing out here, Finnish?”

“Waiting for mommy to come get you?”

“My shoulder hurts.” One said in a whiney, falsetto voice.

“You're finished, Finnish.”

Matt recognized these guys as most of the A Squad. Matt stood his ground as they circle around him. “You think you’re tough? We’re playing Rolling Meadow Tuesday and if you don’t show up to play, you’ll be sitting on the bench in high school. All hat, no cattle. Picking on me isn’t going to prove anything. I know some of them and they’re biting at the bit to eat your lunch.”

No one said anything for a minute, then someone in the back – that someone was Jeremy – said, “Come on, let’s go.”

They walked away and Matt stood alone.

## Chapter Twelve

Before practice on Monday, Coach Thompson approached Matt. “Roger’s still banged up from last week. We are going to rest him. You’ll start with A Squad and play the first and fourth quarters.”

If there was ever a moment where Matt wanted to tell his parents to come watch him play, it was now. They would be so proud. *But I made my bed and now I must sleep in it.*

Tuesday. Rolling Meadow was coming to River Oak for the rivalry game. All day the school buzzed. The schedule was adjusted to allow a pep rally in between second and third period. The band was loud, the cheerleaders went crazy, and the student body was into the excitement. Matt’s stomach did flips.

After Friday night, he had to live up to his words and prove to his teammates he was worthy. No mistakes; he had to be perfect. Not only prove he could play on A Squad, Matt needed to excel in this game. He wanted those guys to respect him. He needed a monster game.

Three extra sets of bleachers were set up along the field. These were all packed with seventh graders. The band even showed up to play.

For the coin toss, Matt and two others represented River Oak. For Rolling Meadow Matt recognized Roscoe, one of the quarterbacks from summer camp. The guy said he would make the A Squad, and he did.

“Way to go, Matt. You beat out Roger.”

The two shook hands. Matt did not say any more.

From the very beginning Coach Thompson called a game which let Matt know he had confidence in him. Matt threw it about one of every three plays. It was great playing with the A Squad receivers. They could catch. River Oak scored first, and Matt made the extra point.

Matt knew his line was huge, but the other's side was just as big on defense. After the first drive ended in a touchdown, Matt felt good about the team, but also felt a nagging fear of getting creamed. On the first drive he was not even touched. How long could that last?

On the sideline, Jeremy teased him. "You're not even dirty. Did you even play?"

"You looked like you crawled through a pigsty."

"Look at my backside. All clean. That means no one knocked me backwards."

Jeremy slapped Matt's shoulder pads.

On the third play of the second drive, Coach Thompson called a running play for Matt. Matt had to get the first down. Matt had to keep hold of the ball and not fumble. Matt had to stay alive.

Matt faked to Jeremy and then followed him through the hole. Matt dodged a first defender and then ducked just under the full force of the safety, running straight at him. The guy would get credit for the tackled, but he missed destroying Matt with his full force. Matt made the first down.

The quarter ended. It was 7-0. When the fourth quarter started River Oak was behind 19-7. Matt gathered the offense on the sideline.

"I was serious about what I said Friday night. If you guys want to play in high school, you have to be better than you opponent right here, today. This is your test. The

high school coaches are watching. They're looking at their future team. It's going to be us – or them.”

Matt and his offense put a nice drive together and drove down and scored. He felt no pressure on the upcoming kick. Hit or miss the team still needed to score a touchdown. Matt stayed focused and made the kick. Now they were five points behind. The downside to the drive was it took over five minutes off the eight-minute quarter. Before the defense could force a punt, another two minutes slipped by. Less than a minute and over seventy yards to go.

After three straight completions, they were past the fifty, but only twenty seconds remained. Coach Thompson called his last time out. “Finnish, can you recognize a two high safety look?”

Matt nodded.

“If you see it on this play, just yell ‘Nebraska.’ Guys, if you hear that then two wideouts go down and out and run for the sidelines. Finnish, you run the QB draw. All you need to do is juke out the middle linebacker. Then run for a touchdown. If they are in any other defense, then the play will be a power sweep to the right. Just keep blocking downfield and keep running. This will be our last play.”

The team broke the huddle, and Matt strolled slowly and confidently to the center. He looked all over the field and studied the defense. As far as he could tell they were had two deep safeties, spread wide apart. Before stepping under center, Matt yelled, “Nebraska! Nebraska!”

Matt took three steps back, set his feet, looked left, looked right, tucked the ball and took off. He gave the middle linebacker and little shoulder fake and turned on his

speed as fast as he could go. He had to run fifty yards before the safeties could recover and pursue. Matt almost made it. A defender dove at Matt near the five.

At this point, Matt improvised. This was the last play of the game. His team needed this win. He just let go of the ball as the safety pulled him down. A teammate chasing after Matt and trying to block, picked it up and scored. River Oak was up 20-19. Matt made the extra point and River Oak beat Rolling Meadows 21-19. He knew he played well, and his quick decision allowed for the victory.

Chapter Thirteen

The next morning before class the group of A Squad lineman who Matt confronted after the seventh-grade mixer cornered him in the hallway.

“I can’t believe you fumbled.”

“You got lucky.”

“We’re glad Roger’s coming back next week.”

“You had your chance, and you blew it.”

Matt began to walk away and one of them pushed Matt hard from the back. Matt dropped his book and notebook.

“Fumble.”

“Again.”

Matt looked down the hall and saw Denny staring with her mouth open. What could he do?

After practice, Coach Thompson called Matt over. “You need to keep a tighter grip on the ball.”

“Coach, I did it on purpose. There would have been not enough time on the clock. The whole team would have had to run down the field and set up. We would have lost.”

“The point is you fumbled. I don’t tolerate mistakes.”

Matt couldn’t understand everyone’s reaction. He had a great game. He won the game. And everyone thought he almost lost it.

Dinner that night was quiet. Matt so desperately wanted to share his feelings. Certainly, his own parents would believe him. But he couldn't even bring it up. Finally, his mother spoke, "How are you enjoying *Romeo and Juliet*?"

"You know my reading schedule?"

"Of course. I keep track of what's going on in your life."

"It reads weird; no one talks like that."

"But the love story, what do you think of the relationship?"

"Mo-om."

"I think the boy is embarrassed," his dad added.

"I think I need to study my history. May I be excused?"

"No dessert? I brought home a cake from the bakery," his dad teased.

"Can I eat it in my room?"

"No."

Matt got up and put his plate in the dishwasher.

That Friday afternoon. Jeremy and his dad came by to pick Matt up to go to the away game. Matt grabbed a light jacket. Autumn was just around the corner.

The three sat together and their conversation was on the game at hand.

Eventually, Jeremy's dad said, "I'm sorry about your fumble."

"I'm telling you. I did it on purpose."

Jeremy chimed in, "Don't give me that. You fumbled and got lucky when Chase scooped up the ball."

"Jeremy, there was no time left on the clock."

“After the touchdown there were nine seconds left. We could have line up, and after you spiked the ball, we would have scored.”

“There was no way. I fumbled on purpose.”

“You’re just trying to cover your mistake.”

“Boys, calm down. No need to argue about it.”

“No. Jeremy needs to understand. It was our best chance of winning.”

“No one sees it that way. You’re lucky Chase saved you.”

Matt crossed his arms and fumed.

“You guys see that? That was a nice tackle.”

*My best friend doesn’t believe me.*

While Jeremy’s dad pulled into Matt driveway, Jeremy asked, “Can you come over tomorrow and help me with my math?”

“I’m sorry. I promised someone I would be at the library.”

“All day?”

“Thanks for taking me. I had a really good time.” Matt stepped out of the car.

The next day Matt’s dad said he had errands to run, and Matt could ride his bike to the library. This was not normal as the drive to the library required driving down a busy road which he had never been allowed on. “Are you sure?”

“What was I thinking? No. Don’t ride your bike. I can take you later in the day.”

“Well, I was supposed to meet a friend to study.”

“Just call and re-schedule.”

Matt thought his dad was acting weird. His mom said she was sick and staying in her room. *Maybe Dad is going to drug store to get some medicine.*

Matt called Denny and scheduled for later. He thought about riding over to Jeremy's even though he was still mad. After sitting at home doing nothing for an hour, Matt pulled his bike out of the garage. Just as he did the skies opened up. A real gully washer, Matt thought.

Matt's dad returned home and after making lunch he took Matt to the library. The rain had let up, but it was still overcast. Inside he found Denny in the back by the reference section where they had studied the last time.

"So, what do you think?"

"Think? Of what?"

"*Romeo and Juliet*. Wasn't it so tragic?"

"Oh, I haven't even finished it."

"How can we discuss this, when you haven't even read it."

"I started it. I read the fight scene. I liked the line about biting my thumb."

"What about the balcony scene?"

"I haven't gotten that far."

"I wanted to talk to you about that."

"Well, maybe you could explain the story."

"Maybe you could explain why you fumbled."

"Denny!"

"I'm sorry. This is all going wrong. I'm having a party at my house next Saturday. Would you like to go?"

"Of course. Is it your birthday?"

“No. It’s just a party. About a dozen kids. Play some games. Listen to music. There will be cake. But you don’t have to bring a present.”

“Are you thirteen?”

“Four more days.”

“Wednesday?”

“If you score a touchdown for me on Tuesday, I’ll count it as a birthday present.”

“But we have a bye week.”

“Then you’re obligated to come Saturday and bring a rose.”

Matt placed his hand on his hear and dramatically said, ““What’s in a name” that which we call a rose, By any other word would smell as sweet.””

“You did read it?”

“Alas, I did.”

Driving home from churc, Matt’s dad brought up the soccer schedule. “Matt, I haven’t been to any of your games so far this year. I’m thinking I’ll take the afternoon off and watch you play.”

Matt heart rate went suddenly sky high. He had the schedule in his backpack. He had a vague idea that all sports were having a bye this week, but wasn’t positive.

Matt answered quickly, “So sorry, Dad. We have a bye this week.” Matt hoped he was telling the truth.

“I’ll make one this year. I promise.”

*I can’t believe I just dodged another bullet.*

## Chapter Fourteen

Before school on Monday, Matt saw Jeremy running over to him. “You didn’t come over to help me with my math.”

“I started to, but it was raining.”

“It didn’t rain Sunday.”

“I forgot.”

“We have a big test today. How could you forget?”

“Relax. You’ll do fine.”

“Some friend you are.”

Tuesday was bye week and that didn’t mean anyone got the day off. Roger was back, and Matt was back on B Squad. They ran a drill the coaches called seven-on-seven, but it was not the passing game like the high school ran. It was all geared toward working on the inside running game. On the B Squad it was five offensive linemen, a fullback and the quarterback, against four defensive linemen and three linebackers from the A Squad. The coaches just loved this kind of sadistic practice. The defense got good practice and the offense was mauled.

On one play Matt faked the handoff and then took the ball to the right. The defensive end slowed him up just in time for the linebacker to hit Matt with a full head of steam into Matt’s hip.

Matt tried to stand up. His hip was killing him. The coach told him to sit down and called in Billy Jones, the C Squad quarterback. A student trainer gave Matt an ice bag. After practice the team trainer told Matt he had a hip pointer and certainly not a

serious injury, it would be painful for maybe a week. He instructed Matt to ice it at home and come to school early for more ice treatment.

At home, Matt had a difficult time sneaking a bag of ice. He was supposed to ice it for ten minutes every hour. After his parents went to bed, Matt applied ice once for twenty minutes. With his mom staying home, Matt couldn't think of an excuse of why he needed to be at school early and he missed his appointment with the trainer.

Matt's hip was sore, and he could barely move around. He walked gingerly in between classes. Just as he entered science class, Matt realized his mistake. His plan was to bring a card, but he was so distracted he forgot.

“Happy birthday, Miss Teenager.”

“Shh. Be quiet. I don't want anyone to know. Why are you limping?”

“I got a hip pointer in practice yesterday.”

“You'll be better by Saturday?”

Matt was worried about how much Mrs. McIntyre and his mom talked. Matt really wanted to go, but he thought that her mom might see him limping and would tell Matt's mom. Matt couldn't explain a hip pointer as a soccer injury. Matt needed to decide. He thought surely, Denny would understand.

“Denny with my hip being sore, I don't think I can make it to your party.”

She didn't reply. Matt at first thought this was a good sign, but the longer class went the colder it felt between them. When the bell rung, Denny ran out of the class.

For the remainder of practices during the week, Matt did not participate. Billy Jones ran the B Squad offense. Matt felt alienated and not part of the team.

On Friday, Matt's dad took him to the game. Matt managed to walk slow and hide his limp. The stadium was built along the grade of a hill. It was designed so the parking lot and the top of the seats were ground level. The field was on lower down a slope. Matt and his dad sat near the top where the families sat. Matt just didn't think he could hide his limp if he had to walk down the stadium steps to the seventh-grade section. All his friends were down there, and it looked as if they were having fun. He made eye contact with Denny and waved, but she did not return it.

"Do you want to go down there with your friends?"

"Nah, Dad. I'll stay with you the whole game."

During the game, a strange guy came up to Denny and stood next to her. It looked as if they knew each other. Denny found himself watching Denny and this strange guy more than he paid attention to the game.

On Saturday about the time Matt should have been going to Denny's party, he sat on his front porch steps holding a bag of ice on his hip. Nate came out his front door. Matt waved and yelled, "Great game last night."

Nate diverted his route from his car to come over to Matt. Matt stood up. Nate told him to sit back down. Nate stood on the walk, in front of Matt. "What's been going on with you?"

"I got a hip pointer."

"Get that better. You need to be playing."

"What do you mean?"

"The high school coaches have taken notice of Billy Jones. They really think he has potential. If he fills in, he could be a three-year starter, and a D-1 prospect."

“He could beat out Roger?”

“I’m just saying what I hear.”

“Are they talking about my fumble? I did it so we had a chance at winning.”

“The high school coaches don’t care who won that game. They’re just evaluating who can play at the next level.”

“Are you playing this week?”

“I can barely walk.”

“You need to be out there competing.” Nate looked at his watch. “I gotta run. Good luck.”

## Chapter Fifteen

In the locker room on Monday before practice, Coach Hauser, one of the two assistant coaches, spoke to Matt. “We’re going to rest you this week. Give you a chance to heal fully. Jones will play on B Squad, and Scarborough will get another opportunity on C Squad.”

Monday was horrible. There was an icy tension between Denny and Matt in science class. He hoped she could see how much he lipped.

The game on Tuesday was away which meant Matt didn’t have to endure another period of tension sitting next to Denny as the team boarded the bus before school was over.

As his teammates warmed up before the game, Coach Hauser asked Matt to carry a clipboard and write down each play and the result of the play for the game. Nothing felt more like a demotion than this.

River Oak won, the players cheered and enjoyed the bus ride home. Matt sat next to Coach Hauser on the bus and went over the plays one by one. This was worse. He presented the facts to the coach that Billy Jones had a great game. Matt commented on one play. “Billy did the wrong assignment and, in his confusion, got sacked.”

“He’s learning. We expect a few mistakes along the way. He’s got a strong arm, though.”

On Wednesday Matt took the test for *Romeo and Juliet*. He was glad to get it over with. He never wanted to think about it again. After the test the teacher assigned the students to watch the movie *West Side Story*.

In the locker room, Jeremy pointed at Matt. “You see this? My math test. I failed. And it’s your fault. You didn’t help me when I needed you. I thought we were friends.”

Matt went over in his mind a half dozen responses. He said, “There’s still time to pull your grade up.” That didn’t smooth things over between the two, but Matt didn’t care at the moment. Jeremy seemed to be doing just fine hanging out with his A Squad friends.

Matt didn’t see his mom that afternoon. His dad was home early and said she wasn’t feeling well. Matt’s dad made dinner, corned dogs and canned green beans. It was rare for his dad to cook, and Matt understood why. His mom was so much better at it.

After dinner, Matt went to her in her room. “Are you all right?”

“Fine. Just a little tired.”

“I took the test on *Romeo and Juliet* today. I don’t think I did very well. I’m not into romances too much.”

“How’s Denny?”

“Things are fine. For homework tonight we are supposed to watch *West Side Story*. Have you ever heard of it? It’s supposed to be about two gangs in New York City.”

“Matt.” His mother smiled. “Your teacher is going to discuss how *West Side Story* and *Romeo and Juliet* are alike.”

“How do you know?”

“Matt, it’s the same story. Watch it and it’ll be obvious.”

“Do you want to watch it with me?”

“Not tonight. Maybe some other time.” She sighed.

Thursday just before science class began, Matt sat down while Denny was talking to someone by the widows. Up front on top of her notebook was her graded *Romeo and Juliet* test. She had made an A+. Matt was in a different English class and maybe the grading was more strict by his teacher. He made a C- on the test. *She left that out to rub it in.* It didn't matter. He still had time in the semester to pull his grade up. He didn't like the story anyway. And after watching *West Side Story*, he didn't like that movie either. A mushy romance story with too much over dramatic singing. The fight scene was dumb.

Thursday rolled into Friday. Matt's leg felt better, and he practiced on Friday. But the coach had him with the C Squad. Matt and Jeremy had not talked about going to the away game. That evening Matt missed the high school game for the first time all year.

On Saturday, Matt sat on his front porch steps as he did the week before. He hoped that Nathan would come out and say hi. He needed someone to talk to. He read from his next book assignment – *The Outsiders* by S. E. Hinton. It was easier to read than Shakespeare and he liked the story better.

Looking up, he noticed, Lucinda, a girl he knew since kindergarten. She lived around the corner. “Out for a walk and this fine day?”

“I came by to talk.” Though her tone wasn't that friendly.

Suddenly Matt remembered seeing Denny and Lucinda together a few times around school. She was in the same crowd as Denny. Matt remembered Lucinda dancing at the mixer.

“Did anyone send you over here?” Matt sounded accusatory and wished he could take that back.

“As a matter of fact – no.”

“You can walk wherever you want. It’s a free country.”

“Matt, you’re horrible! I came by just to see how you were doing. I thought we were friends.”

“So, who’s the guy Denny has been hanging around with?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I’m having a party next week and I have just decided not to invite you. I came over here to tell you that.” With that she turned and left, back down the sidewalk.

## Chapter Sixteen

Matt tossed his book down and went inside the garage to get his bike. A little exercise would probably help his hip. He rode up and down all the streets in his neighborhood. The weather was nice. It felt good to feel a little breeze as he rode.

He turned back into his cul-de-sac and noticed his dad standing on the porch with his arms crossed and a scowl on his face. "Hi, Dad."

"What are you doing! I specifically told you that you can't ride your bike without a helmet. You're grounded. Grounded from your bike for a week."

"I never left the neighborhood. It's safe around here."

"Don't talk back to me."

Matt couldn't ever remember his dad flying off the handle like that. "Sure. Take the bike." Matt threw the bike down in the yard.

"And you're confined to your room for the rest of the weekend."

Matt picked his bike up and put in the garage. His dad still stood in the same spot.

"Your mom and I are going to watch and enjoy your next soccer match. I looked it up. It's a home game on Wednesday, right after school."

The next day, after not attending church and Matt's mom still in her room, Matt approached his dad on the sofa reading the Sunday paper.

"Is mom sick? Is she well enough to attend my game?"

Matt's dad folded the paper and looked at Matt. "She's fine. And we plan on seeing you play."

Matt stared into space in the direction of his father. He had kept up his lie for months. Matt didn't see any way he could keep it up any longer.

"Well, I have a confession. I'm not on the soccer team."

"You're not? Since the first of the school year, you've been deceiving us. Why?" Then it was as if a light bulb went off in his dad's head. "You didn't make the starting side and you've been too ashamed to let us know. Oh, Matt, I'm so sorry."

"It's not that."

"Then what is it? I'm confused."

"Instead of trying out for the soccer team, I went out for the football team."

Matt's dad inhaled deeply and let it out slowly.

"Dad, I know you're mad. You thought I'd get hurt. But I've been fine. Jeremy's on the team. I have so many friends on the team. You played in middle school. I'm the kicker on the team, and I play quarterback on the C Squad which is not serious at all. No one on C Squad is big or strong enough to hurt anyone." Matt said all of this quickly without taking a breath.

"Matt, you have violated our rules and portrayed our trust. On Monday, I'm going to call the school and have them take you off the team."

"Da-ad."

Both looked up as Matt's mom entered the room. "I've been listening to the conversation." She sat down.

"Honey, it's time we told Matt the full story."

Both Matt and his dad sat speechless.



Chapter Seventeen

“Matt, your mom and I haven’t told you the full story about your mom’s health.”

“Matt.” His mom took a deep breath and paused. “I have cancer.”

“What do you mean cancer? What kind of cancer? Are you going to get an operation?”

“This past summer, when I was diagnosed. The doctors said it was a very aggressive type of cancer and has rapidly spread into the lymph system, so an operation is not an option.”

“What about chemo or radiation?”

“Matt, those will not change the outcome and will only make your mom’s life miserable. They cannot stop this. It’s spread into her bones and liver. This has been diagnosed as a triple negative and with a Ki 67 score of 71 -”

Matt’s mom interrupted, “Dear.” She looked at her husband. “Later.”

“You mean, just do nothing? And you didn’t think to tell me?”

Matt’s dad said, “We heard about a holistic treatment which we placed our hope in.”

“And we prayed for a miracle. We prayed this treatment would work. We thought if it worked then there was no reason to cause you extra stress.”

“After the last check-up, we realized the treatment wasn’t working.”

“So, I wanted to make sure I saw one of your soccer games ...”

Matt ran into his room. He was so distraught. How could he process all of this? He buried his head into his pillow. *No. No. No. This is not true.*

Matt woke. He felt confused. Not knowing where he was for a second. Light beamed through the windows. He sat up. His head hurt. His mom and dad were both sitting on the foot of his bed.

“Mom, no. It’s not true.”

She reached for his hand. Matt saw his mom. She looked small and frail. He hadn’t even noticed before. Now she seemed so very weak.

“What’s this mean?”

“It means your mom is going to be with the Lord, and you and I will continue here.”

“No, Mom. Don’t go.”

“Matt, I love you so much.”

Matt hugged his mom, but gingerly. Tears streamed down his dad’s face. Matt had never seen his dad cry. Soon Matt’s own eyes were so filled with tears he couldn’t see a thing.

He sniffed and wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. “How long?”

“I don’t think we’ll make Christmas.”

Matt burst out crying.

“I don’t think we’ll make Thanksgiving. Maybe not Halloween.”

Matt buried his head in his pillow and cried himself asleep for second time.

Matt woke and the room was dark. He saw the clock – 2:38 AM. He went out of his room. The house was dark. On the kitchen table was a note. “Food in the Fridge.” Matt ate the chicken from a fast-food chain. *Dad must have cooked.*

The next morning his dad was in the middle of frying bacon. “Where’s mom?”

“Still sleeping. I’m not going to work for this week.” He put a plate down in front of Matt. “Want some toast?”

“No. I hate you. You should have told me. You had no right to keep this from me.” Matt went back to his room. He was hungry, but furious with his dad. He didn’t want to be near him.

Matt went from class to class in a daze. What was he supposed to do? Tell his teachers? Tell everyone in his classes? He didn’t want anyone’s sympathy. He saw Jeremy and thought about saying something, but Jeremy was in a group of other guys. In science class, he wished he could tell Denny, but they hadn’t talked in far too long. She probably had a new boyfriend.

She caught him looking at her. “Why are your eyes so red?”

“They aren’t. They’re fine.”

“Matt, can you stay after class for a minute?” Mr. Owens, the science teacher asked.

After all the students had filed out of the classroom, Mr. Owens spoke. “Do you have any questions I can help you with?”

“Mr. Owens, do you know anything about cancer?”

“It’s a subject we will cover next semester.”

“Can it be cured?”

“Many types can, especially if diagnosed early enough.”

“What’s triple negative mean?”

“Matt, let’s set up a time to talk in detail. You need to get to your next class.”

In the locker room, Matt noticed nothing different. He assumed his dad did not call the coach. While doing a dry run of the plays with the C Squad, a receiver dropped a ball. “You idiot! Don’t you know how to catch?”

The player looked startled. The C Squad hadn’t been around Matt much and they were shocked by his blowup. Matt noticed Coach Hauser staring at him. Matt said in the huddle, “No one is asking you to be a hero. Just do your part.”

Matt came home and went straight to his mom. “Mom, I’ve decided I’m not going to school. I’m going to stay here by your side – always.”

“Matt, that’s thoughtful of you. But I really want to see your game tomorrow. You have to be at school to play in the game. Your dad and I will be there sitting in the bleachers.”

The next morning Matt came into the kitchen wearing his football jersey.

“Is this a special game?” his dad asked.

“We wear our jerseys to school on all gamedays.”

“And you haven’t been? Because you were hiding this from us?”

“Thanks for supporting me today.”

School seemed the same as the day before. Matt floated through the classes. In the hallway he saw Jeremy. “How have you been doing in math?”

Jeremy slammed his locker shut and walked away.

## Chapter Eighteen

From the locker room, Matt hurried outside to warm-up. He wanted time to himself and most everyone left the kicker alone as he did his routine. He did a quick run through with the C Squad.

In the first quarter Roger led the team to a touchdown. Matt hit the extra point to tie the game. He felt good about the kick, straight down the middle and plenty of height. He looked toward the bleachers but couldn't see his parents. Hopefully they knew where to go and were not late.

B Squad's defense had trouble stopping the other team. Billy moved the offensive down the field, but not quite enough to get a score. By halftime, it was 18-7.

River Oak received the second half kick-off, and the C Squad marched on the field and scored. Matt didn't throw the ball once but ran it several times. Against the other team's C Squad Matt looked impressive. In the seventy-five-yard drive, Matt ran it for sixty of the yards. By the end of the third quarter, River Oak was behind 24-14. They had the ball near midfield.

The A Squad scored quickly to make it 24-21. The other team used a lot of clock and River Oak's defense finally stopped the drive near their own twenty. The other team went for it on fourth and three and didn't make it. There was only three minutes left in the game. River Oak rose to the occasion, drove quickly down the field with a great run after catch that went for fifty yards and almost scored. It was now first and goal at the one.

On first down, illegal motion. At the six, they gained one yard. On second down at the five, Roger threw an incompleting. He threw it hard, trying to thread the needle in

the middle of the endzone in heavy traffic. On third down, Roger was in trouble and tried to scramble but was tackled for a loss of five. It was now fourth and goal at the ten.

Coach Thompson called a timeout. Only twenty seconds left.

“Finnish, come here. Can you make this kick?”

“Yes, sir.” In practice with Caesar he had been making kicks from this distance.

Matt had never attempted a field goal so far this season. Extra points were essentially twenty-yard kicks – ten for the end zone, and seven back from the two-point line. The line of scrimmage was at the ten, so this was to be a 27-yard field goal. In the pros and in college this was a chip shot. In high school it was good odds. In seventh grade, it was a nail biter.

Matt trotted out on the field. He concentrated on the goal posts. He did not look for his parents. He did not even look at his teammates as they broke the huddle and lined up. Matt aimed his arm and counted back his steps. He was as mechanical as he could be. Doing it exactly as Caesar had taught him. “Always assume a perfect snap,” he had said. “Make your steps, keep your head down and come across with your leg. Muscle memory. If you watch the snap and placement then you mess up your timing.”

The center snapped the ball, Matt took his steps and swung his leg. He did not look up. There was no roar from the meager crowd. It was just one bleacher of fans. Matt looked up. The kick was good. He made a twenty-seven-yard field goal to tie the game.

After the final coach’s huddle, the team ran to the locker room and Matt went to find his parents. He never found them. *Well, maybe they went home.*

Matt came home and found a van parked in the driveway. A couple of men closed the van’s back door. Inside, the living room has been invaded. In the center of the

room was a bed where his mom lay sleeping. A woman dressed in a blue hospital outfit stood next to the bed. His dad stood out of the way.

“Dad, what’s going on?”

“Shh. Not so loud. Your mother is sleeping.”

“Is Mom all right?” Matt asked in a much quieter tone.

“Matt, meet Rachel. Rachel is a hospice caregiver. She’s here to help your mom.”

Mom’s getting treatment to get better?”

“Rachel is helping with Mom’s pain.”

“Thank you, Miss Rachel. Dad, when did Mom’s pain start?”

“Matt, come here.” Matt stood next to his dad and his dad put his arm around him. His dad shook and tears poured down his cheeks.

Matt hugged his dad. “What’s wrong?” He began crying.

The two went to the kitchen and Matt put his backpack down on the table.

“I’m going to the store. Why don’t you spend some time with Mom. Rachel is leaving soon but will be back in the morning.”

“Dad, is this a good thing?”

“This is the best thing.”

Matt sat by his mother’s bedside. She slept, so Matt opened his book and read it to her. After a few minutes he went to get a glass of water and when he returned by her side, she was awake.

“I was enjoying you reading so much. You have a lovely voice.”

“Oh, Mom.” Matt held her hand. “All of this is scaring me. I don’t understand.”

“It’s a new season of life, Dear. Why don’t you get the Bible down and read to me from Ecclesiastes, chapter three.”

Matt stopped reading after “for there will be a time for every activity, a time to judge every deed.”

“All my deeds will be judged?”

“We live under the new covenant. God forgives our sins so “that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.”

“Are you mad at me for joining the football team?”

“Matt, I’m very disappointed that you set out to deceive us. But I will always love you.”

“I love you, too.”

“As parents do, we put restrictions on you to protect you. We didn’t want any harm to come to you. After my diagnosis, your dad became obsessed with trying to keep you safe. Like you need him, he needs you.”

“I just didn’t think I would get hurt.”

“But you did get hurt.”

“How did you know?”

“My teacher friends have kept me informed. I heard you hurt your shoulder and your hip.”

“Dad didn’t know?”

“No. He’d would have lost it. I’m guilty as charge. I hid the truth from him. That’s not to say I approve of what you did. I just understand it. I hope, your dad will forgive me for not telling him.”

“He loves you. Of course he will forgive you.”

“Mom, I love you. But when I found out you hid the truth from me, I was furious.”

“I’m sorry. Will you forgive me?”

Matt wrapped his arms around his mother’s neck and whispered, “I love you.”

The next day, Matt stayed home from school. He and his dad took turns reading to her. His dad knew what verses to read. They read whether she was awake or asleep. Miss Rachel didn’t stay but an hour or so. She taught Matt’s dad how to administer the pain medicine.

On Thursday, Matt stayed home again. He and his dad continued to read, but his mom didn’t seem like she was listening anymore.

That night Matt lied awake in bed. He thought about what his mom said about forgiveness. She had asked for his forgiveness, and he did not respond. She was dying. He knew it. Somehow, he was mad at her. He did not want her to leave.

But what *he* wanted didn’t matter. He needed to make things right. He would tell her he loved her. He would tell her he was sorry for deceiving her. And he would forgive her for keeping her cancer a secret. He would tell her these things tomorrow.

## Chapter Nineteen

Matt woke up naturally at the same time he did every morning. He sat up in bed.

*What if ...?*

He ran downstairs. His dad was by her bedside, holding her hand. “Her pulse is very weak.”

“Miss Rachel will be here soon. She’ll fix that.”

His dad just stared at the wall. After a minute, he stood up and said, “Matt, I’m going to fix you some breakfast. Why don’t you spend some alone time with your mom.”

Matt held her hand. “Are you awake?”

Her eyes fluttered. She took a breath.

“Mom, there are three things I want you to know. I love you. I will always love you. Two, I’m sorry I deceived you about football and soccer and everything. And I want you to know, I forgive you. Sounds funny. Yes, all of this was a shock. But I’m sure it was more of a shock to you.”

She moved her mouth a bit as if trying to smile.

“You were thinking of me. You have always thought of me. You hiding the cancer from me was a way of caring for me. I see that. I forgive you. I’m sorry I lied for so long. I love you.”

There was a knock on the door. Matt opened it and let Miss Rachel in.

“I know I’m a little early. Just wanted to check on your mom.”

Matt stood aside as she did some checks.

“Go get your dad.”

After doing so, Miss Rachel took Matt by the hand and led him into the kitchen.

“Those two have known each other a long time. Let’s give them a moment to themselves.”

## Chapter Twenty

After two more days of staying at home, Matt decided he would go back to school. It was now Wednesday. During these days, his mom hardly spoke. His dad would spoon in some soup for her and give her pain medicine. Miss Rachel checked in every morning and would leave after an hour or so. It was agonizing to watch.

Matt went to school early and went to his science classroom. Mr. Owens patiently answered Matt's questions about cancer. Matt thanked him. He went about his day not talking to anyone else. At football practice, Matt went through his kicking routine. He did not work out as quarterback with any of the squads.

After practice, Matt found Jeremy.

"I'm sorry I didn't help you with your math homework that day."

"That's OK. I needed to learn how to do my own work. I've been too dependent on you."

At home, his mom lay in her bed, almost exactly as she was when he went to school. "Did you miss me today?"

Her eyes fluttered.

Matt held her hand.

Matt's dad taught Matt how to spoon in some ice chips into her mouth. He also let Matt squeeze in her pain medicine through a syringe under her tongue.

When Matt awoke the next morning, the living room was crowded with people. Miss Rachel had her arm around Dad. His eyes were red. He looked tired. Two men lifted Matt's mom onto a gurney.

Matt took a knee next to his mom and kissed her. "Goodbye, Mom. I love you."

Matt's dad helped Matt up and the two cried in each other's arms.

That Friday night, Matt and his dad sat together at the football game. At home after the game the two sat across from each other at the kitchen table.

"Dad, I'm sorry about deceiving you about football."

"Matt, thank you for saying that. You mean so much to me."

"Are we going to have a funeral for mom?"

"Of course."

"I've never been to a funeral. I don't know how they work."

"I'm getting a lot of help. Your mom was a very popular teacher and has many friends."

After several minutes of silence, Matt spoke, "Would you like to go to our game on Tuesday? It's the last game of the season and the championship game of all the school's in the north side of Kansas City. We are playing Northside, the old middle school down by the river. The game will be at the high school stadium."

"Of course. Are you playing?"

"I'm the kicker on A Squad and the last two days have been practicing with the C Squad as the quarterback."

"C Squad, huh? Does that mean you'll be safe from harm on the bench?"

Matt explained how the quarters were played by the three squads.

"Yes, I'll be there and cheer you on. But I may end up biting all my fingernails off by the end of the third quarter."

## Chapter Twenty-One

The team got dressed and ready for the game in their own locker room, then they rode the bus to the high school. It was a beautiful fall day with low humidity and mild temperatures. The team would not use the high school locker room but would gather at one end zone for halftime.

Matt looked up at the stadium. It had a section of seventh graders who rode a bus to the game. With so many empty seats, no banners, and no band the stadium looked empty. It didn't have the excitement like a high school game. There was an announcer for the public address system, and the big scoreboard was in use. That helped.

Matt kicked off and made sure it was not near Northside's speedy return man. For the rest of the first quarter, River Oak could not get its offense moving. The big middle linebacker, Smith-Cline, was all over Jeremy and everyone else who touched the ball. Roger was sacked twice. At the end of the first quarter Northside was up 12-0. The only good thing for River Oak was the other kicker missed two extra points.

The B Squad matchup favored River Oak as Billy Jones performed nicely. He led the team to a touchdown, but on the ensuing kickoff, Northside ran it back for a touchdown. At half time it was 18-6.

Both teams had a drop off in talent for the C Squad. Matt dominated against Northside. By the end of the quarter, he only threw it four times for one completion of five yards, but Matt's running made the difference. Matt carried the ball ten times and average twelve yards a carry. River Oak tied the game late in the third quarter. Since Matt was the A Squad kicker, another player was the C Squad kicker. With the score tied Coach Thompson decided to go for two. He called a quarterback sneak.

Matt approached the line of carefully, surveying the field, just as he had seen quarterbacks do on TV. He noted two defensive tackles to either side of the center. Behind them stood two linebackers. He wished the C Squad had practiced the audibles as the A Squad did. But today all he had to do was take the ball and run low. Maybe, if he stayed right behind the center, he might make it.

Matt took the ball and before he could think he was pushed over backwards with his center falling on top of him.

*I can't breathe! I can't breathe!*

The players got up and he was fine. He was breathing, and nothing seemed broken. He stood up and saw the kick-off team running onto the field. The score was still tied.

Coach Thompson stopped him on the sideline. "Nothing you could do about that. They read that play and were waiting for it."

Two plays later the quarter ended, and the A Squads came back on the field. The River Oak defense did well. It kept Northside's offense from scoring. But Roger and his offense could not move the ball. In fact, Smith-Cline hit a runner so hard that he coughed up the ball deep in River Oak's end of the field and a safety picked it up and easily scored. Now it was 24-18.

As the game neared its end, Coach Thompson called the trick play they had practiced all week for this special occasion. It was a sweep to the right, then a reverse to the left and a pitch back to Roger who let the ball fly to the receiver who was wide open. River Oak had scored with just ten seconds left in the game. The score was tied, and Matt came on the field for the extra point.

Matt did not look up at the stadium. He did not look at the scoreboard. He looked at the spot where the holder would place the ball. He took his steps back and over. He took two deep breaths and let them out slowly, then nodded at the holder. The center hiked the ball, and Matt went through with his leg as he had done many times in games and in practices. Before he even looked up, he heard his teammates on the sidelines cheering. River Oak was ahead 25-24!

The kick-off team circled around Coach Thompson. “Ten seconds left. Their only chance is to run the kick back. They have all the time in the world to try every kind of trick in the book. This game is ours to win. All we have to do is make the tackle. Finnish, squib kick it. Everyone, stay in your lanes. Fall on it if it’s in your lane, but primary mission is to make the tackle. No matter what they have up their sleeves, it won’t work. Stay in your lanes. Lets’ go.”

Matt bent over the tee with the ball. He had never in his life attempted a squib kick. He had seen it a million times on TV. *How am I supposed to put this ball?* Matt placed the ball as normal. Matt decided he would lean forward a bit, just like a low, free kick in soccer.

The referee blew the whistle, Matt kicked and nearly lost his balance. The ball skidded across the middle of the field, but Matt soon lost sight of it among the players. Everyone was running to the right. A player pitched the ball back to number 18, their speedy return man. Matt glided to the right. The player ran past most of the River Oak players. Matt saw how fast the player moved and angled to cut him off.

The player turned on a burst of speed and Matt’s angle was off. The guy looked like he would get past Matt. In desperation Matt dove at the player’s legs. As he fell on

the ground Matt had both hands on one ankle. That did the trick. The player went down. Time expired. The game was over, and River Oak won the championship of all middle schools north of the Missouri River.

Matt sat up and surveyed the field. His teammates on the sidelines were jumping up and down. The runner whom Matt tackled offered his hand to help Matt up. “Nice tackle.”

“Thanks.”

“We’ll probably meet again next year.”

Matt looked up in the stands. The student section cheered. His dad was standing a bit off from the small group of other parents. He caught Matt’s gaze and feigned a heart attack.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

The next day in Mr. Owens' science class, the teacher did not mention the game. He focused intently on the lab that day. Matt and Denny had to work together to dissect a pig's eye. Other than what was strictly necessary the two did not talk.

After turning in all their equipment, the players were excused to go home. Before Matt walked out Coach Thompson stopped him.

"Finnish, I'm sorry about your mom."

Matt was silent a minute, then said, "Thanks Coach."

"I really appreciate how well you played this year. You're a good athlete and have a bright future. I hope you stay with the program during the offseason and come back for the eighth-grade team."

"I need to better communicate with my dad."

It was the earliest Matt had been home all year. Matt's dad planned on working late, since he had missed so much work.

Matt sat on the front porch steps. Every so often a breeze would kick up and more leaves would float down. A squirrel chased another up and tree and out onto a branch where they jumped to another tree.

Matt stood up and walked over to Lucinda's house. Matt hadn't seen or talked to her since he was so rude that one day. He knocked on her door and she answered.

"I'm really sorry about that day I said those mean things to you. Will you forgive me?"

Lucinda stood there silently for an agonizing moment.

“Matt, I already have.” She kissed him on the cheek and quickly turned back into her house, closing the door behind her.

Saturday was the funeral. Matt sat in the front pew with his dad and his grandparents on his mom’s side. The church was packed, most being teachers and former students. A string quartet from the high school played a few songs. A handful of people stood up and read verses and told memories. Most of these were teachers and one was an uncle he had never seen before. Matt’s dad tried to speak but ended up just standing at the pulpit and crying.

The family rode in a limousine to the cemetery. It was raining and cold. Not many attended. Matt placed a rose on the casket and recited to himself the line from Romeo and Juliet.

Afterward there was a gathering at church. Matt and his dad had to shake hands with everyone as they strolled in. Matt was in a daze. Denny and his parents went through the line. Mrs. McIntyre said kind words while Denny and Matt avoided eye contact.

After a meal was consumed and people began to leave, Matt approached Denny.

“Denny, I’m sorry about the way I behaved awhile back. I acted selfishly and I ... I’m sorry. Will you forgive me?”

“Matt, thank you for saying that. “Your apology means a lot. I promise I’ll be more cordial in science class.”

Matt thought she sounded cold but wasn’t sure if she was trying to be funny.

“Thank you.”

The last guests to leave were Jeremy and his parents.

“Will you forgive me for not helping with your math?”

“Yeah.” Jeremy, with his hands in his pockets, leaned his shoulder into Matt’s.

“It’s really me who should apologize. I was trying to impress those other guys when we picked on you. I’m sorry.”

“I forgive you.”

“Wait, it’s worse. I saw you fumble on purpose and didn’t stick up for you.”

“Jeremy, I can’t forgive you for that.”

Jeremy playfully punched Matt in the shoulder.

The next morning, Matt went to the kitchen to eat breakfast and saw his dad out the back window. “What are you doing?”

Matt’s swing set was dismantled and stack to one side of the yard. Matt’s dad had a shovel, work gloves and was digging a hole. This is highly unusual for him. He wasn’t really a yard guy.

“I’m making a memorial garden. In the middle I’m planting this red bud tree. I’ll have flowers all around the tree and some vines over there. Had to take out the swing set.”

“Da-ad. I need my swing set.”

“Are you serious?”

“Of course not. Can I help?”

“I’ll show you the plans I drew up.”

“How long have you been out here?”

“Only about an hour. I took down the swing set when you were at your party yesterday.”

“What kind of flowers?”

“I have chrysanthemums now. In the spring I’ll plant some marigolds. Trying to focus on something the deer won’t eat.” He handed the shovel to Matt. “You dig the hole for the tree. I’ll work on the flowers. Dig the hole twice the size of the root ball. I’m almost there now.”

“What do I do with the dirt?”

“Just place it in that lower area by the fence.”

They worked in silence for the next few minutes.

“Is that good enough?”

“Perfect. Now take the saw and make some slight vertical cuts – four should be fine. Just so the roots open up and spread out. Then put in the mulch chips at the bottom of the hole before you set the tree in.”

“When did you learn so much about gardening?”

“Just picked up a few things along the way. Now hold the tree steady and I’ll fill in the rest of the hole with these bags of gardening soil. The we’ll give it a good watering.”

“Dad, do you understand girls?”

“I know your mom loved you very much.”

“I’m talking about Denny.”

“Who’s that?”

“Just some girl in my science lab.”

“Is there something brewing here?”

“There might have been, but I said some things which were mean.”

“Well, you should apologize.”

“She didn’t seem like she accepted it.”

“Everybody’s different. Just need to stay true to your true friends. Jeremy seems to be a true friend.”

“Can I take one of these chrysanthemums before you plant them all? I’d like to give it to her as a peace offering.”

“Sounds like a good plan to me.”

“How are we going to get by without mom?”

“Somehow, we’ll have to make it work.”

“We could go sky diving together.”

“Or maybe not.”

“Motorcross?”

“Let’s finish the garden first.”

Copyright © 2026 by Eric Holmes